

Chapter Forty-One—A Troubled Tribute

“So it is with great pleasure that I welcome to the stage, the very charitable and very handsome Mr. George Clooney.”

The end of Jon Stewart’s eloquent introduction was followed by a standing ovation that went on for several more. Amidst all the applause, George stepped onto the stage, smiling and waving. A flurry of flashes greeted his entrance as the paparazzi and tabloid television captured the moment for posterity.

I felt sick to my stomach. Any moment now George would surprise the audience with his own special announcement about the SSRS. At some point during his speech, George would signal the booth to play his film. A film that would never be seen this evening because the DVD containing it was now in several pieces on the control room floor.

“Are you sure there’s not another copy?” Rick asked, as he rubbed my shoulders to calm me down.

“I just tried calling Celia’s cell phone, and it went straight to voicemail,” I said, discouraged. “And I don’t think we have time to go and find her.”

I looked over at Adam Wordon, who was still lying in the corner. Our fall to the floor a few minutes earlier had temporarily knocked him unconscious, allowing Rick and I plenty of time to tie him up with some electrical cords and duct tape.

Rick wanted to immediately turn Adam over to security guards. But when I explained that Adam’s presence was crucial to George’s presentation, he agreed to hold off. Although without the DVD of the film, I wasn’t sure how well George’s presentation was going to go.

“Thank you Jon, for that incredibly generous introduction,” George was saying from the stage. “I am deeply honored and tremendously humbled to be here this evening.”

What was I going to do? I knew the film was the centerpiece of George’s plan. He’d created it as a way of cleverly exposing the SSRS to the world. I say *cleverly*, because George was not planning to expose the group as the low-life, revenge-seeking scum they actually were. But rather as a group with similar aspirations to the SSCP.

George told me he used footage of actual SSCP Chosens, including myself, in the process. (With our faces blurred out, of course.) However, in George’s movie, the Chosens are not presented as benefactors of the SSCP, but rather of the SSRS. George had decided the best way to give the SSRS the attention it so desperately needed was to credit them with all the SSCP’s charitable activities. In this way, they are exposed as a legitimate organization, but also publicly infused with a better objective.

It was a big risk. But George believed that if the SSRS was presented as a selfless organization, Adam and his followers would have no choice but to try and live up to that image. Anything less would be a huge disappointment to the public and depict them for what they really were—a bunch of selfish egomaniacs.

"We're dealing with people who crave the spotlight," George told me earlier in the week. "So if we give them what they want, all kinds of free publicity, I'm hoping it will help repurpose their goals."

"But why would that stop them from exposing the SSCP?" I'd asked.

"After we tell the press about the SSRS and their *selfless charitable undertakings*, why would they risk exposing an organization with a similar philosophy? It would steal all their thunder."

"What about the accusation that you and the other SSCP members are playing God?"

"Personally, I don't see it that way," George responded, though I could tell he'd been bothered by that particular allegation. "We're not doing this because we think we're better than anyone, or to watch people like mice in a maze. There is some real thought and intent behind our organization, and I don't plan to have Adam or anyone else destroy something that has so much potential."

George was angry. He kept it under control, but I knew that deep down inside he was seething. He looked out the window for a moment, before adding:

"Besides, if they accuse us of playing God, they would have to answer the same accusation about themselves. And to these people, even revenge isn't worth the price of some great publicity."

I thought George's idea of publicly repurposing the SSRS sounded logical, and it was certainly inventive, but I wasn't convinced it would actually work. Adam and his followers would have to do a complete turnaround in their philosophy and agenda in a matter of minutes, which seemed almost impossible. But that was another reason George's film was so important to the presentation. Without it, the audience wouldn't see any tangible proof to back up his story. And with actual members of the SSCP and SSRS in attendance, the whole situation could backfire horribly.

"Though I appreciate this honor," George continued from the stage. "I feel I am not deserving of such praise. Especially when there are so many others who have given much more and worked much harder."

This was it. George was working up to the moment when he would broach the subject of the SSRS.

"We have to wake Adam up," I told Rick. "He needs to hear this."

Rick moved over to the corner and began shaking Adam. When that didn't produce any results, I took the technician's glass of coke and threw it in Adam's face.

"Hey!" The technician whined. "I was drinking that."

Adam's eyes began to flutter, and within moments, he was shaking his head and trying to speak. Unfortunately for him, his mouth had previously been sealed with several strips of duct tape, so whatever he said was lost in translation.

With Rick's help, we forced Adam to his feet, and soon he was standing in front of the glass window of the control booth looking down at George on stage.

"I am always impressed with someone who can come up with a new idea," George said to the audience. "Or a new way of looking at things. Those are the people I admire and respect. And I would be doing you all a terrible disservice if I didn't mention one group in particular that has selflessly redefined what it means to nurture the human spirit. An anonymous organization that has spent the last several years creating opportunities for people of all races and economic classes in an effort to effect positive change in society—one person at a time. Tonight seems like the perfect moment to bring their amazing accomplishments to light. I'm speaking of an organization known as the SSRS."

Adam's eyeballs practically popped out of his head. Good. Part One of the plan was successful—achieving the element of surprise. Adam was definitely affected. The mention of the SSRS also seemed to hit a chord with members of the audience, as a soft murmur began growing throughout the hall.

"SSRS stands for the *Secret Society of Reality Stars*," George explained with a smile. "And though the name might remind you of a comic book, the work they do is definitely worthy of heroes."

Boy, was George laying it on thick. But I could see his words were already having a profound effect on Adam. Sweat was pouring down Adam's face, and his eyes took on that look of *perpetual surprise* that's always so popular with cut-rate plastic surgeons. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost!

"The group was founded by a film electrician," George continued. "And a group of his friends who all happened to come from the world of reality television. It was their intent to secretly help out average everyday people like themselves, and give them an opportunity to follow their dreams."

More murmurs from the audience. I'm sure SSCP members were totally confused by now. None of them, except maybe Julia, were even aware of the SSRS yet. Or at least not by name. So to hear George talking about another group so similar to the SSCP must have been terribly disconcerting.

"I'm speaking of a man named Adam Wordon," George said.

A hush fell over the audience. For a few moments, no one spoke. Then suddenly the room was filled with conversation, some of it even rising above a whisper. George continued, undeterred.

"Some of you may have worked with Adam at one point or another. His roster of credits is impressive."

More whispering. More conversation. This was not going well. People were confused as to why George was talking about this group at a benefit designed to honor him.

As for me, I was still watching Adam. Tears were running down his cheeks. But why? Did he realize what George was up to, or did he finally feel some remorse for all the terrible things he'd done? Or was he simply happy that people were talking about him?

"Now I could talk all day about what a great group this is," George persisted. "But that wouldn't be half as much fun as actually seeing their work in action. So I've prepared a short film to show you some of the people who have clearly benefited from the SSRS's amazing generosity."

That was the cue to play the film. Only there was no film to play. When the lights didn't dim after a few moments, George looked up to the booth and waved. Time seemed to stand still as I watched George fidgeting on stage. The scraggly technician looked to me for advice, but I was useless.

"I guess you'll have to tell him the DVD was damaged," I said.

"You want *me* to tell *George Clooney* his DVD is damaged?" the technician shrieked. "In front of *this* audience? Are you crazy? Everyone will blame *me*."

"Well, we've got to do something," I yelled in frustration. "He's waiting for us to play his movie, and we're not even responding. How do you think he feels right now?"

I could hear the volume of the chatter growing, as people were trying to fill the uncomfortable gap where a movie should be playing.

To make matters worse, Lacie Fromage suddenly appeared on the balcony overlooking the audience and began yelling "Fraud, fraud!" Apparently she'd managed to escape from the closet Bert and I locked her in earlier. Or maybe someone accidentally opened the door. Whatever the reason, she looked disheveled and disoriented. Though it certainly didn't stop her from using this moment to her best advantage.

"They tried to shut me up!" Lacie screamed at the famous faces below her. "They locked me in a closet so I wouldn't reveal the truth. But now that you all know, I'm happy to say I was the first one to expose this mockery of humanity to the world."

Lacie must have assumed the SSRS Tribute Video had already been shown. Since she was locked in a closet for the last hour or so, she wasn't privy to the fact that the presentation started later than planned. Therefore, her outburst was not only premature, but also a total contradiction to what George had just talked about.

Lacie's outburst caused even more confusion among the partygoers, as they tried to determine whether Lacie was a part of the presentation or just plain crazy. What she was saying didn't make any sense, though with Lacie it rarely did. Her natural propensity for slurred speech making much of what she said unintelligible.

George looked helpless. The whole evening was about to blow up in his face unless I did something. I looked down at the audience, searching for inspiration, when I saw something that gave me an idea. Not a brilliant idea, but an idea nonetheless.

I grabbed my eye patch and wig and quickly put them back in place.

"Stay here and keep an eye on Adam," I said to Rick, as I began exiting the booth.

"What am I supposed to do?" The technician yelled after me.

"Hit me with a spotlight. I'm about to bring down the great Lacie Fromage."

With Rick yelling something behind me, I ran around the booth to the balcony area where Lacie was standing. Taking a cue from my earlier conversation with Ellen, I assumed the role of a swaggering Pirate as I made my way down the balcony.

"Ah, there you are, Pretty Bird!" I yelled when I was about twenty feet from her.

The sudden appearance of someone else on the balcony caught Lacie off-guard. It also caused the audience below us to quiet down, finally convinced this must be some kind of weird comical interlude in the evening's program.

"Polly want a cracker?" I yelled, as I began creeping up on Lacie like a lion stalking his prey.

"What are you doing?" Lacie yelled, looking absolutely horrified.

"Come here, Pretty Bird. The Captain wants you back in the Galley."

Some of the audience began giggling in appreciation, obviously enjoying my blatant mockery of Lacie's feather ensemble. Lacie, however, was not amused.

"Someone call the police," she screamed. "This is the Assassin that locked me in the closet."

As soon as I saw an opportunity, I lunged at Lacie and quickly grabbed her tightly around the waist. My intent was to pull her off the balcony and take her someplace in the back where she couldn't cause any more trouble.

Lacie was not such a willing captor, however. As soon as I grabbed her around the waist, she began flailing her arms and legs in all directions, smacking me in the face or back-kicking me in the knees. It felt like I was trying to capture a bull rather than a bird. Nonetheless, I maintained my charade as a pirate, adding an occasional "Arrgghh" or "Shiver me timbers" whenever I saw fit.

As Lacie screamed, the audience below us seemed to be enjoying this strange and unexpected break in an otherwise conservative evening. They clapped and hollered and seemed to be encouraging me to take Lacie away, her long history of histrionics as well-known as Paris Hilton's vajayjay."

Lacie began hitting me hard with her fists. At one point, she pulled off my wig and sent it flying into the audience. Much like a Bridal Bouquet, several people actually ran into each other trying to catch it. (I believe Tyra Banks was the final winner.)

Lacie was quite a strong woman for her age, and also quite adept at maneuvering in high heels. After pulling off my wig, the eye patch sort of hung on its own, not covering up anything but a small piece of my neck. This left my puffy eye clearly exposed and unprotected.

I was trying to adjust my stance, when Lacie suddenly slammed one of her spiked heels into my foot. That bitch! Without thinking, I pushed her away so she'd get off my foot, and it sent her flying backwards. She grabbed my eye patch to keep herself from falling, but the elastic snapped instantly with the force of her pull. As she went down, the impact also caused me to fall backwards, and within seconds I was lying on the ground facing her.

When I looked up, though, Lacie wasn't moving. Instead, she was just staring at me, and there was a very odd expression on her face. Was it horror? Anger? As she stood up slowly, the spotlight I'd requested earlier bathed her with such an intense amount of light, it made her look almost ethereal. (Especially with all the feathers.)

"YOU?!?" Lacie finally managed to spit out.

Lacie obviously recognized me. That meant the jig was up! Without my wig and eye patch, there was nothing for me to hide behind. And although the audience below couldn't see my face yet, I was sure that Lacie was about to tell everyone exactly who I was.

With renewed determination, Lacie puffed up her chest and appeared to grow in stature and power, much like Maleficent when she turns into a dragon during the final battle scene of "Sleeping Beauty." I knew this was going to be a victorious moment for her, a chance to really stick it to the SSCP. By unmasking one of the their top secret Chosens in public, she guaranteed herself the cover of every tabloid in town.

But before Lacie could even speak, a female voice suddenly yelled from the other end of the balcony.

"Oh Lacie Dear."

"What? Who is that?" Lacie asked, as she tried shielding her eyes from the spotlight.

"I think you're being very rude," the female voice said as she stepped into the light. It was Celia, and she was holding something behind her back. "You interrupted George's speech right when he was getting to the really good part. And for what? Just so you can stage some silly prank to get yourself more free publicity?"

"Why I...I...," Lacie stuttered. She was obviously not prepared for this type of encounter.

"We all know you crave the spotlight, Lacie," Celia continued, showing a fiery determination I'd never seen before. "And you'll do anything to keep yourself in it. Even if it means trashing me to somehow make yourself look better. And frankly, I'm tired of it. I've never done anything to you in my life, and yet you continually drag my name through the mud."

You could practically hear a pin drop in the audience. People had speculated for years what might happen if Celia ever paid Lacie back for all the nasty comments she'd made. And tonight appeared to be the moment they'd been waiting for.

"It's time you got a little taste of the dirt you sling at other people."

And with that, Celia pulled a huge metal container from behind her back and graciously dumped its contents all over Lacie's yellow feather gown. The audience collectively gasped as they watched the messy remnants of a Chocolate Fountain cascade down Lacie's frilly ensemble like a mudslide.

Lacie was so shocked by the humiliating public assault and the sticky molten mess that was once her dress, she ran out through the velvet curtains separating the balcony from the back area; chocolate droppings following behind her like a trail of breadcrumbs. The audience went wild with appreciation, clapping and yelling. I looked at Celia, who appeared to be stunned.

"I had to do something," Celia whispered, as she helped me up. "She'll probably sue me, but I'm pretty sure it was worth it."

"You were awesome," I said, smiling back at her. "But the DVD is broken. And Adam Wordon is here and..."

Before I realized what I was doing, I turned around and faced the audience, the bright spotlight illuminating my every feature. I tried to move out of the light, but it was too late.

"Isn't that Henson Ray?" I heard someone say below me.

And then from everywhere I seemed to hear my name whispered and bantered about. Even with my puffy eye and messy hair, people recognized me. All the members of the SSCP who had followed my "storyline" for months were now seeing me here in person. Some of them for the first time, maybe.

As I looked at George watching me from the stage, I was filled with a deep sadness and disappointment in myself. I tried so hard to make sure everything went smoothly this evening, taking risks I never would have considered a year ago, and ultimately none of it mattered.

I broke the DVD. I exposed myself to the SSCP. And I'd let George, Celia and Unity down. Not to mention Rick, who must consider me a total whacko by now. At that moment, I couldn't imagine how things could get any worse.

But, of course, they did.

Next Chapter: My Big Moment

Only Two Chapters Left!