

# THE CASE OF THE *Flashing Fashion Queen*

A Dix Dodd Mystery

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## *Chapter 1*

A LOT OF people specialize.

If you have a toothache you go to the dentist, not the doctor (unless he's a really hot doctor and then you go there first). If you need a new roof, call the roofer. Groceries? Call the grocer. You wouldn't go to a mechanic for your annual pap smear, nor have your OB-GYN under the hood of your ... um ... car. Okay, bad analogy. But you see where I'm going, right?

The point is, when you have a special job in mind, you call a specialist. And if you live in Marport City and need someone to get to the truth of a matter — and when the matter is private and dear to your heart — you call me.

You see, I'm a private detective. I'm not so new to the business itself, but new to being out on my own. Six months' new. I worked for years at a private detective company called Jones and Associates. The number one company in Marport City. All professional. All business. All men. And no matter how hard I worked there, how brilliantly I put things together (and that would be damn brilliantly, thank you very much), I was always the 'girl'. The one sent to do the coffee runs. The one who ordered office supplies and hunted down the lost files. I never had a real shot at advancing there, despite my many years of service and their many years of promises. So a few months before my fortieth birthday, I set out on my own. Hung up my own shingle.

The boys at Jones and Associates told me I'd never survive, that I'd be hauling my skirted butt back there within the year. Well, it's been six months, and I'm still hanging onto that shingle. Hanging on by my fingernails, mind you, but hanging on.

These days, I specialize in trailing men who cheat, or who are suspected of cheating. I trail them for wives who are wondering about girlfriends, and girlfriends wondering about wives. Overprotective

moms, neurotic dads, and yeah, the occasional jealous ex-girlfriend who just has to know. I find out where, when, with whom and if you're really interested — how. I take pictures. I take notes. I check gas gauges, tire treads and odometers. I follow trails left by credit card receipts and miscellaneous bills. I check out alibis.

As you can imagine, it isn't always pretty. But it's always interesting.

And some cases aren't always as they seem.

Take for example the case of Jennifer Weatherby, or as I like to call it, The Case of the Flashing Fashion Queen. Who would have known that one phone call, that one seemingly ordinary phone call, would turn into such a mess?

But then, death is always messy. Or rather, murder is messy. Especially when I'm caught smack-dab in the middle of it.



"Hey, Dix. Jennifer Weatherby just phoned to double check our address. I'm guessing her ETA is about two minutes."

*Oh, thank God!* I glanced up at my assistant. "Thanks, Dylan," I said, as though I'd never doubted she'd show.

Jennifer Weatherby had called me two days ago, on May 30. Called, in fact, just as I was writing out the rent cheque for the landlord, and wincing at how pitifully few dollars remained in my account.

*Five thousand dollars.* That's what she'd offered me. I'd just about dropped the phone. But Mrs. Weatherby had been clear: five large for a week's worth of work.

But here's the thing — sometimes these hot new clients don't show. Sometimes they call in a fit of anger or jealousy, but when they calm down, they decide they don't need a private detective after all. And often they're too embarrassed to call and cancel. So, yeah, I was more than happy when Dylan told me she was en route.

His message delivered, I expected him to turn and leave. Well, kind of. Dylan Foreman rarely did what was expected.

Good thing he was the best assistant I'd ever had.

Okay, the *only* assistant I'd ever had. And strictly speaking, he wasn't really an assistant. He was an apprentice. All aspiring private investigators have to complete a period of apprenticeship. I'd done mine with Jones and Associates. When Dylan Foreman knocked on my door just a month after I opened for business and laid his story on the table, I

couldn't refuse him.

The man had a law degree, on top of a degree in communications and another in criminology. After passing the bar, he was scooped up by one of the top firms in the city and had been well on his way to making a name for himself in criminal law. But all that changed one day when he got a call from a scared kid.

The kid had been abducted by his father, a client of the law firm and a suspected child abuser. Bastard had picked the boy up at school and driven him five hundred miles to another city. Police were searching for him frantically. Dylan had been working late that night when the call came in from the missing child. The kid had hit re-dial on the phone while his father had left him alone to go out for beer. Scared and crying, he'd told Dylan the things his father had been doing to him.

So Dylan called the police, gave them the number that had come up on the call display and they'd had the kid within the half hour. Found the little boy alone and scared, battered and bruised.

Dylan knew what he'd done. The minute he'd picked up the phone to call the cops, he knew his career was effectively over before it ever really got started. But all he could think about was the fact that the client had called earlier in the day and the senior lawyers had done squat to protect that kid.

Needless to say, he got flack. Then he got fired. Eventually, he got disbarred.

"If you had it to do over, would you do the same thing?" I'd asked him.

"In a fucking heartbeat."

I'd hired him on the spot. He worked hard; and thankfully, he worked cheap.

And omigod, he was handsome! And young — all of twenty-eight. Okay, yeah, I had sort of a crush on him, but nothing serious. Nothing that kept me up at night. He was just ... nice to look at.

He was pretty good on the computers, too, up to and including some minor hacking when the situation demanded. He also made a mean cup of coffee (and I liked my coffee mean), and he didn't mind getting his hands dirty when it came to that. Plus, holy hell, my clients *loved* him. If I had a dollar for every time I'd come out of my office to find a dejected damsel crying on his broad shoulders, the male strippers at The Nuts and Bolts next door would be some happy young men. Except the Canadian mint stopped making dollar bills years ago, and it's damned hard to make a loonie stay inside a G-string unless you tuck it ... Well,

you get the picture.

Where was I? Ah, yes, Dylan Foreman, and why I tolerated his idiosyncrasies.

Simply put, we were well matched. What I lacked in compassion, Dylan more than made up for. I could deliver the bad-tasting medicine, but it was Dylan who had the bedside manner. He had a sympathetic ear, a compassionate nature, and a way of really listening to women that few men possessed. While I told the women their men were cheating, he told them they deserved so much better than the dogs who cheated on them. They left my office feeling low, and his desk feeling relieved.

"We're in perfect proportion, Dix," he told me once, when I'd remarked on this.

Dylan was handsome in that I'm-not-trying way — chocolate brown eyes, shoulder length brown hair begging to have fingers ran through it. He was built like a basketball player, long, lean and muscular.

And all six foot four of him now stood in my doorway.

*Perfect proportion indeed.*

"Was there something else you wanted, Dylan?" I fought down the fluster that I was really too old for. Knowing, dammit, that I could always blame it on a hot flash, if need be.

"I was thinking about the business cards." Dylan entered my office and closed the door behind him.

"Oh, no, not again." I leaned back in my chair, coffee cup in hand, and clunked my feet up onto my desk. We'd been making do with those print-it-yourself, perforated thingies, but the time had come to order some real business cards. It was kind of fun, but also kind of becoming a pain in the ass getting them perfect. "I told you, nothing fancy on the cards. Just plain simple: *Dix Dodd, Private Detective*. Address and phone number."

He frowned. "Boring. We need something people will remember. Something that'll make you stand out. You know . . . something with flair."

"Such as?"

*"Dix Dodd, Private Detective. Call me if you think you're getting screwed, or know you're not."*

I groaned.

"Come on, Dix! It's perfect. To the point. Unforgettable."

I shook my head. "And completely not going to happen."

We both heard the footsteps in the hallway and our conversation halted. The door to the outer office opened to admit a female. I could

see her silhouette through the frosted glass window of my office as she stood beside Dylan's desk. She tipped a hand to her hair, then back down again. She raised a cigarette to her lips, lit a lighter, but pulled both away before she lit the smoke, and before I needed to run out to remind her of the building's no-smoking policy.

"Don't worry," Dylan said, heading for the door. "I'll think of something else for the business cards."

"Thanks, I just want something —"

Without benefit of a knock, my door flew open. Dylan stepped aside before the doorknob caught him in a place that could do damage. My feet thumped to the floor; my chair tipped forward as I sat up straight.

"Dix Dodd?"

"Yes."

"I'm Jennifer Weatherby."

Beside me, Dylan stood dumbstruck. A first, in my experience.

Of course, I didn't acquit myself much better. I pride myself on my unflappable self-control. Pride myself on my smoothness in dealing with all kinds of clientele. I didn't fidget. I didn't blush. And I didn't stutter out of nervousness. But I have to admit I was a little stunned by Mrs. Weatherby's appearance. It's nothing for women to come into the office a bit overdressed to hide from prying eyes. After all, as much as I may not like to admit it, paranoia often plays a large role in the lives of the women who called upon my services. But this chick had gone just a tad overboard. Like, jumped-off-a-cruise-ship-in-the-middle-of-the-Pacific overboard.

Jennifer Weatherby stood just a few inches short of six feet tall in her modest heels. Modest *height*, that is. Nothing else about those violet velvet puppies could be called modest. The hem of the purple dress she wore stopped just above the knee. She wore a wide black belt cinched at the waist, and broad shoulder pads that would have made Darth Vader envious. While the neckline of the dress didn't exactly plunge, it didn't need to. The lady was well endowed. If Mr. Weatherby was cheating, he certainly wasn't a boob man. Mrs. Weatherby tipped a well-manicured index finger to the rim of her wide glasses, pushing them back up on the bridge of her nose. Her blond hair was piled high in a feat of engineering that must have required a ton of product. I braced for the reek of hair spray, but all that wafted toward me was perfume. *Lavender* perfume, of course.

Dylan recovered before I did from this first encounter with the

Flashing Fashion Queen.

"Mrs. Weatherby," he said. "Can I get you a coffee?"

I held my own cup protectively close.

"No, thank you," she said. "I . . . I don't tolerate caffeine well. Makes me jumpy." The last thing I wanted to see was this lady jumping.

"Perhaps a juice, Mrs. Weatherby?" I offered.

"No . . . thank you," she said shakily. "Nothing for me."

On this cue, Dylan left, closing the door behind him. He'd give us time. Enough time for me to get to the heart of the matter: enough time for an S.O.B. fest, but not enough for a sob fest.

"Please have a seat Mrs. Weatherby."

I could tell she was nervous. She moved to cross her left leg over her right as she sat, then her right over her left. She finally settled on pressing her knees so tightly together I just knew they'd have those little round, red circle things on the inside if and when she ever relaxed them again.

She cleared her throat hoarsely. Man, she must have been crying for days.

"I don't know where to begin."

That was my cue to cut to the chase. "Why do you believe your husband is cheating, Mrs. Weatherby?"

"Jennifer . . . please call me Jennifer."

I nodded. "Okay, Jennifer. Why do you believe your husband's cheating?"

"Oh, I don't *believe* my Ned's cheating." She pressed her hands to her impressive chest as she drew a deep breath. "I *know* he's cheating."

I opened my desk drawer and pulled out the pad and paper. I'd long ago learned that clients do not like tape recorders on the best of days, and I didn't bother suggesting one to Jennifer Weatherby. The Weatherby name was well known in Marport City. Ned Weatherby had positioned himself to make a fortune on personal computer safety before anyone even suspected there was a need for such things. But when the viruses and spyware started to hit, he launched his product to the panicking masses just in time to save the businesses that had become so technology-dependent. He'd been a shrewd businessman, buying out his partners just months before he'd patented and launched the product — convincing them cleverly that the company was doomed. Some said Ned Weatherby had unleashed the viruses himself, but nothing was ever proven. Whatever the cause, the effect remained — the Weatherbys were loaded. And in Marport City, loaded meant life in the proverbial



fish bowl. Mrs. Weatherby would want her privacy.

"Tell me about the cheating, Mrs. Weather . . . I'm sorry, Jennifer." I looked down at my notepad, as always placed upon my lap so the client couldn't see what I was writing. Some people talked more with the eye contact, needing the comforting encouragement to go on. Others, I'd found, talked more without it, needing the smallest pretense of detachment and privacy as they spilled their stories.

"Ned and I have been married for a long time. Almost twenty years. And I . . . I thought it was a good marriage. I thought he was happy. I know I was. Who wouldn't be happy with a man like my Neddy?"

Good. She was an eyes-averted talker. As long as she kept talking, I'd keep my gaze lowered.

"But you don't think so anymore?"

I heard her pull a tissue from the box strategically placed on my desk.

"He has a mistress. I'm one hundred percent sure he does."

"You've seen her?"

"Oh, yes. Many times." Her words were muffled through the Kleenex she held to her face, but in my job you get used to tissue-speak.

I was beginning to think Jennifer Weatherby needed a divorce lawyer more than she needed a private dick. The vision of the five thousand dollars growing wings and flying away popped into my head. If she was that sure her Ned was cheating, why did she need me to gather the proof? "Do you have a name?"

She looked up at me startled. "Er, I told you, Jennifer Weatherby."

"No, I mean, do you have a name of the other woman."

She sat up straight. "No, no name. But I've seen her many times. She drives by the house all hours of the day and night. Once when I was out in the front garden having my tea, she slowed her car down, and stared back at me."

I was beginning to have real doubts about this client. "That really doesn't mean —"

"And I've seen them coming out of a motel together. The Underhill Motel."

"The Underhill?"

She nodded, anxiously. "Yes, I was out shopping one day and saw Ned leaving there with this . . . this floozy."

'Floozy'. That word always struck me funny and I bit down on my lip to kill the giggle. I always pictured an intoxicated duck whenever I heard it.

I knew the place. The Underhill Motel was one of the older motels in the city, known for its cheap rooms and its hourly rates. A lot of the call girls work out of it. I made a mental note to check with some of my contacts. But it struck me that whatever Ned Weatherby was up to, and whomever he was up to it with, he apparently wasn't out to impress them — not at the Underhill.

"Is it possible," I asked, "that your husband was employing a prostitute? Maybe this was just a one-time thing? Not a mistress but a —"

"No! Absolutely not! I'm sure she's more than just a prostitute. She loves Ned. She *has* to love Ned. I mean, who wouldn't love my Neddy-bear."

I looked down on the doodles on the legal pad — tight circles usually grouped in two, and ladders going to nowhere. Something that looked like demonic chicken tracks. No, wait . . . those were webbed feet. Duck tracks, then, wending crazily around the bottom corner of the page. And one big, block lettered word — NOTACHANCE.

Well, now it was a word.

I had serious doubts about this case. Usually clients wanted proof and confirmations of suspicions. Mrs. Weatherby appeared to have both. The other angle, I knew, would be that she wanted blackmail material. And, okay, though it wasn't my favorite thing to participate in, it did up the ante a bit more. "What is it you're looking for from me then, Mrs. Weatherby? I mean, if you're sure Ned is cheating, what can I do to help you out?"

"I want you to follow Ned for a week. I want his every move documented. His whereabouts recorded.

"Here's what you need." The Flashing Fashion Queen snapped open her purse and dumped its contents onto my desk. *Holy Hannah*. I could not believe what this woman toted around. Six paper-wrapped tampons (in different sizes, no less), four different shiny tubes of lipstick, foundation, blush . . . There were packages of bobby pins and even a small can of hair spray. The woman was a walking feminine first-aid kit. Of course, among the jumble was an envelope marked for Dix Dodd. This she handed to me as she began piling the rest back into her purse.

"I've enclosed Ned's itinerary for this week. Or rather what he says he'll be doing this week. And I need you to photograph him everywhere."

"When he's with another woman?"

"Even when he's not."

I looked at her skeptically. Now the winged five thou was flying

above my head twittering, 'Catch me if you can!'

"I know my husband, Ms. Dodd. And I love him desperately."

"But if he's —"

She handed me the second envelope — this one pulled from a deep pocket of her purple dress. "That's five thousand dollars. And there'll be five thousand more at the end of the week. That's ten grand for one week's work, Ms. Dodd. Surely, that's worth a few extra rolls of film. And a few less questions."

Surely it was. I picked up the package.

"I just have one question, Jennifer. What does this woman ... this other woman, look like?"

She swallowed hard, and wet her lips. "She's ... she's about your height. Slender. Blond hair, hazel eyes."

Hazel eyes? How close of a look had Jennifer Weatherby gotten?

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, she's threatened me. Several times she's called the house telling me she wanted me out of the way."

I blinked, then stared at her. "This might be a matter for the police then, Jennifer."

"No, it's a matter for you, Dix. I have faith in you."