

Chapter Fourteen

Cassandra maneuvered the boat into the slip easily. Even though it had been a while, she remembered the movements as easily as riding a bike.

“You’re good,” Ryan commented, watching her drop anchor a ways from the shore. “Just one thing, we’re still a ways from the shoreline. How are we going to get in?”

Cassandra pointed to a compartment, “There should be an inflatable dinghy in there,” she said. “It should only take a couple of minutes and we can head in.”

Anastasia Island was beautiful with acres of pristine beaches and wildlife. As far as Cassandra could tell, there weren’t very many people here, if any at all. It was as though the island was deserted.

“Where is everyone and where in the heck do we start looking?” Cassandra asked, looking over the deserted coastline as they waited for the boat to inflate.

“It’s the hurricane,” Ryan answered. “They’ve more than likely moved inland to wait out the storm, or gone to other areas to help friends and relatives prepare to evacuate.”

“Evacuate? Have they called for an evacuation?”

“Not yet,” he admitted. “But it’s coming. Anyone who’s lived here for any length of time knows that and is already preparing. That’s probably why the island seems deserted.”

Ryan took out the map and started looking it over, searching for any clues that would help them locate where they should start digging. There was nothing.

“What’s that?” Cassandra asked, pointing to a sheet of paper lying on the

floor of the inflated boat.

Ryan climbed down into the now inflated boat and retrieved the folded map. He looked up at Cassandra, "It's filled with coordinates."

"How many?"

"At least twenty," he said glancing at the list. "No, there may be thirty. Most of them look fairly close in proximity."

"Do you think they're a trap?" she asked. "Do you think he's planted explosives for us to find?"

Ryan shook his head. "I don't think so. Maybe one clue goes with the next and as a whole we can see the entire puzzle when we're done."

"That would make sense," she said, picking up the two shovels and handing them down to Ryan before climbing into the dinghy with him.

Ryan started rowing the boat toward the shore. As they reached the shoreline, he pulled the boat far inland away from the rising tide, anchoring it into the sand with a stake.

"What's the first coordinate," Cassandra asked, pulling out her cellphone and bringing up an app.

Ryan read her the numbers, looking over her shoulder as the directions appeared. He reached down and grabbed both shovels.

"Let's go."

The first coordinate took them away from the shore and towards a more densely grown area. Cassandra started to look around nervously.

"Um, I hate to ask this, but are their alligators and snakes on this island?"

"It's Florida," he responded. "Probably."

"Great."

They continued deeper into the wooded and vine covered area until the GPS located told them they were standing on the spot of the entered coordinate.

"So I guess we just start digging?" she asked.

"I guess so. You don't have to," he said. "I can do this part."

Cassandra picked up one of the shovels. "I appreciate your being a gentleman, but if both of us dig, we get to the clues faster."

"It's getting dark," Cassandra commented after they'd been digging about 30 minutes. "What if the GPS is wrong and we're digging in the wrong area?"

"I think we have at least an hour of daylight left," Ryan said, shoveling another load of dirt into the pile. "We're at least 3 feet deep, if Crane buried something here on his own, it can't be much further down."

The next shovelful proved that theory to be true. "I've hit something he said, climbing down into the hole. Cassandra used the flashlight app on her phone to get a better view of what they'd uncovered.

Ryan started brushing the dirt away from the area and was horrified by what he found.

"Is that a skull?" Cassandra asked. "That's a skull! Is it real? Is it human?"

Ryan carefully climbed out, pulling the sheet with coordinates out of his pocket.

"I'm going to give you one of the coordinates further down the sheet. If the next hole we dig is another skeleton, I think Crane has sent us to his graveyard."

"Why? Why would he do this?"

Ryan reached over and pulled Cassandra to him, embracing her in a comforting hug.

"If you're trying to understand the mind of sociopath, don't. It can drive you crazy."

A tear slipped down Cassandra's cheek as she thought of her sister.

"If your theory is correct and all of these coordinates lead to graves and his victims, then that means there are almost thirty people buried here."

"Yes. Probably all women."

"Thirty women with fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands, children."

"I know. If it turns out that this is a graveyard for his victims, then at least the families will know and can give them a proper burial."

Cassandra pushed away from him and wiped her tears. "What if Sydney is in one of the graves?"

"I don't think she is. But if she is, then it would be the last coordinate."

"Let's look there first," she said, pulling the app up again. "Give them to me."

"Are you sure you want to do this? Maybe I should call my friends at the FBI and let them take it from here."

"No," she said. "Not until I know."

Reluctantly, Ryan read out the final coordinates. They made their way in the waning light of evening to a place not far from the shore.

"Are you positive?" he asked again before they started.

"If Sydney is here, I want to know," she answered and gently removed the first shovel of dirt from the spot. "Since we know what we're probably going to find, let's be careful."

Ryan nodded, amazed at the strength Cassandra showed in the face of all she'd had to deal with over the last few days. It would have broken most, yet here she was, possibly digging to find her sister's body.

This grave was not as deep and it only took about twenty minutes before they uncovered a plastic bag covering a new body.

"Why don't you step away," he suggested. "Let me uncover the face. I've seen your sister. I'll know whether it's her or not. If it's her, you don't need to see her this way."

Cassandra nodded and turned away. Ryan leaned over and peeled back the plastic covering the face of Crane's latest victim.

"It's not Sydney," he announced, making Cassandra turn around.

"Oh no," she whispered, covering her mouth. "Poor Kate."

Ryan reached inside the plastic and pulled a note from Kate's hair. He sat back on his heels as he read the instructions.

"We're supposed to go to a jewelry store in West Palm Beach," he said. "We have eighteen hours to get there."

“Okay, but what do we do about them?” she asked, fighting back tears as she swept the air with her arms.

“Cassandra, you’re not going to like what I’m about to say,” he started. “But this is not something I can just walk away from.”

“You have to call the authorities.”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“There may be a way I can tip them off to this without them knowing we’re tracking Crane and that he has your sister.”

Cassandra stood in silence, relieved her sister was not Crane’s latest victim, yet sorry for the bubbly woman who she’d met at the happiest place on earth.

“My friend, Dave Graham. He’s a good man and he’ll understand the situation I’m in.”

Cassandra nodded.

Ryan took out his phone and punched his friend’s contact information, putting him on speaker. Dave answered after a couple of rings.

“Ryan? Is everything okay? Has Crane contacted you?”

Ryan let out a sigh before answering. He wished he could just hand everything over to the FBI and go back to living his quiet life of solitude. But there was no possibility of that happening now. He was in too deep and his feelings for Cassandra too strong.

“Are you alone?”

“Yes,” his friend answered. “I’m at home watching television and surfing the Internet. Why?”

“I’m going to tell you some things, but you have to swear to keep them to yourself.”

Dave was silent.

“Dave?”

“Okay. I won’t say anything to anyone.”

“Crane has kidnapped someone and he’s using her as bait to make me find him.”

“Are you serious? Ryan you can’t do this alone. Let us help!”

“I’m not alone. I’m working with the victim’s sister. If Crane thinks we’ve brought in the FBI, he’ll kill her.”

“This is insane. What am I saying, it’s Crane, of course it’s insane. What do you need me to do?”

Ryan took a deep breath.

“The latest clue he sent was a set of coordinates on Anastasia Island.”

“Isn’t that near St. Augustine?”

“Yes.”

“Go on.”

“There are almost thirty of them.”

“Okay.”

“They’re graves.”

Dave was again silent for a few seconds before speaking again.

“You’re sure?”

“We’ve dug up two of them already. The first coordinates on the list led to a victim who has been dead a long time. There’s nothing but bones left. The last coordinates on the list uncovered his latest victim. She’s probably been dead less than 10 hours.”

“Ryan, you need our help. You know why he’s doing this.”

“Yes.”

“He intends to kill you. Don’t play into his hands. Let us help you.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? He won’t know. Trust me.”

“I can’t take that chance,” Ryan said. “I’m going to take a photo of the paper and send it to you. We’ll be gone by the time anyone gets here.”

Ryan ended the call and uploaded the photo.

“What now?” Cassandra asked.

“We take the boat back to St. Augustine and head to Palm Beach.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll find him,” he assured her.

“What if we’re too late?” she asked. “What if he gets tired of playing the game and kills Sydney then leaves the state before the hurricane hits? You heard him, he’s losing patience.”

Ryan took Cassandra’s face in his hands and kissed her.

“I wish I could promise you this will all turn out okay.”

“You can’t.”

“No, I can’t. But I promise I will die trying to make sure it does.”