

Neigh It Isn't So is a humorous murder mystery set in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Maggie Bloom is hoping to have a romantic weekend with her new husband but has to put her plans for canoodling on hold to help solve a murder and kidnapping at Archangel Ranch.

## **Neigh It Isn't So**

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# Neigh It Isn't So

A Maggie Bloom Mystery



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## CHAPTER ONE

I figured Seraphina Simboli disappeared about the time I was fishing Wally, my English cocker spaniel, out of the marsh behind my house. Wally's dash into the ebbing tide had a lot to do with alluring animal smells and self-gratification and absolutely nothing to do with common sense. Once he found himself in unfamiliar surroundings and the object of his lustful plunge nowhere in sight, he howled like a banshee until I waded in to rescue him.

Seraphina had also been known to follow primal urges without thinking much about the consequences. She had been, metaphorically speaking, stuck in the marsh more than once. And until now, someone has always been there to haul her out.

When my phone rang at six o'clock the next morning, I wasn't thinking about Seraphina Simboli or anyone else. I was sound asleep, dreaming about Ben Jakowski, my brand new husband. We were on a ship, snuggling next to each other in bed and listening to the ocean through our open veranda door. He reached over to caress my face and run his hand along my naked body. "Ignore it," he whispered when we heard the sound. But of course the ringing woke me up and the dream faded. I opened my eyes and groped for the phone.

It was Angel Lombardi, Seraphina's sister. "Get over here," she said and hung up. She sounded distressed, so I threw on some clothes and drove down William Hilton Parkway faster than the legal 45mph, hoping the Beaufort County deputies on Hilton Head were all busy eating doughnuts.

It was going to be another scorcher in the Lowcountry. The outside temperature on the dashboard already read eighty seven degrees, which meant it would be around one hundred by late afternoon. Since Angel and I lived only twenty minutes apart, I turned under the bronze angel seated on a bronze, rearing palomino spanning the entrance to Archangel Ranch before I finished my coffee.

Archangel Ranch never failed to take my breath away. Set among tall loblolly pines and live oaks that dripped Spanish moss, the ranch was proof that man and nature could live together quite nicely. But I wasn't there to get breathless. I had to find Angel. I pulled up to the portico of the low, white cedar ranch and crawled out to have a look at a note taped to the oak front doors.

*Maggie Bloom, come to the barn as soon as you see this. I really need to talk to you.*

I threw my Jeep into gear and headed down the service road to the barn. Angel jerked the car door open before I came to a complete stop.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said as she flung herself at me. Although she moves with the grace of one of her amazing horses, Angel is a bit over six feet tall, and when she flings herself at someone, it is with significant energy. I felt the steering wheel indent a portion of my spine before I could climb out of the car and return her hug.

"Come with me. And watch where you walk."

Without waiting for a reply, she stalked into the barn. I hurried after her, trying to avoid the straw and horse manure that littered the usually immaculate center aisle.

To say the barn was slightly chaotic would be like saying World War II was a minor skirmish. There were animals everywhere. The stall doors were open and the horses ambled aimlessly around the barn and the property. There was a horse on the lush green lawn munching an azalea bush. Florence, a sweet old mare I remembered from previous visits, trotted down the driveway towards the front gate. Gabriel, a two-year old palomino colt, stood at the washstand while Eddie Bender, Angel's stable hand, sprayed him with water.

In the last stall, two rabbits, several guinea pigs, a cat, and Barney, the Springer spaniel, hunched over a pile of lettuce leaves and carrots thrown in a heap on the straw. As I watched, Barney and one guinea pig strolled past me. The dog headed for his water bowl, but I had a feeling the pig had other plans. Before it could make a dash for freedom, I scooped it up and offered it to Angel, who distractedly stuck it in the pocket of a large work apron hanging on a stall door.

Angel looked like she had been caught in one of the fans in her barn. Her red plaid shirt was buttoned unevenly, giving her a slightly

*NEIGH IT ISN'T SO*

off balance look. She'd managed to capture half of her blond hair in a ponytail. The other half stuck out around her head in spiked clumps, an effect I was willing to bet she couldn't duplicate if she tried.

It seemed pointless to ask if something was wrong. Nevertheless, since civilities have to be observed, I did. She pointed her chin at Eddie and said in a low voice, "I need to talk to you alone."

Unfortunately, it was another twenty minutes before Eddie finished with Gabriel and approached the first stall with a pitchfork and a wheelbarrow.

Angel yanked the wheelbarrow out of his hands. "That's okay, I'll do the stalls. You can have the rest of the day off," He looked puzzled but wasn't about to argue. She waited until his battered, red pickup truck swung through the gate before she spoke. That's when she told me that Seraphina hadn't come home. That she had disappeared.

It never crossed my mind that something might be wrong with Angel's sister. I'd already decided my friend was probably in the throes of some estrogen related collapse. It was hard to believe anyone would get upset because Seraphina, or Sera, as we called her, wasn't asleep in her bed. I mean, it wasn't like this was the first time. But Angel was very definitely upset, so I asked the obvious. "What do you mean Seraphina has disappeared?"

"She's gone. She went out last night with Donovan, and I waited for her to come back and she didn't."

Just as I thought. Sera was probably at this very minute enthusiastically practicing the Lowcountry Limbo with an equally enthusiastic partner she met at a bar. But I wasn't going to say that to Angel. When she didn't offer any further information, I said, "You mean they went out for dinner or to a movie?"

Angel glared at me. "Is that your idea of a joke? I'm not much in the mood for joking. Donovan is a horse. She rode Donovan off the property. She left about seven o'clock. Said she was going down the road to Gold's. They have a lighted ring and she wanted to practice some dressage routines. I didn't get worried until about ten. That's far too late to keep a horse out, and I wanted to close the barn for the night."

She tried to run her fingers through her hair but only succeeded in creating more spikes. "I finally called the Golds." Angel looked at me sheepishly. "You know how Seraphina hates it when I check up on her."

I nodded. Seraphina was what some folks, less tolerant than Angel, would refer to as a handful. At six she had been a red-headed, perpetual-energy pixie with a stubborn streak strong enough to make grown men weep when they tried to reason with her. At twenty- three she was a red-headed free spirit with a zest for life, an insatiable appetite for the opposite sex and an intensely stubborn will. If she'd been my sister, I'd have locked her in her room until she turned fifty.

"Howie Gold said he hadn't seen Sera all evening. He was kind enough to ask around for me, but everyone said the same thing. I know she's a grown woman and doesn't have to tell me where she's going, but when she takes off on one of my horses, I think I have the right to know." Tears, which she tried to brush away, threatened to spill out of her hazel eyes. "She loves the horses as much as I do, so I know she would never deliberately do anything to hurt them, but keeping a horse out too late is really irresponsible." She paused to take in a huge gulp of fresh air before she continued. "I hunted for her all night, and then I sat on the front porch and watched for her. But she never came back."

I babbled something like, "You mustn't worry, surely she isn't missing," and "I'm quite sure there has to be a logical explanation," and "everything will be fine" before I finally shut my mouth. I sounded like a nauseating Pollyanna.

To tell the truth, I really wasn't that worried. Since I knew Sera was capable of altering her plans on the slightest whim, I thought it was highly possible she had veered off course with a man, spent a delightful night under the stars and, unlike my hapless cocker spaniel, knew exactly where she was, did not need rescuing and had never once thought about calling her sister. I was willing to bet she'd return home with a smile on her face and pine needles stuck to her backside.

But I didn't want to say that to Angel. No sense getting her more upset than she was.

"Maybe we should wait a bit before we start to worry. I mean, you know she's changed her plans before." In case Angel had forgotten, I

said, "Remember when she ran away with that lawyer visiting from Connecticut? As I recall they had been on their way to a tennis match when they suddenly decided to see if they could get on a boat to Cuba. Seraphina had been in Key West for three days day before she called home."

Angel wrapped her arms around her body to stop her shaking. "I know she isn't with some man, and I know she isn't being irresponsible. Not this time." She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it to me. "This was tacked to the cross ties on the washstand in the barn. I found it this morning."

*There was a man who wasn't smart*

*And now she's going to die*

*This will no doubt break your heart*

*Too bad you had to wreck the pie.*

Under this verse was another message. *If you don't want your sister to die, don't call the police. You will hear.* The words had been cut out of a magazine and pasted on the note.

I read it three times before the message penetrated my shocked brain. No wonder Angel was unhinged. This was terrible.

"This is absurd," I told her. "It sounds like the ramblings of some infantile mind. I definitely think we should call the police."

Angel snatched the paper away from me. "No. We're not calling the police. You see what that says. They'll kill her if we do."

I patted her arm. "Listen, sweetie, whoever wrote this sounds a bit unbalanced. I think the best thing to do is let the sheriff deal with this. He can be discreet and not put Sera in any danger."

Angel shook her head so vigorously, her blond ponytail slapped her across the face. "I'm not doing that. I'm waiting until whoever wrote this gets in touch with me and tells me what to do next."

It's safe to say I was very confused. "Do you understand this note at all?" I asked. "What does it mean, 'there was a man who wasn't smart?' What does Tony say about this?"

"Tony doesn't know. He's in Nepal. He called yesterday and I could barely hear him. Something about reaching a base camp, and he wouldn't be able to call again for four or five days. He and two other architect friends planned this trip for over a year." She wrung her



hands. "We're not very busy at the ranch and Tony had just finished designing a house for someone in Savannah, and it was a good time to take a break. Even if I tried, I couldn't reach him." Absentmindedly, she hauled the guinea pig out of the apron pocket and deposited it on the floor of the stall. This time, the rodent wasted no time racing for the great outdoors.

"Do you think this has anything to do with Tony? Any business deal gone bad? Someone unhappy with a house he designed?" Which I couldn't imagine. Angel's husband was a super architect.

"No. I thought about that too. Tony didn't seem upset about anything. He's been working on the new, planned community off Hwy 170." Her shoulders slumped. "I'm just so scared, Maggie. This time something bad has happened, and it isn't Sera's fault." She took my hand and squeezed it so hard my fingers went numb. "Will you please stay here with me at the ranch and help me find her?"

"Hey, we live so close to each other, all you have to do is yell," I told her. "I'll hear you and come a running."

"I want you to be here. Please?"

This presented a dilemma. "I don't know how I can do that, Angel. What would I do with my dogs? And Ben is coming home. Have you forgotten I have a new husband?" *And I have planned a marvelous weekend that involves not leaving the bedroom and sending out for Chinese.* "I also have to work," I reminded her. I own *Heavenly Cupcakes*. Our slogan is *You Won't Find a More Sinful One Anywhere*. And boy, were my hips proof of that! I previously owned *In Bloom* and specialized in painting decorative boxes, flower planters and other objects, but the bad economy closed me down. No one wanted to spend \$50 for hand painted coat hangers. But everyone still liked to eat, and a luscious cupcake could even be considered therapeutic—sort of comfort food for the soul. My shop was closed for a week of vacation, so theoretically I could stay at the ranch. I was going to spend the time catching up on paper work, but...

Angel clapped her hands together. "This is easy. Ben can come here too. You two can have a real getaway. As for the dogs—for heavens sake, Maggie—do you really think a few more animals are going to make any difference? Bring them. No one will even notice."

*NEIGH IT ISN'T SO*

She was right about that. Archangel Ranch reminded me of a petting zoo.

## CHAPTER TWO

Wally and Willow caught on quickly that something was up. They ran across the bed, jamming their noses into my overnight bag and generally getting in the way. I fingered some wispy, black lace undies I'd been saving for a special occasion. Ben Jakowski, my lovely new husband, sure deserved a special occasion or two. He was a wonderful, good-looking, patient man who, for some reason I really couldn't fathom, genuinely loved me. He was also a free lance writer who at the moment was working on a story in San Francisco. If I called him and told him about Angel's problem, I knew he would tell me to stay with her.

He was the best thing to ever happen to me and an amazing contrast to my first husband, the lying, cheating Peter Bloom, who preferred a Barbie doll with a surgically enhanced chest and the IQ of a turtle to me. I tossed out the old cotton Jockeys and put the lacy stuff in my bag. If I could convince Ben to come to Archangel Ranch, I intended to wear them.

I left a message on his cell phone telling him about my plans and gave Wally and Willow a few swipes with their brush so they would look presentable to go visiting.

On the way back to Angel's we stopped at MacDonald's for lunch. I ordered a Big Mac for me, and fries for the dogs. When we arrived at the ranch, Wally and Willow headed for the barn, and I hunted for Angel.

I found her in the ring, riding a big bay with a white dagger on his nose. Judging from the energy he expended trying to toss Angel off his back, I concluded he didn't feel much like exercising. I watched with delight because I knew the horse didn't stand a chance. If Angel wanted him to walk, he would walk. Sure enough, within a few minutes, she had him prancing nicely.

*NEIGH IT ISN'T SO*

She stopped in front of me, and the horse flattened his ears and exposed an astonishing set of huge, yellow teeth. I jumped back, sensing he was about to taste my hair.

"I wish Rebecca would do this," Angel said. "The last thing I want to do right now is take care of her horse." She jumped down and led the horse to his stall. "This is Lightning, and there is no bigger pain in the ass in the whole world, unless it's his owner."

"I can see that," I said as I closed the stall door. "Who is Rebecca?"

"Rebecca von Sonnenbrook. She's a good friend of mine. Her husband doesn't like the smell of horses or manure so I let her board Lightning here, but she's supposed to take care of him. I can't let him out with the other horses because they don't get along." She put some carrots in his bucket and patted him on the nose. "He tries to bite everyone. And his temperament is terrible. On a scale of 1 to 10—1 being nuclear explosion proof and 10 a nuclear explosion—Lightning is a 12. He rears if a marshmallow hits the ground. I've asked Rebecca to find somewhere else to keep him, but so far, she hasn't. Now she's in Columbia. She should be back tomorrow though. Her husband is some big shot investment banker and likes to have Rebecca on his arm when he entertains."

"Is she a trophy wife?" I kept an eye on Lightning, who was attempting to stick his tongue through the bars on the stall door.

"More or less. To be honest, I've never met him. He's considerably older, but I think she loves him. But let's not talk about Rebecca. I'm so glad you're here, Maggie," she said as she took my arm and led me to the house. "I know you'll be able to think of something."

"She'd never leave this behind." Angel picked up a gold, heart shaped locket on Seraphina's dresser and showed it to me. "There is a picture of our mother inside. She wore it all the time, except when she was working in the barn or exercising the horses." She rubbed the smooth metal with her thumb. "She said it was her good luck charm."

"I've been thinking, Angel," I began. "If Sera is being, um, detained for reasons we don't yet know, why haven't you had any

demands from the person who has her?" I did my best to skirt around the word, "kidnapper," but Angel knew what I meant. "If it weren't for the note, I'd expect her to turn up any time. But the note has me puzzled. There should be some request for money or something."

"Maybe it's all some kind of a hoax," she said hopefully. "Someone might be playing some kind of joke on me." She automatically began to fold clothes that were strewn over Seraphina's white chenille bedspread. "Although it really isn't very funny."

Sera's room was a surprising combination of teenager and young woman. The furniture was white, and the walls a pale yellow. A pink, mint green and pale yellow patterned rug covered a portion of the bleached oak floor. Her dressing table held a substantial collection of make-up, a cell phone, an open jewelry box, a half eaten chocolate bar, a lacy white bra and a pack of pink florescent condoms. Blue ribbons from horse shows were draped over the top of the mirror. Above her bed was a net full of teddy bears. Angel saw my glance and said, "She keeps meaning to get rid of this junk but never gets around to it. She's lived with us for the last eight years, you know. Ever since our mother died."

"Has anything else out of the ordinary happened here?" I asked.

"Well, the barn cats were pretty sick last week. The vet said he thought they had gotten into some kind of poison, which I couldn't understand because we don't have any poisons on the ranch. Even the vegetable garden is completely organic. And there was a dead raccoon in the pool. And another one in an empty stall in the barn." She looked doubtful. "I suppose that can happen. Now that I think about it, there have been a bunch of little annoyances."

"How about men? Is Seraphina dating anyone special right now?"

Angel shrugged. "Who knows. You know Sera. She's never without a guy, but she changes them like other people change their socks. I have no idea who the current one is." She picked up a pair of high-heeled clunky sandals and a pair of running shoes and put them neatly on the floor of Seraphina's closet. "For the past three years she's been working at Stoddard's Ranch, teaching little kids to ride. They called to ask why she wasn't at work and I told them she was sick."

*NEIGH IT ISN'T SO*

She's been helping me here, too. She's wonderful with horses. By the way, I told Eddie Bender that Donovan is at Gold's. He believed me."

"Don't worry, Mom. You know Aunt Sera. She'll be back soon." Brian, Angel's son, stood awkwardly in the doorway, his hands in the pockets of his shorts. "Hi, Maggie."

He had grown at least a foot since I'd last seen him, which put him at nearly six feet. He had thick dark hair like his father and his mother's fair complexion. He squirmed as I gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek but smiled good-naturedly. "Are you going to help me convince Mom everything will be okay?"

Bless his little fourteen year old heart. If only it were that easy.

I followed Angel down the hall from the family quarters to the guest wing of Archangel Ranch. "We're not near capacity at the moment," she said over her shoulder. "We only have two guests, which is good because I can hardly think about meals and things right now. Fortunately, Estancia del Palmetto is providing the evening entertainment this week."

I'd forgotten about the custom of exchanging entertainment with neighboring ranches. By doing this, no single ranch was responsible for providing festivities for its guests every week. Estancia del Palmetto, the spread next to Archangel Ranch, always came up with something glitzy and spectacular.

We came to a stop in the hall. "This is your room," she said. "You and Ben should be comfortable in here. You can have a nice, romantic vacation."

Remembering the lacy undies in my bag, I felt my face grow hot. "We don't need a romantic vacation. We might ride the horses a bit, but we're not doing anything else until Seraphina comes home"

A glimmer of a smile appeared on Angel's sad face. "Maggie Bloom, you do not know how to horseback ride. I've seen you attempt it and believe me, you don't want to try it in front of your Ben."

The room had a king size bed and a couch covered in cheerful red fabric with plenty of bright pillows to lean against. There was also a writing desk with personalized stationary and picture postcards of the ranch. Framed watercolors of horses decorated the walls.

Angel sat on the bed while I unpacked the few clothes I'd brought and watched as I arranged Willow and Wally's blanket in the corner. They wouldn't sleep there. As soon as I turned out the light, I knew they would jump on the bed and plop down beside me. Another thing Angel didn't need to know.

"Is there anything else you should tell me?" I asked. "Something that perhaps didn't seem significant to you at the time? We need some clues."

"Well, a real estate agent has been calling – pestering me actually – but that couldn't have anything to do with Sera."

"How has he been pestering you?"

"It's a woman. She said her name was Tanya Becker. I was so annoyed, I called the company she said she was associated with, but they never heard of her. Anyway, she kept asking me if we wanted to sell Archangel Ranch, and I kept telling her no. She got kind of ugly. She said her buyer wouldn't be offering such a good price forever. I tried to tell her it didn't matter what she was offering because we had no interest in selling."

So, someone was very eager to buy Archangel Ranch. This was interesting information. "Do you know of anyone who wants this place?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Land is at a premium around here. I don't think we'd have any trouble selling it if we wanted to, but I intend to grow old here. You know how long it took us to build this place. Tony and I love it."

It didn't take me long to hang up my clothes. In the bathroom, I brushed bronzer across my cheeks and gave my lips a swipe of Starlit Pink. Angel hung on me as if she were afraid I'd disappear if she let go. In the living room, though, she relinquished my arm so I could shake hands with the other guests, Edna and Bernie Dudek. Bernie seemed pleasant enough. Probably in his fifties, short, with a fringe of black hair around his otherwise bald head, old fashioned tortoise shell glasses and an obvious fondness for colorful clothes. He wore banana yellow slacks and a shirt with purple, green and red palm trees.

Mrs. Dudek was another matter. Her hair was the color of a brass lamp. I decided she couldn't smile because the gobs of makeup on her

*NEIGH IT ISN'T SO*

face prevented any type of facial expression. Her low cut gold lamé top revealed too much crinkled skin on a well-endowed chest. She watched carefully as Angel moved around the room taking drink orders while trying to appear normal.

Under different circumstances, I decided, this might have been fun. Dinner, however, was not. Edna Dudek complained that her vodka was too warm, the dinner was too salty and the sun, now a flaming ball on the horizon, was in her eyes.

"I want to drop kick her to the moon," I told Angel.

She patted my hand. "We don't do that to the guests, dear."

Angel did her best, but her stiff upper lip began to quiver when she served the spaghetti marinara. By the time the folks were ready for dessert, I served it alone. She collapsed in a chair in the kitchen with her head in her arms on the table. "I don't feel so good," she said. "I can't stand worrying about Sera anymore." She got to her feet and waved to me. "I'm going to lock myself in my bedroom, take every mind numbing drug I can find and sleep forever."

"Okeydokey." There was no point in arguing with her. There was also no way I was going to let her obliterate herself with pills, even if it meant sitting on her stomach all night. But I was glad she had decided to go to bed because I had plans of my own.



## CHAPTER THREE

Fortunately, Angel fell asleep from natural causes, so I didn't have to threaten her with a stomach pump or some other gruesome method of removing ingested pills from her body. I waited until her breathing was deep and regular, then covered her with a quilt and tiptoed out of the room. The blue light of the TV flickered under Brian's door, which I hoped meant he was occupied for a while.

First I called Lucy Rotblumen, my best friend in the world, and told her what was going on. "Do you need me now?" she asked. "I can rearrange my schedule if you've got something interesting to do." In the background, I heard laughter and the tinkling of glass.

"Where are you? What's all that noise?"

"I'm at Starling Adam's house. We're screening new vendors for a charity event. Some kind of jewelry made from bottle caps. So what's up?"

I told her about Sera's disappearance and heard her tsk, tsk.

"Didn't she try to elope with Karen Stone's son? I seem to remember something about Gary Stone calling the sheriff to report his Mercedes stolen. It turned out the kids had driven it to Las Vegas."

I sighed. Sera certainly had a reputation. "That was years ago, Lucy. This time I think something may have happened to her. It doesn't seem like a prank."

"Let me know what I can do. You know I'll be happy to help Angel."

I hung up feeling better. Then, without so much as one pang of remorse, I zoomed down the hall and gently turned the knob on the door to Tony's office. This wasn't snooping, I reassured myself; it was a necessary investigation into Seraphina's disappearance.

Afraid to use the wall switch, I stumbled in the dark across the room until my hip banged against the corner of Tony's drafting table. My hand felt the crook of a goose-neck lamp, which I bent low to deflect the light before I turned it on. These precautions were necessary

because I had a probably accurate feeling that, much as she wanted the return of her sister, Angel wouldn't want me rummaging through the contents of her husband's desk.

But how else were we going to determine who had snatched Seraphina? That is, if she had been snatched. I had to admit there was a tiny kernel of suspicion that maybe Seraphina had orchestrated this whole disappearance herself. But logic told me she didn't have the temperament or lousy character to do something so unkind to her sister. Seraphina was willful, headstrong and impulsive, but she wasn't malicious or calculating. You couldn't help liking her. You just thanked your lucky stars you weren't the one chosen to live with her.

So, since Angel insisted calling the police was not an option, we would have to do the sleuthing ourselves. This reasoning made me feel almost pious, and I noticed my hand opened the drawer of Tony's desk without so much as a slight tremor.

He was a very organized man. Rows of colored folders hung suspended from a metal rod in the drawer. Each folder held correspondence related to buildings or houses that Tony had designed. Realizing it would take hours that I didn't have to read the contents of every folder, I gave them only the most cursory search and, finding nothing, closed the drawer.

I sat back in his leather swivel chair and looked around, taking in the sport memorabilia on one wall and the framed photos above his desk. In one, a smiling Tony had his arm around Angel and Brian as they stood in front of the barn. In another he was accepting an award for "Excellence and Ethics in Architecture." A child's drawing of the ranch was prominently displayed in the center of the grouping. Across the bottom of the picture were the words, *To Daddy. Happiness Is Archangel Ranch.*

I got up and roamed around the room. Outside, the wind had picked up, batting the fan palms against the windows. The first heavy drops of rain splattered on the skylight above my head.

A scratching on the French door nearly made me jump out of my socks. Considering recent events, I expected to see a gun toting hulk. I was slightly embarrassed to realize it was only Sushi, one of Angel's cats. I opened the door and the cat scurried past me, but not before she

gave me what I could only interpret as a withering how-could-you-be-so-stupid cat look.

I stood at the door for a few minutes, inhaling the damp air and listening to the unfamiliar night sounds. A shutter on the barn banged rhythmically as the wind blew against it. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked. I thought about Seraphina and why someone would want to harm her. The note Angel found sounded like gibberish. Scary gibberish. Especially the part about wrecking the pie. And Angel was right when she said Seraphina loved the horses. She wouldn't deliberately keep Donovan out too late.

Angel's determination not to call the police was based on the fear that if she did, the unknown abductor would carry out his/her threat to kill her sister. Therefore, she intended to carry on as if nothing were wrong while she waited for either another manic rhyming note to arrive or for her eyeballs to spin around in her head – whichever came first. As far as I was concerned, neither option was acceptable.

With renewed energy I returned to Tony's desk and this time studied the area above the drawing table. There were probably twenty or thirty cubbyholes, each stuffed with an architectural blueprint. Faced with the daunting task of examining endless drawings, I was about to give up until I realized Tony had neatly labeled each one. My fingers traced the names as I quickly moved down the rows. They were, for the most part, private homes. Nothing terribly interesting and I would have no way of knowing if one of the recipients of Tony's services had a gripe unless I cross-referenced each drawing with the correspondence in the drawer. And there was no time for that. Angel's natural slumber could end at any moment, and if she suddenly developed a nocturnal hankering to visit Tony's office, my goose was cooked.

Thank heavens at that moment fate took pity on me and stopped my roving finger on a cubbyhole marked "Angel Town." I pulled out the drawing and spread it open on Tony's drafting table, anchoring the sides with a bottle of ink and a hunk of petrified wood I found on the desk. Neat writing on the top saved me from trying to interpret what I was looking at. "Planned Urban Development. Possum Trace Road. Beaufort County."

NEIGH IT ISN'T SO

A carefully drawn map showed the location of an entire town, with roads running like the spokes of a giant wheel around a town center. Inside the spokes were plots labeled "Residential, School and Farm." To the north was the Business Park and Shopping Center. Parks dotted the entire map, some with lakes, some with playgrounds. There were also plans for two swimming pools and four tennis courts.

The next drawings were sketches of the proposed houses for Angel Town. Potential buyers had three designs to choose from, ranging in price from a proposed \$150,000 to \$580,000. The houses were all neat, two story dwellings slightly reminiscent of Victorian architecture.

I tapped my teeth with a gold letter opener. Tony had designed a complete town. This was a huge project, which would involve hundreds of people. Had it already begun? And more importantly, did it have something to do with Seraphina's disappearance?

I consulted a large map of South Carolina pinned on the wall next to the drafting table. Possum Trace Road was near Hwy 170 and 278. This new community would provide easy access to both Savannah and Hilton Head. It could be a great place to live if folks didn't care about beach proximity. Since I'm no dumbie, I quickly located a satisfyingly thick folder marked "Angel Town" in Tony's file drawer. There was far too much material to read by the light of the gooseneck lamp in the office. As I pulled the folder out of the drawer, a bit of paper fell to the ground. My heart turned to ice when I saw it was written in the same cut out letters as Angel's note and said, *Don't mess in the pie or you'll regret it.*

I grabbed the folder, turned the light out and marched to the door. I realized I was freezing cold. Had Tony taken this note seriously? As far as I knew he hadn't mentioned it to Angel, but he also hadn't thrown it out. And what pie was he not supposed to mess in? Tomorrow I would try to figure it out.

Neigh It Isn't So is a humorous murder mystery set in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Maggie Bloom is hoping to have a romantic weekend with her new husband but has to put her plans for canoodling on hold to help solve a murder and kidnapping at Archangel Ranch.

## **Neigh It Isn't So**

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