

Chapter Twenty-Eight—The Other Side

As we watched Paul and Brit carry out a very heated argument, I asked Celia what she meant by the nickname *Purgatory Paul*.

“He’s the guy who nearly won *Top Salesman* a few years ago.”

“You mean he’s another reality show person?” I asked, shocked at this new bit of insight. “I’ve really got to watch more television. I just thought he was a real estate broker.”

“He is,” Celia continued. “And a very successful one. That’s why he tried out for *Top Salesman*, and got all the way to the final two. But then the Host viewed some videotapes of him manipulating and backstabbing the other contestants, and decided he wasn’t right for the job. Apparently even salesmen have ethics.”

“I can’t believe it,” I said.

“What? That salesmen have ethics?”

“No. That Paul was on a reality show.”

“Believe it. He was all over the Internet because of the nasty stunts he used to pull on his team members. His strategy was to make everyone else look bad, so he would look good. And it worked for most of the shows, until he got down to the final two. I’m surprised you didn’t read about it. *Purgatory Paul vs. Virginal Vanessa*. People were talking about it for weeks.”

“I guess I must be talking to the wrong people.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Celia said. “What’s important is that Paul is a bad guy. A very bad guy. And now that I know he and Brit are somehow involved in all this, it makes me extremely nervous.”

“Why?”

“Because I think it points to something bigger, something much more organized than we’d previously thought.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling totally confused.

“SHHHH. We have to hear what they’re saying,” Celia said. “Come on.”

She signaled me to follow her and we moved in closer to one of the side windows. In doing so, we were leaving our comfort zone in the shadowed portion of the yard, and risking exposure in a much more illuminated area. But as none of the neighbors appeared to be home, we figured it was a fairly safe move.

Celia and I slid under one of the windows, which Brit had cracked open earlier. The television had thankfully been turned off, so it was much easier to hear Paul and Brit speaking.

“The only thing Henson knows,” Paul said angrily. “Is that you ask a lot of questions.”

“I’m not so sure,” Brit responded. “I think he’s been to the SSCP house.”

Celia and I froze at the mention of the SSCP. If there were any lingering doubts about Brit and Paul’s involvement with *the other side*, this certainly alleviated them.

“Did he actually tell you he’d been to the house?” Paul asked.

“No. But I felt like he was hiding something.”

“You’re being paranoid,” Paul shot back. “Henson is an idiot. A simpleton. Why do you think the SSCP picked him?”

Paul’s comment pricked me like a tetanus shot, causing me to physically recoil from the wound. Celia shook her head to let me know it wasn’t true, but the remarks still burned.

Especially since it came from Paul, the friendly real estate broker Unity had introduced him to. Paul, the man whose tie matched his handkerchief, and whose hair cascaded like frosting down the sides of his head. Paul, who’s impeccably tanned skin and polished nails obviously blinded me from seeing who he really was-- a total asshole. *I should have known.*

“I still want to go somewhere else,” Brit continued. “Why can’t I go to Australia or Texas? I’ve been in Plainfield now for six months and I’m bored out of my mind.”

“Stop your bitching,” Paul said, grabbing a beer from the fridge. “Next week this phase of the operation will be over, and then we’ll move onto the more exciting stuff.”

“I can’t wait.” Brit said, also grabbing a beer. “I just hope the pay-off is worth all the trouble.”

“Oh, it will be. They won’t even know what hit them. It almost makes me...”

Paul was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone.

“Hello? What? When? Okay, give me the address.”

Paul grabbed a pen and a pad of paper and quickly jotted something down.

“We’ll be right there,” he said, as he slammed the phone shut, ripped the paper from its pad, and headed to the front door.

“Come on, Brit” he said quickly. “We need to get to the city. I think we’ve found one of our missing links.”

Without another word, Brit and Paul dashed out the front door, slamming it behind them. At the same time, Celia and I ran to the back of the house to avoid being discovered. Before they’d even pulled out of the driveway, Celia and I both started talking at the same time.

“What do you think the missing link is?” I asked, as Celia said: “I can’t believe I trusted him. I’m beginning to feel like this is all my fault.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” I said, responding to her comment, as she responded to mine with: “I don’t know, because there aren’t any current Chosens in New York.”

We both took a moment to adjust our conversation pattern to the more conducive AB, AB model, so that we wouldn’t end up talking over each other for the rest of the night.

(A) “Should we follow them?” I began.

(B) “No,” Celia responded. “We need to search the house first.”

(A) “I’m so confused,” I said, feeling like I was in some kind of fog. “How do Paul and Brit know so much about the SSCP?”

(B) “They broke into George Clooney’s computer, remember?” Celia reminded me. “And of course, I gave Brit a lot of background information during our stay at Apple Valley. Though at the time I certainly didn’t know that’s what I was doing.”

“Why can’t you just call George and tell him what’s going on? I mean, shouldn’t other SSCP members be involved in this?”

“Yes, but not yet. I have to find out more information before I involve the SSCP.”

“Why? They might be able to help.”

“True. But then I’d have to tell them about *you*. That I’ve talked to you. And that I’ve become friends with you. And I’m not quite ready to do that yet.”

“You’re afraid they’ll be angry?”

“Yes, they’ll be angry. But they’ll also drop you as an SSCP Chosen. The rules state that if an SSCP candidate or Chosen finds out what’s going on, they are no longer considered suitable for help. The organization doesn’t want people to know they’re receiving special attention. They want the candidates to believe life is giving them unique opportunities and rewards. It changes the dynamics if someone knows.”

“That sounds pretty harsh. To just drop someone like that?”

“It’s only happened once before, and it was a very unpleasant experience. I don’t want the same thing to happen to you.”

“But I honestly don’t need the SSCP anymore. I’m making money with my eBay business, and I have a house and friends...and I met you.”

“Yes, that’s true. And we’ll always be friends, no matter what happens with the SSCP. I promise you that.”

I was so flooded with emotion by what Celia said, a small tear escaped from my right eye. Celia smiled for a moment. But only for a moment.

“Okay, no time for sentimentality,” Celia said, rubbing me gently on the shoulder. “Right now, we need to break into this house and see what we can find. There may be something in there that will tell us where Unity is.”

Celia moved back to the window that was cracked open and tried pushing it up, but it didn’t budge.

“Damn,” Celia spit out. “They’ve got one of those child safety locks on. This window isn’t going anywhere.”

“Should we break it open?” I said, remembering how someone had broken into my house.

“No,” Celia said quickly. “We don’t want them to know we’ve been here. We’ll have to do this very carefully. There’s got to be another way in.”

As Celia and I walked around the house, testing windows and doors, I couldn’t help scrutinizing Unity’s involvement with Paul.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “Paul is Unity’s real estate broker. Why would she associate with someone with so much notoriety? Especially if he’s evil.”

“She probably doesn’t know,” Celia answered, while trying the handle on the back door. “Unity doesn’t exactly watch a lot of television.”

“He seemed so nice, though.”

“Evil sometimes comes in that form, Henson. I can’t tell you how many famous good-looking people I’ve met that would sell their own mother if it somehow benefited them. It’s not only the ugly who are evil.”

“I know,” I said. “It just makes them easier to identify.”

I walked over and half-heartedly tried the sliding glass door on the porch. To my great surprise, it actually slid open. I let out an involuntary little scream of delight, which Celia reciprocated.

Brit must have come out to the porch at some point and forgotten to lock the glass door behind him. People are like that in the suburbs. They don’t bother locking their doors. Having lived in Manhattan for a good part of my life, this was a strange concept for me; as no one in their right mind would ever leave their doors unlocked in the city.

“Was I right about Brit or what?” Celia declared, smiling. “He’s cute, but not smart.”

“*An idiot! A simpleton!*” I said, imitating Paul’s recent assessment of me. Celia laughed.

We slid the door open wide enough for us to slip inside, and then began our hunt for some kind of clue as to Unity’s disappearance. Brit and Paul had left in such a hurry, they didn’t turn off any lights, so we were able to walk around the main floor without much trouble.

It was pretty generous accommodations if Brit was the only person who lived here. The spacious living room blended in with the dining room and kitchen to form a huge open area, commonly known as a Great Room. The first floor also contained two empty bedrooms, several bathrooms, a laundry room, and a sauna. All very nice, but not particularly helpful in terms of providing any kind of information.

We grabbed a flashlight from the laundry room to light our way upstairs. Being very careful not to disturb anything that might indicate our presence, Celia and I slowly *cased the joint* for information.

On the second floor there were multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, and an office. It was in the office that we found a treasure trove of information, complete with papers, notes, and a computer. Another interesting discovery was the prevalent use of the acronym SSRS. It was everywhere. On notebooks, on the computer screen, even on a set of t-shirts that were piled up in the corner.

“What does SSRS stand for?” I asked Celia.

“I have no idea,” Celia said, as she flicked on a desk lamp to help illuminate the area. “It must be the name of their organization.”

Celia sat down in front of the computer and began to click through its contents. As I watched over her shoulder, I picked up one of the t-shirts to see if perhaps there was some sort of catch phrase written on the back. Or maybe some other clue as to who these people were. But SSRS was the only thing embroidered on it.

As I examined the shirt, I suddenly imagined a whole line of merchandise for the *Secret Society of Celebrity Philanthropists*. Perhaps a line of t-shirts that said SSCP on the front, and the catch phrase “Are you a member?” on the back. Or a board game where you try to figure out which celebrity is stalking you. Or limited edition handbags with SSCP emblazoned everywhere. Women just love to buy products with other people’s initials on them. (DKNY baby!)

“Does the SSCP have a line of t-shirts?” I asked Celia. “Or any other kind of logo merchandise?”

“Uh...no. We’re a secret organization, remember? That’s what the *first* S stands for. *Secret*.”

“Right. I knew that.”

Celia was clicking through the contents of the computer, opening up documents, skimming what they contained, and then moving on to the next. As we didn’t really know if Brit was the only person living in the house, we had to find out whatever we could as fast as possible.

“What if they based their organization on the SSCP?” I asked, thinking out loud. “Which means the first two letters of their name might also stand for *Secret Society*?”

“Yes, but Secret Society of *what*? What does RS stand for?”

Without thinking, I started looking through a series of newspaper and magazine clippings that were piled up on one side of the desk. They were mostly about people who’d been arrested for some kind of crime. I didn’t recognize any of the names or faces, but most of them seemed to be connected to the entertainment industry.

At the bottom of the pile were some older, yellowed clippings that talked about the cancelled television show, “*Hi Dad—I’m Your Bastard Son*.” The articles were all negative slams against the show, mostly accusing the network of pandering to the lowest common denominator. One article even included a picture of Brit, smiling in an almost demonic way. The caption underneath read: *Brit Peters--the biggest pariah in reality show history*.

“Find anything?” I asked Celia, who was scrutinizing the computer like it was a giant video game. She swiveled the mouse around like a joystick, zapping files open and closed with Playstation precision.

“Maybe,” Celia reported. “There’s this file of articles pulled from the web about people who’ve been arrested for some kind of crime.”

“Same here,” I said, pointing to the stack of clippings on the desk. “I was trying to find some kind of connection between them.”

“Well, let’s see,” Celia began. “This one is about a girl who was caught slashing tires on Wilshire Boulevard. She was once on that show *Big Brother*. And this one is about some guy who was kicked off *American Idol* because of his jail record. There are a few here about Sammy T from *Survivor*. She was arrested for breaking into Colin Farrell’s house.”

“Did she take anything?” I asked, wondering if she might have stolen a pair of his underwear or something equally as intimate.

“It doesn’t say. It was settled out of court.”

Celia flicked through several more articles, while I pulled out a scrapbook that was hidden under the pile of clippings. I opened it up to the first page, which was a rather simple drawing of a coat of arms. A coat of arms with the letters SSRS inscribed across the front.

“Wow. They even have their own coat of arms,” I said, before turning to Celia and asking: “Does the SSCP have a coat of arms?”

“A *what?*” She was not amused.

“Never mind.”

I flicked to the next page and found it filled with pictures. Pictures of George Clooney and Julie Roberts and Andy Garcia and Brad Pitt and Matt Damon. It looked like they were all in a casino, perhaps taken during one of the *Oceans* movies. There was also another guy that appeared in several of the pictures. Someone I didn’t recognize; probably a member of the crew from the way he was dressed. As I flicked through the book, that same crew member kept appearing again and again. Sometimes with celebrities, sometimes with models, sometimes all alone doing his job.

My heart started pounding as I continued perusing. I couldn’t vocalize what I was thinking or feeling, but I had the sensation that a major revelation was about to happen. Like I was hovering over the precipice of knowledge, just waiting to fall in, and these were my last few moments before some big discovery.

“Could it really be that simple?” Celia whispered aloud. She’d apparently found something interesting on the computer.

I didn’t stop to ask Celia what she was talking about. I was too caught up in my own detective work. Toward the back of the scrapbook, there was a series of old clippings that

had been taped to the pages. “Man arrested for soliciting a minor” read one of the headlines. Another one screamed “Anonymous Donor Frees Pervert.” There were several other articles with similar titles, all centering around a former crew member of the “*Ocean’s Eleven*” cast who was arrested for trying to have sex with an underage hooker.

“Oh my God!” I said out loud. “Celia, Look...”

But when I turned to Celia, there were tears running down her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, immediately dropping the book.

“I know what this is about.”

“What do you mean?” I said, while rubbing her shoulders.

“I suspected something, but I didn’t really think they were this organized. This is terrible, Henson.”

“You know who these people are? And why they might have kidnapped Unity?”

“Yes, I know who they are. Or at least some of them. I’m not sure yet how Unity is involved, but I have my suspicions.”

“What about the acronym SSRS? Do you know what that stands for?”

“*Secret Society of Reality Stars*. This is about revenge.”

Next Episode: A Nasty Tribute