

Chapter Six

“We’re almost there,” Ryan encouraged her. “Just keep moving.”

Irritated by his words, Cassandra turned on him. “Seriously? What do you think I’m about to do? Sit down and have tea?”

Ryan wisely kept his mouth closed for the final 15 yards they needed to cross. The shoreline was so close, just a few more steps and they would be out of the water - not out of danger, but at least out of the water.

“Did you hear that?” Cassandra stopped for a moment.

“What?”

“Sshhhhh ...”

“Sirens.”

“Yes.” Cassandra turned back toward him. “You can’t say anything. You can’t let them know what we’re doing out here.”

“I know.”

Cassandra continued to walk toward the shore. “What are we going to say? We need to come up with something believable.”

Ryan racked his brain for a plausible excuse. “I wanted to take you out for a romantic trip in the Everglades, but our boat sunk?”

“You suck at this,” Cassandra said. “Who brings a date out to an alligator and snake infested swamp for a romantic evening?”

“It’s been a while since I’ve taken someone out for a romantic evening,” he

responded. "Do you have a suggestion?"

Cassandra digested that piece of information. "Let me think for a minute."

They were five feet from the shore when it happened. Out of nowhere, Ryan was sucked under the water, his arms flailing.

"Ryan!"

Cassandra's heart stopped beating and she reached toward him to help, despite her panicked exterior. He grasped her hand and stood up.

"What the heck happened? Was it a snake? Did it bite you?"

"I slipped," he said, right before feeling the punch Cassandra gave him in his shoulder.

"I thought a gator had you!" She took a deep breath and exhaled her relief.

"I was afraid one was going to get me if I didn't get back up and out of the water. Splashing attracts them."

"Then let's get out of here," Cassandra said and immediately noticed the flashing red and blue lights headed down the road toward the Jeep.

"How do we explain your Wrangler?" she asked.

"We'll come up with something," he said. "First let's get out of this water."

Moments later, they were on dry land, but didn't have time to relax. After all, a gator or a snake could grab them from the bank. They kept walking until they reached the road and Jeep's flickering flames.

Within a few minutes, the two police cars pulled up. All four officers got out of their vehicles, guns drawn and told them to lie down on the ground hands above their head. They did as they were told.

The lead officer confiscated Ryan's gun, and after assessing the two of them, must have decided they were no immediate threat. However, one officer, who looked a little too nervous to Cassandra, kept a gun trained on them. The other officers holstered their weapons and stayed by their car.

"I'm Officer Harnisch," he introduced himself. "Mind telling me what the hell is going on here?" Despite the headlights shining on both of them, the officer flashed his handheld light into each of their faces.

Cassandra and Ryan stared at the officer, but remained silent.

“Well?” His voice was raised, obviously growing impatient with both of them. “What are you two doing out here in the middle of the Everglades, and what on earth happened to this Jeep?”

Cassandra spoke first.

“It’s my fault,” she said.

“Really?” Officer Harnisch responded. “How is that?”

“Well, I was feeling a little ... you know...” she raised her eyebrows, “but I was so bored with the same old boring routine, so I convinced my boyfriend to drive out here to the Everglades. At first we were just going to drive out here and get romantic in the Jeep, but we saw an old boat by the road and I thought it might be fun to take it out to one of the fishing platforms and ... you know. Only, once we were out there, the boat sprung a leak and we had to walk back to shore.”

“And the Jeep?” he asked, motioning with his flashlight toward the flames.

Cassandra made a face and shrugged her shoulders. “Ask him.”

“It was old,” Ryan offered. “It started making a strange noise several weeks ago and I meant to have it checked out, but never made the time. I guess I should have. The engine was smoking a bit when we stopped, so maybe something with the engine blew?” He sighed. “I loved that Jeep.”

The officer kept looking at the two of them, clearly disgusted by what he saw and heard.

“Who in hell brings a woman out into the middle of the Everglades for a quickie?” he asked.

“Haven’t you ever gotten bored?” Cassandra asked. “Wanted a little more adventure in your life?”

“Not that kind of adventure,” he answered. He shone the flashlight toward the water and back at them.

“I suppose your ID’s were in the Jeep?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact,” Ryan answered. “I have mine.” Officer Harnisch gave him permission to dig his wallet out of his soaking jeans.

Cassandra once again felt the glare of the flashlight in her face.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere? You look really familiar.”

“I’m a celebrity,” she smiled, hating herself for saying something like that out loud.

Harnisch continued to stare at her.

“Reality TV,” she clarified. “Last Man Standing.”

His eyes widened when he connected the show to her face. “You’re that girl!” he exclaimed. “The one who won! Cassandra! You were my favorite! I was hoping you would win!”

“Thank you,” she answered, trying not to think of the time they were wasting out here in the middle of nowhere.

Harnisch told the officer with the unsteady hand to holster his gun. It was a relief to everyone when he did. Ryan handed him his license and Harnisch studied it for several seconds. He looked over at Ryan, dripping from his earlier stint in the water and examined his driver’s license. He looked at Cassandra.

“I thought you were from Tennessee?”

“I am,” she answered.

“But you’re dating him?” He nodded toward Ryan, the disappointment in his voice was clear.

“Long distance relationship,” she answered.

“But on the show you said you weren’t dating anyone.”

“I lied,” she said, reaching for Ryan’s hand. “We’ve been together a long time.”

He continued to look from one to the other.

“You’ll be needing a ride back to ...” he looked at Ryan’s license and seemed shocked by the address. “Key Biscayne.”

“We would appreciate it,” Ryan answered. “I’ll call my insurance company about towing the Jeep.”

“I’m going to have to write this up,” Harnisch said.

“We understand,” Cassandra said, “only can we do that on the way? I’m really not comfortable staying out here soaking wet when I could be back at Ryan’s taking a nice hot bubble bath.”

The officer cleared his throat and nodded. “That won’t be a problem.”

He placed the two of them into the back of his car and told the other officer to write up the report while they drove back to Ryan’s condo.

“What do you do for a living?” he asked Ryan, more out of curiosity than protocol. “It must be a good job for you to afford a nice condo like that.”

“I have an internet business,” Ryan answered.

“What kind of internet business?”

“I blog,” Ryan answered.

The officers both laughed.

“And that makes you enough money you can live in a swanky condo on Key Biscayne?”

“More than enough.”

The officers stopped laughing.

“Just what is it you blog about?”

“Personal safety and protection.”

“Yet you come out here with your girlfriend for a night of ... romance ... let your Jeep get so bad it blows up and –“

“I know,” Ryan said, putting his arm around Cassandra’s shoulders. “Some things are worth losing a Jeep for.”

He looked over at Cassandra. She knew he was putting on a show for the officers. After all, they were supposed to be a couple that’ve been together a long time. She rested her hand on Ryan’s thigh.

It was awkward, yet comforting at the same time. She could see Harnisch sneaking glances at them from time to time. He didn’t look like he was quite buying their story.

“How long have the two of you been dating again?” he asked.

"A year," Ryan said at the same time Cassandra blurted out, "Two years."

Ryan reached out and pushed a stray hair away from Cassandra's face and stared into her eyes. "We met two years ago," he clarified. "We've been serious about a year."

The two officers exchanged looks.

The remainder of the ride was quiet and it wasn't long before the police car pulled up in front of Ryan's condo.

"We'll be in touch if we have any further questions," he told Ryan.

"Thanks for the lift," Ryan replied as he helped Cassandra out of the back and put his arm around her shoulders again. Cassandra placed her arm around his waist and the two turned and started walking toward the entrance. To anyone observing, they looked like a couple who were comfortable with one another, instead of the strangers they were.

"I'm going to kiss you," Ryan said as they walked.

"Excuse me?" Cassandra said, never losing a step.

"They're watching us," he said. "Make it believable." Ryan stopped, turned to Cassandra, took her face in his hands and kissed her, deeply. To anyone watching, it was a sensual kiss between two people who couldn't wait to get upstairs and be alone.

Ryan heard the police car drive away.

"They're gone," he said and released her.

Cassandra, however, was reeling from the kiss.

"Thanks for the warning," she said, touching her lips, her pulse firing a bit more rabidly than it should. "You're pretty good at this pretending thing."

He smiled. "So are you."

They turned and walked into the building.

"Mr. Donovan!" The concierge at the front desk called to him as they entered, giving their disheveled appearance a once over before continuing.

"There was a parcel delivered for you a few moments ago from a very nice

gentleman. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. You missed him by only a couple of minutes."

Ryan looked around the lobby.

"Did you see which way he went?"

"No, sorry. Anyway, the box is back here. It's quite heavy."

Ryan walked around the counter, where the concierge directed him to the box's location. He picked it up without fanfare, thanked the man and started toward the elevators.

"Oh and one more thing," the concierge called after them.

"Yes?"

"He told me to tell you and Miss Thompson he's looking forward to seeing you very soon and that you should enjoy your present this evening as he'll be sending another one in the morning."

Ryan and Cassandra looked at one another, perplexed.

The elevator doors closed behind them.

"What do you think it is?" she asked.

"No telling. We can open it when we get to my place."

The two of them walked into the condo and Ryan grabbed a knife from a drawer, slicing through the tape.

"There's no timetable," he noted as he ripped through the second side.

Cassandra continued to watch, wary of what kind present they'd received this time.

Ryan opened the card on top of the interior of the box and handed it to Cassandra. "Enjoy the rest of your evening," the card said.

"What's inside?" she asked.

Ryan sat back on his heels and sighed before pulling the contents out one at a time.

Two bottles of very expensive champagne, crystal glasses, bath bombs, and

various other romantic items accumulated on the floor of Ryan's condo.

"Is he serious?" she asked, picking up the most revealing negligee she'd ever seen in her life. "I'm worried sick about my sister and he thinks this is what's on my mind? Sex?"

"Don't let him get to you," he offered. "It's what he wants. To throw you off your game." He started putting the items back into the box. "I have two bedrooms and two bathrooms in the condo," he said. "I took the liberty of taking your backpack to the guest room earlier. You can stay here for the night and that way, we'll be clean and rested for when our next 'present' arrives tomorrow morning."

Cassandra nodded. "Thank you. I could use a shower," she said. Her eyes rested on one of the bath bombs. She reached down, scooping up one of the round balls. "And a bath."

She looked over at Ryan, who looked more exhausted than she felt. "Thank you for letting me stay here. And thank you for helping me. You didn't have to."

Ryan gave a nod and watched as she started down the hallway.

"Sorry about the kiss," he called after her, making her pause. "I just thought it would give our story more believability and get them on their way faster."

Cassandra nodded, then continued to walk down the hallway, not the least bit sorry about that kiss.