

Chapter Twenty-Four—Mama Madrid

Mama Madrid was a Spanish restaurant in the heart of downtown Plainfield. I'd passed it many times on my way to the grocery store, and felt the colorful floral awning and garden-themed interior was quite inspired. Like something out of an old Zorro movie.

And remembering Ramona's passionate dissertation on supporting Plainfield businesses, I thought this might be the perfect opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Celia could practice being a man and I could help the local community. Everyone wins.

So Celia, Henry, Bilbo and I climbed into Henry's red Cadillac Coupe DeVille and drove to where *Mama Madrid* was located. The area was certainly not upscale, but every single shop was occupied. Further proof that this town was not only surviving, but thriving as well.

Henry parked the car several blocks from the restaurant, so Celia would have a good amount of space to practice her "walk." Celia's natural gait was quite bouncy, her posterior movements reminiscent of a gently swinging pendulum. Hypnotic, yes; but Masculine, no. The stride would have to go.

"You can't strut like you're on a runway," Henry explained. "You have to swagger. Show some bravado. Why don't you try walking and talking at the same time?"

"What an unusual concept," Celia said sarcastically, before adjusting her voice to a much lower pitch. "*So...uh...how's about we go to one of your houses, watch some football, drink some beer, and stare at sexy cheerleaders shaking their groove thangs.* How did that sound? Pretty butch, huh?"

"Butch Dike, maybe." Bilbo laughed. "You need to be less angry, and more confident. You can be aggressive, but you have to do it with style."

"And what would you know about aggression?" Henry snorted. "You're the biggest bottom this side of a Teletubbie."

"You should talk," Bilbo shot back. "At least my ass isn't referred to in Hollywood as the *other* La Brea Tar Pit."

"Why you nasty little Queen," Henry said very loudly, as he slapped Bilbo on the top of the head.

"Stop doing that." Bilbo yelled, before hitting Henry in the stomach.

This launched the two men into a quasi slap fight, which looked particularly comical given their size difference. Thankfully, their histrionics were soon interrupted by a deep voice behind me.

“*Yo, Ladies. Knock off the pansy crap.*”

Henry, Bilbo and I turned around to find Celia leaning against the car, her arms confidently folded across her chest.

“What? You never been called a Pansy before?” she asked, still affecting her masculine tone. “How ‘bout we get a bite to eat before you two ladies start eating each other alive?”

Celia was grinning from ear to ear. We couldn’t help but laugh. Her vocal inflection sounded like a cross between Joey from *Friends*, the Fonz from *Happy Days*, and Vinnie Barbarino from *Welcome Back, Kotter*. Ironically, the combination was a perfect match for the “costume” Henry brought her to wear, which can best be described as “Punk-Leather-Pirate.”

With her new voice in place, Celia had found a nice balance between *thug* and *lug* that made her male persona quite appealing. She was now more masculine than both Henry and Bilbo combined, and slightly more macho than myself.

Brief side note: On a Masculinity scale from one to ten, I’d say I come in somewhere between 6 or 7. Not really butch, but not too feminine either. Just a normal average guy. Some might even refer to me as “straight-acting,” as if that’s some sort of compliment. On the same scale, however, Henry and Bilbo hovered somewhere between 1 and 2. Celia, in her current persona, might be considered an 8.

The only reason I mention this is because the four of us were now standing in the center of a rather busy street in downtown Plainfield. And though there were many other people around, it seemed as if our little group was the main topic of interest. Mainly due to Henry and Bilbo’s recent dramatic behavior.

With their colorful clothing and flamboyant gestures, Henry and Bilbo looked like they’d just stepped off the tour bus of Cirque de Soleil. Their bright sparkly shirts and bedazzled pants screamed of Variety Show kitsch, which may be why people mistook us for a roving band of street performers. Or at least that’s what I assumed from the very enthusiastic audience quickly assembling around us.

As Henry stuffed a colorful-looking cigarette on the tip of his long *Opera length* holder, Mothers with baby carriages began moving in at a rapid pace to get a good viewing area near the front. I even saw a hot dog vendor move his cart closer so he could capitalize on people who might need concessions during our “performance.”

Henry appeared oblivious to all the attention, as he began dramatically puffing on his cigarette and then swirling the long holder in the air until the smoke created a series of spirals and swirls. Bilbo, on the other hand, reveled in the interest he was getting from some local children, who probably mistook him for a member of the Lollipop Guild.

“Look mom, a munchkin,” I heard one little girl say, before her mother quickly corrected her.

Bilbo didn't seem to care. He was responding to the many smiles he was receiving from the crowd, which apparently reminded him of his younger days working as a circus clown. Or a gymnast. Or some other vocation that might explain why he suddenly launched into a series of handstands and cartwheels to entertain the group.

And while this might qualify as another one of my humiliating experiences in Plainfield, the one positive thing I noticed was that no one was paying any attention to Celia. Among the four of us, she and I were the least interesting. We had on regular clothes and looked like regular guys. Henry and Bilbo, however, were no doubt reminiscent of the local community theater's production of “La Cage Aux Folles.”

As our colorful little group walked to the restaurant, we might have been mistaken for a parade float, with Henry and Bilbo waving and smiling like Beauty Pageant contestants. The odd thing was, people were waving and smiling back. In any other small town in America, we might be immediate *road kill* with such a display of flamboyant arrogance. But here in Plainfield, we were more entertaining than the puppy display at Petco.

When our group finally made it to the restaurant, Henry and Bilbo had spoken to nearly every person we passed on the street. They weren't intimidated by anyone, which I found rather admirable, since I tend to be intimidated by everyone.

The décor of *Mama Madrid* was very colorful, accented with a wide variety of exotic flowers and plants. Someone had even painted a large mural of a Spanish landscape on the main wall, complete with houses that actually lit up. It was quite an impressive display, like something out of the Magic Kingdom. I was shocked that something so cool could be found right here in Plainfield, which just illustrates what a total ignoramus I can sometimes be.

The Hostess at *Mama Madrid* was a friendly looking young woman named Maria. She spoke very little English, but had such a pleasant smile and warm friendly eyes, that we all fell in love with her immediately. Maria showed us to a table near the back of the restaurant, which was cut off from the front by several trees and a flower display. Celia took the chair near the wall and I sat next to her. Henry and Bilbo sat opposite us, with Bilbo directly across from me.

When Maria handed us our menus, there was a collective gasp at the table. They were written completely in Spanish. Apparently if you ate here, you were expected to bone up on your language skills first.

“Oh dear,” Henry said. “Does anyone know Spanish?”

I myself had taken four years of Spanish in high school, though for some reason had only managed to retain a few phrases and a very dirty poem.

“I know Pollo means Chicken,” I offered. “But I have no idea what the other stuff is.”

“Who cares?” Celia said in her masculine voice. “Let’s each pick something and then we can share whatever we get. Sound good?”

We all agreed and everyone began scouring the menu for something interesting to order. I was immediately drawn to something called *Pulpo*. I had no idea what it was, but once I said the word *Pulpo* out loud, I was sold. (I mean honestly, how could I *not* try something called *Pulpo*?)

Bilbo opted for *Chiperones*, which he jokingly referred to as the Spanish version of the “Chippendales.” Henry settled for *Fritura Mixta de Pescado* because he thought it sounded regal, like The Count of Monte Cristo. For the rest of the meal, he insisted we refer to him as *Fritura*. Or by his royal title, *The Mixta de Pescado*.

And finally, Celia decided to get the *Calameres*, because she knew that meant squid. Once we’d all settled on our items, we called Maria over to take our order. We each did our best to pronounce the dishes correctly, though Henry definitely won the prize for most dramatic.

The waitress reacted to our choices with a strange expression, which I attributed to our language barrier. But once the food was brought to the table, we realized it wasn’t our pronunciations that confused her, but rather our choice of dishes. Because even though each of us had ordered a completely different meal, the main ingredient in each of them was the same. Squid.

Or Octopus. Which is really just squid on steroids.

When we looked down at our plates and discovered what we’d done, we all burst out laughing. Which caused the waitress to begin laughing as well. She must have suspected we didn’t know what we were ordering, but didn’t want to embarrass us by pointing it out. Either that, or she didn’t know enough English to let us know what a bunch of morons we were.

“I didn’t realize we were having a contest,” Henry said. “*Best Use of Squid in a Spanish Entrée?*”

Celia took a bite of her *Calameres* and cooed with delight. I then took a bite of my *Pulpo*, which was some kind of squid and potato creation. Pure Ambrosia. I heard similar grunts of approval from Henry and Biblo as they devoured their meals in quick succession. We

were each so mesmerized with the taste of our particular selection that the idea of sharing entrees was quickly abandoned.

As we happily ingested our food, Maria began folding napkins at a table a few feet away. She was a pretty girl, but seemed to be hiding behind her hair, which was constantly hanging in her face.

Henry and Bilbo must have noticed this as well. Because as soon as they finished gobbling down their meals, they calmly set to work on fixing Maria's hair. Though few words passed between them, the three somehow managed to establish an understanding and camaraderie. (Brought together by the universal language of beauty, no doubt.)

The other two employees, a bartender and a cook, sat behind the bar watching some kind of sporting event that involved snowboards and bikini models.

While Maria folded napkins and Henry and Bilbo fussed with her hair, Celia and I continued eating our entrees.

"I don't know how they ate their food so fast," Celia whispered. "They practically inhaled it."

"Slower eaters make better lovers," I whispered back.

The comment must have caught Celia by surprise, because when she began laughing, she spit a small piece of squid at me.

"I'm sorry," she said, removing the masticated tentacle from my cheek.

"Haven't you ever heard that expression before?" I asked.

"No, but it's so true." Celia said in a low voice. "I can't tell you how many guys I've been with that rush through their meals. And when I think about it, every single one of them was bad in bed. Their version of sex was like a commercial break between ball games."

"It's better to savor the food. Enjoy it. What's the point in eating if you're going to rush through it? You might as well not eat at all."

When I looked up to catch Celia's reaction, I found her staring quite intently at something behind me. Her face turned completely white, which in itself was quite a feat considering all the make-up she had on.

"Celia, are you okay?" I asked. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"I think I did."

I turned around to catch a glimpse of what Celia was looking at, but the restaurant was empty. Even the sidewalk outside the restaurant was empty, which was clearly visible through the huge picture window in front.

“What was it?” I asked.

“It was nothing,” Celia said, unconvincingly. “I must have imagined it. I guess I’m a little nervous about trying to pull this off.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “You’ve got the voice down, as long as you don’t have to talk too much. And your body language is good, as long as you don’t overdue it with the gestures. And your make-up is flawless...”

“As long as I don’t get caught in a rainstorm, right?” Celia said, laughing as she normally would, before catching herself and adjusting the laugh downward. It eventually ended up somewhere between Santa’s Ho-Ho-Ho and Fat Albert’s Hey, Hey, Hey.

“What are you two laughing about over there?” Henry asked, pinning Maria’s hair back into a very flattering updo.

“Nothing. Where’s Bilbo?” I asked, because he was nowhere to be seen.

“He ran to the car to get some tweezers and our emergency bag. We’re going to give this beautiful girl a complete make-over, starting with these two anthills she calls eyebrows.”

Henry said the last part directly to Maria, who responded with a little giggle. She probably didn’t understand what he’d said, but probably wouldn’t care if she did. Someone was fussing over *her* for a change, and she was enjoying it.

“Who’s getting a make-over?” A loud cackle of a voice came from the front of the restaurant. Someone had just entered through the front door and was sashaying his way back to our table. Someone very familiar to me, in fact. Someone by the name of JezeBall.

“Oh, Henson Ray, look at you,” JezeBall screamed with delight when he saw me. “Eating out in our little city with your friends. Such a sweet sight for sore eyes.”

JezeBall brushed past Henry and Maria and plopped himself in the chair across from me. Luckily, Henry didn’t seem to notice that JezeBall called me by my real name.

“It’s been so long, dear.” JezeBall said, taking my hand in his, leaving my elbow no alternative but to plant itself firmly in the remaining Pulpo. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to smile.

“You don’t look fine,” JezeBall said in his typical loud manner. “You look like shit. You’re still worrying about Unity, aren’t you?”

Celia nearly gulped on her drink when JezeBall mentioned Unity’s name. I grabbed her leg under the table and squeezed it, hoping to keep her from saying anything to give herself away.

“Yes. Have you heard anything?” I asked quickly. “I know you were going to have your lawyers check up on her whereabouts.”

I only added the last part for Celia’s sake, so she would know that JezeBall was a friend of Unity’s and not someone from “*the other side*.”

“Yes, I was. And I did.” JezeBall said, sighing. “But unfortunately we’ve lost her trail. She was in Australia, we know that. And then she must have gone somewhere else. But no one seems to know where.”

My mind raced to episodes of the television series *Lost*, where a group of passengers on a plane leaving Australia are suddenly marooned on a strange tropical island somewhere. Could something like that have happened to Unity? It would certainly explain her dropping off the face of the earth. But television shows aren’t based on reality, just like reality isn’t based on a television show. Or is it?

“I’m sorry, but I don’t believe we’ve met.” JezeBall said, sticking out his pudgy little hand for Celia to shake. “I’m JezeBall.”

Celia aggressively grabbed his hand, giving it a quick hard pull rather than a shake. The force caused JezeBall to fall slightly onto the table, pushing the front of his shirt into Bilbo’s abandoned Chiperones plate.

“Oh my. That was the hardest I’ve been tugged in a long time,” JezeBall said, as he pulled himself off the table. “Did you have a name too? Or just a hearty handshake?”

“Sorry, my name is...” Celia suddenly stopped.

Though we ‘d spent all afternoon perfecting Celia’s look, and most of the evening working on her voice and mannerisms, we’d never once thought about what her name might be. Or her back-story. Or anything about who she might be as a man. And now, here she was, thinking on her feet. Hopefully all those improvisation classes would pay off.

“My name is Sly,” Celia said, half smiling. “I live in the city. Came out here to see my man Hen...er, Bruce.”

“Who’s Bruce?” JezeBall asked.

“Why, I am, of course.” I said, winking at JezeBall, and then pointing to Henry, who was no longer paying attention to us. JezeBall must have picked up on what I was trying to convey, because he suddenly smiled and raised an eyebrow.

“Why *Bruce*,” JezeBall said, batting his eyes. “You are just full of surprises.”

At that moment, Bilbo bounced back into the restaurant with a backpack and a handful of bobby pins. And he was not alone. Trailing behind him were five or six Latino boys in their mid-twenties, all dressed in the kind of colorful clothing only gay men would attempt. The merry band of boys was extremely loud and flamboyant, which only added to the restaurant’s growing atmosphere of a gay Fiesta.

Even the cook and bartender, who ‘d stayed in the background up until then, suddenly made themselves visible to help manage the growing clientele. And the growing noise. The boys emphasized nearly everything they said with an elaborate hand gesture or a finger snap. On the scale of Manliness, they lingered near 0, though I’m sure they didn’t care about such things.

Maria, her hair in curlers and pins, escaped from Henry and Bilbo’s mentoring long enough to show the new group a table and hand out menus.

“Sweetie, what’s with the hair?” One of the boys asked. “Is that some kind of punk rock look you’re going for?”

Maria then spoke to the boys in Spanish, saying something that made them all suddenly stop speaking and drop their jaws. After she left the table, the boys started whistling and clapping. I had no idea what she might have said, but Maria obviously had some hidden talents we weren’t yet aware of.

“Are you and Sly going to the RAMBO tonight?” JezeBall asked me, loud enough for Henry and Bilbo to hear.

“What’s a RAMBO?” Bilbo asked sincerely.

“It’s the *Rainbow Association Monthly Boys Outing*,” JezeBall responded, as he swiveled around to face Bilbo and Henry for the first time. “In other words, a gay get-together.”

“I love gay get-togethers,” Bilbo said, from somewhere behind Maria.

“Looks like you boys are in the fashion industry,” JezeBall said confidently. “Am I correct?”

“Close,” Henry said with a slight hint of attitude. “We’re make-up artists.”

“And I see you’ve made it your mission to make-over my little Maria. Is that correct?”

“Not really a make-over. I think we’re just enhancing what she has.”

“A little tweezing, a little trimming,” Bilbo added. “She’s quite a beauty.”

“I’ve always thought so,” JezeBall said, smiling. “That’s why we hired her.”

“YOU hired her?” I said in shock. “What do you mean?”

“Why darling,” JezeBall giggled. “I own this establishment.”

“You’re *Mama Madrid*?”

“It was a nickname I got back in the sixties during my hippie days. Or rather a derivative of a nickname.”

“Another derivative?”

“I’m full of them, Honey.”

“I’m not even going to ask.”

“It was *Mama McDrug*.”

“And yet you told me anyway. Thanks.”

“Oh, stop being such a prude. I’ve owned this place for a few years. It’s sort of a hobby. The other owner is a former employee of mine. So I put up the money and helped him with the design and business plan, and the rest is up to him. And so far, he’s been doing pretty well. Especially on Saturdays and Sundays; this place is packed.”

“I had no idea,” I said. “The food is amazing.”

“Especially the squid,” Bilbo yelled.

“Well, everyone has secrets,” JezeBall said, turning to Celia and giving her a wink.

“That’s what makes life so interesting.”

I wasn’t sure whether JezeBall was implying something about Celia or just making a general comment, but she squeezed my leg so hard under the table that I thought my circulation might never return.

“There’s going to be a big Drag Show at the party tonight,” JezeBall announced.

“Another mansion with a ballroom. And I hear they’ve built a little catwalk, too. It should be highly entertaining. So you simply must come.”

And there it was. The open invitation to the RAMBO party hung in the air like a stadium banner. And there was nothing Celia or I could do to make it go away. Or prevent Henry and Bilbo from accepting it, which they gladly did.

“This is going to be such fun,” Bilbo squealed. “I just love a good drag show.”

“I didn’t say it was going to be good,” JezeBall said. “But it’ll definitely be a drag.”

And with that, JezeBall let forth one of his famous Phyllis Diller laughs that literally cut the sound barrier in half. I heard the boys up front trying to imitate it amidst their giggles and whispers. If JezeBall heard them, he didn’t seem to mind. In fact, before he left, he even went up to the boys and invited them all to the RAMBO party as well. By the time he left, the boys were no longer making fun of him, but rather enjoying his company. It was a nice transition to witness.

While Maria completed her spa treatment with Henry and Bilbo, Celia and I discussed our plan of attack.

“So, with Henry and Bilbo at the party, that complicates things a little.” I whispered to Celia.

“It doesn’t have to,” Celia said. “If you can keep them distracted, I can blend into the background and case out the party-goers.”

“But they think my name is Bruce and everyone in Plainfield knows my name is Henson. I can’t believe that’s not going to come out at some point. Like something out of a bad sitcom.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to handle it,” Celia said, squeezing my leg again for emphasis. Thankfully, she had a much gentler grip this time.

“I’ll just have to avoid everyone I know,” I said, pouting.

“Never deny. Never explain.” Celia said. “The first rule of handling bad press.”

Though Celia kept assuring me that everything would be okay, I couldn’t shake my sense of foreboding. I had yet to attend a Plainfield RAMBO without somehow making an ass of myself, and tonight had all the earmarks of a complete disaster.

It’s ironic that the evening would turn out to be one of the most important nights of my life. Not to mention, the most surprising RAMBO I ever attended!

Next Episode: Glitter and Guile

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