

Chapter Thirty-Three—Danger at Dixie Dells

The next week was a flurry of activity. Not only did I have the SSCP and the SSRS to contend with, but I also had a crapload of eBay auctions to catch up on as well. I'd been absent from my house for two days, and the snail mail and e-mails had quickly been piling up.

When I arrived at the post office the following Monday with my first load of packages to mail out, Patty greeted me with a very uncharacteristic scream.

“HENSON! Thank God! I almost called the police to file a missing persons report.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked, somewhat taken aback by her unnecessary attention.

“You’ve been coming here almost daily for months,” Patty continued, ignoring the customer in front of her. “And then, all of a sudden, nothing. I thought maybe you’d been abducted by aliens.”

“Sorry. I got caught up in some personal stuff.”

At this point, everyone in line turned around to listen, perhaps assuming that I was about to give a quick recap of all the personal stuff I'd been caught up in. But since I had no intention of sharing my life with a bunch of complete strangers, I just smiled at them and busied myself with sorting through my packages. (I felt like one of those African art dealers at my old storage locker who continually sorted through their masks and statues as if they were actually looking for something. Perhaps a buyer.)

“You wouldn’t believe what’s happening on the Web these days,” Patty blurted out, when I finally made it to the service window. “Something strange is happening on a global basis.”

“You mean another terrorist threat?” I asked,

“Even stranger. All these former cast members from reality TV shows are going crazy or something, breaking into people’s homes, harassing them on the street. It’s like there’s an epidemic of some kind. Or at least a pattern.”

“What kind of pattern?”

“Well...they only seem to be harassing famous people. For instance, Amelia Ferrit from *Tales of the Topless* got caught breaking and entering the home of Danny Devito. She said she was looking for some stolen artwork. Then those guys who won *Twin Swap* were cited for stalking Mary Kate and Ashley, and some guy from the Australian *Big Brother* was just arrested for trying to blackmail Nicole Kidman. The one thing they all have in

common is that a reality show cast member is doing something illegal in connection with a famous celebrity. That sounds like a pattern to me.”

You have no idea!

Patty’s comment made me more anxious than ever. From what she was telling me, it seemed like the SSRS had ramped up its efforts of late. And even though some of those efforts had obviously failed, it made me increasingly nervous about whether I would fail as well. My big mission didn’t happen until Saturday, but I never stopped thinking about it for a minute. It had to succeed. It just had to.

The next day, as I was burrowing through another pile of auction items I needed to send out, there was a knock on the door. It was Ramona. We hadn’t spoken since the night she caught me breaking into Brit’s house.

“I’ve found him, Henson,” Ramona screamed in delight. She was very excited.

“You’ve found who?” I asked.

“My brother Humberto. As you know, we had a huge fight a few years ago and haven’t spoken since.”

“Actually, I *didn’t* know that...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ramona continued. “Now you do. The point is, he moved out of his old apartment and never told me where he went. But last night, my cousin let it slip that he’s living in Manhattan and working for some food company. She wouldn’t give me his phone number. But she promised to talk to him for me, and tell him how sorry I am.”

“That’s great. I’m sure you two will be back together in no time.”

Ramona was beaming. Just knowing her brother was living somewhere close by must have been a comfort to her. It meant there was the possibility of a reunion. And perhaps some apologies and explanations.

“I haven’t forgotten about the other night, you know.” Ramona said, abruptly changing the subject.

“Neither have I.”

“I hope you’re not getting mixed up with the wrong crowd. Especially that guy you were with. Sly? What kind of name is that?”

“It’s short for Sylvester,” I said, thinking quickly. “Just like Sylvester Stallone. He goes by the nickname Sly as well.”

“That’s not exactly a *plus* in my book. Is this Sly fellow your *boy toy*?”

“No.”

“Lover?”

“No.”

“Just a trick then?”

“No, Ramona. Sly is my *friend*. And where did you learn about *tricks*?”

“AsktheGayGuydotcom.”

Ramona stayed for another twenty minutes, filling me in on all the interesting articles she’d googled recently or the chatrooms she frequented. Her constant web surfing for homo propaganda made her officially more active in the gay community than I was.

When she finally departed, I tried calling Officer Rick again. I’d already left him several messages, but so far he hadn’t returned any of my calls. It was very frustrating, because I couldn’t exactly leave him a personal message at the police station. So instead, I used the excuse that I was following up on my stolen Jeep and figurine, and wanted to ask the Officer a few questions.

I can only imagine what Rick must think of me after Celia and I deserted him the other night. Celia had promised to help smooth things over, but then had to fly to Los Angeles for a few days to do some fittings for a Vanity Fair photo shoot.

“If you need anything,” Celia said, before heading to the airport. “Call my cell phone. I’ll call back as soon as I can.”

She hugged me hard, and I could see her eyes beginning to water. I had a huge lump in my throat as well. We’d become very close over the last weekend and I never wanted it to end. Although I knew that once my mission for the SSCP was finished, our relationship would probably be over as well.

As I was contemplating my uncertain future, the phone rang. It was Barney. He and Bob were having dinner with the Two Jakes, the wrestling couple I’d met at my second RAMBO, and wanted to know if I’d like to join them. I immediately accepted, and then launched into a long-winded explanation about the stolen Jeep, and how sorry I was I hadn’t told them about it before, but I felt weird because after it was stolen I got a new car through a bizarre set of circumstances and I didn’t know how to explain the whole thing without sounding like I made it all up, so I just didn’t say anything.

When I was finished with my verbal diarrhea, there was a long pause on the other end, and then Barney began laughing.

“We know, “ Barney said. “We’ve known for a while. We just couldn’t figure out why you never told us.”

“I was embarrassed. You sell me this great Jeep, and two weeks later it’s stolen. I thought you’d be mad at me.”

“What??!?” Barney laughed again. “Henson, you’re a nut. Why would I get mad at you if someone stole the Jeep? It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“We’ll pick you up at seven.”

After I hung up, I began perusing the SSRS website on my computer. I was hoping I’d find something that would be incriminating enough to stop them from launching “Celebrity Outings.” But after looking through the website for a couple hours and finding nothing new or significant, I decided to call it quits. I leaned back in my chair to stretch, and instinctively looked out the side window at the house across the street. The house that so many celebrities had traveled to during the last few months, and where Celia and I sat for hours as I learned all about the SSCP and my place as a Chosen. It now stood dark and silent, with no trace of the excitement recently played out inside it. It was sad, looking at the now familiar structure, knowing that it would never again be used for Henson-sightings.

I could feel my throat start to tighten with emotion, so I decided to take a shower. Perhaps I was hoping to wash off some of the sadness that was slowly engulfing me. The sadness of knowing that my wild and exciting life was about to end, and I would soon be downgraded from a *Chosen* to a *Normal*. (Or whatever the SSCP called a regular person. ND Background?)

Bob and Barney picked me up promptly at seven. The two Jakes were already in the back seat, and had cleared a space for me to climb in between them. We exchanged the customary hugs and kisses before I sat down, though the two Jakes continued touching me all the way to the restaurant. One of them would squeeze my arm, while another rubbed up against my leg. Or one would whisper something in one ear, while the other whispered something in the other, their hot breath tickling my neck and shoulders. They certainly were an affectionate pair. I had a feeling if Bob and Barney weren’t with us, I might easily have become this evening’s special entree.

The restaurant we went to was another Plainfield original—Lydia’s World Famous Dixie Dells Café. The specialty of the café was down-home southern cooking, complete with hot biscuits, fried chicken and country ham. There was even Fried Catfish on the menu, though none of us were very keen on trying it.

I was a little surprised at the choice of restaurant because it was about as far from healthy cooking as you could get. There was even a sign on the door that read: *Leave your weight and worries behind, because the only thing that's low-fat, low-calorie and low-cholesterol at Lydia's is the water.*

“We like to indulge ourselves every now and then,” Bob informed me. “And Lydia’s chicken and biscuits are some of the best we ever tasted.”

The walls of Lydia’s Dixie Dells Café were covered with framed black and white pictures of Lydia with famous celebrities of the fifties. Frank, Dean, Judy. The pictures were taken in a much different restaurant than the Dixie Dells, much more elegant and refined. But all the photos featured Lydia smiling as wide as she could, holding a plate of her famous fried chicken.

Most of the pictures had faded, as had Lydia herself, who was now twice as big and three times as old. She still worked in the kitchen though, and made her way through the dining room at various intervals to greet her guests and offer some of her down-home Southern hospitality. (I later found out Lydia was actually born and raised in Newark, NJ. But like my neighbor Ramona, she had chosen to identify herself with another locale—in her case, the South. I suppose it was much more profitable for her.)

“I want empty plates coming back to the kitchen, you hear?” Lydia bellowed, leaning her large frame on the back of Barney’s chair. “None of that doggy bag nonsense, or trying to take anything home. You came here to eat, so that’s what you’re gonna do.”

And with that, Lydia shuffled back to the kitchen and disappeared behind the swinging doors, humming and fanning herself all the way. She was an earth mother, to be sure, and I could see why the restaurant had survived so long. Her presence made you feel well taken care of.

In fact, this was the first time I’d actually felt relaxed all week. The first time I could just sit around and catch up with my new friends in Plainfield. Especially the Two Jakes, who kept me entertained with stories of their recent trip to the Syracuse Gay Wrestling tournament. It was nice to once again have their undivided attention. But now that I had feelings for Officer Rick, I didn’t want to encourage their little game of ménage a trios. I would have to nip this baby in the bud.

“Well, well, well,” a voice came from behind us. “If it isn’t the most handsome assortment of men this side of Chippendale’s.”

I turned around to find JezeBall, who once again magically appeared in the very restaurant in which I was eating. I was glad to see him, because I’d totally forgotten to call about Unity. But when I opened my mouth to speak, I noticed someone else standing behind him. Someone I never expected to see again.

“You all know Brit, don’t you?” JezeBall said, gesturing toward Brit as if he was Vanna White displaying a puzzle board.

Brit flashed a huge smile, before he looked down at me with a smirk of condescension.

“Hello Henson,” Brit said, patting me on the shoulder. “Sorry I skipped out on you the other night. Urgent business. Hello everyone.”

People around the table nodded at Brit, though none of them seemed very excited to see him. I smiled and tried to appear happy, but all I really wanted to do was punch Brit in the face. Or kick him hard in the groin. Or any of a dozen other scenarios that involved the painful mutilation of one of his body parts.

“Henson, may I speak with you a moment?” JezeBall asked, as he gently pushed me out of my chair. “Brit, why don’t you take Henson’s place while we have a little chat?”

“Can’t I be a part of the little chat too?” Brit asked.

“No.” JezeBall said firmly, before smiling and performing a little hitch-kick.

JezeBall practically pulled me out the front door and onto the stoop outside. He was breathing heavily and looked quite overheated. As I waited for him to catch his breath, I noticed a black van on the opposite side of the street. The lights weren’t on, but the engine was running. You couldn’t really see in the windows because they were tinted, but it reminded me of the van I’d seen outside my house the day I was followed home from the post office.

“Is something wrong?” JezeBall asked.

“No, nothing,” I said, turning back to him. “I’ve been meaning to call you. I heard from Unity.”

“I know,” JezeBall said. “I spoke to her today. She’s very fond of you.”

“And I of her.”

“That’s nice,” JezeBall replied, smiling briefly. “Now tell me what you know about this Brit fellow.”

The directness of his inquiry startled me.

“Not a lot. Why?”

“I’m not sure, but I think he means to do you harm.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just a feeling. A hunch, perhaps. Did you know he was out here watching you through the window?”

“When?”

“Before we came in,” JezeBall said, looking around to make sure Brit hadn’t somehow joined us. “He was standing at the window staring at you. Or at your group, anyway. When I asked him what he was staring at, he told me he’d spotted some friends. Naturally I wanted to know who his friends might be, and that’s when he began asking all kinds of questions about *you*.”

“Maybe he likes me,” I said, trying to sound casual. The last thing I wanted to do was call attention to Brit before my big night on Saturday. If anyone from the SSRS ever suspected what was about to happen, it could ruin everything.

“He wanted to know if you were a trustworthy person,” JezeBall continued. “And then he asked if you’d spoken to me about your neighbors across the street.”

“My neighbors?”

“Yes. He seemed to think you had some strange neighbors or something. Is that true?”

This was awkward. I couldn’t very well tell JezeBall about the SSCP house, since he obviously didn’t know anything about it. But how was I going to divert his attention without lying to him?

As fate would have it, I didn’t have to. For at that very moment, the black van on the other side of the street suddenly came to life and sped across the intersection to the sidewalk right next to where JezeBall and I were standing. The side doors swung open abruptly, and three large men emerged from inside. Without a word, they ran over and grabbed me, pushing JezeBall aside in the process. The assault happened so quickly, it took us both by surprise.

I tried to struggle out of the men’s grip, but they were very strong. Two of them picked me up and threw me in the van, slamming me hard against the metal interior. The other one was trying to put something over my mouth. A cloth of some kind, perhaps doused in chloroform. I slapped his hand out of my way and tried to get out, but one of them punched me in the stomach. It felt like a steel pole, the pain causing me to double over inside the van.

“Come on, come on,” the driver yelled. “Get in. We’ve got to get out of here.”

In my feeble position, I could hear JezeBall calling my name. It sounded like he was hitting the men with something. A stick of some kind.

“Back off, you old Queen,” One of the men shouted, before I heard him slam JezeBall to the ground. There was a short cry of pain, and then nothing.

Only then did I fully realize what terrible danger I was actually in.

Next Episode: Rebounds