

## **Chapter Seventeen—What the Records Revealed**

For the last two days, a shiny red convertible had been parked in front of the house across the street. I never saw anyone moving inside the house, but the appearance of the car told me someone was definitely there. I debated whether to take Brit's suggestion to go over and introduce myself, but decided to get more information about *Tree and Sympathy* first. I needed to know exactly whom I was up against before I confronted them about my portfolio. Knowledge is power.

It had been a week since my visit from Celia Westend, and still there was no word from Unity. JezeBall had called midweek to say his lawyer was looking into her whereabouts, but hadn't found anything yet. He once again assured me that everything was going to be okay, and said he'd let me know as soon as he'd heard something.

In order to unleash some of my anxiety, I decided to confide in Patty about my visit from Celia Westend. She listened with such intense interest and concentration that I was afraid she'd stopped breathing. When I was through, she let out a big sigh.

"Woah. That is some freaky stuff," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "In all my days of web exploration, I've never heard anything like that. You are blessed, Child."

"But I can't really tell anybody about it, can I? Who would believe me?"

"I believe you," Patty answered with conviction. "If Britney Spears can have an alien baby, then Celia Westend can buy you a car." The logic of this comparison escaped me.

"Well, yes, you believe me." I said. "But not everyone is as open-minded as you are. Or as internet-educated. An experience like this is so foreign to anyone's frame of reference that it would end up sounding like a hoax. Or a desperate cry for attention. I don't even think I'd believe it."

Patty and I discussed my options for the next fifteen minutes, until several other customers came in and rudely interrupted us. I said good-bye and walked back to my house, passing the Creeping Moss on the way. The girl with black eyeliner and lipstick once again stared at me as I walked by. Only this time she was laughing. And crying. At the same time. As if she couldn't decide which she found more appealing.

In a weird way, I identified with her dilemma. My current circumstances put me on a tightrope of emotion, forcing me to find balance where there wasn't any. I could either laugh or cry, because the irony of my situation was both funny and sad.

The only thing that gave me some sort of through-line these days was my virtual store on eBay. Giving myself the daily routine of photographing and listing my collectibles was a nice distraction from all the other issues swirling around in my brain.

Plus, my auctions seemed to be getting more attention than ever. I had three regular buyers who seemed to bid on everything I put up for auction no matter what it was. Their screen names were TAS41, OceanView22 and KillingTimenTX. One of them lived in Los Angeles, one in NYC and one in Dallas. Yet all of them had their items shipped to PO Boxes. It was strange to think that because of their constant support of my auctions, these three people had actually become my major means of employment. My cyber employers, as it were. True, they didn't offer health benefits. But their generous bids allowed me to buy a brand new furnace, so the "deathtrap waiting to happen" never came to fruition.

And even though I was thankful, I was also somewhat puzzled. I always knew my comics and action figures might be valuable, but it didn't really explain the ridiculous amounts of money these people were willing to pay for them. How can you possibly justify spending two thousand dollars for a copy of X-Men #6? Or five hundred dollars for an old Star Wars action figure? My regulars were placing monumental bids as if money didn't matter. I was reaping the benefit, and raking in the dough, but there was something very odd about the whole situation.

"You got how much for a comic book?" Ramona asked me at our next cooking lesson. She couldn't believe I'd just sold an early Spider-man for a cool \$750. "Ridiculous waste of money."

On this particular Saturday morning, we were in the middle of making a traditional Cuban dessert called "Tocinillo del Cielo," which when translated into English literally means "bacon from heaven." Which is odd, since it didn't look or taste like bacon, nor was bacon among the many ingredients. In fact, the end result looked more like Flan than pork, so the fact that bacon was even mentioned was completely misleading. When I asked Ramona for an explanation, she merely said:

"Who knows? It's one of the mysteries of Cuban culture."

I never told Ramona about my own personal mystery, the visit from Celia Westend. Not that I didn't trust Ramona. I just didn't want the Neighborhood Watch to now include celebrity stalking. She'd already interrogated me enough about my new car.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to buy a car?" Ramona asked defensively. "Luis has some connections with the Chrysler dealership on Route 22. He might have gotten you a better deal."

"That's okay," I said. "I got a great price on it."

"How much?" Ramona asked, squinting her eyes and preparing to calculate.

I wondered what she would say if I told her the great price meant “free ride.” The truth was, I had no idea how much the car cost. It wasn’t listed on any of the paperwork in the glove compartment, and I hadn’t thought to do some research online to find out.

“Does it matter?” I countered Ramona’s question with a question. “I already bought it, so any kind of discount Luis could’ve gotten me is really a moot point at this moment.”

Ramona was not pleased with my answer, but didn’t pursue it further. I can only imagine what she must think of me. First, I didn’t know the name of the company I bought my house from. And now I didn’t appear to know how much I paid for my car. I was either a lazy scatterbrain or the Village Idiot. Or both.

I tried to appease her by asking if she’d like to accompany me the following week on my trip downtown. I wanted to visit Plainfield’s Municipal Offices to find information about the previous owner of my house, and possibly gain some more insight into the house across the street. Ramona was thrilled with the offer, and spent the rest of our cooking session humming and smiling. She even offered to help me clean up “the mess in my front yard”; and much to my dismay, we spent the rest of the afternoon weeding, pruning and raking. Who knew these three words would ever enter my vocabulary?

The following Tuesday Ramona and I set out for Plainfield’s Municipal Building, which was conveniently located across the street from City Hall. This was not my favorite area in Plainfield, as the downtown section still had a long way to go in terms of economic development. There were some new buildings and office areas, but most of the stores lacked any sort of brand or chain name to draw visitors in.

There was *Marie’s Mexican Oasis* and *The Chicken Hut* instead of *Taco Bell* and *Kentucky Fried*. Or *ABC Tools* and *Clothes to Go* instead of *Home Depot* and *The Gap*. I found the whole thing rather depressing, especially since this town used to be the height of fashionable shopping. It once had its own *Macys*, for God’s sake.

I shared my thoughts with Ramona as we were walking past the various mom-and-pop shops, but the response she gave me was not at all what I expected.

“You should be happy there are shops here at all, Henson.” Ramona said, in a reprimanding tone. “Ten years ago, most of these buildings were boarded up, and no one would dream of shopping here. Now at least the downtown area is thriving, and all these little stores have sprung up. This is a good thing. Think of all the opportunities these people are getting to create a business and a better life for themselves. They’re trying to live the American Dream, and you should embrace that. Eat at their restaurants. Shop at their stores. Give them the ability to grow and prosper. They are the hope and future of Plainfield.”

I could almost hear the Battle Hymn of the Republic slowly building in volume as she spit out her impassioned plea for community support. But I knew she was right, and it felt

like a huge slap in my face. This town didn't need my pity or judgment. It just needed my patronage.

"Gee, when you put it like that, I feel a little foolish about my superficial assessment." I said.

"And well you should," Ramona snorted. "Life is not as easy for all people as it is for you. Sometimes you need to step out of your comfort zone and live in someone else's shoes. That's how you really learn about life."

When she said my life was easy, I'm sure she was referring to my new house and car. But if Ramona ever knew just *how* easy it was to attain those things, her opinion of me might be even worse than it was right now. Which is another reason I never divulged very much to her. I didn't want to suffer the wrath of the Cuban Norma Rae.

Once inside the Municipal building, we proceeded to the Tax Assessor's Office on the second floor. The hallway was long and narrow, lined with a series of beveled glass doors on each side. Each door had the name of a different department on it. As we walked past the Office of Vital Statistics, I noticed a crowd of people jammed into the small waiting area.

"What's in there?" I asked Ramona. "Seems very popular."

"That's where you register a new birth, or file for a marriage license, or get a death certificate."

"How convenient. The circle of life, all in one office."

We passed several other doors leading to various departments, until we finally reached the Office of the Tax Assessor.

After explaining what I was looking for, the pleasant-looking woman at the counter disappeared behind a row of filing cabinets to search for the information. When she returned, she was holding a rather large folder of official looking documents. The folder was labeled with my house's address on Fern Willow Lane.

As Ramona and I eagerly bent over to view the information, the woman put on a pair of reading glasses.

"It looks like the house was recently bought by someone named Henson Ray," the woman said, scanning the first document in the file.

"That's me," I said, raising my hand as if she was taking attendance.

The woman began flipping through the pages.

“Before you, it was owned by Tree and Sympathy, Ltd.” The woman flipped through some more pages. “Before that it was owned by Randall Morrison. Looks like he was the original owner when it was built in 1927.”

“Is there any more information on the second owner? Tree and Sympathy?” I asked, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice. “An address or something?”

The woman flipped back through the pages, but didn’t seem to find anything except the same PO Box in London we already had. I was starting to get frustrated, when something suddenly occurred to me.

“I’m also looking at some other houses on the market,” I began. “Do you think we could look up information on those as well?”

Ramona looked at me in shock, until I wrote down the addresses of the two homes I was interested in. The house across the street from me and Unity’s house. There had to be some kind of information in one of those files that might be helpful.

When the woman went to find the records, Ramona turned to me and smiled.

“Smart move. For a moment there, I was afraid you were seriously going to move.”

“Don’t be silly,” I whispered back. “I would definitely tell you before I did something like that.”

“You didn’t tell me about the new car before you bought it.”

“That’s different. The car isn’t a house.”

“No, but the car can take you away from the house. And then you’d be gone someday just like that sweet old woman who lived there before you.”

“What? You never told me the woman was older. How much older?”

“Substantially older. White hair, tiny frame, English accent. She was really very sweet. And funny, too.”

“Unity.” I said unconsciously.

“Unity, yes. That was her name. Unity Kingsmith.”

“Unity *Kingsmill*. She used to live in my house?”

“Not for long. Maybe a few months. Do you know her?”

“Slightly.”

The woman came back with the two files we requested. We examined the information for the house across the street first. It was purchased about two years ago by Tree and Sympathy, Ltd. Again, there wasn't any other helpful information in the file to lead us to the actual company itself.

But the file for Unity's house was a different story. The house, as Unity had told me, was originally built by Cornelius Tyler Tree in the 1920s. As I looked down at the name, the weight of what I was seeing hit me. Cornelius Tyler *Tree*. That was the name of the man who lovingly built the house for his Lady Fair. Could he really be related to Tree and Sympathy, Ltd.? And why hadn't I made that connection before? I must be an idiot. Or an idiot savant. Or both.

Ramona and I looked at each other. We were obviously thinking the same thing. We carefully scanned through the other papers and found Cornelius's original address in London. It was listed on an old document that contained information about renting the Madison Avenue home. Apparently Cornelius had never sold the property when he moved back to England. He held on to his little English cottage despite his wife's disapproval, renting it out whenever he could through a local realtor in Plainfield. The house stayed in the family until Cornelius's death in 1979, at which time it was passed down to his only child, a married daughter who was living in New York City on the Upper West Side.

As I stared down at the daughter's name, my breathing seemed to stop.

*Unity Tree Kingsmill.*

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