

KNIFEPOINT

CHAPTER ONE

There was a guy standing in the hallway in front of my office door. I'd never seen him before but I recognized him instantly and I knew why he was there. It was something in his eyes, a hybrid of sadness and rage, that I'd seen in my business too often before. Whether he'd wind up as a paying client or not remained to be seen, but I knew that customer service leads to referrals and referrals lead to repeat business so I got ready to customer service the shit out of him.

"You Heller?" the man asked as I approached. He wore a pair of khaki slacks and a light blue, button-up shirt, neatly tucked in behind a brown faux leather belt. It was the kind of outfit that was meant to be comfortable and casual, but the tight creases on the sleeves and the slacks told me both had been ironed just that morning.

"That's me," I said, poking the key into the lock and twisting.

"The Shorts and Sandals Detective?"

I bristled. The L.A. Times had done a piece on me last year that I had only agreed to because I thought it'd drum up business. Unfortunately, all it drummed up was a stupid nickname, gleaned from the lousy title of the

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article: SLEUTHING WITH THE SHORTS AND SANDALS DETECTIVE.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s me, too. But I have to tell you I’ve never been too fond of that nickname.”

“Seems like it fits,” he said, eyeing me up and down, confirming my t-shirt, cargo shorts and Teva sandals combo.

“I live in California,” I said. “Shorts and sandals are kinda the uniform.”

“Heard they were gonna make a movie,” the man said.

“God, I hope not,” I said.

The man fidgeted, embarrassed. “You know, I’ve been waiting here since seven o’clock.”

“Hours are posted.” I tapped the little card taped to the back of the window glass. “Eight to five.”

“I know,” the man said quickly. “I wasn’t trying to say you were late. I just wanted you to know I’ve been waiting.”

“Not a problem,” I told him. “Come on in.” I stood back as he stepped into the tiny waiting room and then followed him inside. He stopped and waited as I stepped past him and opened the door to my office. “Take a seat,” I said. “I’d offer you coffee but ... well, there isn’t any.”

The man sat down in one of the two guest chairs that face my desk. I took the chair behind it. The compact refrigerator in the corner hummed efficiently and I

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desperately wanted my morning Coke Zero. But it would be unprofessional to drink in front of a new client and, as I recalled, there was only one can in the fridge anyway.

“So,” I said. “You know my name ... what’s yours?”

“Robert Gleason,” the man said. “But please call me Rob.”

“All right, Rob. What can I do for you?”

He hesitated, like they all do, wrestling with equal amounts embarrassment, depression and rage. Finally, he choked out the words I knew would be his next: “I think my wife’s cheating on me.”

“And you’d like me to follow her and find out if that’s true or not?”

Another pause. “Yes.”

I sat for a moment, musing. Then I said, “Hey. Do you like pancakes?”

“What?”

“Pancakes. You like ‘em?”

“Um, sure.”

“Let’s go get some breakfast,” I said. “My treat.”

There was a Denny’s a couple of miles away so we hopped into my old Toyota Camry and took the beach road. We were silent during the three-minute drive and it wasn’t until we were in one of those red vinyl booths—coffee steaming in front of Gleason and a Diet Coke fizzing in front of me—that I asked, “Okay, what makes you think your wife is cheating?”

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Gleason shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "It's just a feeling."

"You came to a private detective based on a *feeling*?"

"No, it's more than that," Gleason said. "She seems ... I don't know ... *aloof*. Distant."

"Does she work?" I asked. "Is she busy?"

"Yeah, she runs a doctor's office. She's the office manager," Gleason said. "There's always a lot of paperwork, and Obamacare has only made it worse."

"What about you?"

"At work?"

"Yeah," I said. "Busy?"

"Oh, it's been crazy busy," Gleason said. "I own an auto repair shop here in town and we've been installing catalytic converters left and right. There's been a ring of thieves going around stealing them and we've been overwhelmed with the replacements."

I nodded. "What about at home? Everything good there?"

"Sort of," Gleason said. "I mean, we talk, but we don't go out to dinner or anything."

A server stopped by and quickly and efficiently took our orders. We both asked for buttermilk pancakes. I was thankful Gleason didn't order the Rooty Tooty Fresh 'N Fruity.

"Too tired?" I asked, after the server had sauntered away.

"Sorry?" Gleason asked.

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“Too tired,” I said. “You know, to go out to dinner or anything.”

Gleason nodded. “Yeah, I guess.”

“So maybe it’s not an affair,” I said. “Maybe she’s just tired.”

“It’s not just that,” Gleason said. “She’s been working late a lot.”

“You said she was busy.”

“But it seems like it’s more now than ever.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Have you been working late?”

“Almost every day,” Gleason said. “People are pouring in.”

I just looked at him.

“Okay, I get your point,” he said after a moment. “But it’s not just that.”

“How’s the sex?” I said.

Gleason was taken aback. After a moment, his face clouded and he said. “None of your business.”

“If you want to hire me because you think your wife is having an affair, it *is* my business,” I told him. “So, how’s the sex?”

He stared at me, and I had the sense he was silently debating whether to answer the question or not. Finally, he said, “It’s all right. We don’t ... do it as often.”

“But you do it,” I said. “It’s just that the frequency is down.”

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“Yes.”

“Because you’re tired?”

Gleason sat back and took a deep breath. “Yes,” he said. “I guess so.”

Our food came, and we dug in. I put a pat of butter between the two pancakes on my plate and then doused them with syrup. Gleason waited until I was finished and then did the same. I took a bite. As good as breakfast gets.

Gleason cut off a little triangle of buttermilk pancake with his fork, stuck it in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. I don’t know if he even tasted it.

“So my point,” I said between bites, “Is that maybe you don’t need to be running off to a private detective just yet. Maybe you need to start by *talking* to your wife, and then maybe get a little rest. Go on a short vacation, or something, hell, even just a weekend getaway.” I ate the last of my bacon, instantly regretting that is was all gone.

Gleason ate another bite of his pancakes and this time I could sense that he was enjoying them. “You may be right,” he said. “I may have jumped the gun.”

“Maybe,” I agreed.

He gave me an odd look. “Forgive me for asking, but do you do this often?”

“Do what?”

“Turn away business?”

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I smiled. "No, not too often," I said. "To be honest, cheating wives aren't my favorite type of work. It's boring, it's salacious and it often ends badly, whether there's any cheating going on or not." I took a sip of Diet Coke, the fizz tickling my nose. "That being said, if you get that rest, if you take that small vacation, and you still feel like something's amiss, call me. And I'll do what I do."

I reached into my shirt pocket and took out a business card which I slid across the table. Gleason took it, glanced at it, and tucked it into his wallet. "Thank you," he said.

"And if you feel bad about me turning away business," I said. "You can always buy breakfast. Every little bit helps."

R. SCOTT BOLTON

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Contact R. Scott Bolton at rsb@rscottbolton.com