

COTF 2

Chapter 1

I was on the phone with my agent when I heard that France had been destroyed. Didn't like the news. Not the France thing; that didn't bother me too much. But the fact that Trina Baxter – my agent – was ripping me a new one didn't sit too well with me. No doubt you've heard of "the riot act". Apparently Trina didn't think I had.

" . . . attitude that you displayed towards women was absolutely *appalling*," Trina said. "Not only was there not a *single* major female character, but the few who *were* involved were portrayed in the most - "

"Wait, wait, wait," I said. "Hold on just a minute."

We were discussing my last book, *Clash of the Figments*, in which I had risked my life, solved multiple mysteries, and oh, BY THE WAY, just happened to save the entire world in the process. Now I was being blasted about it?

"We had *plenty* of women involved in that case," I said.

"Like who?" Trina asked.

"What about that chick in the airport scene?"

"See, Dick, that's the first thing, you don't refer to women as *chicks*."

"Sure I do. I call them that all the time."

"I *know* you do, but you *shouldn't*. That's my point," she said. "It's degrading."

"Trust me, for this chick, it was a compliment. She was a scud."

"Dick, it doesn't matter what the circumstances are, or who you're talking about, or what they look like. Calling a woman a "chick" is degrading, and it's *always* inappropriate."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No, I'm not."

"Okay. Whatever." I said, "So what about the *woman* in the airport scene? Simon fell in love with her and wanted to marry her. How is that not showing a woman in a positive light?"

"You threw a fish across the terminal and told her to fetch."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Yeah, that was pretty funny, wasn't it?"

"No, Dick, it wasn't. And you likened her to a dog. You called her 'Fido'."

"Hey, that was Simon, not me. Besides, did you see the way she went after that thing? If that wasn't dog-like, I don't know what is. I'll tell ya, I had this dog once when I was about 12? You talk about fetching, this dog would - "

"*I don't care, Dick!*" Trina yelled. "*Nobody* cares. It doesn't matter what you *think*; what matters is what's *right*. You have to be sensitive to the issues of the day."

"Oh, so like saving the planet wasn't sensitive enough?"

"Twenty years ago, maybe. But by itself it's not good enough anymore."

I leaned back in my chair and sighed, getting a little fed up with the whole conversation. I like Trina, don't get me wrong. But she's a literary agent, and her job is selling books. At least, I think that's her job. Now that I think about it, I'm not really sure what the hell she does.

"You sell books, right?" I asked.

"*What?*"

“Nevermind.”

She launched right back into her tirade with a renewed fury, continuing her chastisement of me for my demeaning behavior and language. Seems somewhere along the line it not only became suddenly objectionable to use the word “chick” with regard to women, but also many other perfectly acceptable and affectionate words like “boobs”, “hooters”, “jugs”, “Golden Bozos”, and so on, and so on.

Blah, blah, blah.

Look, I’m a detective. A private investigator. A dick. I solve cases and bring criminals to justice. That’s what I do. What I *don’t* do is spend a lot of time worrying about whether or not I’m going to hurt somebody’s feelings. To be honest, some people *deserve* to have their feelings hurt. Some people deserve to have a whole lot *more* than just their feelings hurt. When I find people like that, I try to help them out. And if somebody else gets hurt in the process, they were probably standing too close.

“Dick?”

“Yeah?” I said.

“Did you hear what I said?” Trina asked.

“Oh, sure, sure. You bet. Hey, so, bottom line time, okay? What is it exactly that you want me to do here?”

“What I *want* is for – ”

Just then my call waiting beeped.

“Hang on Trina,” I interrupted, “I got another call. Hold tight.”

Talk about saved by the bell. I pushed the receiver to connect the other line. I’m not sure if she even noticed. I was positive that I didn’t care.

“Lassiter,” I said.

“Dick, it’s Burroughs, I need to talk to you right away. France has just been destroyed.”

“Jackson?” I said. “Hey, how you doing, man?”

“Not too good, Dick,” he said impatiently. “Did you hear what I just said? France has just been wiped off of the face of the planet.”

Everybody getting in my face today. Shot a glance at my calendar to see if it was “Call Dick and Dump Shit On Him” day.

Nope.

“Dick? Are you there? Did you hear what I said?” Jackson said.

“Hey, can you hold for a second? I’ve got my agent on the other line. Be right back.”

“Dick, didn’t you - ”

I cut him off and beeped back over. The line was silent. Trina had either finished blasting me, realized I was no longer listening, or had stopped to inhale.

“Trina?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Sorry about that. You remember Jackson Burroughs?”

“Of course.”

“Well, that’s him on the other line. Sounds like I may have another case.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Seems like somebody just destroyed France.”

“Destroyed France? What, like, the whole thing?”

“Appears so.”

“Wow,” she said. There was a pause as the magnitude of this sunk in. Then, “Those people have more problems, you know?”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “But hey, that’s what they get for making our attack jets go around their airspace every time we need to go blow somebody up.”

I stretched back in my chair and sighed.

Attack jets.

Explosions.

Good times.

Then a thought hit me: “Hey, Trina, what do you think about me getting some of those cool 20” chrome spinner rims for the Impala? That’d be sweet, don’t you think?”

“*What?*”

“Nevermind. Hey, I’ll talk to you later, okay? I think Jackson’s still on the other line. Sounded like he had something important on his mind.”

“Like, maybe, France getting destroyed?” she said sarcastically.

Bitch.

“Oh yeah, that might have been it. Listen, don’t be a stranger, hey? Call me.”

I hung up on her and switched back over to Burroughs. Made a mental note to disconnect my call waiting. I don’t like people in general so having one phone conversation is bad enough. Who needs to juggle two calls at the same time? Not moi. That’s French for “not me”, by the way. Just in case you didn’t think I had depth.

“Jackson. What is up, my brother?”

I heard a sigh of exasperation on the other end of the line. Apparently the blatant & reckless verbal display of my street cred made him uneasy. Too bad. I mean, hey, what’s the use of growing up on the streets of suburbia if you don’t put what you learned to good use?

“Dick,” he said.

“That’d be me,” I replied, noticing the lack of patience in his voice. Or was it the lack of patients I was noticing? No, no, it was patience that he didn’t have. I was sure of it. No way to tell if he had patients or not. Wasn’t a doctor that I knew of. And even if he was, why would I think he was in a hospital? Unless he had patients at home, but who did that anymore? Sick people laying all around your house? No way.

Of course, he might have some *patents* at home. Was he an inventor?

“ . . . vaporized, just like that,” I heard Jackson finish.

“Sorry. What?”

“Dammit Lassiter! Are you listening to me? France has been vaporized. Destroyed, gone, missing. Kaput. *It has disappeared off the face of the planet!* Do you understand?”

I really hate it when people yell at me. I hate it even more when they yell at me in italics. And when people yell at me in italics and then follow it with a question asked in a tone of voice that one would address a child, I get five times as mad. Granted, most people would probably only get three times as mad, but higher math has never been my game.

I recommended a particular intimate physical action to Jackson and slammed the phone down. For you cell phone freaks, that’s kind of like pushing the “off” button, except that it requires actual movement.

Five seconds later the phone rang. It was Jackson. Of course it was Jackson, who the hell else would it be? Oh wait, I guess it could've been Trina too. Sorry to jump in your shit like that. When I'm pissed, I share with everyone. Now I feel bad.

Not really.

I picked up, leaned back, and crossed my feet on my desk.

"Lassiter," I said.

I heard the sound of controlled breathing. Jackson after all.

"Dick, I want you to listen to me, okay?" he said.

"I'm all ears," I replied.

"Okay. Look, less than 2 hours ago, the sovereign nation of France suddenly ceased to exist. One minute everyone's enjoying their morning, sipping their wine, thinking about who's wife to seduce, and the next thing you know, pow. France is gone."

"People and buildings too, or just the actual land part?" I asked.

"Everything. It's like it never existed."

"What about on maps?" I asked. "Does it still exist on maps?"

"Of course it exists on maps! What kind of question is that?"

"Are you sure? I mean, have you looked at a map since it was destroyed? You know, to see if it's still there? Maybe it never *was* there. Maybe we just *imagined* that there was a country called France."

"We imagined it," he repeated.

"That's right. Mass collective psychosis. It never existed at all, but everyone in the world *thought* it did."

"Dick - "

"In fact," I continued, "what if we were all batteries supporting a machine infrastructure which injected the world as we know it into our subconscious minds by way of a software program and the disappearance of France was actually caused by a computer virus created by a small but courageous group of rebel freedom fighters in an effort to crash the system and expose the entire charade, thereby freeing the minds of the previously oppressed."

"Dick, you really have to stop watching *The Matrix*. It's affecting you."

"Of course you'd say that. You are an agent, after all."

"Dick, just take the damn thing back to Blockbuster and pay your overdue fine."

"Blockbuster? You don't get out much, do you?"

"Just stop watching the damn movie, Dick!"

"Alright, alright," I said. "I'm just trying to offer a plausible explanation. You have to admit, it *would* tie everything up very neatly."

"It would," Jackson offered, "but that's not what happened."

I still wasn't so sure, but I let him continue anyway.

"Look, let's cut to the chase. This is big. The biggest thing to ever happen in our lifetimes. And the implications to national security are enormous. Governments from all countries are putting everyone and everything they have on this. We've got - "

"Except France," I said.

"What?"

"Except France. They don't have anybody working on it, I mean. Because nobody even knows where the hell they are."

I could feel heat coming through the phone.

“Hey, look,” I said. “It’s what I do, alright? Don’t hate the player, hate the game.”

The heat rescinded, replaced by a sigh.

“As I was saying,” Burroughs continued, “We’ve got the NSA, CIA, DHS, FBI, DEA, ATF, Special Forces, SEALs, NASA, ICE –”

“Wait a minute Burroughs,” I interrupted again, “Special Forces isn’t an acronym.”

“I know,” he replied. “That’s how big this is. We even have *non*-acronymical organizations working on it.”

Hmm, I thought. This was bigger than I thought. I also thought I would like a strawberry Pop-Tart and a glass of milk, but this probably wasn’t a good time to get a snack. Too much thinking going on for that.

“To make a long story short,” he said, “this is the most serious event the world has ever dealt with. It’s also the biggest *mystery* the world has ever dealt with. As such, in addition to the government organizations that are working on it, we have also established a special task force comprised of the world’s finest criminal sleuths to tackle it as well.”

“And that’s where I come in,” I said.

“That’s where you come in,” he repeated. Or paraphrased. Or whatever. “There’s a meeting tomorrow in New York. You need to be there.”

He read off the address to me and gave me some other details. I took notes when necessary, doodled when appropriate, and by the time he had finished I had all of the information I needed, plus a pretty cool picture of a dragon with a tail that actually wrapped around to the other side of the page. But proud of my drawing as I was, I couldn’t help but think instead about what was happening.

This was big time. The world’s biggest mystery. The world’s first task force of private investigators. No, make that the *best* private investigators. And yours truly, Dick Lassiter, was being asked to be part of it. Finally getting the respect that I deserved.

I fired up a butt and watched the smoke drift lazily towards the ceiling. The conversation turned to a debate on whether Lacrosse was actually a real sport, and if so, why there wasn’t a professional version of it on TV; the normal small talk that important people banter about in the midst of global emergencies.

I was about to ask Burroughs a few important sounding questions to wrap up the call when the first bullet ripped through the window and blew the phone right out of my hand.