

## Chapter 8

Simon had a two story house and his bedroom was on the second floor corner. Since it was 3 a.m., Jimmy and I decided it might be a good idea to see if we could get Simon's attention without waking up his wife, Pricilla.

Pricilla was one of those people who don't spell their name with an "s". She was also one of those people that thought there were very strict guidelines on what people should be doing in their homes at 3 a.m. (sleeping was high on this short list). And lastly, but not all inclusively, she was one of those people that didn't like me.

So, although the first thing wasn't that big of a deal, the other two encouraged us to leave her the fuck alone.

I tossed a few pebbles at Simon's window.

*tink!*

*tink!*

"Simon!" I whisper yelled. Nothing. A few more pebbles.

*tink!*

*tink!*

"Hey, Simon! Psssst!" I whisper yelled a little louder. "Wake up!"

Jimmy saw what I was doing and asked if he could help too.

"Sure," I said. "Just toss a pebble up at the window, but gently, okay? Gently."

Two seconds:

***Crash!***

Simon's window disintegrated in a shower of broken glass. Luckily for us, most of it landed inside of the house instead of raining down on our heads.

"What the fuck, Jimmy?" I yelled. "Pebbles! I said pebbles! What the hell was that, a brick?"

Before he could answer, the light in Simon's room came on. In fact, the lights at several of his neighbor's houses came on too, which I thought was pretty nose-y of them. 'Mind your own business', that's my motto. Or, wait; no. 'Deny everything', that's my real motto. Pretty solid. But I have to say, I do like that one about minding your own business too.

Can I have two mottos? Are there rules about this? And what about 'Never commit'? That's a handy motto if I ever heard one. Dammit, I'm going to have to write all of these down.

"Jimmy, do you have a pen?"

"Are you guys *drunk*?" This was Simon, doing a little whisper yelling of his own.

His head was sticking out of his bedroom window where the glass used to be. Probably not real safe, seeing as how there were still some jagged pieces jutting out from the frame. He seemed a little annoyed.

"Are you trying to insinuate that we've been drinking?" I asked.

"Hi, Simon!" Jimmy said, waving.

"Yes. That's why I asked if you were drunk," Simon replied. Then, "Hi, Jimmy."

"I believe I'm going to eschew answering that question," I replied haughtily.

"Oh, I guess not then."

Magical word, eschew.

“Sorry,” he continued, “I didn’t mean to be rude. But holy crap, what are you guys doing throwing rocks at my freaking window at three in the morning?”

“We were trying to wake you up without waking up Pricilla.”

“And how was that going to work? Pricilla sleeps in here too, you know,” Simon said.

“I sleep in here too, you know! Idiots!” This was Pricilla’s voice, coming from deeper inside the bedroom. Easy to hear, though, what with the window being broken and all.

“Hi, Pricilla,” Jimmy called out

“Hi, Jimmy,” she replied, her voice suddenly all rainbows and unicorns. “Are you doing okay, sweetie?”

Pricilla kind of had a thing for Jimmy.

“Oh, you know. Just surfing. Playing my guitar. Hanging out.”

“You are so stable,” she said. “Truly a man among boys.”

“Hi, Pricilla,” I called out.

Why not? Everybody else was doing it.

“Dear Lord in heaven and the Pope in Rome, I should have known you were going to be out there too.”

Oh, yeah. That’s why not.

Fond as she was of Jimmy, Pricilla most definitely did *not* have a thing for me. Unless you call a deathwish a thing.

“We’re just here to pick up Simon,” I said.

“And that’s why you broke my window with a brick in the middle of the night?” she shot back.

“That was Jimmy, not me.”

“Sure,” she said, “just deny everything and blame it on Jimmy. Par for the course.”

Wow, I told you that was a great motto. Even better with “blame it on Jimmy” tacked on to the end of it.

“Does anybody have a pen?” I asked again. I really needed to get this stuff written down before I forgot it.

*“For crying out loud, will you people shut up over there!?”*

We all turned to look next door where Simon’s neighbor was leaning out of his window in his PJ’s or nightshirt or whatever, looking very annoyed. It had lots of pictures of Elmo on it whatever it was. His pajamas I mean.

“Hey, I’m really sorry, Todd.” This was Simon in his best placating tone. “These are just some business associates of mine. They were just trying to wake me up without making a big fuss - ”

“And how’s that working out for everybody?” came a new annoyed voice from behind us, across the street.

We all looked. Another guy hanging out his window. I guess that’s the new thing in suburbia these days; hang out your bedroom window in the middle of the night talking to your neighbors. Seemed little weird to me, but I’m not one to judge.

“Oh, hi, Pete,” Simon said. “Look, I’m really sorry, we didn’t mean to wake anybody up - ”

“I did,” I clarified. “I wanted to wake *you* up.”

“And you did too,” complimented Jimmy.

“Success is my middle name,” I said.

“Really?” Jimmy said. “Dude, that’s cool.”

“If I hear *one more word* out of you people - ” started Mr. Elmo PJ guy.

“Hey, hey, guys, guys, look,” interrupted Simon, still in HR resolution mode, “Can you all just go back to bed? This is kind of important or we wouldn’t have bothered you. I promise.”

Simon looked down at me and whispered. “This is kind of important, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah. Biblical proportions.”

Simon shifted back to his neighbors. “Seriously, we’re all done here. We’ll take this inside,” he continued. “Again, I’m really, really sorry guys. It won’t happen again. Promise.”

Then, to me and Jimmy in yet another annoyed whisper yell: “Will you guys just shut up and come inside?”

Finally. I thought he’d never ask.

“Are you going to do this every time you have a new case?” Pricilla asked.

We were all sitting down in their living room and Pricilla had just brought in some coffee. It was now 3:30 a.m. A little early for coffee I thought, but then again, I wasn’t usually up this early. I also wasn’t usually in the mood to answer questions, and, in fact, couldn’t think of a situation where I was ever in the mood to answer them, so I decided to shift the balance of power and ask *her* a question.

“You mean, come over and pick up Simon, or break your bedroom window and piss off all your neighbors?”

See how I did that? Just sit back and learn, grasshopper. And when you can take the pebble from my hand . . . you can throw it at Simon’s window and wake him up without smashing the damn thing in and getting broken glass all over everything. It’s not rocket science.

“Well, that depends,” she said, “are they mutually exclusive?”

Fuck. Maybe it is rocket science.

She wasn’t supposed to ask another question back. This was starting to look like a tennis match, and I hate tennis. And what the hell does “mutually exclusive” mean? I was going to have to Google that. But later.

I picked up my coffee, leaned back, and gave everybody in the room my partial Billy Idol look, one at a time. First Jimmy, then Simon, and finally, Pricilla, with a little extra linger on her, just to make sure she got my point.

Jimmy and Simon were dutifully impressed, of course, but Pricilla, on the other hand, seemed unfazed by my manly half-sneer.

“Oh my god,” she said, shaking her head, “not your Billy Idol look again. And what exactly is that supposed to do to me, anyway?”

“Shhh!” Simon interjected. “Don’t talk like that. In some countries women are required - by law - to have sexual relations with anyone who Billy Idol’s them.”

Pricilla snorted. “What countries?”

Yet another question.

“Some,” Simon replied with finality. “Just be glad you’re not in one of them, or our marriage could be grappling with a serious case of infidelity right now.”

“Hey, do you have any Fritos?” Jimmy asked.

Talk about the right words at the right time. Pricilla seemed to think so too.

"I *cannot* deal with the three of you in the same room," she said getting to her feet. "Not at four in the morning."

"Actually, it's only about 3:34," I said.

"Is that a 'no' on the Fritos?" Jimmy asked. "What about tortilla chips and hummus? Or salsa, maybe?"

Pricilla held her hands up in front of her as if trying to keep something at arms length. She shook her head, as if mentally confused. Then she walked out of the room without another word.

We all watched her go and then stared silently at the empty door frame for a moment.

"She seems tense," I offered.

Simon nodded. "She gets like that."

"Can I just go in the kitchen and take a look myself?" Jimmy inquired.

"Sure, Jimmy," Simon replied. "There's some Frosted Flakes in the pantry. I don't think we have any milk though."

"That's okay. I can just eat them out of the box." He disappeared into the kitchen.

A silence overtook the room, and Simon stared at me out of the corner of his eye, considering me. Ever nonplussed, I just sipped my coffee and waited for him to make his move. Or ask his question. Or make a recommendation on where to go for breakfast.

Suddenly, a thought that had been tickling the back of my mind resurfaced with vivid clarity.

"Hey, do you know what 'mutually exclusive' means?" I asked.

"Well, sure," Simon responded. "Don't you?"

"Oh, yeah. Of course. But, you know, I don't like to automatically assume that everybody else does too. In fact, I never assume anything, because that way I don't -"

"Make an ass out of you or me," Simon finished. "Yeah, I saw 'The Bad News Bears' too."

"The original. With Walter Matthau."

"*Of course*, the original."

"Well," I said, "I don't automatically *assume* that everyone has, so you don't have to be a smartass about it."

"Sorry. It's early. And I wasn't expecting you."

"A case just came up. That's why we're here."

"I figured."

"Hey!" Jimmy called from the other room. "You've got Fruit Loops!"

"Go ahead," Simon yelled back. Then, to me, "Is this about France?"

"So you've heard," I said. A statement, not a question.

"Everybody's heard. It's all anybody's talking about."

"Well, we weren't. Until just now, that is."

"You know what I mean."

"Are you assuming that? Because I thought we'd already covered assumptions in their entirety."

"We did, we did. My bad," he said. "Please. The case?"

"Yeah. We're on our way to New York," I said. "Got an important meeting to attend."

"New York City?" Simon asked.

“No, New York State. We’re just going to arbitrarily drive the fuck around and see if we spot a great big important meeting. Then we’ll dive in like a bunch of hungry vultures. Of *course*, New York fucking city.”

“Okay, okay,” Simon said. “I was just making sure.”

“Sorry. It’s early,” I said. “And I wasn’t expecting you.”

“*What?*”

“Just something you said a while back. It worked for you. Thought I’d give it a try.”

“Completely different context.”

“Okay. I’ll give you that,” I said. “Anyway, there’s a big meeting in the Big Apple tomorrow with all of the best fictional detectives, cops, and private eyes from around the world. All the heavies in one place, coordinating and putting their heads together to figure out what the hell happened. And fast.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, ‘wow’. And yours truly is part of the game. But I guess that goes without saying.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to assume that,” Simon said.

“Good man.”

“So, not to assume anything else either, but I’m guessing me and Jimmy are going with you?”

“Nailed it.”

He nodded, but rather than being overcome with excitement - because what could be more fun than trying to find out who bitch slapped France off the face of the planet - he suddenly appeared pensive.

“Same author?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“Has he gotten any better?”

“Nope.”

Big sigh. Pained look. Resignation. Acceptance.

“Okay,” he said finally. “I guess. I mean, it is a sovereign nation. France, I mean. If you need me to help crack the case, I’ll go.”

“Actually, I just need you and Jimmy for gas money. And portable human shielding. But if you want to think you’re actually helping to crack the case, that’s fine by me.”

Jimmy suddenly appeared from the kitchen with a bag of corn chips.

“Dude, you *did* have Fritos after all. They were way in the back, almost like you were hiding them from somebody.”

Simon and I both got to our feet and we stood there for a moment as I glanced from one of my partners to the other; Simon looking uncertain and scared, Jimmy happily munching away.

“Alright, men,” I said. “We’ve got a job to do. Let’s roll.”

“Shotgun!” Jimmy yelled.