

Chapter 4

I pulled into my driveway around 2 p.m. At least I think it was p.m. Who the hell could tell anymore with Daylight Savings Time? Just another distraction created by “The Man” to keep us mostly honest working folks distracted from what was really going on in the world if you ask me. Seems to be working okay.

I’d taken the back roads home. Always do. Interstate 4 is the main artery that runs through the heart of Orlando, but anyone who lives here (or anyone who has ever visited for, say, an hour) knows that it’s not so much a highway as a long 6 lane parking lot. Many a tourist with a carload full of excited children had forgone a day at the theme parks in order to spend it instead on the fabled roadway leading there. In the end, there wasn’t much of a difference. Just a matter of where you’d rather wait in line.

Today, traffic had been even worse than usual if listening to the radio on the way home was any indication. Apparently there had been quite the ruckus downtown near my office that morning which had invited scores of police, emergency vehicles, and local news vans to assist in jamming the already congested streets. Made me think about moving my office to a better location. You just can’t do good business in a bad part of town, and it appeared that that neighborhood was taking a turn for the worse.

I pulled my key from the ignition, pushed the button on the garage door opener, and walked back up the drive to the mailbox while the Impala continued dieseling.

Just as I got to the end of the driveway, the garage door reached full open and my house exploded into a fireball of orange flame.

Bal-LOON!

Shit. Auto-correct.

Bal-LOON!

Dammit!

Bal-LOON!

Bal-LOON!

Bal-LOON!

Bal-LOON!

Motherfucker.

Ka-BOOM!

Finally. Holy shit.

The blast knocked me off my feet and sent my hat flying. I raised an arm to shield my head as wood and brick splinters shot past. After the initial shock wave, debris started

to rain down, and something that looked kind of like what was left of my coffee pot landed a few feet away with a thud (I have more trouble with those things, you just don't know).

I heard a ringing and slowly reached for my cell phone. Then realized that I didn't own a cell phone and that the ringing was in my head. I rolled onto my back and caught my breath as I watched the black smoke mushroom up into the sky. The Impala's engine finally coughed to a stop and the stillness and quiet were complete. Well, except for the ringing in my ears.

Now, I'm not what you'd call a paranoid guy. In all honesty, I'm not even sure what paranoid even means.

So.

Not really sure where I was going with that, but - oh, wait; paranoid means that somebody is out to get you. Or, at least, you *think* somebody is out to get you. So I guess I do know what it means after all, and, I also remember what I was going to say, too. Kind of a double bonus win for everybody on that.

See, I'm putting two and two together and thinking about how just this morning my office gets shot all to hell? And now I come home and my house explodes? And I'm thinking, right? Two and two equals four, and somebody is trying to kill me.

Pretty simple math.

I slowly got to my feet. It seemed like the thing to do.

As I was standing there considering all of this a cast iron skillet suddenly landed with a thud about three feet away from me. *Holy crap, I thought, now somebody's bombing me with cookware.*

I started scampering away and then stopped as I realized a couple of things: One, the skillet was probably just making it back to earth after being shot into space by the explosion and I wasn't actually being bombed with cookware, and two, I don't scamper.

I saw my hat laying on the far side of the road with a pair of feet standing next to it, cleverly concealed by a pair of shoes.

Ever notice that we wear a lot of pairs? Pair of shoes, pair of socks, pair of pants, pair of underwear, pair of panties (not me; some dudes, yes, but mostly chicks), pair of gloves, pair of earrings, pair of glasses; but only one shirt.

Why is that? How come a shirt is the only thing we don't wear that doesn't come in a - oh, wait. I guess we don't wear a pair of hat either. Or a pair of tie. Or a pair of bra (again, not me; mostly *chi-women*, but some dudes too probably).

Still . . . there's an overwhelming majority thing going on with pairs. Not sure that's kosher. Or legal. Maybe I'll check with a SJW later on that.

Something else suddenly came clanging down on the ground behind me, but I was done paying attention to parts of my house falling to earth.

Went and grabbed my hat instead. Stood up and checked out the guy that was standing next to it. Considered him for a moment.

He was still looking past me at the smoking hole in the ground that used to be my house. Dull expression in his eyes, mouth hanging open. It was like the guy had never seen a house blow up before.

"You okay there, hopscotch?" I asked.

He seemed to finally notice me. Gave a little shake of the head, made eye contact.

"What?"

"I said, 'are you okay?' Well, technically I *asked* if you were okay. And I called you hopscotch. But let's not belabor the point."

He seemed even more confused, if that was possible.

"Hey," he said, taking a few steps toward the location Formally Known as the Place Where Dick Lived and pointing a finger at it. "The HOA's not going to like that."

"The what?"

"The HOA. The homeowner's association. You can't have all that burning debris in your yard. They'll give you a fine."

"Speaking of fines," I said, "I'm doing just that, thanks for asking. You know, as somebody who was almost some of that same burning debris you just mentioned as opposed to someone else who's apparently more worried about his plummeting property values."

Again, the thousand yard stare. Starting to annoy me, and I had stuff to do, like getting the hell out of there before whoever had blown up my house checked to see if I had blown up with it. I tried a different tack to see if I could make contact.

"So what's your name, hopscotch?"

"Robert."

"Bobby. Got it," I said.

"No, it's Robert. I don't go by Bobby."

I pointed my finger at his chest.

"Hey, what's that?" I asked.

He looked down and I lifted my finger up and popped him in the nose. Yeah, it was funny in the 3rd grade; it's still funny. Also tends to take some of the air out of pompous little windbags who think they can fly on the same plane of intelligence as me.

Sorry if that sounds a little condescending, but I've had *psychiatrists* tell me they've met very few people with an intellect like mine, so sometimes I have to remind the unwashed masses where they fit into the circle of life.

"Hey!" he said.

Really? That's the best he can come up with? Case closed on Exhibit "A". Told you so.

"Listen, Bobby," I said.

"It's Robert."

"Right. So, do you have, like, a clean hand towel?"

"Yes," he said suspiciously.

"Well, can you go get it for me?"

"Why? Are you bleeding?"

"No, but you're going to be if you keep asking me questions. Now can you do that for me? Get a towel, I mean?"

"Okay. I guess so," he said, moving toward his house with guarded trepidation.

"Oh, and hey, Bobby? How about we step it up a little, yeah?"

"It's Robert."

"Right."

He scampered off and disappeared into the bowels of his garage, giving me a few moments to collect my thoughts.

The first thing I thought was, *Yeah, I thought he was a scamperer.*

The second thing I thought was that I didn't give a shit what any homeowners association thought about the smoking hole in the ground where I used to live. It wasn't really even my house anyway; I was just staying there because my real house had burned down awhile back. In fact, it was the smoking hole in the ground on the adjacent lot.

My third thought was that this neighborhood was really going to shit.

My fourth thought - and this one like, *finally*, had some meat on the bones - was that maybe somebody was trying to kill me.

And then I realized that I had already figured all that out. So either I was a little more dazed & confused from the blast than I'd originally thought, or I was so good that I was getting stuff done even before I thought about doing it.

If that makes any sense.

And I'm not sure if it does.

Can you still hear ringing or is that just me?

And how many times are we going to use the word "thought" here? Holy crap. It's called a thesaurus, asshole. Try using it. No, not you, I'm not talking to you; it's this author. Usually I can handle it, but sometimes this guy, I swear . . . I don't know. I'm a little testy right now, that's all.

And no, "testy" is not the Latin singular of "testes", even though it does kind of sound like it. I'm going to stop right here for a moment because I have to say, the fact that I even have to point that out is kind of creepy weird and definitely inappropriate. I mean, just this morning France has been wiped of the face of the planet, my office has been shot all to hell, and my home blown up in a raging fireball and you're here thinking about my balls? Really?

Bobby came back out.

Thank God.

"Here you go," he said, holding the towel out to me.

I didn't take it.

Instead, I asked, "Are you an art lover, Bobby? Because I have to say you look like a true connoisseur of American culture, beauty, and history. Am I right?"

"Okay, I don't know who you are, but I really wish you'd call me Robert - "

"Right. Got it. So it's a yes, right? I mean, if somebody smeared peanut butter all over the Mona Lisa, you'd wipe it off, wouldn't you?"

"Well - "

"Of course you would. Who wouldn't? Only a cretin, that's who. And while we could debate all day about what your real name is, you're definitely not a cretin. I think we can all agree on that."

"Well, no; I mean, yes - "

I pointed across the street to my driveway.

"You see that?" I said.

"The car?"

"Wow. 'The car', he says. What a kidder."

I smiled, shaking my head, and put my arm over his shoulders.

"That car my friend," I explained, "is a 1972 Chevrolet Impala. Two-door convertible. Power steering. Power front discs. And a 270-horsepower, 454 cubic-inch Turbo Jet V-8 rocket under the hood. I'm talking pure pussy. With an attitude."

"Really?" he asked.

"Yeah. You drive that thing down the street? Women literally undress in front of you."

"They do?"

"Yes. Literally. In fact, this car creates so much public nudity that it's been completely banned from the state of Utah. Mormon's hate it."

"Get out. Are you serious?"

"Not really," I admitted, "I made that last part up, but everything else is true."

"That's still pretty badass, though," he said.

"Yes, it is. And that badass Detroit Rembrandt just happens to be covered with debris and broken glass and who knows what else. So I need you to take that towel and go wipe all that crap off of it."

Bobby forward-slash Robert looked up at me, slightly confused again. So I gave him a firm push.

"And if you see a scratch, be sure to buff that out too," I said. "I'd do it myself but I've got a few calls to make. You know how it is."

I watched him shuffle off across the street, pulling his shirt up over his mouth to filter out the smoke and being careful not to step on burning embers, when I remembered I don't have a phone."

"Hey, Billy," I called, "You got your cell on you?"

Of course he did.

They all do.