

Chapter Sixteen—A Shocking Explanation

Officer Hernandez stood patiently, waiting for me to utter a response. Only none was coming. There was a car parked outside my house, registered in my name, whose keys I had in my pants pocket. How could I clarify something that didn't have a logical explanation?

"I'm waiting," the Officer said, getting a little impatient with my blank expression.

I felt my stomach start to churn. A very uneasy feeling was sweeping over my body as my forehead began to perspire like a miniature waterfall. My hands were already clammy and I felt my head start to get lighter. I leaned against the door for support, as I was determined to stop my emotions from controlling my consciousness. I was not going to faint again.

Just then, a loud voice erupted from somewhere behind the bushes on the side of my house.

"Henson, Yoo-Hoo. Are you here?"

It was a female voice, familiar and yet not familiar. The officer and I turned to look in the direction of the sound, when a woman in a baseball hat and dark glasses suddenly burst through the bushes. She was a petite little thing, with clothing that accentuated every curve and bosom.

"There you are. I've been looking all over for you." The woman said, in the thickest and most unbelievable southern accent I'd ever heard.

As the woman got closer, the sick feeling in my stomach got worse. If it were possible to have an out of body experience, I would say it definitely happened to me at that moment. Because there is simply no other explanation for what happened next.

"Don't you love your new car?" the woman asked, while looking around in every direction. She seemed rather nervous and fidgety, though it didn't stop her from coming all the way up to the door.

As she stood in front of Officer Hernandez and me, it was impossible not to see the beauty behind the sunglasses and the baseball hat. This woman was flawless, with a body that had obviously been worked out to within an inch of its life. A body that had been seen in a million men's fantasies and in a dozen or so Hollywood movies. A body that had sold more posters than Farrah Fawcett's famous cheesecake shot in the 1970s.

"Hey, aren't you..." The Officer suddenly asked, his face turning various shades of red.

“Shhhhh...” The woman said, placing her finger to her lips. “No questions now, Officer. I’m only here to make sure Henson likes his gift.”

Officer Hernandez did as he was told, his mouth slamming shut like the elevator doors at my old storage locker.

“My gift?” I asked, still uncertain as to whether I was dreaming all this.

“Yes, I sent you the car keys a few days ago. Didn’t you get them?”

I stared at the woman in the dark glasses and the baseball hat. This was the same woman I’d seen following me three days earlier. And now that she was standing in front of me, there was no doubt in my mind as to her true identity. This was Celia Westend, the actress featured on more magazine covers than the entire cast of *Desperate Housewives* combined. And she was standing on my doorstep talking about a car she had just given me as a present. Was I having a stroke?

“Henson, Honey. Can you hear me?” Celia asked, touching my arm gently, as if we were old friends. The feeling of her hand on my skin sent a tingle up and down my spine. Thank God I was already leaning against the door or I may have passed out right then.

“I...I...I...Yes...I got the keys,” I stammered, pointing to the keys in the Officer’s hands. I was having a hard time actually looking Celia in the face. She was too damn beautiful and I was too damn unworthy.

The Officer held up the keys like a scared puppy, and Celia reached out and took them, but not before gently touching the inside of his palm with her index finger. The result, of course, was that the Officer instantly froze like a statue, his mouth hanging open like a porcelain birdbath. Had there been a passing Blue Jay, I’m sure it would’ve swooped down for a quick swim.

“So...you gave...Mr. Ray that car?” Officer Hernandez finally asked, his voice cracking at odd moments.

“Yes. It was a surprise.” Celia said, turning to me. “Aren’t you surprised?”

“That would be an understatement,” I managed to answer, because the irony of this must have been clear to everyone.

“I’m sorry if I caused any confusion,” Celia said, pushing past me into the house. She turned around and finally took off her sunglasses, allowing us the full view of her famous green eyes. I was sure the Officer and I would turn to salt at any moment.

“No problem,” The Officer finally said, after gawking at Celia for what seemed like hours. “I’m glad we cleared that up.”

“Thank you for your time, Officer.” Celia said, leaning over to give the Officer a kiss on the cheek. The action, though totally inappropriate, was so sincere and honest that I think I saw tears welling up in the Officer’s eyes.

“I hope I can count on your discretion, Officer...Hernandez,” Celia added, looking at the Officer’s nametag. “I don’t want the press or paparazzi bothering poor Henson with questions about our relationship.”

Relationship? Did she just say we had a relationship? Was this lady nuts?

Officer Hernandez didn’t say another word, but nodded that he understood what she was asking. Then he slowly turned and walked unsteadily back to his car, his fingers gently rubbing the area where Celia had kissed him. Perhaps like me, he couldn’t believe any of this was really happening.

“Close the door quickly,” Celia said, as soon as the Officer got in his car. Her demeanor instantly changed from sweet to serious, her accent from Southern to Hollywood-ern.

As I shut the door and turned to face her, it was as if I was facing an alternate future. Like I had stepped into a time warp, and I was now in some parallel universe where movie stars buy the common people expensive presents, and money grows on trees.

“Before you ask me a question,” Celia began, as soon as I closed the door. “I just want to say that I can’t tell you anything.”

“Tell me anything about what?” I asked, still not comfortable with the fact that I was addressing a Hollywood icon.

“Anything about anything.” Celia answered defiantly. It was as if she was ready for some kind of battle, and I was the enemy rude enough to ask a probing question--like why a famous movie actress with millions of admirers would want to buy a simple nobody like me a new car?

“I shouldn’t have done this. Come to see you, I mean. It’s totally against policy. But I saw the police car, and I’d forgotten to send you any kind of explanation with the car keys. I screwed up, I admit it. But no one has to know. This will just be our little secret, okay?”

I felt like she was speaking a foreign language. There was way too much information to comprehend, and none of it made any sense. I had so many questions to ask, but I started with the most obvious.

“How do you know me?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you,” she answered.

“Why did you buy me a car?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you.”

“What’s your next movie?” It was a trick question.

“I can’t tell you,” she replied with the same monotonous tone, before adding: “Because even I don’t know yet. I’m currently in contract negotiations to buy several properties, but nothing is settled. I’m trying to create some serious work for myself, you know? So I don’t have to do another mindless bombshell role.”

I’m sure she was being sincere, but why she was talking to me as if we were intimate friends was incomprehensible. Again, she presumed we had a relationship I apparently wasn’t aware of.

“That sounds like a smart move,” I said, looking around the room for some sign of a hidden camera. If I was being punk’d, this was the most elaborate set-up ever.

“I’m glad you think so,” she said happily, as if my opinion had some kind of merit.

I decided to confront her head on.

“Were you following me the other day?”

“You saw me? Damn. I was trying to be inconspicuous.”

“I don’t think that’s really possible for you.”

“I wore camouflage clothing, though. How did you notice me?”

“Well, for one thing, you kept ducking behind trees every time I turned around.”

“Damn.” She sounded like a spoiled schoolgirl who had just been caught stealing candy. “I was hoping you didn’t see that.”

“I saw it. And I think the people sitting on the picnic table saw it too.”

“And weren’t they creepy?” she confided. “They covered that bench like moss on a tree.”

I was shocked that Celia made the same analogy that I’d thought of. Creeping Moss. True, she only said they were creepy and they looked like moss. But it was basically the same thing. And I hadn’t shared that idea with anyone. This was simply too much of a coincidence to be comfortable with.

“Forgive me if I sound ungrateful,” I began, trying to focus my thoughts. “But why did you buy me a car? I know you said you can’t tell me, but can you at least give me a hint? People in your position don’t suddenly drop out of the blue bearing expensive gifts. Especially for a stranger like me.”

“You’re not a stranger, Henson.” Celia smiled. “In some ways I feel like you’re the brother I never had.”

Okay. Time for a reality check. This woman was either a psychopath, or this was just some delusional dream I was having. I decided to test whether I was awake or not by grabbing the first sharp object I could find and jabbing it into my hand. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a fork, and the painful sensation it caused was enough to convince me that I was actually awake.

“What are you doing?” Celia screamed, grabbing the fork from my hand. “Are you crazy?”

“I must be,” I shouted back. “Because there’s simply no other explanation. Why would the biggest movie actress in the world know anything about me? Or act like she knows me? How is this possible when I’ve never spoken to you a day in my life?”

“Do you really think I’m the biggest movie actress in the world?” Celia asked, oblivious to anything I said that came after that.

“Of course. That’s why your presence here is more than a little surreal.”

“Bigger than Angelina?” Celia needed further clarification.

“Yes.”

“Bigger than Julia?” Celia asked with bated breath.

“At this moment in time, yes,” I assured her, though why my opinion had any value to her was still a mystery.

“Yes, but to stay that way I need better projects. Better directors. I can’t survive on my looks forever.”

I stood there watching her, my mouth perpetually agape, because frankly there was nothing else I could really do. My questions were getting nowhere, and though I was grateful to be conversing with a famous movie actress, this was certainly an unusual reason for doing it.

Celia must have sensed my frustration, as she stopped focusing on her personal career path for a brief moment to offer a tidbit of explanation.

“Look, the car is yours, scot-free. No hidden fees or anything.”

“But why?”

“Because...I wanted to give you the gift of transportation.”

The gift of transportation? That’s a weird thing to say. I seemed to recall that Unity had said something similar when she gave me the house. “I am giving you the gift of shelter,” she said at the time. Could these two women possibly be connected?

“Do you know Unity Kingsmill?” I blurted out, feeling for the first time that something was finally starting to connect, though I wasn’t sure exactly how.

Celia looked at me with surprise, but she didn’t answer. Instead, she quickly turned her head and looked out the window, her beautifully crafted face even more compelling in profile. I noticed tears welling up in her eyes, and her thoughts seemed a million miles away.

The quiet moment was interrupted by the sharp ringing of my phone. Celia motioned for me to answer it and like a faithful puppy, I did. It was Ramona. She had seen the Police Officer at my front door, so she was calling to make sure everything was okay. I said that I was fine and that I would talk to her later, as I didn’t want to go into detail right then.

But when I hung up the phone and turned around, Celia was nowhere to be seen. The front door was wide open, though, indicating that she made a quick exit. Great. Now I might never find out why her relationship with Unity would prompt her to buy me a car. Even if Unity had talked fondly about me, I can’t imagine that it would inspire someone to make such an extravagant purchase for a complete stranger. But she was acting like we weren’t strangers, like we were long time friends. She even called me “the brother she never had.” What’s up with that?

I walked to the front door and looked out at my new car. It glistened in the midday sun, beckoning me to get inside and take it for a ride. Which I did, against my better judgment. But I wanted to get inside it, to drive it, to feel it. Just to make sure it was actually real. I looked in the glove compartment and found the insurance papers and some other documents. My name was everywhere, as if I’d been involved in the entire transaction.

There was also another name present on the paperwork. It was the name of a company that apparently sold me the car, and who also paid all the insurance and maintenance costs. An increasingly familiar name that was beginning to show up in the most interesting of places. *Tree and Sympathy, Ltd.*

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