

I've only got (private) eyes for you

With a bit of detective work, a case of a cheating heart can be cracked on Feb. 14

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The wife had a feeling her husband was up to no good. On Valentine's Day, she hired James Gonzalez, private investigator, to follow him.

Gonzalez trailed the husband from his real estate office to his first appointment – lunch with a woman, which might have been innocuous had he not tenderly given her a box containing jewelry. From there, the man headed for a second appointment – another meal, another woman, another gift.

That afternoon, the two-timing spouse had a third appointment – in a hotel room.

“He was running around like a madman trying to get to all of them on Valentine's Day,” said Gonzalez, owner of Bear Witness, a Costa Mesa investigations company.

Valentine's Day doesn't just keep florists buzzing. The holiday can keep philanderers – and the private detectives hired to catch them – busy as well.

“We call it the 'Festival of Lies,’” said Paul Dank, whose Michigan-based firm runs a Web site called cheatingspousepi.com. “It's the holiday of romance, and if they're having a romance with someone other than their spouse, they're definitely going to spend some sort of special moment with them.”

There are two basic kinds of infidelity Dank said. The first is the spontaneous, alcohol-fueled, one-night stand. Valentine's Day is better for catching the full-blown affair.

On the day to honor romantic love, it's not only wives who expect chocolates and a candlelight dinner – mistresses want it, too. And if the

woman is doing the cheating, which private eyes say happens frequently these days, she's going to want to mark the day with her lover.

All of which means evidence can get left on credit cards, phone bills, computers and, perhaps most damning of all, surveillance video.

“It plays like a broken record every year,” Dank said. “They buy new underwear. They make up a story that they're going to be off-site or they have to go out of town. Then, they go get a hotel room with a Jacuzzi and roses on the bed.”

Reliable statistics on infidelity are hard to come by. Unlike divorce and marriage, affairs can't be objectively measured. Surveys vary widely, and researchers can't verify what people report about their sex lives.

“How common is cheating? We don't know for sure,” said Steven Solomon, a clinical psychologist in La Jolla and co-author of “Intimacy After Infidelity: How to Rebuild and Affair-Proof Your Marriage”. “But it's an alarmingly and distressingly high number. It shatters a relationship and many relationships never recover from it.”

Every year after Valentine's Day, Solomon notices an uptick in the number of calls about infidelity-related problems. A few are from spouses who, prompted by guilt, have come clean about their betrayal. More are from spouses who got caught up in the thrill of the affair and sloppy about covering their tracks.

“At the beginning, the affair is so exciting. It's not reality,” Solomon said. “It's so special and passionate and magical that many people want to spend Valentine's Day more with their affair partner than with their spouse, and that's what ends up getting them into trouble.”

Private detectives and marriage counselors are sure of one thing: More women are getting into the act. Though men still stray more often, women are just as capable of leading a double life.

To her friends, Kendra had the perfect life. At 22, she married her college sweetheart, a doctor. (Last names are not being used for privacy reasons.) But throughout much of her 9-year marriage, she said, her husband was unfaithful. To catch him, she installed a software program on his computer that recorded his e-mails, chats and the Web sites he visited.

“When I found out, I thought, 'What's wrong with me? Am I not smart enough, funny enough, pretty enough?’” she said.

His lies and her loneliness, she said, led her into an affair of her own. “I found someone who thought I was all those things,” she said.

One Valentine's Day, she made up an excuse for not coming home and spent the night with her boyfriend enjoying a romantic meal on the Queen Mary in Long Beach. “I knew what I was doing was morally

wrong,” Kendra said. “I was living a life that went against my better judgment.”

Kendra broke off the affair and tried to repair the marriage. They had a daughter together. But the same problems cropped up again, and they divorced.

Two years ago, Colleen, a 48-year-old Costa Mesa mother of two, found herself on the other end of heartbreak. In January 2005, Colleen began noticing odd charges on her husband's credit card: big room service bills and purchases from Saks Fifth Avenue and the women's clothing store Caché.

The weekend after Valentine's Day, she hired private investigator Patrick Schneemann, owner of Western Investigations, to trail her husband to a downtown San Diego hotel, where he was staying on business.

Colleen bought Mylar balloons, told the front desk clerk she wanted to surprise her husband for their anniversary by decorating his room and obtained a key. When Colleen was sure her husband was out, she and Schneemann sneaked into the room and outfitted it with hidden cameras.

That weekend, cameras caught Colleen's husband in flagrante. “He called me the next day like nothing was wrong and said, 'I'm really tired,’” said Colleen, who has since separated. “I was thinking, 'I know why you're tired ... Viagra boy.’”

To catch cheaters, private investigators rely heavily on surveillance, for which they charge from \$75 to \$125 an hour. Video cameras can be disguised as pagers, and even attached to sunglasses and hats. Other techniques include installing GPS devices on cars and computer forensics.

California law prohibits a wide variety of electronic eavesdropping, including placing hidden cameras in hotel rooms without consent, said Paul Horton, a professor of law at California Western School of Law in San Diego. But surveillance in public places – such as coming and going from restaurants and hotels – is permitted.

Not every bust is as obvious as Colleen's case, said Schneemann, whose office is in Bonita. More often, he catches spouses in little lies – being somewhere other than where they said they'd be, being with someone other than who they said they'd be with. Private eyes also watch closely for body language that indicates intimacy or deception, like slipping off a wedding ring.

In a no-fault divorce state like California, adultery has no legal bearing on a financial settlement. But in a contentious divorce, a spouse who has evidence of an affair can try to use it as leverage to get a more

favorable outcome by threatening to tell the children, or by outing the cheater to the community if the person has public standing.

Even in the face of irrefutable evidence, adulterous spouses sometimes try to lie their way out of it.

Schneemann caught one husband smooching another woman in a car. Schneemann notified the man's wife, who knocked on the car window and confronted him.

The man became indignant and insisted he was merely consoling the woman after a death in her family. The wife backed down. "She allowed him to manipulate her," Schneemann said. "I guess some people would rather hang on to their spouse at all costs."

While getting the goods on a cheating spouse can be a thrill, delivering the bad news isn't. Some clients weep. Some get angry. Men in particular, he said, are devastated. "There's nothing fun about the destruction of a marriage," said Schneemann, a married father of six. "There are elements of the job that do give you a rush. But we never forget that we're talking about a marriage, a family, kids."

In the world of infidelity, he's learned, it's best to leave judgments at the door. Once, a Los Angeles man, worried about the faithfulness of his girlfriend in San Diego, hired Schneemann to spy on her. Sure enough, the woman was entertaining a stream of men.

Schneemann didn't feel too sorry for him. The Los Angeles man was married. The two-timing girlfriend was his mistress.