

Chapter Six—Neighborly Curiosity

Life in Plainfield New Jersey was even better than I expected. I was amazed at how easily I settled in to my new routine of taking care of a house and yard. After years of living in cramped rental apartments, it felt good to finally have some space I could spread out in.

I was also pleasantly surprised to find that my neighbors actually knew how to say “hello.” In New York, people in apartment buildings don’t always acknowledge each other. They avoid eye contact in the hallways, or turn their heads when they see you on the street, anything to prevent intimacy or responsibility for your existence.

In the suburbs, though, people tend to be more settled. So it’s important to form some kind of bond with your neighbors. They don’t have to be your best friends, but it’s always good to have them on your side.

I was lucky because my house was situated on the corner of two streets, so I only had neighbors on one side. A thirty-something Cuban couple named Diaz, Luis and Ramona. We spoke several times over the wooden fence that separated our yards, and found that we shared a mutual interest in animation. Luis was a teacher at a local school, but liked to work on little animation projects in his spare time. Ramona loved Bugs Bunny and the Warner Brothers cartoons.

“That Elmer Fudd is never going to catch Bugs,” Ramona explained one day, as if talking about a real person. “Bugs is too smart for him. And he’s a Bunny, for Goodness Sake. It is shameful that a grown man can be outwitted so many times by a rodent. That would never happen in Cuba.”

Once I hired a taxi to take me grocery shopping, and I ran into Luis and Ramona at the local supermarket. Actually, I passed right by them without noticing. Sometimes that happens when you see people out of context. Without their house and yard as a background, I simply didn’t recognize them. However, I did recognize an unmistakable voice that soon stopped me in my tracks.

“What? We are not good enough to converse with in the local A&P? You only talk to us when there is a fence in between? ”

When I turned around, Ramona was smiling from ear to ear. Luis stood behind her, waving. After apologizing for my shortsightedness, we began walking the aisles together. I soon realized that Luis and Ramona had very different tastes than I did when it came to shopping. Their grocery cart looked like an exotic floral display of colorful packaging and unusual produce. Mine, on the other hand was filled with so many sugar-enhanced items, it looked like I was shopping for a family of heroin addicts. Especially when the

Captain Crunch, Velveeta Cheese and Peanut Butter qualified as the most nutritious items in the cart.

“What is all this junk?” Ramona asked, making a thorough inventory of my purchases. “Where is the meat? Where are the vegetables?”

“There’s meat in the frozen dinner,” I said, shrugging. “And I don’t like vegetables.”

“You don’t like vegetables?” Ramona asked, scrunching her face up into a tight ball. “That is ridiculous. Everyone likes vegetables.”

“Ramona, leave the man alone,” Luis warned.

Ramona rummaged through her cart for a moment, and then began extracting a large collection of produce-type items.

“Here, have some of mine,” she said, pushing a pile of unfinished crudités in my direction.

“I don’t have the patience to make salads,” I confessed. “Or meals in general. I’d rather just heat something up in the microwave.”

“That’s terrible,” Ramona said, her expression changing from concern to pity. “You can’t eat your whole life out of a box. What you need is some instruction on how to make a proper meal. And I’ll be happy to teach you. When would you like your first lesson?”

“Ramona, please...stop meddling.” Luis said, sternly.

“I’m not meddling, Luis. I’m teaching,” Ramona said with resignation. “Just like you do all day at school. This boy needs a woman to teach him things, and he’s obviously not out there looking for one on his own.”

This was the first time that Ramona or Luis had made any sort of reference to my sexual orientation. Or I assumed that’s what she was inferring.

“I am going to teach Henson how to cook, so someday he can make wonderful meals and catch himself a husband, eh?” She nudged me with a big wink. Yup, that’s what she was inferring.

Luis let out a frustrated sigh. His wife obviously had her own mind and her own opinion, and used them whenever she saw fit. And apparently, she saw fit to make my culinary education her next project. By the time I was done paying for my groceries, Ramona made me commit to my first cooking lesson, which would be held that Saturday morning at 9 am. I agreed, and then quickly ran out to my waiting taxi, which ended up costing a Hell of a lot more than the groceries.

Once at home, I noticed that my trashcan had been knocked over and was lying on its side in the driveway. Not only that, but I soon discovered that all the trash was missing as well. And I'd just put three full bags in the can earlier that morning. I looked around the area, but the absent trash bags were nowhere in sight. That was odd. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to take my garbage.

I decided to call Unity about it, but her answering machine picked up. I left a short message and then began unpacking my groceries. (Or as Ramona referred to them, my Diabetes Enhancers.)

It was the third message I'd left for Unity this week, and she hadn't responded to any of them. In fact, for the past month our "creative consultations" had become far less frequent. Instead of meeting two or three times a week, we were now limited to once or twice. She claimed it was because of other commitments, but I had the sneaking suspicion that something else was going on. Whatever the reason, I thought it best to begin looking for some other kind of employment. I couldn't live off Unity's good graces forever.

Later that evening I decided to peruse the local Want Ads for possible job opportunities. Since it was a warm night, I thought the sideporch would make the perfect venue to accomplish this. So with coffee and paper in hand, I trudged out to the porch and flopped on the swing to begin reading. And that's when I saw it. Some kind of strange activity in the house across the street.

When I first glanced over, the curtains to the living room window were wide open and there were lights on in other rooms as well. But then suddenly, as if triggered by my presence, the curtains were quickly closed and all the lights in the house went out. Total blackness, as if no one was there.

I wasn't sure if it was a coincidence, or whether I'd somehow been the cause, but I pretended not to notice. This was not an easy task. Especially if you have the very uncomfortable feeling you're being "watched."

After about twenty minutes of pretending to read, I let out a huge yawn as if totally exhausted, and dragged myself dramatically into the house. I wanted to make my exit appear natural, though I'm sure my acting ability left a lot to be desired.

Moving very quickly, I ran up to the second floor and peaked out one of the windows. But there was still no light or movement coming from the house across the street.

And though I kept checking back every fifteen minutes or so, the lights never came back on. At one point, I thought I saw someone looking up at me from one of the dark rooms. The face of a woman, I believe. It was there and then quickly disappeared. Or maybe it was just a figment of my overactive imagination.

The next morning I decided to tackle the wallpaper issue in the dining room. The issue was the wallpaper itself. It was a horrible green and brown with antique images of angels and flowers, giving the room the appearance of a dilapidated brothel. And though I've never actually been to a brothel, dilapidated or otherwise, I was pretty sure my dining room shouldn't have the appearance of one. The wallpaper needed to come off. And according to the bottle of EZ Remover I purchased, it was going to be surprisingly simple.

The only problem was that the wallpaper was not very cooperative. It really liked where it was and didn't have the slightest desire to leave. And contrary to what the EZ Remover instructions claimed, the paper would not come off in easy-to-manage sections. It came off a strip here and a tear there, but never in any kind of continuous stream.

After an hour of minimal success, I began yelling and swearing so loudly that I almost missed the rapid knocking on my front door. I was hoping it might be Unity, finally able to give me some time. But when I opened the door, I was greeted by a burly grey-haired gentleman holding out a basket of what appeared to be muffins.

"Howdy, Neighbor. I'm Bob." He said with a big smile. "Paul from Castle Realty told me about you. I live two blocks away, so I thought I'd come over and welcome you to the neighborhood."

"Thank you. That's very nice," I said.

"These are for you," Bob continued, pushing the basket of muffins into my hands. "They're Carrot Apple Lime with a Rosemary Reduction. And Macadamia Nuts. My partner Barney is a baker."

"Oh." I said. "I've never heard of a Carrot Apple Lime muffin."

"It's one of Barney's inventions. He's always trying out new recipes. This is his first batch, so you'll have to tell me what you think."

"You mean I'm sort of a guinea pig?"

"Don't worry," Bob reassured me. "I've been his guinea pig for the last sixteen years and I haven't gotten sick yet."

I laughed, feeling immediately at ease with Bob. He seemed like a real character.

"Now the reason I'm here," Bob continued. "Is because there's a RAMBO party tonight and I wanted to make sure you didn't miss it."

"Excuse me?" I asked, not sure if I'd heard him correctly. "Did you say a RAMBO party?"

I suddenly imagined a group of over-age men dressed in army fatigues and playing war games in someone's backyard.

“Well, that's what it's called. It actually stands for Rainbow Association Monthly Boys Outing. It was supposed to be called the Monthly *Man's* Outing, but the acronym RAMMO doesn't sound as good as RAMBO.”

“It certainly conjures up a different image,” I agreed. “What's the Rainbow Association?”

“It's fictional. I mean, there's no formal board of directors or anything. It's the name someone gave to the mailing list of all the gay couples and singles that live in Plainfield or nearby towns.”

“Is there a registry for that?”

“No. It's just a casual thing. You meet someone, they tell you about it, you get put on the list. And now that you know me, I'll make sure you're included.”

“Thanks. What time is the RAMBO?”

“It starts at seven thirty, but you probably don't want to get there before nine,” Bob said, winking. “If you'd like, Barney and I could swing by and pick you up. That way, you wouldn't have to enter the throngs of people all by yourself.”

That sounded like a great idea, so we made plans to meet around 8:45 and then Bob left. I was once again overwhelmed by the generosity of spirit that was present in this little community. Had I finally stumbled upon what it must be like to live a straight suburban existence? A house in a sleepy little town, neighbors that drop by with muffins, a RAMBO party every month. This was living!

I spent another thirty minutes wrestling with the damn wallpaper before giving up completely. It was a much more tedious and time-consuming task than I'd anticipated. Perhaps I should consider doing a smaller room first. Like a closet. Or a cupboard.

I eventually decided to set up my computer instead. I'd been procrastinating about getting the Mac out of its box ever since I moved in. The cable guy had already come out and installed the line, so I was all ready to go. So why was I delaying the inevitable? Maybe because I wasn't quite ready to be connected to the world again? Or maybe I was just enjoying my freedom from e-mails and blogs and pornography. Either way, I figured now was a good time to get myself plugged back in.

Setting up the Mac was an easy process, so within an hour I was online and ready for action. I decided to write a quick blog entry when I discovered something rather bizarre. My blog counter, which kept track of how many people visited my site, was suddenly off

the charts. Before I left New York, my number was hovering around sixty or seventy hits, but now for some reason the counter was registering over ten thousand.

There had to be some kind of mistake. I hadn't posted any new material for a couple of months, so I wasn't sure why "Henson's Hell" would suddenly become so popular in my absence. The only other time the blog got any kind of boost in traffic was the week after I was fired from the advertising agency. But that was only two or three hits every few days. So why I should all of a sudden warrant thousands of hits was mind-boggling.

I decided to call my hosting company to see if there was an error on my account, and perhaps the numbers were inflated. But the helpful customer service person I spoke with assured me that the number was indeed correct and I was now averaging around 500 hits a week. But who was reading it? And why?

I spent the rest of the afternoon going through my e-mails and surfing the web. In the evening, as I started to get ready for the party, I noticed the house across the street again. There was a man standing to the side of the living room window, and he was definitely watching my house. In fact, he was staring at it.

As soon as he noticed me, he turned and walked away. But not before I got a good look at his face. Or at least I thought I did. And I know this is going to sound terribly cliché, but from what I saw, he looked a lot like George Clooney. Granted, I only saw him for a few seconds, so my credibility might be questionable. But if I had to imagine what one of my neighbors looked like, why not imagine he looked like George Clooney? The reality would surface soon enough anyway.

A half hour later, while taking my shower, I began getting nervous about my first Plainfield RAMBO. I'd always considered myself socially awkward, tending to be more of a wallflower than the center of attention. But I was determined that tonight was going to be different. Tonight I was going to step out of my comfort zone and live a little. No matter what, I was going to make a good impression.

That was the plan, anyway. The reality turned out to be somewhat different.

Next Week's Episode: The Plainfield RAMBO