

## Chapter Nine

Cassandra followed Kate up the stairs toward the hotel entrance. She barely had time to take in the extravagant furnishings of the lobby before they were on the move toward the elevator. Kate continued to smile at her, though her eyes were asking the question, "Why aren't you more excited about this?"

The elevator took them to the top floor and the largest, most opulent suite Cassandra had ever seen.

They were not alone. A team of people, who all looked a little too excited for Cassandra's taste, swarmed around them when they entered the main room.

"Yes! She's already pretty!" she heard one of the women exclaim, as a thin man with a pony tail and well groomed beard grabbed her hair and had a look of disgust on his face.

"When was the last time you deep conditioned?" he asked in a clipped British accent.

A woman holding a tape measure immediately started measuring her waist, bust and hips before sighing. "Perfect just as he said," she smiled. "The dress will fit beautifully."

A chill ran down Cassandra's spine with the words, "just as he said." How did Crane know so much about her? Right down to the measurements for a dress. It was beyond creepy.

"Did you meet him?" she asked to no one in particular.

"Who?"

“The man who paid for all of this,” she clarified. “Have you met with him?”

“No,” the woman who Cassandra determined was responsible for doing her makeup answered. “Everything was done over email and telephone. He sent payment via a messenger, which I thought was odd, but wealthy people sometimes can be a bit strange.”

“Eccentric,” Kate spoke up. “They can be eccentric.”

“Right,” Cassandra nodded. “So no one here met with him?”

Everyone in the room looked around at one another, all shaking their heads no.

“There was someone else I spoke with though,” Kate injected. “A woman.”

“A woman?”

“Yes. She had a Southern accent very much like yours.”

Sydney!

“What did she say?”

Kate seemed a bit put off by Cassandra’s desperation, but continued to smile.

“She just gave me your measurements and told me the kind of dress you would probably prefer to wear for your wedding. She said to tell you something about stress and Lavender would help you get through it.”

Cassandra could no longer stop the tears spilling from her eyes and down her cheeks. It was just like Sydney to be thinking about her when she was the one kidnapped by a sociopathic killer.

“Oh don’t cry!” Kate soothed. “All brides get nervous on their wedding day! It’s all going to be okay!”

Cassandra nodded and tried to stay calm by reminding herself that Sydney was still alive.

“Are you ready to get started with the fitting for the dress? The wedding won’t be until later this evening. Your friend really did plan everything so you would have the perfect night to remember for the rest of your life.”

“I bet he did,” Cassandra answered, remembering his words to do everything he said or else Sydney would die. “Okay. Let’s get started.”

For over five hours, Cassandra was massaged, bathed, shampooed, conditioned, styled and pampered. She wasn't the sort of girl who usually went for that sort of thing. She never went for mani-pedis like her other friends, nor did she spend an obscene amount of money on her hair and makeup as a few others.

However, she had to admit by the time the styling crew was finished and they turned around the chair so she could see herself, the results were pretty spectacular. Her skin glowed and she looked as though she was ready to step onto a film set. Her eyes, cheeks, lips and hair all combined to make her admit that maybe a little polishing once and a while might be a good thing.

She turned her head from side to side to get a better view of her hair, which was unbelievably shiny. Like a model in a commercial shiny. She rarely wore it up except to put it in a ponytail and go, but this was like something an artist would create. It was simple, yet complicated and elegant. The braiding was like something out of a magazine. She couldn't believe what she was looking at. And was that a small tiara woven in between the strands?

"You people are miracle workers," she smiled. "Thank you."

Kate helped her out of the chair and directed her to the middle of the room where there were other boxes and a dress hidden behind a zippered bag.

"First," Kate began, "we need to put on the necklace and earrings, and then we can get the dress and shoes on you."

Cassandra watched as Kate walked to the table and brought back a velvet box. Carefully she lifted the lid and was stunned at the sparkling array of jewels she saw.

"Seriously?" she asked. "I'm supposed to wear this? Isn't there a guard or something that should be watching over these?"

"They're not real," Kate smiled.

Relief flooded through Cassandra at her words.

"They're not cheap, because they are the best simulated diamonds, but they're not astronomically expensive either. You'll be wearing thousands of dollars in jewelry, not millions."

"Good." Cassandra remembered Sydney and turned to Kate. "Would you mind grabbing my backpack and handing me the quilted green bag inside?"

Kate didn't wait for further instruction, instead, she walked to Cassandra's

backpack and pulled out the green quilted carrying case where she was keeping the oils from the starter kit she purchased from Sydney.

Reverently, Cassandra unzipped the bag and pulled out the one that said Lavender.

“Are those essential oils?” the man with the beard, who Cassandra now knew as Kevin asked.

“Yes. My sister loves them and they make me feel as though she’s close to me when I wear them.”

He took the bottle and opened it, smelling the calming scent.

“Lavender,” he said. “You know, this is the Swiss Army Knife of essential oils?”

Cassandra smiled. “No. I didn’t know that.”

“Not only will this make you smell nice,” he said, handing the bottle back to her. “But it will calm your nerves for your special day. It has many, many uses.”

Cassandra tilted the bottle and let the drops fall on her wrists, before applying a few drops to her chest and neck.

She closed the bottle tightly and put it back into the case, zipping it back up. Kate took it from her and put it back in her backpack.

“Now for the dress,” she said, unzipping the white bag.

Cassandra’s mouth remained closed, but her eyes widened in disbelief at the gown in front of her. It was exactly the kind of dress she would have picked out, were she really getting married instead of this faux ceremony she was about to embark on with this stranger.

It was a ball gown, but very simple and elegant. No lace, no crystals, just a perfectly constructed white ball gown with capped sleeves.

She held her breath as she stepped into the massive layers, wondering if it would zip up. It did. And it was spectacular. She could be marrying a real life prince in this kind of dress.

“One last thing,” Kate said, retrieving a shoebox from the table. She opened them to reveal the most beautiful shoes, Cassandra had ever seen. They were elegant, tasteful and absolutely beautiful.

And they fit. Perfectly.

Cassandra could not believe what she saw as she looked in the mirror.

“Are you ready to get married?” Kate asked, shocking Cassandra back into reality.

It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real.

Cassandra kept the mantra in her head all the way down the elevator. She was doing pretty well until she stepped out to the front of the hotel and realized it was evening. But the most shocking thing was the crystal horse-drawn carriage waiting for her in front of the building.

“Seriously?” she asked.

“Seriously,” Kate answered. “I told you. He wanted everything to be perfect.”

“Alrighty then,” Cassandra said, preparing to head toward the fairy-tale carriage.

“Oh! One more thing,” Kate said, grabbing her arm.

“Yes?”

“You need to sign this,” Kate held a clipboard with a crystal pen.

“What is it?”

“Your marriage license.”

“My what?”

“Marriage license! It’s not legal if it’s not signed. See here ... your fiancé has already signed it.”

Cassandra saw Ryan’s scrawled signature, took a deep breath and signed her own name.

What kind of game was Crane playing?

That question continued to weigh on Cassandra’s mind during the entire carriage ride to what appeared to be Cinderella’s castle.

People were taking pictures and waving. She felt bad not smiling and waving back, but the circumstances surrounding this marriage did not exactly make for a

joyous occasion.

Finally, the carriage stopped where she was helped by two elaborately costumed men. She looked around at the huge crowd gathering around them. She took the offered hand of one of the men and looked toward the flowered archway where her awaiting groom stood.

Cassandra almost stumbled when she saw him. She was not the only one to be poked, prodded and groomed this afternoon. He looked like one of the men on those romance novels she saw her sister reading from time to time.

Handsome. He was very, very handsome and her heart skipped a beat as she drew nearer to him.

His gaze was intense as he tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow.

"You're stunning," he said, as helped her up the last few stairs.

"Thank you. You look pretty good yourself," she managed, trying to avoid looking at the growing crowd around them. As they reached to top of the stairs she turned toward him. "A real marriage license?"

"Once this is all over, we'll have it annulled," he promised. "Let's get this over with, so Crane can have his fun and we can find your sister."

The next twenty minutes were a blur of words, hands and rings. Rings. She was now wearing a wedding ring and professing undying love and commitment to a man she'd known less than 48 hours. How on earth was this happening?

"You may now kiss the bride," the man standing before them said.

They faced one another, both looking uneasy and nervous. Ryan leaned in and their lips met. The sound of the applause was deafening.

They both smiled and waved at the crowd applauding their nuptials, before the sound of fireworks igniting overhead stole their attention.

Ryan looked back down at her, and leaned in.

"Don't show any emotion," he warned.

"Okay."

"Crane is in the crowd, watching us."

Cassandra felt sick. She was about to ask what they should do, but before she

could, he was gone. She watched as he sprinted down the stairs through the crowded, darkened streets and gasped.

Ryan was in fast pursuit of Kevin, the man with the well-groomed beard.