

Chapter Twenty-Five—Glitter and Guile

The RAMBO party was already in full swing when we got there. The long narrow ballroom was filled to capacity, making it difficult to move around. Celia disappeared almost immediately upon arrival, preferring to be alone as she scoped the room full of faces. This left me to deal with a very giddy set of make-up artists, both of whom were happily pushing through the crowd, knocking people out of their way as they went. And if that wasn't bad enough, Henry and Bilbo provided me with an extremely rude running commentary on the physical features of all the guests they passed by.

“Needs botox. *Too much* botox. Bad toupee. *Obvious* chest implants. Serious plastic surgery needed. Acne alert, *calling Dr. Zitzmore.*”

The comments went on and on, as if they were cataloging all the partygoers by their surgical needs or mishaps.

At one point, I was separated from Henry and Bilbo when a large man dressed like Whitney Houston pushed in between us. He was a fairly hefty guy, maybe 6'2" or 6'3". But with the addition of some ridiculously tall stiletto heels, he looked more like *Godzilla Whitney*, threatening to destroy everything in his path. (Which at the moment, happened to be me.) As he bulldozed his way in front of me, Whitney's long flowing wig cascaded over my head, causing me to have a temporary blackout. When I was finally able to dig my way out of the hair, Henry and Bilbo were nowhere to be seen.

Truth to tell, I was somewhat relieved, as it gave me a temporary reprieve from their bitchy repartee. Instead of looking for them, I found a nice piece of wall near the back of the ballroom where I could relax for a moment and get acclimated.

“Hey stranger, haven't seen you in a while,” a voice came from my left. It was Bob, my neighbor from down the street.

Though it wasn't intentional, I hadn't really spoken to Bob or Barney lately. Especially after the Jeep was stolen. I'd never even told them about it. Nor had I told them about the new PT Cruiser I'd suddenly acquired. How was I going to explain having a new car, when I was only able to pay \$100 for their Jeep a few weeks earlier?

“Great to see you,” I said, hugging Bob. “I'm sorry I've been out of commission. A lot of stuff going on.”

“That's all right. You've missed some of Barney's best cooking, though. He made a Cajun Pot Roast the other day that was out of this world.”

“Sounds great,” I said sincerely.

A few more minutes of polite conversation passed between us before Bob asked the inevitable question:

“So how’s the Jeep working out?”

Did he already know what happened to the Jeep, or was this just an innocent inquiry? I couldn’t tell. But the music was so loud I pretended I didn’t hear him, hoping this would buy me some extra time to figure out what to say. Luckily, Barney arrived at that moment, and the question was soon lost amidst further hugs and hellos.

In the middle of our “catching up” session, we were suddenly swept into a crowd of people moving in the direction of a set of stairs. This left us little choice but to follow along as the throng made its way down to the basement.

And what a basement it was! Completely “finished,” with faux marble walls, porcelain tile floors and a popcorn ceiling. Recessed lighting bounced off the numerous potted plants and fresh floral arrangements, giving the area the look of a sunny living room. Had you not just climbed down a flight of stairs, you might never even know you were in a basement at all.

At one end of the long room was the bar, a black-lacquered monstrosity that spanned the entire length of the wall, and screamed of Art Deco and Noel Coward. The rest of the room was filled with sofas, chairs, a few pinball machines, a pool table, and several other assorted table games that people were using as makeshift seating areas.

“This room is as big as my high school gymnasium,” I said. “I guess the owner must have kids, huh?”

“No,” Barney answered. “One of the guys works for Mattel. He uses this room when he entertains clients.”

“There’s certainly enough to be entertained with. You could be lost in here for days.”

“Let’s hope not.” Bob interjected. “I don’t want to miss the Drag show.”

“Isn’t that what we’re watching right now?” I said, referring to the colorful collection of Drag Queens already lining the length of the bar. Many of them were dressed as famous celebrities, giving me immediate insight into what a casting session for *The Jerry Springer Show* must look like.

There was a Liza Minnelli standing next to two different versions of Judy Garland. One was Judy during her “Wizard of Oz” days, and the other was an Older Judy dressed all in black, no doubt representing her darker years. The older Judy was displaying a whirlwind of facial ticks and hand gestures, emphasizing the pain and torment her version of Judy was apparently going through. Liza just laughed, smoked and drank, every now and then

blurting out something like “Mama, can you hear me?” or “Life is a Cabaret, Old Chum!” (I wondered if Lorna Luft was hiding out somewhere as well.)

A little further down the bar were Barbra Streisand and Madonna, the former elegantly dressed in a long flowing white gown reminiscent of Barbra’s recent concert appearances, and the latter dressed in a white bodice with large protruding cones and a long blond pony tail, reminiscent of Madonna during her popular years. While the two were busy chatting with each other, they were joined by a Cher look-alike, who whipped her hair around so many times, she knocked off one of Madonna’s cones.

There were also three different versions of Diana Ross: two during her Supremes days and one during her later years as the Supreme Diva, with long flowing black hair and an even longer flowing red velvet gown. The gown was so big and puffy that when Diva Diana sat down, it bubbled up around her, hiding her body inside it like a bud about to blossom. The other two Dianas remained together in a corner, dancing and hand-gesturing to the music in perfect unison.

Bob, Barney and I found an opening at the bar next to a giant Dolly Parton, her enormous breasts jutting out several feet in front of her.

“Pardon me, Miss Parton.” I said, trying to squeeze past her.

“I’m sorry, Darling,” Dolly said, smiling. “Are my breasts in your way? They just seem to have a mind of their own, don’t they?”

“Yes, but you carry them very well.”

“That’s sweet of you to say,” Dolly gushed, thrusting her breasts directly in my face, causing me to once again get lost inside the costume of a Drag Queen. Dolly just laughed and jammed my head further in between her enormous breasts, until I nearly couldn’t breathe. If it wasn’t for Barney finally pulling me out, I might have suffocated in there.

“How about if I get the drinks?” Barney suggested. “You seem to get easily distracted.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I whimpered. “Dolly was being aggressive.”

“Aggressive?” Dolly laughed. “You haven’t seen *aggressive* until you’ve witnessed two pole cats fighting over the biggest farm chicken on a hot summer night in Sweet Potato Junction. They are as mean as mountain fires and as aggressive as buckshot.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but Dolly seemed to think it was hilarious. She burst out laughing, and then immediately jumped into a short chorus of “*Here You Come Again.*”

When she finished, someone on the other side of her began clapping. As Dolly whipped around to find out who her admirer was, her gigantic breasts side-swiped the nose of a

short Asian man, causing him to immediately start bleeding all over the front of Dolly's dress. There was a series of screams, some general pandemonium, and then Dolly and the man were escorted upstairs to get some ice and a stain remover.

"Never talk to the Drag Queens," Bob whispered, as he moved into the spot at the bar that Dolly had just vacated. "They can be dangerous."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. The Plainfield Drag Queens are a competitive bunch. This is their one big night besides Halloween to strut their stuff in public. Do you think any of them are going to play it safe?"

"Just wait till you see the Drag show," Barney added. "Or Drug show, as it should be called. Some of these girls are so high, they'll do anything for attention. For some that works. But for others....Well, let's just say, you don't want to stand too close to the runway."

"I had no idea," I said, as the bartender handed us our drinks. "Is this an annual event?"

"Yes, it's the Diva Ball," Bob revealed. "Didn't you read your invitation?"

"Maybe. Mostly I just look at the date and time."

"Look, there's Celia Westend," Bob said suddenly, causing my heart to literally skip a beat.

As I scanned the crowd in panic, I noticed my old friend Brit standing across the room staring at me. But I didn't let my eyes rest on him too long, as spotting Celia was my main objective right now.

"Where?" I asked a little too quickly, my brow beginning to sweat.

"Right over there. Next to Jennifer Lopez."

My eyes finally caught sight of what Bob was looking at. It wasn't the real Celia Westend at all, but rather a drag queen dressed like Celia. Or more specifically, he was dressed in the famous red leather outfit Celia had worn in one of her strangest vehicles, the sadomasochistic cult film "*The Whip and I*."

In the movie, Celia played a disillusioned Dominatrix who discovers a magical whip that compels people to tell the truth as soon as they are hit with it. (Much like Wonder Woman's magical lasso.) At first, Celia's character uses the whip for personal gain. But after one of her prostitute friends is brutally murdered, she uses the whip to help the police find the killer. This selfless act of heroism eventually leads her to a new life as a crime-stopping hooker--Dominatrix by day, Vigilante by night.

It should come as no surprise that “*The Whip and I*” was another critical disaster, though the red leather outfit Celia wore in the movie became iconic. A photo of Celia wearing the costume became one of the hottest selling posters in the world. Even hotter than the famous Farrah Fawcett phenomenon in the 1970s, Celia’s poster was plastered in every gas station, repair shop and strip club from New York to Los Angeles. At one point, demand was so high for the poster that the printing plant had to work twenty-four/seven just to keep up with the orders.

The red leather dominatrix “look” became so popular, in fact, that *Victoria’s Secret* launched an entire line of red leather bodices and pantsuits to cash in on the frenzy. But their version only captured the dominatrix “look,” rather than the actual copy of Celia’s costume. *Victoria’s Secret* wisely chose not to create anything that even remotely tied itself to “*The Whip and I*,” as the film had become such a bone of contention with the Religious Right. Not that members of the religious right necessarily shop at *Victoria’s Secret* stores, but they’ve got to get their dominatrix outfits somewhere, right?

The Drag Queen standing in front of me, however, was not wearing the *Victoria’s Secret* faux collection. He was wearing an exact replica of the outfit Celia wore in the film. So either it was a homemade costume, or he’d somehow gotten the real outfit on eBay. His tiny frame looked incredible in the red leather ensemble, and his make-up and hair were flawless. As were his voluptuous breasts, which heaved and bounced just like the real thing.

And though I was relieved to learn that Celia’s identity was still intact, I wondered how she’d react to seeing a life-size version of herself. Because to me, it was like staring at one of those wax figures in *Madame Tussauds*. You know it’s not the real thing, but you can’t help being fascinated by it. Not to mention a little creeped out.

“So how’s the Jeep?” Barney asked, jolting me out of my inner monologue.

“Well...funny you should ask,” I began, knowing that I would have to tell them, though still not knowing how.

“Well, well, well...” A voice said from behind us. “The Great White Hope makes an appearance.”

We turned around to find Steven standing next to Henry and Bilbo, all of whom had a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. (Henry’s cigarette being slightly extended through the use of his long black holder.)

“Hey Steven,” Barney said, stepping forward to hug him. “Who’s the Great White Hope?”

“Why Henson, of course.” Steven said, curling his left lip up in a half-smile. “Didn’t he tell you about his pornographic display at the Decadence Ball? He was definitely the big attraction there.”

Bob and Barney turned to look at me, their faces taking on very concerned looks.

“You went to the *Decadence Ball*?” Barney asked me, sounding slightly disappointed.

“Yes, but I thought it was a RAMBO,” I protested. “And *nothing* happened.”

“Says *you*,” Steven continued, turning to Henry and Bilbo, who had apparently become his new best friends. “Henson is quite the exhibitionist.”

If Henry and Bilbo heard Steven call me by my real name, they didn’t seem to notice. Or maybe they thought it was my last name. Or more likely, they just didn’t care.

“I am not an exhibitionist,” I practically yelled. “I didn’t think anyone else was around. It was an accident.”

“Honey, that was no accident,” Steven laughed. “Between you and Hart Azrock, I felt like we were at the Gay Porn Awards.”

“*Hart Azrock*?” Bilbo blurted out, nearly spilling his drink. “Hart Azrock was at a party in Plainfield? I must come out to the suburbs more often.”

This launched Bilbo, Henry and Steven into a titillating conversation about Hart and other porn stars in general. Apparently all three were aficionados, and the level of information they knew about the porn industry was beguiling. Not to mention a little disturbing.

Bob and Barney seemed totally engrossed with the discussion, so I excused myself to go to the bathroom, even though the bathroom was the furthest thing from my mind. I had to find Celia. If for no other reason than to make sure she was okay.

When I got back upstairs, there seemed to be even more people than before, and the ballroom was barely penetrable. Many partygoers had spilled onto the marble and stone veranda, which was tastefully decorated with potted trees and Greek-inspired statues. I blended in with the wall, and slid along it as far as I could, stretching my neck the entire time to see over the throngs of bobbing heads.

Even though we were all packed in like sardines, people still danced along with the music, causing a ripple effect of movement as bodies crashed into one another.

During one such ripple, I spotted Celia near the front of the catwalk talking to someone. I couldn’t see who it was, so I pushed my way through the gyrating bodies until I got a closer look. And what I saw not only surprised me, but confused me as well.

There, standing in front of Celia, smiling and laughing, was my old friend Officer Hernandez. Rick Hernandez. What was he doing at a Plainfield RAMBO? And more importantly, did he recognize who Celia really was?

As I made my way to the platform, I wasn't exactly sure what interested me more. The fact that Officer Hernandez was at a RAMBO, or the fact that Celia was talking to him. Could this be her SSCP contact? Or even worse, someone from *the other side*? I had to find out.

As I approached the front of the catwalk, Celia suddenly turned to me and smiled. But before I was able to say anything, she grabbed my arm and pulled me toward her.

"Henson, glad you're here," Celia said, maintaining her masculine voice and demeanor. "I want you to meet Rick. He's a police officer."

When Rick turned to see my face, his eyes lit up like a Jack O'Lantern.

"I believe we've already met," I said, giving the Officer a half-smile of recognition.

"Uh...yes," Rick said smiling back. He seemed slightly embarrassed, which made him all the more adorable.

"So what are you doing here?" I asked. "Casing the joint for drug-smugglers?"

Celia looked at me strangely. She seemed to sense how uptight I was, but couldn't understand why.

"No, I'm here strictly for the entertainment."

"Oh, you like watching the freak show so you can tell your buddies back at the station all about it?" I said in my most sarcastic manner. Why was I being such a bitch to this guy? This wasn't like me.

"I think Drag is kind of funny," Rick answered. "But I certainly wouldn't share it with the guys back at the station."

"Why not? Afraid they'll think you're a fag?"

"Well, they already know that. They just don't like to hear about it."

What? Did I hear him correctly? The beautiful Officer Hernandez was gay? The perfect policeman was a *poofa*? It was almost too good to be true.

"You mean..." I asked, blood suddenly rushing to my face.

“That I’m gay? Yes. I thought you knew.”

“Well, I hoped...I mean, I wondered. But it’s not like you’re obvious or anything.”

On the masculinity scale, Rick is definitely a “10.” (Maybe a 12, if there is such a thing.)

“Rick was just telling me he met a big celebrity a couple weeks ago,” Celia said, winking at me. “But he won’t tell me who. Maybe you can get it out of him.”

I turned to Rick, who also winked at me, making me wonder if they were both winking about the same thing.

At that moment, the music suddenly stopped and a loud screaming voice burst over the speaker system.

“LLAAAAAADDDDDIIIIIEEEESSSS and GENTLEMEN, it’s time to start the Drag Show. Whoever is not in the main ballroom, get your asses in here right now. The Divas are ready to strut!!!”

This was followed by much cheering and clapping and general chaos, as throngs of people began flooding into the ballroom from the veranda. The influx of people caused Rick, Celia and I to be pushed right up against the front of the catwalk, with Rick and I smashed together face to face. I could feel his warm hard body so close to mine, it reminded me of riding the New York subway. To say it was awkward would be an understatement, but to say it was unappreciated would not be truthful either.

Rick was definitely a hot man. And yes, I was extremely attracted to him. But I was sure he probably had a boyfriend. The good ones always do.

So though it was nice to be this close to him, I felt like I should make some attempt to push myself away. Rick apparently did not have the same inclination. Before I could do anything, he leaned over and kissed me right on the lips. It practically knocked the wind out of me. In fact, if I weren’t currently being held up by the close proximity of various bodies, I might have fainted right there on the dance floor. (And for once, it would have been justified.)

“Sorry. I’ve wanted to do that ever since I met you,” Rick said, as he pulled his lips away from mine. He seemed like he was seven feet tall at that moment.

Celia squeezed my arm and smiled at me. It was a perfect moment. A kiss from a gorgeous cop, and a squeeze from a Sex Goddess. I was in heaven. And if I wasn’t mistaken, I think Rick’s hard body had just gotten a little harder.

“I can’t believe you’re gay,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“Believe it.” Rick responded, gently squeezing my shoulder.

“Our first Diva this evening,” the announcer screamed over the microphone. “Is a local girl who made good on her New Jersey roots....Give it up for...QQQQuuuueeeennnnn La-ti-fah!”

At that moment, a small round “woman” appeared on the catwalk, dressed in the sexy jazz outfit Queen Latifah wore in the movie *Chicago*. Given her short stature, she looked more like a Princess than a Queen. A mini Latifah, if you will. But her size did not diminish her enthusiasm, as she happily strutted down the catwalk, waving and posing. The audience went wild with applause, and several men stopped her strutting long enough to shove a dollar bill or two under her dress strap.

Rick and I smiled at each other, and then I turned myself around so I could watch the show. Celia appeared to be enjoying the raucous atmosphere, even though it didn’t seem like she’d spotted the person from the *other side*. Rick clasped my hand in his and I felt a warm tingle in the core of my being. Could this really be happening? Could it really be this easy to hit it off with someone?

When the mini Latifah’s music was over, she walked off the catwalk and down into the audience, where she continued to strut and receive money from the crowd. I wondered how Celia and other movie actresses might react if they were similarly rewarded every time they left a make-up chair. As they strutted to the set, they would wave and smile, while gaffers, grips and fellow actors clapped and stuck dollar bills in their costumes.

Why people feel it necessary to reward Drag Queens with dollar bills, I will never know. It must be some kind of tradition, because I’ve seen it carried out in countless clubs and bars throughout the world. If a drag queen is performing, there will always be people with dollar bills ready to reward them. Perhaps it’s a way of paying the Drag Queens homage for the hours of hair and make-up they must endure to make themselves “pretty.” Or perhaps it’s to give them money for singing lessons, as lip-synching is only going to get them so far.

Personally, I like a Drag Queen who can do it all: sing, dance and make us laugh with witty patter. But these are few and far between. Most Drag Queens I’ve seen haven’t got a clue what to do when they’re on stage. They strut and gyrate and lip synch to Whitney or Beyonce or Cher, but it never amounts to a real performance of any kind. It’s just posturing.

I was about to ask Celia her opinion on the subject when I noticed she had the strangest expression on her face.

“Celia...” I whispered, before quickly correcting myself. “Sly, are you okay?”

“*Air*,” Celia shouted. “I need some fresh air.”

“Sly’s not feeling well,” I said, turning to Rick. “Can you please help me get him outside?”

Rick didn’t need to be told what to do next. He began parting the sea of partygoers, so Celia and I could walk through like Moses on a mission. Once outside, Celia seemed to calm down, but she was still shaking like crazy.

“Do you want something to drink?” Rick asked, without missing a beat. “Maybe you’re a little dehydrated.”

“Some water would be great,” Celia said, trying to maintain her masculine persona.

“Water it is.” Rick said, smiling. “And what about you, Handsome? What can I get for you?”

“Nothing,” I said, smiling. “Just make sure to come back. I don’t want this dream to end just yet.”

Rick laughed and disappeared into the crowd. As soon as he was gone, Celia turned to me with a very serious demeanor.

“I know who it is, Henson. I know who works for the *other side*. I just saw him in the ballroom.”

Next Episode: Drag Nabbit!

Hooked on Henson?

If you enjoy the story, please tell your friends, neighbors, book clubs, blogs, chat rooms, etc. about the website. Word of mouth has been extremely important to the growing popularity of this ongoing serial, and I appreciate the help of all those who have been passing the story on.