

Chapter Four—Unity Kingsmill

The house that Unity Kingsmill lived in had a rather interesting history. It was originally built in the 1920s by an English businessman named Cornelius Tyler Tree. He was moving to America to start his own company, and he built the house to appease his wife, Harriet, who was not at all happy about moving from her beloved England. Cornelius had an English architect draw up plans for a typical Tudor home, and when he came to America, he had the house built to the exact specifications. There was a beautiful majestic fireplace in the living room, and an equally impressive version in the master bedroom. The bedroom had French doors that looked out onto an exquisitely manicured English garden, complete with waterfall and pagoda. There were even two guest rooms so Harriet's family could come and visit whenever they liked. The final result was a fairy tale cottage built from the love of an English gentleman for his Lady Fair.

Unfortunately, when the Lady Fair came to America to inspect the house, she was horrified at what she considered a "mockery of English design." Harriet took the very next boat back to England and never returned to the beautiful little cottage built from love. Shortly after that, the heart-broken Cornelius decided against forming a company in America, and returned to England, where he spent the rest of his life trying, without much success, to please his ever-irritable Lady Fair.

When I first heard this story, all I could think was that Harriet was a major bitch. If someone went to that much trouble for me, building me an elegant little home with a garden and a pagoda, I would get down on my knees and....kiss his feet.

I found the story to be a very sad one, and I was immediately sympathetic to the poor husband. But of course I didn't know any of this when I first entered the house. In fact, I didn't know anything about my hostess either.

As I entered the foyer to the Kingsmill home, I caught a whiff of something that smelled like cinnamon and apples. Or maybe caramel and apples. Whatever it was, it reminded me of visiting my Grandmother's house when I was a child. The moment you opened her front door, you were immediately greeted with an avalanche of tasty smells and pleasing aromas. This was because my Grandmother was forever in the kitchen, baking, brewing, cutting, stewing....She never seemed to be without a dozen or so cooking projects at once, all designed to keep our bellies full and happy for hours to come.

That was how the home of Unity Kingsmill smelled, too. Safe, familiar, comforting.

I turned left from the foyer and entered a massive living room with a very high ceiling, supported by large wooden beams. The surprising height of the ceiling gave one the impression of being in a medieval castle. Or perhaps a ski lodge. Not that the two have anything in common.

At the other end of the room, sitting in a black Hitchcock rocker, was Unity Kingsmill. She was a rather small, frail-looking woman, with a shock of bouncy white hair that surrounded the warmest smile.

“Do come in,” she began. “The fire is very warm over here.”

“Thank you,” I said. “It was very kind of you to see me.”

“And it was very kind of you to come.” She replied politely. “I’m rather excited about seeing your work.”

At this, my heart sunk. But then, as if noticing I didn’t have anything with me, Ms. Kingsmill gave me an unintentional “out.” Or was it?

“But of course I didn’t expect you to bring anything for me to see today. I really just wanted to meet you first, to see if you’re a good personality fit for my story.” Unity smiled, her eyes twinkling like pixie dust.

I sat on an ottoman near the fireplace. The heat of the fire felt good and no doubt covered the flushed look that must have saturated my face.

“The truth is, I did bring some work to show you,” I said, looking down at my feet. “But it fell out during the train ride. And then I accidentally left my portfolio in Tom...er, Mr. Selleck’s car.”

“No harm done. You’ll have plenty of time to show me your work in the future. As I said, you come highly recommended.”

“Oh yes, about that,” I blurted suddenly. “I didn’t quite catch the name of who recommended me.”

“Martin Pestin. The realtor.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I know who that is.”

“It doesn’t matter. The point is, he knows who you are. I believe he saw some of your work at the agency you work for.”

“*Worked* for, as in the past tense. I was actually let go recently.”

“Better for you,” Unity said optimistically. “This will give you more time to devote to my book. And wouldn’t you rather be working for yourself than some stuffy agency?”

“Well, yes,” I answered, half-heartedly. “In a perfect world. But...”

“But this is a perfect world, Henson.” Unity countered. “I’m surprised you haven’t seen that yet. But you will. You will.”

I didn’t quite know how to respond, but I was beginning to feel more comfortable with my possible future boss. She was like a jolly little elf that never allowed an unhappy thought to linger in her presence.

“I hope you like Caramel Apple Pie,” Unity said, changing the subject. “Because I’ve been up all morning preparing it.”

Caramel Apple Pie was one of my grandmother’s specialties. She made it for our family every Thanksgiving while she was alive, and several times by special request on my birthdays.

“And popovers, of course,” Unity stated, as if popovers were a staple at every meal.

This was too good to be true. Every Sunday morning my father would get up early to make popovers or pancakes. Popovers were always my favorite, with their soft fluffy interiors and crusty outsides. They were the perfect traps for capturing butter and jellies and all kinds of yummy ingredients.

It was as if Unity Kingsmill knew me already. These were two of my favorite foods, jam-packed into one delicious meal. Again, I felt the need to pinch myself. Which I actually did this time with very unpleasant results.

“I’m amazed at the menu,” I finally was able to blurt out.

“Too much?” Unity asked with a sly smile.

“No. Too good to be true. It’s like you could read my mind.”

Ms. Kingsmill seemed to be considering something for a moment, but then decided against it. A few seconds later, she was suddenly out of her chair and motioning for me to follow her.

“Would you like a tour?” she said, winking at me.

“Absolutely,” I smiled back. “It’s a beautiful home.”

“Yes. Beautiful and sad.”

Ms. Kingsmill then launched into the story of the English Gentleman and his ungrateful wife, all the while pointing out secret cubbyholes and interesting architectural nuances. She was like a museum tour guide, stating the facts in such a way as to remove herself from any feeling about the subject she was describing. As if detaching herself from the surroundings was the only way she could get through the process.

“My husband Noah brought me to this house in 1975 and I’ve lived here ever since,” Unity said, bringing the house’s history up to the present. “He’s no longer with us, my husband. But he will always be a part of this house. It was his haven.”

“I can see why,” I offered. “It’s absolutely beautiful. Like a movie set. Everything is so perfect.”

“That was Noah. He was a master carpenter. Worked on a lot of Broadway shows. Movies too. When we first bought the house, it had been abandoned and run down for years. But Noah was determined to bring it back to its original glory. This house was his ultimate set design, I suppose.”

Unity let out a little laugh, which seemed to echo somewhere in the distance.

During the tour, I had the odd sense that several other people were in the house with us. Though I never saw anyone, I was aware of whispered conversations, always taking place just out of my hearing. Or maybe it was a radio. But no matter where we were in the house, the whispers never got louder or softer. They seemed to remain at the same level throughout, as if they were part of everything around us.

When Unity stopped for a moment to catch her breath, I took the opportunity to ask a few questions of my own.

“May I ask, Ms. Kingsmill, how you happened to know Tom Selleck?”

“Please call me Unity,” she responded. “I’ve known Tommy since he was a boy...or practically a boy. I used to be an acting coach in the city, taught all kinds of famous people. But Tommy has been one of my favorites. He always visits when he’s on the East Coast.”

“He seems very nice. Even nicer than he is on TV.” I added, gushing like a schoolgirl.

Unity smiled, looking me up and down.

“Yes, I think you will fit in nicely. But come, let’s eat our lunch before it gets cold.”

With that, Unity took me by the arm and guided me to the dining room, which was beautifully decorated in soft shades of green and burgundy. The centerpiece of the room, a large oak dining room table, was already laid out and ready for us, the meal piping hot upon our plates. The site of a completely prepared meal was a little bit of a shocker, but at least it gave me a clue to where the whispers might be coming from. Unity had a staff.

During our lunch, Unity asked me many questions. Questions about my past, my family, my dreams, what I wanted out of life. I wasn’t sure what any of them had to do with my

ability as an artist, but maybe this was some new kind of interviewing process I wasn't aware of.

The lunch lasted for several hours, at the end of which Unity announced to me that if I wished it, the job was mine. Without seeing so much as a doodle from me.

She asked if I could begin work the following day, as she was going on a trip in the next few months, and she wanted to make sure we got a good start before she left.

"You can work on the illustrations while I'm away. I'll still pay you, so don't worry about that. Does that seem acceptable to you?"

"Yes. Thank you. I would love to work on your book," I said sincerely. And I honestly meant it. Ms. Kingsmill was saving me from a very depressing existence, so I might have agreed to just about anything. Luckily, she only required an illustrator.

"Your ride is waiting outside to take you to the train station," Unity said.

Before I slipped out the door, Unity tucked a little brown bag into my hand.

"This is for you. A couple pieces of pie for the road. So don't shake the bag around."

As I turned to say good-bye, I couldn't hide the small tear that was seeping out of my eye. This woman, who knew me from no one, had just made me feel like the most important and talented person in the world. She'd given me an amazing meal of all my favorite foods, a stimulating conversation that continually boosted my ego, and a job that would help me stave off the poorhouse for at least another few months. And now, to top it all off, she was giving me two pieces of pie. She truly was a Goddess.

"Ms. K-K-Kingsmill," I stuttered, obviously affected by the huge lump in my throat. "I mean Unity. This has been one of the best afternoons I've ever spent. Thank you so much for...for...being you, I guess."

"Why Henson, that is so sweet. I knew I was right about you. You have heart. And a good soul. I see great things for you."

I wanted to say thank you, but instead I reached out and hugged her. My new employer. An elderly woman of questionable frailty. A stranger until today. And I hugged her. What was I thinking? But to my delight and surprise, she hugged back. Just like my Grandmother.

When I got outside, I was more than slightly disappointed that the ride waiting for me was not Tom Selleck again. But rather a regular taxi with a regular taxi cab driver.

On my train ride back to the city, I kept recounting all the wonderful things that had happened to me that day. The complete surprises, the celebrity encounter, the new job...it was almost too much to comprehend.

That night, as I drifted off to sleep, I thought about how much I liked Unity Kingmill. How magical she seemed. And for the first time since I was a kid, I had a dream about Santa Claus.

Next Episode: A Twist of Faint