

Chapter Forty-Two—My Big Moment

As I stood by the balcony overlooking this room of famous faces, I was once again reminded how absurd my life had become. A little more than a year ago, I was unhappily employed as a third-level graphic designer, and my prospects were nothing short of grim. But now, I was a well-known figure among a certain group of famous celebrities, and I still had little inclination as to why. What was it the SSCP saw in me that made them think I had greater potential? And what, if anything, should I be doing to fulfill it?

I certainly wasn't showing any "greater potential" this evening. Because no matter how many times I'd tried to "save the day" over the last several hours, everything I did seemed to make things worse.

Especially my decision to lock Lacie Fromage in a closet. If only I'd found a better method of dealing with her. Then she wouldn't have disrupted the evening with her passionate outburst, and I wouldn't have made a complete fool of myself trying to stop her.

But it was pointless to dwell on this, especially *now* when I was standing in the spotlight for all to see.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," George was saying from the stage. "I would like to introduce you to one of the actual beneficiaries of the SSRS, Mr. Henson Ray."

What? This wasn't part of the plan.

"Henson is rather unique," George continued. "As he is the *only* SSRS beneficiary to actually know about the group's existence. He found out by accident, and that's why he's here tonight—to share his amazing experience with all of you."

It felt like I was in a fog, which is the usual precursor to one of my famous fainting spells. But I couldn't let that happen. Not now!

I quickly grabbed the balcony railing and lowered my head slightly so I wouldn't get dizzy. The gesture must have appeared like I was bowing, as several people below me bowed back.

I could hear my name lobbed about like a tennis ball, as guests at every table began to discuss what was going on. I'm sure members of the SSCP were quite confused, but I also imagined members of the SSRS were as well.

I caught a glimpse of *Purgatory Paul* across the balcony from me. He looked more confused than angry, and I wondered what was going through his mind at this moment. Was he buying into this new direction George was outlining for the SSRS, or was he planning to retaliate? I couldn't tell.

I looked down into the room and saw various members of the SSCP. Meryl, Matt, Marky Mark. They were all looking up at me and smiling. But why? Didn't they care that George had credited all their patronage to the SSRS? And weren't they a little

shocked to see me here, one of their Chosens? Especially one with a big puffy blob where a left eye should be?

Apparently not. I guess they assumed if George introduced me as a beneficiary of the SSRS, there must be a good reason for it. A reason they didn't fully understand yet, but were willing to play along with. (Actors are very adaptable in situations like this. Possibly because of all their experience with improv and pretense.)

As I scanned the room of famous faces, I also noticed a table filled with members of the SSRS. I recognized them from the many pictures on their website. People who had been instrumental in some of the attacks on the Chosens, and who now faced a very important decision. Do they go along with the ruse and pretend to be a benevolent organization or do they continue with their plan to launch "Celebrity Outings"?

As I continued to survey the room, my eyes finally landed on Unity. She was sitting in her wheelchair near the front of the stage, and she was smiling. Without realizing it, I began waving to her. Though I think the audience assumed I was waving down to them, because several people began waving back. It reminded me of that scene in "The Sound of Music" where the children sing "So Long, Farewell" to the Captain's party guests.

"Why don't you come up here, Henson," George said from the stage. "I'm sure the audience would appreciate hearing about your experience."

What? He wanted me to talk now? In front of *this* group of people? But what would I say? I hated public speaking; it was one of my biggest fears. To stand in front of an audience of your classmates or peers and make a speech was nauseating enough. But to stand in front of *this* particular audience of people was downright terrifying.

I felt a hand gently pull me out of the spotlight. It was Celia. She began guiding me down the balcony to the stairs at the rear.

"Don't worry," Celia said, quietly. "Just speak from your heart. And whatever you do, don't mention the SSCP."

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, there were several celebrities waiting to greet us. Queen Latifah was the first to shake my hand, followed by Sandra Bullock and Christopher Meloni. (Hot!) Drew Barrymore leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek as I walked by, while Ellen and Portia were both smiling and waving. Ellen had put her makeshift eye patch back on, which made me laugh.

I cannot truly describe how awkward and wonderful my walk to the podium was. I felt like a King strolling among his subjects, as people patted me on the shoulder or whispered little asides as I passed. There were so many faces, so many smiles; but I couldn't really comprehend any of it. None of this seemed like reality.

As I got closer to the stage, I noticed a white ethereal glow emanating from somewhere near the front. It seemed to be surrounding one particular individual, creating what lighting designers might call a "special." But once I was near enough to see who was exuding the special glow, I almost stopped in my tracks. For there, standing directly in front of me on my route to the stage was the Queen of Media herself, Oprah Winfrey.

She was beautifully decked out in a crisp white ensemble encrusted with hundreds of tiny beads and sequins. The sequins sparkled and flashed under the light, creating this amazing glow about her. Or maybe it was just her natural glow, which I mistakenly attributed to the clothing. Whatever the cause, she looked amazing.

As I approached, she stepped forward holding out her hand to greet me. I was stunned. The great Oprah was about to touch me, and I suddenly lost all feeling in my arms. I saw my hand lifting itself up to meet hers, but it seemed like an out of body experience. Like I was watching a movie of Oprah shaking my hand, rather than actually experiencing the moment as it happened.

But as soon as our hands connected, the warmth that emanated from her put me immediately at ease.

"Hello, Henson. It's so nice to meet you."

A tear exploded from my right eye as I smiled back at her. But there was no time to stop and chat. Celia was pulling me up on stage with her, and all I could do was blindly follow.

Once we reached our goal, George greeted me with a handshake and guided me directly to the podium. I looked into his eyes for some kind of instruction, but he just smiled and nodded toward the microphone. I knew he trusted me to say something that would sell his interpretation of the SSRS, though I couldn't imagine what that might be.

My heart was pounding at an unnatural rate as I looked out into the audience, the weight of this moment hitting me like a poison arrow. All those famous faces, all those perfect smiles, all that expensive clothing. It was all directed towards me, eagerly anticipating the pearls of wisdom that would no doubt spill forth from my mouth.

But I was speechless. I didn't know what to say, or how to talk to these people. I didn't know how to publicly thank the SSCP for all they'd done, while at the same time crediting the SSRS for the actual work. It was too much for me to pull out of a hat, when all I really wanted to do was crawl down a hole.

And that's when I saw Unity. Sitting in her wheelchair, smiling up at me, she seemed to be urging me on. Her very aura seemed to be telling me that I could do this, that I would instinctively know what to say. The look of support and confidence in her face gave me a sudden boost of adrenaline.

I looked over at Celia and George. They also believed in me and trusted me to handle this. Finally I looked up to the technician's booth to see if I could spot Rick. And there he was, standing next to the glass partition, looking down at me. He smiled and waved, and I knew everything was still okay between us.

"A moment like this. Some people wait a lifetime for a moment like this..."

The lyrics from the famous Kelly Clarkson song "A Moment Like This" ran through my head like a calliope. A moment like this. This is what it feels like to have "a moment." A moment in the sun. Or in my case, a moment in Klieg lights.

In an instant, the last year flashed through my mind like a movie on fast forward. I was not the same sniveling, cowardly loser I once imagined myself to be. In fact, I'd never really been that person. I just used that label as my excuse not to move forward in my life, or break out of my comfort zone. And here I was, totally out of my element, and yet I knew I could handle it. I didn't need to hide behind excuses anymore. I was meant to take this moment, and that's exactly what I intended to do.

So with a grateful nod to Unity, I stepped up to the mic and began the most important speech of my life.

"Hello, my name is Henson Ray."

It's not really important that you know exactly what I said during my ten-minute dissertation, because you've already heard most of it anyway. And if I repeated it all here, it would sound like one of those corny, *wrap-it-up-with-a-nice-bow-endings* that movies like to throw in when they can't figure out what to do right before the credits roll. The hero always gives his big morality speech, and when he's done the entire room is silent. Until one lone person stands up and begins to clap, followed by a few more people, and then still more, until the entire audience is finally up on its feet clapping and cheering. If only life were that easy.

Suffice it to say, I was clear and succinct in what I spoke about, without giving away too many specific details or naming any names. I talked about going to Plainfield for a job interview, and how that eventually led to a whole new life there, which included a new house, a new car, a new source of income (eBay) and a new set of friends. I painted the SSRS as a wonderful organization that was completely responsible for all my life-changing opportunities, and I urged the group to continue with their amazing charitable efforts.

Then, before closing, I decided to throw in a little firepower of my own. I mentioned how I accidentally found out about the organization because of something my friend Brit told me. As I'd hoped, the mention of Brit's name caused quite a ruckus among the table of SSRS members. I'm sure they were even wondering if Brit was somehow in cahoots with the SSCP.

Which is exactly the kind of confusion I wanted to create. By making members of the SSRS suspicious of each other, it would chip away at some of the trust and loyalty they felt towards Adam and his co-horts.

And that's also why I saved my best piece of information for the end. My trump card, if you will. *File 41*.

File 41 was the most incriminating collection of evidence we had on the SSRS, and neither George nor Celia even knew it existed yet. That's because I'd only found it this afternoon when I was searching through the DVDs we'd taken from the SSRS house. And with everything else that was going on, I never found the right moment to mention it. Until now.

When I said the name "File 41," I repeated it three times just to emphasize my point. Naturally, this got the attention of the SSRS members, as I'm sure they all knew what that secret file contained.

But I didn't elaborate. I only said that File 41 contained fascinating information on all the group's wonderful accomplishments. (I let this last bit of irony hang in the air for a moment before I proceeded. Very dramatic of me.) And in conclusion, I assured the audience that all the SSRS secrets would remain that way, as long as the group continued with their wonderful philanthropic work.

At the end of my speech, there was a very warm round of applause and some polite cheering, but it certainly wasn't the wild audience response you see in the movies. I guess celebrities don't like to display that kind of enthusiasm unless they're in front of a camera.

Nevertheless, I could tell I'd done a good job. George shook my hand and Celia hugged me tight; but the best indication came from Unity. There were tears running down her face like a proud parent watching her child blossom. I was quite moved by her genuine show of affection, and began to get quite emotional myself.

"And now for that video I promised you," George was saying from the mic.

This time the lights dimmed on cue and the film finally made its way to the big screen. I looked to George, who simply said:

"I brought a copy, of course."

During my speech Celia told George about the broken DVD, so they were able to get his copy to the booth before I finished speaking. Celia had taken it up, and presumably seen Rick and Adam as well.

It was good to see George's film finally have its rightful showing. The movie opened with George standing in front of a building, looking very similar to the way Adam was dressed in the SSRS version. He spoke for a few moments about Adam Wordon and then began recounting the major accomplishments of the SSRS. George even used some of the same footage from the SSRS version, except he blurred the faces to protect the real identities of the Chosens. As the images were shown, George happily recounted how each Chosen had progressed with the help of the SSRS.

The final portion of the film showed a screenshot of the SSRS website. Only it wasn't the real SSRS website, but rather a copy George had commissioned someone to build over the preceding week. The homepage had a very similar look, complete with the SSRS Coat of Arms; but this version had much different content. Content that was pulled directly from the SSCP website and given a new home here.

The screenshots of the revised website, with its newer and more positive focus, caught the SSRS members by surprise. If they weren't already suspicious of Adam's possible involvement in this, this probably tipped the scales. I could see several of them looking around, perhaps wondering why Adam or Brit or Paul hadn't appeared to deny any of this. Or maybe they were wondering if they'd all just been punk'd. (After all, Ashton Kutcher *was* in the audience.)

Whatever their real thoughts might've been, they certainly weren't happy ones. Several members of the table looked so irritated, they eventually got up and walked out.

The film closed with an image of Adam Wordon, with the words "Founder of the SSRS" clearly printed below his face. As the film ended, George again took the microphone.

"And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome to the stage, the man behind this amazing organization, Mr. Adam Wordon."

At that moment, Adam was ushered onto the stage by Rick, who held him firmly by the arm. All of Adam's tape and binding were gone, but he still looked sweaty and disoriented. George walked over to greet Adam, and whispered something in his ear. I don't know what he said, but it seemed to make Adam extremely uncomfortable. As he walked slowly to the podium, I could see sweat pouring down his face.

But what would he say? Had we done enough to stop him from exposing the SSCP? Was he swayed by our artful presentation? Or would he move forward with his plan no matter what?

It all came down to this moment; to this fateful fork in the road. Which path would Adam choose? I had a feeling whatever he said in the next few minutes would not only determine the future of the SSCP, but possibly all of Hollywood as well.

A dozen possible outcomes began flashing through my head, most of them ending in some kind of apocalyptic tragedy. Yet no matter what kind of horrible scenario I dreamed up, nothing adequately prepared me for what happened next.

Next Episode—A Shocking Conclusion

THE FINAL CHAPTER WILL BE POSTED ON MONDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2007.

Don't forget to visit Henson's blog at <http://www.hensonshell.blogspot.com>