

Chapter Twelve—Lost and Found

The next morning, as Barney predicted, I was a whimpering ball of misery. My head ached, my stomach was queasy, and the bags under my eyes had quadrupled into large steamer trunks. Not only did I *feel* horrible, but I *looked* horrible too. Thank God I'd had the foresight to cancel my semi-weekly cooking class with Ramona. I couldn't imagine trying to cut up onions and garlic when I felt like this.

The sun was too bright for my eyes, so I spent most of the morning in the dark with the curtains drawn. I tried to distract myself from how I felt by watching television, but that just made me nauseous. And not for any of the usual reasons either.

Later in the day, when I was finally able to walk around, I noticed there were lights on in the house across the street, and a beautiful black limousine was parked in the driveway. As I had nothing better to do, I decided to keep an eye on this for a while. Maybe I'd finally see something that would put my paranoid fantasies to rest.

I got out a small pair of opera glasses I'd recently found among my boxes of collectibles, and a folding chair I'd gotten at a garage sale, and set myself up for a stake out. The guest bedroom provided the best vantage point, as the window allowed me to look down upon the house from a somewhat elevated position. The room was also dark enough that I could observe the proceedings without anyone being able to see me doing it.

So, wrapped in my bathrobe and sporting my fourth cup of piping hot tea, I settled in for a few hours of amateur sleuthing. The thought of finally getting some clear images of my mysterious neighbors caused me to have a little adrenaline rush. Or maybe it was the four cups of tea. Either way, I was starting to feel better. Stalking potential celebrities was fun.

Not much happened for the first two hours, which was pretty disappointing, not to mention extremely boring. I was almost ready to give up and watch my favorite sick-time movie, "Victor, Victoria," when something caught my attention inside the garage.

I could see light and shadows creating movement through the garage door windows. The windows weren't very big, maybe ten inches high by twelve inches long. But there were three of them spread across the length of the garage door, so one could get a pretty good abbreviated vision of the interior.

I grabbed my opera glasses and concentrated on the first window. Nothing. I moved onto the second window. I could see that someone was moving around, but I couldn't yet get a good view of who it was. As I moved my focus to the third window, I was surprised to find a man's face looking back at me.

Well, he wasn't really looking at me, but rather at my house. Nevertheless, the shock of being observed caused me to instinctively lurch backwards, and soon both the chair and

myself were laying flat on the floor. When I managed to get myself up again, the garage door suddenly opened and light spilled out onto the driveway. I moved back a little from the window, for fear the light might illuminate me as well, though of course it didn't stretch that far.

A tall man emerged from the garage, carrying a brief case of some sort. He was dressed in a dark suit, and had the appearance of a chauffeur. As he walked to the black limousine parked in the driveway, he again looked over at my house, doing a thorough check of the premises. I was glad I'd moved away from the window, as the room was dark enough to hide my presence. Had I been closer, I'm sure my white ghostly pallor would've glowed in the window like a lighthouse beacon.

After perusing my property, the man leaned over to open the car door. Finding it locked, he began fumbling around in his pockets. When he didn't find what he was looking for, he set his brief case down on the ground, and did a fast check of his coat and shirt. When that didn't prove fruitful, he bent down to look in the driver's side window.

Apparently what he saw made him extremely nervous, because he began running around the car, frantically trying to open every door. When he realized all of them were locked, he began violently kicking at everything in sight: the tires, the shrubbery, his briefcase. He didn't even seem to mind when a particularly good punt sent the briefcase sailing across the front yard, landing somewhere in the middle of the grass. He looked at it and scoffed, and I wasn't entirely sure he ever planned to retrieve it.

"Charles, what are you doing?" a booming voice came from inside the garage. A woman's voice, rich and commanding. (Thank Goodness the window was already open for me to hear this.)

"Are we ready to go?" The woman continued. "I have a plane to catch."

"Yes, Ma'am. I just need to fix something in the car first. It should only take a few minutes."

"What's wrong with the car?" The woman asked, sounding more curious than concerned. Had I heard that voice before?

"Nothing, Ma'am. The keys appear to have locked themselves inside. I just need to retrieve them and then we'll be on our way."

That must have struck the woman as particularly humorous, because she burst out laughing. And what a nice laugh it was. Practiced, perfected and refined. Genuine yes, but controlled. This was no Howard Dean laugh. This lady knew how to construct a chuckle.

"Come inside," the woman finally said. "I'll help you find a coat hanger."

“Yes, Miss Winfrey,” the chauffer responded.

Oh no, he didn't! He did not just say Miss Winfrey. As in Oprah Winfrey? Come on, this was too much. Oprah Winfrey in a house across the street from me? In Plainfield, New Jersey? I mean, I know the woman gets around, but this was ridiculous.

I began to panic that I was perhaps slipping into dementia, an imaginary Oprah “sighting” being the first sign that your end is near. Grace before Glory...or something like that.

Or perhaps I was just hearing things. Maybe the chauffer hadn't said *Miss Winfrey* at all. Maybe I misheard him and he really said something else, and it only sounded like *Miss Winfrey*. Or even more likely, my overactive imagination conjured up *Miss Winfrey* out of nowhere, and the chauffer hadn't spoken at all.

Regardless, I decided to wait it out until the Winfrey wannabe emerged from the house so I could get a better look. What else did I have to do? I took another sip of my tea, which had now successfully completed the evolutionary process from hot to lukewarm to cold. It still tasted good though, as the sweet honey glided down my throat and seemed to sooth my aching innards.

I began daydreaming about the possibility of a celebrity hideaway across the street, when the ringing phone rudely interrupted me. Reluctantly I moved to answer it, which required me to leave my stakeout area.

“Hello?” My gravely voice coughed into the phone. This was actually the first time I'd spoken all day, so I hadn't yet cleared all the mucus from my throat. That being said, a huge mound of phlegm suddenly collected itself in my mouth, and I wasn't able to speak again until I removed it.

“Henson, is that you? You sound terrible.”

It was Barney, calling to check up on me. I decided that Barney must be the mothering type, a natural born caregiver. He was probably happiest when helping others. Which made me, a gay needy neighbor, the perfect candidate for his attention. God Bless Him.

I found a Kleenex and managed to rid myself of the green vile just in time to assure Barney that I wasn't suffering from a stroke or alcohol poisoning.

“Sorry I haven't called,” I muttered. “I've been miserable.”

“Yeah, you certainly packed it away last night, didn't you?” Barney teased.

“I'm so embarrassed. I don't usually drink wine, so I was little out of my element.”

“A little?” Barney laughed. “You kept yelling something about wanting to see Jodie Foster's chair before you left. What was that all about?”

“I have no idea.” I lied. I didn’t want to take the time to explain anything right now, as I really needed to get back to the window for the emergence of Oprah. Even if it was a faux Oprah, I needed to be there.

“Well, I won’t keep you,” Barney said, sensing that I wasn’t in the mood to talk. “Just wanted to make sure you were okay. Give me a call when you’re feeling better.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I said, and hung up. I was glad he didn’t try to strike up a conversation, though at this point it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. By the time I made it back to my stakeout area, the black Mercedes and whoever was in it had already left. All the lights in the house were out, and once again the inhabitants remained a mystery.

I almost cried. Here I was, feeling like crap, and my one little glimmer of interest for the last couple of hours had just been extinguished without a resolution. It was like having a full body massage without the release. The disappointment factor, while certainly not justified, is extremely deflating. In every sense of the word.

Without the need to stalk my neighbors any longer, I lost interest in even staying awake, and was soon back in bed. I slept most of the day into the night, and only woke up once to go to the bathroom. At least I think it was the bathroom. I was way too groggy to wake up completely, and sort of slept-walked my way to what I assumed was the toilet. The next morning I found out it was actually the bathtub, which apparently looks about the same size as a toilet when viewing it through squinted eyes.

It was Sunday. And since I hadn’t expended much energy the day before, I decided to throw myself head first into working around the house. I decided to tackle the second floor guest room for several reasons. Not only did it require the least amount of work, it also provided me a perfect view of the house across the street.

A quick glance out the window told me everything I needed to know. The house was completely deserted. There were no cars in the driveway, and it didn’t appear that anyone was inside moving around. So once again I was left with more questions and no one to provide the answers. This would be another frustrating day of...

Wait a minute! Something caught my eye in the front yard. Something dark and flat, like a blanket. Or a large stepping stone. Or a briefcase.

Holy Paydirt! It must be the briefcase the chauffer had kicked there the day before during his angry tirade. I’d completely forgotten about it, as apparently so had he. And there it was, lying right there in the middle of the grass.

My heart began to race. Maybe the briefcase contained important documents. Or something that might provide insight about my mysterious neighbors. Or better yet, what if it was Oprah’s briefcase he’d kicked there? And there were all kinds of top-secret Oprah materials inside? Like the title of her next book club selection.

I debated jumping into some clothes and running across the street to retrieve it, but then I remembered the Neighborhood Watch. I couldn't be seen taking something from my neighbor's front lawn. Especially when I had nosy people like Ramona keeping a close eye on everyone's property.

So I waited until nightfall and then snuck across the street in the shadows of the trees, like a prowler about to pounce. I walked casually down the shaded sidewalk in front of the house, and then veered quickly into the grass, trying not to appear suspicious. (As if "veering" is a natural act we all partake in regularly.) As I got closer to the briefcase, I saw that it wasn't a briefcase at all, but more of a portfolio. A black leather portfolio like the one I'd left in Tom Selleck's car nearly a year ago.

As I knelt down to get a better look, I was surprised to find that it not only looked like my portfolio, but in fact it *was* my portfolio. I could tell from the ripped corner where my ex-boyfriend's cat had used it as a scratching post. And there was the coffee stain my ex-boyfriend had left with his cup one morning, creating a lasting ring. Yes, this was definitely my old portfolio. But what was it doing here, in my neighbor's front yard? And why did the chauffeur have it in the first place?

I suddenly realized that I was no longer paying attention to my surroundings, and was blatantly lurking in full view of passing cars and nosy neighbors. So, without another thought, I picked up the portfolio and headed back across the street and into my house.

Once inside, I was able to examine the contents of the portfolio in the light. And this is where things got even weirder. Because though I was certainly happy to be reunited with my missing portfolio after all this time, I was totally unprepared to discover what it contained.

For there, carefully inserted into the inner plastic sleeves, were all the drawings and artwork I'd lost on my very first trip to Plainfield. My sketches, my doodles, my paintings. All magically restored to their original holder.

At that moment, I was almost certain I was losing my mind.

Next Episode: The Revelations of Ramona