

A Sparkle in the Fog

Chapter 6

Dilbert

“Shhh, Thester, move over; let me see too,” I whisper and nudge Thester a little; he inches to the right. Immediate relief. Space, it’s a powerful device; even a micro unit of it can keep a friendship activated. I may own a lot of spy gear, the Cryptogram Deluxe—a mechanism that decodes scents left on mailboxes and neighborhood bushes, a Gizmomatic 500—a device that detects when someone is planning a counterattack, like the time Thester thought he’d hide the slipper I took from Mr. Fieldjoy. Anyway, I may have a truckload of secret tools, but the best apparatus for retaining a friend is space. And currently there isn’t much of it, not during this surveillance. The window ledge is the perfect height for a spy like me. I can rest my paws on the ledge and peer discreetly into the farmhouse window. This operation’s got to stay undercover. The tall, thick sunflowers are working hard to hide us: they stretch their leafy hands as wide as possible, tucking us in, keeping this inspection top secret, the kind of secret best kept by top dogs, like me. Everyone knows I’m terribly good at handling covert missions, and if they don’t, they’re about to. Thester is, however, a different story. For one: he’s so tall, and for two: he’s completely ridiculous, two disadvantages when you’re a spy.

Right now, we’re scoping out the joint. A secret agent such as myself discerns when something smells off. And something’s been stinking up the place ever since Isie arrived. You never know: this girl could be a plant, a double agent collecting information for the opposition’s evil plots. You must be able to decipher who the Fieldjoy farm’s opposition is; think opposites: fast-food dives, vending machine operators, and cats—of course. I’m pretty suspicious of this Isie girl. Ever since she infiltrated the farm, the Fieldjoys have acted quite unusually. They haven’t pulled one weed, haven’t offered us a midmorning snack, haven’t tossed a ball to me—Mrs. Fieldjoy hasn’t even chewed one piece of bubblegum, and she loves bubblegum. It’s strange, I tell you. This Isie is a breach of security, and I don’t like the smell of it—the breach or her britches—not one sniff. It’s true, she hasn’t committed any crime—not that I know of anyway. But she looks like a culprit, so I figure it doesn’t hurt to do a little spying.

“Stop breathing on the window; you’re fogging it up, Thester. They’re gonna notice we’re here,” I warn.

I hear Thester take a deep breath of air and hold it. Oh, brother. I just ignore him. Even though the massive sunflowers work to shade us from the sun, a few perseverant rays are able to squeeze in between the shadows; they hit the window glass and bounce off—right into my eyes. I lean in a little, trying to see Isie more clearly. The sunflowers’ chubby faces lean in too.

I can see Isie turning the pages of a big book; she licks one finger, turns the page, licks the finger again, turns the page again. What is this? Some new kind of sleuthing trick? Her way of gathering scents? *Pffffttt*...I scoff at such methods, so beginner’s-gumshoe level. I don’t need to do anything so crude as that; my schnozzle can detect the scent of her book from here. Immediately, I lower my chin so I can whisper into my secret tape recorder that’s hidden in my tie. (This is where all the folds

from my excess skin come in handy. I just tuck the wires into the crevices, and the recorder goes undetected.)

“Note #1: Suspect Isie’s fixated on large book; book contains pictures of rare gems. Suspect may be a gem thief in disguise.”

You see, I’m meticulous with details; I take notes on everything. That’s the way a good sleuth does it.

“Hey, Thester, what’s Mr. Fieldjoy reading? ...Thester?” I turn my head; Thester’s cheeks are all puffy, and his horsey face is turning blue. His eyeballs are starting to roll into the back of his empty head. “Thester! You can breathe now!” I whisper urgently.

Phhhrrraacckkerraa.... The air nearly explodes from Thester’s lungs; he coughs and snorts at a loud, klutzy-horse volume. Lucky for us, at this precise moment, Mrs. Fieldjoy drops a pan on the kitchen floor; it clatters, clanks, and then spins to a rattling stop. Fortunately, no one has heard Thester’s guffaw.

“For heaven’s sake!” (Can’t help but roll my eyes when I say this; whenever the vocal cords give a deep, raspy whisper like this, the eyeballs rotate; it’s an automatic response.) “Be quiet, Thester.”

“Sorriry.”

“Note #2: Teach Thester definition of word 'quiet.' ” I go to grit my teeth and then accidentally bite the inside of my mouth; pain shoots through my face. My vocal cords release a little yelp.

Great.

Thester gives me a look similar to someone who can raise one eyebrow really high. I’m in the middle of inventing a way to wash the smirk off his face when, finally, Thester’s breathy window-fog clears, and I can see inside.

“Looks like Mr. Fieldjoy is reading the newspaper. I activate my Eyespy Maximizer and feel a rubberbanding stretch in my right eyeball as it zooms in and magnifies the images.

Yep, that’s a newspaper, alright. I can always tell by the pages that slip to the floor and by the way Mrs. Fieldjoy always says the same thing: “I have news for you, Mr. Fieldjoy” — her eyes always kind of checkmark upward when she says it—“you and that inky paper mess you’ve piled on the floor.”

And the ingredients piled on the kitchen counter indicate she is baking....a coconut cake.

Coconut. And cake. And coconut. Those delicate flakes of celestial sweetness. Light and fluffy bits of angelic dreams.

But listen: My nostrils may be flaring; my rubbery earflops may be crawling up my scalp—but I remain focused. I am a professional, see. I think little of the tropical wisps that long to engulf my senses. I fully ignore the tropical perfume spiraling from the ingredients. And I certainly pay no mind to the sweet flakes longing to tap dance their cheer across my tongue. Not a single thought strays from its duty to report each minute detail.

Be assured, my right eyeball remains telescoped to its fullest extent, while my left is swiveled to its socket’s sidewall—ready to catch any shadow of an ambush. Though I needn’t even look at the scene. My schnauzer took the readout before I even glanced in the window. I can sense a cake before it is even formed.

Especially a coconut cake. I definitely know coconut. Boy, do I. Mrs. Fieldjoy even knows I do; she's often saying how I'm full of coconuts. Though she mispronounces the word—"kookoonuts"—is how she says it. No matter. The important thing is not how you say it but how you bake it. The scent is unmistakable. I've been analyzing her baking for years.

Mmmmm... Coconut cake. Moist, sweet, creamy coconut cake.

My mind takes a detour. Quickly, I slurp up the saliva that starts to leak from the sides of my mouth. Taking a peak at Thester, I see drool streaming from his chops, and a hypnotized, dopey look has captured his face.

"Thester, snap out of it. Focus."

Mr. Fieldjoy looks up from his paper and begins to speak; the newspaper makes a crinkly complaint. "Whatcha learning there, Isie?" He glances over the top edge of his newspaper, his eyebrows arched; he's trying to sound nonchalant, as if he's only slightly interested, but the energy in his eyes says the opposite.

Isie looks up from her book. "Did you know diamonds are the hardest substance on earth? And they're so beautiful too," the obnoxious girl blurts, her eyes wide.

"Note #3: Suspect obsessed with diamonds," I record.

Mr. Fieldjoy lets the paper fall to the table; he smiles. He's got her full attention.

"Are you enjoying the new book?" Mrs. Fieldjoy asks as she pours something into a bowl and stirs, each powerful turn of the wooden spoon stirring a waft of coconut into the air—I can smell the aroma through the window glass.

"Yeah! It's great. I'm nuts about rocks and gems; they're the coolest."

"Note #4: Suspect demonstrates mental deficiencies—thinks she's a nut—unclear whether peanut, cashew, or almond."

"Well, in that case..." Mr. Fieldjoy reaches over and grabs a paper bag on a nearby shelf. His eyes sparkle as he reaches inside. When Mrs. Fieldjoy sees what her husband is doing, she stops stirring, gets a kind of knowing smile, and leans her back into the kitchen counter to watch; the bowl of whipped coconut frosting rests in the crook of her arm.

"Look what I have here for you." Mr. Fieldjoy's words dance off his tongue as he plunges his hand into the bag but then slowly draws it out again to reveal the object inside.

I feel my droopy ears perk; I can't believe what I see. In his hand is an enormous, multifaceted diamond. It's shaped like a fat ice cream cone. Mr. Fieldjoy holds it to the light and turns it one way, just a little; it flashes blue and gold. He then twists it the other way, and a piece of a rainbow spills from it. Suspect Isie just gawks, doesn't say a word.

"Note #5: No 'thanks' from suspect—typical of a criminal; rude behavior often detected in thieves," I wisely deduce.

"What did you do, Grandpa? Rob the jewelry store?" Isie asks—offensive girl that she is.

This tickles Mr. Fieldjoy; he chuckles. "It's not real, just a crystal."

Isie smiles and releases a giggly exhale. "It's beautiful; I love it!" she says, stretching her arm across the table and snatching the crystal from Mr. Fieldjoy's hand; she holds it to the light. "It's as big as the Hope Diamond." Her whisper is filled with marvel; she turns the translucent chunk of earth, making it flash, her mind drinking each color burst it emits.

“Hey, I think there’s something in here,” Mr. Fieldjoy’s nose dives into the newspaper; he begins flipping the paper’s pages; his fingers jerk and jump from page to page like someone with a hard-to-locate itch, “something about the Hope Diamond.” He bats each page aside, searching for the front page of the stack.

“Aha!” He pounds his index finger three times on the headline, but before he reads the headline...

“It says,” Isie steals the words from his mouth, “the Hope Diamond’s been stolen from the Smithsonian Museum in Washington.”

Mrs. and Mr. Fieldjoy stare at her. “How did you...?”

“I read the paper early this morning.”

“You read...”

Mrs. Fieldjoy finishes his thought: “the newspaper?” Now their words are filled with marvel; in fact, they overflow with pride as they gawk at their granddaughter who suddenly seems much more grown up than a second earlier.

Embarrassed, Isie looks down and scoots her eyeglasses up higher on her nose. Mrs. Fieldjoy changes the subject. “No! That’s terrible,” she groans. “The Hope Diamond is so rare.”

Isie’s head pops back up. “It’s the largest dark blue diamond in the world,” she says; her words bounce.

Mr. Fieldjoy refocuses on the news; his expression hardens. “So wrong,” he says to himself. The bitter thought makes his lips pucker.

“A natural wonder like that should be enjoyed by all; it shouldn’t be in the hands of greedy criminals.” Mrs. Fieldjoy pounds the old nail.

My heavy ears lift; my whiskers *boing*. “Crime! Finally, a mystery! I better get to work!”

Concerning the last statement; I’m not positive whether I thought it or actually said it out loud, meant to think it. Turning toward Thester, I remind my mouth to whisper. “Thester, this is an important case! I’ll need an assistant...”

“I’m with ya, Pal!” he trumpets.

Pound, pound, pound... “Hey you two, get out of my flower bed,” Mrs. Fieldjoy uses her calloused knuckles on the window to shoo us away. She grabs the fly swatter and turns to exit the kitchen; we know what this means.

Oops, too much thinking out loud, best skedaddle.

The front door opens and out comes Mrs. Fieldjoy, her flyswatter held high. “Alright, you two; I’ve told you before,” she scolds, her voice like hardened maple syrup, her stomp as solid as a rice crispy treat.

We hesitate a few seconds, giving her a fair chance. We know how to play this game. We flail around a bit, pretending to be scared. We twist and turn ourselves within the thick of the flowers; for extra measure, we bump into each other, acting startled. When Mrs. Fieldjoy reaches the garden, we scuttle our way out, extending our rumps in her direction, providing a spacious target for her descending tool of punishment, this thin, flimsy flyswatter that even a faint breeze can bend—sad, sad thing that it is. She aims at our rumps and flicks her wrist downward, making the wimpy plastic swatter curl. Nonetheless, we jump and shriek—wouldn’t be interesting if we didn’t. As we rush away, I look back. Mrs. Fieldjoy has her hand on her hip.

“You keep out of the garden, you two. Behave!” She scolds some more, but I see that little semi-hidden grin she has.

As Thester and I race each other to the barn, I’m flooded with one thought, OK, a couple of thoughts. Isie...Isie...thank goodness for Isie. Because of her, I now know about the missing diamond; because of her, I now have a case! (Fine: that was three thoughts; stop counting; it’s the big picture we’re after here.)

“Note #6: Isie disguised as suspect. Really an informant,” I shout into my secret tape recorder while running for cover.