

### Chapter Thirty-Four—Rebounds

What was happening? I'd been standing in front of Dixie Dells talking to JezeBall, when three burly men suddenly jumped out of an SVU and grabbed me. They threw me in their van, punched me in the stomach, and tried to cover my face with some kind of tainted cloth. I was still recovering from the punch as the two men got back in, so there was no possibility of escape.

But then as one of the men was closing the van door, I heard a wonderfully familiar voice running up behind him.

"Oh no you don't," Barney yelled, as he grabbed the closest man by his shirt collar and pulled him forcibly out of the vehicle.

Bob grabbed the other one, and the four men were soon engaged in a furious fistfight. The third man was still trying to cover my mouth and nose with his tainted cloth, which I managed to resist by somehow rolling out of the van. I didn't know that's what I was doing of course; my only intent was to move away from him. So you can imagine my surprise when I suddenly fell to the ground with a thud, my right side taking most of the impact.

The third man jumped out of the van to retrieve me, grabbing one of my legs in the process. And that's when the Two Jakes swarmed in to help. Like a tag-team working with perfect precision, Jake One slammed into the man's chest from the front, while Jake Two kicked his calves from behind. The double assault caused my would-be kidnapper to immediately fall to the ground. Within seconds, Jake One had his arms and chest pinned down, while Jake Two wrapped his legs around the man's stomach in a tight scissor hold.

The driver of the van was now screaming for everyone to leave, as he slowly pulled away from the curb. As I got myself up far enough to see the license plate, a searing jolt of pain shot through my stomach. It was almost as if I'd been punched again, the throbbing was so intense. But at least I was able to see the plate number. SSRS ONE.

The van picked up speed and bolted down the street, before stopping several hundred feet away, its engine roaring. Bob and Barney were still trading punches with the two men, though the attackers seemed to be getting the worst of it. Barney was certainly a better fighter than Bob, being ten years his junior. But Bob had a much meaner face and angrier attitude, which is sometimes more powerful than a punch.

At one point, Bob's attacker stepped backward and kicked Jake Two in the face, causing J2 to fall back in pain and loosen his grip on the third man. As Jake One reached out to help him, he also loosened his hold, and within moments the man was free from his constraints and running down the street after the beeping van.

When the other two men saw their comrade leaving, they also broke free from their adversaries and ran down the street. Bob and Barney wanted to go after them, but I begged them not to. I didn't want any of my friends getting more involved in this than was necessary. Especially now that it was obvious someone could get hurt.

In fact, someone *did* get hurt. JezeBall. He'd been lying on the ground since he was knocked there, and he didn't seem to be moving. Jake One ran inside to call an ambulance, while Jake Two began giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. After a few moments, JezeBall's eyes began to flicker.

"Mouth-to-mouth does not mean using your tongue," JezeBall suddenly blurted out. Jake Two jumped back in surprise, and then began laughing.

"Don't scare me like that," Jake Two said, rubbing JezeBall's shoulder. "What were you trying to hit those guys with? A twig?"

"It was the only thing I could find," JezeBall slurred. "Had to help Henson."

"You were very brave, JezeBall," I said, smiling down at him. "I'm so grateful."

"They used to call me *Braveheart* at Women's Wear Daily. Or rather a derivative."

"I can only imagine what that might be."

"*Brainfart.*"

"Nope. I didn't imagine that."

Before losing consciousness again, JezeBall mumbled something about Mel Gibson being the Mad Hatter and that his tea was spiked with liquor. A few moments later, Jake One emerged from the restaurant to tell us the ambulance was on its way.

Barney was already on his cell phone talking to the police, which is about the worst thing he could have done. Not only because I didn't want this altercation to somehow ruin things for Saturday, but I also didn't want Officer Rick involved in yet another one of my strange situations. Especially given the precarious nature of our last encounter.

Understandably, the sidewalk outside the Dixie Dells was abuzz with activity. The fight and its aftermath had attracted a small crowd from inside the restaurant. People were standing on the steps and in the doorway, chomping on chicken and eating biscuits. They were watching the proceedings much like Romans probably did during the Coliseum's bloody Golden Age. That is, until Lydia came out and intervened.

"What do you think this is, Dinner Theater?" Lydia bellowed, admonishing the crowd for their rubber-necking mentality. "Leave these poor men alone. Haven't they been through enough?"

Lydia did a great job of ushering people back into the restaurant with free slices of Lemon Meringue pie, though a few remained behind to catch a quick smoke. Including Brit.

He'd been standing near the front door, watching the proceedings with a particularly smug look on his face. I hated him now more than ever. I knew he must have been involved in the attack, and that's why he was watching me from outside the restaurant. That's also why he didn't come running out to help like my other friends

did. He never wanted me to be rescued; he wanted me to get kidnapped. But why? And for what purpose?

Within minutes, a rescue vehicle arrived and JezeBall was placed on a stretcher. He looked so feeble without his lively personality and mannerisms to back him up. The Two Jakes offered to accompany JezeBall in the ambulance because Jake Two also needed some medical attention. He'd suffered a rather hard kick from one of the attackers, and his nose was now reminiscent of the classic BOZO model.

When the ambulance drove away, Bob and Barney expressed their concerns.

"What was that all about?" Barney asked, scrutinizing my face for answers.

"I don't know," I lied. "Those guys just suddenly grabbed me and put me in the van."

"That's not normal behavior," Bob said, very concerned. "Do you owe someone a lot of cash? Like the mob, maybe?"

"Or maybe you're really a rich guy," Barney offered. "And this was a kidnapping attempt to extort money from your family."

"Interesting ideas, but I'd have to say *no* on both counts. I'm not rich and I don't owe anyone money."

"Then why would these men want to forcibly drag you into their van? They looked pretty dangerous."

All I could do was play dumb. Which is exactly how I acted when Officer Spitzer showed up to file a report. He asked us all a bunch of questions about the men, and why they might want to kidnap me. I suggested that maybe it was a college prank that went too far, or a case of mistaken identity, but even Officer Spitzer found those explanations implausible.

The one question that no one seemed to answer, however, concerned the van's license plate number. I couldn't believe I was the only one who'd seen it, though of course I wasn't about to share that information. I didn't need anyone tracking down the SSRS right now.

After the Officer left, Brit walked over to our group.

"Are you guys okay?" Brit asked, with an air of mock concern. "When I saw those men attacking you, I didn't know what to do."

"Luckily, Henson has friends who *do* know what to do," Barney said with a tinge of anger.

"Yes, I can see that," Brit replied. "Henson is a very lucky fellow."

Although he was smiling, I sensed Brit had a deep resentment towards me. Something personal that went beyond his work for the SSRS. As he turned and walked away, I wondered what I'd ever done to make him hate me so. It wasn't until two days later, the night before my big assignment, that I would have the

displeasure of seeing Brit again. Only next time, it was under much more dangerous circumstances.

Friday night. The night before I was to execute George's big plan. The Two Jakes had called earlier to let me know that JezeBall was doing fine, and the doctors expected him to be out of the hospital by Monday. That was certainly good news.

Later, when I was watching television in my bedroom, the doorbell rang. I thought it might be Barney with a new batch of muffins, or maybe Ramona wanting to tell me she'd been in contact with her estranged brother. But instead, I found myself face to face with Officer Rick.

"Hello, Mr. Ray," Rick said in a very official tone. He was all business. "I received your messages at the station and I'm here to give you an update on your growing list of altercations."

He'd obviously heard about my run-in with the attackers the other night. Great! How pathetic I must seem to him. Like some stupid *Man-sel in Distress*, always getting into some kind of trouble. No wonder he hasn't called.

"Listen Rick," I blurted out before he could speak again. "I'm so sorry I left you the other night. It wasn't because I didn't like you, because I do. But I had to take care of my friend who was sick and we had to leave quickly...and...and..."

I stopped talking because Rick was grinning from ear to ear. Instead of becoming angry or possibly confused by my explanation, he was downright happy. It took me only seconds to figure out why. From behind Rick's back, Celia suddenly jumped out giggling like a schoolgirl.

"Surprise!"

Celia moved past Rick and hugged me tightly.

"I told you I'd fix everything," She whispered in my ear.

"Celia told me about her little *acting exercise*," Rick said, smiling.

"She did?"

"Why yes," Celia said, winking at me. "It's okay if Rick knows. After all, they're planning all kinds of publicity on it."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Publicity?" I asked, shaking. "Is that such a good idea?"

"Yes, Henson. That's what usually happens before a movie opens. And a movie where I'm impersonating a man will certainly get a lot of attention. Especially for the people who'll wonder where I'm going to hide my boobs."

"Oh, right," I sighed, finally understanding what she was doing. "You told Rick all about the new movie you're in. And that's why you were dressed as a man at the party last week. As an acting exercise."

"You are so quick, Henson dear," Celia said, winking at me again. "But it should be a great film. My character has to assume the identity of her late husband in order to collect on his inheritance. And the whole time, the audience will be wondering: does she get away with it? Does she get caught? If it's done right, it'll be like one of those Film Noir thrillers from the 1940s. We may even shoot in black and white."

Celia was so convincing in her description of the faux film that it made me want to see the actual movie, whether it was phony or not.

"I never would have believed someone who looks like you could play a convincing guy," Rick laughed. "But hey, you had *me* fooled. You were excellent."

I stepped aside so Celia and Rick could enter the house. Rick hugged me quickly, apparently not wanting to be left out of this particular form of greeting. I was happy to oblige, and held him longer than perhaps was necessary. When we parted, our eyes met. We were both keenly aware of the strong chemistry we shared, and if Celia hadn't been in the room, we might have...But it's really pointless to think about such things.

"I called Rick last night and flew in this evening," Celia explained. "He was kind enough to meet me at the airport and drive us here."

"It was a pleasure," Rick said, bowing slightly to Celia. "Of course, she talked about *you* the entire time."

I felt so happy to see them both; I could hardly contain my enthusiasm. It was like I'd gotten a huge burst of adrenaline that my body couldn't handle. Which only meant one thing. In order to calm down, I needed to eat.

"Anyone hungry?" I asked, as I leafed through a pile of take-out menus I'd collected.

"I'm starving," Celia admitted. "I haven't eaten for days because of that damn photo shoot. And even then, people were asking me if I'd gained any weight. Sometimes I just hate this industry."

After ordering a large pepperoni pizza with extra cheese, Celia entranced Rick and I with an amusing reenactment of her experience at the Vanity Fair photo shoot. First there was the make-up girl who got a little too friendly while applying Celia's body tan. Then there was the lighting guy that asked her what kind of breast implants she had, so he'd know what kind of materials he was bouncing his lights off of.

"I can't believe people talk to you like that," I said, astonished.

"That's nothing," Celia said, rolling her eyes. "When you're famous, everyone thinks they know you. They see you on TV or in the movies all the time, so they don't afford you the same common courtesies or social boundaries that apply to everyday strangers. You're open season for anything and everything they've ever wanted to say to you."

"Like what?" Rick asked.

"Well, someone might ask me why I'm such a horrible actress, or why I bother acting at all. Or someone might tell me that I'm looking old and I should consider getting plastic surgery. Of course there's always the weight issue. Am I too thin? Am I getting fat? The media is obsessed with the weight issue. It's abnormal."

How could someone ever look at Celia and think she was anything but beautiful and well proportioned? And even if they didn't, why would they ever feel it necessary to tell her?

Celia had a great wit about her, and was particularly good at doing impressions of all the nasty people she'd met. Without warning, she would suddenly slip into the character of the person she was talking about, brilliantly taking on their physicality, voice and mannerisms. The transitions were so quick and effortless, not to mention hilarious, that Celia might be compared to a young Tracey Ullman. Why she'd been hiding her comedic talents all these years was beyond me.

We were laughing so hard at one point that I had to get up and move away for fear I'd hyperventilate. And that's when I happened to notice a light on in the SSCP house across the street. At first, it didn't strike me as odd. But then later, as Celia was recounting an incident at the airport, it made me think about her timeframe. Had she and Rick actually stopped at the SSCP house before coming over to see me?

"Did you show Rick the SSCP house?" I asked while Rick was off in the kitchen refreshing our drinks.

"No. We came straight to you," Celia said with a yawn. She looked exhausted. "I was actually going to ask if I could spend the night *here*. It would be so lonely over there."

"Of course you can. I'm flattered you'd even want to."

"We're best buds, remember? Nothing's going to change that."

Her sincerity made me want to cry. Here I was, having the most wonderful evening in the world, with my new movie star friend, and my new boyfriend-in-training. How could it possibly get any better?

"So who's staying in the house then?" I asked, wondering if maybe George had decided to shack up there for the evening.

"No one. What are you talking about?"

"There are lights on in the living room. I just assumed you'd already been over there."

Celia jumped up and ran to the window. There were indeed lights on in both the living room and the back bedroom, but the driveway was empty of cars.

"This doesn't look good," Celia said with panic in her voice. "Nobody is scheduled to be there. It's been marked off-limits ever since..."

Celia stopped talking, but I knew what she was about to say. Ever since I found out about the SSCP, I'd been cut off. And even though I'd resigned myself that life as a Chosen was going to be over at some point, the realization that I was already *out* was terribly deflating.

"I'm sorry, Henson. I didn't mean to sound so harsh. George didn't want anyone to tip off what's happening tomorrow night, so that meant no one was allowed to go to the house."

"But if it's not someone from the SSCP over there, than who is it?"

"I don't know. But I certainly intend to find out."

**Next Episode: Déjà vu**