

Chapter Twenty-Seven—At the Liar’s Lair

The house that Brit led us to was in a very nice, private neighborhood that I’d never been through before. A whole new world of massive mansions and stately homes, some of which were fairly new. The entire neighborhood reeked of wealth and privilege, making it immediately apparent what kind of people lived here. The *right* kind.

Brit’s house was certainly the most ostentatious of the bunch, standing out like a sore thumb in this neighborhood of elegant restraint. The front door was overshadowed by a long proscenium arch, which took six faux-marble pillars to hold it up. The pillars were all painted a salmon-pink color, reminiscent of Pepto-Bismol, and were ornately decorated with cherubs and flowers and other fussy decor. The influence was definitely Italian, though the execution was unquestionably tacky. I was surprised a block committee hadn’t been formed to rid the clean and manicured landscape of such a visually offensive property.

Celia parked the car down the street, and we stuck to the shadows as we made our way to the backyard of Brit’s house. We didn’t want any of his neighbors to see us spying on one of their own; though it’s doubtful any of these class-conscious families associated with someone like Brit.

When we reached the back of the house, we found a dark shaded area under a large willow tree that provided us with a perfect view of Brit through one of the big picture windows. He was inside watching television, apparently waiting for another person to arrive.

Celia and I were sitting in the grass for several minutes before either of us said anything. In fact, neither of us had spoken since our discussion in the car about Brit. When Celia told me she’d been in Rehab, it pretty much ended our conversation for the time being. But now that we were comfortably settled into our makeshift stakeout position, the moment had apparently come to elaborate.

“Okay. I’m going to tell you about Brit,” Celia began. “But it requires me to tell you about a period in my life that was thankfully spared from the public eye. It’s very personal to me and a little embarrassing. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, feeling a rush of love and protection for my new confidant.

“So basically I was a mess,” Celia began. “I was under a lot of pressure from my agents and managers to lose weight, to go to parties, to do interviews, to basically whore myself to the industry. Anything I could to make sure I didn’t lose my A-List status. A status I’d never asked for or even wanted.”

“But then my life wasn’t about *me* anymore. It was about everyone else around me. Everyone who counted on me for their livelihood. For their expensive cars and designer homes and preferred seating at exclusive restaurants. Whenever I wanted to take some time off to relax, I was immediately chastised by my “*team*” for trying to take money out of their pockets. I wasn’t Celia Westend the *person* anymore. I was Celia Westend, the *corporation*. And eventually it became too much for me to handle. The stress of trying to please everyone would keep me up at night, so in the morning I’d look puffy and tired in front of the cameras. I began developing these huge bags under my eyes, which meant the make-up people would have to perform miracles just to make me look presentable. It was around this time those horrible photos in *The National Enquirer* began to surface.”

Celia was referring to the famous month-long tabloid war, where every rag in town tried to outdo each other by catching her in a less-than-flattering position. There were pictures of Celia without make-up, Celia without clothing, Celia looking drunk or high. It was a nasty campaign that would drive a normal person into seclusion, but Celia kept right on going. Through it all, she appeared happy and unaffected. She even made an appearance on “Saturday Night Live” to poke fun at all the attention she was getting. But now I realized it was just an act, the smiles hiding the pain.

“I was taking pills to go to sleep at night,” Celia continued. “And then more pills to wake me up in the morning. I had a pill for losing weight, a pill to treat depression, a pill to control anxiety. Even a pill to help my stomach handle all the pills I was taking. And none of it seemed to be helping. Because I still felt tired and restless, as well as very depressed and alone.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, trying to offer some sort of comfort. “I really have no concept of what it’s like to be *you*; it’s so beyond my frame of reference. But to have so many people coming at you from all directions *must* be weird. Like playing a constant game of Dodgeball.”

“More like *Rollerball*. It’s bloodier.”

Celia scanned the yard and surrounding area before continuing.

“What you may not know, Henson, is that becoming an actress was not something I ever dreamed about. I went to college to study for a Business degree, not an acting career. But during my sophomore year at Northwestern, everything suddenly changed.”

“I was performing in this musical variety show called *Waa-Mu*, and some agent from Chicago happened to see me. I was only in the chorus and had a few speaking lines, but he apparently saw something in me that he liked. So he approached me after the show, gave me his card, and asked if I’d ever done any modeling. Of course, I hadn’t, other than the mock fashion shows my girlfriends and I did when we were kids.”

“But the idea of making some extra money while I was still in school sounded very appealing. And that’s how it started. I was doing some small modeling gigs here and

there, which led to some on-camera work in local commercials, which eventually landed me a very lucrative contract as the national spokesperson for Bikini Land Sun Products.”

(Brief side-note: For those of you who might not remember, Celia was the original Bikini Land Sun Bunny, a dubious distinction that made her instantly popular with two very specific demographics--middle-aged men and pre-pubescent teens.)

“That was fun,” Celia said with heavy sarcasm. “Traveling around the country to tradeshows and state fairs, all the time wearing the skimpiest bikini possible. Like I was in the same category as the Prize Pig or the Blue Ribbon Bull. It was humiliating and degrading and I hated it. All except the money part. I was making lots of money, which I’d already earmarked for grad school.”

“That was my plan, anyway. But it soon became clear my education was never going to continue as long as I kept getting such lucrative modeling gigs. I eventually had to take time off from college, with the intent of going back as soon as the jobs stopped coming. Only they never did. In fact, they just kept getting bigger and bigger. Pretty soon, I was flying off to London and Paris, going to exclusive parties, meeting celebrities, buying anything I wanted. It was crazy.”

“That was when I got my first taste of what it was like to be somewhat famous. My picture began appearing in gossip columns and I was starting to get linked romantically with so celebrities, I sounded like the Happy Hooker. But none of it was true. It was just gossip. Though some of the gossip could be pretty hurtful. Like saying I must’ve had a boob job or a nipple enhancer, because my breasts couldn’t possibly be that perky on their own.”

“You have beautiful breasts,” I said, taking a defensive tone. Celia looked at me and smiled. “I mean, I’ve never thought of them as anything but your own. They don’t look like they’re fake.”

“That’s because they’re not.”

Inside the house, Brit was on the phone again and he appeared to be yelling. Celia and I tried to move in closer to catch what he was saying, but the television noise was drowning out his conversation. When he finally sat down to drink a beer and watch TV again, Celia continued her story.

“Anyway, by the time I got my first movie, I was in shell-shock. I didn’t even have to audition for the film. It was just given to me. Nobody cared if I could act or not. They just wanted to make sure I looked good in the costumes. Though the word *costume* is really being generous for the thin pieces of silk they gave me to wear. “

“That first movie, *The Woman with a Limp*, was not the best experience in the world. I’d never taken an acting class in my life, and didn’t know the first thing about how to create a character. I’d only done the *Waa-Mu Show* in college because my friends were doing it.

So I didn't understand about motivation and objectives and sense memory and all that stuff. I just read the lines and tried not to miss my marks. It wasn't until later that I started attending real acting classes and studying with a private coach. But by that time, I'd pretty much been written off as nothing but a ditzzy sex symbol."

It was strange to hear Celia again talk about her career with such honesty. And to learn more about how she became who she was. Or rather, who the public thought she was.

"After *The Woman with a Limp*, and all the sudden success I achieved, my life was like a treadmill. I kept moving, moving, moving, and I couldn't seem to get off. That's when I really started with the pill-popping. It was very innocent at first, a couple here, a couple there. But soon I became dependent on them. I was popping so many pills, I couldn't even remember which ones I'd already taken. That's when I checked myself into the clinic for the first time."

"The first time? I never heard about that," I said.

"That's because my Press Agent leaked that I was in the Bahamas having an affair with Matt Dillon. Paparazzi spent weeks scouring the islands for a trace of our secret love nest, while I was hundreds of miles away quietly detoxing at Apple Valley Spa."

"Apple Valley? Isn't that some kind of chic getaway for the rich and famous?"

"Yes. That's how it's advertised to the general public. But it's really a glorified version of the Betty Ford clinic. You could probably assemble a fairly impressive cast list from the people who check in their on a regular basis."

"And so you checked yourself in to get control of your life?"

"Yes. And that's where I met Brit. He was there too, trying to kick his dependency on cocaine. Or so he said. Now I'm wondering if that was all a lie."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I saw him again recently, when I checked back in to Apple Valley a few months ago. That's why I couldn't go with Unity to Australia. I physically couldn't function properly. I needed major help."

"You got hooked on pills again?"

"No. This time it was for an eating disorder. I'd made myself very sick with all the damage I was doing to my body. Not eating. Or eating massive amounts of food, and then throwing it up. Unity confronted me about it one day, and that's when we decided I'd better get some help before I joined her in Australia. But by the time I left Apple Valley, Unity was already missing."

“So how does Brit fit into all of this?” I asked, still not clear as to why Brit would want to hurt the SSCP.

“I guess you don’t know who Brit is.” Celia said, turning her attention to the house.

“No. Should I?”

“Only if you happen to watch a lot of reality television. He was on that series *Hi Dad— I’m Your Bastard Son*, where each contestant tried to fool an unsuspecting man into believing he was their illegitimate child. The first contestant to successfully dupe the poor victim into adopting him won a million dollars.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“It was. That’s why it was cancelled after only two episodes. If the series had ever played itself out, you would have learned that Brit actually won the million dollars. The retired Army Officer he’d targeted was so shocked and saddened when he learned it was all a hoax that he broke down in tears. Apparently the guy really did have an illegitimate child somewhere.”

“But the public never saw those final episodes, and so Brit never got the kind of fame and notoriety he’d been hoping for. His subsequent snorting, drinking and drugging eventually landed him in court, where he voluntarily checked himself into Apple Valley in order to avoid jail-time. I know all this because he was in my therapy group, and we soon became close friends. Or so I thought.”

“You confided in him?”

Celia looked embarrassed. Or perhaps sad. She shook her head in acknowledgment.

“I trusted him because he seemed to be in a similar situation as me. We used to take long walks on the beach and talk about negative publicity and how to overcome it. Brit told me about wanting to become a successful actor, and I told him about what success in this business is really like. He was a great listener and always seemed to say the right thing.”

“Yes, he’s very smooth,” I commented. “Like an electric eel.”

Celia laughed. Her eyes sparkled in the moonlight. Even dressed as a man, she was stunning.

“During one of our walks, I told him about the SSCP and my experience with the *Oceans Eleven* cast. At the time, I thought the SSCP had disbanded, so I didn’t think there was any harm in talking about it. It was just an amusing experience I’d been through, and Brit seemed very interested. But then, my time there was up and we both went our separate ways, and I never spoke to him again.”

“Not until a few months ago when I checked myself back into Apple Valley to get help for my eating disorder. A few days later, Brit arrived as well. I thought it was just a coincidence, until he started asking me all kinds of questions about the SSCP. What were they doing? Who were they following these days? I didn’t want to talk about it, which didn’t make him very happy. He left Apple Valley a few days later.”

“So you think he was there specifically to get information from you?”

“Yes. I realize that now. But at the time, I didn’t make that connection. I just thought he was being curious. I didn’t know he actually had an agenda, the Big Liar.”

Celia and I ducked down as a pair of headlights suddenly swerved into the driveway, illuminating the backyard where we were sitting. Brit jumped up from the couch and hurried to the door to let in the new arrival. At the same time, Celia and I moved closer to the back window so we could get a good look at whoever was about to enter the house. My heart was pounding so loud, I was afraid everyone in the neighborhood would hear it.

I don’t know who I was expecting to see when Brit opened the front door, but it certainly wasn’t the person who was now standing there. For Brit’s companion in crime was actually someone I knew. Someone I met through Unity, and someone I thought she trusted. And while I’d always thought of him as a little too smooth and polished for my tastes, I never would have suspected he’d be caught up in something like this.

But there he was. Paul, the real estate broker for my house.

“Oh my God!” Celia blurted out. “It’s *Purgatory Paul*.”

Next Episode: The Other Side

Hooked on Henson?

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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.