

Chapter Eight—Another Uncomfortable Discovery

I opened the backdoor to find my neighbor Ramona, and she didn't look happy. But why was she pounding on my door in the middle of the night?

"I will not tolerate tardiness in my students," Ramona said curtly, before I could even say hello. "We agreed on nine o'clock and it is now nine fifteen."

Wait a minute. It was nine-fifteen? That meant I'd slept much longer than I thought. Ten hours longer, to be exact.

"I don't have all day to wait for you," Ramona continued. "Now come on, we are way behind schedule as it is."

I'd forgotten that today was my first cooking lesson with Madame Diaz. I wish I'd thought ahead of time to reschedule it. But who knew the Plainfield RAMBO was going to cause me such physical destruction?

"Can I get some coffee first?" I asked Ramona, trying to open my eyes from their current half-slit position. "And maybe throw on some clothes?"

"We have coffee. We have muffins. You will eat while you work. But yes, perhaps you'd better change first. I do not think Luis would like to see you in your pajamas. He is not a big fan of Winnie the Pooh."

It's true. The pajamas I was wearing had a Disney theme, though I don't usually wear anything when I sleep. But before I answered the door this morning, I wisely thought to throw something on, and the Pooh Nightshirt was the first thing I could find.

Ramona allowed me a few minutes to pull on some real clothes, which I managed to do in record time. To complete my ensemble, I threw on a baseball hat and a pair of sunglasses. Ramona frowned at the sunglasses, but said nothing. Instead, she grabbed my hand and escorted me the short distance to the backdoor of her home.

It was my first time in the Diaz domain, and I was pleasantly surprised to find it had a modern-looking interior. At least the kitchen did. Silver industrial-looking metallic cabinets, accented by black marble countertops. Very sleek and chic.

As Ramona guided me through the process of preparing a typical Cuban dish (which I'm still unable to pronounce), she needled me with questions about the previous evening.

“So what kind of party did you go to last night?” Ramona asked, without the slightest hint of curiosity.

“How did you know I went to a party?” I responded, taking a sip of the black mud she insisted was coffee.

“Please, Henson. Look at you. If you didn’t go to a party last night, why would you look like something the goat dragged in? Besides, I’m on the Neighborhood Watch. It’s my job to know everything.”

“That’s a little scary,” I said under my breath. If Ramona heard me, she ignored it.

“So...tell me...what kind of party? Birthday? Anniversary? Toga?”

“It was a party for members of my church.” I said, wondering if she’d pick up on the subtle allusion. She didn’t.

“Which church is that?” she asked.

“It was a euphemism.”

“Is that like a Protestant?”

“You’re misunderstanding me. When I say ‘members of my church,’ I mean other gay men. As in the church of homosexuality.”

“Is there really such a church?” Ramona stopped butchering some chicken breasts to give me her full attention.

“No. It’s just a way of identifying ourselves to other people. Like in the sixties, gay men would ask if you were a ‘friend of Judy’s.’ If you said yes, they would know you were gay.”

“I have a friend named Judy, but I don’t see how that makes me gay.” Ramona admitted.

“They were referring to Judy Garland. If you said you were a friend of Judy’s, you were telling people you were gay. Because Judy was a huge gay icon. So nowadays, when we say that someone is a member of our church, we’re really just saying they’re gay like us.”

The light finally clicked, and Ramona’s face lit up with the biggest smile.

“Oooooohhhhhh.” She squealed with delight, as if I’d just revealed something of top-secret importance. “My brother used to say he was a friend of Judy’s, though he never brought Judy home to meet the family. Now I know why.”

“You have a gay brother?” I asked, somewhat astounded.

“Yes. But I didn’t find out until recently. He never told me about his church, you see. I had to find out on my own.”

There was a touch of sadness in Ramona’s voice. It was obvious she loved her brother very much, and perhaps was hurt that he’d never confided in her. But such is the “coming out” process. We all do it at our own pace and within our own comfort zone.

“Now tell me about the party.” Ramona asked, taking on a decidedly different tone from earlier. “But please take your sunglasses off while you’re using that knife. You want to chop the carrots, not your fingers.”

So while I chopped and grated, I told Ramona about some of the evening’s highlights. Everything but the Eight Layer cookies, of course. Ramona loved hearing about the house and the people, but I think she was most interested in the conversation about eBay.

“I’ve sold a few things on eBay,” Ramona admitted. “But mostly I use it to buy clothes and jewelry. It’s very addictive.”

Ramona began listing all the great items she’d won on eBay that were half the price of retail stores. When we eventually put the chicken concoction in the oven, Ramona led me down a hallway to a small office so we could look at her computer. The office was a very colorful room, with several framed Warner Brothers cels hanging on the walls. I imagined Luis probably edited his animated films in here.

For the next forty-five minutes, while our mysterious entrée baked, Ramona gave me a guided tour of eBay and the selling process. And she was a very good teacher too. I felt like I could easily clear out my storage locker tomorrow and start selling.

At one point, as we were browsing through the various items, Ramona turned to me with a concerned look.

“Henson...do you have any enemies? Or anyone who might be checking up on you?”

I was so taken aback by the question; I didn’t know how to respond.

“I don’t want to scare you, but I’ve seen a couple of men in the neighborhood lately. They’re always parked outside or near your house. I don’t know what they’re doing here, but I thought I’d let you know.”

If Ramona didn’t want to scare me, she should’ve used a different approach, because this information was definitely upsetting. Especially since Brit had mentioned something similar last night at the party.

“What makes you think I have enemies?” I asked, curious as to why this might be her first assumption.

“Something about the way these men looked. They weren’t friendly. And they didn’t seem like workmen. They’d just watch your house for an hour or so, and then drive away.”

“Gee, Nancy Drew, did you find out anything else?” I was amazed at the level of detail Ramona concluded from her casual observations.

“As I said, I’m part of the neighborhood watch. It’s my job to always stay alert.”

“I appreciate it, believe me. I’m just surprised I didn’t notice them myself.”

“You’ve probably been too busy swearing at your wallpaper.” Ramona said with a smile.

“You heard that?”

“Of course. You had all your windows open.”

“Sorry. It got so stuffy in there with all the chemicals and solvents I’m using. But please tell me more about these men.”

“I’ve seen them maybe three times in the last two weeks,” Ramona said, lowering her voice. “I never saw them get out of the car, but I wasn’t watching them the entire time either. I just happened to notice them one day when I went out to the mailbox, and then a couple times after that. Once, I went to the upstairs window and watched them through my binoculars. And what I saw made me very suspicious.”

“What did you see?”

“They were taking notes. They were watching your house and writing things down.”

“What kinds of things?”

“I’ve no idea. My binoculars can only see so much.”

“Maybe they lived in the house before me,” I offered. “And they were just checking to see what kinds of improvements I was making.”

“I doubt it. No one has lived in your house for years. Ever since...” Ramona broke off mid-sentence.

“Ever since what?”

“Ever since the last owner moved out.” Ramona said quickly, although it seemed like she was holding something back. “At any rate, it might not hurt to get a security system installed. Just to be on the safe side.”

And with that, Ramona led us back into the kitchen, where the chicken dish was about to be removed for inspection. The dish actually looked better coming out of the oven than it did going in. There was a beautiful brown crust on top, complimented by a wonderful aroma of chicken and carrots and all the other ingredients we'd included. (I lost track after chicken and carrots.)

After a short period of cooling, Ramona wrapped up my portion and sent me on my way, asking me to return the pan at my earliest convenience. I thanked her again for the lesson and returned home just in time to answer the ringing phone.

“Henson, it’s Barney. I’m just calling to make sure you’re okay.”

I was glad that Barney and Bob still wanted to be friends, even after my rather embarrassing entrance into Plainfield Society.

When I mentioned to Barney that I was going to clear out my storage locker, he generously offered the use of their old Jeep to do it. Since it would save me the trouble of renting a car, I happily accepted, and we made arrangements to do the hand-off early the following morning.

After hanging up, I called a local security company about installing an alarm. The earliest they could come was next Thursday, so I made an appointment and then went upstairs to work on my computer.

Out of curiosity, I glanced out the front window to look for the mysterious car Ramona mentioned. But there was nothing but the usual bunch belonging to the neighbors. Upon looking out my side window, however, I noticed something quite different.

There was a delivery truck parked at the house across the street. The house where I thought I'd seen George Clooney in the window. A deliveryman was attempting to lug several oversized boxes with a tiny hand-truck. At one point, the hand truck almost tipped over, causing the man to begin cursing rather loudly.

As he stopped to adjust the boxes, I noticed someone emerge from a door inside the garage. It was a woman wearing dark glasses and a scarf around her head. She seemed very concerned about the contents of the boxes.

If only I had a pair of binoculars like Ramona. Then I could get a closer look at what was going on. But just to be safe, I hid behind a curtain so the woman wouldn't see me watching her.

The workman began wiping his face on his shirt, which became drenched within seconds. The woman must have felt sorry for him, because she handed over her scarf to help speed up the mopping process.

Without the scarf, the woman's beautiful brunette hair flowed freely, creating a follicle frame around her cherubic face. She looked like a movie star. In fact, as she took off her sunglasses to go back in the house, she looked very much like the movie star Sandra Bullock.

Now I know what you're thinking. I'm delusional. First George Clooney and now Sandra Bullock? I must be living in some kind of fantasy world to presume that famous celebrities would suddenly want to move across the street from me. It's crazy talk. Preposterous! Ludicrous! I agree with you. I don't believe any of it either; I'm just reporting what I saw. (But perhaps instead of getting my blood sugar checked, I should get my head examined.)

Nevertheless, I still watched the house for another half hour to see if "Miss Congeniality" would reappear. She didn't. The truck eventually drove away, and the house was dark and quiet once again. A fortress of secrecy.

I eventually sat down at my computer and started going through the registration process for eBay. But I couldn't get Ramona or Brit's questions out of my head. What had Brit meant by "strange activity surrounding my house"? Did it have something to do with the men Ramona saw in the van? And did the men in the van have some connection with my missing trash? And where the heck was Unity and why hadn't she called me back yet?

My mind was working a mile a minute and I was extremely anxious. I needed something to distract me. Like writing a new blog entry. That could be fun. Something simple and generic. Like how I felt about clearing out my storage locker and seeing all my old stuff again. Pretty dull topic, but it would allow me to be somewhat creative without revealing too much.

Ever since I discovered my blog was averaging 500 hits a week, I wanted to make sure I didn't reveal too many personal details. And a posting about cleaning out my storage locker seemed like a pretty safe bet.

Or so I thought. Unfortunately, my visit to the storage locker the following morning proved to be my strangest experience yet.

Next Week's Episode: Cold Storage