

Chapter Seven

“How did you sleep?” Ryan asked as Cassandra entered the living room of the condo, yawning.

“Not good. You?”

“The same.”

The smells wafting from the kitchen area reminded Cassandra she hadn't eaten much over the last several days. Needless to say, her eating had been the last thing on her mind.

“That smells good,” she commented. “What are you making?”

“Bacon in the oven, because there's less mess that way and it comes out perfect,” he smiled. “Pancakes on the griddle, warmed maple syrup, with fresh squeezed orange juice and coffee.”

“Wow! You're a chef! I'm impressed.”

“It's not hard,” he said, expertly flipping one of the pancakes.

“Who taught you to cook?” Cassandra asked, taking a bite into one of the perfectly cooked pieces of bacon on her plate. “This is really good.”

“I took a few cooking classes here and there over the years,” he said. “It was a way to pass the time and I ended up discovering a new hobby. Do you cook?”

“No! You are looking at the ramen noodle and takeout queen.”

“That's not good.”

“That's what my sister says,” she responded and instantly the mood shifted.

Missing her sister, Cassandra reached inside her backpack and pulled out the bag of oils.

“What are you doing?” Ryan asked.

“Looking for the Lemon vitality oil.”

“Why?”

“My sister used to always put it in her water and one time she gave me some orange juice that she’d added a couple of drops of Lemon to and it was really good.” She looked up at him. “Not that this isn’t good as it is. Using the oils just makes me feel closer to Sydney.”

“I understand,” he said. “Is it just for taste, or was there something about Lemon vitality in that book you read?”

“If I remember correctly, I think it helps keep your digestive system healthy,” she answered. “It’s also for immune support and since we’ll be going Lord knows where, I think my immune system could use an added boost.”

Ryan slid his glass across the table. “Go ahead and hit my juice with a few drops,” he said. “It couldn’t hurt.”

He took a sip.

“This is good.”

“I told you.”

For a few moments, the two made small talk while enjoying their pancakes and orange juice. Cassandra had just finished the last drop of her coffee, when her phone rang, interrupting their conversation.

“No caller ID,” she said, looking at Ryan.

“Go ahead and answer it,” he said. “But put it on speaker.”

“Hello,” she answered, following Ryan’s suggestion and hitting the speaker icon.

“Cassandra?” her sister’s panicked voice filled the room.

“Sydney!” Cassandra shouted. “Are you okay? Where are you?”

“Hello, Cassandra,” a familiar smooth voice answered in return. “I can tell I’m on speaker. Good morning, Ryan.”

“Let me talk to my sister,” Cassandra said. “I swear if you hurt her –“

“You’ll do what? Kill me? You’ll have to find me first.”

Cassandra looked at Ryan who motioned for her to stay calm.

“Sydney’s not much of a fighter, is she?” William Crane’s voice taunted. “She’s not like you. I do admire your fierce nature. It’s why I thought you and my friend, Ryan would make a good match. Speaking of which, how did the two of you enjoy my gift yesterday?”

“You mean our unnecessary trip to the Everglades?” Ryan answered. “The sinking boat and having to wade through snake and alligator infested water in the dark was a blast. Really. Speaking of which, you owe me a Jeep.”

“Hmmm,” Crane purred. “We’ll see about that. My next gift should be arriving shortly. I think you’ll enjoy your next destination. I do hope you make it in time or poor Sydney may find herself without a head.”

And with that last remark, the phone went dead.

Ryan and Cassandra stood silently in the room, neither knowing what to say.

“At least I know she’s still alive,” Cassandra finally spoke, her voice raw with unreleased emotion.

Ryan looked as though he were about to say something, when a soft knock on the door signaled the arrival of their “gift.”

Almost instantly, Ryan was at the door with his gun drawn, a gun which seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Cassandra watched as he checked outside, reassuring himself that no one remained in the area. There was only a large yellow envelope lying on the floor with the words ‘36 HOURS’ written across it.

Ryan brought the envelope inside, shut the door and locked it. After holstering the gun, he tore the top off the envelope and was promptly covered in pink glitter.

“What the hell,” he cursed.

“You’ve been glitter-bombed,” Cassandra noted, reaching across the sparkling table and grabbing the envelope. She reached inside and found a second,

smaller envelope and opened it, finding a set of car keys.

“I think he’s given you a replacement for the Jeep,” she noted, dangling them from her finger.

“I’m going to jump in the shower and get this glitter off. It will take me less than 5 minutes and then we’ll head out,” he said, taking his shirt off and heading down the hall.

“Aren’t you curious as to what kind of car he sent?” she asked.

“No,” he answered and she heard the shower turning on.

Faster than promised, he was in and out in less than three minutes. She didn’t want to tell him that there was still some sparkle left in his hair and a few places on his face. Glitter was as bad as sand and almost impossible to get rid of.

“Let’s go,” he said, grabbing the backpack he’d packed the night before. Cassandra reached for her own backpack, tossing the keys to him.

“It’s another Jeep,” she said, following him to the door.

Ryan locked his condo and the two took the stairs down to the lobby. They walked outside into the blaring, hot sun and spotted Ryan’s new vehicle immediately due to the large pink bow tied on top.

“He’s got good taste,” Cassandra commented as they approached the white four-door Jeep Wrangler with a soft top, which had been removed. She opened the door and looked inside. “This thing is loaded. Leather seats, GPS, satellite radio.”

“New is not always better,” Ryan said, removing the bow.

“Any clues inside as to where we’re supposed to take this thing?”

Ryan started inspecting the underside of the Jeep for anything unusual, before lifting the hood on the engine. “Not that I can tell,” he said.

“Maybe if you start it, they’ll be a message or something.”

Ryan opened the door for Cassandra, before walking around and climbing in. He put the key in the ignition and turned, hoping he’d not missed a bomb somewhere.

Nothing.

“I’m not seeing any clues,” he said, checking the glove compartment, sun

visors and under the seats. “Maybe the glitter was a clue.”

Cassandra watched as the GPS booted up.

“There’s something preprogrammed into the GPS,” she said, pointing to the stored data.

Ryan reached over and touched the screen, which showed a map pointing north.

“Do you know where the directions lead?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Fear gripped Cassandra’s stomach. “Is it somewhere dangerous?”

“You could say that,” he answered, shifting the transmission into first.

“Where are we going?”

“Disneyworld.”