

### **Chapter Thirteen—The Revelations of Ramona**

“You want to give me your Jeep?” I asked Barney in disbelief.

I was sitting in Bob and Barney’s dining room. They’d invited me over for a last-minute dinner and cake tasting. Barney had developed a new recipe for Chocolate Cherry Pound Cake he was dying to test out, and enlisted Bob and I as official tasters. (A role I was more than happy to play.)

We were talking about my ongoing transportation issues when Barney suddenly offered to give me his Jeep.

“I’m not exactly going to give it to you,” Barney immediately corrected me. “You’d have to pay a little something for it. But yes, Bob and I have two cars already. The Jeep was extra, for when we needed to cart around large items.”

“Large items like me, you mean?” I said, referring to my many trips in the Jeep’s back seat.

“Well, yes. That’s why I thought you might like it. You’ve driven it. You’re familiar with it. Now it’s time you actually owned it.”

The thought of having my own car was so foreign to me. Despite my age, I’d never owned a car in my life, nor ever needed to. When I was in high school, I’d borrow my mom’s car. In college, everything was within walking distance or easily accessible through mass transit.

And when I moved to New York City, owning a car seemed like more of a hassle than a convenience. All the expenses associated with parking and upkeep made it a luxury I couldn’t justify, let alone afford. So other than the occasional rental car, my relationship with steering wheels was minimal. But now that a car was being offered to me for a mere hundred dollars, how could I refuse?

The ’93 Jeep Cherokee wasn’t exactly a glamorous acquisition. It didn’t have a radio, and the tannish-brown color wasn’t what you’d call exciting. But it was mine. Which meant I could finally go places on my own without the assistance of someone else’s driving. It gave me a sense of independence I’d never had before, and I found myself making up stupid little errands just so I could use it.

Owning a car was a luxury I could finally afford because my eBay auctions were consistently bringing in money. I’d managed to streamline the selling process by using some of the same copy from auction to auction. This cut my listing schedule in half, giving me plenty of free time to obsess over a new phase in my eBay experience. The subtle transition from seller to buyer.

Now that I was making good money selling my old comics and toys, I decided to use some of the profits to purchase a few extravagant items I'd always wanted but could never afford. Things like the coveted Pink Dress version of the Sleeping Beauty statue, where Princess Aurora and Prince Phillip are dancing. This limited edition figurine from the Walt Disney Classics Collection was one of my Holy Grails.

The statue was released in the mid 1990s when I couldn't afford my rent, let alone a three hundred dollar porcelain statue. But even if I'd been able to afford it, the piece was nearly impossible to find. Every dealer in the country was bombarded by crazed Disney fans when the piece was first announced, so by the time the statue was finally released most of the allotted pieces had already been spoken for. This left many collectors scrambling to find the remaining inventory.

As for me, I simply added it to my growing list of dream items, like going to a Broadway show. Something I'd always wanted, but could never afford.

That was, until recently, when I began tracking some Pink Dress versions on eBay. Several of the rare statues had come up for auction in the last month, though the starting price was always over a thousand dollars. Too high for me. I was waiting for the bargain. That special auction where the seller doesn't exactly know what he's selling.

One day that special auction arrived. The statue of Sleeping Beauty and the Prince Dancing. The Pink Dress version. Limited Edition. With a starting bid of only one dollar. And what's more, the seller didn't even include a picture. Big no-no, especially on a high-ticket item like this. Even if you're only selling a book, it's better to include a picture of it because it gives people something tangible to lust after. And lust is a huge part of the eBay mentality. As are gluttony and greed.

I wrote to the seller and requested digital photos of the figurine to make sure it wasn't cracked or damaged in some way. The photos he sent back were incredibly detailed and showed that the piece was in perfect condition. And lucky for me, the seller didn't even think to post the photos on the website so others could see them as well.

On the day of the auction, I was disappointed to find there were already a few bids on the statue. I was sort of hoping no one else would find it. The current bid was at a hundred and twenty-five dollars, which wasn't bad. But then in the last half hour of the auction, the price quickly escalated and I knew there was going to be a bidding war. This could get ugly.

I decided to wait before I placed my bid. From observing the bidding process on my own auctions, I discovered that many savvy eBayers followed this guideline. They laid low while the high bidder anticipates his victory, and then places a much higher bid in the last few seconds that knocks everyone out of the water.

And that is exactly how I won the auction. I waited until the last ten seconds and then submitted a bid I hoped would be the highest. Within moments, I was able to refresh my screen and see those eagerly anticipated words “Congratulations! You have won this auction.”

I shouted with delight. My Holy Grail. The much sought-after Pink Dress limited edition version. I was finally going to get it. To have it, to hold it, to display it. What more was there to live for now?

I tried to explain my excitement to Ramona at my next cooking lesson, but her response wasn't exactly what you'd call enthusiastic. In fact, her whole attitude that day was pretty dismal.

“Is this what you do with your money, Henson? Buy porcelain dolls?” Ramona said with raised eyebrows. “I would think you'd want to spend your money fixing up that yard of yours. It's becoming an eyesore.”

“Thanks. I'm well aware of that.” I said, feeling a little deflated. I began to knead the dough I was working on with a little more aggression.

“Do you think my brother collects porcelain dolls?” Ramona suddenly asked in horror.

“I have no idea. I don't know your brother.”

“Yes, but do all gay people collect porcelain dolls? Is this one of your things?”

“I don't believe so,” I responded, somewhat offended at the naiveté of her question. Without realizing it, I began punching my dough rather aggressively. “Do all Cuban people smoke Cigars and pester their neighbors?”

Ramona looked at me in shock, as if I'd just slapped her in the face. But instead of bursting into tears, she suddenly burst out laughing.

“Oh Henson, I'm sorry,” she said. “I do not mean to take my frustrations out on you. You are a nice man and you can buy as many porcelain dolls as you like.”

“They're NOT dolls!” I protested. “They're statues!”

“Whatever. You can buy women's underwear if you like, I don't care.” Ramona said, making a leap of association that baffled me. It's the same kind of reaction I have when certain conservative groups profess the connection between gay people and bestiality, as if one was a natural progression to the other.

To drive home her apology, Ramona got up and hugged me, which was quite awkward since my hands were covered in dough. And though I never hugged back, once again, her husband walked in with impeccable timing to witness her affectionate squeeze. I felt like

I was playing the neighbor character on some really bad UPN sitcom. This time, however, Luis didn't even bat an eye.

"Her brother again?" Luis asked, pulling a can of soda from the refrigerator.

I responded with a nod. Which was not easy, as Ramona was practically choking me with her hug.

"Luis, do we know any gay people we could fix Henson up with?" Ramona asked, finally releasing her vice-like grip.

Luis didn't respond immediately, and neither did I, because I think we were both considering the implications of the question. I was about to object, when Luis responded.

"There's Jacob Weinstock at school. I'm not positive he's gay, but he teaches Home Economics. And sometimes he carries a purse."

Ramona looked at me with hopeful eyes, as if waiting for my approval to contact Jacob immediately.

"Um...I don't really want to be fixed up..." I said. "And certainly not with someone who carries a purse."

"It's not a purse. It's a hand wallet. I've seen it." Ramona assured me, hoping this wouldn't ruin her chances of matchmaking. "All the men in Europe carry them. It's no big deal. And think, Henson. He teaches Home Economics. He could help you with all your curtains and decorating."

"What about that guy from the lawn and garden shop?" Luis said, obviously intrigued by the opportunity to "out" members of his community.

"Which guy? Howard? The man with a wife and five children?" Ramona blurted, shocked that her husband would even suggest such a candidate.

"No. The other one. The guy that came to fertilize our lawn last year."

Ramona's eyes turned as large as Frisbees, and she looked at me with renewed glee.

"Oooooohhhhh...Paco. Yes. He's gorgeous. Beautiful body, great hair, good teeth," Ramona went down the list as if describing the attributes of a racehorse. "You'd like Paco. He's a real hump."

"I think you mean *hunk*."

"Yes, but he's got a beautiful hump too," Ramona said, before breaking into a flurry of giggles.

I looked over at Luis, who was rolling his eyes at his wife's childish delight.

"He may be too young for you, though." Ramona said with some concern. "Do you like Twinkies?"

Ramona was referring to a faction of the gay population that are young and silly and still going through the awkward transition from boy to man. Usually Twinkies are boys in their late teens or early twenties with a propensity for feminine behavior. I was never into that particular gay subset, but I wasn't about to tell Ramona that. When I didn't respond, Ramona tried a different approach.

"Are you a Daddy Top then? Because Paco might be a perfect match for you. He looks like a Bottom Boy to me."

"What's a Bottom Boy?" Luis asked innocently.

"It's someone who likes to receive rather than give," Ramona responded, winking at me.

Once again, I was at a loss for words. My shocked expression and reddened face must have delighted Ramona, because she then added with great pride:

"I've been doing some research on Google."

Luis didn't seem to understand what Ramona meant by receiving and giving, or that a Twinkie was a person and not a snack food. But it didn't seem to matter much, as he was already on to his next candidate.

"There's that butcher at Mario's Meat Market. The one with the earrings and the tattoos. I think he's a part of your school."

"Part of his *church*, not school." Ramona said, correcting him. "We've been over this a dozen times, Luis. I don't know why you can't remember."

"Church, right. Sorry," Luis said, turning to me. "Anyway, I've seen him talking pretty intimately with other guys who wear earrings and tattoos. So either he's gay or he's a Hell's Angel, I'm not sure which."

"It might make a difference," I said, imagining the reaction a Hell's Angel might have if Luis tried to fix me up with him.

And while I found it completely endearing that Luis was taking time to consider a potential date for me, this was definitely getting into some weird territory. Luckily, Ramona interceded.

“I don’t think the butcher is a good match for Henson. He looks like he’s into S&M and leather and all that other stuff.”

“What other stuff?” Luis asked, trying hard to grasp all the new facets of gay culture.

“You know, whips, chains, nipple clamps.”

I saw Luis unconsciously flinch at the mention of a nipple clamp, and shortly thereafter he was back in his office typing away at the computer. Or maybe he was Googling the term “Bottom Boy,” I don’t know. Either way, Ramona and I were once again alone.

After she gave me a brief lesson on how to cut my dough into little squares, I decided to tell her about my portfolio experience. I left out the part about faux Oprah, though. Why complicate the issue by bringing God into it?

“And you say a man kicked this into the front yard and left it there?” Ramona asked, completely intrigued by the incident.

“Yes, and I don’t know why he even had it. I mean, how could he? I lost the drawings somewhere between Manhattan and Plainfield, and I left the portfolio in...a taxi. (I decided not to mention Tom Selleck either.) So how the two missing pieces suddenly came together and wound up in my neighbor’s front yard, I have no clue. But isn’t it bizarre?”

“You need to talk to your neighbors,” Ramona said. “You need to find out why they have your stuff.”

“That’s the thing. It never seems to be the same people there at any one time. I’ve only caught glimpses, but I know that I’ve never seen the same person twice.”

“You think it’s a Shag Shack?” Ramona asked with interest.

“A what?” Apparently Ramona’s Google exploration had taken her to some pretty kinky places.

“A Shag Shack. I’ve read about them. Companies buy these vacant houses in quiet neighborhoods, and then loan them out to their executives as a place to shack up. It’s one of the job perks.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Yes, they were very popular in the 90s,” Ramona said, continuing her historical dissertation. “Especially during the dot-com boom. Those start-up companies had them all over the place. It may be why the boom became such a bust. Too many Shag Shacks taking up everyone’s time and money.”

“Not to mention energy. I had no idea.”

I made a mental list of all the celebrities I thought I'd seen in the house across the street. George Clooney. Sandra Bullock. Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner. John Travolta. Nicole Kidman. Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony. Oprah Winfrey. But the thought of any of them using the house to shag in was a little implausible. It's not like the city of Plainfield was some kind of sexual aphrodisiac. Or at least I didn't think so.

“Let me do some checking around,” Ramona said, as she began reshaping all the squares of dough I'd just finished. “I have some friends in Town Hall, as well as some real estate agents. We'll find out what's going on in that house. Not only for your sake but for the neighborhood as well.”

Thank God for the Neighborhood Watch. If it wasn't for concerned citizens like Ramona, we might have Shag Shacks and Flop Houses in every decent community in America. And I'm not even including quasi-flop houses like Motel 6 or the Super 8, who use penis-size numbers to attract their clientele. (Motel 6 obviously caters to the average male, while the Super 8 is for the more generously endowed. I've even seen Hotel 10s in my time, but they're never very crowded.)

After finishing my cooking lesson, I took my weekly covered dish and went back home, leaving Ramona once again to scour the internet for gay folklore. I, on the other hand, was planning on spending the rest of the day working on the house.

The guest room was coming along nicely, and I was very pleased at the progress. I wouldn't exactly call it a practical accomplishment, as I had no intention of having any guests, but it was still nice to have something nearly completed.

Particularly because there hadn't been anything to distract me from my work. The house across the street had been empty and quiet all week. I was beginning to wonder if my problem wasn't really the neighbors, but rather my procrastination. Maybe I fabricated this whole celebrity sighting nonsense just to keep myself from working on the house.

Whatever the reason, I was about to find out much more than I bargained for. In fact, my life was about to take a sharp turn into the Twilight Zone, beginning with a series of events that are not only bizarre, but also totally unbelievable.

It also means we've nearly arrived back at the point in my story where I first veered off. I'm referring, of course, to the appearance of the Blue PT Cruiser in front of my house and the run-in with Officer Hernandez. Remember that? We left all that back in Chapter Two, and now it's almost time to return there.

But first, I must recount one more RAMBO party I attended. Perhaps the most important RAMBO to date, if not the most revealing. And if you thought the first two parties were interesting, you ain't seen nothin' yet.

**Next Episode: A Randy Rambo**