

## **Chapter Seven—The Plainfield RAMBO**

Bob and Barney picked me up promptly at 8:45 for the Plainfield RAMBO. I was surprised to find that Barney (the baker) was about ten years younger than Bob and looked like a WWF wrestler. His grip was firm and strong as he shook my hand. No doubt from kneading bread all the time.

“You look worried,” Bob said, as I climbed into the backseat of their Jeep.

“I’m petrified,” I admitted.

“Don’t be. You’re going to be fine.”

The ride to the party was quite informative. As we drove through the various neighborhoods, Bob and Barney filled me in on all the gay real estate in that area.

“A gay couple lives in that house,” Bob pointed out. “Some lesbians live over there. And coming up on the left is Jim McGreevy’s house.”

“Plainfield’s most famous and notorious gay,” Barney piped in.

“What a beautiful property,” I said, trying to catch a glimpse of the legendary ex-Governor as we drove by. “Has McGreevy or his boyfriend ever come to one of the RAMBOs?”

Bob and Barney looked at each other for a moment and then burst out laughing. Apparently not.

The party was being held at one of the beautiful mansions I’d seen so many times on my way to the Plainfield train station. This particular home was perched on top of a large hill, with a beautiful stone staircase leading up to it. The front of the house had a round stone turret, like something you might find on a castle. It was quite an impressive sight, rising up from the hill like Rapunzel’s Tower, and spanning the entire two stories of the home. Subtle lighting accentuated various trees and gardens in the yard, completing the fairy tale atmosphere.

“Wow,” was all I could say.

“Pretty vulgar, huh?” Bob joked. “Wait till you see the ballroom.”

“They have a ballroom?” I asked, suddenly wishing my house had a ballroom as well.

“Oh yes. Many Plainfield homes have them.”

“Well, the older ones anyway,” Barney added. “Remember, in its heyday, this area was the stomping ground for New York’s wealthy and elite.”

The next few moments went by in a daze. To semi-quote a Carly Simon song, “I walked into the party as if I was walking into a dream.” The foyer in the home was almost as big as my old apartment building, with a grand staircase wide enough for Scarlett O’Hara to run down. A beautiful two-story crystal chandelier cascaded down the center of the room, completing the picture of elegant opulence.

Off to the left was the Ballroom. Tall, massive, ornate. I felt like Julie Andrews when she first discovered the Gold Mirrored ballroom in “The Sound of Music.” (Not that I really identify with Julie Andrews or anything. I certainly don’t think of myself as a woman. I just can’t recall any movies where a man discovers a Gold Mirrored ballroom and begins to dance around in it.)

I was so captivated by my surroundings that I barely noticed how crowded the place was. There were men everywhere. On the staircase, in the ballroom, pressed up against me. It was like a casting call for “Queer as Folk.” I made a conscious effort to remember all these impressions, so I could share them with Unity at our next meeting. She loved to hear about amusing social entanglements.

As Bob, Barney and I made our way through the room, I was introduced to numerous people, all of whom had the exact same question: Why did I move to Plainfield from NYC? I responded as best I could, without mentioning anything about Unity’s generous gift. I’ve always found that “less is more” when it comes to meeting people. Don’t impose your entire history on them or they’ll never have a reason to talk to you again.

After a few minutes of casual conversation, I began to relax and enjoy myself. Everyone was very friendly. I was amazed that such a large thriving gay community could survive outside a major city. And so many different types too. As I scanned the room, I noticed a cute boyish-looking man in a leather jacket staring at me. I smiled at him, and he smiled back, but he never came over to join our group.

Shortly after that, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Paul, the realtor.

“Hey stranger. I was hoping you’d show up.” Paul said with a grin, showing off his perfectly manicured set of white teeth. “How’s the house coming along?”

“Slowly. I’ve discovered I really hate wallpaper. It’s so hard to get off.”

Unfortunately the only part of my response Paul heard was the last sentence. In one of those classic Hollywood moments when the room suddenly gets silent and one person’s words are heard above all the rest, I found myself yelling “It’s so hard to get off” to a very enthusiastic crowd.

“I’ll get you off.” One person quickly shot back.

“No. I saw him first.” Someone else yelled.

“Let’s all get him off.” Still another offered. “Give him a real Plainfield hello.”

This was followed by much laughter, none of which was mine.

“Don’t worry about it.” Paul said, sensing my embarrassment. “These are a randy bunch, but relatively harmless. How about a drink?”

Since Bob and Barney were nowhere in site, I followed Paul into the kitchen area, which was nearly as big as the foyer. I was about to ask him if he’d spoken to Unity this week, when a large tower of a man suddenly stepped in between us. The Man Tower was apparently named Roberto and he was not only tall, but rather wide as well, giving him the appearance of a walking bridge. London Bridge, to be specific.

The Man Tower grabbed Paul in a bear hug, and proceeded to monopolize his attention with a story about his latest boyfriend. Since there was obviously no room in their conversation for me, I decided to continue the hunt for alcohol on my own.

During my search, I stumbled across a pan of Seven Layer cookies sitting on a shelf above the bar. Seven Layer cookies were always my favorite when I was a kid, because they’re packed with so many sweet and gooey ingredients. (Seven to be exact, hence the name.) They’re also terribly fattening, which is why I rarely ate them any more. But tonight was a special occasion, so it somehow seemed appropriate to celebrate with a Seven Layer cookie. Or two.

While I was eating I made some small talk with a few of the kitchen dwellers, a group of forty-something men who were having a conversation about the pros and cons of selling on eBay. One guy said he made a fortune selling his dad’s old collection of baseball cards. Another guy said he had a friend who quit his regular job because he was making more money on eBay. Still another said he paid for his entire vacation by eBaying.

And that’s when a light went off in my head. In fact, I don’t know why I never thought of it before. I had an entire storage locker on Manhattan’s Westside filled with comic books, monster masks and movie memorabilia; all my childhood collectibles hidden away and forgotten. Maybe some of the stuff could finally be sold for a profit.

Sensing that I might have an untapped goldmine on my hands, I began asking the men all kinds of questions. They were extremely helpful, and we spent the next twenty minutes going over the entire process. They told me what to do, what not to do, and how to avoid negative feedback. Eventually the conversation moved on to something else, so I grabbed another cookie and began pondering my upcoming fortunes.

The prospect of finally cleaning out that storage locker and earning some extra money was getting me very excited. And I mean that literally. I felt like I'd suddenly been pumped with caffeine or adrenaline. My arms were tingling with goose bumps and I had the strangest sensation of euphoria.

At some point, I was interrupted from my thoughts by one of the men, who was snapping his fingers in front of me and shouting:

“Hello? Hello? Are you still there?”

“What?” I said, jumping back. Why was he yelling at me? I couldn't have been daydreaming that long.

“Just wanted to make sure you were okay,” the man said, smiling. “You looked like you were zoning out.”

“I wasn't zoning. I was pondering.” Weak response, I admit.

“Oh puh-leaze, you were off in Never Never Land looking for Peter Pan. I can tell a zombie when I see one.”

I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but it struck me as extremely funny. I began to laugh rather loudly, which is not typical behavior for me. But for some reason I was feeling light as a feather. And happy. So very, very happy. Which was interesting, since I hadn't even had a drink yet.

A drink. That sounded like a good idea. My mouth was feeling a little dry. I decided to get a beer and then maybe go find Bob and Barney.

“Hey Cutie. Having fun?” someone asked me to my left. I turned to find a short older gentleman with large white Gucci Glasses and a huge waft of cotton candy hair. The combination gave him a clownish appearance, and I mustered all my strength not to burst out laughing. I didn't know why I was finding everything so funny, but I was. Must be my latent sense of humor kicking in.

“Hey, Cutie. Is anybody there? You're pretty, but can you talk too?”

I suddenly realized I was having a private inner monologue, and had completely forgotten to respond to this poor clown's question.

“I'm sorry. Yes, I'm having fun. Cutie is having fun.”

“What's your name, Sweetheart?” The man asked, bobbing back and forth. He didn't seem to have the ability to actually stand still. So instead he opted for a sort of swaying movement, which every now and then was accented with a small hitch-kick.

“My name is Henson,” I said, taking my first sip of beer.

“Well, you’re adorable, Henson. Are you new here in Plainfield?”

“Yes. Fresh meat, as they say.” Did I actually verbalize that out loud?

“Well, don’t worry about me, Honey,” The man with Gucci Glasses said. “I’m as old as dirt. I’m certainly not trying to get into your pants. Although they look very nice on you. And trust me, I’ve been in the fashion industry for years. I know when a man looks good in pants. I also know when a man looks good without them. “

He finished this with another laugh, a little hitch-kick, and a spin. Well, not really a spin. I think he just lost his balance, but it was very effective nonetheless.

“I could tell you stories that would make your hair curl. Models, drugs, sex, Halston. I’ve seen it all. Bob Mackie, one of my best friends. Ralph Lauren, we visit every few months.”

“I can’t believe you know all those people.” I said, trying hard to concentrate. My mind seemed to be on a roller coaster ride, filling my head with images and ideas at an alarming rate. I’d get a flash of insight, or a brilliant concept, and then it was gone as fast as it came. And the harder I tried to remember something, the further away it got.

Luckily, Gucci Glasses was busy talking, so he didn’t really notice my vacant expression. Or perhaps he did, and was just ignoring it. Being in the fashion industry, vacant was probably an expression he was quite familiar with.

At one point, the cute boyish-looking man in the leather jacket entered the kitchen, but seemed to hesitate when he saw me talking to Gucci Glasses. Within moments he was gone again.

“And then Vera Wang said she wanted sushi, and we all laughed...” Gucci Glasses said, punctuating his statement with a laugh, a hitch kick and a head toss. The latter sent his cotton candy hair into a frenzy of activity, many cloud-like animal shapes appearing and disappearing within the white fluff. Or at least that’s what it looked like to me.

“What is your name, anyway?” I asked, trying to distract myself from watching the animal shapes. “I don’t think you told me.”

“You can call me JezeBall,” Gucci Glasses declared.

“Why?”

“Because that’s my name.”

“Your parents named you JezeBall?”

“No, my parents named me Seymour. But I don’t like Seymour.”

“And JezeBall was the only other option?”

“It’s actually a nickname I was given in college. Or rather a derivative of a nickname.”

“Was it originally Jezebel?”

“No, it was originally Jizz Ball.”

“Yeah, that’s much too graphic. I can see why you changed it.”

And with that, JezeBall laughed so hard, he fell back into a waiting chair behind him.

“Oh Honey, you are dry. Dry and witty, that’s what you are. You’ve completely worn me out.”

That sounded like my cue to excuse myself. I was feeling a little warm at the moment, anyway, and thought some fresh air might be a good remedy.

“It was very nice meeting you, JezeBall. I’m going to get some air. We’ll hobnob again later, okay?”

“You can count on it, Honey.”

Once outside, the cool night air hit me like a ton of bricks. It felt good after the somewhat stuffy kitchen area. I was getting a little sweaty in there. Maybe it was the beer.

I decided to take a stroll into the backyard to examine the landscaping, which appeared to be quite extensive. Several benches were placed at strategic points around the yard, all of them currently filled with people having private tête-à-têtes. Not wanting to force myself into any of these conversations, I opted for the fountain area, which was practically deserted.

It was quite an expensive-looking fountain, made of marble and stone, with a beautiful cherub posing at the top. Surrounding the fountain, like a living moat, was a colorful assortment of wild flowers and plants.

I was mesmerized by the flow of the water, as it spilled from the various spouts at the top down into the waiting tub below. So pretty, so smooth. It wasn’t until several minutes later that I realized I hadn’t moved a muscle; I was just staring at the water. Was I drunk?

I checked the contents of my beer bottle and was surprised to find there was still plenty left. I hadn't even had a full bottle of beer yet, so why did I feel completely wasted? It didn't make sense.

I was about to go back inside when I found myself face-to-face with the cute boyish-looking man in the leather jacket.

"You must be the new guy." The boy-man said, eyeing me up and down.

"I suppose so. This is my first RAMBO, anyway."

"I'm Brit. I live near you, I think. You're on Fern Willow Lane, right?"

"Yes. It's nice to meet someone else from the Hood," I said, trying to sound young and hip. (Though I'm sure it came off as old and dorky.)

"Yeah." Brit agreed, forcing a smile. Then he lowered his voice before adding, "So what do you think about all the weird happenings in our neighborhood lately?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly alert.

"Well, there seems to be a lot of activity around your house in particular, if you know what I mean."

"Actually, I don't." I said, trying to sound calm, when I was actually beginning to feel rather anxious.

"You haven't noticed all the people taking an active interest in your house?" Brit asked, his facial expression changing from friendly to quite serious.

I don't know why, but Brit's inquisition was having a weird affect on my body. I could feel my heart pounding faster. Or was it racing? And what were those spots doing in front of my eyes? What was happening to me? My feet felt like jelly, and a warm rush suddenly engulfed my entire body, sucking me into it. The last thing I remember was falling and feeling the ground hit me with a thud. And though I could hear Brit calling to me, I was far, far away from him now. I could hear people talking, but I only caught snippets of what they said. "The new guy." "He passed out." "Is he on Drugs?" "He better not OD at my party, because I don't need that kind of reputation."

An image of a newspaper headline flashed in my mind. The headline read "Henson Ray Passes Out at Plainfield RAMBO. Ruins his Social Standing in NJ Gay Community."

And whether I was motivated by the thought of being slammed by the local newspaper or just plain embarrassed, I suddenly forced myself out of my sleepy haze and bolted upright, much to the surprise of the small crowd that had gathered around me.

“Woah there, Buddy. You almost hit me in the head.”

It was Paul again. Why did he always have to be around when I was fainting? And why was I always fainting lately?

“What happened?” Paul asked.

“I don’t know. I was standing here talking to...”

I looked around to find Brit, but he was nowhere in sight.

“Talking to yourself? It’s okay. I do that sometimes, too.” Paul smiled.

“I know what you must think, but I’m really not like this. I don’t go around fainting just for the fun of it.”

“I would hope not,” Paul said, putting his arm on my shoulder. “But let’s get you inside before...”

Paul didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. At that moment Bob and Barney appeared out of the crowd and gently whisked me away. I felt like a spoiled movie star whose beefy bodyguards just saved him from another drunken escapade. Except I wasn’t drunk, was I?

“Are you okay?” Barney asked. “You look a little out of it.”

“I am,” I admitted. “It’s so weird. All of a sudden I just started feeling so light-headed and happy and free and...then I was by the fountain and I guess I blacked out...I can’t explain it.”

Bob and Barney looked at each other, nodding.

“Did you by any chance have any of the special cookies that were in the kitchen?” Bob asked with a grin.

“You mean the Seven Layer cookies? Yeah, they were great.”

“I’m afraid those were actually Eight Layer cookies,” Bob explained. “The eighth layer being the rather generous supply of hash that was in them.”

“WHAT?” I said, nearly shouting. “You’re kidding.”

“Calm down,” Barney cut me off. “They were a birthday present for one of the guests. They weren’t supposed to be out for general consumption.”

“Whoever offered you those cookies should have told you what was in them,” Barney said, beginning to get a little angry.

“Well...they weren't really offered to me,” I confessed. “I sort of found them on my own.”

Now it made sense why the pan of cookies had been up on a shelf. I'd just assumed it was to keep them from getting wet on the bar. But in reality, that's where someone had hidden them. And being a presumptive party guest, I naturally assumed they were for everyone.

“Hello?” Barney said, waving his hand in front of my face. “Are you still there?”

Apparently I'd been zoning out again.

“Sorry,” I said, snapping back to attention. “I've been having all these weird thoughts.”

“I can only imagine,” Barney laughed. “How many cookies did you eat?”

“Maybe three or four. They were very good.”

“I'm surprised you can still walk.”

“Oh, I have a high tolerance for stupidity,” I said, trying to sound cavalier. “I'm capable of functioning no matter how moronic I become.”

“You're not moronic,” Bob assured me. “Just a little stoned. Do you want us to take you home now?”

“I'd love to get something to eat first. I'm famished.”

After stopping at McDonalds for a quick bite, Bob and Barney drove me home, and I was once again alone with my thoughts. Thoughts about everyone I'd met tonight, and all the things we talked about. Thoughts about all the money I'd make by selling my collectibles on eBay. Thoughts about what Brit said, and why it made me faint. And why was everything making me faint these days? Maybe I should get my blood sugar checked.

I glanced out the window at the mysterious house across the street, at the neighbors who seemed to react so negatively to my presence. The house was quiet tonight. No open windows. No lights. Probably no one was home. Certainly not George Clooney. Or whoever lived there.

I went to bed that evening, looking forward to a nice deep sleep. The effects of the cookies were taking their toll on my energy, and all I wanted to do was lie down. Thankfully, I was in dreamland shortly after my head hit the pillow.

I couldn't have been asleep more than five minutes when the pounding began. Loud, unending pounding, like someone hammering a nail. Only in this case, someone was pounding on my back door. In the middle of the night. And it sounded like they were going to break it down if I didn't answer.

So, like a fool, I got out of bed and went downstairs to see what dire emergency needed my immediate attention.

**Next Week's Episode: Another Uncomfortable Discovery**