

Chapter Fifteen—Tree and Sympathy

JezeBall called early the next morning to say he'd made a terrible mistake. Instead of giving me a muscle relaxer for my headache, he'd actually given me one of his extra-strength Levitra pills. (A conclusion I'd already reached on my own.)

"I hope you're not allergic to them," JezeBall said, obviously worried.

"No, I wouldn't say I was allergic. In fact, I think it worked a little too well on me. I was literally up for hours."

JezeBall burst out laughing, no doubt followed by a hitch-kick or two.

"I'm so sorry. I forgot I had one of those in the bottle...you know, just in case. But it's been in there for over a year, so I'm surprised it still works. Did it help with your headache?"

"Well, yes and no." I responded dryly. "My headache definitely subsided, but it was sort of replaced by the ache of a different head."

Again JezeBall burst out in laughter. Only this time it was followed by a few coughs and what sounded like an expulsion of gas. We spoke for a few more minutes and then we ended the call. Almost immediately the phone rang again, and it was Ramona from next door. She had some interesting news she wanted to share and asked if I could come over right away.

When I got to her house, she ushered me into the little office, and we both sat down in front of the desk. She had a notebook open, which was filled with all kinds of scribblings and phone numbers and several doodle attempts of a vampire.

"Who's this supposed to be? Dracula?" I asked, pointing at one of Ramona's doodles.

"Bugs Bunny."

"Since when does Bugs have fangs?"

"Those are ears."

"Then what's this blood dripping out of his mouth?"

"Carrots."

"Oh. So much for my art interpretation skills."

Ramona ignored my unsolicited critique of her doodles, as she seemed very anxious to tell me something.

“So I did a little checking on that house across the street from you,” Ramona began, before skimming through the notebook in front of her. “And I found out something very interesting. The house is owned by a corporation. Tree and Sympathy, Ltd.”

Ramona emphasized the words *Tree* and *Sympathy* as if she was revealing the winning Lotto combination.

“Tree and Sympathy?” I laughed, oblivious to why she was so excited about this bit of information. “That’s funny.”

“Why is that funny?” Ramona asked, apparently disappointed with my jovial reaction.

“Because there’s a famous play called *Tea and Sympathy*. I wonder if it’s based on that.”

“I don’t know, and frankly, I don’t care,” Ramona said abruptly. “Doesn’t the name *Tree and Sympathy* mean anything else to you, Henson?”

“Not really.”

“They also own several other homes in Plainfield. I thought you might’ve heard of them.”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“Because they used to own your house as well,” She said, looking me square in the face.

“Oh.” Uh-oh.

“You don’t even know the name of the company you bought your house from?” Ramona asked, eyeing me curiously.

I’d never told Ramona and Luis about Unity Kingsmill, or how she’d generously given me the house. Ramona was nosy enough as it was. I didn’t need her relating this kind of information at the next meeting of the Neighborhood Watch.

“Well, actually,” I began, trying to grasp at some explanation that might seem plausible. “I really didn’t meet the sellers. The whole transaction was done through my lawyer.”

“But surely you have the paperwork that shows the seller’s name.” Ramona was not going to give up so easily.

“Who reads the paperwork?” I said, as nonchalantly as possible. “I saw the house. I liked it. I bought it. End of story.”

“You are a fool not to read the paperwork. All that fine print.” Ramona said, shaking her notebook in my face.

“That’s what Lawyers are for.”

Ramona was not pleased with my lackadaisical attitude. I could tell she was disappointed in me, but what could I do? It would take too much time and energy to explain how I really got the house.

Ramona flipped through several more pages in the notebook, but not before whispering under her breath: “This would never happen in Cuba.” I allowed her a few minutes to fume, and then gently tried to get the conversation back on track.

“So who is Tree and Sympathy, Ltd.?”

“They’re a company based in England,” Ramona answered, while glancing at her notes for verification. “A charity organization, I believe. They own the house across the street from you and a couple others. One is on Park and one is on Madison.”

“Madison? Where on Madison?” I asked.

Unity lived on Madison. Perhaps she knew the people who lived in the other Tree and Sympathy house. Not that I could ask her any time soon, as her current whereabouts were still in question.

Ramona began furiously looking through her notes, but couldn’t seem to find where she’d written down the exact addresses of the houses.

“It’s a Shag Shack, I’m telling you.” Ramona said with great conviction. “They probably rent it on an hourly basis.”

“You think all the houses they own in Plainfield are Shag Shacks? Was mine?” I asked, suddenly imagining my house filled with sexual orgies and other licentious behavior. At least it would explain the brothel-themed wallpaper in the dining room.

“No. There was a woman who lived there for a few months or so. But then...” Ramona’s voice trailed off. This was the second time she’d alluded to the previous tenant without giving me any information.

“Then?” She didn’t seem to want to finish the sentence.

“She was gone. Just like that. I’d spoken to her over the fence one day, and we had a nice conversation about Rhododendrons and what we wanted to do with our backyards... And then the next day, she was gone and there was a ‘For Sale’ sign on the front lawn.”

“That’s weird,” I piped in.

“When we were talking, I never got the feeling she’d be leaving the next day. She sounded like she had big plans for the house.”

“So I guess this charity, Tree and Sympathy, bought the house from her?”

“No, that’s the strange part. Tree and Sympathy have owned this house since the late 1980s. So I guess the woman was only renting it.”

“Perhaps that’s why she left so abruptly. She couldn’t afford the rent.”

“Perhaps.”

“And since mine was a rental, the house across the street from me must be as a rental as well, because I don’t think I’ve ever seen the same people there twice.”

But why would a charity want a few Shag Shacks in Plainfield? I know organizations like to entice their donors with a few perks, but this was going a bit far.

“I couldn’t find out much about them,” Ramona said, continuing her presentation. “They don’t have a website, and the only address listed for them is a PO Box at Victoria Station. I found their name on several donor lists for charity events, but other than that, there appears to be no other information.”

“Is that the reason you think they’re a charity? Because they’ve donated money to various causes?”

“Either that, or they’re a front for some kind of mob activity.”

“You’re right. Those are the only two options,” I said sarcastically.

Ramona had a flair for the dramatic, preferring to believe the most outrageous scenario for any situation. So even though there might be a million reasons why Tree and Sympathy owned so many properties in Plainfield, Ramona had conveniently narrowed it down to the most titillating two—a flophouse or a mob house. We spent the better part of the next hour discussing the pros and cons of each, though Ramona didn’t seem to notice that my participation was mostly mocking.

In the afternoon, Ramona insisted on coming over to help me weed the flowerbeds in my backyard. Not that I planned on spending my day that way, as weeding was definitely the least of my priorities. But after much urging from Ramona, the tedious process actually kept my mind occupied on something other than the SSCP. Ramona even gave me step-by-step instructions on how to grab the weeds by the root so they wouldn’t grow in as fast. I realized at that moment that I still had so much to learn about taking care of a

house and yard. How fortunate that I had such a helpful (and pushy) neighbor to guide me!

During the next week, I went to the post office almost every day. And though I certainly could've used my Jeep to carry the packages the short distance, I opted instead for piling everything into an old shopping cart and pushing it down the street. It was the only exercise I afforded myself, and I figured by pushing the packages, I was actually combining aerobic activity with strength training. It's funny how we can delude ourselves like that.

The walk to the post office, past the local park, was always beautiful. Until I noticed that the resident group of Goth had taken over a picnic table very close to the section I walked by. They'd slowly crept their way from a spot on the other side of the park, to a table somewhere in the middle, to finally arrive near where I walked every day. As before, they clung to the benches like moss, their bodies intertwined, their minds off in space.

Somebody was strumming a guitar, though I couldn't really see who it was through the mass of bodies. The rest of the group was humming along. Or were they chanting? One of the women with black lipstick and heavy black eyeliner stared at me as I made my way past them. At one point, I swear she hissed in my direction. Or maybe she was spitting at me. Either way, it gave me the creeps. (Which is how I happened to name them "The Creeping Moss." A good name for a rock group, right?)

The only exciting part of my trip was when I finally got to listen to Patty's never-ending assortment of cyber gossip. She was very funny, and I loved hearing all about the latest dirt she gathered from the Internet. If not for her and Ramona, I might never appreciate the breadth of content that was readily available on the World Wide Web. Nor would I ever need to.

"Want to hear something weird?" Patty said, very conspiratorially. "Someone broke into George Clooney's personal computer. Apparently downloaded a lot of his private stuff."

"Where did you read that?" I asked, wondering what kind of private stuff George might have on his computer.

"It was on some Police blog. They also arrested one of those reality show people, Rick Regis, for stalking and intimidating a garbage man."

"Why? Did the garbage man forget to pick up his trash one day?"

"No. The garbage man works in an entirely different state, and swears he doesn't even know who Rick Regis is."

"Neither do I," I confessed. I'm not familiar with that many reality shows.

“He was the guy who won the million dollar prize on *I’ll Marry Your Mother*,” Patty explained.

“*I’ll Marry Your Mother*? That sounds more like a threat than a proposal.”

“In some cases, it was. Do you want to hear the premise?”

“No, the title was enough.”

“I don’t understand people who do these reality shows,” Patty said, shaking her head. “It’s like they’re desperate for attention, you know? They enjoy that instant fame. But then, when the show ends and they have to go back to their normal lives, that’s gotta be a huge letdown.”

“And you think that’s why Rick Regis was stalking a garbage man? Because he wanted some attention?”

“I’ve seen bigger men do much worse for less attention than that.”

I had no idea what Patty meant by that, though she said it with such conviction that I simply nodded my head in agreement. I also used the opportunity to change the subject.

“I have to tell you what happened at the latest RAMBO party.”

Patty’s eyes lit up with excitement, and she settled back in her chair for my monthly briefing. As delicately as possible, I told her the story of what happened to me in the Jacuzzi, which had her laughing so loud, I thought the building would collapse from the tremor of her vocal power.

“I hope you’re writing all this stuff down,” Patty said when I was finished. “These parties you go to are priceless. You should be keeping a journal, including everything you know about that house across the street. So you’ll have proof of what you’ve witnessed.”

“Do you think I should go to the police about finding my portfolio on their front lawn?”

“I suppose you could. But if this house is a rental like you said, then the person who had your portfolio could be long gone by now. And because you now have it back in your possession, how can you prove it was ever really stolen? It would be your word against theirs.”

Patty was right. I didn’t really have a valid complaint. But perhaps her idea of keeping a journal was a good one. Maybe by writing everything down, it would give me some clarity on the various events. Maybe if I saw it all on paper, I’d be able to make some sense of it.

Which is exactly what I began doing. Writing about everything that had happened to me in Plainfield. My first meeting with Unity, the day she gave me the house, the mysterious people across the street, the RAMBO parties. Even my conversations with Ramona and Patty. Anything I could remember to help me create a clear picture of the events.

It was like therapy, writing the journal. Ever since I'd stopped my daily blog entries, I missed having an outlet for that kind of self-expression. So now that I was allowing myself that opportunity again, the thoughts and ideas seemed to pour out of me like a chocolate fountain. In fact, what you're reading right now is actually a derivative of that journal. (As everything in life is no doubt a derivative of something else.)

And now that I've effectively filled you in on some of the details of my past year, I think we're finally ready to continue the story from where I first diverged.

I'm referring, of course, to my uncomfortable confrontation with Officer Hernandez and the appearance of the blue PT Cruiser. To recap briefly, three days after I received a mysterious set of car keys in the mail, my Jeep was stolen and a new car registered in my name appeared in front of my house. And try as I might, I had no clue as to how it got there or why it was registered to me.

But hold on to your hats. Because even though I'd been through some pretty weird stuff up until now, my life was about to get turned upside down once again.

Next Episode: A Shocking Explanation