

### **Chapter Thirty-One—In Apartment 16J**

My hands were shaking when I pressed the buzzer to apartment 16J. It was well after one o' clock in the morning, so I didn't really expect anyone to answer. But since we'd come this far, it couldn't hurt to see what happened. Maybe there was someone living in the apartment that might be able to help. Or at least answer a few questions.

When no one responded after a minute, we decided to buzz again on the outside chance someone didn't hear the first ring. After a few moments, a disembodied voice blasted over the crackling intercom system.

“Yes? Who's there?”

Was it Unity? I couldn't tell. The intercom was obviously one of the first models ever created, so the reliability of its vocal transmission was somewhat in question. It crackled and popped and seemed to noisily obscure much of what was said.

“Unity? Is that you?” I practically yelled into the microphone.

No response. After a few moments, I spoke again.

“It's Henson, Unity.”

“And Celia. We're very worried about you.”

Silence. Then suddenly, the loud jarring scream of the door buzzer jolted us into motion, and within moments we were inside the building. We still didn't know what awaited us in apartment 16J, but we were both anxiously willing to find out.

The elevator did nothing to calm our anticipation as it slowly creaked and clawed its way up the shaft to the top floor. My heart was pumping hard and I could feel my breathing coming in short measured gasps.

The elevator finally reached the sixteenth floor, and jerked slightly as the doors opened for us to escape. I couldn't imagine Unity living in a building like this, with its antiquated elevator and intercom system. But perhaps it was just another *Tree and Sympathy* acquisition, and Unity didn't really live here at all. They just used her name for the building roster.

The door to 16J was slightly ajar, and there was a television playing in the background. As I slowly pushed the door open, I wasn't sure what we were going to find. Would it be Unity? Or maybe someone connected with her disappearance? Or would it be someone

who was just renting the apartment? Either way, Celia and I were taking a big chance in coming here, especially if Paul and Brit were the people waiting inside.

“Hello Henson, Celia.”

The voice came from behind us. As we turned around, we were happily greeted by a wonderfully familiar smile. It was Unity. She was back. And even better than that, she was safe. Or at least she appeared to be safe, despite the fact that she was currently sitting in a wheelchair.

“How are you?” Celia asked, running to Unity’s side and giving her an affectionate squeeze.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“We were so worried about you,” I said, as I also rushed over to give her a gentle hug.

“I didn’t realize you two were acquainted,” Unity said, looking at us curiously. “How did that happen?”

“It’s a long story,” I said, before quickly changing the subject. “You gave us quite a scare, Young Lady. We didn’t know where you were or what happened to you. We thought the SSRS might have...”

As soon as the words escaped my mouth, I regretted saying them. If Celia and I had any hope of hiding my knowledge of the SSCP, I’d just blown it. By using the acronym for the SSRS, I’d pretty much implied I knew about the SSCP as well. The two went hand in hand.

“The SSRS?” Unity asked. “What in the world is that?”

I looked to Celia for help, but she seemed resigned to our fate.

“It’s the *Secret Society of Reality Stars*. They’re the ones giving the SSCP so much trouble.”

Unity looked at Celia with a strange expression.

“He *knows* about the SSCP, Unity,” Celia said with a sigh. “I told him everything.”

“I see.”

Unity was silent for a moment, her mind obviously trying to grasp the significance of what she’d just heard. My knowledge of the SSCP, and her involvement with it, meant that all their generous “help” would now come to an end. But I was okay with that, as long as I didn’t lose Unity and Celia as well.

The room was silent. We all looked at each other, but I don't think anyone knew exactly what to say. Or how to explain what each of us had been going through over the past several months. It was all too enormous to talk about. Too many threads to tie together, too many secrets to reveal. Unity was the first to break the silence and speak.

"I take it you've been helping each other then?"

The way Unity phrased the question, along with the twinkle in her eye, made both Celia and I immediately relax. After that, it was open season on anything and everything. We sat and talked for hours, sharing all the various adventures we'd each experienced. It felt good to finally share with Unity all my suspicions about "the house across the street," all the famous people I thought I'd seen there. And how I discovered she was connected with the house by doing a little research at the local Tax Assessor's Office.

Unity listened in fascination, perhaps taking mental notes to help prevent these types of issues in the future. It was also interesting to hear everything from *Celia's* perspective, though most of it I already knew. But the story that mainly interested me was what happened to Unity and why she'd disappeared for several months.

"It's the silliest thing, really," Unity began. "I was in Australia, trying to figure out how to help that poor girl who'd been attacked, when the most horrific thing happened. I was out one day, attending a matinee of *HMS Pinafore* at the Opera House, and I lost my footing."

Celia and I looked at each other. We knew Unity didn't lose her footing. She was actually *pushed* down the flight of stairs, as evidenced by the SSRS video we'd seen earlier. But neither one of us wanted to bring up that unpleasant bit of information right now.

"The next thing I knew," Unity added. "I was in a hospital in Sydney. The doctors said I'd been in a coma for eight weeks."

"Eight weeks?" Celia gasped. "Oh Unity, I'm so sorry."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" I added, before realizing what a stupid question that was.

The irony apparently hit Unity at the right time, because she burst out laughing. As did Celia. And eventually I joined in as well. Perhaps we were overly giddy from our happy reunion, or maybe we were just releasing our pent up stress. Either way, it felt good to let go like that, to share a few moments of mutual joy with these two amazing women. When we finally managed to calm ourselves down, Unity continued her story.

"I'd been lying in this hospital for months," Unity said. "And no one knew who I was. My purse had apparently been stolen after I fell, so I was listed as Jane Doe on the hospital roster."

“Which explains why no one could find you,” Celia concluded.

“So how did you finally wake up?” I asked, fascinated that someone could lose several months of their life, and then suddenly recover.

“You’ll think I’m crazy,” Unity laughed. “But *you* woke me up.”

“I did?” I asked, astounded.

“You *and* Celia. That’s why it’s not a total surprise to me that you’re both here together. I saw you in my dreams that way. And you were both calling to me, and shaking me, and it apparently worked. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I finally came out of the coma just to shut you both up.”

The comment made me laugh. And then I got a big lump in my throat. Why would Unity have visions of Celia and me together, unless there was something entirely unworldly or unexplained going on? Could the power of our desire to find Unity have activated some hidden form of communication in the human psyche? Or was it just a coincidence? Whatever the reason, I was happy to see Unity alive and well and sitting before me.

“I called you the other day,” Unity added, turning to me. “But our connection was so bad. I only heard every second or third word you said, and then the line went dead. I tried calling again, but I couldn’t get through.”

“I thought you were asking me to help you,” I said. “Like you were in trouble.”

“Actually, when I called you, I was trying to tell you I’d already had a bit of trouble. But that I’d gotten some help and I was flying home that day.”

“Never heard it that clearly,” I said, a little embarrassed. “But that’s how I happened to go across the street to the SSCP house. I knew it was owned by *Tree and Sympathy*, so I was hoping whoever lived there might know something about where you were. Imagine my surprise when I found Celia.”

Celia was smiling. She knew I was implying it was actually *me* who’d initiated our first contact, rather than *her*. But I didn’t want the SSCP to get angry, or kick her out of the group. So maybe if they thought *I* was the instigator, things would go easier for her. And it’s not like I was telling a lie; I was just misdirecting the truth a little. (You know, like the Government does.)

“Celia was very hesitant to talk to me,” I assured Unity. “It wasn’t ‘til I said you were in trouble that she finally agreed to help.”

“I assume you got the message I left for you yesterday?” Unity asked.

“Uh, no.” I said, again embarrassed. “I wasn’t home all day.”

“Oh. Then how did you know where to find me? Or that I’d be here?”

“We didn’t,” Celia jumped in. “We didn’t know what we’d find, actually. We were following a tip given to us inadvertently by the SSRS.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned them,” Unity said. “But who are they?”

For the next forty-five minutes, Celia and I told Unity everything we’d learned about the SSRS, including finding their website and the video of her being pushed down the stairs. Unity was visibly upset when Celia told her, as I’m sure she always imagined the best in people. The revelation that someone intentionally did her harm must have been devastating.

Still, Unity listened intently to everything that was being said. Her eyebrows rose at the mention of Adam Wordon, though she didn’t seem at all surprised that Paul might be mixed up in this.

“How did you happen to associate with Paul?” I asked, finally able to quiz Unity on their connection.

“He was recommended to me by someone within the SSCP,” she answered, turning to Celia. “Someone who was very insistent I use him.”

“Who?” Celia asked, her eyes practically bulging out of her head.

“Lacie Fromage.”

Celia’s jaw dropped open, revealing her perfect set of pearly white teeth.

For those of you who don’t remember, Lacie Fromage was the biggest sexpot of the late 1970s. She became internationally famous when her strapless gown fell off at a Cannes Film Festival. Nowadays, that type of exposure is commonplace. But back then, it catapulted Lacie from total unknown to global superstar within a week. Her quasi-French accent and exotic good looks made her an instant favorite with Hollywood producers, who quickly found a way to exploit her generous assets in a string of mildly successful B-Movies. The most famous of which is the undeniable cult classic *She Strips to Conquer*, about a poor migrant worker who takes up poll dancing to save her family from starvation.

Another well-known fact about Lacie is that she absolutely *hated* Celia. Their rivalry was notorious, or at least that’s the story that was continually perpetuated in supermarket tabloids. In truth, it was actually a one-sided rivalry, as I don’t believe Celia really participated in it. But that didn’t stop Lacie; she trashed Celia in the press every chance she got.

“*Lacie Fromage?*” Celia exclaimed, still in apparent shock. “I didn’t even know she was a member of the SSCP. How did that happen?”

“I think George felt sorry for her,” Unity surmised. “He’d had a big crush on her in the seventies, and wanted to do something to make her feel needed again. She apparently broke down in front of him one night at a party, and whined about how nobody loved her anymore. And you know George; he’s a sucker for a beautiful woman with a problem. He instinctively wants to help them.”

“I’ve never understood why Lacie doesn’t like me,” Celia said, the pain of so many hateful attacks clearly evident on her face. “I’ve never done anything to her. I’ve never even met her.”

“It’s not you, Dear,” Unity said. “It’s what you represent. The Fame. The Career. The Beauty. All the things she had twenty years ago.”

“That’s not a reason to attack me.”

“No, it’s not. But Lacie is a very vain and selfish person, not to mention calculating. When she heard I was going to be giving Henson his own house, she pressured George into involving her realtor friend Paul to make it look legitimate.”

“Legitimate?” I asked.

“Yes, I already owned the house. Or rather, *Tree and Sympathy* did. But I didn’t want *you* to know that. So we decided to use Paul to make it appear like a more recent acquisition. It was Lacie’s idea.”

“*Lacie’s* idea?” Celia retorted. “Or *someone else’s* idea which Lacie carried out.”

“More likely the latter,” Unity answered. “But it explains how this SSRS group knows so much about our work and the various Chosens. Lacie’s been feeding them information.”

“So Lacie’s a Mole,” I surmised.

“I can think of a few other words that would suit her better than Mole,” Celia noted, the right side of her lip curling up into a snarl. “I just wonder how George is going to react when he finds out Lacie is the security breach.”

“I was always leery about trusting her,” Unity said. “But I thought if I took her suggestion about working with Paul, Lacie might return the favor and stop attacking Celia. Unfortunately, that never really came to fruition.”

“It’s okay,” Celia said, feigning a smile. “At least we know who we’re dealing with now. Maybe we can use that to our advantage.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, right now we know who they are, and when their next attack is--at the charity benefit honoring George next Saturday. But since they don't know *we know*, maybe we can feed Lacie some false information that will help prevent it from happening.”

“Like what?”

“I don't know. I only made the suggestion,” Celia said, flustered. “I didn't actually carry the idea to its conclusion. I can't think of everything!”

I laughed, because it was clear we were all getting a little cranky. We'd been talking for so long, it was now almost five in the morning. Unity suggested we get some sleep and then we could tackle everything fresh once we were rested. I insisted that Celia take the guest room, while I made do with the foldout couch in the office. And within twenty minutes, we were all safely under covers and unconscious.

I must have fallen asleep quickly, because all I can remember is having the most wonderful dreams. Not that I remember many of the details, really, except that they were all very colorful and I was having a good time in them.

At one point, I saw a beautiful man standing over me. Tall, dark, handsome. As he got closer, he started saying my name very softly. “Henson. Henson?” He was so nice and gentle, and he looked like someone I knew. Someone I admired. Oh wait, it was George Clooney.

Wow. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a George Clooney dream, but they were always so pleasant. They were never sexual dreams or even particularly romantic, but very satisfying nonetheless.

“Henson? Henson?”

The voice was becoming more persistent now, and I could feel myself slipping into consciousness. But no, I didn't want to wake up yet, because then George would go away. But I didn't want George to go. I wanted him to stay and keep saying my name.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I wasn't sure if it was still a part of my dream or whether it was really happening, but the hand began to gently massage me.

“Henson? Time to wake up.”

There was no stopping the inevitable. I had to wake up. I had to leave George. I had to help Celia and Unity destroy the SSRS.

But when I opened my eyes, George was still there. And what's more, Unity and Celia were standing behind him.

This wasn't a dream. This was just another day in my bizarre reality. A reality that had the real George Clooney standing over me rubbing my shoulder. I'll never need to dream again.

**Next Episode: The Plan**