

Chapter Nineteen

The shining light from the morning sun woke both of them. The sheets entangled in their legs bore witness to the previous evenings escapades. Cassandra blushed at the memories.

Ryan kissed her forehead and pulled her closer to him, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” she smiled.

“How did you sleep?”

“Did we sleep?”

Ryan kissed her and smiled.

“Some.”

Cassandra positioned herself so she could look directly in his eyes.

“I want you to know that I don’t regret anything,” she said, her eyes intent. “None of it. I’m happy about last night.”

Ryan reached up and caressed her cheek.

“I don’t regret anything either,” he said. “I’m happy too.”

“No matter what happens,” she leaned her head against his hand cupping her face.

“No matter what happens,” he agreed.

Cassandra looked past him out toward the ocean.

“It won’t be sunny for long,” she mused, noting the rough surf and clouds threatening to overtake the sun. “The storm’s almost here.”

Ryan sighed, kissed her and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

“We need to find whatever it is that Crane –“

He stopped speaking so suddenly; Cassandra’s heart started pounding in alarm.

“Ryan? What is it?”

Cassandra followed his gaze to see a neatly wrapped box sitting beside the bed with the words, “36 Hours” scribbled across the top along with an envelope.

“Was that here last night when we came in?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then he ...”

“Was in the house with us,” Ryan finished.

“Not just that. He was in the room. Watching us.”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to be sick,” she announced, wrapping the sheet around herself and heading to the bathroom.

Ryan dressed quickly, picked up the box and placed it on the rumped bed.

Cassandra emerged, dressed a few minutes later, looking white as the proverbial sheet.

“Are you okay?” he asked, reaching for her.

Cassandra shook her head in denial. “No,” she said. “I’m definitely not all

right.”

“What can I do to help you?”

“You can’t. The thought that he was here in the room with us is just so sick. It also means Sydney could have been here the entire time. Why didn’t he do something last night? Why not just confront us while we were vulnerable?”

“He’s got some kind of plan,” Ryan sighed. “You can’t try and understand the mind of a mentally disturbed person. It will drive you crazy yourself.”

Cassandra’s hand reached out and touched the box, pulling the envelope that was taped to the cover.

“Let’s see what this vile man has to say,” she said, ripping the envelope open and pulling the letter from its sheath.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Donovan,

I’m so happy you enjoyed your stay at my former home. It certainly looked like you did from my perspective.

The house is yours now, Cassandra, for as long as you’re alive that is.

I do hope the two of you will join me and Sydney in one of my favorite places. It shouldn’t be too hard to figure out, though you may have a bit of trouble getting to it. Trust me, it will be worth it.

I’m sorry to say this game is coming to a premature end. I have so enjoyed playing with the two of you, but Mother Nature seems to want this game to end on her terms.

I wonder who will win?

Crane

Cassandra reached over and tore into the box, sifting through what seemed to be a mountainous amount of tissue paper before finally pulling out the contents.

“It’s a book,” she announced, handing it to Ryan. “A very old book.”

Ryan flipped open the cover.

“It’s a first edition signed copy of ‘To Have and Have Not’ by Ernest Hemingway.”

The two locked eyes at once.

“Key West,” Cassandra said. “But isn’t that where they’re predicting the storm will hit?”

“Yes,” he said, combing his hands through his hair. “Cassandra look, I know you want to be there for your sister, but you cannot go down there. I promise you, I will do everything in my power to get Sydney safely back to you.”

Cassandra shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I’m coming with you.”

“Dammit Cassandra! Despite Crane’s words, this isn’t a game!”

Cassandra had never seen Ryan so agitated. He silently paced across the room and faced her from the other side.

“You cannot come with me,” he said, his voice firm, his eyes intent.

“And you cannot tell me what to do. You can’t stop me. I’ll find a way to get there, even if it’s not with you.”

“Do you have a death wish?”

“Do you?”

“Dammit!” he swore again.

Cassandra crossed the room to stand in front of him.

“I know you’re worried,” she said. “But can’t you see that I’d be out of my mind wondering about you and Sydney? I’m sorry, Ryan, but I’m not that kind of girl. I can’t just sit at home hoping for the best. Crane brought me into this and I’m seeing it through to the end. No matter what.”

Ryan sighed, reached out and pulled her into him, holding her tightly in his embrace.

“Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

“Just your luck,” she answered.

“Then I guess we should get started,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “I have no idea how we’re going to get down there since they’ve already announced no one is going to be allowed to head South, but we can figure that out once we get there.”

Cassandra nodded. Despite her words of bravado, she was scared.

“We’ll figure this out,” she said, echoing his words.

Without speaking further, they packed their belongings, grabbed the Hemingway book and headed out. Cassandra stopped at the door’s threshold and took one last look at the ocean. The sun no longer glistened on its surface as the entire area was now covered in dark, gloomy clouds and the waves looked angrier at each crash.

“If I have to pick a winner between Crane, us and her,” she said, nodding toward the churning Atlantic. “I’d place all bets on her.”