

The Waitress

The Last Epicurean was the kind of eatery favored by working stiffs getting off an all-night shift. I'm talking about the cops who'd maintained order as society's dregs roamed the streets after dark. And there were the firefighters and nurses, those angels of mercy, coming in to decompress over eggs and coffee. And the coffee was a wonder. It wasn't that hoity-toity artisanal blend drowning in candy flavors that cost six bucks. No, the Joe at the Last Epicurean was more bitter than a disappointed mom on Mother's Day.

That's why I was there that afternoon. I needed a cup of gritty reality to wake me up from the stupor of the past night. You know how it is; you invest your heart and soul into a dream, and it turns on you and becomes a nightmare. My dream was named Babe, and she's now the embodiment of night terrors.

You know what I'm saying?

Don't act coy with me, missy. You're talking to Nic Knuckles, Private Investigator.

It was two days ago, Tuesday night. I was sitting here slurping my soup when Babe shoved a slice of pie under my nose. I hadn't ordered it, and she wasn't being generous. She was a waitress tripping as she walked by, unloading the pie and two cups of piping hot coffee into my lap. It set my tough guy reputation back by a decade. Sure, laugh, but let sixteen ounces of steaming hot java soak into your undies and see if your voice doesn't climb a few octaves.

"I'm so sorry, Mister Chuckles," she said as she wiped my crotch with her apron. That made it worse. No, I don't mean her inappropriate violation of my private zone. I'm talking about her mangling my last name.

"It's Knuckles, sister, Nic Knuckles."

"Oh, no, I'm really, really sorry."

The situation got a whole lot worse when the waitress started crying. Man, I hated when that happened. The sight of a weeping female made my own eyes water, and I'd start sniffing. It was terrible for business. Trust me; a crybaby P.I. didn't get much work.

“What's your name, doll?”

“Babe.”

“That's a nice name,” I said. “What's causing you such grief?”

“It's my Johnny. He's cheating on me.”

A man named Johnny mistreating his woman, how many times have I heard that song? It must be a hundred or more. Anyway, here was another case, making me almost hating being a man. We could be such slimeballs.

“You seem like a pretty swell girl,” I said. “Why would he do something like that?”

“I don't know. We've been together for almost five years. At first, we'd cuddle for hours. But now Johnny ignores me and runs the streets all night.”

“Maybe I should pay your Johnny a little visit. Talk to him about how to treat a lady.”

Before she could answer me, a loud bark came from the kitchen. “Babe, your orders up.” She stutter-stepped, a look of regret on her face, and turned back to her waitressing. I was left with coffee-soaked pants and a burning curiosity. Who was this Johnny, and why would he treat such a lovely girl like Babe so poorly?



The next day I walked by the Last Epicurean and saw Babe working the counter. I stepped in and sat down. She seemed embarrassed and ignored me. I guessed she was feeling bad about dumping in my lap both the hot coffee and her problems yesterday.

“Good morning, Babe.”

The woman refused to acknowledge my existence. I didn't care. She wasn't the first gal to regret sharing secrets with me. I never knew why that acted that way. I'm a private investigator, and people's private stuff was the nature of my business.

"I'm ready to order when you have a second," I said. Babe ignored me, refilling the coffee cups of the few customers eating a late breakfast.

I kept my gaze locked on her as she went about her work. The more I studied her, the more I appreciated her beauty. Of course, the hairnet and the black polyester waitress outfit were a turn-off. But looking past that, I could see that her face was an enticing blend of every man's fantasy, combining girl-next-door with a lusty librarian.

Babe continued to snub me until the last patron left. With the joint empty, she had to talk to me. She approached with an order pad in hand.

"Can I get you something?"

"Sure, how about a slice of truth topped with a scoop of candor."

Babe shrugged. "I don't think that's on the menu."

Sadly, the girl wasn't acting flippant. Maybe she wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I knew she was hurting. I grabbed her wrist and exposed her bare arm, swallowing hard upon seeing the road map of ugly red welts up and down her skin.

"Who did that to you?"

Babe's eyes teared, and she pulled away. "I don't want to talk about him."

Just as I thought, Johnny boy was not only a philanderer; he was abusive. I didn't care if she had hired me or not, Nic Knuckles didn't stand for a man mistreating a woman.

"Maybe I should visit this Johnny and explain how to treat a lady," I said.

Babe laughed. It was a sad and hollow sound. “That won’t do any good. He does what he wants when he wants.”

I pushed the menu aside and leaned in across the countertop. I had a simple question for Babe, but was reluctant to ask because I knew the answer. But maybe this time, just once, the answer would be different. “Why do you stay with him?”

“I can’t help it,” she said. “I love him.”

There it was, love, the most lethal four-letter word in the English language. Why did sweet-hearted women like Babe fall for bums like Johnny? Did she ever think maybe a decent man would appreciate her affections? Yeah, some guy who didn’t have a handsome puss but would treat her like a queen, someone like Nic Knuckles.

“It’s none of my business, Babe, but I’d like to meet this Johnny. Maybe I could give him a little relationship counseling.”

A smile peeked through the glum expression on her face. "Really? You think you could change him?"

“That’s what I do. I change people.”

Sure, I was talking like a con artist. I mean, I did change men like Johnny. Sometimes it was their nose or the hang of their jaw. I figured if Babe were unable to extricate herself from this bad relationship, then I’d need to set her free. All I wanted was five minutes with Johnny.

“He hangs out around the bars and strip joints down on Elmont.”

I gave Babe a knowing smirk. “I know where you mean. Now how about a cup of joe and a slice of pie.”

She giggled. “Of course, and I’ll try and keep it out of your lap.”

I laughed, and she gave me a wink as she turned away to place my order. That's when I fell for her. Cupid must have used a bazooka because I was now crazy in love. I'd do anything to wake up every morning looking at her. If I got Johnny Boy to leave town, perhaps Babe might open her heart up to an old, crusty PI. Yeah, I know I'm probably violating some ethical standards, but she *wasn't* a client, after all. She was just a pretty, sweet waitress involved with a bum.



That night, I sat in my old LTD, parked in an alley. I'd canvassed the Elmont Street establishments of ill repute, sizing up any guy who might be Johnny. Whether built like a fireplug or tall as a redwood, I got in their faces. I was determined to find the guy and deliver my message. I probably confronted two dozen men. The closest I came was a guy named Jonathan, who looked eighty years old and was missing a leg.

It was about two in the morning, and I still hadn't met Johnny. The bars had another hour to drunk up customers, and I was trying not to be mugged by sleep. A black and white cat suddenly walked across the hood of my car, arched its back, and let loose a bone-chilling hiss. That knocked any snooze from my head.

"Get the hell off my car," I yelled. The damn feline followed my order but took its sweet time. I guessed it used some supernatural animal radar to know that I would not get out of my car to challenge it. I'd rather get in a bar fight with three sailors than tangle with an alley cat.

I woke up sometime near dawn when I heard the street cleaner roar down Elmont. My clothes smelled like I'd slept in them, which was what I had done. Returning to my apartment, I scraped off the grime with a hot shower and collapsed into bed. Falling asleep was difficult

because I was thinking about Babe having to spend one more night with Johnny. But exhaustion overtook my anger, and I went deep into the land of slumber.

It was mid-afternoon by the time I woke and got all my senses functioning. Anxious to check on Babe, I quickly dressed and headed to the Last Epicurean. She was working the counter. I gave her a nod as I planted my butt on a stool. She finished up submitting an order and rushed over to me. Her eyes were big with anticipation. Man, I hated disappointing her.

“How did it go?” she asked.

"Not good. Johnny didn't show up."

“Are you certain? He was out all night. He came home in his usual abusive mood.”

I looked down and shook my head, hoping she wasn't as disgusted at my failure as I was.

“I had my eyeballs on the street all night,” I said. “Give me a better description, and I'll try again tonight.”

Babe shrugged. “He's black.”

Okay, that's a start. He's African-American.

“And he has white spots across his face.”

It sounded like Johnny had a skin pigment disorder. That should make him easier to spot.

“And part of his right ear was chewed off in a fight.”

Whoa, Johnny must be a brawler.

“And his tail has a kink,” she said, moving her index finger as a letter Z.

I felt my soul drain from my body, ripping my heart out along the way. *Good Lord, Johnny is a damn cat!* That would explain the indifference toward Babe and the scratches on her arms. My crush, Brooklyn's sweetest, prettiest little waitress, was a cat-lover.

I sucked in a lungful of air. It was enough buoyancy to keep me upright on the stool.

“Actually, now that you describe Johnny, I did run into him.”

Babe’s eyes bulged as if her joy was trying to burst through her skull. “You did? Did you talk to him?”

A tremor erupted across my face — a combined grimace and stifled laugh. What would I say to a woman who was not only nuts about her cat but was certifiably coo-coo? Thank God, I’m Nic Knuckles, Private Investigator., who had to think fast on my feet many times.

“Yeah, I talked to Johnny. I think if you try some catnip, he’d be a better boy.”

Babe reached across the counter and hugged me. “You are the best, Mister Buckles.”

“Knuckles,” I said, “It’s Nic Knuckles.”

The woman jumped up and down, clapping her hands like a kid at the circus. What could I do? Maybe my broken heart would need a long time to heal, but I’d made the woman I loved happy. I guessed I’d have to take what circumstances offered and bury my busted feelings.

“Bring me a cup of your coffee,” I said, “and make sure it’s hot.”

THE END