

### **Chapter Thirty—The Missing Link**

“I’ve got the police on speed dial, so don’t try anything funny,” A female voice said from behind the row of flashlights.

Great! That’s all I needed. Another encounter with the Plainfield Police Department. Especially since I’m the burglar this time, instead of the one being burgled. If any of this ever got back to Officer Rick, it would certainly end any kind of future our relationship might have. (Though after ditching him at the party, I wasn’t sure we even had a future, let alone a relationship.)

“Who are you and why were you in that house?” A male voice asked.

The lights were so bright, we held up our hands to shield our eyes.

“Don’t move!” The female voice yelled, apparently interpreting our hand movement as some kind of threat. “I’ve got a gun and I know how to use it!”

“Don’t say that!” a male voice protested.

“Put your hands back down so we can see your faces,” another voice yelled.

Celia and I exchanged glances, before lowering our hands once again. I wasn’t sure what we were going to say to get ourselves out of this mess, but we had to think of something fast.

“Henson?!?” the female voice exclaimed, as she lowered her flashlight.

I was shocked to hear my name, but somewhat relieved when I realized to whom the voice belonged. It was Ramona, my favorite Cuban Cooking Instructor and Gardening Consultant from next door.

After a few moments the other flashlights were lowered to reveal her husband Luis, and several other people I’d never seen before. I assumed this must be the local chapter of Plainfield’s Neighborhood Watch, but why was Ramona *involved*? I would hardly call this area a part of our neighborhood, unless Ramona was a District Manager of some kind.

“What are you doing here?” Ramona asked.

“Well...um...,” I began.

Not a great start. But what could I say without revealing information about Celia, the SSCP, or the SSRS?

“Yo. My name is Sly,” Celia said with conviction. “And I’m good friends with the owner of this house.”

Celia dropped back into her male persona with ease, even though the make-up on her face was starting to melt around her like dripping wax. She still looked like a man, but more like a man with a very bad skin condition.

“You know the owner?” Ramona asked, unconvinced. “What’s his name?”

“Brit.”

“Wrong!” Ramona shot back, no doubt feeling like she had tremendous power at the moment.

“Brit *is* living here, though.” Celia continued, unfazed. “He’s been here for months.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you broke into the house,” Ramona said, standing her ground.

“They were sneaking around in the yard, peeking in the windows.” One of the other neighbors said. “I wasn’t sure if they’d gotten into the house, though. That’s why we called you.”

“And I’m glad you did,” Ramona said, patting the neighbor on the back in appreciation.

“We didn’t break into the house,” Celia shouted. “The back door was open. Brit is a friend of mine and we were going to play a prank on him.”

“We didn’t steal anything,” I said, lifting up my hands for inspection. Celia lifted hers up as well. Luckily, we’d already tucked the DVDs and printed material into our pockets prior to leaving the house.

“Henson, you surprise me.” Ramona said, shaking her head. “I thought you were such an honest man.”

“I am, Ramona,” I assured her. “This is not what it looks like. Sly is right. We were just playing a prank.”

“What kind of prank?” One of the other neighbors asked, apparently interested. (Perhaps playing pranks on your neighbors was a common practice here.)

“We were going to hide in one of his closets,” Celia said quickly. “And then jump out and scare him.”

“That’s it?” the neighbor asked, clearly disappointed. “Amateurs!”

He was obviously hoping for something much more outrageous.

“But then Brit didn’t come back home,” I added. “So we thought we’d leave and surprise him at a different time.

“Well...” Ramona said thoughtfully. “I guess it sounds plausible.”

“Oh Ramona, stop it.” Luis scolded. “This is Henson we’re talking about. If he says they were playing a prank, they were playing a prank. Let’s all go back home and go to bed, before we wake up the rest of the neighborhood.”

I felt bad lying to Ramona and Luis, when they so obviously trusted me. But was I really betraying that trust by not telling them about the SSCP and the SSRS?

Luis walked over and shook my hand, while Ramona stayed her distance for a few moments conferring with other members of the posse. Luis seemed relieved that it was only me they found in the house, and not some dangerous criminal he might have to fight.

“Ramona likes to play cops and robbers every now and then,” Luis said, smiling. “So please forgive her for going a little overboard.”

“That’s okay,” I answered. “But I know she must be thinking this would never happen in Cuba, right?”

“And what does she really know about Cuba?” Luis said matter-of-factly. “She’s never even been there.”

“But...”

“I know, I know. She always mentions Cuba, but she was raised in Jamaica, Queens. She’s an American through and through.”

“Then why...?”

“She identifies with Cuba because of her Grandmother. Always has.”

“So her Grandmother was raised in Cuba?”

“Nope. She’d never been there either. But it was the homeland of her family for centuries, so she sort of lived there vicariously.”

“And Ramona is just carrying on the family tradition by osmosis?”

“I suppose so. And how can it hurt if it makes her happy? I love her no matter where she’s from.”

What a great guy Luis was. Happy to stand quietly in the background while his wife aggressively bulldozed her way through life.

“But what about her brother?” I asked. “Doesn’t he live in Cuba?”

“No. He lives in Manhattan somewhere. They haven’t spoken in years. She had a little trouble...*adjusting* to his new lifestyle.”

“Shhh.” Celia cut in, just as Ramona was about to approach our little group. She had dismissed her band of merry crimestoppers, and was now reluctantly joining *the accused* for further interrogation.

“So you know someone in this house named Brit?” Ramona asked, directing her question at Celia.

“Yeah. He’s lived here for months. Must be renting from the owner.”

The prosthetic piece Henry had used to make Celia’s nose look bigger was showing definite signs of upheaval. Around the edges where it had been blended into the skin were small gaps that appeared to be flaking.

“This is a rental property,” Ramona said with superiority. “Hasn’t been used for a long time, though. Then six months ago, someone decides to rent it for a year. Paid in cash, one of the neighbors told me. Some guy who works in television. Adam something.”

“Adam Wordon?” Celia said out loud, though I don’t think she meant to.

“Why yes,” Ramona responded. “Do you know him as well?”

“Slightly.”

Ramona seemed to be concentrating on the flaky skin around Celia’s nose.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Ramona said. “But you need to get yourself a good moisturizer. Your skin looks dangerously dry.”

“Ramona!” Luis blurted, rolling his eyes.

“What? I’m trying to be helpful. Just because you’re a man doesn’t mean you shouldn’t moisturize. You don’t want to end up looking like a leather wallet, do you? Or George Hamilton.”

Celia felt the area around her nose, and realized what was happening. She looked at me with panic in her eyes, and I knew we had to get out of there fast before her entire face disintegrated. She still looked pretty normal in the shadows, but if Ramona ever decided to turn on her flashlight again, the jig was up. So before anyone had a chance to further the conversation, Celia and I politely excused ourselves and were soon on our way back to the car.

“Let’s make sure someone is home next time before you go into their house, okay?”  
Ramona yelled in our wake.

Within ten minutes we were back at the RAMBO party looking for Henry and Bilbo. Celia pulled her hat down over her head so the brim would cast a shadow on her face. She also kept her eyes directed downward so that people couldn’t really get a good look at her peeling prosthetics.

The crowd had thinned a bit, as people spilled out onto the patio area and into the yard. When we finally found our missing comrades, they were as high as kites, and surrounded by a bevy of drag queens.

“Your make-up is flawless,” Henry was telling one particularly overweight Diva. “But the pounds, Honey. You need to lose a few before you can fit into the really fabulous clothing. Sequins, rhinestones and crystals don’t look as pretty when they’re stretched, you know what I’m saying?”

“I know,” The Diva responded. “But it’s so hard to lose the weight.”

“Then stop eating,” Henry shot back. “Simple as that. You think Celia Westend got to where she was because she ate donuts and chocolate? No way, Baby. She starves for her art.”

“You know Celia Westend?” The Diva asked, his eyes popping out of his head.

“Well, of course, darling. I know everyone.”

At that moment, Henry noticed us standing next to him and let out a loud scream.

“Celia, Darling, you’re back,” Henry said rather loudly. “We were just talking about you.”

Apparently Henry’s advanced state of euphoria had created a memory lag, because he’d completely forgotten we wanted to keep Celia’s identity a secret.

“Who’s Celia?” The Diva asked, looking past us into the crowd of people.

“I am,” I said, pushing myself in front. “Henry likes to call me Celia as a joke.”

“Oh.” The Diva said, disappointed. “I thought he really knew her.”

As the Diva walked away, Henry tried to protest.

“Wait. I do know Celia,” Henry shouted. “And this is not her. This is her friend, Bruce. Wait. Come back!”

I put my arm around Henry and steered him in the opposite direction from the departing Diva.

“Celia is a secret, remember?” I whispered into Henry’s ear.

“What? Why are you spitting on me?” Henry yelled, breaking away.

Henry’s scream suddenly caught Bilbo’s attention. He’d been in the corner making out with the mini Queen Latifah we’d seen earlier, but was now happily bouncing his way toward us.

“Where have you guys been?” Bilbo screamed in delight, as he hugged me tightly, thrusting his face directly into my crotch.

“We ran into an old friend,” I said, peeling Bilbo off me like a barnacle from a rock. “We need to go!”

“Just one more drink,” Henry protested.

“NOW!” Celia said in her deepest and most commanding tone.

Fifteen minutes later we were speeding down Route 22 toward the city. As I drove, Henry and Bilbo were happily singing and laughing in the backseat, while Celia attempted to clean the prosthetic pieces off her face.

We had intended to take *my* car back to the city, but Henry and Bilbo were in no shape to drive themselves. It meant Celia and I would probably have to catch a train back to Plainfield, but it didn’t matter. The only thing that seemed important right now was finding *the missing link* on the Upper West Side. Hopefully, whatever that was would help us find Unity.

“It’s past midnight,” Celia said. “We might be too late.”

“Too late for what?” I asked.

“Too late for whatever Paul and Brit were going to do. They have almost a two hour head start on us.”

Henry and Bilbo began singing old Cher songs, and that was pretty much the brunt of our conversation for the rest of the journey. When we arrived in Manhattan, we dropped them off at their apartment building, and drove off. Henry didn't even notice we'd taken his car, as he and Bilbo danced their way up the stairs and into the doorway.

“Next stop, 145 Riverside Drive,” I announced, as I stepped on the gas.

Celia had done a great job of removing most of the make-up and prosthetics from her face. She'd also managed to unravel the binding around her breasts without the help of Henry or Bilbo. When she was done, her breasts popped out into the moonlight, allowing me a close-up look at her famous rack. At that moment, I felt a rush of appreciation for art and beauty and everything esthetically pleasing.

“Are you staring at my breasts?” Celia asked me, as she squeezed herself into an old t-shirt she'd found in Henry's trunk.

“Yes. Sorry,” I said, looking away. “I've just never seen such a perfect pair in the flesh. All the girls I dated in my pre-gay days were pretty flat.”

“They were the lucky ones,” Celia said laughing.

“They were also sixteen or seventeen, so I'm sure things developed later. But by that time, I'd moved on to a much different kind of breast.”

“My chest may be my fortune, but there are days I'd gladly trade it in for a less obtrusive model. The attention it gets can sometimes be depressing.”

Once again, I felt a brotherly affection for this woman. I'd only known her for a little over twenty-four hours, but it seemed like a lifetime to me. I felt I understood her so well. And what's more, I wanted to help her.

“What do you think we'll find?” Celia asked.

“Where?”

“At the apartment. Or whatever it is.”

“I don't know,” I said, turning the car up 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue toward Central Park. “You've been at this much longer than me.”

When we got to 86<sup>th</sup> Street, I turned left and followed it down to Riverside Drive. Once there, we found 145 pretty easily. It was a tall brick building that looked like it had

survived many World Wars. I parked the car, and we practically ran to the building, entering the small vestibule to see what we could find.

There wasn't a doorman, but rather a framed roster on the wall, that contained the names of all the residents of the building. Next to each name was a small round button you could press if you wanted to buzz them. Celia and I quickly scanned the list of names to see if any sounded familiar. Near the bottom of the list, we found one that definitely stood out from the rest.

U. Tree.

**Next Episode: In Apartment 16J**