

"I FEAR, MR. BRAHM, THAT MY WIFE HAS BEEN UNFAITHFUL," SAID THE man in the light gray suit. "And I would like you to find out for sure."

"Why do you think that?" I said.

"Lately she has been dressing and undressing in the bathroom."

I leaned forward at my desk and made a note in my note pad. It seemed like the thing to do.

"We have a rather large bedroom, and traditionally she dresses and undresses there, in front of me. But as of late—"

I picked up where the man in the light gray suit trailed off. "But as of late, she's been getting dressed and undressed in the bathroom."

"Correct."

"And this concerns you because?"

The man in the gray suit had dark skin. His hair was black, slicked back. He appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent, maybe North African. He had an accent I couldn't quite place, a faint tag at the end of some of his words that whispered *a long time ago I was from somewhere else*.

He shifted forward in his chair, slightly. "It concerns me because she wasn't built that way."

"How was she built, then?"

"She was built, how should I put this?"

"Put it however you want," I said.

"She was built for pleasure." He shifted back in his chair and looked down at his left hand. "For my pleasure." His thumb was making small circles against the pads of his middle and index fingers. "You see, I spared no expense. It's not often a man gets the opportunity to marry the woman of his dreams. I should know. I've been married before, numerous times. But on this occasion,

I desired, as I said, to marry the woman of my dreams. So that is precisely what I did when I contracted to have Diane, ah, assembled. I spared no expense.”

“Who was the physician?”

“Do you think it is relevant?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. But maybe. If you don’t want to say now, I can always ask you later if I need to.”

The man thought about this briefly. “I suppose it makes no difference. Dr. Karl Maudlin. Do you know of him?”

“No,” I said. “Then again, there’s lots of people of whom I don’t know.”

“That is true for most of us, I suppose. He has an office in Midtown, just northwest of The Cross.”

I made another note. Now the first one had a friend. “So Dr. Maudlin built you a wife, and he built her for pleasure. Your pleasure, and yours alone.” If the man in the gray suit was uncomfortable about another man speaking in such a way about his wife, he didn’t show it.

“That is as good a way as any to put it. And Dr. Maudlin’s work is exceptional. He is, quite simply, one of the best. I made sure of it before I paid the deposit. You can hardly even see the seams.”

“And your wife used to dress and undress in front of you,” I said, “but now she dresses and undresses in the bathroom.”

“Yes.”

“And you think it’s because she’s gotten bashful.”

“Yes.”

“But there shouldn’t be a reason for her to *be* bashful.”

“Correct.”

“Because she wasn’t built that way.”

“Yes.”

I made one more note and then laid my pencil down. The poor thing needed a rest.

My chair creaked as I leaned back. My office was one of those one-room corner deals, with windows in two walls. It was big enough, one might even say spacious, if one were feeling partic-

ularly generous, until, of course, said one realized there was no waiting room, and the outer door opened directly into the hallway.

On the frosted window of the door, printed backwards when read from inside the office, were the words BRAHM & SHELLEY INVESTIGATIONS.

There were two desks in the room—the one I was sitting at, which was mine, and the one I wasn’t sitting at. Both had papers and folders stacked up neatly. Both had desk lamps that were lit, casting conflicting, angular shadows throughout the room with buttery swaths of yellow light. Twin black metal filing cabinets stood together in the corner. The blinds were pulled up, as were the thick, heavy blackout shades beneath. Cool night air wafted in through the open windows.

The wall clock read 4:15. Three stories below, the city of San Monstruo was wide awake.

“Your wife was built to be sexy and vivacious,” I said. “But only for you. She was built to give you just what you want. But now she isn’t doing that. And you think that maybe it’s because she’s giving it to someone else.”

For the first time a countenance of indignation flashed across the man’s dark face. It was brief, but it was most certainly there. And then it was gone. I’d hit a nerve with that last one. It almost made me feel like lifting up my pencil again and making another note.

“What I mean to say,” I continued, “is that maybe you feel she is supposed to be, ah, open with you, and bashful with others, but if now she’s bashful with you, then maybe she’s—”

This time the man in gray picked up where I left off. “Then perhaps she is spreading her legs for some unholy son of a bitch somewhere else. Yes. Correct.”

“Mr. Chatha,” I said, “I’m going to need a photo of your wife.”

“I assumed you might.” Mr. Chatha retrieved a picture from his breast pocket. He reached across and laid it on the desk. I picked it up.

Ka’anubis Chatha was correct. His wife Diane was most certainly built for pleasure. The photo had been taken at a party

somewhere. She wore a strapless green dress and gold shoes. Her skin was a delicate pale. She wore her hair up. It was a deep, almost-burgundy red. Her lips and nails were painted to match. Her neck was long and smooth. If I had to put a word to the neck, the word would be *exquisite*. I checked over the entire photo again. I thought maybe I liked the neck best. However, I would have conceded, had someone cared to make the argument, that any other single part of her came in a close second.

Diane Chatha's husband was also correct when he said that one could hardly even see the seams. She had one on each shoulder, just above the joint. Like two faint, faded blue chalk marks they were, and as far as I could tell, they were perfectly symmetrical. I didn't know much about these do-it-yourself types, but I did know one thing: symmetry was expensive. When you start slapping body parts together, it could get to be a hassle making different parts from different dames match up just perfect. More often than not decomposition would set in, forcing the doctor to move a stitch line back an inch here, nudge one over a few inches there. They could still look nice, these assembly-required dames, but not as nice as Mrs. Chatha. Not hardly.

"What can you tell me about your wife's nightly routine?" I said. "Where does she go? What does she do during the day? When does she generally leave the apartment?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Chatha said. "She shops. I know that. She shops almost every night. But as to where and when, well, I work most of the night. That's why I'm hiring you. To find out the answers to these questions."

"Where do you live?"

"940 Bingham. Two blocks north of East St. Gabe."

It was time for another note. I picked up my pencil and made it happen. Let it not be said that Vic Brahm is a man of inaction.

"I know where it is."

"Apartment 2701."

"Sounds nice."

"It is."

"You have a doorman?"

"Of course."

"Maybe he would know when Mrs. Chatha leaves the building each day?"

"He probably would," Chatha said. "But I am not going to ask him." Then, leaning forward, "And neither are you."

"I won't need to. I'm going to find out for myself."

"You will be discreet?" It was as much a statement as it was a question.

"You'll never know I'm there. And neither will your wife. And neither will your doorman." I splayed out both his hands, palms up. "All part of the service."

"And your partner?" the man said, nodding toward the empty desk across the room. "I trust he can be expected to demonstrate a similar level of professionalism?"

"Probably," I replied. "Shelley's dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"So was he. Is there anything else I should know before I move forward?"

"I don't think so," replied Chatha, standing up. "You have her picture. You have our address." He walked over to the coat rack in the corner and retrieved his gray, wide-brimmed hat. He turned back to me as he placed it on his head. "Oh, I was born four thousand years ago in Egypt, and I spent quite a few centuries entombed in a sarcophagus."

I stood up also. "So nothing of significance."

"Not that I can think of."

"Mr. Chatha, I'll be in touch when I know something." With that, I showed Mr. Ka'anubis Chatha to the door of my office. It wasn't hard to find. Like I said, the office wasn't that big, and plus I was a seasoned detective.

The clock now read 4:22. The sun would be up in less than two hours. Time to grab dinner and call it a night.

KA'ANUBIS CHATHA AND HIS WIFE LIVED IN A RITZY HIGH-RISE AT THE far-east end of midtown, overlooking the bay. Chatha's job, whatever it was, provided the funds for a pretty swank setup. The building was soft gray brick with lots of glass and chrome. The doorman I was not to talk to sat, for the most part, behind a big desk just inside one of the two revolving doors. His skin was so transparent he looked like a man-shaped balloon filled with fluid, muscle, and bone.

I spent three nights following the exquisite Mrs. Chatha, seeing where she went, what she did. More precisely, seeing what she bought.

The first night I waited half a block down at the bus stop not reading my copy of the *Monstruo Register*. At the bottom of page three was a bit about some elderly lady's effort to get Fagen's Well legally named a historical landmark, thus saving it from demolition next month. "It is a part of this city's history," the old lady claimed, right before purportedly casting a hex on the neighborhood and plunging fifty feet straight down, killing herself.

City officials were investigating whether or not the old hag was actually a witch, and whether or not, if she was, she had the ability to do anything extraordinary enough for the locals to worry about. For now the city wasn't taking any chances. After all, what mayor in his right mind would want the citizens of one of his precincts incubating slugs in their small intestines during an election year?

Mrs. Chatha left her place around eleven-thirty and went shopping down where St. Gabe meets San Diablo—at The Cross. She had popped in and out of more stores than I cared to count, and, as far as I could tell, each of the stores specialized in the same kind of merchandise—expensive. That evening alone she visited

a small art gallery, a custom furniture gallery, a jeweler specializing in antique pieces, a jeweler specializing in pieces that were not antiques, two dress boutiques—maybe three, I lost track—and an upscale lady's shoe shop. That last one had an enormous front window adorned solely with a single pair of red, strappy pumps sitting atop a solitary wooden stool. Somewhere in there she found time to take in lunch at a Turkish bistro.

When she left her apartment that night, she had done so empty-handed. And when she returned four or five hours later, she was still empty-handed. The packages arrived shortly thereafter, sent along by the boutiques and jewelers and dress shops via young delivery boys, handsome and hideous alike.

Each time the boys arrived, they didn't stay long, so apparently no funny business there. If Mrs. Chatha was fooling around, it was either with a gentleman who at this time to me remained anonymous, or she did it elsewhere. *Don't shit where you eat* is a pretty easy lesson in life. Surprising how few people ever actually learn it.

The second night she left a little after midnight. She took in a picture by herself at The Emperor, a baroque movie palace also located down at The Cross. I sat ten rows behind her. It was a who-done-it about this married couple who solved mysteries while saying things to each other that everyone was supposed to think were very witty. But it wasn't the kind of film people would actually laugh at, heavens, no. It was the kind of film that was too funny to make people laugh. When the husband said something to the wife, and then she said something back, people in the audience were supposed to smile and look at each other and make a face that said, "Yes, I understand why this is so funny. That is because I am so smart. And so are you. We are very smart people. We are so-phis-ti-cates. Ha ha. Yippee."

I was unable to solve the crime before the husband and wife explained the plot. In fact, I'm still not sure who done it. The husband said it was the palooka with the dog, but that hardly made any sense to me. He didn't seem the type. Then again, I was

watching Mrs. Chatha more than I was the picture. Even the back of her head in a darkened theater was nice to look at. Maybe not quite as nice as the front, but I would take what I could get.

On the third night I got lucky, and when I say that “I got lucky,” what I mean is, “Mrs. Chatha got lucky.”

That night I was staked out in my car across the street, my camera on the seat beside me. Around eleven, something happened that got me distracted, and I almost missed her leaving.

I'd been sitting there for a few hours. Ka'anubis Chatha had already left for the office. I was working on a powdered donut that I had brought along for company when a zombie passed by. He was dressed in orange and gray stripes—the standard issue uniform of civil street sweepers—and pushing a broom. On his face was bolted an iron mouth guard, a preventive measure to keep him from getting peckish with nearby pedestrians.

Giving the living dead street detail was a stroke of genius on the mayor's part. For years no one knew what to do with the poor bastards. I mean, there they are, you know, undead, just wandering around, biting people, making those people undead too. Sure, you could shoot them in the head or burn them or whatever, but half the time they came back a few months later anyways.

But here was the thing the mayor realized—zombies don't do anything except walk around and eat. So, hell, slap an iron plate over their mouths, stick a broom in their hands, and tell them to get to work. Smart thinking, in my book.

So there I was in my car when this meatbag comes sweeping by. Only this one, he gets himself wedged in between my car and a lamppost. Just stuck in there, sweeping and sweeping. Real Einstein, this dumb son of a bitch.

I didn't care, really, except he was starting to draw attention to me, or he soon would, and when you're tailing a dame and trying to take dirty pictures of her dancing in the sack, attention can be less than helpful.

I got out of my car, went around, and gave the meatbag a good shove. When I turned my attention back to the apartment, Mrs.

Chatha was already out the door. She was wearing a fur coat. I couldn't tell what kind exactly, but it was dark brown and closed up to her chin. On her head she wore a light brown hat with a white bow.

I had been trailing her for three nights now, and each time she wore a different fur coat. The first night fox. The second I was pretty sure was rabbit. This one was hard to tell, at least from my vantage point. Wolverine? Maybe kangaroo.

Standing in front of her was her invisible-skinned doorman, hailing her a cab.

I jumped back in my heap and started it up. By the time a cab picked her up, I had already pulled out and made a u-turn. We both headed south down Bay Avenue.

The bay stretched out on the right, high-rise apartments and office buildings stood at attention on the left. We passed The Dunes and snaked our way down the coast. Soon we passed the observatory, perched atop its rocky crag overlooking what would soon be Moth Island, once the tide went out.

And then Mrs. Chatha's cab took a left, heading west. Right smack dab into the heart of Paradise Valley. And that's when I knew that very soon I would be billing Mr. Ka'anubis Chatha for work rendered.

THE red neon sign on the hotel was one of many neon signs adorning the street. *Hotel Imperial* it read, only the word *Hotel* was not illuminated. A quick perusal of the surrounding area gave one the inclination that the hotel's name was perhaps slightly overwrought. Exaggerated, even. Late-night pedestrians came and went. Junkies and whores lined the sidewalks and doorways, milling around in that twilight world between business and pleasure, dug in for the long haul. Some real naughty folks lounged about as well.

A half-block down, jazz music sauntered out of a nightclub called The Argos, its front door propped open by the bouncers, two enormous guys joined at the hip—literally—both wearing

coveralls and dirty canvas sacks over their heads. A quarter-ton of inbred, Village-raised, toe pickin' hillbilly just looking for a fight. Yee ha.

There were several barbershops, an all-vampire girlie show, a small antique curio shop called World of Harms, a small Romanian grocery, a rib joint called The Boneyard, several liquor stores, and a movie house whose marquee advertised a double bill: *Full Moon Fever* and, ironically, *The Bone Yard*.

The hotel itself stood separate from the other buildings and nestled between two alleyways. Six stories high and sporting a front window too dirty to see through, the place reeked of bitter husbands, lonely drunks, and by-the-hour love.

Mrs. Chatha approached the establishment and entered without even a glance around to check if she was being seen by someone who shouldn't be seeing her. That meant she knew where she was going. It also meant she had been there before. Us professional detectives call that a clue. I almost wished I had brought my notebook with me. I could have written the clue down in it. Oh, well, live and learn.

I parked a block down, shoved a few coins in the meter, and made my way back up the street. I wasn't in much of a rush, only because I couldn't imagine Mrs. Chatha would be in much of a rush. She struck me as the type of woman who preferred to take her time and do a job right. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking on my part.

"Looking for to have company?" The voice was that of a female. A female what I wasn't sure until I turned to see who had spoken. She was, as Sandburg might have said, a "painted woman under a gas lamp luring the farm boys." Or as Shakespeare might have said, "a whore."

She wore a slinky dress cut right above the knee and dozens of thin, jangly bracelets on each arm. From her head grew a mop of twisting snakes hissing and nipping at each other. A neon sign advertising Las Mujeres Vampiro Bar and Grill hung above her and radiated green, swampy light, changing the squirming vipers

a liquid kaleidoscope of browns and violets. All in all, she wasn't half bad.

"You know what they say," she said. "Look inna my eyes an' I make you harda stone. C'mon, my friend. Show me to some love."

I kept walking, and she picked right up with the next passing potential client. "Hey, my friend, I turn you harda stone maybe?"

As I approached the hotel, I peered down the alley to the left. It was maybe four paces wide and littered with garbage cans and crumpled trash. The hotel's first-story windows were covered with wrought-iron bars, and the only doorway I saw seemed pretty intent on staying shut. The shades were drawn in most of the windows on the upper floors.

Up the adjacent building, a tobacco shop with apartments on top, ran a fire escape.

As I crossed the front of the hotel, I tried to peek inside. I couldn't catch a glimpse of anything. The windows were too dirty, and the small canvas awning cast an impenetrable shadow.

The alley on the far side was pretty much the same as the first, except the adjacent building on that side didn't have a fire escape.

I checked my watch. It was still early. I had no idea when Mrs. Chatha was coming out, and, quite frankly, it didn't much matter. The stuff I had been hired to sniff out was happening right then, not later. And besides, I was getting paid whether I stood outside a cruddy hotel fending off dope pushers and scale-covered whores or I sat in my office drinking coffee and reading the paper.

A shiny red delivery van slowly passed by—an early morning meat wagon. On the side in gold script lettering was printed KARLOV'S MEAT EMPORIUM. Below it, in smaller letters, read phrases like 24-HOUR SERVICE and FULLY HEATED DELIVERY VANS.

The back gate of the truck was shoved open, and a guy with two steel hooks swung a hefty, fire hydrant-sized chunk of shimmering goat flesh into the gutter. The truck rumbled on and turned a corner.

Karlov's had an exclusive contract with the city to supply late night snacks to San Monstruo's less-civilized populous. Every