

Who's Calling

Chapter 3

Detective Dilbert

The air in my office is sticky and thick, like I'm trying to breathe through a blanket, so I pull at my tie, trying to loosen it a bit. Air, I need fresh air. But I can't leave the office. What if the phone rings while I'm out? What if a client comes needing detective work?

"For the Love of Dogmittens!" I growl. The ceiling fan is having another seizure. It's jerking back and forth in a semicircle. Leaning back in my chair, I hurl the rubber ball at the fan.

Sputter, sputter, rumble. Bang. The lazy contraption argues with me, but it must know I mean business this time, because it finally begins to whirl.

Ahh...

Feeling a cool breeze on my face, I close my eyes and exhale; my mind quiets. Gratefully, I sink into my chair—I remember how Mrs. Fieldjoy once called it a bean bag, which is completely confusing since she often tells Thester he's "full of beans," so if this is a bean bag and Thester's full of beans, then...

"Gross!"...I don't even want to think about it.

I lean my weight more deeply into my chair's comfort and let the fan's breeze swim across my saggy hound skin. Before I know it, my muscles start loosening, and my tension begins tiptoeing away.

Stop. Wait. What am I doing? I can't relax! I remind myself.

I'm too old of a hound dog to fall for this old trick. I give the fan a scary glare...*the nerve... trying to make me feel better. It can't fool me. Life is miserable, and that's that.*

Just then...

B-R-I-I-I-I-N-G-G-G-G! B-R-I-I-I-I-N-G-G-G-G!

The phone! I feel my paddle-plop ears pop up and pull back; they give me an automatic face lift. *Could be a client...might be a mystery to solve...*

"Hello? Hello? Daring Dilbert's Detective Agency."

"Ahem...Why hello there, mate," a strange voice says in a weird kind-of British accent. "I'm ringing for Detective Dilbert...I say...would you be so kind as to allow me a chat with the investigator?" the caller asks.

I've learned not to give too much information; gotta be coy. So I hedge a little.

"He's a busy man, you know; may I ask who's calling?"

"Well, the name's top secret, mind you. But I suppose I can tell you— I'm from the CIA."

Ziing-a-boing-a-boing! CIA?! Central Intelligence Agency—top secret stuff for the federal government. Wow! My heart jumps, trying to reach out and hug the phone. But I gulp and choke my excitement into place. Gotta keep my cool. "Does the President of the United States need my help?" I woof. "I'll do anything; just name it!" (So much for being coy. But where has it gotten me thus far? I ask you.)

"You'll be needing a passport, and we must obtain your paw print immediately. This is a buggger of a case; you'll need an assistant. Someone cheeky and clever..."

(Silence) Someone who cheers you on with a joke or two... (Silence again) Someone nearby that has a wicked NEIGH...

“Hey, who is this?” I demand. (You’d be surprised how many detectives forget to ask this question—not me.) “And, and,” the fragmented clues are snapping in place, “If you’re a CIA agent for the United States of America, then why are you speaking in a British accent?”

“Uh...Mmmmmmm...Uhhhhh... Oh come on, Dilbert; you know it’s me—your old pal Thester.”

Ah...another cruel Thester-joke. My hopes are punctured; my chest deflates. How can I be so daft? Of course it’s Thester.

“How ya doing, Oscar Mayer?” Thester taunts.

“Please, stop calling me that. I am a hound dog, not a wiener dog,” I coldly state.

But that gets me thinking... *Oscar Mayer hot dogs, hmmm... I’ve had one of those before. Snatched it off the barbecue grill when Mrs. Fieldjoy wasn’t looking. What can I say? A detective has to practice his covert maneuvers.*

I shake my head, releasing the excess drool.

“Thester, I’m a serious detective; I’m supposed to be hounding right now. It is my sole responsibility to sniff out...”

“I know; I know,” Thester scissors my statement. “You sniff out danger, track it down, and wipe it out,” he quotes robotically.

“That’s right, but instead, I’m stuck here listening to your lame-brained ideas. Stop hounding me to goof off; I’ve got to get off this phone; a client could call with a real case,” I warn.

Thester’s a difficult character to decipher, a bit like a hologram, at least to me. You think he’s understanding your instructions, you think he’s following your advice, but then he goes and does the complete opposite of what you say he should do. And believe me, he can be weasley sometimes; it’s his profile. Born that way. He’s not a complex case to unravel. He’s more of a simple stitch, the kind of beginner stitch Mrs. Fieldjoy teaches her students in sewing class, which is meant to be straight but comes out all ziggedy-zagged.

See, Thester’s the type that would try to make you laugh when you’re at a funeral, the kind of pal that would invite a skunk to your birthday party, the type that would pretend he lost the key after you’ve let him handcuff you to a suspect’s car door—don’t really want to talk about that one.

On the other hand, he does call every day to ask how I am, and he does sneak me extra doggie treats from the bag on the high shelf inside the kitchen. And I guess he does actually get me laughing, sometimes. So, I decide to tell him the scoop.

“If you really want to know how I am, I’m...I guess...I mean... well...NO! I’m NOT great. Haven’t had a case in weeks. Suppose I’m just an old bloke that needs to be put out to pasture.”

“A pasture’s not a bad place to be for a mystery-loving hound dog,” Thester tries to encourage. “There’s detecting to do every day in the pasture. Heard of connect the dots? Well, in the pasture you’d connect the plops.”

Thester’s voice flattens; he knows this joke isn’t gonna work, but he’s already started it, so...

"Each morning there's batches of fertilizer," Thester's yapping. "You gotta track 'em, then match 'em to their owners."

But the more Thester explains, the more his joke wilts; his words take a hollow sound: "You sniff the plops, connect the dots, and wipe..." Thester's run out of fertilizer-fuel. He doesn't even bother finishing.

I say nothing; I let the silence stretch long and loud, like Mr. Fieldjoy's undershorts on the clothesline. After a few seconds, I poke the final hole in Thester's balloon: "Is that supposed to be funny?" I ask, although I don't really want an answer.

Like a leaky air pump working on a flat tire, he tries pumping clarity into his floppy joke: "Don't you get it? You know, you always say you 'sniff out danger and wipe it out?'"

And that gets my detective brain thinking...*wipe it out...toilet paper...freshly-flushed water...I open and close my choppers; my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth...Yep, think I'm thirsty.*

"Thester, I've gotta go!"