

The adultery case.

ATTORNEY BUCKHOLDTZ needed his secretary again. He leaned two-handed on his desk, and the shadow of his paunch fell over my divorce papers.

“Vera! Get me Bill Hogan's number, will ya?”

I flinched, not expecting him to shout. He sat down, a shiny brown vest riding up on his gut, and a whoosh from his chair pushed tobacco air at me. I sipped the overcooked coffee his secretary had poured me, and wished that I was fishing.

“A good secretary makes all the difference.” Buckholdtz winked and grinned lopsidedly. His eyebrows were lopsided, thick fuzzy caterpillars. His whole face seemed out of kilter, one side lower than the other.

Buckholdtz grubbed through the clutter on his desk, his fingers pale and wriggling. “Vera is one of those super-efficient girls that can do anything in an office,” he confided, firming his jowls. “She takes care of all the details for me.”

His words rang like a cash register. I'd shopped lawyers this morning – and withdrew the joint savings this afternoon. A pair of banker's lamps glowed green on the credenza behind Buckholdtz. Framed by the two lamps, the pudgy face of a woman with a toddler smiled primly from an eight by ten.

“Yes, I imagine she does,” I said, imagining myself in his place, Saabing my kids to KinderCare. Living in a mansion in Grosse Pointe.

His fingers found a Bic and stopped wriggling. His head popped up, flopping his bangs, thin, the color of dun. Shorter than John Denver's. Lighter than his eyes.

Maybe to him I was a grub, or as plain as one, about to be hooked. I wore my best blue slacks and a white shirt. I'm not one for cologne, but when in Rome . . . it was a good chance to use up the Brut. The only problem with my clothes was my old Nikes; I didn't have anything but them and boots. I hoped no one would notice.

"Now, when were you served these papers, Mr. . . ."

"Stuet."

"Stew-it," he enunciated. His forehead rippled, taking the caterpillars up with it.

"That's right! You're the adultery case."

I felt my ears turn red, then my face. I glanced at the door, hoping he would close it. Instead he hunkered down in his chair.

"I got the papers Tuesday night, Mr. Buckholdtz -"

"Lester. Call me Les. Please." He bared his teeth, coffee brown. "You're the one in Southfield with the laundromat, right? You going to pay me in quarters? Ha ha!" He pulled out a long yellow pad of paper and scrawled my name and ADULTERY.

"I got the papers Monday night, right after *Jeopardy*. Someone knocked on my front door, asked me if I was Joseph A. Stuet. Handed me the papers, told me I had to be in court Friday morning." I shifted. "Can they do that already?"

"That would be your wife's motion for temporary relief." His hands clasped authoritatively. "It's a hearing to work out the property and finance issues while the divorce is pending. You know, who stays in the house, who pays the bills. We can raise her adultery as an affirmative defense." He spoke as if he was diagnosing a cold.

“But we can't hear it this Friday. I've got to *voir dire* a jury that morning. Besides, you're supposed to get seven days' notice on a motion for temporary relief, and you only got four. Don't worry, we'll just call your wife's attorney and continue it to next Friday - ” he looked at the door - “as soon as Vera brings me that phone number.”

“Excuse me? I'm not sure I - ”

“Vera!” The cords of his neck stiffened. “Will ya get me Hogan's number already!”

From the lobby, footsteps tapped the floor. Buckholdtz settled in, his seat moaning. He rocked back, his head almost hitting the photo of his wife and kid. Real glass in the frame, no dust that I could see. No dust on the lamps, either. Must have a good cleaning lady.

Vera's heels clacked closer, then fell silent as she hit the office carpet.

It sure wasn't her dusting the lamps, not her cleaning anything. Not with hair puffed up like the NBC peacock. Not in that dress - what a shade of purple!

Vera handed Buckholdtz a little pink phone message. Her fingernails were the same purple as her dress. They gleamed better than the paint on my Jimmy.

“Thanks, Vera . . . ” Buckholdtz's voice changed. He took a long time looking at the message. When he finally looked up at Vera, she glanced at the floor on my side of Buckholdtz's desk.

Oh, my God. She sees my Nikes.

My head dropped. There were my Nikes under Buckholdtz's desk. But next to

them sat something else: purple panty hose all crumpled next to a purple purse.

“Mr. Stew-it here is a new divorce client,” Buckholdtz said, loud enough for my wife’s lawyer to hear him without a phone, and looking a tad bit purple himself. “An adultery case.” His fingers diddled the message. “His wife’s got a temporary motion set for this Friday, but I can't make it because of that jury pick. I'm going to continue it for a week, and – ” he hesitated, fingers falling limp – “I see our time's up here, so he'll need to reschedule. Check my calendar for next week.”

I glanced under the desk again. Yup, sure enough. Vera’s panty hose.

“Of course, you’ll have to pay the retainer fee before then.” Buckholdtz flashed his teeth at me again, but his eyes weren’t smiling. He lumped into his chair.

“Just how much is your retainer fee?”

“Typically I charge two thousand dollars. To begin representation.”

The coffee in my stomach gurgled. “I don’t have that much with me.”

Vera stepped next to me. She wore purple lipstick, too, thick and sloppy.

“May I,” Vera asked, “get you your coat?” Rather tart she was, considering the details she’d left under the desk.

“I didn't wear one.”

I nodded to Buckholdtz and the picture behind him of his wife. Vera flounced to the windows and pulled open the blinds. It was late in the day; sunlight bleached everything. In the lobby, the squish of my Nikes back-washed into Buckholdtz's office.

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