

Chapter Eighteen—A Flash of Pink

When Ramona and I returned from our visit to the Tax Assessor's Office, a police car was parked outside my house and the security alarm was blaring.

The alarm produced a horrible shrieking noise that literally scared the crap out of me the first time I heard it go off. It happened only once, on the day it was installed. The technician was doing a test run of the system and neglected to tell me. I was in the upstairs bathroom at the time, skimming through a copy of *Home and Garden* that Ramona had loaned me. So when the siren was activated, the sudden piercing shriek jolted me off the toilet seat and onto the floor. Within seconds I realized it was the new alarm, but the shock kept me constipated for the next two days.

This time, however, it was not a test run. This was a real alarm, caused by a real intruder. I quickly parked the car and ran to the front door, Ramona following close behind. Once inside, I turned off the alarm and did a quick scan of the living room. The back window had been broken into, and the whole floor was filled with shards of broken glass. But the thing that surprised me the most was the presence of Officer Hernandez, the policeman who investigated my stolen Jeep. He was standing in my backyard on the other side of the broken window, and appeared to be doing a thorough inspection of the damage.

"What happened?" I asked, walking carefully across the floor to the broken window.

"Looks like someone broke into your house," The Officer answered. "You'd better let me come in and check around before you do anything."

I let Officer Hernandez in through the back door. And while Ramona and I waited in the living room, he did a thorough check of the premises. It was weird, having a complete stranger go through my rooms and closets. But it was even creepier to think that *two* strangers had actually gone through them today—first the thief and now Officer Hernandez.

When the Officer returned from inspecting the upstairs, he had a big smile on his face. A smile? What was that about?

"Is something funny?" I asked, not amused by his inappropriate facial expression.

"Sorry, no. I was just admiring your collection in the bedroom."

Oh God! He'd seen all the Disney stuff. Now he probably couldn't wait to tell his buddies back at the precinct, so they could all have a good laugh at my expense.

"You have anything of value that someone might want?" The Officer asked, while flipping open a notebook.

“You mean like jewels or money?”

“Could be. Or it could be something else. Stock certificates, expensive electronics, porcelain figurines...”

As soon as he said the word “porcelain,” I bolted from the room and ran upstairs to my bedroom to check on the curio cabinet. It was my only display case, and it contained all my expensive Disney memorabilia, including my prized Pink Dress version of Sleeping Beauty. As I leaped the stairs two at a time, I comforted myself with the fact that not everyone shared my particular tastes. Some people might even consider the Pink Dress sculpture a worthless piece of crap. (Actually, most people probably would. Unless you were a Disney connoisseur like me.) So the likelihood that anyone would single it out to steal was highly unlikely.

When I got to the top of the stairs, though, my worst fears were confirmed. The display case had been opened and there was a big empty space in the middle where the Pink Dress sculpture had been. Nothing else was taken or missing. Only the Pink Dress.

“NO!” I screamed, as I proceeded to run around the upstairs looking for it. Maybe the sculpture hadn’t been stolen at all. Maybe the statue was getting bored standing in the display case all day, and had decided to take itself out for a little afternoon walk. (Like in *Toy Story*.) I realized of course that this line of thinking was totally insane, but I still spent the next five minutes hunting for it.

I didn’t tell Officer Hernandez or Ramona exactly what I was looking for, though they still helped me search. I think Ramona was really more interested in looking around the house than in actually helping with the investigation. If for no other reason than to compare it to her own.

“As far as I can tell, only one thing was stolen,” I finally told the Officer.

“And what was that?” The Officer asked, whipping out his pen to jot down information.

For a brief moment, I debated whether I should lie about this or not. Which was worse? Having a Pink Dress figurine stolen from your home, or having to explain to a Police Officer what a Pink Dress figurine was? He’d already seen the collection, but having to describe it was a different story. No matter how *butch* you try to make it sound, anything with the phrase *Pink Dress* in the description is going to sound faggy. Or even nerdy, though I’m not sure which is worse.

“A sculpture,” I began, hoping this would sound more impressive than a figurine.

“What kind of sculpture?” The Officer raised his right eyebrow.

“Porcelain. With gold plated accents.”

I was deliberately being evasive. But maybe I didn't really need to give him a detailed description. Maybe the attributes would be enough.

"I'm going to need a detailed description."

Crap. I guess there was no avoiding this. So as fast as I could, I spit out:

"It's the Walt Disney Classics Collection limited edition Pink Dress version of the classic Sleeping Beauty pose where Prince Phillip and Princess Aurora are dancing."

I looked at the Officer, expecting to see a sarcastic smirk or a painful wince. But there was none to be had. He wrote down as much of the description as he heard, and then asked for the correct spelling of Aurora. He thought I'd said RarRara.

"Estimated value of the piece?" The Officer asked, his pen eagerly awaiting the response.

"Depends," I said. "The current aftermarket value is somewhere between one and two thousand dollars."

"Two thousand dollars? For a Disney sculpture?" The Officer asked in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, unfortunately he is," Ramona interjected, as she strolled casually into the room. But where was she coming from? "You really need to get that boiler replaced, Henson. That thing is archaic."

"I know, I know," I said, irritably. "*A death trap waiting to happen.* I ordered a new system, but it hasn't been installed yet."

"What kind?"

"I don't know. Some new state-of-the-art thing. It was very expensive."

"You should have talked to me first. Luis knows a lot of contractors. He could have gotten you a good deal."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think of it."

"Just like you didn't think about the car before you bought that, heh? Probably paid a huge mark-up on it too."

At the mention of the car, the Officer and I exchanged glances. I shook my head to indicate that Ramona didn't know where my new PT Cruiser had actually come from. He smiled back at me and said nothing.

“Frankly the car and the boiler are not really important right now, because someone just broke into my house. So let’s try to stay focused on the issue at hand, okay?”

“Well, there’s no need to get snippy,” Ramona said, as she examined the window and the Officer standing in front of it. “I have a friend who might be able to replace that glass this afternoon. Let me go make a phone call. I’ll be right back.”

Ramona made a quick exit out the front door, leaving me alone with Officer Hernandez.

“Seems like you just can’t stay out of trouble,” The Officer said, smiling at me. “First, a stolen car. Then, your house is broken into.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault. I don’t ask for these things to happen.”

“Not to mention your interesting relationship with…” The Officer dropped his voice before adding, “*You know who.*”

Unfortunately I did. Celia Westend. I could tell that the Officer was very interested in finding out more about her, but what could I honestly tell him? Other than recommending which of her many horrible films were actually worth renting.

“How do you know her?” The Officer asked.

“I don’t,” I said, honestly. “She’s a friend of a friend.”

Which wasn’t entirely untrue. I suspected there must be some kind of connection between Unity and Celia, though I still didn’t know exactly what it was.

“Must be a very good friend if she’s giving you a car,” the Officer continued. “And why was she in Plainfield, anyway? I never expected to…”

“Look Officer,” I interrupted, trying to keep our conversation focused on the break-in. “I appreciate your interest in Ms. Westend, but that’s really not going to help me find out who broke into my house.”

“Right, right.” He said, as he turned back to his notebook. “By the way, you don’t have to keep calling me Officer. My first name is Rick.”

I watched as he nervously wrote something down in his notebook. His face had turned an amber color, and I sensed that he was embarrassed about something.

“Uh…Thanks…Officer…Rick,” I muttered. “Do you need to take fingerprints or anything? Is there a CSI Plainfield that will be showing up soon?”

Officer Rick looked at me and began to chuckle. His laugh was deep and hearty, his teeth white and shiny, his eyes warm and twinkling. Just like a Harlequin Romance book cover

come to life. And from the way he was looking at me, I suddenly felt my Gaydar go off. Or maybe it was my cell phone vibrating in my pocket. Either way, the sensation was jolting.

“Mr. Ray, this is not exactly something the CSI would investigate,” the Officer said, looking back at the broken window. “I’ll have a Detective from the precinct come over. He’ll probably take some pictures and dust for fingerprints. Other than that, there’s not much we can do.”

“That’s comforting.” I said, feeling more than a little discouraged. “So I guess I should just resign myself to never seeing the sculpture again?”

“I’m not saying that,” Officer Rick said gently. “There’s always a chance. We might get a lead on someone trying to sell the piece, or we might break up a gang of thieves and find your item in their warehouse. So you never know. I wouldn’t necessarily give up hope just yet.”

As Officer Rick was speaking, he seemed to light up from within, and I suddenly found myself wildly attracted to him. Even more than when we initially met. The sound of his voice was like a soothing river, as it ebbed and flowed throughout the room, and I found myself mesmerized by his intonations. That is, until I realized that he wasn’t speaking at all. In fact, neither one of us was saying anything. We were just gazing into each other’s eyes.

After what seemed like an inappropriately long period of time, the officer abruptly broke the trance to write something down. Though neither of us acknowledged it, a connection had been made. Where that connection might lead, I didn’t know. But the possibilities were certainly enticing.

“My friend Ricardo will be over in half an hour,” Ramona said, as she came bursting back into the house. “He should have no problem repairing that, but you’ll have to pay him in cash.”

Ramona’s friend Ricardo arrived at about the same time as the Plainfield Police Detective, so the rest of the afternoon was spent answering questions and listening to Ricardo pound out the old window and install the new one.

“Do you have any enemies?” the Police Detective asked, in a very accusatory manner. “Do you owe anybody money? Did you really spend two thousand dollars on a porcelain statue?”

The questions were endless, but it wasn’t getting us any closer to who might want to break into my house and steal one particular item. Except for Ramona and Patty, no one else even knew I had a Pink Dress statue, not to mention exactly where it might be in the house. And since Ramona was with me when the robbery occurred, and there was no way Patty’s enormous body could ever fit through the window, I ruled them out immediately

as suspects. (Not to mention the fact they were my friends and neither was particularly interested in Disney.)

“Let’s think about this for a minute,” the Police Detective said in a very dispassionate manner. “Once the thief breaks the window, the alarm goes off, right? So he knows he’s only got a certain amount of time before the police show up. This means he needs to work fast; get as much as he can and then get out. But you said *only one thing* was stolen. A very specific and expensive figurine. Which leads me to believe this break-in was pre-meditated. The thief knew what he was looking for and maybe even where to find it. He knew you had that particular figurine in your house.”

“It’s not a figurine, it’s a statue,” I said correcting him.

“Whatever.”

But how could someone know I had the statue? And why only steal one? Why not all the items? (Not that I’m complaining. I certainly wouldn’t want anyone having a field day with my collection. But only stealing one statue seemed a little weird. Like someone was trying to make a statement. Or deliver a message of some sort.)

By the time everyone finally left, I was completely wiped out. It had been a highly emotional day. First, I find out that Unity is part of some international charitable organization. Then I realize that she not only owns the house with the charming back-story, but she’s also the daughter of the man who built it, Cornelius Tyler Tree. And though her married name was Kingsmill, she’d never completely let go of the family moniker. *Tree and Sympathy, Ltd.* It took on a completely different meaning now that I knew what the Tree stood for.

My thoughts were interrupted by the ringing phone. It was probably Ramona offering yet another opinion on who might have broken into my house. I debated whether to answer it or not, but finally decided to pick up.

“Hello?” I said, irritably.

“Henson...is that you?”

It sounded like Unity. But there was so much static and noise on the line, it was difficult to hear her.

“Unity?” I yelled back, my heart pumping faster.

“Yes...Don’t...” The static was excruciating. I could only hear every third or fourth word, but her message seemed clear. “Help me...Henson?”

The line went dead.

“Help you? Help you how?” I began yelling into the receiver as if my shouts could bring her voice back. But it was no use. She was gone.

When Unity didn’t call back after a half hour, I began to go crazy. I tried using Star 69 to get a phone number, but a recording told me the last incoming call was from a private number. What was going on? Where was she? And why did she say she needed my help? Was she in some kind of danger?

I was a bubbling ball of emotions, so tightly wound that I might unravel at any moment. My benefactress was in trouble, and I felt helpless to do anything about it.

Or was I?

I glanced out the window at the house across the street. The curtains were drawn, but there were lights on in several of the rooms. Someone was home. Someone who might be connected to *Tree and Sympathy* and ultimately to Unity herself.

And right now I didn’t have the time or patience to wait any longer. Unity was in some kind of trouble and I needed to help her. Which meant I had to march across the street right now and demand a thorough explanation from whoever was currently inside that house. Why did they have my portfolio? Why did they all look like famous celebrities? And most importantly, how were they connected to Unity and where was she?

My pulse was racing as I walked out my front door and across the street. I was so determined to have my questions answered that I didn’t even consider what I might find out. Maybe more than I really wanted to know. But I didn’t care at that moment. All I could think about was Unity. Poor Unity. She sounded so scared and helpless. Where could she possibly be?

Once I reached the neighbor’s front door, my heart felt like it was popping out of my chest. I was nervous and excited and scared to death. All the strange sightings, the weird behavior, the A List celebrities; everything I had seen and witnessed over the last several months had been building up to this one defining moment. The moment where I throw my fears and insecurities aside and courageously confront the unknown. No more hiding. No more mysteries. I was determined to have all my questions answered tonight! No matter what.

I took a deep breath and pressed the doorbell. Within seconds, I heard movement from inside. This was it! Someone was running across the house to open the door.

“You’re early,” a voice yelled with glee.

The next moment, the door burst open and I was standing face to face with Celia Westend. In unison, our jaws both dropped to the floor.

Next Episode: The House Across the Street