

*One Dead, Two to Go*

CHAPTER ONE

Call me Eddie Shoes.

Not a very feminine moniker, but it suits me. My father's name was Eduardo Zapata. In a fit of nostalgia, my mother Chava named me Edwina Zapata Schultz, even though by the time I was born she hadn't seen my father in seven months. Edwina was a mouthful to saddle any child with, so at the ripe old age of six, I announced that I would only answer to Eddie. I didn't have any nostalgia for a guy I'd never met, so Zapata just seemed like a name no one ever spelled right the first time. Chava wasn't particularly maternal in any conventional sense, so not a lot of nostalgia for Schultz either. At eighteen I legally changed my name to Eddie Shoes.

It said a lot about my sense of humor.

Chava and I had come to an understanding. She stayed in my life as long as our contact was minimal and primarily over email. It was just enough to allay her guilt and not enough to make me crazy, so it worked for both of us. She'd always been down about my choice of career, but what did she expect from a girl who called herself Eddie Shoes? If I hadn't become a private investigator, I probably would have been a bookie, so she should have been a little more positive about the whole thing.

My career was the reason I sat hunkered in the car, in the dark, halfway down the block from a tacky hotel, clutching a digital camera and zoom lens, waiting to catch my latest client's husband with a woman not his wife. I'd already gotten a few choice shots of the guy entering the room, but he'd gone in alone and no one else had arrived. I assumed the other woman was already waiting for him. After tailing the guy for a few days, I had a pretty good guess who the

chippie would turn out to be. I didn't think he'd hired his "office manager" for her filing skills, and sleeping with the married boss was a cliché because it happened all the time. I could already prove the man a liar. He'd told his wife he played poker with the boys on Wednesday nights, and I didn't think he was shacked up in this dive with three of his closest buddies, unless he was kinkier than I imagined.

But then, people never ceased to amaze me.

December in Bellingham, Washington, often brought cold, clear weather and that night was no exception. Starting the engine to warm up sounded tempting, but I didn't want anyone to notice me sitting there. Nice it wasn't raining, but if the thermometer had crept much over twenty, I hadn't noticed. To make matters worse, I'd scrunched my almost six-foot frame down in the driver's seat for more than two hours. Even with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders, I was half frozen, and desperately hoped my mark didn't have more stamina than I'd pegged him for. All I wanted was to go home and go to bed.

And at some point, I would need to pee.

Up on the second floor, the door of the hotel room I had my eye on finally opened. I brought my camera up, ready for the money shots. My earlier pics proved that the dirty white stucco on the side of the building bounced the pale glow from the minimal exterior lights enough for pictures to be clear without a flash. Even from this distance, there was a nice unobstructed view of the location. The only barrier between someone standing on the narrow walk and my camera lens was a flimsy, rusty-looking, wrought-iron railing. The balusters looked too thin to stop anyone from falling the height of the first floor to the asphalt parking lot below. I doubted anything at the tawdry place passed code.

But what did I care? I wasn't going to stay there.

The “liar”—I have always been creative with nicknames—stepped out, straightening his tie. I snapped a few pictures and held my breath, hoping the other woman would come out behind him. Even if I took pictures of her exiting a few minutes later, the husband needed to be in the picture with her. A surprising number of wives would argue with me about what actually took place in these various, if interchangeable, hotel rooms. For some reason they would rather believe the info about their husband cheating was fake than admit he strayed, which confused me because I got paid either way. It felt especially crazy when they must already know the truth, otherwise they wouldn’t have hired me in the first place. But I knew better than to look for logic in the ways of the human heart and got the best evidence possible.

The man turned sideways. Light from the room behind him threw his face into silhouette. He had an exceptionally generous head of hair, which made him very recognizable even in bad light. Mid-forties, and mostly in good shape, he appeared athletic as long as he didn’t unbutton his sport coat. I could see why women were attracted to him, though he didn’t do a thing for me. I preferred men a little more honest.

But then, I’d never been married, so what did I know?

A figure moved from behind him into the shadow of the doorway.

“Come on, honey, step out into the light.” I held the camera to my eye. “One more step, so I can see your face.”

The woman obliged by leaning into the cold blue glow cast by the old style, energy inefficient streetlights, her cheeks stained red in the flash of the vacancy sign. I happily clicked away as the “office manager” wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered sweet nothings in his ear. She clearly wore nothing but lingerie. She must assume no one else would be out this late on such a cold weeknight. Or maybe she enjoyed having people see her, a bit of an

exhibitionist in the happy homewrecker. Whatever the cause, she had him in the perfect spot for the best pictures.

I loved it when guilty people made my job easy.

My photos might not be art, but they were gold in my book. No way the wife could believe this was anything other than what it looked like.

Several photos later, the husband extricated himself from the mistress and she ducked back into the room and closed the door. He walked briskly toward a shiny red Chevy Camaro. The guy owned a GM dealership and drove a new car every day. He lit a cigarette, which he puffed on for a few drags before he tossed it into the gutter. Not just a cheater, a litterer. The bastard. The cigarette stench backed his poker party story and covered the smell of another woman, killing two birds with one cancer-causing stone.

As soon as he pulled out onto the street, I stretched back up to full height, relieved to still feel my feet. I started up my ancient green Subaru Forrester, cranked my heater, and headed for home, relieved I didn't have to wait around in the cold for the mistress to reappear. Whatever she did next wasn't my concern. Having the two of them in the pictures together convinced me my work was done.

The hotel was located downtown—the blue-collar north end, not the high-priced, brick, historical south end, so I dropped down to Lakeway Drive, scooted under the freeway, and wound through the streets that curved around Bayview Cemetery. Traffic at ten o'clock on a midweek winter night was light, and I arrived at my little house by ten-thirty. I downloaded the photos from the hotel onto my computer, wrote up a final bill for my client, and went to bed content.

What could possibly go wrong with such an easy case?