

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine—A Nasty Tribute**

Celia and I were glued to the computer screen. She'd found a file containing hundreds of letters from former cast members of popular reality TV shows. Letters filled with complaints about how they were portrayed on the programs, and how their lives had been ruined by all the negative publicity.

We became mesmerized by the anger and frustration that erupted from the various documents. The stories of how people thought they were getting a "big break" on television, only to realize it was nothing more than a horrible joke played out at their expense. The realization that the road to instant fame is not paved with Gold, but laminate.

Some of the stories were heart breaking. People were disowned by their families, or fired from their jobs. They were ostracized by their churches, neighbors, and friends. The aftermath of many broken dreams. It didn't paint a very pretty picture of the reality genre, at least not for these people.

"There's so much anger in these letters," Celia said. "I understand why people might be disappointed, but why are they directing that anger at the SSCP?"

"Maybe this will provide an answer," I said, handing her the scrapbook I'd been looking through earlier.

Celia perused the photos with great intensity, but it wasn't until she reached the newspaper clippings in the back that she finally vocalized what she was thinking.

"Adam's involved in this? That's why they're targeting the SSCP? Because of Adam Wordon?"

"Isn't he the original guy the SSCP followed around? The one you called *Mr. Lightning*?"

"Yes. And he's also the *only* person the SSCP has ever dropped as a beneficiary."

"What do you mean?"

"During the filming of *Oceans Eleven*, Adam somehow figured out he was being followed by celebrities, and that's why all these amazing things were happening for him. He even confronted George one day, and thanked him for all the great stuff he was getting. And then he offered a few suggestions for future gift ideas."

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. He wanted a new car and his own Supermodel girlfriend, among other things. George was so taken aback by the crudeness of Adam’s requests that he called off any further involvement with him. The film was about to wrap anyway, so George thought the whole thing would just go away.”

“But it didn’t?”

“No. Adam moved to Florida after the film wrapped, and got in trouble for soliciting that hooker. It must have been quite a shock when he realized his luck had suddenly run out.”

“But it says here his bail was posted by an anonymous donor,” I said, referring to one of the articles. “Was that the SSCP?”

“It was George. He felt guilty about what happened, perhaps even a little responsible. So he posted Adam’s bail, and that was finally going to be the end of it. But when Adam got out of jail, he bribed someone for the name of his anonymous donor, and then confronted George one night in front of Spago. He blamed George for his recent misfortune and threatened to trash his name in the media unless he was paid a large sum of money.”

“I can’t believe someone could be so presumptuous. Or have such a feeling of entitlement.”

“Ignorant people can be like that. George was hardly intimidated though. He told Adam he refused to help him any further, and apologized for what he already considered a generous act of good will.”

“I guess Adam decided *not* to go to the press. But why? What stopped him? And how did he get hooked up with a group of *Reality Stars*?”

“Keep reading.”

While we were looking through the letters, my eyes kept gravitating to a small icon in the upper left corner of the computer screen. The icon was an exact replica of the coat of arms from the scrapbook.

“What’s that?” I asked Celia, pointing to the icon.

“Some kind of software program, I think.”

But when Celia clicked on the icon, it opened up a web page that was more revealing than anything we’d found so far. It was the SSRS web portal. Or rather the login page. The screen displayed boxes for a Username and Password.

“Crap,” I said out loud. “How the Hell are we going to break into that?”

Celia quickly typed something in the boxes, and hit Enter. Within seconds we were on the SSRS home page. I turned to Celia in admiration, but she just shrugged.

“I told you Brit wasn’t very bright,” Celia said, smiling. “He made his User Name and Password the same word. BRIT. He must have trouble remembering anything else.”

We scanned the homepage, which was filled with stories and photos and links. One of the sidebars had a picture of me, with the headline “See Henson Screw a Jacuzzi.” When we clicked on the link, it launched a movie that was apparently taken during my solo performance in the hot tub. As I watched in morbid fascination, I was shocked that any of this was really happening.

“Turn it off,” I finally managed to say. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“This is the same video clip someone posted on the SSCP website when they hacked into George’s computer.”

“But why me? What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything,” Celia assured me. “This isn’t about you. You just happen to be caught in the middle.”

Celia clicked on a link that said “Clooney Charity Showdown.” It took us to a page that had details about an upcoming Charity Event in New York City that was honoring George Clooney with a Humanitarian Award. The event was taking place the following Saturday, and there was detailed information on how to get tickets.

“That’s odd,” I said. “Why would they be promoting an event honoring George Clooney? It would seem to be in conflict with their goal to hurt the SSCP.”

“What makes you think this won’t?” Celia replied, pointing to a paragraph below the ticket information.

As I read the copy, I got an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach. The SSRS was planning on humiliating George at the charity event by switching out his Tribute Video with a video they created. A video designed to expose the SSCP in a very negative light.

“How could they possibly make the SSCP look bad...?”

Before I could finish the sentence, Celia had clicked on a link at the bottom of the page that launched a flash presentation. On a black background, the words “George Clooney” slowly appeared in white knock-out type, underscored with some reverent music. This was followed by a male voice-over:

“George Clooney. Actor. Writer. Director. Humanitarian.”

The screen changed to a photo of George.

“But who is the real George Clooney? And why does he think he has the right to play God?”

The screen suddenly changed to another picture of George with a rather crazed look on his face. The disturbing photo was underscored with the famous theme music from “Psycho,” leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind as to what was being implied. After a brief moment, a man appeared on the screen. The same man from the photo albums.

“Hello, I’m Adam Wordon. And I’m here tonight to expose Hollywood’s nastiest little ‘inside joke’—*The Secret Society of Celebrity Pranksters*.”

Celia and I looked at each other in surprise and then back at the screen.

“Also known as the SSCP, this group of pampered and privileged celebrities has taken on a new venture—controlling other people’s lives. From their penthouse apartments high atop New York City, or their comfortable bungalows in Malibu, they watch the antics of average, ordinary people and then pull the strings on their lives like Master Puppeteers.”

The screen switched to a short montage of various people going about their daily routines. Shopping, mowing the lawn, relaxing by the pool. Nothing special about any of them. That is, until we saw a photo of *my face* flash across the screen, followed by a clip of me weeding in my backyard.

“These are the *Chosens*,” Adam said, as if on cue. “That’s the term George and his arrogant friends like to call the people they manipulate for their enjoyment. Like observing mice in a maze, they follow their select group of Chosens around for a while, giving them money or other prizes to see how they’ll react. Only the *Chosens* don’t know they’re being played like pieces on a game board, so not all of them make the best use of their new-found prosperity.”

The screen now changed to a series of clips showing a drunk man staggering out of a bar, followed by a girl getting stoned on a park bench, followed by a man gambling away his money in a casino. But the image that really gave me angina was the embarrassing footage of me in the Jacuzzi.

“Oh my God!” I shouted. “This is going to haunt me for the rest of my life, isn’t it?”

“Now you know how *I* feel. *Everything* I do comes back to haunt me.”

“If that footage ever ends up on YouTube, I’ll kill myself.”

Celia rolled her eyes at my dramatic outburst, as the screen changed back to a close-up of Adam.

“When opportunity is thrown at you in such a careless and reckless manner,” Adam continued. “There’s bound to be repercussions. But the SSCP doesn’t care about that. All they care about is the immediate gratification they get as they secretly observe someone reacting to one of their tokens of philanthropy. Like children playing with toys, they sometimes take very good care of them, and sometimes they get bored and want to throw them away. So if one of the Chosens doesn’t behave the way the SSCP wants them to, they are dropped immediately from the program. And that’s when the real trouble begins.”

The images now changed to a more disturbing theme: a girl laying in a hospital bed all bruised and bloody, followed by an older man begging for money on the street, and finally the drunk guy from earlier being thrown out of a bar.

“These are just examples of what happens to the discarded Chosens after George and his gang have abandoned them. Their spiral downward is fast and merciless.”

The movie went on like this for another ten minutes, painting a very grim picture of the SSCP. I was included several more times, with shots of me at the various RAMBO parties, drunk or high or humping the Jacuzzi. Why they felt it necessary to use the latter piece of footage over and over again, I don’t know. But they certainly got a lot of mileage out of it.

“This is sick,” Celia said, when the movie was over. “He’s taken a lot of footage out of context, and twisted facts every which way to support his accusations. But the whole thing is a lie. None of these people have been abandoned by the SSCP.”

“Whether it’s true or not, you know the media is going to have a field day with this. Especially since he called you the ‘Secret Society of Celebrity *Pranksters*.’ He must know that’s not the real name, right?”

“Of course, but *Pranksters* gives us a much more cold-hearted image. He’s trying to make us look like heartless monsters.”

“And he does a pretty good job of it, I’m sorry to say. He paints a pretty dismal picture of the SSCP.”

“If this film ever gets released to the press, it will definitely finish the SSCP. There’s no way we could carry on after this kind of negative exposure.”

“You think all these people in the SSRS are doing this because of what happened to Adam?”

“No. But I think Adam was instrumental in bringing them all together. *He* may want revenge against the SSCP, but it seems these *other* people just want revenge. Some kind of payoff for all their angst.”

“But why direct it at your group? Why not direct it at the networks who produced the shows, or the production people who worked on them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the SSCP represents everything they wanted to become, and therefore, everything they didn’t achieve?”

“But what happens *after* they expose you? Is that the end of it? After years of preparing for your downfall, they just move on with their lives as if nothing happened?”

“It does seem a little pointless, but maybe this is only the tip of the iceberg. Remember Paul said something about this *phase* being over next week, and then they’ll move onto the *more exciting stuff*.”

“This is making less sense than when we knew nothing. I wish they had a Mission Statement somewhere explaining in detail what their true purpose was.”

We looked through another section of the website, which revealed information about all the SSCP Chosens.

“I’m really shocked at how much they know,” Celia said. “I thought George had gotten better security for the SSCP website, but this looks like they are as up-to-date about our candidates as we are. Their website is even modeled after ours.”

Celia clicked on a link that said *The Fall of the SSCP*.

The link launched another flash presentation, which was a series of what looked like “out-take” clips set to humorous music. The montage showed various movie stars, including George and Celia, either tripping or falling or doing something clumsy. The final clip showed a woman falling down a short flight of steps. Ouch!

“That was weird,” I offered.

“This looks like a gag reel, designed to make us look foolish.”

“But why spend time and money on this stuff? I’m still not understanding what they gain from all this.”

Celia paused the presentation and hit rewind. The video skipped back several frames, and then Celia hit play again. When the image got to a shot of the woman walking down the steps, Celia froze the frame. She then changed the screen display to a much larger version so we could view it in close-up.

The screen went black for a moment, as the computer went through the process of adjusting to a new display size. When it eventually refreshed to the larger format, both

Celia and I gasped. The woman falling down the stairs was not just *any* woman. It was Unity Kingsmill.

“Oh my God,” I cried. I looked at Celia, and saw tears already running down her face.

In the upper right corner of the picture, you could see someone in a grey pullover moving into the shot. When Celia hit play again, we watched as the attacker purposely bumped into Unity until she lost her balance. What happened next was extremely painful to witness, as Unity fell down several stairs until her body finally slammed into the hard concrete at the bottom. Celia and I both jumped in unison at the sight, a feeling of disgust overwhelming me.

“How can they get away with this?” I yelled, the anger welling up inside me. “They physically assaulted an older woman. Why can’t we just turn them over to the police?”

“Because we can’t prove anything yet,” Celia said, trying to calm me down. “All we have is a piece of video that shows Unity being pushed. But you can’t really see the face of the person pushing her. It could be anyone.”

I became outraged. I wanted to throw the computer against the wall and smash it into a million pieces. (Celia wisely stopped me from doing this.)

“Look--This happened in Australia,” Celia said, pointing to the screen. “You can see the Opera House in the background.”

“How can you be so calm about this? You don’t care if Unity may be lying in a hospital somewhere, urgently needing our help?”

“Yes, of course, I care. But you told me you spoke to Unity right before you came over to the SSCP house, right?”

“Right,” I responded, though I wasn’t sure why this mattered. “So what?”

“This video has a date stamp on it from two months ago,” Celia explained, pointing to the date in the bottom right hand corner. “If I’d just seen this video and didn’t know you’d recently spoken with her, I’d worry the fall might have killed her. But it didn’t, because you just heard from her yesterday.”

“Yes. But where is she?”

We scanned the rest of the computer for maybe twenty minutes, printing out various pages for future reference. There was a whole section on Adam, with pictures of him from the various television programs he worked on. Among them, “Take My Wife, Please!” and “The Preschool Wars,” about a group of Upper East Side families competing to get their children into the most prestigious NYC Kindergarten.

“This might explain the connection between Adam and the *Reality Stars*,” Celia stated. “He works with them all the time. But what did Paul mean by the *next phase*? I don’t see anything about it on here.”

“At least we have Brit’s password, so we can access the SSRS website outside the house,” I reminded her. “But you still don’t think we should go to the police with all this?”

“No. I don’t want the police or media involved. We need to handle this on our own. But it means I’ll have to call George. I don’t see any other option now.”

Celia and I spent the next few minutes putting everything back together exactly as we found it. If we were going to beat the SSRS at their own game, they couldn’t know we knew about them.

In the process of tidying up, I found two DVDs marked “Footage” and “SSRS Files.” Celia made a quick copy of each and shoved them in her inside jacket pocket.

We were downstairs and almost out the door, when I suddenly noticed the notepad Paul had written on earlier. It was lying on the floor at an angle, which perfectly highlighted the scratching and indentations left behind by an overzealous writer.

“Celia,” I said, pulling on her sleeve. “We need a pencil.”

After a quick search, I found a pencil and began rubbing the edge of the tip along the pad to form a shaded area. As if by magic, the shade highlighted the scratches on the pad, revealing to us what had been written on the previous page. (I’d seen this technique used on countless TV shows, but to see that it actually worked was pretty amazing.)

“145 Riverside Drive,” I said, giggling. “This is where they said their *missing link* was.”

Celia tore off the piece of paper and headed for the sliding glass door.

“Come on. We’ve got to pick up Henry and Bilbo and drive into the city. If something is going down tonight, we’re going to be a part of it.”

I followed Celia as she slipped out the porch door, and carefully closed it behind us. Once we were back in the protective cover of nightfall, I began to shiver with excitement. It was like we were in one of Celia’s movies and I was playing Sherlock Holmes to her Dr. Westend. (Or Dr. Watson, if you want to be literal.) There was mystery, adventure, movie stars and a slew of bad guys to contend with, and I was caught right in the middle of it. This was definitely the most thrilling night of my life, and I was quite thankful we hadn’t run into any major problems or obstacles so far.

That is, until we snuck out the back door, and were immediately confronted by a gleaming row of flashlights shining in our faces.

“Stop right there or we’ll call the police!!!”

Now this could definitely be a problem.

**Next Episode: The Missing Link**