

Chapter Twenty-Six—Drag Nabbit!

"You saw someone from the *other side*?"

I could feel my stomach starting to knot.

"Yes, and we can't let him slip away," Celia said, standing up. "Come on."

"What about Rick?"

"I'm sorry, but we'll have to ditch him. We can't do what we need to do with Officer Rick around."

"What exactly do we need to do?" I asked.

"We need to follow this guy and see where he goes. Maybe he'll lead us to Unity and whoever is trying to sabotage the SSCP."

"You don't think he works alone?"

"No way. He's strictly small potatoes. He can't be the brains behind this, because frankly, I didn't think he had any brains. He's nothing but a stoolie."

A stoolie? No one ever uses the word *stoolie* any more. Or refers to someone as *small potatoes*. Not unless you happen to be Jimmy Cagney. Or David Caruso on *CSI Miami*.

Celia was beginning to talk like Tess Tamént, the character she played in *The Moll on the Gangster's Face*. The movie was about a trashy dance hall waitress in 1930s Chicago who makes it big when she becomes the girlfriend of a notorious gangster. The movie did great at the box office, if only because the double-entendre in the title was purposely meant to be pornographic. And also because Celia looked amazing in the period costumes Halston designed for the film. Especially the long flowing evening gowns she wore in numerous party sequences, which reminded one of a modern day Carole Lombard or Jean Harlow.

Modern might also describe Celia's contemporary acting style, which did nothing to capture the essence of depression era desperation. It did, however, capture Celia a MTV Movie Award for "*Best Body in a Bodice*."

"So how do you know this guy is from the *other side*?" I asked Celia, trying to make sense of what little information she was giving me.

"It's a long story and we don't have time right now. We've got to get back to the ballroom before Rick returns."

"But we can't just leave," I pleaded. "He'll think I don't like him."

"I know, Honey. He's a great guy, and it looked like you two were hitting it off, but we can't be around him right now. We have to think of Unity. This is our one opportunity to find the people behind her disappearance, and having a real policeman around is just going to complicate matters. But don't worry, we'll figure out something to tell Rick later. And if need be, I'll step in again like I did before."

"Why can't we just ask Rick to help us?"

"Because he's a cop, remember? How are you going to explain why we want to follow this guy? And what if we have to do something illegal, like breaking and entering? Do you think Officer Rick is going to be down with that? No. He'll probably have a million questions, all of which we can't answer. I'm sorry, but right now, Rick would be a major liability."

"Well...", I said, trying to stall. This was a horrible position to be in.

"Come on, Henson. I can't lose sight of him. This could be the break the SSCP has been waiting for."

So though I was possibly throwing away any chance of a relationship with Officer Rick, I followed Celia back into the ballroom. She was surprisingly good at pushing us through the crowd, her eyes quickly scanning the various faces that were bobbing and gyrating in front of her.

"Let's hear it for sexy Celia Westend!" The announcer screamed, as the audience went wild again.

Celia turned to me in horror, looking very much like the proverbial deer in the headlights. But when the spotlight focused its attention on the Faux Celia in the Dominatrix outfit, Celia's face suddenly turned brighter. She was not angry or humiliated as I'd feared, but rather amused at the portrayal.

The Drag Queen had mastered Celia's mannerisms in a way that was more of a tribute than a joke, and the audience was totally eating it up. Dollar bills were being thrown onto the stage in rapid succession, as the Faux Celia strutted her stuff down the runway. At one point, she struck the famous pose from Celia's best-selling poster, which caused the audience to get even crazier. So many dollar bills were thrown onto the catwalk, in fact, that the faux Celia was having a difficult time picking them all up.

On the other side of the room I spotted Henry, Bilbo and Steven. They were all waving their arms and chanting "Celia, Celia" in unison. It was good to know that in this brief moment, Celia was able to see what a profound effect she'd had on the gay population. She may have been critically-maligned and pigeon-holed in her career, but that didn't diminish her star power. She was idolized not so much for her talent, but because she managed to carry on through numerous tabloid scandals and a string of less-than-stellar movies, and still remain at the top. And if there's anything the gay community loves and embraces, it's a survivor.

"We love you, Celia," I yelled, trying to incite the audience even more. A few people took up the chant, turning it into a modified version of "We Love You, Conrad" from the musical *Bye, Bye Birdie*.

*We love you Celia,
Oh yes we do,
We love you Celia
And we'll be true.
When you're not near us,
We're blue.
Oh Celia, we love you.*

A few other people around the catwalk joined in, so the final two lines became quite loud. At the end of the song, there was a thunderous burst of applause and screaming. It was a magical moment, made all the more magical because the real Celia Westend was standing in front of me, and I was the only one who knew it.

At the end of the song, Celia turned to me with a huge smile on her face. Not only was she smiling, but she was laughing as well. That is, until she happened to glance at something behind me. Whatever it was made her face turn stone cold within seconds.

"So you're a Celia Westend fan," A familiar voice shouted in my ear.

I turned around to find Brit, the mysterious disappearing man, smiling from ear to ear.

"I've always found her a bit clueless myself," He continued. "But what do I know?"

"Hey Brit," I said. "I thought I saw you downstairs earlier. How've you been?"

"Good, good," Brit answered, though his mind was obviously elsewhere.

I felt Celia press me firmly on the back, which probably meant she wanted to be introduced. Being the gentlemen I am, I politely stepped out of the way so she could move in front of me. This did not, however, have the effect I'd expected. Celia suddenly looked more frightened than appreciative, as she dug her recently cropped nails into my arm. Nevertheless, I still continued with the introductions.

"Brit, this is my friend Sly. Sly, this is Brit. He lives in Plainfield...somewhere."

Brit looked at Celia strangely for a moment before sticking out his hand to shake hers. Celia did not reciprocate the gesture, but rather nodded.

"You look familiar," Brit said to Celia. "Have we met before?"

Celia shook her head "no," and then quickly turned around to face the catwalk again. I found her abrupt reaction a little rude, but maybe she was distracted by something. Maybe she saw the person she wanted to follow, and I was holding things up by talking to Brit.

"He's a little shy," I said, trying to make some excuse for Celia's behavior.

"A shy Sly," Brit said, smiling. "How amusing."

The faux Celia had now left the stage, and was making her way through the audience, collecting dollar bills as she went. The real Celia, however, was kicking my

leg with the back of her foot, obviously trying to tell me something, though I wasn't really sure what. After a few moments, I realized she was actually using Morse Code. Three short kicks, then three long rubs, followed by another three kicks. SOS--The international sequence for signaling help.

Now before you think I'm brilliant for figuring this out so quickly, let me share with you one brief flashback. It was five years ago in a Chelsea bar/restaurant. I was sitting across from my best friend Eric, a very flirtatious muscle boy who thrived on people's constant attention. It didn't particularly matter who the attention was from, as long as it was directed towards him. Therefore, when we went barhopping together, I basically served the same function as the fat, ugly best friend of the prettiest girl in school whose only purpose is to make the prettiest girl look even prettier. (Not that I'm ugly or fat, but you get the point.)

During this particular evening, Eric decided we should create a signal for when we needed help getting rid of a guy we thought was a loser. Not that this was ever an issue with me, since I rarely got hit on in Eric's presence. His "star aura" far outshined mine, and I'd long ago resolved myself to living life in his shadow. That is, until he moved away and joined a monastery, which is pretty much when our friendship ended.

At any rate, Eric's brilliant idea for "our signal" was to use the classic Morse code SOS. If one of us needed help getting rid of someone who was annoying or drunk, we'd simply kick each other under the table, using the *three short--three long--three short* sequence. Seemed like a good idea at the time, though I'm sure one kick would have been more than sufficient. By the end of the evening, my leg was so bruised from Eric's constant *signaling*, that I couldn't walk properly for a week. Eric had no bruises, of course, because I never had the need to get rid of anyone. Except maybe Eric.

So when Celia began her series of back-kicks, my sense memory instinctively knew where she was going with it. I did not, however, know *why* she was doing it, or what she needed help with. That is, until Brit opened his mouth again to speak.

"So did you ever go over and introduce yourself to your neighbors?" Brit asked, his face taking on a particularly mischievous expression.

And that's when it hit me. Both literally and figuratively. Because after Brit asked the question, Celia nudged me in the back. But the nudge only confirmed what I had just realized myself. *Brit was the person from the other side!*

It would certainly explain Brit's erratic appearances, his mysterious line of questioning, and his uncanny ability to vanish without a word. All the traits of someone with a hidden agenda.

The faux Celia had made her way to where we were standing, and Brit held out a dollar bill for her to swipe as she passed by.

"With all the awful films she's made, she could probably use a little extra cash," Brit said, laughing. I hated him at that moment.

"So what exactly do you do for a living again?" I asked, changing the subject.

The directness of my inquiry seemed to startle Brit, as he looked at me curiously for a moment before responding.

"I'm...in sales," Brit responded without conviction. "But that's so boring. Let's talk about you. How's the house? How're the neighbors? Anything exciting happening in your neck of the woods?"

"Nope, nothing exciting. What about you? Anything happening where you live? And where exactly do you live, anyway?"

Brit was not happy with my interrogation. In fact, he wasn't too keen on questions at all, as he began jutting his eyes around the room, perhaps looking for a quick escape route.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let's hear it for Dolly Parton!" The announcer *screamed*, as he apparently didn't understand that a microphone alone would project his voice without having to amplify it further.

The giant Dolly Parton we'd met earlier plodded on stage, her massive breasts bouncing like paddle oars. She still had a slight bloodstain on her white outfit, which she tried to cover up with a ridiculously large corsage. Or maybe it was a houseplant. Whichever, it added another oversized element to Dolly's already oversized breasts, which did nothing to help her sense of balance.

When the music changed to the song "9 to 5," Dolly began lip-synching to the best of her ability, which certainly wasn't much. She did not however have the same exciting effect on the audience as the faux Celia had, and people began talking amongst themselves rather than watching Dolly sing.

"I'm going to get a drink," Brit said, using the noise to avoid answering any questions. "Do you want anything?"

"No thanks."

"Okay. I'll be back in a minute."

As Brit began making his way through the crowd, I knew this would be the last we'd see of him tonight. He had no intention of coming back or talking to me again, so Celia and I would have to follow him if we wanted to get answers. I looked back at Celia momentarily before grabbing her hand and pushing through the crowd.

Across the room I saw Rick holding two bottles of water. He wasn't looking in my direction, but he wasn't looking too happy either. In fact, he looked sort of sad. I felt awful. But what could I do? Celia was right about us needing to focus on finding Unity first. My love life would have to wait. I just hoped that Rick would be able to wait as well.

Brit quickened his pace as soon as he got out of the ballroom. Celia and I tried to keep a far enough distance between us in case he happened to look back, but he never did. Once outside, Brit walked the length of the veranda and took the steps down into the yard, quickly disappearing around the side of the house.

Celia and I quickened our pace, so we wouldn't lose him. We were just about to turn the corner, when Celia grabbed my arm. The light from the side windows cast a glow into the yard, and we were able to see Brit's shadow before we'd actually turned the corner and run into him.

Celia put her finger up to her lips, and we both stopped to listen. Brit was having a conversation on his cell phone.

"I'm telling you, I think he knows." Brit yelled into the phone. "He was asking me all kinds of questions."

Celia and I looked at each other briefly.

"I don't think I should be doing this any more. Get someone else to cover Henson. I'll follow that girl in Texas."

Celia was stunned at the mention of the girl from Texas, and I knew Brit must be referring to another one of the SSCP's projects.

"Then meet me in an hour." Brit screamed into the phone. "I'll be at the house."

And with that, Brit slammed his phone shut and began walking. For an instant horrifying moment, I envisioned him suddenly marching around the corner of the house and slamming right into us. But instead, it sounded like he was going in the opposite direction, toward the front of the house. He was leaving.

"We need the keys to the car. I'll run inside and get Henry and Bilbo."

"Don't bother," Celia said, holding up Henry's key ring. "Henry gave them to me because he didn't want anything bulky in his pockets. *It takes away from the package, you know.* Come on."

"What about Henry and Bilbo?"

"Leave them. We'll come back later. I'm sure they won't even miss us."

Celia and I peeked around the side of the house to make sure Brit was far enough away for us to follow. Unfortunately, he was nowhere to be seen. In a panic, we rushed around the corner and ran to the front of the house. Brit was already down the driveway and to the street, so Celia and I kept in the shadows of the surrounding trees as we made our way to the car, keeping Brit firmly in our line of vision. Once inside Henry's Coup De Ville, we ducked into the seats until Brit was safely in his car with the engine running.

"Where do you think he's going?" I asked.

"To *the house*, wherever that is," Celia responded.

As soon as Brit was far enough down the street, Celia and I were on his tail. I felt like we were in a bad Nancy Drew story, and Celia was playing Nancy in drag. (Which would actually make her more of a *Nancy Boy* than a Nancy Drew, but that's neither here nor there.)

Celia did a good job of maintaining a reasonable distance from Brit, so that he wouldn't suspect we were following him. The silence in the Coupe De Ville was deafening. Neither one of us spoke for several minutes, our eyes glued to the taillights of Brit's car. I was the first one to speak.

"So how do you know Brit?" I asked, looking over at her.

"The question is, how do *you* know Brit?"

"I don't really know him," I answered. "He sort of shows up at these RAMBOs, and then disappears. He was the one who gave me the idea about knocking on your door."

Celia growled and squinted her eyes, and I could tell she was seething inside.

"Your turn. How do *you* know Brit?"

Celia took a deep breathe and expelled. Then she turned to me and said, very simply:

"I met him in Rehab."

Next Episode: Liar's Lair

Hooked on Henson?

If you enjoy the story, please tell your friends, neighbors, book clubs, blogs, chat rooms, etc. about the website. We now have a Passalong Postcard on the homepage that you can send to friends via e-mail.

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 along.