

Chapter Five

Cassandra looked out over the swampy landscape that was the Florida Everglades. The sun was below the horizon, but the streaks still gave some illumination to the sky, outlining the tall pine trees in the distance.

Oddly enough, it was beautiful and terrifying at the same time. She wouldn't have minded being a tourist and shown this part of America as long as it was from the comfort of a vehicle. She hoped she wouldn't have to get out.

She was lost in her thoughts, when all of a sudden something large and definitely not human ran across the road in front of them, causing Ryan to slam on the breaks. She was fortunate that her seat belt worked, or else she would have been splayed on the dashboard by the force of his stop.

"What was that?" she asked, her heart racing from the unexpected jolt.

"Cougar."

"Did you say cougar?"

Ryan looked over at her and smiled. "Yes. And this one was beautiful."

"Are you serious?"

Ryan tilted his head.

"You don't like cats?"

"Not ones so big they can rip my throat out, so that would be a no."

He smiled again and Cassandra noted in the waning light, just how handsome Ryan Donovan was.

"Something wrong?"

“Hmm? Other than almost being run off the road by a giant cat, no. Why?”

“You were staring.”

Cassandra felt her cheeks flush from the heat and was thankful the darkness prevented him from seeing it.

“Sorry. I think the last twenty-four hours have put me in a state of shock.”

“No one would fault you for having a breakdown. I certainly wouldn’t. Most people wouldn’t be holding up so well under these circumstances.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “You can keep driving.”

Ryan put the gear back into first on his well-worn green Jeep Wrangler and started slowly moving forward.

They had only been moving about a mile, when Cassandra spotted something up ahead. “What is that?”

Ryan slowed the Jeep down and Cassandra gasped as she realized what it was lying in the center of the road.

“Is that a Python?” she asked.

“Looks like it,” he answered, preparing to shift gears and run over it.

“You can’t run over it.”

“I thought you hated snakes.”

“I do.”

“But you don’t want me to hit it?”

“I don’t care if you hit it. I’ve read stories about people hitting snakes with their cars and the snake is thrown up into the car with the people. You don’t have a top on this Jeep. What are we going to do if you hit it and somehow it ends up in here with us?”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

It didn’t matter what he thought, because by the time the two of them had discussed the situation, the snake was almost on the other side of the road.

“How much further?” she asked. “I’m ready to get our clue and get out of here.”

“About five more minutes should get us to the spot, but -”

“But what?”

“The plane didn’t crash on a road. It’s out there,” he motioned toward the wet marsh on either side of them.

Cassandra took in a deep breath, closed her eyes and said a prayer whatever the clue was, it would be on the road.

Five minutes later, her prayer was answered. Just not the way she wanted. As Ryan’s phone announced their arrival, Cassandra spotted a box on the side of the road.

Ryan kept his headlights on, grabbed a flashlight and got out. Despite the sickening fear in the pit of her stomach, Cassandra did the same. Carefully, shining the flashlight onto both sides of the road, knowing a snake or alligator could thrust toward her at any moment, she followed Ryan to the box.

1 HOUR was scribbled on the outside.

“Would you like to do the honors this time?” Ryan offered the box to her.

It was light, just as the first box had been. Cassandra held the flashlight under her arm and lifted the lid, then immediately dropped the box, screaming.

A coiled snake slithered out, leaving behind a key attached to a note. “Enjoy the ride,” it said.

“Are you okay? It didn’t bite you did it?”

Cassandra shook her head.

“It’s a baby Burmese python,” Ryan said, shining the light as they watched it slither into the nearby water.

Cassandra hugged herself. If Sydney’s life wasn’t in danger, she would leave Florida this instant and never look back.

Ever.

“What kind of key is that?”

“It’s an airboat key,” Ryan answered. He took his flashlight and shone it around again, this time, lighting a path that led to a small, rickety dock with a very small airboat attached. “And there it is.”

Cassandra followed Ryan’s gaze and realized he was talking about the weathered and definitely not sea-worthy looking contraption about twenty-five yards from where they were standing. They would not only have to traipse through the brush which could be hiding anything, including much larger snakes than the one that just slid into the water, but they were supposed to get on a boat that looked older than dirt and definitely had seen better days.

“Are you kidding me?”

“You can stay here in the Jeep if you want. I’ll go out, find out what the clue is and bring it back.”

The thought of sitting out in the middle of nowhere with cougars, alligators and huge snakes waiting for Ryan who may or may not get back from his boat trip was definitely not her idea of an appealing proposition.

“Do you know how to drive an airboat?” she asked.

“I’ve been on few boats since I moved down here,” he responded, not really answering her question.

“Riding on an airboat and driving one are two different things,” she said. “They can flip if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Ryan looked at her. “Do you know how to drive one?”

“As a matter of fact,” she smiled. “I do. I had to learn as part of the show when we were racing to the next station, though the ones we had were brand new.”

“Okay, Captain,” he stepped aside, extending his arm to allow her to pass. “After you.”

Cassandra took the key and moved past him, shining her light on either side of the path before she stepped. The last thing she needed was to be some crusty old alligator’s dinner, or worse, to find herself wrapped in a slithery embrace with one of those pythons.

Cassandra remembered reading that Miami was a central hub for people bringing exotic animals into the United States. It’s believed that the Burmese Pythons were bought as pets, but once they became too large and unruly for the owners to handle, they decided to release them into the Everglades rather than turning them over to someone who would know what to do with them.

Of course, there are other theories as well, such as hurricanes destroying homes and the snakes finding themselves in the everglades. Whatever their origin, they had found the environment particularly welcoming and now they were destroying the natural inhabitants of South Florida's national park.

Cassandra shivered again when she thought of the photo she'd seen of a python so long it could easily wrap itself around her body twice. Or the one where the snake had eaten the alligator.

"I'm surprised we're not being swallowed alive by mosquitos," Ryan commented as he too, moved his flashlight from side to side.

"It's the Purification I had you put on before we left," she answered. "It's got Citronella in it."

"The stuff in those outdoor candles?"

"Yes. Citronella's a plant and it's a natural mosquito repellent. Purification's got Citronella in it so ..."

"You must be really into these oils."

Cassandra stopped and turned around.

"No. Sydney is really into these oils. I finally, after several years of her begging me to give them a try, bought a kit to placate her. She, in turn, gave me a book explaining the oils, what they are and what they can do to support me in a natural way. I brought the oils with me, because it makes me feel close to her. I read the book on the plane, because I was bored."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had no idea ..."

"It's okay. I just wish I had her instead of the oils."

Ryan reached out and grasped her hand. "We'll find her, Cassandra. If it's the last thing I do, I will help you get your sister back."

Cassandra swallowed back the gigantic lump that formed in her throat and nodded.

"And I'm kind of happy you brought the oils," he said under his breath as they started back on the path. "I hate mosquitos."

When they reached the airboat, it looked worse than she'd thought from seeing it in the distance. It was old. No, scratch that. It was ancient. It seemed as if

the thing would fall apart once they got in.

Thankfully, it didn't.

Cassandra turned the key and flipped the switch on the giant light overhead.

"Which way?" she asked.

"According to the directions on the sheet, we're to go straight ahead one mile."

"I'll have to keep it slow as we approach," she said. "Airboats don't have brakes."

The giant fan sputtered into motion and slowly, they started moving forward. It didn't take them long to reach their destination. There was a rotting, wooden platform with a box waiting for them.

Cassandra killed the motor and they drifted the rest of the way toward the platform. Somehow, she managed to land it in perfect alignment.

They tied the boat to one of the posts and were about to climb onto the surface, when one of the biggest alligators Cassandra had ever seen launched itself out of the water and onto the platform next to the box.

The two of them remained completely still, waiting to see what the alligator would do next. Fortunately, it didn't seem to want to stay on the platform and almost as quickly as it appeared, it disappeared on the other side.

The boat swayed precariously from the force of the massive body reentering the water. The two of them gingerly stepped out of the boat, half expecting the wood to give way since the creaking boards ominously reminded them that the platform was old and rotten. The box had the words 1 HOUR scrawled on top.

"I'll open it this time," Ryan said, half expecting a deadlier snake to pop out once he did. Instead, there was just another note. "Enjoy your return trip," it said.

"Are you kidding me?" Cassandra asked. "Seriously? We drive all the way out here, get in a dilapidated airboat that's barely afloat, just for him to tell us to enjoy our trip back? What the heck?"

"It's Crane. He likes to play games. He's letting us know he's in control."

Cassandra wanted to scream in frustration, but she decided that wouldn't do anyone any good.

“So what do we do now?” she asked. “Just get back in the boat and then drive back to your condo?”

“That’s all we can do,” he answered.

An explosion in the distance lit up the night sky like a giant fireball, causing both of them to fall down and take cover. Ryan instinctively covered Cassandra’s body with his own. They waited a few minutes, then sat up and looked around. It only took Ryan seconds to realize what that explosion was.

“My jeep,” he said.

“Your –“ Cassandra followed his gaze and realized the massive flames were coming from the exact location where they’d parked the Wrangler.

“Fantastic,” Ryan muttered.

They were just about to get back in the airboat when they noticed the bottom was filling with water. Rapidly.

“Are you kidding me?” he yelled.

Ryan looked at the boat, which was obviously sinking, then he looked at Cassandra.

“Most of the everglades is only about 3 or 4 feet deep,” he said. “We’ve got an hour to get back to the road, before time runs out.”

Cassandra’s eyes widened and she started shaking her head.

“No. No. No. No. No. No. No.”

“It’s the only way,” he said, offering her his hand. “The clock is running.”

Knowing he was right, Cassandra grasped his outstretched hand.

“I’ll hold the flashlight. You hold the gun,” she said, before saying a quick prayer and slipping beside him into the warm water of the Florida Everglades.