

### **Chapter Three—A Brief History of Henson**

At this point, I think it's important to step back a moment and give you a little background on my situation. I mean, here we are in Chapter Three already and you don't even know my name or much about me.

First thing's first. My name is Henson Ray. I was born in a small town in Ohio where people often referred to me as "the boy who had a first name that sounds like a last name, and a last name that sounds like a first name." Seriously. When people first met me, the typical conversation would inevitably go something like this:

"Hi. I'm Henson Ray."

"Don't you mean Ray Henson?"

"No. I mean Henson Ray."

"That's unusual. You have a first name that sounds like a last name, and a last name that sounds like a first."

"Really? I never noticed that before." I'd say sarcastically. "And what's your name?"

To which someone who thought himself particularly clever and witty would respond:

"I'm Majors Lee." Or "I'm Reagan Ronald." Or even, "I'm Brown Charlie." The last comment was from a fraternity brother, his humor being of the racist variety.

My name notwithstanding, I had a pretty normal childhood. I went to school, I played with the neighborhood girls, I had a crush on my baseball coach...all the things that a typical gay boy would do in any Small Town U.S.A. Except that I didn't really know I was gay. Or rather, I didn't really know what being gay meant.

Everyone else seemed to know, though. I can't tell you how many times I was called names like "chic" and "trendy" by my schoolmates. Of course, those weren't the actual words they used, but I knew that's what they meant. Because in my mind, I was unique and special, and somehow felt that I wasn't long for this town. There were other things out there in the world that were calling to me, and as soon as I finished college, I was going to go out and find them.

That being said, we can skip over the years of frustrating attempts at living a normal life, the women I pursued with little or no interest, the straight sex that redefined the word awkward, my first gay experiences, being "outed" at my fraternity by a jilted lover, and many other equally embarrassing and personal anecdotes that no one really needs to hear. (You have your own baggage, don't you? That should be enough.)

Which brings us up to about a year ago. I had just broken up with a guy I 'd been with for almost three years, and I started feeling very dissatisfied with the state of my life. I was living in a small, cramped studio apartment on West 43<sup>rd</sup> street and it was driving me crazy. I could literally stand in the middle of my room with my arms outstretched and touch both walls. It was that narrow.

But I didn't have a lot of money, so the possibility of getting a bigger place wasn't really an option. And that's when the most amazing thing happened.

I had been working for a very exclusive boutique advertising firm as a graphic designer, but finding it difficult to move up the very short corporate ladder to where you made the real money. There were two other people above me who had been with the firm for years, and they weren't going anywhere. Not any time soon, anyway. Which meant my salary was not going to rise above its current pathetic level any time soon, either. I was basically stuck.

Don't get me wrong. There may not have been much opportunity in my position, but there were certainly "perks". I'd recently sat in on a creative meeting with Julia Roberts for some new beauty product that was being developed. Actually, I was only there to take notes and under no circumstances to open my mouth or to look Ms. Roberts directly in the face. I think they feared that I might repulse her or something.

It didn't matter. I was in the same room with Julia Roberts. I felt very hip, which for me was a pretty new feeling. The last time I'd felt this hip, I got a rash.

So the meeting was in progress. The head of the firm was giving the pitch to Julia, while the other two designers stood close by to nod their approval at appropriate intervals. This went on for about twenty minutes, until suddenly Julia interrupted the presentation by turning to me and asking a question.

"What do you think about this campaign?" she asked, looking me straight in the eyes.

"I'm sorry?" I said rather timidly, not really sure she was actually talking to me. Maybe she was just talking in my direction. Or maybe her head got stuck, a temporary glitch in an otherwise perfect ninety-degree turn. Soon it would no doubt continue on its swiveling journey and eventually land in front of the appropriate person for the question. Anyone, that is, but me.

Because to tell you the truth, I didn't think people like Julia Roberts could even see people like me. Just like my aforementioned description of Celia Westend, I'm sure Julia Roberts viewed me as nothing more than an extra. Like the many people who filled the background in her movies. Not really important. Not really noticeable. Mostly blurry. That must be how I looked to her, blurry.

"You've been sitting there taking notes," Julia continued, making it clear that she was indeed asking me the question. "You must have some opinion."

It was one of those surreal moments in life when everything suddenly stops and you feel like you're experiencing things in slow motion. I saw my boss and the other designers look at me in horror, fearing that anything I might say would certainly be offensive. In some far off part of my brain, I imagined myself as Cinderella being frowned upon by my Evil Stepmother and sisters. I had never really been asked my opinion on a project before, so I wasn't entirely sure I even had one.

"I..I agree with everything that has been presented." I said, trying to sound as politically correct as possible. The head of the agency relaxed his grimace, but the two "stepsisters" continued to look at me with disgust. The tone of my voice was apparently like fingernails on a chalkboard to them.

As for Miss Roberts, I thought I detected disappointment on her face. She must have hoped for a different kind of response from me. Perhaps an honest one, and I'd let her down. She'd given me the opportunity to voice my opinion, and I wasted it.

It was almost more than I could bear, appearing weak like that in front of Julia Roberts. After all, she'd been my *friend* ever since she first appeared in "Mystic Pizza." We grew up together during "Steel Magnolias" and "Pretty Woman." We suffered together through "Dying Young," "Flatliners" and "Sleeping With the Enemy." (As did most of the audiences.) We felt giddy and in love during "My Best Friend's Wedding," "Notting Hill" and "Runaway Bride." And then there was "Erin Brockovich". That's where Julia sort of stopped for me.

And here she was, sitting in front of me, and I didn't even have the guts to respond honestly to her question. So even if her negative reaction was just a product of my imagination, the thought of disappointing someone like Julia Roberts was more than I could bear. I was already a disappointment in my personal life, my career was a major disappointment, and my living conditions were constantly disappointing. So I was not about to disappoint America's Oscar-Winning Sweetheart.

"Miss Roberts, I don't think this campaign presents a very flattering portrayal of you," I suddenly blurted out, taking everyone off guard. "It concentrates mainly on your *Pretty Woman* fame rather than who you are right now. I mean, we all know you were the *Pretty Woman*. You were cute. You were cuddly. You were a prostitute. But that was decades ago. I think you've moved on from that."

At that moment, jaws all around the room began hitting the floor and smashing into millions of tiny pieces. I had just overstepped my position so many times that I was sure as soon as the meeting was over, I would be as well.

"What an interesting comment," The head of the agency said, trying to save face. "But of course you've not been a part of all the detailed work behind-the-scenes, so your comments really have no basis or credibility."

I didn't hear him, though, because my eyes were trained on Julia. And she was smiling at me. Yes, smiling. I had possibly lost my job and any future I might have in advertising, but at this moment, I was transfixed on the most perfect smile in the world. The Mona Lisa Smile. And I couldn't help wondering, how did they fit so many teeth into one little mouth?

"He may not have been a part of the process," Julia said, turning back to the main group. "But he certainly hit the nail on the head. I don't like it. Call me when you have something better." And with that she got up, thanked the people in the room, and left, her entourage of six following closely behind. She never looked at me again.

The rest of the day is a blur. I know I was fired shortly after the meeting, and I know I ended up in my apartment sometime the next morning. But what happened between those two points in time, I have no clue. I only know I got very, very drunk, and threw up most of the following day. I also found two hundred dollars in my pants pocket, which I'm sure wasn't mine. But how it got there, I don't know. I was just hoping I hadn't earned it during some bizarre "Pretty Woman" of my own. For me, this had to be one of the lowest points in my life.

During the next few weeks, I made a half-hearted attempt at looking for a new job. I didn't really want to go back into advertising, and I wasn't even sure I wanted to be a graphic artist anymore. I was confused, low on funds and feeling very much alone.

It was around this time that I got a call from Unity Kingsmill. Mrs. Kingsmill introduced herself as a friend of someone, though I didn't quite catch the name. But I'm pretty sure it was a man. She said she was looking for an artist to illustrate a book she'd been writing, and would I be interested in showing her some of my work. To me, this sounded like a very interesting proposition, especially since I didn't currently have any other job options to compare it to.

"What kind of book?" I asked, fearing for a moment that it might somehow be pornographic.

"A children's book," she responded, in her very proper English accent.

I was so relieved. Not that I have a problem with pornography, but my artistic style does not really lend itself to realistic interpretations of the human body. My art teacher in college once told me that my drawings of the male penis looked like I had taken a sweet potato and shoved it through a grinder. And that my etchings of the female vagina "lacked focus." Funny, that.

But this was going to be a children's book. That was right up my alley.

"I'd love to show you my work," I said a little too enthusiastically. Mustn't sound like I'm desperate.

“Do you have a car?” she then asked.

“Uh...no. Is that a prerequisite for the job?” I was afraid this might be a deal-breaker.

“Not at all,” she laughed. “I was just going to tell you how to get here. If you don’t have a car, you’ll have to take the train. I live in Plainfield, New Jersey.”

“Oh...New Jersey,” I said, suddenly wondering if Kingsmill was the name of one of those huge factories you see on the road to Newark.

“It’s a lovely little town. Not quite what you’d expect” she said, sensing my hesitation. “If you take a train out tomorrow morning, I’ll have my driver pick you up at the station. Shall we say around noon?”

I agreed to the meeting, and shortly thereafter, was scavenging through the piles of crap on my floors to find enough drawings and doodles to assemble a reasonable portfolio. Most of the stuff I’d done recently was all business-to-business. Brochures, print ads, very dry boring stuff. I only really got to do the fun graphics projects in my spare time, and mostly just for myself. It was this kind of “stuff” that I would have to somehow present to Ms. Kingsmill in order to get the job.

As I picked through the stacks and stacks of papers, I began wondering what kind of children’s story someone like Unity Kingsmill would write. Would it be a mystery, or comedy? Or maybe it was an adventure story or a fairy tale. I knew I shouldn’t get my hopes up for anything in particular, especially since she was probably interviewing many more candidates than just myself.

That night I fell asleep dreaming of what it must be like to be someone named Unity Kingsmill. Whatever I imagined, however, would never live up to the woman I met the following afternoon.

I caught a train the next morning at eleven ten. My portfolio was tightly clenched between my arms, my entire sense of value compacted between two leather sleeves. The train ride was pleasant, but uneventful. I even dozed off for a while, waking only when the train’s intercom system shrilled a nasty bit of feedback right into my ear. I was jolted upright, sending my portfolio onto the floor in front of me. Or maybe it was already there, I couldn’t tell.

As I picked up the portfolio, the businessman sitting in front of me got up and moved out of the car. I must have jostled his feet when I did it, as he seemed to leave in a huff. When I turned to apologize, I noticed an attractive Indian woman sitting across from me. She was dressed in a very colorful Saree, her face mostly hidden by a scarf. But her eyes were active and they appeared to be fixated on me. When I glanced at her, she turned away quickly, as if embarrassed by the attention.

Through the rest of the ride, I was aware she was watching me, though it seemed more out of curiosity than scrutiny. Like I was a puzzle that needed to be solved, and she only had a few more station stops with which to do it. So while she continued to stare, I kept my focus on the landscape outside the window. Towns and houses and trees seemed to whisk by, giving further evidence that there is indeed life outside Manhattan. I almost fell asleep again, when the conductor finally announced our arrival at the Plainfield train station.

Arriving at the station around noon, I wasn't exactly sure what I should be looking for. When Ms. Kingsmill told me her driver would pick me up, she neglected to tell me in what. A limo? An SUV? A motorcycle with a side car?

And what did her driver look like? How would I recognize him?

As I walked to the end of the platform, I saw a rather tall good-looking man with sunglasses who looked a lot like Tom Selleck. (I know what you're thinking. I'm obsessed with movies stars. Well...maybe.)

The man was very well dressed, and looked like he was there to pick up his girlfriend or his wife, or possibly both. As I walked to the exit of the platform, I found myself staring at him. Not intentionally. He just happened to me in my line of vision. But I didn't want to get caught, so as soon as he glanced in my direction, I quickly looked away with one of those awkward head-spins that never really looks very natural.

The awkward head turn was followed by an equally awkward change of direction which almost made me trip over myself. I'm not sure, but I think I heard the man chuckle.

Totally humiliated, I walked to the exit of the platform, and out into the station parking lot. Other than an older couple and some teenagers, there wasn't a car or a driver in site. But it was still early. 11:59.

Maybe instead of a car, her driver had a horse and buggy, and they were a little late getting out of the stable. She was English, after all. It was possible.

"Henson?" I heard somebody call over my shoulder. "Henson Ray?"

"Yes, " I said, turning around and coming face to face with the gorgeous man from the train platform.

"I'm here for Unity Kingsmill. She asked me to pick you up."

"You're...her driver?" I managed to get out, between the drools that no doubt seeped out the corners of my mouth.

"No, not really, " he laughed, taking off his sunglasses. "Just an old friend. I'm Tom. Nice to meet you."

I couldn't even find the right words to say how nice it was to meet him, so I just nodded instead. And apparently I spit too, because I noticed a long splash of water propel itself from my mouth as my head bobbed up and down.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Ready to go where?" I said, feeling like I was in a dream.

"To meet Mrs. Kingsmill. That is why you're here, isn't it?" Tom asked, as he flashed one of his famous smiles. Such perfect white teeth. I wondered if he and Julia Roberts went to the same dentist.

"Of course. Yes. That's why I brought my portfolio," I said, stating the obvious.

And with that, I lifted the black leather case up to show him, only to realize something was terribly wrong. The latch that held the two covers together had somehow come apart, and all my artwork, all my years of doodles and dreaming, was all gone. Gone with the train. Gone with the wind. Gone was my job.

"Is something wrong?" Tom asked, suddenly looking concerned. He had such great facial expressions. I don't think those expressions were used to their full potential during his *Magnum P.I.* days.

"I...I don't seem to have my art," I responded, as I felt my stomach starting to churn. "Something happened to the latch. I'm so embarrassed. Maybe I should come back another day. I don't want to waste Mrs. Kingsmill's time."

"Don't be silly," Tom said. "I'm sure Mrs. Kingsmill would never find time with you a waste."

What? Did I just hear that correctly? Did Tom Selleck just give me a compliment? He doesn't even know me.

"Come on, get in," he said, pointing to a beautiful new red Ferrari. "She expects you for lunch."

And with that, he took my empty portfolio and threw it in the back seat.

"We'll take the scenic route," Tom said. "You've got to see some of these old houses."

I wasn't entirely sure this was really happening. It seemed so foreign to any kind of experience I'd ever had before. Here I was in a beautiful car, with a beautiful man, being given an intimate tour of Plainfield, New Jersey. Somebody pinch me.

“Plainfield was once a very popular area for wealthy New Yorkers to build their summer homes,” Tom began, sounding like a professional tour guide. “Eventually many of those families moved here permanently, and it became a thriving community for the well-to-do. As we drive around, you’ll notice a lot of huge mansions and remarkably preserved Victorian homes.”

“Cool,” I said, sounding very dorky indeed.

Tom smiled. “You’ll have to ask Unity about her house. It has a very unusual history.”

As we drove around, Tom pointed out many unique and beautiful homes. He was absolutely correct in his assessment. Plainfield appeared to be a hidden little gem in the New Jersey landscape.

“Of course, not all of Plainfield still holds that wealthy clientele today. During the sixties, there was some upheaval here, like there was in Asbury Park. Racial tensions. A lot of the wealthy families began moving out, and houses were being sold for pennies. These huge mansions that were once the height of fashion were now being abandoned or destroyed.”

“What happened? It doesn’t look like that anymore,” I said, as we passed a sprawling brick monstrosity that looked like Bruce Wayne’s Manor from the old Batman show.

“People began moving back. Buying the old houses, fixing them up, creating a community. It’s gone through a tremendous rehabilitation over the last twenty years. “

“I like to hear stories like that,” I offered, finally feeling a little more relaxed. “When there’s a person or a place that people have given up on, and suddenly they surprise you with something amazing. Like this town, finding new life and new energy from the people who decided to give it another chance. That’s really cool.”

There’s that word again. “Cool.” Who says that any more? I sounded like my capacity for learning new vocabulary was suspended sometime in the seventies.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Tom said, looking at me with the warmest, most sincere smile I’ve ever seen. “Obviously Unity knows what she’s doing.”

Before I was able to ask what he meant by that, Tom suddenly pulled up in front of an English Tudor style home that looked like it had stepped out of a fairytale.

“Here’s your stop,” Tom said, making it clear he wasn’t getting out of the car.

“You’re not coming in?” I asked, trying not to sound too disappointed.

“No. I’ve already seen Unity today. Now it’s your turn. Just follow the driveway up to the front door. She’s waiting for you in the living room.”

As I got out of the car, I felt a sadness sweep over me. For the last fifteen or twenty minutes, I had been driving around in a car with Tom Selleck, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. And now he was leaving me, abandoning me, with someone I knew even less than him. What in the world could possibly happen next?

“Good luck,” Tom said as he drove off, once again flashing his perfectly warm smile. It was only after he was out of sight that I realized I had left my portfolio in his backseat. Not that it mattered, but now I was going to face Unity Kingsmill completely empty-handed. If I had my portfolio, at least I would look like an artist, even if I didn’t have any actual art on-hand.

I walked up the driveway, which was framed with overflowing flowerbeds and exotic plantings. Approaching the house, I had the odd sense that I was wandering into the cottage of the Seven Dwarves. The detail and dimension would have made any Hollywood set designer envious. It was a perfect little English cottage.

The front door was set back between two wings of the house, so you were actually surrounded by the house before you even entered it. Like a huge mouth, ready to swallow you whole at any moment.

Walking up to the door, I had a slight sense of foreboding. Like Julie Andrews felt before she knocked on the Von Trapp’s door in “The Sound of Music.”

“What will this day like? I wonder.” I sang softly to myself. Or at least I thought it was to myself.

Because before I could even lift my hand to touch the doorknocker, a voice from within the house said:

“It’s open, Henson. You can come right in. The living room is to your left.”

And with that I opened the door and stepped into the house that would soon change my life forevermore.

### **Next Episode: Unity Kingsmill**

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