

Chapter 9

Motoring. Top down, sun shining, heading north on I-95. (I know, just like Chapter 6, except now . . .)

Destination: New York City.

a.k.a., The Big Apple.

a.k.a., The City That Never Sleeps

a.k.a., The Place Where the Big Detective Meeting Is

a.k.a., The Place Where Simon's Wife Pricilla is Not

Oh, and also, it's not just me and Jimmy in the car this time; Simon's here too. So it's actually pretty different from the start Chapter 6. In fact, if I could do it all over, I probably wouldn't even make the Chapter 6 comparison at all, because the more I think about it the more I realize that it's so different you probably wouldn't have even noticed it if I hadn't brought it up in the first place.

I mean, I guess I could just delete all of Chapter 9 so far and start over with no mention of Chapter 6 at all, but then I'd have to think up a whole bunch of new stuff to take the place of all of the stuff I've just explained - namely the similarities and non-similarities of Chapters 6 & 9 - and well, shit, look, there's a bunch of words here now. I'm supposed to just waste them and start all over with a blank page?

Doesn't seem right.

That was a lot of work. Well, okay, *some* work.

But a bunch of words, for sure. Not to mention all those 'a.k.a.'s'. Those are just flat hard to write out, what with all those periods after every letter. That's crazy.

It just seems like a waste is all, and - Hey, that's it. I can't just get rid of it, because that would be a lot of waste, which would negatively impact Climate Change, and there's no way I'm getting on the wrong side of that ball. Or thing. Or whatever.

So.

Doing my part to keep the planet warm.

"You mean, 'doing your part to keep the planet *cool*'," Simon said.

I was so deep in thought I almost forgot Simon was even here. But sure enough, I looked over and there he was sitting in the passenger seat next to me.

"I thought Jimmy called 'Shotgun', " I said.

"Well, he did," Simon said, "but I explained to him that shotguns - being long barreled weapons - were not allowed in the front seat of vehicles traversing interstate highways. Lest the barrels interfere with the driver's vision. Or his physical driving machinations. Or whatnot."

"Machinations?"

"It's a word. And Jimmy doesn't know what it means, so he just assumes I know what I'm talking about and gets in the back seat."

"I'm right here, you know," Jimmy said from the backseat. "I can hear you."

"Well," Simon said over his shoulder, "do you know what 'machinations' means?"

"No."

"Okay, then. It doesn't matter. See?"

"Oh, okay," Jimmy said. "I guess - hey! Look! There's another 'End Road Work' sign. Can we - "

"No," I said. Then, to Simon, "I thought we were supposed to be trying to keep the planet warm?

"No, no, no, we already *are* making the planet warm," Simon said. A little condescendingly too, I might add, which kind of made me want to punch the shit out of him.

"Well then what the fuck is the problem?" I said instead. "Everybody keeps getting in my shit with the whole 'hey, we need to address global warming and kumbaya and Helen Reddy and shit', and now you tell me there isn't even a problem?"

"Helen Reddy? What's she got to do with anything?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure she's in there somewhere," I said. "And what the hell is with 'driving machinations'? That makes absolutely no sense at all. Do you even know what it means?"

"I don't have to," Simon shot back. "All I need to know is whether or not Jimmy knows what it means, and since it has more than two syllables, it's a good bet he doesn't. So who cares?"

"Oh. I see your point."

Jimmy started making race car sounds in the back seat.

"Brrrrrrrrrrrr!" he said. Then, shifting to second, "Brrrrrrrrrr!"

"Here's the thing," Simon said, "There definitely is a problem, Helen Reddy is not part of it, and nobody can really agree on what we're supposed to do about it."

"Well, then," I said reasonably, "It sounds like we're all doing our part."

"Brrrrrrrrrrrr!" Third gear.

As Jimmy prepared to shift into fourth, Simon abruptly shifted the conversation to something that was not only more germane to the storyline, but also a hell of a lot more fun than global change. Or climate warming. Or whatever.

"So," he said, "I guess this has something to do with France. Or more precisely, the complete destruction thereof."

Okay, so maybe "a hell of a lot more fun" was over simplifying things a bit.

"Brrrrrrrrrrrrr . . ." Fourth. Finally.

Now that Jimmy was up to speed, I figured it was probably time to bring Simon up to speed as well, albeit without the sound effects.

I shared what little we actually knew about about France's sudden disappearance, all of the different countries and government organizations tasked with taking action, and, of course, what I believed to be the most important aspect, the big meeting in NYC of all the world's greatest fictional detectives of which I - again, of course & quite humbly - figured to figure prominently.

As it turned out, France *did* still exist on maps, as was discovered by a South Dakota high school student's timely science fair project on cartography entitled "Here's Where France Is", for which he got second place.

The NSA was able to speedily confirm this finding three weeks later, which predictably resulted in outrage, something called 'clapping back', and national marches about the latent sciencism of the contest judges since the student garnering first place had merely performed & documented an exhaustive 5-year search for extraterrestrial life in all known habitable planets within 75 light years of earth.

In addition, some European news stations were reporting an increased number of people in public places wearing horizontal black & white striped shirts, solid black pants, and white face paint, which, while simultaneously resembling mimes and presenting a fashion trend rife with its own internal brand of horror at the same time, was probably unrelated.

So.

"Wow. I don't suppose there's any way it could be that moose again?" Simon asked.

He was making a reference to a previous foe of my past that I successfully defeated. One of . . . well, one, I guess.

"No," I said. "Zodar's location has been confirmed. He's under observation and still heavily medicated. Plus, he was watching a 'Real Housewives' marathon when France disappeared. Turns out he's a fan."

"Which one?"

"New York, what else?"

"Well yeah, RHONY is the flagship, but the OC is pretty good too. And New Jersey."

"Get the fuck out," I said. "Nobody does New Jersey anymore. And stop making pop culture references that nobody reading this will understand in 20 years."

Simon snorted. "Yeah, like that's going to happen," he said.

"What? You don't think anybody's going to read this? In 20 years?"

"Look, we've been over this before," he said. "All I'm saying is that we're stuck - again - with an author who has no industry connections, no gameplan for success, and, quite frankly, no observable talent. I'm just being a realist."

"A realist?" I countered. "You're a fucking fictional character, but you're a realist?"

"Look, you know what I'm saying, man. I mean, look in the backseat for God's sake."

I shot a glance to the rearview. Jimmy's arm was extended out the side of the car and he was pretending his hand was a spaceship, using the wind currents passing the Impala to "fly" it around.

"*Pew, pew, pew!*" he was now saying, apparently firing his laser cannons at some invisible bad guys.

Never underestimate the long term consequences of drugs.

"Look," I said, shaking my head, "I think you're wrong. Dead wrong. This guy's going places, and I'm going to ride his coat to success."

"You mean his coattails. See? You can't even - "

"Yeah, what the fuck ever. The thing is, connections, gameplans, and talent? That stuff is great and all, but this guy's got something even better."

"And what's that?" Simon asked.

I took my eyes off the road - dangerous at any speed, but especially over 80 mph - and looked Simon straight in the eye.

"He's got us."

And that's when Jimmy and I learned that Simon couldn't cuss anymore.