

## **Chapter One—Something's Amiss**

The first time I noticed someone following me was three weeks ago. I was walking from my home to the post office when the hair on the back of my neck began to rise. At first I thought it was the wind, or maybe a strange reaction to my new fabric softener. Whatever the reason, I ignored the warning and continued on my merry way.

The walk to the post office was not far, maybe a mile. But it took me past the most interesting little park, filled with trees and flowers and a resident group of locals known as *The Creeping Moss*. This wasn't their official title or anything. It was just a name I'd given them, for several reasons, none of which is particularly important right now.

The important thing to remember is that I was being followed. How did I know this? Well, other than the strange erectile disturbance of my neck hair, I'd also observed a woman maybe fifty feet behind me who kept dodging behind trees whenever I turned around. If she was a spy, she wasn't a particularly good one.

Kind of reminded me of that Celia Westend movie from a few years back, where Celia played a sexy spy who tried to assassinate the ghost of Henry the Eighth. Not that the plot made any kind of sense, but who cared? It was Celia Westend in a bikini, Celia in a scuba suit, Celia in lingerie. Had Celia paid as much attention to her enemies as she did to her wardrobe, the whole movie could have been wrapped up in a few minutes. Unfortunately for us, Celia managed to survive numerous catastrophes for another ninety-eight.

It was incredible to watch her, though. She was too loud, too obvious, and too uncoordinated to be a spy. She was also stuffed so tightly into the red velvet stocking that passed for a business suit that she looked like a sausage about to pop out of its skin. No wonder Entertainment Weekly voted her "Best Side Dish for Poached Eggs."

Now you might ask why I even bothered to give such detail on a Celia Westend movie. Considering that the detail I gave you was infinitely more than the writers and producers bothered to give when they created the so-called plot of the film. But I digress. The reason I am mentioning Celia at all is because the person following me looked remarkably like her. Even from fifty feet away.

I know what you're thinking. Why on earth would Celia Westend be following someone as ordinary as me to the post office? What interest could I possibly be to the woman who won the Golden Globe for *Hottest New-Comer* two years in a row? Or was that the Maxim Awards?

Either way, I'm sure I held little or no interest to someone like Celia. I am so far below her frame of reference that she might observe me the same way she observed a gnat. A quick glance and then she'd hit me with repellent.

But since I was walking to the post office and had nothing better to do, I managed to come up with several possible scenarios why someone as famous as Celia Westend might be following someone as inconsequential as me. After all, this was not the first time in recent months I thought I'd seen a famous celebrity in Plainfield, though it

was certainly the first time I'd noticed one following me. Up until now, they'd pretty much kept their distance.

And even if it wasn't Celia Westend, it definitely made the walk more interesting to pretend it was. Maybe I was Celia's long lost brother, or a distant relative she needed to contact. Or maybe I looked exactly like someone who'd recently died, and now she was stalking me like James Stewart stalked Kim Novak in *"Vertigo."* Or the most likely scenario: I was suffering from delusional fantasies, and it was actually a psychiatrist from the local mental hospital following me and not Celia Westend at all.

As soon as I reached the post office, though, my fantasy life with Celia Westend was quickly traded in for something much more realistic.

"You got two packages today," Patty, the post office clerk, said from behind the counter.

Patty was a rather large African-American woman who spoke in very precise and measured sentences, as if everything she said had been prerecorded. I sometimes wondered if Patty was actually one of those animatronic people like they have in Disney World. Or West World. Or Future World. (Don't you just love pop culture references from the 70s? I know I do.)

Despite her rather stiff composure, Patty and I had become great friends over the past several months. She would tell me all the exciting gossip from around the neighborhood, and I would tell her all about the renovations on my new house. Granted, it wasn't really an even trade, as Patty's gossip was infinitely more compelling.

Patty did not confine her gossip to our little neighborhood though. She had her finger on the pulse of everything happening all over the world. Because when Patty wasn't hustling stamps behind the postal counter, she was busy surfing the World Wide Web on her computer. Patty was an Internet junkie. She spent her nights and weekends cruising the web for the most bizarre oddities, which also might explain why Patty was still single at 43. (But that's another book entirely.)

Nevertheless, every time I took a trip to the post office, Patty would pass on the best of her acquired knowledge. And though I really enjoyed learning about alien invasions and haunted spirit orbs, the source of Patty's information was always somewhat questionable.

"I read that the Government can monitor you through your cable box," she began.

"That could be embarrassing." I shot back. "Do you know what I do in front of my cable box?"

"No, I don't. But the Government does. They're watching you."

"Well, now that I know, I'd better put on a better show, right? We wouldn't want to disappoint the Heads of State."

Patty laughed. She had a very warm laugh. Calming, in a way. It reminded me of my mother's laugh when I was kid. Comforting and familiar. I knew everything would be okay whenever I heard my mother laugh.

"So where are my two packages?" I asked, feeling quite antsy.

"Hold your horses. I haven't told you the most exciting part yet."

"What could possibly be more exciting than getting two packages?" I queried.

"Only that there are aliens among us, watching us every day. The Government knows all about it, but they're not saying anything."

"They don't have to. There've been plenty of movies and TV shows telling us that for years. Some people even think the media's purposely preparing us for the day when aliens actually make themselves known."

"They already have," Patty whispered, darting her eyes around the room to make sure no one else was listening. "Tom Cruise is their leader."

I suppressed my urge to burst out laughing.

"I'd always suspected as much," I finally replied.

"I'm serious. He's part of a secret society of celebrity aliens. Gwyneth Paltreau is one of the supreme high commanders. Why do you think she named her child Apple?"

"Because she's an alien?"

"Exactly. It doesn't make any sense, otherwise."

She had a point. I almost told her I'd just been followed by Celia Westend, but decided against it. If I ever wanted to see where my packages were from, I didn't need to distract Patty with celebrity sightings. Especially when they might all be in my imagination. (But more on that later.)

"Maybe Tom and Gwyneth are the people who sent me the packages," I said, hoping she would take the hint. "One might even contain my extraterrestrial membership card."

"Wise Ass," Patty blurted, as she moved behind the wall to retrieve my mail. At least I hoped that's what she was doing. She returned a few minutes later with a large box and a small Priority Mail envelope.

"That's not a package," I said, pointing at the envelope.

"It's thicker than a letter, isn't it? It's a package."

"Well, it's not thick enough to be anything I ordered on eBay. Look, it doesn't even have a return address."

"Maybe it's anthrax. Should I call in the Feds?"

"Are you serious? Who would want to anthrax me?"

"Tom Cruise?"

"I could think of a lot of things I'd like Tom Cruise to do to me, and none of them involve Anthrax," I assured Patty, who finally cracked a smile.

Patty liked it when I made gay references. She thought it gave her culture. Plus, ever since "Will and Grace" became mainstream, I think a lot of people wanted a funny gay to call their very own. Problem is, not all gays are particularly funny. In fact, some are down-right ornery. (More on that later, too.)

"This one is definitely from an eBay seller. It even says eBay right on the package. What did you get this time?" Patty said, as she examined the large parcel closely.

"I think it might be the Disney sculpture of Sleeping Beauty in the Pink Dress," I blurted out, as if this sort of description was commonplace. "The one I've been waiting for."

"Huh?" Patty asked, dumbfounded.

"Don't you remember? I told you about this. It's a limited edition version of the pose from *Sleeping Beauty*, where Aurora and the Prince are dancing, and the fairies keep changing the color of her dress. The regular version of the statue had Aurora in a blue dress, but this version has her in the pink dress. Only five thousand were made, and they sold out very quickly. I wasn't able to get it when it first came out, but now...now I finally have her. My Holy Grail."

Patty just stared at me. She didn't understand my obsession with Disney memorabilia. She didn't understand why I collected it and why it gave me such joy to get this particular item. But that's okay. Everybody has their "thing." The internet was Patty's "thing," and collecting high-end Disney artifacts was mine.

"I have no idea what you just said," Patty snorted, pulling out a box cutter. "But I know it involves a dress. So let's see it."

My heart stopped. Did she actually think I was going to open the coveted "Pink Dress" right here in the post office? Was she mad? Why would I unpack the most expensive piece of porcelain I ever acquired in such a dangerous venue? Who knows what could happen to it here? No, it would be much safer to wait until I got home, and then carefully, gingerly take the piece out of its protected packaging. Maybe even wear a pair of white gloves to do it.

"I'd rather wait until I get home," I yelled, just in time to stop Patty from digging her box cutter deep into the package innards.

"What? How am I supposed to see this dress if you're going to take it home? Unless you're planning on wearing it to the post office someday."

"It's not a dress. It's a statue of a dress. Or rather a statue of Aurora in a Pink Dress."

"Who's Aurora?"

"That's Sleeping Beauty's real name."

"How come they didn't call her Sleeping Aurora then?"

The best way to answer a question like this is to pose a similar question about something the other person values. Such as:

"Why is Tom Cruise the leader of the aliens?"

In this way, you are letting the other person know that some questions don't have simple answers. Or in fact, should never be asked in the first place.

"Look...it's a very rare piece," I said, lowering my voice. "It was also very expensive. I just don't feel comfortable opening it here. But I'll take a picture of it and bring it in tomorrow. I promise."

"A picture? You can't tell what a dress looks like from a picture. That's why I never order clothes online. I just don't trust those sizing charts."

"This isn't a dress. It's a statue. Made of porcelain. Which is stone, not silk. You couldn't wear it if you tried."

Clearly, Patty was not going to let up, so I had to think of something that might appease her.

"How about if I let you open the anthrax letter." I said, pointing to the bulky Priority envelope. "Will that make you happy?"

"Don't patronize me," Patty said, grabbing the official-looking envelope and tearing it open. "I know this isn't anthrax."

Patty may have known the envelope didn't contain anthrax, but she certainly wasn't prepared for what it *did* contain. A set of car keys. No letter. No explanation. Just car keys.

"Why would someone send me car keys?"

"Maybe you won a new car. From one of those contests you always enter." Patty suggested.

"What contests? I haven't entered any contests."

"Maybe you did, maybe you didn't. It doesn't matter. I know plenty of people who've won cars from contests they never entered."

"Are these real people or cyber people?"

"Funny," Patty said, ignoring my sarcasm. "This key looks like it goes to a pretty cool car though. It has an automatic door opener and a panic button and everything."

"I think they call this a smart key," I added, sharing knowledge I wasn't entirely sure was true. "But if I won a car, where is it?"

"Maybe that's part of the contest. You have to go and find it."

"Yeah, right. Where are the instructions? Where's the phone call telling me I won? Where's the hidden camera following me around to see if I find it?"

"You can't see the hidden camera because it's HIDDEN. Duh!" Patty said looking around. "Otherwise, they'd just call it a camera. No hidden, necessary."

"I want you to send it back to wherever it came from. There's obviously been some kind of mistake. My Jeep is too old and crappy for a key like this, so someone else must be missing it."

"I can't send it back. There's no return address, remember? It just says it was mailed from New York City."

"This is so strange," I said, furrowing my brow. "Why would someone send me a car key and not even a note explaining what it's for?"

"God works in mysterious ways. One day you get a car key, maybe the next day you get the car."

"Well...as much as I like that explanation of the universe, I think someone made a terrible mistake," I said as I pushed the key deep into the pocket of my pullover. "But right now, I've got to get Aurora home before anything happens to her."

"You're a nut, you know that? All this fuss over a dress. You'd think you were a woman."

"It's not a dress. It's a...oh, never mind. I'll see you tomorrow."

And with that, I left the post office and walked home, being careful not to jostle the package or its contents along the way. I was so focused on transporting my statue safely that I almost didn't notice I was once again being followed. But this time it was not by a Celia Westend look-alike. This time it was by a man with a much more sinister agenda, though I certainly didn't know that at the time.

All I knew was that he was following me and he didn't look very jovial. Not wanting a confrontation on the street, I quickened my pace and managed to get a good lead on the man. Once I got home, I locked the door behind me and ran bolted upstairs to look out the office window.

The man was standing on the street corner talking on a phone. I hid in the shadows watching him, not really sure what I might do if he should suddenly decide to break down the front door. I scanned the room for something I might use as a weapon, but the only things I could find were an empty stapler and a yardstick, neither of which offered much in the way of protection.

A few minutes later, a black van drove up and the man got inside. I tried to read the license plate number, but it sped off before I could get a good look. All I managed to get were the first two letters. SS.

The whole experience made me very uncomfortable, especially because of all the other strange things that had been happening. The mysterious neighbors who appear to be watching me from their windows. The sudden disappearance of a very close friend. And now I discover I'm being followed. What was going on? My life seemed to

be turning into some kind of bizarre roller coaster ride and I had no idea how to stop it.

Thank God I had the new Disney sculpture to take me to my “happy place.” Though as everyone knows, happiness doesn’t last forever.

Three days later, my 1993 Jeep Cherokee was stolen from my driveway.

**Next Episode—Another Coincidence?**