

## Chapter Four

The two strangers continued to stare at one another as Ryan's last words hung in the space between them.

Ryan's phone rang, making them both jump.

"It's the FBI," he said.

"You can't –" Cassandra started.

"I know," he answered, before accepting the call and putting it on speaker.

"Ryan?" Dave's voice immediately came through. I saw you called a few minutes ago, but you didn't leave a message. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Ryan answered, his voice deliberately calm. "Crane hasn't killed me yet."

"You've reconsidered then? You'll help us?"

"No. I know you're going to hate hearing this, but I sat on my phone and it redialed the last person who called me. Sorry to give you false hope."

Ryan's friend on the other end let out a sigh that filled the room. "Come on, Ryan. You're the only one who seems to be able to understand him and knows how he thinks. We need you."

"And I need to keep breathing," Ryan answered. "Don't ask me again, because the answer will be the same. No."

Cassandra held her breath as Ryan ended the call.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Wait," he answered. "I'm sure it won't be long."

"What is it we're waiting for? A phone call? A letter?"

The stuffiness of the room seemed to get to both of them at the same time. Ryan walked over to the doors and opened them up now that the rain had subsided to more of a gentle shower and the lightening was only a distant flash.

“With Crane it could be anything,” he offered. “A box. A game. A letter. A map.” He walked into the kitchen and grabbed two bottles of Fiji water and gave one to Cassandra. “Whatever it is, he’ll have some kind of a time limit for us to figure it out and get to the next clue.”

“How will we know how much time we have?”

“He usually likes to put it in Sharpie on whatever it is he has had delivered or placed at that station.” He took a sip of water. “Sometimes we had weeks, sometimes days, sometimes just a few hours to figure out what the hell he was up to.”

“Like the show,” Cassandra injected. “We had to figure out clues, solve them and get to the next clue within a certain amount of time.”

“Exactly.”

“Hmmm. I wonder if the creator of that show knew about Crane’s MO and used it to develop his reality show?”

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe. Maybe not. It would be an interesting concept to watch.” He looked over at her with a little more respect. “You must have been very good to win.”

“I know a lot of useless information that came in handy when figuring out clues and a few hacks to get me there faster.” Cassandra wasn’t someone who rested on her laurels. She didn’t like to brag and was prepared to move on from her stint on the show.

“So what’s next for you? Are you headed to Hollywood to become a star?”

“Stop mocking me,” she chided, unscrewing the cap of the Fiji water and taking a sip.

Ryan raised both hands in a gesture of surrender.

“I’m not mocking,” he insisted. “It just seems like that’s what most of these reality show participants’ ultimate goal is when these shows end. They move to Hollywood and hope to expand on their newfound fame.”

“That’s not me,” she smiled. “I did it on a lark, enjoyed the game and was happy to get back home and back to my life. At least until this happened.”

“And where is home? Somewhere in the Southern region of the US I presume, since I can detect a distinctive drawl in your speech.”

“Really?” she asked. “I have a drawl?”

Ryan smiled. “Yes. You most definitely have a drawl. I would guess somewhere in Tennessee.”

Cassandra’s eyes widened. “You’re good.”

“I used to be.”

“You still are. I was born and raised in Franklin, just south of Nashville.”

“Married?”

Cassandra shook her head. “No.”

“No fiancé ... boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Kids?”

“No. There’s only Sydney. Both of our parents are gone. It’s just me and my sister now.”

“Good. That means there’s no one back home to use against you since he’s got the one person you care about most in the world.” Cassandra looked at him, an unspoken question in the expression on her face.

“No unexpected surprises,” he clarified.

“How long do you think we’re going to have to wait? It’s already 6 and it will be getting dark soon.”

“Afraid of the dark?”

“Not usually, but I understand down here in Florida you’ve got a few species we don’t have in Tennessee.”

“You’re pretty safe out here on Key Biscayne.”

“No alligators?”

“Not on the island.”

“What about snakes? I was bitten by a copperhead when I was 5 years old while chasing fireflies one summer. It was dark, I didn’t see him and had to stay in

the hospital for a week. I'm not a big fan of traipsing around at night. And I'm deathly afraid of snakes."

"I'm not fond of snakes either. Odds are, we'll be searching for something around Miami, in which case, we'll have to worry more about criminals than four legged creatures. I don't think he'd want to start off with anything too difficult. If I'm right, our clues will become increasingly more difficult to decipher and also increasingly more dangerous as we move along. He likes to play."

"Terrific."

"But hey," he smiled. "You're fresh off a reality show where you were an ace at doing that kind of thing, so we should be just fine."

Cassandra looked at him to see if he was being a jerk. He wasn't. He looked worried. And he still looked scared. She didn't blame him. If someone had ripped her down the middle like Crane did to Ryan, she wouldn't have survived. He must have some kind of internal will to live that was very strong.

She watched him, his hands were in continuous movement. He was definitely nervous.

"How long has it been since you were with the FBI?" she asked.

"Eight years," he answered. "It's been a long time since I've had to get inside someone's mind to avoid being killed. I'm not thrilled to be going back into that trap again."

"I understand why," she said. She tried hard not to worry about Sydney. Her sister was too nice. She wondered, not for the first time, how Bill Crane managed to kidnap her. Sydney was friendly, but she was also not someone likely to fall into a trap.

That was because of their father. Their entire lives he drilled into both girls, "Always be aware of your surroundings. Always be on the defensive. Expect the unexpected."

Cassandra always thought he was just a paranoid ex-cop, but, as it turns out, there was something to be afraid of. The boogeyman was real and he had somehow managed to grab Sydney.

"Do you think he's already killed her?"

"Your sister?"

Cassandra nodded.

Ryan was pensive for a few minutes before answering.

“No,” he answered. “Not yet.”

“Really?” she asked. “You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

“No. If I thought he already killed her, I would call my friends at the bureau and let them take it from here. As long as we play his game, he’ll keep your sister alive.”

“But for how long? How long will his game last?”

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. “Until he gets bored.”

“And then he’ll kill her?”

“No. Then he’ll lead us into a trap where we’ll find her, but he’ll be waiting.”

“To kill all three of us.”

Ryan nodded.

“But we’re not going to let that happen.”

Ryan stood up and took Cassandra by the shoulders.

“Look,” he said. “I don’t know you and you don’t know me, but I swear to you I will do everything in my power to find him before he can harm Sydney. And once we have him face to face, I will do everything in my power to kill him before he can kill us.”

“We,” she whispered, almost inaudible.

“What?”

“You said, ‘I ... WE will do everything in OUR power to kill him before he kills us.”

Ryan looked at her, realizing he really didn’t know this woman before him at all. He made assumptions about Cassandra Thompson. Apparently those assumptions were wrong.

“We will do everything,” he agreed.

There was a shallow knock on the door. Ryan unholstered his gun and flipped

the safety off, motioning for Cassandra to take cover behind the couch. Cassandra watched as Ryan checked the peephole, then gingerly opened the door a small crack. He checked up and down the hall, then pulled a small box inside the condo, shut the door and locked it.

He picked it up and looked it over. "It's too light and small to be a bomb," he announced.

Cassandra stood up and walked over to him.

"Open it," she said.

Carefully he tore the brown paper away to find the words "5 HOURS" in black ink scrawled across the top of the box. He lifted the lid and looked inside.

"What is it?" Cassandra asked, peering inside the box.

"A model airplane."

"He wants us to fly somewhere?"

Ryan remained silent as he studied the small model aircraft.

"I don't think he intends for us to fly anywhere. At least not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because wherever this clue leads, we've got 5 hours to get there."

"Let me see it."

Ryan handed the model plane over and watched as Cassandra inspected it.

"The only thing identifying the plane is the number," she said. "Four Zero One."

"Four Zero One," Ryan repeated. "Why should I know that number?"

He pulled out his phone and typed in Flight 401, then swore.

"Dammit."

"What is it?"

"It's a plane that crashed in the Everglades in 1972."

“The Everglades?”

“Yes. A little over an hour’s drive from here.”

“Now? But it’s getting dark outside.”

“I know, but I’ve got a couple of high powered flashlights we can take with us.”

“Where in the Everglades are we supposed to go?”

Ryan shrugged and went to a closet, coming back with two huge handheld flashlights.

“I guess somewhere close to where the plane went down. I changed the batteries in these last week since hurricane season is about to be in full swing.”

“Okay,” Cassandra sighed, her voice shaky. “We’re headed to the Everglades in the dark.”

“Yes.”

“Where there are alligators.”

“Yes.”

“And snakes big enough to eat alligators.”

Ryan looked over at her.

“I’m bringing my guns.”

“Me too,” Cassandra lifted the edge of her shirt to reveal a small handgun strapped to her body. Ryan had not even noticed it was there and he was pretty good at spotting hidden weapons. Apparently, he was not that good.

“You know how to use that?”

“My father was a retired cop and I was born and raised in Tennessee ... of course I know how to use it.”

Ryan holstered his Glock, walked to the closet and brought out two rifles.

“Then let’s go.”