

Chapter Eight

"I've never been to Disney World," Cassandra mentioned as they pulled into the massive parking lot of the happiest place on earth. "Is it as fun as people would have you believe?"

"I wouldn't know," he answered, his frustration with the cars lined up in front of him apparent. "I hate waiting in lines."

"So you've never been either?"

"No."

"Really?"

Ryan looked over at her. "Really. My parents never had the funds while I was growing up and once I became an adult, other things held my interest much more than a mouse infested amusement park."

"Well don't you sound like a lot of fun."

Ryan cut his eyes over at Cassandra.

"I'm surprised you haven't been though. It sounds like you and your sister had the perfect childhood."

"And a perfect childhood would not be complete without a visit to Disney World?"

"That's what I'm told," he said.

Cassandra looked out the window, awed by the huge park they were about to enter. She just wished it were under different circumstances.

"We almost came once," she admitted. "But Sydney got appendicitis so we had to cancel."

“No rain checks?”

Cassandra smiled. “No rain checks. I think, like you, by the time our parents could afford to take us again, Sydney and I were more interested in going someplace where there would be cute boys hanging ten than spending hours with our parents and other kids riding twirling teacups. I guess it just wasn’t meant to be.”

The two of them sat silently for a few moments, as the traffic slowly began moving.

“This traffic really is insane, isn’t it?” she looked behind them at the miles-long stream of cars waiting their turn to park.

“You’ll be able to bring your kids one day,” Ryan offered. “You can experience it through their eyes.”

Cassandra looked over at him, noting how his jaw was clenched.

“Thank you for saying that,” she said. “Even if it’s not true.”

Ryan looked over at her.

“You and your sister will come out of this alive,” he assured her. “I beat Crane once, I can do it again.”

Cassandra choked up, so she just nodded.

“You’ll be fine too,” she managed. “Like you said, you beat him once, you can do it again.”

Finally, they were allowed to park and the two of them got out of the Jeep and headed toward the main entrance of a place that is twice the size of the island of Manhattan.

“It really is beautiful,” she noted as they walked toward the gate past sculptured bushes and gorgeous flowers. They looked at one another when they realized they had yet another line to wait in. They sighed and took their place in line.

Ryan was about to say something, when a message over the loud speaker interrupted him.

“Would Ryan Donovan and Cassandra Thompson please come to the Customer Service Desk at the Main gate.”

They looked at one another before turning around to search for a Customer Service Desk.

“Over there,” Ryan said. The two excused themselves from the sardine-like quarters and made their way over to the Customer Service Desk.

“We’re Ryan Donovan and Cassandra Thompson,” he said, showing his driver’s license.

“Congratulations!” the red-haired woman behind the desk beamed at them. Cassandra thought she was entirely too happy and perky for someone working in this heat. She almost looked the character in *The Little Mermaid* come to life in human form. Would she break out in song at any moment?

“Congratulations?” Cassandra asked, wondering what her sister’s kidnapper had planned for them.

“Your wedding, of course!” she smiled.

“Our what?” Ryan and Cassandra asked in unison.

“Your wedding?” the woman answered, her smile vanishing as she looked from one to the other, mystified at their reaction.

“Go with it,” Cassandra whispered, hooking her arm through Ryan’s.

“You’ll have to forgive my fiancé,” she smiled. “This is all spur of the moment and we’re still a bit shell shocked by our decision.” She winked at the human Ariel behind the counter.

“Of course, well, we have everything ready for your big day. Just come with me.”

Ryan looked over at Cassandra who was still shell-shocked.

“A wedding?”

“Obviously this is some kind of game Crane is playing. Let him have his fun. We’ve never gotten a marriage license, so anything that happens here is non-binding. It’s a game. He’s playing with us, just like he did with the boat. He’s got some kind of clue or something waiting for us once we play. I’m not going to be wandering around a 25,000 acre park looking for some hidden clue when he’s leading us to where the clue is. Are you?”

“No, you’re right. Let’s go.”

Ryan helped Cassandra onto the back of a golf cart with the red-haired woman who informed them her name was Kate, though Cassandra continued to think of her as Ariel in her mind. She gave them a very animated running commentary about all of the attractions in the park and how they would love everything their friend had planned for them as he appeared to have spared no expense to give them the fairytale wedding of their dreams.

Cassandra looked over at Ryan. "What is wrong with him?"

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever happens, it's not legal. We'll play his game and figure out where we need to go from here to find Sydney. We'll find your sister and Crane will be behind bars, permanently."

Cassandra felt Ryan's anger as he spoke the words.

"He'll never let you take him alive," she said, her throat tight.

Ryan looked in the direction Kate was pointing, pretending to be interested in her chatter. "I know."

Cassandra took a deep breath and wondered what Crane's end game would be. Was Sydney somewhere here in Disney World and would any of them come out of this alive? And why the big charade of an extravagant wedding between two strangers? None of it made sense.

Of course, she would do it. After all, it wasn't legal. She would do anything, just as he demanded in his first call to her, to ensure her sister was kept safe. If marrying Ryan Donovan was what Crane wanted her to do so that she could get the next clue and get her sister back, then that's what she would do.

But Ryan didn't have the same ax hanging over his head as she did. He didn't have to go through with this.

"This really isn't your problem," she said. "You don't have to do this. I'll understand if you just wanted to walk away and go back to your condo to live in peace. You could forget Crane, Sydney and I even exist."

"I will never forget Crane exists," he said, his eyes like shards of ice. "Crane's not the only one with unfinished business. We'll do what we have to and get everything sorted once it's over."

They were silent for the rest of the ride until Kate pulled to a stop in front of what could only be described as one of the most luxurious hotels Cassandra had ever seen. It was breathtakingly beautiful. There was a young man waiting who motioned for Ryan to stay seated in the golf cart.

"I'll be taking you to the hotel down the street," he informed them.

"I don't understand," Cassandra objected. "We want to stay together."

"They'll be plenty of time for that tonight," Kate winked. "For now, you need to come with me so that you can be pampered and fitted for your dress before your big event. It really is the most breathtaking dress I've ever seen."

Cassandra looked over at Ryan.

"Don't worry," Kate assured her. "You'll see him in a few hours."

Ryan took Cassandra by the shoulders. "I don't think anything will happen here. He wants us to play out this wedding for whatever sick reason. You've got your cell phone?"

Cassandra nodded. "And my Mophie."

"Good. Then I guess we'll see one another in a few hours."

Cassandra watched as Ryan walked away, wondering where all of this would lead them. She turned to the woman standing next to her who was grinning from ear to ear.

"Are you ready to get married?"