

Chapter Ten

Ryan was fast. He knew this about himself. He ran almost every day. On days he wasn't training for a long distance run, he was running sprints to increase his speed. He felt confident in his ability to outrun Crane.

Unfortunately, while Crane was in prison, he was also training. He had lost so much weight Ryan didn't recognize him at first. The long ponytail and beard only furthered his confusion when he first spotted him in the crowd. But there was no mistaking it. Crane was within his sight and he wasn't about to lose him.

Ryan followed him down a long, dark passageway between two buildings and when he came out the other side, Crane vanished. It was like he disappeared into thin air. The only other person around was Snow White.

"Did you see a man with a ponytail and beard run by here?"

"Yes," she said, looking uneasy. He couldn't blame her. He was dressed in a tux and probably looked like a crazy person.

"Which way did he go?"

She pointed to a hidden door that looked like part of the wall.

"What is that?"

"It's the entrance to the tunnels," she said.

"Tunnels?"

"Yes, they run underneath the park. It's how the workers get across the park when they're in a hurry and don't want to fight the crowds."

Ryan walked over to the wall and found the latch, opening it. He turned back

toward Snow White.

“The man I’m chasing is very dangerous. Whatever you do, stay away from these tunnels.”

Snow White nodded her agreement and Ryan stepped inside the hidden underground world of Disney. Fortunately for him, it was well lit. Unfortunately, the short time he’d spent with Snow White made him lose the running advantage he’d gained on Crane. He could be anywhere in these tunnels. Anywhere.

He started walking down the main corridor, but when he reached the first intersecting tunnel, he realized just how complex this tunnel system was. Crane could be hiding, waiting. He could have taken any direction. Heck, he could be halfway to Epcot by now.

Then there were the hidden rooms. And people. What if Crane had encountered someone who questioned his credentials to be down here? Ryan knew without a doubt, that person would be dead.

Against all odds, he decided to continue his pursuit and hope that his instincts would bring him closer to Crane.

Then his cell phone rang. It was Cassandra.

“I’ve lost him,” he answered, not bothering with the formalities.

“Where are you?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he said. “I’m in the tunnels beneath the park.”

“I read something about those from a friend. You could get lost down there.”

“Crane is down here somewhere. How am I supposed to just walk away and let him go?”

Ryan continued to slowly make his way down the next corridor as they talked.

“He was with me this afternoon,” Cassandra admitted.

“Who?”

“Crane.”

That stopped Ryan in his tracks.

“What? How?”

“He was a part of my wedding ‘team’ and called himself ‘Kevin,” she said. “The only photos I’ve ever seen of The Night Slasher showed him with short cropped hair, clean shaven and he was heavier. I never even made the connection.”

“He’s physically changed quite a bit in the last eight years,” Ryan agreed.

“It chills me to think how close he was to me. He watched me for hours while I was getting ready for the wedding he planned. What kind of a sick game is he playing, Ryan?”

“I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “As I told you before, he likes games, which is why he chose you. He thinks you’ll be a good opponent.”

“What do we do next?”

“I’m going to continue to head down these tunnels for a while longer. Why don’t you head back to the hotel and change out of your wedding dress. If I haven’t found anything in the next fifteen minutes, I’ll meet you back there so I can change clothes too. Then maybe we can figure out what his next move will be.”

“Okay. I’m in the Penthouse suite. Be careful.”

Ryan pocketed his phone and kept walking, attuned to every sound and shadow close to him. He was just about to turn around when he heard heavy breathing coming from one of the corridors ahead. It sounded as though someone was in distress.

He quietly moved toward the sound and whoever was waiting for him around the corner. He readied his gun and pivoted toward the sound.

Lying in the floor was a dying man dressed in ghostly looking old-fashioned wedding attire. He had been disemboweled much the same way Ryan was meant to die all those years ago, only Crane left the scythe behind, still protruding from the man’s abdomen. Ryan almost felt as though he were looking down at himself dying. However, there would be no life flight coming to save this man. He looked up at Ryan, took one last breath and was gone.

Every muscle in Ryan’s body was taut with fear and anger. It didn’t matter how many times he reminded himself of Crane’s sociopathic personality, after eight years, it was a jolt to see it again, first hand.

His thoughts immediately went to Cassandra. Crane had successfully separated them not once, but twice today. Was he on his way to Cassandra’s hotel

room now, or was he already there, waiting?

Ryan turned to run, hoping he could figure his way out of the tunnels when he spotted a sheet of paper stuck to the wall using the victim's blood as glue with the words "Four Hours" written on the wall. Ryan pulled the paper from the wall and read the poem by Jean Toomer.

*Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,
And start their silent swinging, one by one.
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds.
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.*

He folded the paper and started running back toward the hotel. It took him less than fifteen minutes.

"Are you okay?" Cassandra asked as she opened the door. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"In a way, I have," he said, grabbing his bag and heading toward the bathroom to change.

"What happened?"

"We've got another clue," he said.

Cassandra noted the pale look on Ryan's face when he returned. Her own face paled as she read the clue.

"What's this red stuff on the paper?" she asked.

Ryan just looked at her.

"Oh no," she said when the realization hit her. She dropped the paper as though it might burn her. "You don't think –"

"It's not Sydney's," he assured her. "It belongs to another unfortunate soul who encountered Crane." Ryan picked up the paper, refolded it and put it in his pocket. "We have four hours to get to our next clue."

"Four hours? But that's hardly any time at all!"

"I know, which makes me think it's somewhere in the park." Ryan looked at

her. "Whatever happens from this point on, we do not separate."

Cassandra nodded in agreement.

"What's the scariest place in the park?" she asked. "Where would we find dead bodies, ghosts and blood?"

It took them both only a few seconds before they realized the answer at the same time.

"The Haunted Mansion."