

Chapter Two—Another Coincidence?

I couldn't believe someone stole my Jeep. The car was not in the best of shape or particularly attractive, so why anyone would want to steal it was beyond me. Especially since my neighborhood had so many newer and nicer cars to choose from.

Naturally I called the police, who didn't seem too surprised or concerned about the incident. Especially since it was a 1993 Jeep. A half hour later, a police officer showed up at my front door. Officer Rick Hernandez. He was a tall attractive man of the Latin variety who watched me with guarded amusement as I recounted the story.

"The Jeep was parked in my driveway, which is actually detached from the house."

"How detached?" The officer asked.

"Very," I said. "It's behind the fence in the backyard, so you can't really see the driveway from the house. It's hidden."

"I see." The officer said, writing something down in his little notebook.

"So does this type of thing happen a lot around here?" I asked, wondering if maybe I was the latest victim of a local car-napping ring.

"Not usually at this time of year," Officer Hernandez said, matter-of-factly. "Mostly in the winter, when people go out to warm up their cars and then go back in the house. You see a lot of cars get stolen like that. They usually end up in Newark."

"Why Newark?"

"Why not? It's close to an airport, to work, to drugs...whatever. Or maybe someone stole it for the parts. There's a big foreign market for these old car parts. You just can't get them any more."

"So what are the chances I'll ever get it back? Are you going to put out an APB on it?"

"It'll go into our system," The officer said, chuckling at my naiveté. "So if the car ever turns up, it'll be flagged as a stolen vehicle."

"And then...?"

"And then we'll call you to come pick it up."

"Oh, great. What if it ends up in Oklahoma?"

"Then I suppose that would be a problem. But it's highly unlikely the vehicle will ever make it to Oklahoma. They'll run out of gas long before that."

"This is really disturbing to me," I confessed. "I've only lived in this town, in this house, for six months. And already my car's been stolen. How am I supposed to feel about that?"

"Were you planning on trading it in, anyway?" The Officer asked, as if conducting a talk show.

"Why? Do my trade-in plans make the fact that it was stolen any better? "

"No. But because it was stolen, you might get more money from your insurance than you would if you'd traded the car in at a dealership."

The Officer watched me closely, though I wasn't sure why.

"Sometimes people purposely get their cars stolen just so they can get the insurance money." Oh. That's why. He thinks I might be pulling a scam.

"Look Officer," I assured him. "I don't have any insurance on the car. It cost me a hundred dollars. So why would I want it stolen? It's my only form of transportation."

The Officer jotted something on his notepad. I couldn't believe this was happening. Not only had my Jeep been stolen, but now I was apparently a suspect in the theft.

"Here's my card," Hernandez said, interrupting my train of thought. "Call me if you have any questions. In the meantime, I'd get some better lighting or security in your driveway area."

As the officer turned to leave, I saw him notice the car parked on the street in front of my house. It was a Navy Blue PT Cruiser Convertible, which looked like it had just driven off the showroom floor.

"Do you know whom that car belongs to?" he asked.

"Which one? The PT Cruiser? I have no idea. It's actually been parked out there a couple days."

"You're not supposed to park a car less than fifty feet from the curb. It's going to have to be moved."

"Must be a neighbor. Or someone visiting a neighbor."

"Hmm. Maybe I should put out an APB on it," Officer Hernandez said, chuckling to himself. "Anyway, if we find anything, we'll be in touch."

As I shut the door, I thought I saw the Officer turn around once more and smile at me. Was he making fun of me, or genuinely sincere? I couldn't tell. All I knew was that my Jeep was missing, which meant I'd have to find another form of transportation.

I went up to my office to surf the Internet for some kind of deal when there was a loud knock on the front door. Imagine my surprise when I opened it to once again find Officer Hernandez. Only this time he wasn't smiling.

"Hello Officer." I said, trying to decipher his rather stern facial expression. "Did you find something already?"

"Actually, yes. Though it's not quite what I expected."

"Oh?" I said, because I didn't really know what else to say.

"You say you've never seen the owner of this car?"

"The PT Cruiser? Nope. Never saw who drove it. But as I said, it's been there a number of days."

"Are you playing games with me?" The officer asked, taking on a decidedly different tone.

"Games? What do you mean?"

"You say you don't know who owns that car and yet when I did a search on the license plate, it's registered to you."

"What? That's impossible." I said, the hairs on the back of my head once again springing to life. "I never bought a new car. My old one was just stolen this morning."

"That's rather convenient, don't you think?" Hernandez said, eyeing me closely.

Though I knew there was nothing to be afraid of, I suddenly felt very nervous. I stuck my hands in the pockets of my pullover to keep them from wildly gesticulating while I spoke. If there's one thing policeman don't like, it's a lot of gesticulation.

"Look. There must be some mistake." I said, fumbling with something in my pocket. "I never bought, nor have I ever owned a PT..."

At that moment, I chose the wrong opportunity to pull out what I was fumbling with. As I looked down in horror, I realized it was the set of keys I'd received in the mail three days earlier.

"What's that?" Hernandez said, noticing the car keys.

"Car keys. But they're not mine."

"May I see them, please?"

"Sure."

I handed the keys over to the Officer, who turned around and aimed the electronic component at the Navy Blue PT Cruiser parked in front of my house. Within a few moments, a short beep was heard and the car's front lights momentarily flashed, indicating that the car was now unlocked. And though many strange things had happened to me since I first moved to Plainfield six months ago, this was the first moment I realized my world was officially coming apart.

Next Episode: A Brief History of Henson

