

Chapter Twenty-One—The SSCP

“I’m afraid you might be in terrible danger.”

Celia’s words sounded so dramatic and cliché that I burst out laughing. How could I be in terrible danger?

“It’s not funny, Henson.” Celia said, asserting her best no-nonsense attitude.

“Of course it’s funny,” I blurted out. “This whole situation is funny. You. Me. George Clooney. This isn’t reality. It’s insane. I feel like I walked through the Looking Glass and this is my own bizarre version of Wonderland.”

“Okay, you need to calm down.” Celia said, moving over to comfort me. “First of all, Alice didn’t find Wonderland through a Looking Glass. She found it down a hole.”

“I know that. I’m the Disney expert here.”

“Then you certainly should know the difference between the two stories. When Alice went through the looking glass, she wasn’t in Wonderland. She was in someplace completely different.”

“Not to get technical here,” I said sarcastically. “But who cares? I was making a general reference to the Alice stories and I accidentally combined them. Big deal. I lose points for juxtaposing my plotlines. That still doesn’t change the fact that I’m in some kind of danger, though I’m pretty sure I haven’t really done anything to warrant it.

“I’m sorry I said that.” Celia said, taking my hand in hers, and rubbing it gently. “It was a little premature.”

“You mean there’s more?”

“Well, yes. You’re not really seeing the whole picture yet.”

“That’s a big understatement.”

“I’m trying to tell you why you’re involved in all this, but I haven’t quite gotten there. I know it’s a lot to digest, but please bear with me.”

What else could I do? Jump out the window? Being on the first floor, that wouldn’t make much impact.

“Continue.” I said, waving my hand ceremoniously in the air.

“Okay. As I said, after successfully discouraging Matt’s stalkers, the group wanted to pick someone else to follow. Not to hurt them or anything. Just to watch them and report back to the group what they saw.”

“You mean like spying?”

“More like observing.”

“Sounds rather boring.”

“Well, yes, I suppose. And yet, people seemed to get pleasure out of the strangest things. For instance, the first guy they decided to follow was a member of the production crew. An electrician. Every morning, he had a jelly donut, a cup of coffee, and yoghurt. The same thing every day. Then one morning, Don Cheadle noticed he ate a chocolate donut with milk. No coffee. No yoghurt.”

“So?” I asked, not sure why this might be interesting.

“So...why did he change? Why all of a sudden would he eat a chocolate donut with milk, when every other day he had a jelly donut with coffee and yoghurt? What prompted him to do that?”

“And this is the kind of reality that celebrities find fascinating? Good God, no wonder they’re bored all the time.”

“I know it sounds lame, but if you were part of it, part of the process, you might think differently.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. How did this work, exactly? Did George and Brad and Matt and the rest of the gang stand around and observe this guy like some monkey in a zoo?”

“No, No. Not at all. But, as I said, I wasn’t really around for all this stuff, because I was busy shooting a different movie. But from what I’ve been told, George and Brad drew up a schedule that coordinated with the actors shooting days. So on days when the actors were filming, they were assigned to observe the electrician during their downtime. Or if someone wasn’t needed on set that day, they might follow the guy around as well. Then everyone would get together at night and compare notes about what they’d observed. It became like a game. Who could catch this guy doing something particularly funny or crazy or embarrassing.”

“This is what movie stars get paid millions of dollars for? To sit around and make fun of the less fortunate?”

“It wasn’t like that. They weren’t making fun of this guy. They were appreciating him for who he was.”

“Still sounds boring.”

“Well, what’s boring to you might be interesting to other people. Remember that.”

I leaned back on the couch and uncrossed my legs from their lotus position. I’d been clenching them so tightly for the last few minutes, they started falling asleep. As I shook them out to regain circulation, Celia continued her story.

“So this routine went on for a while, until someone, I think Carl Reiner again, suggested spicing things up a bit. What if the group did something to surprise the guy? Or help him out in some way? How would different stimulus affect the guy’s behavior?”

“*Different stimulus?*” I interjected. “Sounds rather clinical.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply this guy was a lab rat or anything, because he wasn’t. The group just wanted to see what would happen if they helped the electrician out a bit. So they began creating situations where the guy might find a bunch of money, or a pretty girl might flirt with him, or any of a dozen other scenarios. Everyone seemed to like the idea because it added another level of intrigue to their favorite new past-time, Mr. Lightning.”

“Who’s Mr. Lightning?”

“That was the group’s nickname for the electrician. It was designed to keep his identity confidential and to make sure no one accidentally mentioned his real name in public. Mr. Lightning soon became one of the hottest *secrets* in Hollywood that year, and everyone wanted to be a part of it. Sharon Stone. John Travolta. The Owen Brothers. It was wild.”

“And he never noticed all these celebrities watching him?” I asked, astounded that someone could be so dense.

Celia looked at me intently for a moment and smiled.

“You see what you want to see, Henson. Do you think you’d notice if celebrities were following *you* around?”

“That depends. If they were really obvious when they were following me, like constantly ducking behind trees every time I turned around. Like *you did* when you followed me to the post office not too long ago.”

Celia scrunched up her face, as if reacting to an unpleasant smell.

“Yes, well, that was unfortunate,” Celia commented. “But I was under a lot of pressure, and...”

Her voice trailed off. She seemed to be losing energy. Probably from talking non-stop for the last half hour, which was possibly more dialogue than she'd spoken in all her movies combined. But I couldn't let her rest now. Not when I felt I was getting so close to some kind of clarity.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Please continue."

"This electrician they were following became sort of a mini-celebrity among celebrities. Pretty soon, actors outside the *Oceans Eleven* group wanted to contribute their own ideas to Mr. Lightning's storyline."

"He had a storyline?"

"That's how they referred to the little obstacles or successes they created to see how he'd react--*Mr. Lightning's story*. And everything was great. At first. But then, so many people started getting involved that the group lost any direction or control of the situation. Celebrities who had heard about Mr. Lightning, but weren't connected with the *Ocean's Eleven* group, began creating their own *plotlines* for Mr. Lightning. And that's when the situation started getting out of hand."

"All of a sudden this electrician is winning huge amounts of money in fake contests, or he's being hit on by the hottest girls, or he gets free dinners at the most popular restaurants. He was having the time of his life, totally unaware that it was all being orchestrated for him behind-the-scenes. And the more Mr. Lightning received, the cockier he became. Within weeks, he'd dropped out of the film industry, left his wife and children, and used his newly acquired cash to move to Florida, where he was later arrested for soliciting a minor."

"It was a great blow to George and Brad and the whole group. They wanted to do something fun and uplifting, and it turned into such a fiasco. Too many people had gotten involved, and without any sort of management or plan in place the results had been disastrous. That sort of put a damper on the situation for the rest of the shoot. When the movie finally wrapped, everyone went on to new projects and the group sadly disbanded. The idea of celebrities stalking anyone had long been forgotten. Or so I thought."

"Then a few years later, I was working on *Jungle Jealousy* with Matthew McConnehey, and he told me about this secret society that George Clooney had started, and would I want to be a part of it?"

"A secret society?" I asked, not quite comprehending what that might entail.

"It's not as clandestine as it sounds. It just means it's a private organization that requires absolute discretion. The full name of the group is *The Secret Society of Celebrity Philanthropists*. Or the SSCP for short. Ashton Kutcher came up with the name one day

as a joke, basing it on some old superhero comic book. But after a while, it sort of stuck, and pretty soon the SSCP became the group's official title."

"The purpose of the organization was to find people of value, who hadn't quite realized their full potential yet, and give them a little help in realizing their dreams. Not quite charity, but not geared toward the masses either. The idea was to concentrate on certain individuals and help create a better life for them."

The tightness in my stomach had been building for the last few minutes. I suddenly had a flash of insight into where this story might be heading, and the realization was overwhelming. I felt like I wanted to vomit. I think Celia sensed my uneasiness, because she began talking rather quickly in a tone that suggested empathy.

"Although I'd see George and the other guys at various social functions, it'd been years since I'd spent any real time with them. So it surprised me when Matthew told me about the group. Apparently after *Oceans Eleven*, George hadn't dropped his idea; he'd just stopped telling people about it. Except the Royal Few. Apparently Matthew was one of them, and he thought I'd make a good fit as well. Over the next few weeks, I attended several SSCP meetings, which were very casual parties at George's place. Julia was there sometimes, Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, Harrison Ford, Barbra Streisand. A regular Who's Who of the most powerful actors in Hollywood."

I tried to imagine what kind of *Grand Poobah* outfit George Clooney might wear to a secret society meeting. Would it include some kind of turban? Maybe one with a feather sticking out of it? And what about a secret handshake or a membership card? Did everyone have a special power?

Celia continued her story, oblivious to my inner monologue.

"It was also surprising to discover how evolved the project had become. There was a screening process now, so they wouldn't waste their time on someone who might prove unsuitable. After 9/11, George was even more impassioned to help people on the individual level. He'd already contributed millions to charities to help the masses, but now he wanted to affect positive change for the everyman."

"The little people." I added, somewhat defensively.

"We don't use that term, and we don't think that way either. People are only different because of opportunity and motivation. So if an opportunity is created for someone, it still takes their desire and motivation to make something happen. That's why an outside party reviewed potential candidates first; someone who was neutral and not a celebrity. If the candidate showed promise or potential, they're given a test period in which to prove themselves. Again, nothing major. Just providing them with opportunities to succeed or fail, and see what they do with them."

I couldn't get the image of a lab rat out of my head. Especially since I had the growing suspicion I might be one of the rats myself.

"If after a month or so, the group is still happy with the candidate, than he or she becomes one of The Chosen. Which basically means, he is officially endorsed by the group as someone they will observe and help."

"Observe and help?" I broke in, hoping that by talking, I could prevent myself from vomiting. "Isn't that the same thing as playing God?"

"Not really." Celia said defensively. "All the group wants to do is help people. To give someone the opportunities they might never have otherwise. And it's not like they're telling anyone about it, or doing it for publicity. This is a truly altruistic concept."

"It doesn't make sense, though."

"Why not? Because you don't think George or Julia or Cameron are real people? That they don't care about other things besides movies?"

"Frankly, no."

"Why are you so cynical? I thought you'd be much more open-minded."

"I am open-minded," I protested. "But you've got to admit, this is beyond comprehension. A Secret Society of Celebrity Philanthropists? It's like something out of *The National Enquirer* or *Marvel comics*."

"The group pays very well to keep this out of the press. Though other people, like Donald Trump, have certainly tried to change that."

"The Donald is involved in this?"

"No. But when Trump first heard about the group, he was all excited to be a part of the process, and give people great opportunities and jobs and money and stuff. Only he wanted to do it during Prime Time on a reality show called *Trump's Secret Society*. George turned him down, of course, and Trump went on to do *The Apprentice*. So I guess it all worked out."

I laughed at the idea of Donald Trump narrating a television show about a secret society of celebrities. "*My Society is the Best Society, with the Best Celebrities and the Best Secrets. Tune in next week to watch Jennifer Love Hewitt give a struggling baker the rise of his life.*"

I thought of Patty and her obsession with web surfing. If she only knew what kind of real-life crap was going on out there, she'd totally freak. And Ramona would no doubt

respond to each of Celia's bizarre revelations with her classic rendition of "*this would never happen in Cuba.*"

"Hey, is Tom Cruise a part of this?" I asked, remembering Patty's comment about Tom being a part of a secret society of aliens. Maybe it was the same society.

"No!" Celia answered emphatically. "He's another one who had an agenda. He wanted to merge the secret society with scientology by using the principles of Dianetics to screen potential candidates. Again, George turned him down."

"George seems to have a lot of power." I said.

"George is a great guy. Very caring. Anyone will tell you that. He's the perfect person to be in charge of something like this. And you should see how well organized it is now. There's a private website where you can view the various candidates online. Or chat with other celebrities about your favorite Chosens. Its all password protected, of course."

My head started spinning. Got to keep control. Focus on something else.

"You said the candidates were interviewed by a mutual party?" I asked, closing my eyes to stop the room from moving.

"Yes." Celia answered, hesitantly.

"Was Unity Kingsmill one of your neutral parties?" Sweat was pouring down my face. After what seemed like hours, Celia answered with a simple:

"Yes."

At that moment, my stomach turned from tight to loose, and I suddenly found myself throwing up most of my dinner. Celia, having witnessed this, began to gag herself, and soon deposited her own small portion of vomit into the mix. This in turn caused me to vomit once again, which triggered the same reaction in her, and we probably could have continued like that all morning. Luckily, she pulled herself away and ran to the bathroom. In the meantime, I got up and took my coffee mug into the kitchen, having lost my appetite for anything that might cause me to vomit again.

My weak stomach has always been a problem for me, because the mere sound of someone gagging or throwing up causes me to reiterate the behavior. When I was younger, people would purposely make gagging noises around me just to see my reaction. It didn't matter if they were faking or pretending, the sound always produced instant results. And since people knew this about me, they picked the most awkward times to practice their gagging techniques. My first adolescent encounter with a girl will forever be known as the day I threw up on Kimberly Reese. We were in the middle of trying to French Kiss when someone gagged very loudly right behind me, and

then...well, you get the idea. (And before you jump to any conclusions, this traumatic experience is NOT why I'm gay, although it certainly didn't help.)

Celia returned a few minutes later, her face freshly scrubbed and shining bright. She hummed loudly to herself as she cleaned up the mess, as if the humming might somehow drown out the horrible smell. Or perhaps it was just to keep her mind occupied while she was cleaning up something so unpleasant. Whatever the reason, she looked adorable. This glamorous movie star on her hands and knees, cleaning up vomit with the best of them. Maybe I'd been a little harsh with her tonight.

When the area had been sufficiently sanitized with various household cleaners, Celia and I moved into the kitchen to continue talking.

"Unity wasn't a part of the Secret Society at the beginning," Celia informed me. "She was asked by Oprah to get involved."

"Oprah?"

Unity never told me she knew the Great Winfrey.

"Yes. Shortly after *Oceans Eleven* when George revived the project, Oprah was brought on board. In fact, George credits Oprah with saving the idea from extinction when she introduced him to Unity. I don't know if you're aware, but Unity has a charitable organization called *Tree and Sympathy*, which has been active since the mid 1980s. The group gives anonymous donations to individuals rather than organizations, because they believe when you affect positive change for an individual, you are planting a seed for positive change in society. Sort of like the *Pay It Forward* idea that was the subject of that Kevin Spacey movie. "

"But the real reason Oprah wanted George to meet Unity was because *Tree and Sympathy* already had a process in place for determining who should be given help. And because of the disastrous results with Mr. Lightning, George was a little gun-shy about how to find good candidates for his mission."

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but...am I...one of those candidates?"

My voice was shaky, as I wasn't really sure if I wanted to know the answer or not.

"Oh no," Celia said quickly. "You're one of the Chosen."

"But...why? Why me?"

"Oh, don't ask me that. Not now."

"Should I ask you tomorrow?"

“Don’t be a smart ass. I’m telling you way too much already. If anyone ever found out...” Celia stopped, searching my face for some kind of reassurance that I wasn’t going to report all this to People magazine.

“Look, I said I wasn’t going to tell anyone and I won’t. But I have a little confession to make.”

“Oh?” Celia asked, her body instantly arching into a defensive position.

“I don’t really know where Unity is right now. I only said that because I needed some answers. I was going crazy.”

Celia squinted, her eyes becoming angry slits, and I was afraid she was going to punch me.

“All I know is that Unity called me, and she’s in some kind of trouble and she needs my help. Our help. Please don’t be mad at me. I had nowhere else to turn. I promise I won’t tell anyone about the SSCP. Maybe we can work together to find Unity. You know, pool our resources.”

Celia’s face relaxed, and she turned away for a moment. When she turned back, there were tears in her eyes.

“It’s all my fault Unity’s in trouble,” Celia said. “If anything happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself.”

Next Episode: Some Answers, More Questions

The next chapter will be posted on Monday, August 6, 2007.