

Chapter Eleven—Another RAMBO, Another Faux Pas

The second RAMBO party I attended was a wine tasting, held at the exquisitely decorated home of two interior designers. I think they actually referred to themselves as Domestic Enhancement Specialists, but the gist was the same.

The house was a marvel of execution, every corner and shelf carefully accented with a tasteful assortment of knick-knacks and fine art. This was the third time since I'd moved to Plainfield that I felt like I was walking onto a movie set. Everything was perfectly placed and balanced. A litany of symmetry.

Each room of the house seemed to have a theme. Some were very apparent, like the Jungle theme in the second floor bathroom, or the Beach theme on the back porch. But some of the themes escaped me. Particularly the room I peaked in that was decorated with an odd assortment of lamps, chairs, tables and other furniture. There was nothing tying any of the pieces together, so I guessed it might be some kind of “abstract” or “existential” room. I later learned this was actually their storage area and “the door was closed for a reason.”

At any rate, the classically inspired setting made the perfect venue for a wine tasting, and once again the attendance was at a maximum. Bob and Barney had kindly offered to take me with them, and then shortly separated from me once we got inside. I think they were trying to give me some “alone time” with a tall good-looking man named Chaz. But as soon as they left, so did he. Apparently I was not Chaz's cup of tea.

I was also not an avid wine drinker, and couldn't tell you the difference between Bordeaux and Chardonnay if my life depended on it. Which, thankfully it never has. It also may account for why my bargain bin wine selections never went over very big at parties.

Luckily for me, JezeBall was there to guide me through the process. JezeBall, as you may recall, was the bobbling clown in Gucci Glasses I'd met at my first RAMBO. He found me almost instantly after I arrived, and was a permanent fixture at my side from then on.

Truth to tell, I found JezeBall very entertaining. Though he often made terribly overt sexual innuendos, he was really quite harmless. And I found his constant name-dropping and gossipy nature to be a perfect match for my recent delusional obsession with celebrities. At least one of us was actually seeing them.

“Darling, this is Pinot Gris,” JezeBall told me, while a very cute waiter poured a dark white wine into my plastic cup. “It tends to be dry and crisp, so you'd serve this with something like salmon or seafood.”

I took a sip of the wine and gulped it down. JezeBall winced at my obvious impropriety, which was followed by an involuntary hitch-kick.

“Henson, Sweetie. You are not guzzling beer,” JezeBall said, holding onto a nearby chair to keep from falling over. “This is wine. You smell it. You swirl it. You savor it. You don’t chug it.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said, attempting to swirl my wine within the limited constraints of the plastic cup. Some of the wine spilled over onto the large Indian rug on the floor, creating a small stain. I started to bend down to wipe it up, when JezeBall grabbed my arm.

“Don’t bother. It’s not real anyway,” JezeBall said in a low whisper. “All this stuff. Knock-offs. Not one authentic piece of art in here. I know the prop house they used to furnish this room.”

I looked around the room at the picture perfect arrangement of furniture and décor. Could all these exquisite furniture pieces really be fakes?

“You see that chair over there?” JezeBall said, pointing to a beautifully upholstered armchair in shades of green and red. “Jodie Foster sat on that in *Silence of the Lambs*. It was used in a scene that was cut from the final film, but her ass has been on it nonetheless. (*Big laugh. Hitchkick.*) I know because I rented it for a fashion shoot with Tyra Banks before it ended up here. Jodie’s name is still written on the bottom. You should definitely turn it over and take a look. Not now, of course; someone’s sitting on it. But later, as the party starts to dwindle.”

I took another sip of wine, imagining myself sneaking into this room later, getting down on my hands and knees and lifting the chair up to find Jodie Foster’s name. To what point, I don’t know, but it was definitely something to consider.

I noticed Brit across the room, standing near a full-size replica of a London phone booth. I couldn’t decide which I found more interesting. The boyish man I met at the last RAMBO party right before I fainted, or the kitschy English reproduction cleverly converted into a curio cabinet. Before I had a chance to decide, Brit suddenly left the room.

“Do you taste the almonds and peaches?” JezeBall asked, referring to the Pinot Gris again.

“There are almonds in this?” I said, looking in the cup for evidence of floating nuts.

“No, not whole almonds. They’re used in the process. So often you can taste subtle evidence of them in the wine.”

“It must be very subtle, because all I can taste is grape. And even that’s debatable.”

“Oh my dear, you have so much to learn about wine.”

“You could probably expand that statement to include many things, JezeBall. But I’m an avid student. I’m here for the long haul.”

Apparently JezeBall only heard the words “long haul,” which unfortunately launched him into a cavalcade of sexual innuendos for the next five minutes. He laughed and chortled and wiggled and hitch-kicked to such a degree, he looked like a Jumping Jack with epilepsy.

When I’d nearly finished my first cup of wine, a passing waiter instantly refilled it. This became a trend throughout the evening. Sometimes my cup wasn’t even empty when someone moved in to top it off. It was because of this ongoing refurbishment that I never knew how many cups of wine I’d actually consumed. And what’s worse, I didn’t even know what my tolerance level was, as I’d never had more than one glass per sitting. But I was feeling pretty happy, so I was sure I was still within my limit.

“Isn’t this tacky?” JezeBall whispered, referring to the plastic wine cups. “Even inexpensive glasses would have been better. But these people are cheap, cheap, cheap. Don’t get me wrong, I love them to death. They have great vision when it comes to other people’s money. But when it comes to their own...well, just look around you.”

I did as I was told and began looking around, which gave me a temporary head rush and a weird spinning sensation. I looked down at my cup of wine and it was still half full. I tried to calculate how many times a waiter had replenished it. Maybe I was up to one and a half cups by now. Or maybe two. Definitely not more than three. I continued the debate for several minutes, while JezeBall prattled on about the hideous draperies that were probably purchased at a factory close-out in Newark.

At some point, JezeBall waddled off to the bathroom, and I was free to fend for myself. I decided to find the snack table, to help saturate some of the wine that was no doubt drowning certain portions of my interior. Unlike the last party, which had very little food, I was happy to find this one boasted a large assortment of cheeses and crackers and cold meats. There were even some trays of fine chocolates, which I’ll admit I had one too many of. To my relief, there were no Eight Layer Cookies secretly tucked away on a shelf somewhere, so I was safe from any accidental consumption.

If my knowledge of wine is minimal, my knowledge of cheese is slightly better. I know American. I know Mozzarella. I know Cheddar. Everything else is mold.

I was in the middle of examining the various choices, when two rather fit men with long hair walked up and began digging into an orange red cheese with a white nutty crust. I was about to inquire as to what it was, when the tallest one turned to me and asked:

“What are you, about 190 pounds? 200?”

I was a little taken aback by the blunt question, fearing there might be some sort of weight restriction on who was allowed to eat the cheese and crackers. Perhaps they were rationing the food for people of a certain body type, and they wanted to make sure I fit the profile.

The taller longhaired man sensed my hesitation, because he then added:

“I’m Jake. I’m an amateur wrestler, and I was trying to figure out your weight class.”

Thank God. At least I could still eat the cheese.

“I’m Henson, and I’m usually around 190. But if I keep eating this cheese, I may be up to 193 by morning.”

“You’re tall. You can get away with it.”

“My name is Jake, too, and I’m 150,” the other longhaired man said, extending his hand to shake mine. He had a great smile, and was slightly cuter than the first Jake.

“I’m 170,” the first Jake added. “But I’m tight.”

He emphasized the word “tight” with a large eyebrow raise, which was about as subtle as Ethel Merman. And then Jake #2 followed with a series of rapid winks that reminded me of flapping butterfly wings.

I was glad the weight issue was out of the way. Usually your weight is something people talk about behind your back. How refreshing that for once it was discussed right in front of you.

“I’m always looking for a good match partner,” the first Jake continued. “And you look like you’re pretty solid. Ever wrestle before?”

“Not officially,” I answered. “Unless you count during sex.”

“But of course,” the second Jake laughed. “That’s the best time.”

“Where do you wrestle?” I asked, curious to know what kind of a team he might be on. He looked to be in his mid-thirties.

“In my home,” the first Jake responded, while looking me up and down. “At other people’s houses. And of course there are the tournaments.”

“As long as you have a good mat, you can wrestle.” The second Jake assured me with a wink, as if I was seriously concerned about it.

I never knew that people my age still participated in wrestling tournaments. Especially gay people. Besides the WWF, of course, though I don't think anyone really considers that wrestling. (Or gay.)

"We went to a tournament in Philadelphia last week," Jake #1 said. "Jake here doesn't wrestle, but I got as far as the third rotation before I was cut."

"I like to watch," Jake #2 offered, winking at me.

"Is this regular wrestling?" I asked, trying to clarify. "Or mud wrestling?"

"Actually, it's the same kind of wrestling you probably did in High School," Jake #1 replied. "There are different age and weight classes, so you're pretty evenly matched up. You'd probably be in the Heavy Weight division."

"Great," I said, putting two pieces of cheese I'd just picked up back on the serving tray.

"That doesn't mean you're fat," Jake #2 assured me. "It's just the name of the group. Anyone over 190 is a Heavy Weight."

"Typically you and I wouldn't wrestle," Jake #1 added, while doing a quick hand-check of my chest and arms. "But I like to wrestle tall guys. They're more of a challenge."

"Plus, he likes to get pinned, if you know what I mean," Jake #2 laughed, once again winking at me as if we had some kind of intimate understanding.

"And we're going to a tournament tomorrow in Syracuse, if you want to come along," Jake #1 offered, while gently massaging my arm, sending a tingling sensation throughout my body.

For the next ten minutes, Jake and Jake and I discussed the ins and outs of gay wrestling. Apparently it was quite a popular past-time among a certain faction of the national gay community. There were even websites devoted to finding an appropriate wrestling partner in your area.

I'll admit I was a little intrigued, though not enough to actually do something about it. I had too many bad memories from childhood gym class, where the teacher constantly berated me for not trying hard enough. Once pinned, I wouldn't struggle, I wouldn't fight, I would just submit. I guess I liked the intimacy of another boy so close to me. And since this was the only opportunity I had to experience it, I was going to savor the moment.

The coach had other plans, however, and began pairing me with Triple Ton Tom, the heaviest boy in our class. Perhaps even the heaviest boy known to man. He could knock me to the ground just by breathing in my direction. And once underneath him, it was impossible to get out. It was also impossible to breathe, which caused me to endlessly

wiggle and squirm just to get some air. The coach viewed this as progress, and began praising me for my effort.

“That’s it Henson,” The Gym Teacher would say. “Use your legs more. Try to push him off you.” Gee, what do you think I’m trying to do, you Sadist Pig?

The Gym Teacher apparently missed the fact that my face was turning blue and I could barely breathe. He only saw that I was actually moving rather than playing dead, and that was a positive improvement.

After that, he never paired me with anyone but Triple Ton Tom, which may be why I’ve never been particularly attracted to large men. (Or Bears, as they’re known in the gay social structure.) I was squashed too many times by one of their Baby Cubs when I was younger.

JezeBall returned from his bathroom adventure just in time to find me practically sandwiched between the two Jakes. Our conversation had turned into a very touchy-feely session that I found myself enjoying despite the obvious impropriety. I could practically hear Ramona screaming “this would never happen in Cuba,” but I allowed it to happen anyway.

“I see the Two Jakes are measuring you for wrestling attire,” JezeBall said, with just a hint of sarcasm. “Better be careful, Henson. I hear they like to tag team.”

“Oh be quiet, you old bitch,” Jake #1 said, while giving JezeBall a big hug. “You’re just jealous because if we were ever wrestled you to the ground, you’d never get up.”

JezeBall let out a huge laugh, and hugged Jake #2 as well. They were obviously all friends. I reached for the empty cup of wine I’d put down while cruising the cheese, and found that someone had already refilled it. Or perhaps it was someone else’s cup. It didn’t matter. It was all the same.

As I took another sip, I noticed Brit lurking in the shadows. He was definitely watching me, but never came over to join our conversation. Maybe he was the shy type, and didn’t want to approach a big group. After a while, he left, and I never saw him again.

Bob and Barney soon found their way to the snack table, and the five of us had a wonderful time, laughing and drinking and eating and drinking and telling stories and drinking. During our conversation, JezeBall dropped about a hundred names or so, and then proceeded to stomp on each and every one of them. He seemed to know all kinds of famous people intimately, or at least implied as much. He was more entertaining than Joan Rivers, when Joan Rivers used to be funny. (Can you say “the 1980s”?)

JezeBall was a great storyteller, accenting his peppery tidbits with a constant calliope of movement and sounds. The hitch kick was replaced during his narration with a sort of mock plié, a half bend of the knees causing his pelvis to thrust forward in a sort of

scooping motion. Not a particularly graceful move, but one that definitely caught your attention. I think we all involuntarily jumped back a little each time he plied his crotch in our direction.

At one point JezeBall mentioned knowing Tom Selleck, which of course caused me to blurt out that I knew Tom Selleck as well.

“Oh really?” JezeBall turned to me in apparent disbelief. “And how do you know Tom Selleck, my dear?”

“Well, I don’t actually know him,” I said, my head suddenly feeling like a fishbowl. (Were those minnows swimming past my eyes?) “But I met him once. Almost a year ago now. Right here in Plainfield.”

This caused the group to erupt in laughter, followed by several people chiding me gently and challenging my sincerity. But I *was* sincere. And despite the sinking feeling in my stomach and the sweat beginning to erupt from my pores, I felt an urgent need to defend my integrity.

“I really did.” I blurted out. “I know it sounds bizarre, but I met him through a Plainfield woman named Unity Kingsmill. He picked me up at the train station and took me to her house.”

“So Tom is moonlighting as a chauffeur?” Jake #2 asked, while winking at me. What the Hell was up with that winking bit? It was getting a little old. And I was getting a little irritated that no one seemed to believe me.

“No. He’s a friend of Unity,” I protested. “Does anyone know her? Unity Kingsmill? She lives in that really cool English Tudor over on Maple?”

Some people said they were familiar with the house, but no one seemed to have any idea who Unity Kingsmill was. No one except JezeBall. He was looking at me with a strange fascination. Maybe it was the wine, but I thought I saw a change come over him. He was no longer the leering fashion fop entertaining the masses, but rather something more genuine. More paternal. Something almost loving.

“I know Unity very well,” JezeBall said with a smile. “Very well indeed. But I didn’t realize...well, of course, I should have...silly me...you’re a very lucky man, you know.”

“Well, yes, I’ve had a little luck of late, but I wouldn’t call it a trend just yet.”

“Oh, I would,” JezeBall laughed gently. “Yes, I definitely would.”

And with that, JezeBall turned on his heel quite effortlessly and gently glided out of the room. Evidently, he could control the wobbling when he really wanted to.

The sudden departure of our self appointed center of attention caused an odd break in the festive mood, and though we all made an attempt to regain it, the moment was gone. Jake and Jake shortly excused themselves to go home, as they were getting up early the next morning to drive to Syracuse for the tournament. I wished them luck and hugged each simultaneously. Jake #1 kissed me on the lips, and slipped his business card into my shirt pocket. Jake #2 kissed me on the cheek, while winking incessantly. Or maybe that was a facial tick. I couldn't decide.

"Are you ready to go?" Bob asked me, after the Two Jakes left.

"I thought this was a wine tasting party," I protested, for no apparent reason. "So where are all the different kinds of wine? I've only had the *Pino Nino*."

"That was the featured wine this evening," Barney explained, obviously amused at my somewhat intoxicated state. "Did you like the...uh...*Pino Nino*?"

"Yes." I said with conviction. "Except for the almonds. I didn't like the almonds."

"Which almonds were those, Henson?"

"The almonds in the wine. I don't like almonds in my wine," I said, clearly fighting an uphill battle with clarity.

The next five minutes were not pretty, and not particularly worth mentioning, except to say that I soon lost the contents of my stomach and the floor beneath me found them. Once again, Bob and Barney were there to help me get home, to make sure I was safely inside my house and that I'd taken an aspirin or two before they left. I was obviously doing nothing to help my already tarnished reputation in Plainfield gay society.

"You're going to hate yourself in the morning," Barney said, when hugging me goodnight. "But when you feel better, give me a call. I want to talk to you about something." Probably some kind of twelve-step program, no doubt.

As I shut the front door behind Bob and Barney, I was overwhelmed once again with the wonderfully caring people living in the suburbs. New York City may be where the glamour is, but Plainfield was definitely where the heart was. And with that, I threw up the remainder of my stomach all over the living room floor.

Next Episode: Lost and Found