

Chapter Thirty-Six—The Creeping Moss

I must have been unconscious for several minutes, because when I woke up the atmosphere around me was quite different. Celia was hovering over me like a Mother Hen, padding my face with a towel of some kind. Rick was also standing near me, and he looked like he had a cut across his cheek. Damn. Someone had scratched that adorable face.

Then I remembered. Brit. That bastard!

I heard some loud yelling coming from somewhere behind me. But when I tried to lift myself up to look, the pounding in my head only intensified. My left eye felt like it was on fire.

“Are you okay, Henson?” Celia asked with concern. “We need to get you some ice for that eye.”

“But what about the laptop?” I protested. “And Brit? We can’t let him...”

“No one’s going to let him do anything,” Rick assured me. “But right now, let’s get you on your feet, okay? We’ll concentrate on that first. Slowly...slowly.”

With Rick’s strong arms around me, I made it to my feet without much trouble. I was still hot and sweaty from running, and I could feel myself dripping all over Rick’s shirt. Luckily he was sweaty as well and didn’t seem to mind.

Once I was standing upright, I tried to get a better look at my surroundings. This was not an easy task, as I currently had the use of only one eye; the other apparently swollen shut and closed for repairs.

But even with one eye, I could finally see what all the shouting was about. The Creeping Moss had apparently captured Brit and was now holding him prisoner under the picnic table. He looked like a caged tiger moving back and forth between the two benches, growling at his adversaries. Every time he tried to get out, one of the Creeping Moss would poke him back with a stick. Or a metal pole. Or both.

“What happened?” I asked, leaning on Rick a little more than necessary.

“These kids saw Brit punch you and steal the laptop, and they all converged on him.”

“We had just gotten to the park when it happened,” Celia added. “And because they’re all wearing dark clothing, it looked like this giant octopus was swallowing him up. It was incredible.”

I looked over at the Creeping Moss, searching for the girl with the black lipstick and eyeliner that had helped me earlier. She was standing near a tall boy with several sharp objects pierced through his lips. When she saw me looking at her, she smiled and walked over to where we were standing.

“Are you okay?” The girl asked, her friendly attitude a complete contradiction to her gothic appearance.

“I’m fine,” I said, ignoring the constant throbbing in my head. “Thanks so much for helping me. Your whole group is really...pretty cool.”

“Thanks. We’ve seen you walk by here so many times, we felt like we knew you. And no one messes with our friends.”

Did she just call me her friend? How sweet. Though why this young Morticia Addams clone would claim me as a member of her universe is beyond me. And a dark universe at that. Nevertheless, I was extremely touched by the gesture. Perhaps even a little misty eyed.

“What’s your name, Honey?” Celia asked, stepping out of the shadows to face the girl.

“I’m Clare,” the girl said, before recognizing who Celia was. “Hey, you’re that actress, aren’t you? The one who was in *The Whip and I?*”

“Yes, that’s me. But please keep it on the down low. I’m trying to be inconspicuous.”

“Sure, no problem,” Clare said, her whole face lighting up. “That’s one of my all-time favorite movies, by the way.”

“Really? It’s not one of *my* favorites.”

“But you were the bomb, Girl! And the way you handled that whip was slammin! I even tried to make my own version out of an old jump rope, but I kept hitting myself in the head with the wooden handles. Which sort defeats the purpose of being a dominatrix, you know? If the only person you’re hurting is yourself.”

“That’s adorable,” Celia said, apparently touched by Clare’s story. “Not that you were getting hurt, of course. But that you fashioned your own whip out of a jump rope.”

“Yeah. My mom wasn’t too happy about it. She thinks whips are a sign of the devil.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. She thinks everything is a sign of the devil. Tattoos, make-up, Howie Mandel. Ever since my dad left us a couple years ago, she’s turned into a Bible-thumping born-again Christian. So you can just imagine what she thinks of me.”

“It must be hard,” Celia said with compassion. “Say, how would you like the original whip I used in the film?”

Clare’s face went completely white for a moment, a stark contrast to the black lipstick and dark uniform she was wearing. Then, without warning, she suddenly jumped in the air and let out a joyous yell.

“Are you kidding?” Clare screamed, the inner girl happily bursting forth from her Gothic cocoon.

“Sure, you deserve it,” Celia said, winking. “Especially since you’re a friend of Henson.”

“Who’s Henson?”

I raised my right hand slightly and smiled.

“That’s your name? Henson?” Clare asked, examining me closely. “I like it. It seems to fit you.”

Just then, the unmistakable sound of *Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony* burst forth from someone’s cell phone. As I turned to find the source, I heard another scuffle near the picnic table. I cocked my head so that my right eye got a clear vision of the area, and what I saw made me gasp.

Brit’s cell phone was ringing, and he was reaching into his pocket to answer it. This could ruin everything. Especially if the caller was someone from the SSRS. Brit could alert them about Celia and me, and completely jeopardize tomorrow night’s big surprise.

“Stop him!” I yelled. “We can’t let him answer that phone.”

Without a word, Rick let go of his hold on me and ran over to the table. The sudden departure of my *Knight in Shining T-shirt* caused me to fumble a little, until Celia quickly stepped in as a substitute.

Brit pulled the phone out of his pocket, and was about to cock it open, when one of the Creeping Moss hit his arm with a metal pole. Brit screamed in pain and dropped the phone, causing a quick scramble from everyone in the vicinity to recover it. The boy with the pierced lips was the closest, and managed to grab the phone before Brit was able to reach it.

“Give me that, you stupid freak!” Brit screamed.

The boy turned and spit in Brit’s face, and then tossed the phone to Rick.

“I’m warning you,” Brit yelled. “If you don’t let me out of here, I’m going to sue you all for kidnapping and unlawful imprisonment. You don’t think the police are going to hear about this?”

“Oh, I’m certain they’ll hear about it,” Rick said smiling. “And I’ll be sure to add the part about you breaking into someone’s house and stealing a laptop. That ought to make any judge very sympathetic towards you.”

“And who do you think you are, Tough Guy?”

“I’m a police officer.”

“Holy crap!” I heard one of the Creeping Moss say under his breath.

And though Brit didn’t seem completely defeated by Rick’s comment, the revelation did manage to knock the wind out of his sails for the time being. He stopped trying to get out from under the picnic table, and sat on the ground in a lotus position.

“I want to see my lawyer,” was the last thing he said.

Twenty minutes later, we were sitting in the living room of the SSCP house. I was lying on the couch with a bag of ice on my left eye, with Rick and Celia seated across from me. Brit was in the back bedroom, tied securely with handcuffs and an entire roll of extra thick electrical tape.

“So is somebody going to tell me what’s going on here?” Rick asked very seriously. “And don’t try to bullshit me, because I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Rick...” Celia began. “I really like you. And I believe Henson really likes you, too. So the reason we can’t tell you what’s going on is *not* because we don’t *want* to. But because we don’t want *you* to get involved in something that you don’t need to be. You have enough on your plate with the headaches of your everyday job. You don’t need to be worrying about...”

“Stop right there,” Rick said. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s the same speech you gave in *Rhonda Stiltskin*, when you were trying to convince the man you loved not to get involved in your family’s illegal business affairs.”

“Wow. You’re good.”

“I’m also a huge fan. And I promise, anything you tell me will be in the strictest confidence. I’m a cop, yes. But I’m a person too. Some things are allowed to be *off the record*.”

Rick looked directly at me when he said the last part. He was trying to let me know that we could trust him. And even though I’d only been acquainted with Rick a very short period of time, there was some sort of connection between us that made me feel safe and protected. I think I’d feel comfortable telling him just about anything. But as to what to say about tonight’s circumstances; that wasn’t really my decision to make. Celia would have to...

“I’ll be right back,” Celia said, suddenly jumping up and heading for the back of the house. “And then we’ll talk.”

Celia went into the bedroom where Brit was being held and turned up the stereo so he wouldn’t be able to hear anything we talked about.

“You tied him up good, Officer Rick,” Celia said smiling, as she walked back into the living room. “He’s not leaving anytime soon.”

The next hour was spent filling Rick in on various aspects of the SSCP story. Celia left out the details about how it all started, or who was really involved in it, and sort of presented an “SSCP for Dummies” version: *The philanthropic efforts of a group of anonymous celebrities was being systematically sabotaged by a rival group of quasi-celebrities, of which Brit was a member. The group Celia was a member of already had a plan in place to hopefully stop the violence and rivalry, and it was going to be carried out the following night.*

“And therefore it’s very important that Brit doesn’t make any kind of contact with his organization,” Celia stressed, as she finished her quick explanation.

“Aren’t they going to be suspicious if they don’t hear from him?” Rick asked. “If he’s an important member of this group, it would be weird if he doesn’t stay in contact. Somebody already tried calling him when we were in the park. If he’s suddenly unreachable for twenty-four hours, that’s going to send up a big red flag.”

“Crap,” I said. “I didn’t even think of that. But we can’t risk letting him talk to anyone. He could blow everything.”

“Maybe not,” Celia said, as she grabbed her phone. “I have a friend who can do perfect vocal impersonations of almost anyone. I bet he’d be able to imitate Brit’s voice and mannerisms enough to get us by for at least a day.”

“Is he a comic?” I asked.

“No, actually he’s my gynecologist. But his impressions are dead on. I can’t tell you how many times Jack Nicholson has given me my breast exam.”

“And you like that?”

“Sure,” Celia admitted. “It makes me laugh. You guys don’t realize because you’re men, but a breast exam is one of the most awkward and uncomfortable things woman have to go through. So if you can laugh a little, it makes you feel less nervous and the whole thing becomes a little less awkward. I’m not saying this guy is for everyone. But for me, his Stirrup Stand-up takes away any anxiety I might have about being there.”

“And you think he’ll be able to imitate Brit’s voice?”

“Not only that, but I’m sure he’d be happy to bring along his surgical forceps just in case Brit gives us any trouble.”

Rick and I both involuntarily gasped in unison.

“I’m kidding, guys,” Celia said laughing.

She then called her gynecologist and got his answering service, so she left an urgent message to call her right away. As the next day was Saturday, I wondered if the Doctor might have already gone to some kind of weekend getaway, like a golf club in the Hamptons or his private booth at the Hustler Club.

“Can’t you get in trouble for holding Brit here?” I asked Rick. “Shouldn’t we be taking him down to the police station or something?”

“It’s okay for tonight,” Rick answered. “But in the morning, I’m going to have to take him in.”

“But then he’ll get to make one phone call, right?” Celia pointed out. “And you know he’s going to call someone from his group.”

“Let me worry about that,” Rick assured us.

“I don’t want you to do anything that could get you into trouble,” I said.

“I won’t. But once Sunday rolls around, he’ll be out of my hands.”

“That’s fine. By that time, everything should be over.”

Even as I said the words, I felt a pang in my heart. *By that time, everything should be over.* It was true. After Sunday, my involvement with the SSCP would finally come to an end. Which meant the fantasy life I’d been leading with Celia and George and Julia and Oprah would vanish into thin air like Glinda flying off in her bubble.

But now was not the time to get depressed. There would be plenty of time for that later. At least Rick would still be around. And Unity. And Bob and Barney and the Two Jakes. And JezeBall. And Ramona and Luis. And Patty. My wonderful little community of friends in Plainfield made me feel like I'd finally found a home. Or as the ABC Family Channel would put it, I was now part of "a new kind of family."

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of a loud crash in the back bedroom. Rick, Celia and I looked at each other for a moment, and then the two of them ran past me down the hallway.

I threw the ice bag off my eye and got up to join them, when I found myself quickly off-balance and falling into a table. For some reason, the loss of my left eye was giving me a strange perception of space and I wasn't able to get my bearings. My right arm slammed into the wooden surface as my feet tangled themselves into a knot, and I was soon falling once again onto the floor. Thankfully, the floor was covered in carpeting, so it wasn't a rough landing.

As I was attempting to get up, I heard Celia scream out "*Oh my God! NO!*" This was followed by a tremendous booming noise, as if a wrecking ball had just demolished the back half of the house.

And then of course, the lights went out.

Next Episode: The Giddy Gynecologist