

Shamu, World's Greatest Detective
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When Charles “Chick” Hennessey arrived at SeaWorld on a Thursday in April, he tried his best to hide his shock. He was pretty good at it, and little wonder. Having dated four linebackers, two catchers, and one golfer, I knew that athletic types, even retired-and-gone-to-seed ones like him, didn't like to show genuine anything to anyone. Everything was always hunky-dory with them. But even the best poker faces have a tough time with Shamu.

It's the smell.

I imagine it's because killer whales are so aesthetically pleasing on the outside, people expect them to be pleasing in general. Think of the scent of garbage piled outside of a seafood restaurant after a very long, very hot day. But a thousand times worse.

Shamu emerged from her tiny pool onto the slideout and called to me, via the thought-activated loudspeaker slung above us. “Angie! By my calculations, it is almost time for lunch. A bit late for callers, is it not?”

“There's just the one, then you can chow down. For your lunch bucket today, Jürgen will be serving frozen salmon and gelatin. Yum.”

“Yet again? How shall I contain my joy?” said Shamu, who then eructated loud and long, clearly meaning to astonish our guest. “Very well. I am famished enough to punt a porpoise. Proceed swiftly, Mr. Hennessey.”

Hennessey, his nose twitching above a rather ostentatious handlebar mustache, turned to me, “How did it know who I am?”

“*She* watches a lot of TV.” I used my head to indicate that he should speak directly to the orca.

“Mostly entertainment news,” said Shamu. “The real news is far too depressing.”

Hennessey, still looking at me and now pointing to his head, said, “So there's an implant?”

“Basically,” I explained for the jillionth time. “Five years ago an interface was implanted into Shamu's brain that translates her thoughts and allows her to communicate with us bipeds.”

I almost added, “And she hasn't shut up since.”

“Mr. Hennessey,” Shamu said, “there are few things in life I tolerate less than being late for lunch. To hurry matters, please understand that I already know you are the owner of the San Diego Padres. You are a former player yourself, have an ex-wife and two children, are worth \$826 million, own three homes and a yacht, and that you recently ate a pretzel with mustard.”

Hennessey looked down at his mustard-stained tie. “Hah, that's pretty good,” he said, still looking at me. “A very overpriced pretzel.” (Did this guy not know what prices were being charged at Petco Park?) “But how'd you know about the money and houses and stuff?”

“Shamu's also connected to the internet.” I nodded again to my boss, and Hennessey finally got the picture.

He turned to her and said, “Okay. Here goes. Month ago I traded with the Yankees for a new outfielder named Freddie Lopez. He’s a good kid, did well in his first few games. But now, suddenly, I can’t find him. He’s not in his digs, won’t answer his phone. I’m the kind of guy who goes to the best when he wants things done, and my contacts say you’re the best, so I’m here.”

Shamu slapped her tail on the water. “Have you asked the police to locate Mr. Lopez?”

“Nah. Guy like me goes to the cops, it gets all over the news. I don’t need that kind of publicity.”

Shamu abruptly slid back into the pool. “Thank you and good day, Mr. Hennessey. Lunch awaits!”

Hennessey’s bald head, already red from the sun, turned crimson. “What the hell does that mean?”

I tried to clarify things. “That means Shamu will not be taking your case, sir.”

“This is bull. You think I’m an idiot? You got some nerd behind the curtains doing all this smartmouthing?”

“I assure you that is not the case.”

I was prepared for what happened next. Hennessey should’ve worn a wet suit. Shamu launched herself out of the pool and bellyflopped, soaking us both in whale-scented water.

“Lunch!” she said.

Mr. Hennessey made more off-color declarations and threats before leaving in a huff.

I turned to Shamu, still submerged except for her tail, which was waving a wet goodbye at the millionaire.

“Why didn’t he make the cut?” I said. “I don’t have to note that Hennessey is filthy rich, and working for him could get you closer to that coastal sanctuary you’re always moaning about.”

“Correct. You do not have to note that.”

“Was it the nerd insult?”

“Hardly original.”

“The mustache?”

Shamu surfaced and spouted water. “The very thing. He reminded me of a sea lion with whom I once shared billing. An unapologetic ham.”

Jürgen arrived, and I helped him feed Shamu and then went off to feed myself some fish tacos. They were delish.

I didn’t think about Freddie Lopez at all, not until the next week when Inspector Didi McCall showed up in her usual blustery fashion.

“Boy, you really fry my eggs, Shamu,” said the curly-haired (bottle) brunette. “How a captive animal gets her fins involved in all my cases is what I’d like to know.”

Shamu ignored the remark. “As always, it is somewhat of a pleasure to see you, Inspector. May I ask to which case you are referring?”

“Freddie Lopez, new outfielder for the Padres. He’s been murdered. I hear Chick Hennessey was here recently asking you to fish around—”

“Careful, Inspector,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah. Like I said, asking you to *find* Lopez.”

“We didn’t take the case,” I noted.

“Maybe that was too bad. Who knows if you and Charm-Free Willy over here would’ve been able to save his life. I just wanted to let you know it’s a straightforward investigation, and there’s no need for you or your partner here to waste any of your valuable time.”

“Very kind of you to come out here and tell us,” I said.

Shamu shimmied onto the slideout. “Agreed. Your persiflage may not be welcome, but you always are, Inspector.”

“Have I just been insulted?”

“Don’t ask me,” I said.

“Since the investigation is, as you say, straightforward,” continued Shamu, “and since you and your stalwart team will solve it imminently, perhaps you can tell me more about the circumstances of the murder. I ask only out of professional curiosity.”

McCall shrugged. “I might as well because it’ll be over in a day or two. Lopez had just ordered a beer at the Chee-Chee Club when he received a call and walked outside. Someone shot him point blank, right there on the pavement. He was taken to Scripps Mercy and underwent emergency surgery but didn’t survive his injuries.

“Witnesses say Lopez had been talking to an older gentleman at the bar. Beard, glasses, wearing a suit. Dude fled the scene, but we’ve got a description and are on the lookout for him. Should pick him up in a few days. Like I said, straightforward. We’ve got plenty of witnesses. Just a matter of time before we hook the perp. Sorry! ‘Arrest,’ I mean, ‘arrest the perp.’ Didn’t want to trigger you.”

“Very considerate,” Shamu said. “And I do thank you for the information. Even though, as you have generously noted, my involvement is unnecessary.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said the inspector. “Just keep your wet nose out of it!”

That really seemed the last of it. Until two weeks later. A young woman named Molly East, with pretty curls and hazel eyes, came in looking flustered and upset. I would have ushered her in, but it was 9:50 in the morning and I told her she had to wait.

“It won’t be long. Every a.m. between eight and ten, Shamu maintains her Sims account. She has an Italian baroque villa populated entirely by Hemingway cats.”

“Oh. That sounds—”

“Nuts, I know. Why would a four-ton toothed whale create and maintain an Italian baroque villa populated entirely by Hemingway cats?”

“That’s interesting,” she said, but she was just being polite. She had something serious on her mind. We gabbed for another few minutes, and then the world’s greatest detective herself leaped from the water to ring the bell above the pool. Business was open.

I did the introductions.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying, Ms. Shamu, but I’ve always loved you since I was little.”

Neither Shamu nor I bothered to tell Ms. East that “Shamu” was a stage name and that there’d been seventeen other Shamus before this one, and that no doubt little Ms. East had been enamored with one of the earlier incarnations.

She continued. “Well, the thing is, someone killed my brother, and the police haven’t

been able to come up with any answers. He was a baseball player. His name was Freddie Lopez.”

The whale looked at me and I looked at the whale.

Shamu said, “When was the last time you spoke your brother?”

“A few weeks ago. I could tell he was upset about something, but he didn’t want to say anything.”

“How could you tell he was upset? Did he hint at anything?”

“No, he’s not like that. But, well, my son, Jeremy, he’s in high school and hoping to get a scholarship to U of C because we can’t afford college. A friend of his offered to hack into the school system to change Jeremy’s grades, and before I could say that my son refused to do it, Freddie went off on a tear about how he hated people who cheated and that nothing was more important than being honest and fair in this world. That it was more important than winning.”

Shamu shocked me by saying, “Ms. East, I promise we will find out who killed your brother.”

“I will pay you, of course.”

“Yes. Angie will discuss those particulars with you.”

After Ms. East left, I said, “Any particular reason for the change of heart?”

“She called me ‘Ms.’ and she said, ‘Please.’ Manners are to be appreciated and encouraged, Angie. Now, I would like you to find out as much as you can about Mr. Lopez.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, after our last visit from the inspector, I took a moment and already did some research.”

“Very proactive of you, Angie.”

“I think so.” I opened my phone and read from my notes. “‘Recently traded from the Yankees.’ Seems Hennessey got the better end of the deal. Both players Lopez was traded for were ‘injured or missed games for health reasons.’ Lopez had a batting average of .280. A decent fielder. One sports reporter called him ‘an up-and-coming star.’ No wife, no kids. Nor any scandals, I might add. Like his sister intimated, kind of a Boy Scout.”

“A Boy Scout, you say. Even a Boy Scout has secrets. And the ones who know best are his fellow scouts and his scout leaders.”

“So you want me to visit the Padres bullpen and poke around?”

“The sooner the better, Angie.”

Two pieces of good fortune happened that afternoon. First, it wasn’t a game day, so I didn’t have to park a mile away from Petco Park, wade through the encampments of unhoused in the East Village, and then get crushed by bug-eyed tourists looking for something to do between SeaWorld and the Gaslamp Quarter.

Second, after I couldn’t get ahold of Chick Hennessey, I was able to reach an athletic trainer I’d dated a couple years back. He said he’d be more than happy to sneak me into the clubhouse.

“Angie Gomez. Sexy as ever,” he said to me, giving me a warm, lingering hug.

“Drake Parker. Shy as ever,” I said.

After some catching up, I asked Drake if he had any intel on Lopez.

“In shape. Seemed like a nice guy.”

“Any secrets you know of? Steroids? Gambling? Girls? Boys?”

“Not that I’m aware of. But you better check with Reno and Britt. They hung out with him. You know who they are?”

“I know who they are.”

He walked me to the locker room and before he opened the door, he said, “Mind you, you might see a lot of nude dudes.”

“Well, since you’re their trainer, you should be able to tell me which ones to avoid, so I don’t trip over anything.”

We agreed to dinner soon, and he gave me another long hug, topped off by a lingering kiss.

In the locker room, I was greeted by even more rampant masculinity, solid funk mixed with cologne, and predictable hoots and catcalls.

In the corner, second basemen Reno Raines and outfielder Britt Pollack were playing what looked like gin rummy.

I told them who I was and asked, “Can either one of you tell me anything about Lopez?”

Britt shook his head. “What’s there to say? He was new in town. We took him out to a few places.”

“Like the Chee-Chee Club?”

“Nah, wouldn’t be caught dead in that dive. Ooh, sorry, I didn’t mean that. He seemed like a cool dude. Then last week he stopped showing up to practice and no one could get him on the phone.”

“Listen, the cops already talked to us,” said Reno. “We told them all we knew, which ain’t much. They seemed to think it was a random killing, and Freddie was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“That sounds like them,” I said. “Which reminds me. Now I know you two are strong, handsome, intelligent ballplayers. But even the best people who get interviewed by cops can feel put on the spot, and it’s only afterward they remember something they forgot to mention. Did either one of you have one of those?”

Right then Reno smacked Britt in the arm. “The app!” he said.

“The app?” I asked.

“Um, yeah. We forgot to tell the cops, but we thought about it later but then forgot again, like you said. Didn’t seem important. See, Freddie was new in town and he needed a little spending cash, so he was starting doing one of the fan-interaction apps. I was gonna do it, too, but I never got around to it. What was the name of it?”

“Fandr, I think it was,” Britt said. “Yeah, Fandr!”

I called Shamu to give her an update. She said to go to the Fandr HQ ASAP. I was already on my way.

“So how does it work?”

Fandr was created by an app dev outfit called QuasiMobo, one of the tech companies gentrifying the northeast East Village. After a few transfers and holds, I was shunted off to their head of PR, Jude Foster, who agreed to meet. Their open space office was in a warehouse of concrete floors, twenty-foot-high ceilings, and a coffee station every ten feet. Foster was all scraggly facial hair and expressive eyebrows.

“Ah! Fandr allows fans to interact with their favorite celebrities. Each movie star, music star, or star athlete sets a price and fans pay for brief interactions with them. Get a recorded message or enjoy a live video chat. Available now. Upload for free at the App Store.”

“Thanks for that thorough pitch,” I said. “So, Freddie Lopez signed up to meet fans on the app?”

“Yes.”

“I know this is virtual, but do any fans get to meet the stars live and in person?”

“Welllllll, they’re not supposed to. Connections can be made, of course. Stars are people too. We advise against it, and we make sure to tell the celebrities that.”

“To make sure you’re not liable.”

Foster’s eyebrows went up and he smiled. It made him look dumb but cute.

“Can you give me a list of the names of the fans he interacted with?”

“Um, some are listed on his page. But that’s only if they’ve chosen to share that. There may be some who choose to remain private, and we cannot release those names.”

“Nice. Privacy is important.”

“Indeed.”

“Indeed. At the same time, it’s possible one of your users was involved in murder.”

Foster’s eyebrows crashed together. Even dumber and cuter.

I gave him my best smile and put my hand on his forearm to press the point home.

“You want to make sure your company’s good name is kept clean.”

The eyebrows melted. He turned around to his laptop and did some quick clicking. “Lopez wasn’t on for very long, but he was popular because he was with the Yankees, so... Yeah, he interacted with more than nine hundred fans.”

“Whoa. That much? Can you narrow that down to fans who live on the West Coast, San Diego area?”

“Just a minute.”

“Thank you, Jude. Can I call you Jude?”

The eyebrows danced. “Please do. Seventy-five.”

After a shared single-origin coffee and an invite to dinner sometime, I brought the list of names back to Shamu. It was feeding time, so there was no discussion of business. Afterward, we looked through the names on the list together.

“This will take a long time to sort through,” I said. “We could give it to the cops and let them do the work for us.”

“We could, Angie, but then would we be doing due diligence for our client? I think not. We need to get a better look at all these suspects, the local area ones first.”

“You think one of these might be our shooter?”

“Possibly. Or he or she may be able to give us information that will bring us closer to the shooter. In any case, we do not want to tip our hand. The killer may feel he or she is free and clear of the police, but if we sniff around too closely, he or she may flee.”

“What’s the plan then? I know you have one.”

“We offer free tickets to see the star of SeaWorld! I will put on my old show.”

“Really? You think that will work? Everyone in town has likely seen you ten times already.”

“And an eleventh time would still be a privilege! But I comprehend your implication, Angie. Very well. Then say I am announcing a secret prize!”

“What kind of prize? It can’t be more free tickets to see the star of SeaWorld.”

“Very well then. Cash!”

Shamu has some pull with the park’s owners, so we were able to rope off a section for the seventy-five locals on the list.

Shamu did her old, well-honed, jump-and-jive routine, which dazzled the crowds.

I scanned the roped-off seats and understood immediately why Shamu had wanted to see them. I noted not one, not two, but five older gentlemen with beards and glasses. I knew that Shamu, despite her performing her heart out, had sharp vision and would no doubt have noticed the five as well.

One of them might have been the person who went drinking with Lopez that night and ran off before talking to the cops. With five possible leads, it was helpful that we’d had each of the suspects, I mean, *guests*, sign forms and sit in specific seats.

I was about to confer with Shamu about our next steps and—

—and that was the moment Inspector McCall showed up with stiletto heels, a megaphone, and a platoon of cops.

“Okay, everyone. Show’s over!” She pointed her goons toward the seventy-five. “Round those people up.”

So much for not showing our hand.

I stormed over to her. “Inspector, you can’t do this.”

“Can’t I? I told you and your blubber-filled boss this investigation was off-limits.”

“That’s not exactly what you said. You said that the investigation would be over in a couple of days. And here we are more than two weeks later and *pfffft*.”

Shamu splashed her tail for attention. “Inspector! If I may beg your indulgence, we are at the moment of crisis in this case. If you would just give me a few more minutes, we might have it solved.”

“No can do, Moby-Doo. We just heard about that app thing, and I appreciate your bringing these suspects together. Be grateful I don’t charge you for withholding evidence. But that’s only because I don’t have cuffs big enough.”

So all seventy-five guests were herded into cars and taken to the station for questioning.

If you’ve never heard a whale curse like a sailor in a computerized voice for a few hours straight, it’s not something I recommend.

After trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to calm down Shamu, I knew I needed a break. For the moment, it looked like the case was out of our hands. We had no more leads, and since there was nothing left to do, I decided to call up Drake Parker.

“I’m glad you called,” he said. “There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“If this is about my safety word again—”

“No, no. About the case. I have something to show you.”

We made a plan to go back to our favorite joint, the Bali Hai on Shelter Island. After what Drake said, not only was I hungrily anticipating crispy calamari and frosty piña coladas, I was also eager to see what the heck he was talking about. Given that Shamu was not in the best mood, I decided not to tell her until I knew what was what.

I put on my sexiest skinny jeans, an Eddie Vedder T-shirt, and ankle boots. It was a lovely night in San Diego, but aren't they all? As I pulled into a parking space, I spotted Drake getting out of his hybrid.

I parked, opened my door—and then a sound like a firecracker rang out. I ducked and rolled, checked my myself for wounds. Nothing.

More shots. The sound of breaking glass. Then a gasp and something hitting the ground.

Under the cars, I saw Drake was down.

I ducked and rolled some more. There were enough SUVs between Drake and I that I had good cover.

When I reached him, I saw his wound would be fatal if he didn't get medical attention ASAP.

The shots seemed to have stopped. People were running. I heard the crackle of a walkie-talkie.

I kept myself low to the pavement, got my phone out, called for an ambulance.

Tapping off the phone, I looked down to see Drake holding his car keys up with bloody fingers. Before fading out he said, "My backpack... Read the files."

After a trip to the hospital with Drake—he was going to be okay, but would be laid up for a while—I chatted with some detectives who were polite for a change. I told them about the gunfire but didn't mention the files I'd gotten from Drake's car. Those I kept in my bag. Later, I went back to the park and filled Shamu in on everything.

Despite the lateness of the hour, Shamu immediately called the inspector and put her on speaker.

"Inspector McCall?"

"Ah, look what the tide brought in."

"Cease your flummery. It is eleven o'clock in the evening, and you are still at the station. I imagine interviewing seventy-five suspects will take at least until the morning and beyond. How will you get your beauty sleep, Inspector?"

"What do you want already?"

"I can solve this case, in time for you to get home and rest your minuscule human brain. Could you please bring the following suspects to the pool as quickly as possible?" Shamu named the suspects.

"Just these five? Why?"

"When you gather them together, the answer to that question will be painfully obvious. While you might be tempted to proceed on your own from there, please know that I also have some evidence that I would like to share with you, in the interest of justice."

"Justice, uh huh."

"And would you also please locate Charles Hennessey and bring him with you. I'm sure he would like to be here as well."

"How the hell do I convince a millionaire to come see a whale?"

"Tell him the fate of his franchise hangs in the balance. He will come."

Meanwhile, I called Molly East and Jude Foster and invited them to come down as well.

By midnight, the area around the slideout was filled. Shamu emerged from the water,

the nighttime spotlights giving her the dramatic entrance she loved.

“Freddie Lopez was a very good baseball player, a potential star. But more importantly, he was an honest person. And when he inadvertently became tied up in a deception, he balked and fled. Ten days later he was found murdered.”

Shamu turned to the five bearded and bespectacled suspects McCall had hauled in and asked each of them to describe what they had discussed with Lopez.

The ophthalmologist had always dreamed of becoming a ball player, and from the sound of it, he grilled Lopez for twenty minutes straight about the possibilities of an ophthalmologist “in pretty near top condition” becoming a professional baseball player at thirty-seven years of age.

The waiter said he was just checking out the app and that Lopez was the cutest and the cheapest celebrity on there.

The sales rep said he was so high when he chatted with Lopez he didn’t even remember downloading the app.

The security guard said he was a diehard Padres fan (bless his heart) and that he wished Lopez the best of luck.

The lawyer’s name was Rick Simon (né Sidransky) and he came from the Bronx. That clicked something with Shamu. Her eyes closed and she gently swayed her tail under the water.

“... at first we just talked about the old hometown,” said Simon, “reminiscing about Yankee Stadium and good deli. But then when he found out I was a lawyer, he said he was in a bind and asked me if he could talk to me in person, as he was unsure of the security of the app. He wanted legal advice. We made an appointment to meet somewhere out of the way, where no one was likely to recognize him.”

“The Chee-Chee Club.”

“Exactly, but before we got to talking, he got a text that seemed to spook him. He ran outside without another word. I waited, then I heard a shot. A bunch of us ran to look, but the shooter was gone. I was afraid I’d be implicated, so I bolted.”

“Thank you, Mr. Simon. Now the question surfaces: Who texted Freddy? Who and what would grab Freddie’s attention so forcefully that he would end this secret rendezvous so quickly?”

McCall spoke up then. “We traced the number of the last text he got. It led to *nada*.”

“As I would have expected,” said Shamu. “Mr. Foster!”

His eyebrows flew way up. “Yes?”

“Your company prides itself on the privacy of its apps. But in the case of Fandr, what part do the franchise owners have to play?”

“Now wait a minute!” Hennessey seemed even redder at night. “I don’t like where you’re going with this.”

“Noted. Answer the question, Mr. Foster?”

“The franchise owners are involved in the contract process.”

“So Mr. Hennessey knew that Mr. Lopez was on the app. Did he ask you to give him recordings of the interactions?”

I leaned in. “Be honest, and you might wiggle out of an accessory rap.”

I can’t quite describe what his eyebrows were doing, but it was vigorous.

“Yes! Yes, he did.”

“When did he ask for these? What date?”

“Oh, April 15! I remember because of tax day.”

“Three days after I refused to find Mr. Lopez for him,” Shamu said. “Mr. Hennessey, I have in my possession medical records for players on the San Diego Padres baseball team.”

I handed the records to McCall.

“These records show that for the last several years, since Mr. Hennessey’s ascendancy to team owner, there have been two sets of medical records for the players. One for internal use and the other for industry consumption, in an attempt to come out ahead in trades. The latter was remarkable for its omissions and understatements. Mr. Lopez somehow found out about these records; it offended his admirable sense of fair play. If these records were revealed to the public it would cause a great scandal for you, would it not, Mr. Hennessey? Which would further decrease the already lagging ticket sales, hurting your business empire considerably. No doubt, hiding these records made it worth your while to stalk and kill Lopez and then also to shoot Mr. Parker?”

Hennessey looked apoplectic. “I ain’t talking to a fish. I want a lawyer. All you got is circumstantial.”

“Not merely. A quick check of your hands should find gunpowder residue, regardless of how well you washed them. But, rather more dramatically, you failed to note the amount of security cameras now placed at the marina.”

A video suddenly appeared on the gigantic display above the pool, and it showed, briefly but, yes, dramatically, Hennessey running through the Bali Hai parking lot holding a gun.

McCall took him away without so much as a thank you.

To no one’s surprise, blue skies ruled over San Diego the next day. I was doing laps with Shamu and it was almost time for her to zone out with her Sims.

“I gave Molly East the discount you told me to,” I said. “You know that means your retirement is a little farther off?”

“Her brother’s character prompts one to be charitable.” Shamu turned and exposed her white belly to the sun. “In any case, it is more important to be honest and fair than to reap profit. I will see my dear ocean soon enough, all in good time. Besides, I signed up for Fandr and have already earned a considerable sum from my devoted fandom. Now, Angie, to my kitties!”

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