

Chapter 11

Dilbert's a Pepper Stepper

What a kerfuffle! They call that Iceland?! If that land is icy, then my doghouse is an igloo. Ice, indeed—the place receives one icy tail wag from me.

Unless...huh...unless the word *ice* is code for fire...well, I'm bun-toast!..that's quite clever...coding fire as ice...clever indeed.

As I was sharing, I most certainly would have loved the place, had I actually visited. Must admit, those heaving hurls of lava rock were a bit of a distraction. And you must not be surprised to learn that as soon as the volcano volley game had ended, I jumped on another plane and headed for Latin America. I figured, if Iceland blasted me with fiery challenges, perhaps Latin America will offer me icy-cool pleasantries... I love how the cool weather makes my saggy skin-rolls tighten, giving extra shelf-grip for my spy gear.

But no, there's no icy to it—it's hot here. And I'd give anything for a chunk of ice right now. In fact, my position in Latin America's so hot, my built-in shelving units have lost all their boing. I keep having to push my sweaty detecting tools back into position.

Whew...actually, it's sizzling hot. Excuse me a moment while I wring the sweat from my ear flops...drip, drip, drip, SWOOOOSH...drip, drip...Ah, That should do it...

As I was saying, the clever way I...

Aargh! Fleabites!..Wait a minute!...my Intelldatadopetameter just slid off its shelf... I'll just pinch these two sag-rolls together for a while...use my left paw to close the unit... YIKES..now my Truth Thermometer!...stuff it back behind my ear...hold my right paw steady...Huh—Fine...

Anyway, I was reminding you that I am a fully equipped and frightfully skilled detective. Therefore...

Cat-whiskers! Blast my paw gestures!...Pardon...I'll just be fetching my spilled spy gear now...Sloop, Shuft, Thud...There, snug in place...Hmmm...I wonder, dear friend, if you wouldn't mind staying a bit still...your rolling eyeballs are confusing my sag-rolls ...and making me hotter too...

Nonetheless, as we were discussing: you witnessed how I “googled” our way out of that volcanic volleyball game. I'm certain I need not point out how clever that maneuver was. Oh yes! And by the way, I know you were just trying to help me back there in Iceland, and pardon my bluntness, but stay put next time—no need to jump from your seat and save the day. I've got it covered. TV detectives often say that. Which reminds me... Please excuse...My watch indicates it is time to press down on my fake beard and mustache. Let's hope the glue hasn't melted. Nope. All is well...in fact...OUCH!...Do

believe it is glued quite well to the skin... Hmm...I'd like to glue those rolling eyeballs of yours in place...

Galup, galup. KERPLUNK; sssssssspptsssss... Steam is pouring from my vehicle's engine, tempting my insides to wither with dismay. The heat has killed my old jalopy's motor. No, you numbskull brain—not my motor; I'm not old. I might not be as young and naive as you are—what with your underdeveloped brain and all—but I'm no geezer; that's for sure. I'm speaking of my Jeep. Poor thing's collapsed; it's refusing to go an inch further. It's so hot and humid, it feels like I'm trapped in a giant terrarium. Why, it's so hot that the bubble gum I left in my shirt pocket has melted and has glued my pocket shut. All this heat to deal with—AND MY JEEP IS BROKEN. Uuuugh. Now what will I do?

I sit, staring into nowhere, thinking nothing. Even my sniffer is on pause. Can't feel a thing, can't smell a thing, can't hear a thing. Except for this irritating high-pitched sound somewhere in the distance. Maybe my brain cells have gone haywire. The noise won't stop. My ears hurt.

“¡Apúrate! ¡Apúrate!” a man with puffy cheeks and angry eyes yells at me.

I have no idea what that means. He leans in so close his nose nearly touches mine; he takes a deep breath and blows on his whistle. Spittle flies out his mouth, but luckily the heat evaporates it before it lands on my face. (Humans look so weird when they're mad. Their cheeks stiffen, their lips twist out of shape, and their eyeballs look like they're playing dodgeball with their eyebrows.) But then I realize who the man is; it's like I'm waking up from a coma. The gentleman is a police officer. And he wants me to move my vehicle. Great. I'm in trouble now.

“My Jeep's broken,” I explain. Now my face is twisting with frustration.

The officer motions to a group of men. Hordes of people are flooding the area.

“It won't move,” I whimper.

Suddenly my Jeep is surrounded by burly men. It's all happening so fast. They push my vehicle into a parking lot, yelling at people to get out of the way as they guide the Jeep off the road. A few seconds later, I find myself and my dead Jeep next to a huge, rusty dumpster in the back of a dilapidated parking lot. Why is this happening to me?

“SON OF A GUN!” I howl, releasing frustration. I'm not really sure what this means. I've heard Mr. Fieldjoy yell this sometimes when things go wrong. What kind of son would a gun have anyway? A knife? (Humans say such stupid things.)

“FATHER OF A RIFLE!” I shout, which makes a lot more sense.

By this time, the crowd is so thick that people are standing shoulder to shoulder. Music begins—trumpets, guitars, drums. It's a parade. There are so many people I can hardly see the procession take place.

"Hey, what the... "

Strangers are climbing on top of my Jeep's hood. They want a better view of the parade. I've got to get out of here. I hop out of the Jeep.

Weaving my way through the mob, I scrutinize the area, searching for a way out of this mess. Then, I get a familiar whiff—something spicy. My bionic nose prints a readout across my eyeballs—tacos with hot and spicy salsa. Smells a little different than the salsa Mrs. Fieldjoy uses at home when she makes veggie tacos. I now know to stay away from that stuff. Slurped a puddle of salsa up one day that had spilled from the jar. Set my mouth, nose, and eye sockets on fire. My thoughts drift. I picture Mrs. Fieldjoy's salsa jar in the refrigerator. Bet it's sitting next to that coconut cake she made before I left the farm. Hmm... I'd love to crawl into that fridge, cool off, and devour that entire coconut cake right about now.

"Hey, what's that?!" English, someone's speaking English! It's the man at the taco stand.

"Appetizers and snacks! Antojitos!" he calls out, hoping to get another customer. Maybe, maybe he can help me. Scuttling up to the taco man, I ask for the scoop.

"A scoop of refried beans, Senor?"

"No, no... The scoop—the news—data. What's going on?"

"Oh Senor, today a magical event takes place." He leans his face into mine, his eyes wide with secret spice. "It is the autumn equinox," he smiles and leans even closer, "when the sun's shadow creates the illusion of a giant serpent, a hungry snake that slithers down the ancient Pyramid Kukukan."

"Did you just say Cuckoo?" I feel my chin shelves curl as I pull back, snickering in disbelief.

"No joke, no joke, Senor! Pyramid Kukukan," he corrects, his one eyebrow arching, revealing his ability to arrow my snicker. But then he laughs. "Oh, Senor," the man shakes his head at me. "You mustn't sniff a present, Senor." His wording has punch, but he laughs as if he's tickled.

Immediately, a wave of heat rises and crashes inside me. "Please excuse, dear Sir. So sorry... You were saying?" I hold my breath, waiting to see what he will do.

The man exhales and releases a gentle smile. The moment has softened. The man's expression now sparks like the sizzle of heated butter. "If you hold out a taco to the hungry snake," his eyes sliver as he speaks, "and its mouth passes over the taco... your wish will come true!" He flashes a giant smile at me now.

Uhhuh, I think secretly. The name *Kukukan* sounds about right. Need I explain I'm thinking *cuckoo* more than *Kukukan*? Or perhaps the taco man is just conning me. Now my own eyebrow arches.

"That's dandy information," I say, "but what I need to know is how to get out of here. I need a plane, a train, a balloon, something!" I plead.

"Senor, a taco shell has two sides to keep everything in place, and this situation also has two sides. I will help you while you help me." The man's head see-saws side to side as he speaks.

"Go on; I'm listening," I say.

"My brother is at the top of the pyramid selling souvenirs. He needs his lunch. Take this plate of tacos and chili peppers to the top of the pyramid. There, you will find your wish granted."

My eyes bulge, and I can't swallow; the pyramid has soooo...many...steep... steps....

"91," he informs, reading my thoughts. "Your lucky number!"

I gulp, wondering if I can do it.

"Be sure to hold the plate out toward the sun so that the peppers will be roasted by the time you reach the top."

"Hold plate...roast peppers..." I repeat, my secret tape recorder recording.

"Trust me, Señor, if you begin climbing now, you will find what you need when you reach the top. Keep a stiff upper lip," he says.

Huh? Stiff upper lip? Not only do I have to run up the stairs while roasting peppers, I now must make my lip stiff? My lip isn't stiff, but my tail sure is—from all this stress.

I have no option but to trust this mysterious man with the spicy accent. But how will I manage to hold the chili peppers and run up the stairs at the same time? I could use some help.