

Chapter Thirty-Two—The Plan

“Hello, Henson.” George said, smiling down on me.

“Hello Mr. Clooney.” I managed to say, as I stared up into his big beautiful eyes.

“Call me George.”

“Gladly.”

Unity and Celia chuckled behind him.

“You’ve been sleeping all day,” Celia teased. “We figured if anyone could wake you, George could.”

“You can wake me anytime,” I said, before realizing I was actually speaking out loud.

George laughed. He must get that kind of adulation all the time. And with good reason. The man was even more beautiful in person than he was in the movies. Surely he was one of the Gods come down to earth.

“You’ve slept for twelve hours straight,” Celia said. “I’ve tried to wake you three times, but you never responded.”

“Twelve hours?” I asked, stunned. “What time is it?”

“It’s five o’clock. George arrived at noon, and we’ve been filling him in on what’s happened.”

“You’re a brave man,” George said, still smiling, still gorgeous. “I appreciate all the help you’ve given Celia. She’s been raving about you non-stop.”

“I’m your biggest fan,” Celia said in a mock swoon.

“And I appreciate all the help you’ve given me,” I said. “I’m still shocked that I would warrant such attention. Although I’ve definitely grown from the experience.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” George said. “I had a feeling when I saw your apartment you were someone who just needed a little push in the right direction.”

“I’m sorry, c-c-come again,” I stammered, not quite sure I’d heard him correctly. “You saw my apartment? You mean my old apartment in the city? How is that possible?”

George's facial expression froze for a moment, though his eyes remained active. There was something going on behind those eyes, a whirlwind of activity. George was not one to use his words lightly, and it appeared he'd let something slip that wasn't meant for my ears. After a few moments, his face relaxed and he said, quite simply:

"I was the one who got you home from the bar the day you were fired."

WHAT? I'd already met George Clooney before and I didn't even remember it? Could I really have been *that drunk*?

"I was wearing a wig," George continued. "And glasses and other stuff that changed my appearance, so you never would have known it was me. And by the time I found you, you were practically sleeping, anyway."

"You found me?" I said, as the moisture in my throat suddenly dried up like a desert.

"Yes. Julia called me one day and said she'd met someone she thought would make a great candidate for the SSCP. Apparently you impressed her during a meeting with your advertising firm."

I might have interjected something here, but I was too stupefied to speak. Julia Roberts was the one who recommended me to the SSCP? That's how this all started? On the day I got fired? The revelation hit me so hard I fell into a position similar to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*; I was frozen in shock. Another little piece of my bizarre puzzle coming together.

"Later that day, Julia had one of her assistants call your office to inquire about you, and that's when she found out you'd been fired. Of course, she felt awful. So her assistant did some checking around, and found out from one of your co-workers that you sometimes hang out at a bar called *Zeros*."

Totally untrue. I never "hang out" at *Zeros*. I'd been to *Zeros* several times with some co-workers, but only because it was conveniently located near our office. It wasn't even a gay bar. Though by the name, you can just imagine what kind of clientele it catered to. And on the day I got fired, I didn't care where I went. I just wanted to get drunk, and get drunk fast. And *Zeros* seemed as good a place as any.

"Sure enough, Julia's assistant found you there," George continued, as if he was the Master of Ceremonies on *This Is Your Life*. "And that's when Julia called me. She asked me to check up on you."

"I can't believe you came to *Zeros*." I said, astonished that George would ever venture into such a place.

"Pretty seedy," George said, smiling. "You're lucky I found you before someone else did."

George then recounted how he got me safely back to my apartment, even though I'd completely forgotten where I lived. He finally had to search through my wallet to find the address. But once I was safely inside my little studio and dozing in my bed, he evidently used the opportunity to do a little snooping.

"And that's when I found all your artwork," George noted. "And your writing."

"What writing?"

"Your blog, *Henson's Hell*. Your computer was on, and I noticed you'd been writing something. It was one of your blog entries. A short story called *Desperately Seeking Asylum*. Pretty funny stuff."

"Yes, that's one of my favorites," Unity chimed in.

"I like *Thimble Man* the best," Celia offered.

I couldn't believe all three of them had read my blog. Although it certainly explained why I got that small surge in hits the week after I was fired. I found out later the reason the hits eventually soared to over ten thousand was because the blog link was listed on the SSCP website, so members could click through if they wanted to find out more about me. Weird to think that people like John Travolta and Jennifer Lopez might actually want to do that.

George also confessed that he was the one who put two hundred dollars in my pocket that evening. He then took my blog stories to Unity, who apparently had a gift for discovering and cultivating talent. Unity loved the stories and decided that she herself would be a good match for what they wanted to do for me.

This apparently was unheard of. Up until that time Unity had always acted as a consultant for the SSCP, but she'd never actually been personally involved with any of the Chosens.

"I saw potential in you, Henson." Unity added at one point. "You were down on your luck and feeling sorry for yourself, but you still had a great sense of humor about it. A self-deprecating humor to be sure, but a humor nonetheless. And out of that humor came a voice, and a point of view, and a desire to express yourself. But you weren't doing that. You were just coasting, hoping something might happen. You needed a push in the right direction. And I decided I was just the person to do it."

"She was very persuasive," George said, winking at me. "What could I do?"

So that's what this all came down to? My blog ramblings? I was chosen as a Chosen because of some creative writing I did on the internet? How bizarre is that?

I suppose I should be grateful the SSCP saw potential in me, rather than helping me because they thought I was a loser. It made their help feel a little less like charity and a little more like sponsorship. Which is not a bad thing, as long as I made good on all the patronage.

When George, Unity and Celia were finished explaining my SSCP selection process, I thought that would be the end of it and I'd soon be on my way back to Plainfield. But there was still one more surprise left to share.

"So now that you know all this," George began. "We're going to ask you to help us. You can say no if you'd like, but we're hoping you'll agree to carry out a very important task."

"And what is that?"

"We want to expose the SSRS."

I didn't even bat an eyelash before saying "I'm in."

What transpired over the next few hours can best be described as surreal. While George explained our plan of attack, I felt like I was a member of his *Oceans Eleven* team. (Or even *Twelve* or *Thirteen*.) The man definitely has a knack for organization.

I was astounded at what he wanted to do and how I would fit in. It was a risky move on his part, and the fact that he trusted a large portion of the success on my participation was daunting. Celia and Unity were either already apprised of the plan, or had no objections to it, because they nodded their approval throughout.

"There's one thing I don't get," I said, after everything was explained. "Why would Lacie Fromage want to help the SSRS when she's a member of the SSCP?"

"Because she's a hybrid," George said, matter-of-factly. "She started her career in the movies but then moved into reality television, so I guess she feels she can play both sides."

I'd forgotten Lacie Fromage had a brief success on Lifetime with a reality show called *Lacie's Next Big Sex Symbol*. It was a rip-off of a rip-off in which Lacie acted as mentor to hundreds of young hopefuls.

Each week she would verbally abuse the female contestants for their physical imperfections, and lavish the male contestants with unnecessary praise for their buff and beefy physiques. The really sad part was that all the shots of Lacie were done with such heavy gauze on the camera lens that it looked like she was filmed in a dream sequence. There were never any close-ups, and most of her dialogue was dubbed in later. (Some of it by a professional voice impersonator, as Lacie tended to mash her words together like potatoes, making it quite difficult to understand her.)

Lacie's Next Big Sex Symbol proved to be an instant hit when it first came out, but then quickly lost its novelty after a few short months. When the show was not picked up for a second season, Lacie Fromage went on a rampage in the press about how the producers had ruined her career with the cancellation. And though it got Lacie a lot of publicity, people soon got tired of her endless bitching. And as one headline cleverly put it, "This Fromage is Getting Moldier by the Day."

It was this type of personality that reality television catered to. A celebrity of the minute. But what happens when that celebrity wants the minute to last for hours, and the public doesn't care? Then the celebrity has to fight to get back in the spotlight. And if that doesn't work, they try something else. Maybe they even hear about a group called the SSRS who is supposedly dedicated to their concerns. A group who wants to help bring them the attention they so richly deserve. Maybe they get caught up in this group, and before they know it, they're part of something that's bigger than their own concerns. Something that turns them into pawns in a war waged by one person against an entire group because of a wrong he suffered.

This was George's theory about the SSRS. Apparently he'd been aware of them for a few weeks now. He suspected that Adam Wordon started the SSRS as a way of gathering helpers for his plan. And it worked, because he'd somehow been able to build an army of angry, vengeful and distrusting people. People he'd met while working on various reality projects. People he could use to carry out the group's true purpose—not only to destroy the work of the SSCP, but to systematically destroy all of Hollywood.

While I was sleeping, Celia and George had apparently perused the SSRS website quite extensively. They found a whole section outlining plans for a new website called "Celebrity Outings," which was dedicated to exposing "the dark side of fame."

"That's the next phase of their plan?" I asked. "They're going to launch a website? What's so special about that?"

"It's not just a website," Celia explained. "It's an ongoing attack on Hollywood. And not just actors either, but writers, producers, directors...even the catering companies are fair game. They plan to expose everyone who's gay, or on drugs, or having an affair. Any kind of dirt they can find will be posted on the site, with no restrictions."

"Aren't Perez Hilton and TMZ already doing that?" I asked. "What's so different about the SSRS version?"

"For one thing, the reality stars are the reporters," Celia added. "And they're being pitted against each other in a constant competition for exposure on the site. So whoever gets the best scoop or the best dirt gets their video story on the home page and a certain share of the advertising revenue. There's also going to be an open forum where viewers can send in their own stories or info about celebrities to win a spot on the site."

“The whole thing is structured like a sales plan,” George clarified. “With big incentives for getting the worst information. I think the goal is to eventually sell the website for billions of dollars, but they would have to make it very, very popular first.”

“And exposing the SSCP is the big story they need to garner national attention,” Celia said, handing me a printout of some computer screenshots. “These are some sample pages they’ve already created for *Celebrity Outings*. As you can see, there is a lot of nasty stuff here.”

I looked through the screenshots, and was shocked to see some of the headlines, accusing various stars of everything from being an alcoholic to being a pedophile to being a wife-beater. There didn’t seem to be anything that was taboo, or anyone that was off-limits. And the names and faces that were maligned could easily spell box office disaster for any of their future projects. One particularly disturbing article claimed a very well-known television actress had a fetish for horses, particularly her prize black Arabian, which she’d apparently had sex with on more than one occasion. Ewwwww! (Not to mention Owwww!)

“This is like opening Pandora’s Box,” I said to no one in particular.

“The official launch of the site won’t be for another month,” George explained. “But they want next week’s charity event to jumpstart their pre-launch publicity campaign.”

This whole experience was beginning to feel like the plot of a summer action movie, with two rival factions going at each other in heightened Hollywood style. The cast would feature real celebrities playing themselves, and there would be tons of cameos and special guest appearances by other famous faces. It could be a major blockbuster event of the summer. That is, if anyone could actually believe the premise. (I’m sure I wouldn’t.)

The other interesting bit of trivia George revealed was that the male contestant who won the title of *Lacie’s Next Big Sex Symbol* was actually someone Celia and I already knew. Someone who’d been on another reality show with similar success. My old friend Brit, who is apparently known in the industry as a reality show whore, having made numerous appearances on shows like *Road Hag*, *Speedo Island* and *Pop That Cherry*, the latter wisely cancelled before it even aired.

Brit and Lacie allegedly had a brief affair during the filming of *The Next Big Sex Symbol*, and many people think that’s the only reason he won. Though currently they weren’t romantically involved, they’d remained friendly. And George believed it was Brit who brought Lacie over to the dark side. She was obviously keeping him apprised on the SSCP, and now it was time to use that connection to their advantage.

Part of George’s plan involved feeding Lacie information she would definitely pass on to the SSRS. Information that would make sure the major people behind the SSRS, including Adam Wordon, would show up for the charity benefit George would be

honored at the following week. This is where I came in, though I was extremely nervous about my participation.

“You’ll be fine,” Celia told me. “George knows what he’s doing. And if he thinks you can handle this, you can handle it. He’s a very accomplished director, you know.”

I knew. There was nothing George Clooney couldn’t do. If he and Oprah ever got married, it would be like joining two celestial Kingdoms together. King Clooney and Queen Oprah. They could rule the earth.

Before that could happen, however, I needed to help carry out George’s plan. Which meant I would have to go to the charity event next week and mingle with the rich and famous. Possibly even talk to some as well. Not only that, but I had to carry out a very important task while I was there. A task that had to be completed at a very specific time and place with the utmost discretion. In other words, I couldn’t let anyone see me doing it. Talk about pressure!

“You don’t need to be nervous about this,” George told me. “You’ve come a long way since that day at Zeros. If I didn’t think you could handle it, I wouldn’t be asking you.”

“You’re a much braver person than you realize,” Celia chimed in.

“I believe in you, Henson.” Unity added. “And so do a cartload of others. You have a whole support system behind you, whether you fully realize it or not.”

“And you have a full support system in here too,” George said, tapping me on the forehead. “You just need to let it work for you.”

I wasn’t really sure what he meant by a “support system” in my head, unless he was implying I was schizophrenic or something. But it didn’t matter. I knew what I had to do, and what was expected of me. I couldn’t afford to fail. The future of the SSCP depended on it.

(Insert dramatic music here...and fade to black.)

Next Episode: Danger at Dixie Dells