

## Ready, Set Chapter 8

Dilbert

Whew, there's so much to do. When you're a scissor-sharp detective like me, everyone expects smooth edges. But detecting is a messy business. It's like cleaning out a barn; stuff gets heaped and jumbled before it gets put right. And that's what I do—I put things right. Criminals right in the slammer, Thester right where I can keep an eye on him, and when I can manage, doggy treats right in my mouth. I must say, all this righting of things can dry the hounding in my bones. Sometimes I feel like a hot dog under a tractor's tire. Pressure-squished. Don't tell Thester that, not the hot dog part. But it is a lot of pressure. Why I keep working hard to please everyone, I'll never know.

Let's see, I think I've packed all my gear—spy glasses that provide X-ray vision, my secret-agent camera that looks like a button on my shirt, dog bones, undercover UV flashlight to read invisible ink, and of course I'm packn'. You know, shhh, a pistol. Here, take a look...drip...drip...drip... It's a Glock model 22, .40 caliber. Drip. Like in that detective movie the Fieldjoys watched last night. It's sweet...drip...drip...drip... Hmm...and kind of sweaty... Hope I don't have to use it.

Let's see, better go over my checklist before I take off.

Pack gear. (Check)

Warm up sniffer. (Check)

Oh, I guess I didn't tell you. I have all these test tubes in my detective agency. Each one's filled with a different concoction. I prepare my sniffer for a case by quizzing my nose. I inhale the scent of a test tube, guess what the scent is, and then look at the answer key to see if I'm right.

Haven't missed one yet. Anyways, back to my packing list:

Get airplane ticket to Iceland—region called Volcano Volley. (Check)

Leave coded message for another detective. (Check)

You know, to take over the case if—*gulp*—something happens to me while I'm chasing the sinister thief. (Check—*Woops!*—no check)

My strong, massive paws are perfect for a job like this.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?" Thester sticks his horsey face into the office's entryway. "Looks like fun; need some help?"

"Sorry, gotta have a certain touch for this task; I'll put it on my list to train you in coding and decoding messages when I get back," I answer, feeling kind of bad for Thester.

He peers at my masterwork with those immense—sort of googly—eyes of his. I've practiced this coding skill for many years, so I'm pretty fast.

"Excuse me, Thester." I squeeze past him to get to the mud puddle outside my office door.

Being strict about my carefulness, I turn my paw to the perfectly calculated angle and re-dip it into the mud. Then, I hold my paw in the air as I hobble-hop on three legs back into the office to print the secret message. Two toe tips, one more side print, and one last full flat paw print.

“There! No one will ever be able to decode this message in a million years!” I exclaim, standing tall.

“Soooo...Why print it?” Thester thoughtlessly asks.

“Bet I can,” Thester foolishly tells me.

“Go ahead and try; no one but a trained detective will be able to read this message,” I warn Thester, not wanting him to get his hopes up. He can really embarrass himself sometimes.

“It says, any hot dog knows...” Thester pretends to struggle to read the code. “Dilbert’s real name is Oscar Meyer!”

“Funny, funny. I am not a wiener dog, nor an Oscar Meyer hot dog. I am a detective, and this is an important message; only an experienced sleuth such as myself can...”

“What does it say?” Thester blurts, begging me to tell him; he wants to be a detective like me so badly.

“Thester,” I am surprised by the breathy huff in my voice; there's a tight twist in my ribcage, “If something should happen to me while I’m hounding the Hope Diamond thief, just show this code to the next detective that takes over this office. He’ll know what to do.”

“You got it, Chief!” Thester's neck stretches high and his hooves kind of click together. His whole body looks like a salute. “But where are you going and what could happen? And most importantly, can I go too?” Now his back slumps and curves; I swear he looks like a question mark.

“You’re a good pal, Thester. But this mission is too dangerous for a rookie like yourself. Just hold down the fort here; I’ll call you if I need some assistance.”

I grab my suitcase, my hat, and my plane ticket.

“See ya, Thester!”

And I’m off for Iceland.