

That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore – Chapter 1

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Thanks,

Matt.

## CHAPTER 1

*Too close to home.*

*And it's too near the bone.*

Archie tried to swagger down the sidewalk with all the grace of a Venezuelan pimp with a cough syrup addiction. He couldn't get those lyrics out of his head, at least it was stopping him from screaming. The battered blue Samsonite suitcase had more of a heft to it than he'd anticipated when he'd set off to Penn Station to collect it.

Ten thirty sharp. No funny stuff. We have people watching.

He'd got there at twenty eight minutes past just as the final call for the New Rochelle train had been announced. Palms sweaty he'd picked up the ticket from the teller like he was supposed to and made his way over to the luggage pick-up area.

Archie's hand shook while he handed over the luggage stub. The old looking Porter in a clean and crisp uniform couldn't quite manage to haul the case onto the counter. A younger man in a crumpled version of the uniform, well a boy was what he really was in Archie's mind stood idly by staring at his scuffed shoes ignoring both of them. So the older porter dragged the suitcase around the side of the counter, just hard enough for one of the wheels to fall off.

"Shit" Archie said, not really caring if the porter heard him.

The Porter looked at him and shrugged. The expression on his face said "What're you going to do?"

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The answer was simple. Archie would do nothing and like it. It wasn't as though he could involve anyone else. They had made that quite clear. The handle was scuffed and felt damp with sweat when Archie hefted it away and into the crowd.

He'd made it onto the 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and began heading uptown. His back nearly in a spasm, Archie called for a cab. He rested the suitcase on the sidewalk for a moment as he tried in vain to whistle, instead settling for a frantic wave of the hand.

The yellow cab with a roof ad for the latest Giorgio for Men pulled up to the curb. Archie motioned for the cabbie to pop the trunk. Doing so, the cabbie got out and came around to the back of the cab just as Archie's cell phone began to buzz in his pocket.

With as much caution as though it were radioactive Archie flipped it open and checked the caller. It was them; it must be as he didn't recognise the number. But all the calls had been from different cell phones. He green lit the call and brought up the cell to his ear.

The computer distorted sound crackled in Archie's ear for a second before the voice spoke. "No cabs. We are watching."

The connection dead, Archie dropped the phone back into the pocket of his pants.

The cabbie picked up the suitcase as though it were filled with pillows, dumping it in the trunk. The weight made cab's suspension cab bob briefly

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with an audible groan over the morning traffic. The cabbie pushed the case to the back of the trunk, as though he was expecting Archie to climb in after it.

Archie tapped in on the shoulder while he was still bending over.

“Da” the cabbie said in a heavy Russian accent.

With the cabbie stretching and his shirt sleeves rolled, Archie could see the ends of a heavily inked tattoo. Huckleberry Hound in what could only be described as coitus with a large breasted redhead. Perhaps it was Jessica Rabbit. Archie couldn't quite tell, since her face wasn't visible. In any case it didn't matter. But at least it showed the cabbie had a sense of humour.

Archie realised that the Cabbie was staring at him. “Ya” he said again. “What matter?”

“I, um.” Archie trailed off, hoping that the cabbie would get the message.

“So where to?”

A small tear formed in the corner of Archie's eye. He brushed it away with the back of his hand. “I've, I've changed my mind.”

The cabbie sighed, but he seemed to be taking it well until, of course, he began cursing at Archie in Russian. At least Archie assumed it was Russian. The Russian paced back and forth. He was definitely going to erupt.

Archie wanted him to stop. Not for him, but for his little girl.

No cops. No funny stuff. We are watching.

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He was about to place a hand on the Russian's shoulder when his common sense slapped him about the face just in time. Better that than the Sarychev Volcano pouring fists of lava over him.

Archie licked his lips. "I can pay."

"I should fucking well hope so." The cabbie spat. He stood waiting.

Archie's cell phone buzzed again. No call this time. Just a message. Archie fumbled for the phone in his pocket, before losing his grip and the phone landed in the gutter. "Fuck"

Archie bent down to retrieve his phone, but the Russian put a hand on his shoulder.

"Money first. Then phone."

Archie straightened. His thoughts trailed off before he could even speak trying to grasp for the words to make the cab driver understand. "But it may be important." Archie's hair was damp with sweat; he instinctively ran a hand through it, making it stand on end and accenting his already scattered frame of mind. "Can't you see I'm under a lot of stress? You're not helping" Archie heart felt as though it would burst through his chest at any moment.

"Da. Money, or I take your suitcase". The cabbie slammed the trunk closed and made his way back to the driver's door.

Without thinking Archie scooped up the phone and was on the Russian's heels in one fluid motion. "How much?"

"One of your Benjamin Franklins." The cabbie laughed.

"What's so funny?" Archie asked, already fumbling with his wallet.

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“He created electricity and I’m going to use him to pay my utilities bill.”

“This is highway robbery!”

The cabbie shook his head. “No, this is Eighth Avenue.” The Russian took this bill, folded it up and put it in the pocket of his denims.

Archie saw no sense in trying to appeal to passers by, he’d just be ignored as just another weirdo on the streets of New York. He’d have better luck telling them the world would end, at least he would have their attention for a second or two and a chair to stand on.

“Why you want to walk anyhow?”

Archie ignored him, and returned to the rear of the cab. “I’m trying to see my daughter. Open the trunk, I haven’t much time.”

The Russian followed him. “I help you.” He said. “It least I can do.”

“How about giving me my hundred bucks back?”

The cabbie just laughed. “I spend it. Where are you going?”

Archie bend down to drag the case from the rear of the trunk. “Uptown, doesn’t matter. Just give me a hand with this, it’s heavy.” He wiped his sweaty palms on his pant legs in preparation for getting a good grip on the suitcase.

“Is that where your daughter live?”

He couldn’t think straight. “I don’t know. Maybe” Archie bent forward again and gripped the handle. He looked back at the cab driver as he pulled at the case. It moved a couple of inches at most. Today was really sapping his strength. “Do you have any kids?” he asked as the cab driver, looked around absently.

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“Da.” The cabbie nodded his head in agreement. “Adeen.”

Archie stood straightening his back. He narrowed his eyes but was struggling to comprehend what the cabbie was saying. If Archie had known any Russian it would be so rusty it would qualify for the scrappage scheme.

“One” He repeated in flawless English. “Yours.”

Archie felt his legs give way as though he'd been punched in the gut.

The cab driver pushed him into the trunk and slammed the lid.

The lyrics began to swim around Archie's head.

*That joke isn't funny anymore.*

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