

Zombie Investigations, LLC.

By

Ali Lauderdale

Part 1: New Client

Given a time of death before even being born was not the death sentence it seemed. Luckily- or perhaps not, depending on how much you like eating brain matter- the cure for babies who died in utero had been formulated.

A simple shot into the amniotic fluid and, voila! You no longer have to grieve for a deceased baby. Selfish parents all over the world took advantage of this, and mine were no different. They thought less for my quality of life and more for their desire to have a baby to name Maxwell Jr.

Now somewhere between life and death, I grew, and the unexpected side effect of constant cravings for grey matter was all I knew. They mashed it up into my formula so I wouldn't go mad even as an infant.

As I got older I had to eat more and more all the time until finally they realized that zombies aren't cute and they surrendered me to the state's most mediocre zombie orphanage. The brains there weren't top notch, and more than a dozen of us slipped to the edge of madness, though I managed to get out of there right on time.

My only choice after that was to live under the shadows, but I had to make money to feed that incessant beast within. So I started up my little P.I. business and used my unnatural senses to my advantage.

I shouldn't call them unnatural, probably just inhuman. Closer to a dog, honestly, if the dog has severely deadened nerve endings. I can appear strong because I don't feel it when something hurts. It comes in handy when I'm attacked by some thug in one of a dozen underground bars, but not so much when I want to get with a lady, if you know what I mean.

I never compared myself to a dog until a cop told me I was a bloodhound. This was after I helped them discover that a room was covered in the blood of not one, but twenty different people. Everyone has their own particular smell.

Crime-solving is about the only place skills like this are useful.

Did I want to be a cop? At one point in my childhood, yes. But the second I walked into the police station for their "Meet A Hero" day when I was seven, I learned my lesson. "Kid, zombies can't be cops. People don't feel safe around you, even the nice zombies." Honestly, that was probably the kindest thing anyone did for me. Crushing my dreams early helped my hopes not climb too high.

You could say I'm grounded in reality.

Clients have reviewed me online, more than one of them remarking on how I "cut to the chase," and "never sugarcoat." Why should I? I'm taking their money, doing exactly what needs done, and then reporting it. What's there to sugarcoat? "Sorry sweetheart, I know you had your mind set on meeting your birth mother, but she maybe just needs some time," seems too cruel. "Yes, I found her. She doesn't regret giving you up and she doesn't want to see you. The tissues are over there," suits me just fine.

So, on any particular day, I have a dozen sob stories come in. Honestly, most are solved within a couple hours with an internet search, but I make people wait a few days so they feel like I worked hard. I charge by the case and not by the day, so that works. It keeps a steady cash flow.

I know some other P.I.'s like to work from dank underground storefronts, the kind with toilets that aren't bolted to the floor, but after the orphanage I am averse to the dingy and moldy. I don't need that atmosphere; I'm already the freaking undead. My place is an average-looking but clean storefront next to a nail salon and a pet shop in a strip mall whose parking lot is only mildly shaded.

Inside I have three rooms; a bathroom of course, with a nice toilet definitely installed professionally, a front room, and a back room. My front room has some anonymous sofas and coffee tables, plus my desk I hesitate to call lavish. I use striped wallpaper because I am sentimental and dislike hanging paintings.

The back room is just filing cabinets, a gun safe, and a money safe. I bricked up the back door a long time ago.

When people walk by, they can see through my two plate glass windows. Most of the time, however, they snicker a bit at the name. I have no lighted sign, but I did have someone put the lettering on each window for Zombie Investigations, LLC. Why sugarcoat things? People should know what they're getting themselves into.

When people come in, they always talk first. Many give me the entire case before I even say hello. Then I tell them I'll take their money and their case and call in a few days. Easy as pie.

Today, however, my client surprised me by walking in and then sitting down. The cream-colored couch made a little squish noise which made me realize that nobody had ever sat in it. She crossed her legs and cracked her knuckles, then picked up a three-year-old People Magazine. She leafed through it and I just stared, caught off guard.

I said that everyone smells differently, and this woman smelled like warm almonds and goat milk. Her real, true smell. She wore no perfume.

I was completely unprepared since no client had ever made me speak first.

"Hello?" I said this tentatively and then immediately felt like an idiot.

She dropped the magazine rather aggressively straight onto the couch and shook her fuzzy hair in my direction. "Hey, where's the detective?"

"I am the detective," I started, then, thinking better of it, said, "I mean, I'm the private investigator."

She bit her little lower lip and apologized, "Sorry, you were at a desk so I thought you were a secretary or something. Why do you have a typewriter?"

I looked at my desk in front of me, "Oh, I just like the look. It isn't really a typewriter, just looks like one. It plugs into a tablet."

"Oh," She said.

I stared at her helplessly while she fiddled with the contents of her purse and stood, walking toward me in wrinkly leather flats. She stared at me over my desk and huffed quietly, tapping a foot.

Finally, a million years later, she thrust a folded note at me. The folding was reminiscent of the skills of a kid in middle school passing a love declaration. The thought harvested some discomfort in me, but I still took the note.

"I need you to find the person who wrote that."

"Find the person who wrote this note?" I asked, in the most redundant way possible. At once I annoyed myself because I hate redundancy. It reeks of superfluousness, which I also despise.

"Yeah," she said. "It has all the information you should need. My name's Lucy. You'll call me in a few days, right?" Brown, knowing eyes blinked at me and all I could do was nod. "Great, what's your fee?"

"Five thousand, up front." I said mildly, wondering what I was even doing taking a case so stupid.

"Great. Here." She pulled a stack of cash from a purse that now appeared suspiciously empty and thumped it on my desk. "Thanks." She said, and both her and her mold-green cotton sweater dress left the building.

I counted out the cash- five thousand precisely- and placed it into my safe with her card. I didn't even read it, just stapled it to one of the bills. A case was a case, no matter how stupid, right? If I couldn't find this guy, I'd just give everything back.

The note seemed like it had been opened and closed repeatedly for years so the lines were soft and worn. At one point water had dripped on the corner, so the blue lines swelled to white circles there. The writing was small and juvenile, in sparkly blue gel pen, but thankfully still legible.

"Lucy, we're moving away. I won't even get to see you before we go. How messed up is that? They don't know I guess what having b.f.f.s is like. Duh. Anywho, I'm not supposed to tell you where we're going because they're stupid jerks, but I'm going to anyway. They suck.

Here's my new address:"

At this point there was a line break, but a perfect rectangle had been cut from the middle of the note where the address must have been. Then it continued.

"Please take care of Our Bug for me. I'm sorry I can't help anymore. We won't be able to talk probably for a long time. I'm going to miss you though. Being a mile up won't be so bad if I just remember that when I'm 18 I can hang out with you guys again. L.Y.L.A.S."

The note was signed, "Jemma Aardvark."

Well, I thought grimly, Case Closed. She said to find out who wrote it and I have.

Only, I knew what she meant. Find Jemma Aardvark. I also knew something else. I already knew where Jemma Aardvark was. Everybody knew where Jemma Aardvark was. Her family name was ridiculous, but the Aardvarks were also one of the wealthiest families in the nation.

The pieces fell together. Lucy and Jemma had been friends and when Jemma moved away, they'd lost touch. Her family was new money- some tech company that had risen in the last decade or so- and clearly after they had moved the parents had cut her off from old friends. Most likely given a private tutor. Lucy had to know this. Obviously this was Lucy's way of getting close to her friend.

After all, how do you contact a celebrity? You can't, not really. They don't run their own fan clubs, social media, or even answer their own mail. The Aardvarks were so rich that they might not even come out of the compound in which they live. Effectively, celebrities.

But, a job is a job, right?

Maybe this would be fun. I'd never broken in to a billionaire's life before.

Part 2: A Real Gumshoe

The next day, I headed back into my little office. I had gone home after Lucy because, frankly, I was not about to start a new case at four in the afternoon.

There are benefits to owning one's own business.

I opened a brand spanking new file folder and clipped the note inside. I then immediately filed the thing away.

Like I said, sometimes a case can be solved easily, especially with the entire internet at my disposal. But I had a true sense of forboding about this one. I'm not saying zombies have a sixth sense or anything. But I had been right before.

So, I blew through several cases that I had been sitting on. Mostly just phone calls with the usual:

"Yes, he's cheating on you. She's not bad looking. No, I won't eat her."

"No, he doesn't have a job. He actually just sleeps in his car at one of several department stores all day."

"No, he's not cheating on you, he goes to a gay bar where he dresses like a woman and sings bad Tiffany covers all night. No, I won't eat him."

I even have a couple actual detectives who have relied upon my tremendous sleuthing skills more than a few times. They get paid far better than me, but a job is a job, right?

Finally I couldn't put it off any longer. I had basically cleared my entire schedule and it was only noon, and I also didn't feel like cutting out early. Still, I procrastinated more and had my same old lunch; store-brand Ramensta-Brains, registered trademark. I actually made myself two helpings, even though the ranch flavor is my least favorite.

At one-thirty I plunked myself down and began working on the case that was already making me more miserable than I had ever been. I couldn't put my finger quite on the problem, which was even worse. I started from the top, with a simple search for Jemma Aardvark in the news.

Well, it wasn't squat, but it wasn't great, either. For such a famous family, their daughter sure wasn't very well covered. A couple articles about her 16th birthday bash from five years ago and a mention of her in the obituary of her mother, a woman I had no clue had died, which tells you just how much I pay attention to current events.

There was a profile from afar of her face and a family portrait in the image search and that was it. I printed all this out and slid it into the file, then took another look at the note. Clearly she'd moved to Denver, which would explain the Mile High reference. I had no idea what "Our Bug" was, but that didn't seem relevant to finding her now.

I put it back and went back to the computer. Well, now I knew her mom was dead, but where was her father, the tech tycoon? James Aardvark, the brilliant mind with the stupid surname. Turned out he was still right here in Colorado. There were plenty of articles about him, and mostly related to Aardvark Industries. Wonderful, I thought to myself. It always goes well when the company is Something Industries.

I gulped down some water and looked outside. The damn sun wasn't even near the horizon.

I grabbed some paper and drew out a little timeline of the Aardvark family's movements. They lived in Portland for fifteen years, just the three of them. James was a guard at a nuclear power plant that had been closed for years and his wife was a waitress. Then suddenly James got a new job working in some lab as a pharmaceutical developer, a year after which he was granted the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in developing a new life-saving drug. He sold the thing for billions of dollars to an unnamed buyer and they all moved to Colorado, where he opened his own little lab right outside his house on his property in Golden.

Lucy had to know this, or else why would she be here? My assumption was that she still lived in Oregon, and a quick search revealed that she still had an address in Portland. So Lucy wanted me to actually find Jemma, as in, go to her and get her to most likely reunite with Lucy.

But something smelled fishy, and it wasn't the indigestion from the Ramensta-Brains. No article I found revealed anything about the drug he'd developed, or why a random security guard at an abandoned plant had suddenly become head bio-chemist or lab tech or whatever he was supposed to have been at a legitimate pharmaceuticals developer. The

developer itself, it seemed, had closed as part of the billion dollar deal Mr. James Aardvark had made.

What was I about to get myself into?

Only one way to find out. I called one of my detective clients and, due to him basically owing me his salary since he outsources his cases to me, he looked up the Aardark Estate's address. He knew better than to ask why since, as previously mentioned, he essentially owes me his entire lifestyle. It seemed James had moved himself and his daughter to the outskirts of Evergreen after his wife died.

I grabbed my humble little camera-fitted drone(everyone should have one, they come in handy for so many things) and hopped on my motorcycle toward the mountains and Evergreen, Colorado.

Once I got close, I turned off onto a different path and pulled my bike into some bushes. The trek wouldn't be too far, and the drone had full battery power. It flew up and I watched the screen. It didn't take long to see the mansion and I began my hike in that direction. Twenty boring minutes later, when I was actually kind of enjoying the woodsy pine scent, I groaned. I heard barking. "Freaking dogs, that's all I needed."

Dogs do not like zombies. I think it has something to do with smell. No zombie smells great, and any zombie will admit that. Regular humans don't really smell it, though they can tell us plainly enough from our weird grey-ish flesh. But it is an unnatural smell and we all smell exactly the same. And dogs do not like it. I have been attacked by tons of dogs.

I stopped and flew my little eye in the sky a bit farther forward. Finally I saw what I had hoped to see; a tall fence wooden fence with barbed wire lining the top. It encircled the land, which was fine with me. I walked as close as I dared before I thought the dogs might catch my scent. I could just see the fence through the trees and I was tired, so I sat down and piloted my drone over to the mansion, where it happened to be my lucky day.

The backyard had a pretty huge hot tub, and who was lying next to it but Jemma Aardvark. Jemma Aardvark in a nice little bikini. Sure, the sun was going down by now, so it wasn't as though she was bathed in golden sunlight, but she was hot. At least, her backside was.

Another benefit of owning your own business: no HR department.

But suddenly I noticed something strange. It caught me off guard and honestly scared me a little. I had to be wrong. I flew my little drone back and rushed to my motorcycle. Speeding the entire way back, I kept telling myself I had to be wrong. There was no way. *It is just the shadows, Maxwell, you idiot.*

By the time I got back into the office I was parched and starving to the point where I just ate the Ramensta-Brains dry after sucking down two water bottles. I shook as I hooked up the drone to my laptop. It was impossible. I fast forwarded the footage and zoomed. Paused.

I was right. *Damn, damn, damn.*

Jemma Aardvark, was a zombie.

Jemma Aardvark could not be a zombie. She had been born normal and the pictures of her with her family in the paper were normal.

And yet.

Jemma Aardvark was a zombie.