

LOVE TAKES A LICKING

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I named my agency "Undercover Operations" because catching spouses between the sheets with someone they're not wedded to is my specialty. Two long years of marriage had taught me where my talents lie.

My latest case presented a departure from the norm. Casey Higgenbotham squeezed his way through my door late Tuesday afternoon, perspiring like a pig from walking up the stairs. He dropped into a chair and sopped up sweat with a hankie, his Pillsbury dough-boy belly straining against the two bottom buttons of his shirt.

"It's my wife," he mourned, his sigh scented with chili-dog breath loaded with onions. "I'm afraid Dolly is cheating on me."

A familiar lead line in most of my cases.

"Who do you suspect the culprit is?"

"Probably ice cream," he answered.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"She has a weakness for ice cream. Although it could be just about anything. Last time, I found Ding Dongs floating in the toilet tank in a Ziploc bag." His words rose in a whine and he leaned forward in his chair. One button bounced against my desk with a ping. "Catch her in the act," he said, "then I'll blow the picture up to poster size and hang it over the refrigerator. Let's see how many pints of peppermint twirl she'd put away then." With a grin, he swiped at his forehead again.

Undercover's budget pays for two cameras and two operatives: me and my assistant Harley Meeks. Presently, my Nikon F-1 and I were spending our pre-dawn hours waiting for the night manager at the Northridge 7-Eleven to do something creative with a straw, the Slurpee machine and his strawberry-blond cashier. Harley watched Dolly on the day shift.

Six days later, Harley came in with five rolls of film and a puzzled look on his face. "I don't get it." He scratched the four hairs on his chin that he calls a goatee.

"She goes to the Hagen Daz every day, but only orders a small frozen yogurt—fat free."

"What's so confusing? There's no Ding Dongs in the toilet tank this time, that's all."

"Five times a day?" Harley asked.

Five frozen yogurts did seem excessive, but after all, they were fat free. It didn't make her a candidate for the Weight Watcher's poster child.

"Give it one more day," I told Harley. "A week of work should convince Casey his Dolly's not doing something she shouldn't."

Later that night, I had my footage by 4 a.m. and crawled into bed around five, with one case closed and the other, I was sure, about to be. Ten a.m. proved me wrong.

The phone rang and Harley's high pitched voice stripped away sleep like an acid bath on a tired old credenza. He sounds like a 12-year-old with tiny testicles when he's excited.

"Get down here quick," he told me. "Casey croaked—face down in a 12-scoop Hagen Daz Hurricane. Smentek's on his way."

Lieutenant Smentek arrived before I did. His tongue trailed around two scoops of vanilla in a candy cone while the police photographer immortalized Casey's corpse. My former client sat in a booth, slumped forward, his face cushioned in a melting mass of chocolate praline, strawberry cheesecake, and, yes, Rocky Road ice cream. Raspberry sauce dripped from the corner of one bushy eyebrow.

"Heart attack?" I asked. A Hagen Daz Hurricane would overload the aorta of Jack LaLane himself.

"Guess again," Smentek said.

Behind the counter a tall, thin man with a panic-stricken face answered questions from Smentek's second in command. Harley watched from a corner. He wasn't

