

Twisted Thoughts, Stiffened Ears

Chapter Two

Thester

I'm perfectly still; the only things moving are my eyeballs. They move upward, sideways, downward; they follow it, follow it, twirling, looping, until—snap—just like that, the fly's caught between my teeth. And that, my friends, is what they call skill. Personally, I call it fun. You get a lot of fly-catching practice when you live on a farm. I'm lucky that way. Actually, there's a bunch of good things around here. But hear that? That kabang? That's not one of them.

I hunch down and peer into the doghouse. Yep, Dilbert's at it again. I wonder if that hurts; looks like it would. Amazing though—how he uses those long floppy ears like a ping-pong paddle to smack that ball. Almost seems fun, except for the pain part. Kind of wish I had ears that could do that. Still, I'd rather be a horse. Don't get me wrong; hound dogs are great, love 'em, especially Dilbert. He's my pal. But, come on. We got the whole "horse sense" thing going and even better, all the "horsing around" stuff we get to do. Nope. It's a horse life for me, any day, every day. And yet...

Truthfully, it does look pretty fun to be Dilbert, a hound dog covered in all those rolls of skin like he is—all those waves of droopy flab, each skin roll forming a secret shelf. I mean, come on. How great is that? He's a living, howling storage unit, so cool. Plus, the dog's got all kinds of gadgets and gizmos tucked between those rolls of his. Don't know of another hound with quite the same feature. It's true that all bloodhounds have sagging rolls of skin, but none like Dilbert; he's got ten hounds' worth of extra skin, not a wallet but a whole purse of paunch pouches. Really puts us at an advantage when it comes to getting a job done. In fact, just last week, Dilbert and I had this really important job—sniffing out a blown tire by the side of the road and then following the scent until we discovered which car it belonged to. Important job. And big too. We had to follow the scent all the way into town in order to locate the car. And locating the car was just the start. I then had to stand guard while Dilbert issued the owner a warning. He lifted his back leg and marked the vehicle as a possible safety threat. After all that work, we still had the long journey home, which required a whole bunch of other jobs, stuff like: skirting the occasional honking vehicle, chasing several rabbits, and heckling the neighboring farm's dogs, who are always too fat and lazy to jump the fence and join us, things like that. By the time we were half-way home, we were, needless to say, pretty tired and definitely hungry. I started snapping at flies, which is fun but not very filling. But old Dilbert, he just pulled a half-eaten sandwich from a shelf below his chin and started chomping. You gotta respect a skill like that. So, yeah, Dilbert and me, we're friends. Now, Mrs. Fieldjoy, she says we're escape artists; we like that classification as well.

Another crashing kabang abruptly yanks me back to the present. I wish Dilbert would stop. Poor guy, he looks downright sad. Though, sometimes it's hard to tell; the way his wrinkly loose skin sags from his face, it naturally gives him a sad, shriveled-apple look. So...sad, happy—it's hard to say. Good thing is, he has me as a friend. I know how to cheer him up. He really likes it when I play pranks on him.

Dilbert curls his upper lip and growls as he swings his ear into the ball.

Each time he hits the ball, he makes this I'm-gonna-get-you kind of expression. Boy, he's really goin' at it. Yep, he's upset alright. I really see it now.

Clenching his canine teeth, he bashes the ball into the wall. It's like he wants his doghouse to cave in or something. Oh, should warn you, best avoid using the word "doghouse," at least when you're around Dilbert, unless you get a kick out of a dog flashing his knifey fangs at you. If you say "doghouse," he'll instruct you to say "detective agency," except for when he's wearing his eye goggles—if he is, he'll want you to call it a "laboratory," or if he's got a lot of mud on his paws, he may have been coding messages on the inside walls of his doghouse; if this is the case, he'll want you referring to it as his "intelligence headquarters." It can be confusing. So, unless you're like me, good at batting away other critters' growls and grumbles, it's probably best to just point at the place and not call it anything. Yep, I know what you're thinking, and you're right: Dilbert is a complex dog. But he's my friend too. And that's why I really don't like what I'm seeing right now.

I can hear his breathy growl kind of sizzle when he smacks the ball. Whenever he whips his ear into it, he lets the air squeeze between his teeth and escape his mouth. He kind of sounds like the truck's overheated engine. He better stop; he's gonna hurt himself.

Dilbert

It feels good to hit something. The ball smacks the inside wall of my office, rattling the roof. It bullets toward me again, and I tip my head and swing my long ear into it; it whacks the wall perfectly. This time, the bang jangles the ducks in the nearby pond, bumping their squawking scatter. But I need louder. The more vicious the crash, the better. Cracks begin clawing at the rubber ball's surface. The harder I smack it, the deeper and longer the cracks.

No work—not one case to solve—not even one phone call. Ugh, I'm panting like a steam engine; my heart is ringing in my ears. I don't care; I'm gonna keep whacking this ball until I get a solution, each added chip in its rubber surface is somehow beastly satisfying; every added crumble is punishment for the unacceptable hollowness inside my head. The cavities inside my skull should be full, should be crammed with ideas, plans, and formulaic plots, should ooze creative detecting. I'm supposed to be a detective. What's going on?

The Fieldjoys are always saying stuff like "Smart dog!" and "What a clever canine!" They swim in gushiness whenever they scratch under my chin. What would they think if they saw all the zeros inside my brain? Things better change; I better find a mystery to solve, or they might kick me to the curb. I can totally see it...living from trash can to trash can—all alone, homeless. Well, not literally, I mean not the kicking part. The only things I've seen the Fieldjoys kick are the tires on their tractor. OK, I guess the curb part's not exactly accurate either since we live down the road from town where there aren't any curbs. But still, what if they start thinking I'm not much use anymore, start forgetting to give me my afternoon treat? I really like those chewy things.

Whatever..I'm just going to keep destroying this ball. I do my fancy over-the-head back-eared maneuver. The ball obeys me and zings through the air; it ricochets off the ceiling, hitting my desk (and yes, it is a desk; don't even think about calling it a doggy bed—I hate it when people say that), then smacks

into the wall. The ball rips across the room. It's coming toward me. Whack...I greet it with a mighty blow. ...Wow...I'm kind of good at this.

I'm ignoring Thester right now; I know he's watching me. He's amazed at my strength and flexibility. He wishes he had my skills. Poor guy. I don't look down on him, though. He can't help it if he's a horse. Hmm...maybe I shouldn't do this in front of him—you know—all these super awesome moves of mine. He already feels bad enough that he doesn't have a submoronic nose like I have. Mr. Fieldjoy's always saying that word, submoronic, or is it uncomic? No, that's not the word—bionic, he says bionic. Yeah, that's it. He'll flex his arm and say something about his bionic powers; I can tell he's joking though 'cause Mrs. Fieldjoy always laughs when he says that; plus, I am a detective, so of course I get the joke. It's true about me, though—I am bionic; except I'm better than bionic; I'm electromagnetic, which is a much better word, obviously. I can smell the slightest scent and follow it for a hundred miles. I can detect an odor and map out the path of a suspect. Thester definitely can't do any of that. He can barely smell what's right in front of him. Once I saw him trot right up to a skunk. Everyone knows not to do that. Yep, that horse really looks up to me—I can see him doing it right now. I've got great eye corners; they catch all kinds of things, especially a horse that thinks he can hide behind a tree. But I can't think about Thester right now. He's just gonna try to make me laugh—and I'm not in the mood and until I've got a case, don't plan to be!

Thester

Wait; Dilbert what are you doing? The darn dog is leaping sideways, diving for the battered ball. He's gonna kill himself. The ball zings toward his face; it hits his ear's sweet spot and really flies. It pings off the ceiling, hits the top of the wall, and then slams into the floor, just missing the water bowl inside his doghouse, I mean detective agency.

Dilbert's ball ricochets off the wall and bops me on the head. Ouch. OK, this is getting old. Better say something. NEIGH...I said...NEIGH! Ugh, that Dilbert is so stubborn. Maybe I should trot over to the old drain pipe and call Dilbert on his phone. That's kind of a joke we have going between us. We like to pretend this old piping system that runs from the farmhouse to the barn and then over to the doghouse/laboratory/headquarters is a phone. At least I think Dilbert's pretending. Doesn't matter; I've got a call to make. ...Let's see, who will I be this time?

Dilbert

Good, he's leaving. I'm gonna crash. I circle my cushy chair three times before flopping into it, like I'm supposed to. No matter how weary I feel, I always get the job done. That's just the way I am. I lean my head back and stretch my neck. My ears flip inside out. I know it's ill-mannered to let one's ears do that, but I don't care.

I feel downright lousy.

What's the use of being a hound dog with nothing to hound? I sink deeper into my chair, pushing my skin upward, deepening its folds. Instinctively, I plunge my snout into one pocket of skin. Everything is dark and the world goes away.

Not for long.