

Prologue

People have strange ideas what it's like being a private detective. Ideas they've formed from television, movies, and books. Which, of course, means ideas they've formed from fiction. I can't think of a single fictional private detective's caseload which even mildly imitates mine. Murder, international jewel thieves, drug smugglers, foreign spies, super scheming madmen, and drop dead gorgeous provocateurs just aren't a part of my daily routine. If they were, I would've found a new line of work a long time ago. I'm not a superhero. Bullets don't bounce off of my chest. And yes, I am

someone who's afraid to die.

An average normal day for me is exactly the same as an average normal day for most people. Boredom, tediousness, and repetition. I'm not complaining, mind you, I'm just telling you the way it is. Incidents of daring, physical excitement, just don't jump into our life very often. If they did, private detectives wouldn't be private detectives for very long. They wouldn't be private detectives for very long because they wouldn't be alive very long.

But once in a great while, a case comes up that stands out and demands to be noticed. A case that's rarer than any precious, highly lusted after jewel. A case which is, without the slightest exaggeration, a once in a lifetime thing. That's exactly the kind of case I've chosen for you to read here. It's a case marked by wounds, feuds, and shadows. The wounds are deep, the feuds are complex, and the shadows are as relentless as the rock that dogs the cursed.

Sisyphus of ancient Greek mythos. And, oh yes, there is one other thing I must tell you about this case. It is my last.

Chapter One:

It had been a dreary, lifeless day at the office when the phone started to ring. Its voice was loud and annoying, but my partner and I welcomed the intrusion. Business had been steady of late, but the cases themselves had been mind numbingly repetitious and tedious. So, when the phone interrupted the dullness of golden silence, both of us made quick grabs for the phone. Maybe, just maybe we thought, an interesting case was about to come our way.

I'm sorry, I haven't introduced my partner and I, have I? Being the gentleman that I am, I'll introduce my partner first. Her name is Alexandria(not Alexandra) Sanos. Alexandria is seven years or so younger than I am.(I'm 47) She's also a few inches shorter than I am. (I'm 5'9") Her facial features are small and modestly attractive.

Alex is a woman of a normally calm, impassive disposition, Sophia Loren hips, and heavily curled dark brown hair.

A woman of well-hidden complexity, she still carries with her the shadows of a less than idyllic childhood. She has never seen her birth mother, who abandoned her to a dispassionate orphanage. As she grew older, she passed in and out of foster care before being adopted at the age of twelve. The people who adopted her were an older, middle aged couple. And while they didn't neglect or abuse her, they were emotionally distant. Not the kind of people who kissed, hugged, and displayed free and open displays of genuine affection. The personality defect only reenforced Alex's feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and isolation.

Marriage and joining the police force were supposed to help her quell a large part of the darkness of her childhood past. Instead, in the end, they only made the darkness take on an even deeper

shade. The marriage was good in the beginning. Carl gave her the outward love and affection she so desperately needed. A couple of years into the marriage, though, an unforeseen became known. Alex couldn't become pregnant without seriously jeopardizing her life.

She tried to have a child once, miscarried and almost died. A year or so later, Carl wanted her to try and have a child again. Alex refused, and the marriage was never the same after that. They remain married to this day, but in name only. Why they are still married, I don't know. They are no medals for staying married. And each person only gets one brief, shot at life. So, if a marriage is bad, really bad, with no hope of it being good, get the hell out, I say.

Alex's time on the city police force was no less debilitating. She clashed often with her superiors. Most of the arguments centered around crime prevention versus crime reaction. She believed everyone benefitted from spending more time, money, and effort

trying to prevent crimes, instead of just sitting around and waiting for them to happen and arresting people. Take drugs. Every year scores upon scores of people are put in jail for drugs. Does this cause less street drugs to be available.? No. Does this cause less people to do drugs? No. Well, few people agreed with Alex. And even fewer people did so openly. This and the general daily inside politics on any police force only pushed her into deeper emotional hole. There were no promotions, no commendations, no recognition of any kind.

With nothing but shadows in both her personal and professional life, Alex sought solace where so many people before her have. Alcohol. Cheap wine and expensive liqueurs to be precise. Within a year, she was an addict. Hitting absolute rock bottom a year and a half later, she checked into AA, quit her job, and put both booze and the polic department behind her.

Alex is, in both mind and body, a true individual. She

believes in unseen cosmic creators of her own design and shuns all forms of organized religion. She dresses well, but ignores over priced, over hyped designer brands and the ever changing chosen style of the day. Her friends are few but carefully chosen. Alex is a person of rare character who disdains pretense in her view of people, institutions, and herself. She is a person, if need be I would die. And that is no lightly given statement from someone, who at times, is completely overwhelmed by thoughts of death. I said it and I meant it.

As for me, I'll try to be as brief as possible. My hair , thin on top and thick in the back, is a mix of gray and black. So far the black is winning. But not for much longer. My stomach is protruding more outward with each passing year. I have a huge head.(No, I don't mean ego. I mean the actual size of my skull.) My eyes are expressive, dark brown, and are lined underneath by deep, half-moon

circles.

I've been married twice. The first one ended quickly and rightly so. The second one wasn't like the first. The second one had substance. Hell, it had everything a good relationship should have. But one, never to be forgotten day, my wife Sarah left the house with our daughter Shelley and never came back. The only times I've seen either of them since is in my dreams.

I have no immediate family. Both of my parents are dead. And I am an only child. Alex is my only close friend. I worship no deities of any kind, I'm cheap, and I have a natural, inborn distrust of groups.(Two's company, three's a crowd, and four's a goddamn mob.)

To me, life is largely a game of 'Let's Pretend'. Let's pretend lies are truth. Let's pretend the road to happiness is lined with technological toys. Let pretend delusion is reality. Let's pretend all

of us are not born of the same savage tribe. I could go on with many more examples, but I won't. At the root of all these countless little games within games is that human beings are very determined to never grow up. One day it will be our undoing.

As for my work history, I've had many different jobs. Like Alexandria, I used to be a cop. And my time on the force wasn't any more pleasant than hers. My troubles centered around a differing opinion about what to do with rogue and corrupt officers. I had no tolerance for them. Left alone, they bring the whole force down with them. To serve and to protect is supposed to apply to the public not to crooked co-workers. Like Alex, I could get few of my fellow officers to agree with me. And even fewer to say so in public. Frustrated and going nowhere, I quit the force after five years.

In my first three years as a private detective, I went through four partners. I even spent some of that time with no partner. Then

Alex, came along .The day she walked into the office we had a long talk over a fresh pot of coffee and quickly hit it off. I was so taken with her, I hired her then and there without hesitation. That was just over seven years ago and we've been partners at the Baying at the Moon Detective Agency ever since.

I'll tell you right out though, that our relationship is difficult to put into an easy fit, neatly wrapped box. We're business partners and friends, to be sure, but something more too. Something that's really hard to explain.

The two of us, for example, have spent an excessive amount of time together. We've shared long hours in the office even when it's not professionally required. We've also gone out socially a few times too. And though we've never gone to bed together, the possibility of it has been there. What has stopped us, I don't know. Not on moral grounds, that's for sure. At least not on my part.

There are a lot of questions between us. A lot of questions, but few answers. Do I love her in a romantic sense? I don't know. She's someone I care about deeply, the only person who's made life bearable for the past seven years. She'd do anything for me. Someone who'd risk her life for me. On more than one occasion, she's enticed me with her wiggling stocking covered toes. She is also someone who insanely insisted on drinking the last cup of coffee every day. Such had been the case again today, this late gray afternoon in March.

"You took the last cup of coffee again," I said seconds before the phone would interrupt our conversation.

"Make another pot. It'll be the most work you've done all day."

"Funny, Alex. You know I don't drink coffee this late in the afternoon."

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right, I’m not.”

Just then, with my hand not more than five inches from the receiver, the phone rang. My hand raced to the receiver like a coiled cobra ready to bite its prey. I would get to the phone first this time, I thought. This time, I’d actually win the race. I grabbed the receiver, put it to my mouth and said:

“Hello, ---” It was the only word I

“Baying at the Moon Detective Agency. How can I help you?” Alex had beaten me to the phone yet again. Damn.

Our office, by the way, consisted of a pair of cramped adjoining rooms and one undersized window. There is no to date, fully loaded computer operation at work here. Computers cost a lot of money. Besides, our

agency is a small outfit dealing with mundane, trivial matters. A computer isn't necessary to do our jobs. So why have one then? Why buy something expensive that's unnecessary?

The city we do business in is Wannabe, Pennsylvania, a gray musty city of just over 100,000 people. Few do well here. Most do not. The few do everything they can to keep things that way. And the most, they, for the most part, just stand there and take it.

They buy and consume and play with all of their hi-tech little toys like small, unthinking

Children, easily bribed and easily amused.

There is evil in this town. The evil of unfettered power and limitless greed. The evil of the few. Per capita, this brand of evil is as high here as it is anywhere in the country. And the few, they are so proud of what they do.

As for the detective agency, it was doing well enough to have

us comfortably in the black. Too many cases, though, involved sexual infidelity. This kind of case repeated often enough can affect your psyche in ways you thought weren't possible. Sex and all of its darker tones can become an addictive fixation.

Since Sarah left me, my only involvement with sex has been with these darker tones. Pornography, prostitution, and affairs with married women have all been a regrettable part of my personal resume the last few years. I offer no excuses or alibis. It's a part of me I hate, but couldn't seem to shed.

So, when the phone rang as it did on the day of March 3rd , I hoping for two things. We had a case to work that would make us some decent money. And two, the case didn't involve sex in any way.

I hovered over her, staring down at her, and waiting for the call to end. Alex, for her part, played the situation for all it was

worth. With her shoeless, stockinged feet up on the desk, and a half smoked cigarette in her mouth, she paid little attention to me. Occasionally, she'd look up at me, wiggle her toes playfully and smile the most rueful of smiles.

I would, in turn, shift my attention away from the phone call and onto her cute little wiggling toes. It was a ploy she used often with me. And I, being the toe wiggling sucker that I am, fell for it every time. Before I could snap out of this strange suggestive fixation, the call was over and Alex had already started to play a new game.

“We may have a client,” she said.

“What kind?”

“It involves a woman and her sister.”

“That’s two women.”

“We know one of them.”

“What’s her name.”

“I’ll tell you ,” she said then proceeded to leave the air empty of words.

“Well? Are you going to tell me or not?”

“Yes.”

“Are you enjoying this game of yours?”

“Not as much as wiggling my toes.”

“Spill it all out, will you? Start with the client’s name.”

“Gina Wilson.”

She smiled devilishly while looking up at me through the top of her eye sockets.

“Come on Alex. Why do you have to give out information like its wartime food rations? Who is Gina Wilson and what does she want us to do?”

Alex took a big drag on her cigarette, then blew a big cloud

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