

## **Chapter Twenty-Two—Some Answers, More Questions**

Celia was sobbing softly. She felt guilty for some reason about Unity's disappearance. I put my arms around her, offering the use of my shoulder to cry on. She fell into my chest, and we sat together like that for several minutes. It felt strange to be holding someone so famous. Someone so ingrained in modern pop culture that her last name was synonymous with the phrase "great ass." (As in "*The best end is a Westend.*") And here I was, sharing an intimate embrace with her.

We sat in silence for several minutes, before Celia pushed herself away, and began rubbing the tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Celia said quietly. "I'm somewhat responsible for Unity leaving Plainfield, so if something happens to her, I...I..."

"Nothing's going to happen," I assured her, though I was trying to convince myself as well. "We're going to figure this out. You and me. Okay?"

Celia looked at me with a grateful expression. She grabbed a few tissues and dabbed the tears on her face. I wanted to ask her why she felt responsible for Unity's absence, but I decided it was probably not a good time to bring it up. Especially after Celia started rolling the used Kleenex into little balls and throwing them at me.

"Thanks Henson," she said, starting to giggle. "You're a true friend. I realize you've only known me a short time, so that's probably strange to hear. But I feel like I've already known *you* for years."

"I guess I have some major catching up to do," I said, patting her on the back. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," she said, laughing.

I was famished as well. Even though I'd thrown up only a half hour before, I had this sudden urge for scrambled eggs. Maybe it was because Celia's bizarre story about celebrity stalkers gave me a strange sort of comfort. Like having a team of guardian angels watching over me. Guardian angels that also happened to be rich, gorgeous and famous.

Or maybe I was hungry because I finally had some proof that I wasn't going crazy. There were definitely some unusual things happening in my life; it wasn't all a figment of my imagination.

We went into the kitchen and started scouring through the refrigerator and cupboards for food. The place was pretty well stocked with frozen meats and dinners, not to mention a plethora of boxed entrees. Pots and pans, however, and any kind of decent cooking utensils were at a minimum.

And that's when I decided this might be the perfect time to test out my newly acquired cooking skills. Over the past several months, Ramona had taught me how to make a wide variety of Cuban dishes, many of which I still couldn't pronounce. Where she faltered was in the teaching of everyday practical meals that didn't take hours of preparation and cooking. Still, I'd learned enough to feel comfortable preparing something that might satisfy our hunger pangs, even if it was only scrambled eggs and toast.

That was my intent, anyway. But when I found all the ingredients for chocolate chip cookies, Celia and I unanimously agreed that chocolate beat out all other options. The perfect placebo for relieving stress and anxiety. Even if only temporarily.

As I combined the various ingredients to make the batter, Celia shocked me with a rather strange request.

"I want to go to the next Plainfield RAMBO."

"What? You can't do that. People would recognize you. And besides, it's a men-only party."

"Who said I'd be going as a woman?" She asked, coyly. "Make-up and prosthetics can do wonders, you know."

I looked Celia up and down, wondering how many layers of prosthetics it would take to hide her enormous breasts and tiny little body. And that face. How could you make that face look anything but feminine? The big beautiful green eyes, the sensual lips, the perfect cheekbone structure. Even if she tried to pass as a feminine boy, she'd be too feminine.

"I don't think make-up and prosthetics are going to hide who you are. I'd still be able to recognize you."

"Oh really? Are you willing to bet on that?" Celia said, with a smirk.

"I'm not the gambling type," I shot back, while cracking two eggs into the batter. "But I'd be totally shocked if you could hide your famous face behind any amount of make-up. You couldn't even fool Officer Hernandez on the day you barged into my house wearing dark glasses and a baseball hat."

"Yes, but I wasn't really trying to hide who I was. That's why I took the glasses off as soon as I got in the house. I thought the shock of my presence might help resolve the situation quickly."

“And it did.”

“But if you’re so sure I’m incapable of hiding my appearance, it might interest you to know that I was sitting right across from you on your very first train ride to meet Unity.”

“WHAT?” I said, dropping the wooden stirring spoon into the batter. I tried to think back to the day I first took the train to Plainfield, which was a little over a year ago. I didn’t remember anyone being in my train car except some businessman and an Indian woman.

“But there was only an Indian woman sitting across from me,” I said, as Celia broke into a huge smile. “NO! You couldn’t have been her.”

Celia nodded in delight.

“Yup. My friend Henry is a make-up artist,” She explained. “And I have to say, he did a truly amazing job. When I looked in the mirror, *even I* didn’t recognize me.”

“I can’t believe it. You were the woman in the Sari who kept staring at me?”

“Sorry about that. I was very curious. You were a new candidate, and I was assigned to follow you from Penn Station to the train stop.”

“I had no idea.”

“After Tom Selleck dropped you off at Unity’s, he drove to the next train station and picked me up. That’s when we discovered you’d left your portfolio in his car.”

I felt a little overwhelmed. And rather stupid. Like when you first discover the truth about Santa Claus. You’re suddenly a part of a different world, a world without magic and flying reindeer. A world where your optimism and sense of possibility is suddenly obliterated with one jarring blow.

“Wow. I’m totally shocked.” I said, feeling my arms shaking a little. I picked up the wooden spoon and began to aggressively stir the batter. I would have used an electric mixer, but there was none to be found among the shelves and shelves of prepackaged dinners.

“I actually retrieved your drawings and etchings for you,” Celia confessed.

“Is that how they ended up in this house?”

“Yes. I put them back in your portfolio, and we intended to send them back to you. But then they were brought *here* so people could look through them first.”

“People? What people?”

“Whoever happened to be staying here. There’s quite a demand, you know. Members have to make a reservation months in advance. Everyone wants to be a part of a Henson sighting.”

I still couldn’t fathom why people would want to watch me, or help me, or have anything to do with me. There is no way to accurately describe the strange sensation you feel, knowing that people like Oprah and Julia and George and Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice might be watching your every move. It’s both flattering and disturbing, though I’m not sure which is stronger.

I threw the bag of chocolate chips into the batter, but not before popping a few in my mouth and grinding them between my teeth until they formed a smooth creamy mess. As the sweet goo slid down my throat, Celia described the Henson reservation process.

“All arrangements to stay in this house are cleared through George. Or George’s assistant. Oprah was the last one to see your portfolio. She was going to take it with her to Chicago, but it never made it to the plane. You said you found it in the front yard?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Oprah’s driver kicked it there, and I guess he just forgot to pick it up later.”

I explained to Celia what I’d observed the day the Great Winfrey paid a visit to Plainfield. To think how many millions of people would love to catch even a glimpse of Oprah, and here she was, staying across the street just so she could catch a glimpse of me. Was this Freaky Friday or what?

I began forming small balls of dough and placing them on the cookie sheet. Celia decided to help, and we soon found ourselves eating more of the batter than actually forming cookies with it. After forcing ourselves to finish one tray, I put it in the oven and set the timer for ten minutes.

“I still don’t get how the artwork fell out of my portfolio.” I said, scooping another glob of raw batter into my mouth.

“It didn’t fall out. It was taken out.” Celia said, rather solemnly. “Do you remember the businessman sitting in front of you?”

“Vaguely,” I said, unsure why she was asking.

“He wasn’t a businessman. He was there to spy on you as well.”

“Another celebrity?”

“No, not really.” Celia answered. “When you fell asleep, he snagged your portfolio and took out all the artwork. Then he left the empty folder on the floor.”

“And you saw all this? Why didn’t you stop him, or wake me up?”

“I couldn’t. I didn’t want to call attention to myself. That’s part of our creed. We don’t interfere, we just observe. Once you left the train, I found the guy and got the artwork back. It wasn’t easy, but I have a pretty good right hook when I need it.”

“I thought you didn’t interfere?” I sputtered, trying to imagine this little woman in a Sari beating up a big businessman. Celia must’ve actually learned something from all those action movies she’d made. Go figure.

“I can’t interfere with *you*. But this guy works for the other side.”

Just when I thought I was finally beginning to understand the intricacies of my strange situation, Celia’s last statement threw me a curve ball.

“The *other side*? What other side? Who are you talking about?” I asked, starting to feel a little shaky again.

“We don’t know exactly,” Celia confessed. “That’s why things are so chaotic right now. And it’s part of the reason Unity left town.”

“I’m not following you.”

“Okay, how do I put this delicately? There’s the *Secret Society of Celebrity Philanthropists*, which is connected with *Tree and Sympathy*. And then there’s a completely different group which seems hell-bent on destroying everything the SSCP and TAS have tried to accomplish.”

“Did you just say TAS?”

“Yes. That’s the acronym for Tree and Sympathy.”

Like an explosion of fireworks, this new revelation hung in the air for a few moments before gently sinking into my brain. TAS stood for Tree and Sympathy. Of course! Which probably meant that one of my best eBay customers, TAS41, was actually an entire organization. It certainly explained why half of my auction items ended up in a TAS house. But this was not the time to pursue this further, as there was something much more important I needed to know first.

“You mean there are other people who know about the SSCP?”

“Yes. Unfortunately. And they’re systematically trying to sabotage our efforts by attacking the Chosens. That’s why your car was stolen and why someone broke into your house and took your prized Pink Dress sculpture.”

“That also might explain why this scary guy followed me home from the post office one day. The *same day* you followed me on my way there.”

“We knew you might be a target. That’s why I was trying to keep an eye on you. But then I got sidetracked. What did the man look like?”

“Um...Scary.”

“Could you be a little more descriptive?”

“*Big* and scary?”

“Henson...!”

“Okay. He was maybe 6 feet tall, bald head, brown leather jacket, and his face looked like it was put through a blender.”

“Well, then he shouldn’t be too difficult to find. I can’t imagine many people fitting that type of description.”

“You’ve obviously never lived in Manhattan.”

“No. But now I’m more determined than ever to go to a Plainfield RAMBO. To see if I can find out who’s behind it all.”

“Why would going to the Plainfield RAMBO help you?”

“Because someone who goes to the Plainfield RAMBOs is working for the other side. That’s how we found out about...” Celia paused, suddenly uncomfortable with what she was going to say.

“Found out about what?” I asked, feeling a sense of foreboding.

“Your little Jacuzzi incident.” Celia said, turning away.

I felt my mouth go dry and my face flush with an intense warmth. If only something could take me away from this incredibly embarrassing and awkward moment.

DING! The timer went off, indicating the cookies were ready, and I was momentarily saved by the need to remove them from the oven.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Celia said, following me into the kitchen. “I know the Jacuzzi experience was probably painful, but it was also pretty funny too. That’s what makes you Henson, and that’s why people love you so much.”

“Because I’m a clown? Because I know how to make a fool of myself without even trying?” I said, rather humiliated.

“No, no.” Celia said, rubbing my back with her tiny hands. “Because you’re human. You’re real. You’re funny. You’re talented. You have an interesting perspective on things. And yes, you do seem to get into some rather interesting situations, especially when you overdo it on the wine or wacky tobaccky.”

Oh My God! These people knew everything.

“How could you possibly know about that? Do you have a spy at every Plainfield RAMBO as well?”

“Yes.” Celia said simply. “That’s how we get reports back about your activity there.”

“Is the spy a celebrity?”

“No, no. Not all work done by the SSCP can be carried out by celebrities. Sometimes we have to rely on an assistant or a friend. They don’t know they’re working for the SSCP, of course. They just think they’re carrying out another bizarre request from their boss.”

“Speaking of which, is it true that J-Lo really insists all her hotel rooms be completely decorated in white?”

Celia looked at me with a blank expression.

“*What?*” I asked, as I carefully removed the cookies from the hot tray. “You get to know everything about *me*, but I don’t get to ask any questions about *your people?*”

“They’re not *my people*. I don’t necessarily know all of them, but I believe in the idea.”

“Okay. So if you already have someone at the RAMBO parties, why do you need to attend one yourself?”

“Because our spy wouldn’t recognize someone from the other side, as they don’t even know *there is* another side. Or any side, for that matter. They just think they’re watching you for a social experiment. But we’re pretty sure someone from the other faction is also attending the Plainfield RAMBOs. Because they were the ones who took the videotape of you in the Jacuzzi and posted it on the SSCP website.”

“WHAT?” I said, dropping one of the cookies on the floor. “There’s a videotape of me in the Jacuzzi? How? I was totally alone.”

“Not totally. Someone was filming you through the trees.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The Jacuzzi area was totally isolated, secretly tucked away behind trees and bushes. No one could possibly have known I was even in there. Unless they heard the motor running, or they'd been following me.

"How did they post a video on your website? I thought you said it was password protected."

"Someone hacked into the system. It's been safeguarded since then, but the sudden appearance of an unauthorized video on the website caused quite an uproar among SSCP members. And some envy as well."

"Envy?" I asked, wondering how anyone could envy such a horrible experience.

"Yes. When you stood up." Celia said, winking at me.

When I realized she was referring to my erection that evening, I suddenly lost all power of speech and feeling. The thought of Oprah and George and Julia and Celia all seeing me struggling with the air hole in the hot tub was more than I could bear. But to see me in such an aroused state, like I was starring in a porn film, was the worst revelation of all.

"There's no need to be modest." Celia said, as she tried to cool off a cookie by blowing on it. "We've seen worse situations. At least you're entertaining."

"Gee, I'm glad my antics provide you with such amusement. Please tell me that Chris Rock isn't planning to use this story in his act."

"You *heard* that?"

"How could I not? You were all laughing so loud. I wanted to know what was so funny."

"I'm sorry. I know we must sound like we're cruel and heartless. But honestly, everyone loves you Henson. Most of them would be so jealous if they knew I was sitting here with you right now. Actually talking to you, instead of just watching."

Like I said, Freaky Friday. Which, ironically, was the day it happened to be at this very moment. Granted, it was still early in the morning, but it was Friday nonetheless. In fact, in another bizarre stroke of coincidence, it also happened to be Friday the thirteenth. I kid you not.

"So if I could go with you to the next RAMBO, maybe I could figure out who is working for the other side. Because, once we uncover one of them, it will be much easier to find the rest."

"Then what?"

“We want to learn why they’re trying to hurt all the people we’ve chosen to help. All we know right now is that a group has somehow found out about the SSCP and is doing everything it can to destroy us. Once we find out who and why, then maybe we can figure out how to stop them.”

“And you think by going to the next RAMBO, you might recognize someone from their group? Even though you don’t know who *their group* is?”

“We have some suspicions, but nothing tangible. That’s why I want to check it out. But our SSCP contact can’t know I’m doing it, and he also can’t know I’ve talked to you. I’m in enough trouble with the SSCP as it is. I don’t want to do anything more to jeopardize my standing.”

“Okay,” I finally surrendered. “You can come with me to the next RAMBO on ONE condition. You have to really, really, *really* look like a man before I’ll take you.”

“That’s no problem. I’ll just call Henry. He can make *anyone* look like a man.”

“I wish I’d know him in high school. I really could’ve used the help.”

“You’ll need to let me know when the next RAMBO party is, so I can make sure Henry is available.”

Okay, are you ready for some more irony?

“I hope Henry has a very flexible schedule,” I said, with the most deadpan delivery I could muster. “Because the next RAMBO party just happens to be tonight.”

### **Next Episode: The Transformation**

*The next chapter will be posted on Monday, August 13, 2007.*