

Chapter Thirty-Five— Déjà Vu

As soon as she saw lights on in the SSCP house, Celia made a beeline for the front door. She was moving so fast that she nearly knocked over Rick, who was returning from the kitchen with our drinks.

“Woah there, Little Lady,” Rick said, stopping in his tracks. “Where are you off to?”

Celia and I looked at each other for a moment. We knew we couldn’t run off again without letting Rick know where we were going. So Celia explained that she’d been renting the house across the street and we were concerned because the lights were on, even though she hadn’t been there all week.

That’s the only thing Rick needed to hear. He didn’t have to know about the SSCP or the SSRs. He just needed to know someone might have broken into a house.

“You both stay here,” Rick said, putting down the drink glasses. “I’ll go over and investigate.”

“No way,” Celia said adamantly. “It’s my house. I want to know what’s going on.”

“And I don’t want to stay here *alone* while you guys have all the fun,” I added. “So I guess you’re stuck with both of us.”

Rick frowned. It was totally against his code of conduct to have friends tag along during an investigation. But since there didn’t appear to be any real threat or danger at the moment, he decided to acquiesce, and the three of us quietly slipped out the back door and into the yard.

It felt a little like Déjà vu, sneaking over to the SSCP house in this manner. Yet this time I had a sense of foreboding, as if something was trying to warn me not to go. In retrospect, I wish I’d paid more attention to that feeling; it might have prepared me better for what happened next.

We stayed in the shadows as much as possible, and walked down the street about a hundred feet or so before crossing over. Rick then taught us a quick series of hand signals to use in case we needed to communicate. As I committed the gestures to memory, I hoped my interpretations were correct. It would be terrible to screw things up just because you gave the wrong tilt of a finger.

Rick led the way as we scrambled to the side of the garage. There weren’t any windows on this part of the house, so it was a safe haven for the time being. As Rick peered his

head around the front corner of the house, Celia and I peered around the back. It was very dark, so my eyes took a few moments to get adjusted before I could see anything clearly.

The backyard was pretty barren. I guess none of the SSCP members would risk being seen out here, so it was never equipped with anything but a few planters. And those didn't look like they were growing anything but weeds.

Rick joined us as we quietly moved around back. The curtains in the bedroom windows were drawn, so they were not particularly helpful in providing us visual access to the inside of the house. When we reached the backdoor, we all stopped in our tracks. The door was slightly ajar and looked like it had been broken into.

Celia gasped, and then quickly covered her mouth. Rick signaled for us to stay hidden in the shadows as he went in to investigate. He slowly opened the screen door and then being careful not to slam it behind him, quietly slipped through the opening and into the darkness beyond.

My stomach was feeling tight and uncomfortable, mostly because I was scared for Rick's safety. He was going in the house unarmed and alone; who knows what he would find. Celia must have sensed my uneasiness, because she grabbed my hand and clasped it tightly in hers. We'd just have to wait here patiently, like two Army Wives sending their men off to war. Helpless, hopeful and harried.

Minutes passed before we heard anything. At first it sounded like loud talking, which quickly escalated into shouting. The seriousness of the situation made me freeze. I didn't know what to do. Rick had told us to stay here, but what if he was in trouble? What if he needed our help?

The shouting escalated, followed by a series of banging noises, and then a loud crash. That was the last thing Celia and I needed to hear before we both ran for the backdoor. I wasn't going to stand idly by while Rick was in danger. Not this man. Not now.

I had just opened the back door when a dark figure came barreling out of the house, knocking into me. The action caught me off-guard and I fell back onto the ground, the other person falling on top of me. We both landed with a loud thud, knocking into Celia as well. I could smell the man's breath and it reeked of alcohol.

Within seconds, the man was getting up. I grabbed at his leg to stop him from running away, but he kicked me hard in the chest. And though it was a painful blow, I still managed to swing my right leg around and trip the guy as he started to sprint. He fell to the ground, giving me mere moments to get up and prepare for the next attack. As he quickly got back up, he turned to faced us, and the moonlight finally illuminated his very familiar features.

It was Brit. He was standing maybe three feet away.

“Well, well, well,” Brit said with surprise. “I’m afraid I underestimated you, Henson.”

“What are you doing here?” Celia shouted at him.

“Celia? Is that you?” Brit asked with a sneer. “I didn’t realize you were in town. We should have drinks sometime. Catch up.”

“Very funny,” Celia shot back. “What were you doing in my house?”

“*Your* house? I was under the impression it was owned by Unity Kingsmill.”

“Why are you so interested in her?” I demanded. “And why was the SSRS staking out her apartment in the city last week?”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. How could I have been so stupid? Why did I let something so important slip out?

Brit looked stunned. Learning that Celia and I knew each other was one thing, but finding out I was aware of the SSRS was a different matter entirely.

“I thought we were friends,” Celia said calmly. “But you betrayed me. How could you be a part of something so hateful?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Brit lied. His eyes were darting around the yard as if he was looking for something. But what?

And that’s when I noticed it. Something bulky was lying in the grass about a foot from Brit’s feet. He must have dropped it when we banged into each other. From where I was standing, it looked like some sort of jacket. In fact, it looked very much like the leather jacket Celia wore last week at the RAMBO.

“Is that what you came here for?” I asked, pointing to the heap on the ground. “A leather jacket?”

“Hardly,” Brit said, as he bent down to pick it up. “I was just borrowing it.”

As I watched Brit clinging to the leather coat, I realized it was actually wrapped around something else. Something rectangular. Brit didn’t care about the jacket; he cared about whatever he was protecting *inside* the jacket. At that moment, whatever it was slipped out the side and landed on the ground with a small thud.

“Henson, he’s got the laptop from the house,” Celia screamed. “It has all kinds of classified information on it.”

“That’s right, Celia,” Brit spit out. “Your precious Secret Society is about to get exposed for what it really is. A private freak show for bored celebrities.”

“You’ve got it all wrong. We’re not like that at all.”

“Oh, please. You follow around losers like Henson as if they were animals in a zoo, and it’s about time the public found out how you’re exploiting them.”

“We’re not exploiting them, we’re helping them. And it’s a little hypocritical of you to be pointing any fingers, since you’ve obviously made a career out of being exploited.”

“Yes, but I knew what I was doing, and I was getting paid for it. Your pathetic collection of *Chosens* are getting the Truman Show treatment and they don’t even know it.”

“I know about it,” I chimed in. “And I don’t feel exploited. I feel lucky.”

“Yes, I bet you do. Lucky enough to become friendly with one of America’s Favorite Bimbos. I’m sure my group will be fascinated to hear about this little revelation.”

At that moment, we were all distracted by the emergence of Officer Rick, who was holding some kind of towel to his head. It looked like he was bleeding. And though my first instinct was to run over and see if I could help him, another part of me saw this as an opportunity to get the laptop out of Brit’s distracted grip.

Which is exactly what I did, right after I gave Brit a really hard kick in the groin. The shock caused him to loosen his hold, and I was able to grab the laptop and begin running with it. I wasn’t exactly sure where I was running *to*, but I knew I needed to get Brit away from Celia and Rick. I wouldn’t let him hurt them any further.

As I ran around to the front of the yard, I yelled something to Celia about making sure Rick was okay, and I’d meet them later. By this time, Brit had recovered from my kick and began running after me, which meant I would have to find some way to evade him. Going back to my house was out of the question. But what about the park? It was only about a quarter mile away. Maybe I could run there and hide in the woods until Brit was gone.

Once out of the yard, I ran down the street, keeping in the shadows as much as possible. I’d walked this route a hundred times on my way to the post office, so I was able to anticipate all the shrubs and trees that jutted out into the sidewalk obstructing the way. Brit, however, did not have this advantage and I heard him several times being smacked in the face by a thick branch or tripping over a wayward root. Not only did this allow me a brief moment of satisfaction, but also a significant lead when it came to the distance between us.

I was a good two blocks in front of him, so I got to the park long before Brit did. This allowed me a few moments to get my bearings and locate a good spot to hide. There were tons of trees, though they were all pretty thin. This wouldn’t allow me much protection from exposure.

The only thing that looked like a good possibility was a picnic table in the middle of the grass, which currently housed my favorite group of Goth, The Creeping Moss. With their dark clothing and eerie chanting, they were an intimidating presence in the darkened park, and I wondered if I could somehow blend in with their current trance-like state.

I approached the group tentatively, softly trying to imitate their chanting before I got close to them. Maybe they wouldn't notice me and I could just blend in.

I moved around to the other side of the table so I could see when Brit entered the park. As I strained my eyes to look for him, I kept chanting. But he was nowhere in sight.

I finally squatted down on the ground so my clothing wouldn't be visible across the lawn, and that's when I came face to face with one of the Moss members. Actually, it was the same girl I'd exchanged looks with a few weeks ago. The one that spit at me after I passed by. And here she was, chanting and chomping, and staring me straight in the face. At one point, she turned her head and spit out a large amount of dark liquid. Was it blood? I couldn't tell.

"Excuse me," a voice called out. "Did you see a guy just come through here?"

It was Brit. He was on the other side of the picnic table. I looked at the Goth girl, and she seemed to sense my panic. Without a sound, she moved aside slightly so I could slip in beside her. Then she indicated that I should actually go under the table, which I was able to do without much trouble. Once I was securely underneath, she moved back into her original position, totally obscuring my body.

This was actually a smart move on her part. Because when Brit didn't get any kind of response from the chanting mass of bodies, he circled the table several times looking at all the members. I don't think it even occurred to him to dig deeper through the pile to find the bodies underneath. Eventually he stopped looking and ran off in a different direction, and I was able to extract myself from my hiding spot.

When I turned to thank the Goth girl for her help, she once again spit some dark fluid on the ground. And that's when I realized she had chewing tobacco in her mouth. Which meant her spits weren't intended for me at all, but rather to expel all her pent-up saliva. What a relief to finally understand the reason, albeit a gross one.

I smiled at the girl and chanted "Thank You." She bowed her head slightly and smiled. We'd made some kind of weird connection. Two opposites coming together because of a simple gesture of kindness. It was a very enlightening moment for me.

Unfortunately, the next few moments were also enlightening, as Brit suddenly came out of nowhere and sucker-punched me in the face. His punch landed in the middle of my left eye, causing me immediate pain and blurriness. I felt him grab the laptop out of my arms. I tried to hold onto it but I couldn't get my bearings.

There were stars spinning before me, and I thought I heard Celia and Rick calling my name off in the distance. Or maybe that was just my imagination. Shadows became more prominent, and I had no control over my legs, which seemed to be filled with prickly sand.

No, this wasn't fair. Not now. I couldn't let another fainting spell keep me from fulfilling my duty. I had to get the laptop back from Brit. I had to stop him from telling anyone that Celia and I knew each other. It could ruin everything.

My legs tingled as they pulled me to the ground, my head filling up with haze and space. I tried to reach for Brit, but there was no point. I was blacking out and I knew it.

But what about Saturday Night? Would Brit ruin George's plan by telling the SSRS we knew all about them? And what would Officer Rick think about all this? Or more importantly, had he gotten seriously hurt in his scuffle with Brit?

The answers to all these questions would have to wait, however. Because for the time being, I was flat on my back in la-la-land.

Next Episode: The Creeping Moss