

## **The K-Town Caper Contest FIRST PLACE**

### **The Curious Caper of the Chihuahua By Bob Leggett**

I knew she was trouble the minute I laid eyes on her. The word was tattooed on her left shoulder. On her right shoulder was an ad for Viking Cruises. She walked into my office on Market Square above Knox Mason Restaurant, and when she opened the door the aroma of fried okra filled the room.

"Are you the private Dick?" she asked, taking the chair across the desk.

"I don't care for the term," I said, "but, yes, in a manner of speaking. What can I do for you?"

"My boyfriend's disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Yeah, you know, disappeared. First he's here and then he's not. Now you see him, now you don't. Disappeared."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"About a week ago. He left our apartment with the dog."

"Let's start with his name."

"Rover."

"No, I mean your boyfriend's name."

"It's Rover. The dog's name is Trevor."

"And his last name?"

"Dogs don't usually have last names."

"I mean the boyfriend."

"Rodgers."

"Rover Rodgers."

"Right."

"I'm guessing there's a funny story behind that, but I'll pass. Your name?"

"Madeline, same as the mayor."

"Last name?"

"Rogerio."

"*Your* last name."

She paused. "Jones. Madeline Jones, but my friends call me Trouble."

"Well, Ms. Jones, if that *is* your real name, was there anything suspicious about your boyfriend's leaving?"

"He said he was going out for cigarettes."

"And what was suspicious about that?"

"He doesn't smoke."

"Right. So let me ask you this. Did he associate with any people you would regard with suspicion?"

"Well, there's this musician named RB Morris that he plays guitar with."

"What was suspicious about him, in particular?"

"He doesn't use periods after the initials in his name."

"I don't think that's enough to qualify him as a Person of Interest. I see you're in need of help, but before I take your case I'm going to need a retainer."

"Are you having trouble with your teeth?"

"A fee. Up front."

"How much?"

"A thousand should cover it."

She pulled a roll of bills out of her jeans and peeled off ten Franklins.

"People don't usually carry around that kind of cash."

"Rover has a cash business."

"Dealing in what?"

"This and that."

"People who deal in this and that can fall in with the wrong crowd. Did you meet any of his friends?"

"Just the RB guy who hates periods."

"Let's take another route. What about his PC?"

"Well, he never used the f word."

"His personal computer. Do you think I might take a look at it?"

"No problem."

"Will I need a password to get in?"

"It's capital L period, capital V period.

"Unusual password."

"It stands for Lady Vols. He's a big fan."

It was only later, after I searched through Rover's email account, that I realized that Madeline had, without realizing it, provided the first clue in solving the case.

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The boyfriend's emails revealed that he was not just a Lady Vol fan, but a dealer in what we in the trade refer to as B.A.A., bootleg athletic apparel. The University of Tennessee was at the moment going through a uniform and logo rebranding, and this one was more controversial than usual, since it involved dropping the word *Lady* from every woman's team but one.

One result of the shift was the sudden desire of die-hard fans to acquire apparel with the old logo but, checking with local dealers, I found that there was none to be had. As soon as word of the impending change got out, the old gear had been bought up with the obvious intention of reselling at inflated prices. One of the buyers was Rover Rodgers, but he apparently had a rival, a man named Tony, last name unknown. Between them, they had cleaned out the apparel section of every sporting goods shop in East Tennessee and points west.

The emails revealed something else. Tony was not happy with the competition. Several emails suggested terms of accommodation. The last contained veiled threats of violence. "Break your frigging neck" and "remove selected organs from your body" were two phrases I jotted down in my notebook.

I decided to pay Tony a visit, and I acquired his address in South Knoxville by letting it be known that I was interested in acquiring some Lady Vol apparel.

Tony opened his front door with a chihuahua in his left hand and in his right a Colt Python with a six-inch barrel and a pearl grip.

"Can I help you?"

"I was told to see a man named Tony for Lady Vol apparel."

"That's me," he said and nodded toward the chihuahua. "And that's Butch, named for the football coach."

"And the last name?"

"Dogs don't usually have last names. The last name of the coach is Jones."

"I mean yours."

"Why do you need to know?"

"If I need to write a check."

"It's a cash transaction. Come in."

I was happy to see Tony lay the Colt Python on the coffee table before depositing his considerable self into a recliner. I took the chair opposite.

"Before we get any further," he said, "you need to know that these old logos don't come cheap. I've got the exclusive franchise in East Tennessee, so to speak."

"I was told there was another guy named Rodgers who also sold them."

"He decided to get out of the business. Wasn't a local. Sort of moved into my territory."

"But you're not a local either."

"Born and raised here."

"I couldn't help noticing the New Jersey accent."

"Watched the whole run of *The Sopranos*," he said. "That must be it."

Butch had jumped up into my lap and fallen asleep. On an impulse I leaned down and whispered something in his ear, at which point he went into a chihuahua frenzy, yelping and licking my face.

"My cash is in my glove compartment. I need to get it before we go any further if you insist on cash."

Tony waved toward the door. "Cash only. No exceptions."

In the car, I called Madeline Jones. "One question. What kind of dog does your boyfriend have?"

"It's a chihuahua," she said.

After I hung up I made one other call then returned to Tony. He was still in the recliner. I stood beside the coffee table as near to the Colt Python as I could get.

"Tony, I'll come clean. I'm not here for the gear. I happen to know that an abandoned quarry is only a stone's throw from here, and I'm thinking that if the police sent some divers down there we would find out why Rover Rogers is out of the apparel business."

Tony was the kind of man who invites comparison to the intelligence level of oxen, and his response was, to say the least, unguarded. "How could you know that?" he rasped, eyeing the gun but knowing I was closer.

"I didn't, but I do now, from the expression on your face. It's an old trick I saw on an *Ironside* rerun."

"Damn that Raymond Burr," he said. "And I saw that episode."

I whipped out a pair of cuffs and attached him to the La-Z-Boy.

"Let me ask you one thing," he said. "What did you whisper to the dog?"

"Just one word," I said. "*Trevor*, the only name he'll ever answer to. You're always gonna have to live with the fact that you were outed by a chihuahua."

"I knew my innate kindness would get me in trouble," Tony said. "I couldn't off the dog. He just looked at me with those big eyes. I guess we couldn't make a deal. You into Lady Vol sweatpants?"

I shook my head. "The police are on the way."

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When Madeline Jones seated herself in front of my desk later that afternoon, I told her what I knew about the disappearance of her boyfriend and informed her that his presumed killer was in police custody. "I'm sorry for your loss," I concluded.

She was surprisingly cheerful. "As I'm sure you've surmised, he was no saint himself. To tell you the truth, I was getting a little tired of picking up after him. And then there was the toilet seat issue."

"I'm glad you're taking it so well. What about finances?"

"I'm still finding wads of cash hidden around the apartment. And I have a lifetime supply of Lady Vol gear. By the way, what's that smell?"

"Fried okra. What do you say to something to eat?"

"When do I get the dog back?" Madeline asked as we walked across Market Square.

"Right now he's being held as a material witness. There's talk of a witness protection program, but there's one problem."

"What's that."

"As Trevor just made clear, dogs, unlike women's sports teams, can't change their names. But enough of that," I said, pointing Madeline toward the Preservation Pub, happy to be done with my role in the great athletic apparel caper.