

Chapter Eleven

“What do you think will be waiting for us in that house?” Cassandra asked. Her anxiety levels were through the roof. She never liked scary movies and she avoided those haunted houses at Halloween like the plague.

“I don’t know,” Ryan said, his face remained calm, though his voice told her he was concerned.

The two of them made their way toward the Haunted Mansion, careful to stay to the darkened shadows so they wouldn’t be noticed. While there were workers around, it was not very many and if the two of them were noticed, they would be escorted from the park.

“Do you think this is it?” she asked. “The end of the game?”

Ryan hesitated.

“I just don’t know. It’s best to be prepared for anything at this point.”

Whether intentional or instinctual, Ryan took Cassandra’s hand and held it as they walked. She was glad he did as it calmed her nerves when she saw the house looming before them in the distance.

“Do we just go in?”

Ryan tried the door leading to the ride and was not surprised to find it unlocked.

“I guess we have our answer,” he said. The two of them continued to hold hands as they walked into the entrance.

Almost immediately, a creepy voice said, "Welcome" at the same time the door slammed shut behind them.

Ryan used the flashlight from his phone to guide them to the next room. Suddenly it seemed as though they were closed off with nowhere to run.

"Is it my imagination or does the room look like it's stretching?"

"I think that's part of the experience," he answered.

"I don't like this experience," she replied and felt the squeeze of Ryan's hand in response.

"We're going to be okay," he assured her. "We're going to be okay."

"Are you telling me or yourself?"

"Both."

Cassandra's heart was beating far faster than it should and she was about to panic, when a door appeared out of nowhere and the entrance to the ride was exposed.

"Get in," the voice above them commanded.

"Is that Crane's voice? Is he watching us?"

"I don't think so. It doesn't sound like him. I think it's just a recording."

Ryan and Cassandra got into the ride and continued to hold hands. It felt comfortable and right at this point. It seemed to give comfort to both of them.

They waited.

Then, the cars began to move forward.

"Here we go," Ryan said. "Hold on and stay alert."

"I don't like this," Cassandra said as ghostly apparitions began appearing out of thin air. "I don't like this at all."

"It's all just smoke and mirrors," he told her. "It's not real."

"Like our marriage?"

Ryan turned to look at her.

“We’ll take care of that when this is all over. You’re not going to be tied to me for the rest of your life.”

At the moment, Cassandra could think of worse things than to be tied to Ryan Donovan for the rest of her life. She was surprised he had not fallen under the spell of some beautiful woman over the years. He was handsome, smart and nice.

“So no girlfriends at all?” she asked. “No one ever tempted you to stay?”

Ryan looked at her.

“No.”

The ride continued and the apparitions increased along with the ghostly voices. Cassandra did her best not to jump out of her skin with each new appearance.

“I could say the same about you,” he said. “Weren’t you ever tempted to commit to anyone?”

“Tempted? Yes. Seriously considered marrying someone? No.”

Ryan laughed and the sound was pleasant to hear.

Then, suddenly, the ride came to a halt and the safety bar on their car released.

“What the heck.”

Ryan motioned for her to remain silent. He flicked on the light from his phone, flashing it around them. Nothing looked out of place, so he got out and turned to help Cassandra out of the ride as well.

“There must be something he wants us to find here,” Ryan said.

Cassandra turned on the flashlight of her phone and started investigating. She almost screamed when a skeleton animatronic suddenly moved and held out its hand toward her.

“If I get out of this place without having a heart attack, it will be a miracle,” she sighed.

“What?” Ryan called from a few feet away.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m just scared out of my wits is all.”

“Over here,” Ryan motioned and shone his light on an old trunk with a fairly new looking message written on it.

The two of them made their way over to the trunk.

The word “Enjoy!” was written across the trunk’s dusty exterior.

“Enjoy what?” Cassandra wondered aloud.

Ryan opened the trunk and looked inside to find a navy blue velvet box.

“Do you think it’s safe to open it?”

Ryan sighed. “There’s only one way to find out.”

They both held their breath as Ryan slowly opened the box to find an ornate golden key inside.

“What do you think the is key for?”

“I have no idea.”

Cassandra flashed her light around the area once more. “Do you think it could be something around here?”

“I doubt it. Everything around here is old, dusty and ghoulish. This key is shiny, ornate and looks as though it belongs to entirely different attraction.”

The two of them started looking around again, when one a ghostly apparition of a woman appeared and began moving toward them. Cassandra grabbed Ryan’s arm.

“I’m usually a pretty self-sufficient kind of girl,” she said. “But these ‘ghosts’ are freaking me out.”

The ghost stopped in front of them and pointed to an exit sign that was now lit.

“Is that a sign we’re supposed to leave?” Cassandra asked.

The apparition didn’t answer, she only continued to point them toward the exit.

“I guess we’ll figure out what this key is for once we’re outside,” Ryan said,

taking Cassandra's hand again.

The two of them made their way to the exit sign, which led them directly outside. Directly in front of them was Cinderella's horse drawn carriage, complete with footmen.

"I guess we have our answer to what the key is for," Cassandra said. "At least Cinderella's castle isn't filled with ghosts."

The two of them climbed into the carriage and sat down.

Cassandra looked over at Ryan, who had an increasingly tense look on his face.

"You know him better than anyone else, what is he up to?"

"I have my suspicions," he said, clenching his jaw.

"Then would you mind cluing me in? Because at this point, it seems like he just wants to show us that he can manipulate us into doing whatever he wants and I'm still not any closer to finding Sydney."

"There is a purpose behind what he's doing," he said, extracting his hand from hers.

Cassandra looked at him, feeling the void of his absent hand more than she cared to admit. Her mind raced, looking for answers, until finally the realization hit her.

"He wants you to care about me," she said, her eyes searching his face and finding her answer when he turned toward her. "That's it, isn't it? The longer we spend chasing his clues, the more you get to know me and the closer we become. He wants you to fall in love with me so he can use it against you when he's ready."

"Yes," he answered.

"You can't force someone to fall in love," she said. "That's ridiculous."

Ryan looked at her. "Is it?"

Cassandra felt her cheeks flush. She was starting to feel something for Ryan. She just hadn't wanted to admit it to herself in the midst of her worrying about Sydney.

How could she be falling for someone she'd known less than a week?

“Are you saying you’re starting to have feelings for me?” she asked. “Because if you are, then you need to stop. Don’t give in to what he wants.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Ryan’s mouth with her words.

“Just like that, huh?” he reached over and took her hand again. She didn’t protest. “I think it’s too late to avoid having any feelings for you.”

Cassandra didn’t know what to say in response, but by then the carriage pulled up in front of the castle and the footmen opened the doors to let them out. A woman greeted them at the top of the stairs.

“The two of you will be spending your wedding night in Cinderella’s suite here at the castle. Everything has been prepared to give you the night of your dreams,” she said, turning toward the doors.

Cassandra turned toward Ryan.

“What should we do?”

“Continue to play his game,” Ryan said, gently placing his hand at the small of Cassandra’s back as they walked into the castle. “And hope we come out of this alive.”