

Chapter Thirteen

“A hurricane? Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Ryan replied, helping Cassandra into the Jeep.

“But the weather is perfect right now!”

“It’s still several days away, so we don’t have to panic ... yet.”

Cassandra looked at his profile as he started the engine and hit reverse.

“Panic? I’ve never been through a hurricane. How much should I be panicked?”

Ryan glanced over at her, then toward the GPS telling him which way to turn.

“I’m sure you know hurricanes can be dangerous ... as in life threatening dangerous. High winds, storm surges, tornadoes, downed power lines sitting in water, snakes –“

Cassandra put up her hands. “Okay,” she said. “I get it. They’re not a picnic in the park. What does that mean for us?”

Ryan sighed and continued to stare at the road ahead.

“I have no idea. The only thing I can hope for is that Crane’s clues lead us away from Florida and someplace further inland away from this storm.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then we’re going to have some decisions to make.”

“Like?”

“Like whether I leave you someplace safe while I pursue him on my own.”

Cassandra shook her head.

“No. Sydney’s my sister and I’m not going anywhere unless it’s to find and rescue her.”

Ryan frowned with her words.

“You don’t understand what this could mean,” he started.

“I understand plenty,” she countered. “I understand that a psychopathic serial killer has kidnapped my sister to use as bait. I understand that he used me as a lure to finish what he started all those years ago with you. I understand that a very dangerous hurricane is headed our way and I also understand that none of us may make it out of here alive.” She looked over at him. “Does that pretty much sum it up?”

“Almost,” he answered.

“Really? What did I leave out?”

“The part where if anything happened to you I could not live with myself. I know it was part of Crane’s plan to get me to feel something for you, Cassandra. I have fought what I’m feeling every step of the way. But –“

“But what?”

“Despite knowing all of that, I do have feelings for you and I cannot imagine a world without you in it. I’m not willing to risk anything happening to you.”

Cassandra swallowed down the lump forming in her throat and chased it with a sip of water.

“I know,” she finally said. “I feel the same way. Sometimes it’s hard for me to imagine that I didn’t even know you existed a week ago.”

Ryan smiled. “A week ago we both had completely different lives and now we’re headed to the Fountain of Youth in hopes of finding another clue to save your sister.”

The two sat silently for a while as they traveled up the road toward St. Augustine. Cassandra couldn’t help but notice the ring on her left hand. She thought of removing it, but noticed that Ryan had not taken his ring off yet either.

She decided to keep it on. She thought about Ryan and how good he was at all of this. He must have been a good agent at one time.

“Do you miss it?” she asked.

“What?”

“The FBI.”

Cassandra watched as Ryan chewed the inside of his cheek with her question.

“You do don’t you?”

He looked over at her.

“Sometimes,” he admitted.

“Have you ever considered going back?”

“Many times.”

“What stopped you?”

She watched his face as he took a deep breath and sighed it out.

“Fear.”

“Fear of Crane? Or something else?”

“I think Crane messed with my head enough that I would be second guessing every move and questioning every decision.” He looked over at her. “You don’t always have that luxury.”

“Crane is the personification of evil,” Cassandra said, turning her face to look out the window at the passing cars, half wondering if Crane was in one of them.

“There is a lot of evil in the world,” Ryan admitted, turning to look at her. “But there’s more good than evil. And good usually wins.”

The time passed quickly as they traveled and it wasn’t long before they saw the exit for the Fountain of Youth.

“St. Augustine’s a pretty place,” Cassandra commented as they drove.

“Yes it is,” Ryan agreed. “Too bad we’re not visiting it under better circumstances.”

Cassandra continued to watch the passing scenery out her window, wondering if she would ever be able to visit St. Augustine as just another tourist.

“The site is up ahead. It shouldn’t be too much longer,” Ryan stated.

A few minutes later, the two pulled into the parking lot and made their way toward the tourist attraction as both scanned their surroundings for any kind of clues or direction as to where they should go next.

“We can just walk the grounds until something catches our eye,” Cassandra offered, noting a beautiful peacock fanning his feathers in all of their glory. After covering every square inch of the attraction and coming up empty handed, Ryan looked around in exasperation.

“Let’s head to the gift shop,” he offered. “That’s where the bottle of water came from. Maybe there’s a clue inside.”

“I didn’t think of that. Good idea.”

Following the signs to the gift shop, they eventually located the souvenirs and water bottles, but again, nothing of importance jumped out at them.

Ryan approached the woman behind the counter.

“Hi,” he said, smiling. “My name’s Ryan Donovan and this is my friend Cassandra Thompson. Is there a package or letter or anything waiting for us?”

“No,” the woman answered, her eyes taking note of Ryan’s wedding ring. “Were we supposed to be holding something for you?”

“Thank you. My mistake.”

The two stepped outside again and looked around at the historic landscape.

“What is it we’re supposed to find?” Cassandra asked. “Maybe walk the grounds again?”

“There wasn’t anything around here before. I can’t imagine that would change in the last few minutes.”

Cassandra looked around, hoping something would catch her attention.

“Maybe we should look at the bottle again,” she offered. “Maybe there was another clue on the bottle and we just missed it.”

Ryan nodded, took her hand and they walked back to the parking lot. As Ryan reached for the door, he noticed a small robin's egg blue box in the passenger seat.

"Here's our clue," he said, retrieving it.

"Do you think Crane put it here?"

"I doubt it. He probably paid someone."

Cassandra watched as Ryan opened the tiny box and found a key with a number.

"Another car?" Cassandra questioned.

Ryan shook his head.

"A boat. The number scribbled across the lid is a boat slip number. We need to find the marina."

"No time limit this time?" Cassandra asked.

"I think we're still on his original timeline, which means we need to find that boat and get to the next place."

Cassandra climbed into the Jeep and buckled her seat belt.

"We're supposed to head into open water with a hurricane headed this way?"

Ryan looked over at her and smiled.

"The storm is still days away. We'll be fine."

"I hope you're right," she sighed. "I saw *The Perfect Storm*. I don't want to be out on the ocean when that thing hits."

"That makes two of us," Ryan answered.

The marina wasn't far away and it didn't take them long to find the right boat.

They climbed on board and starting looking around. It didn't take them long to find the sheet of paper tacked to a portable DVD player sitting on the navigation dashboard, Ryan noticed Crane's handwriting, with the words, "Play me."

Ryan turned the paper over to see a map of Anastasia Island.

“Play it,” Cassandra said.

Ryan looked torn.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “We need to find out what’s on that island and Crane’s probably going to tell us on that video.”

“I know. It’s just ...”

“What?”

“I know Crane. He may have Sydney with him while he’s recording.”

Cassandra made a grab for the DVD player. “All the more reason I need to see it.”

Ryan held it away from her.

“Unless you think he’s already killed her. Is that it? You’re afraid I’ll see Sydney’s dead body on that video?”

“No,” he answered. “I believe she’s still alive. It’s his bargaining chip to keep us playing the game and coming for him.”

“Then what?”

“Just because Sydney’s alive, doesn’t mean he hasn’t been ... doing things to her.”

Cassandra sat down and closed her eyes.

“Oh my God.”

After several deep breaths, Cassandra looked up at him.

“I can do this,” she said. “Play the video.”

Ryan sat down next to her hit “Play.” Crane had once again changed his looks. His head, as well as his goatee were shaved and somewhere along the way, he’d gotten himself a pretty dark tan. He looked completely different.

“Hello lovebirds,” he began, smiling, though even when he smiled, evil permeated from his pores. “Did you enjoy your wedding night? I can only imagine how intense the sex would be between the two of you.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “You didn’t happen to make a video for me to enjoy, did you? Probably not. Ryan likes to keep things like that personal and private, don’t you Ryan? I can only

hope it lived up to my imagination, I'm sure neither of you are a disappointment in the bedroom. Or so I hear. Anyway, I think you'll enjoy my next assignment. You'll be digging for buried treasure on Anastasia Island. You're probably concerned about the boat. Don't be. This boat is sturdier than the last. It won't sink, though you may have a hard time finding the exact spot you need to start digging. By my calculations, you have about 18 hours left to find your next clue. Good luck."

Ryan was just about to turn off the player when Crane reappeared, this time with a crying Sydney sitting next to him.

"Don't forget why you're doing this, Cassandra. Sydney has been delightful company and I would hate for something fatal to happen to her before you see her one last time. With the hurricane headed this way, I'm afraid my patience and interest is coming to a close sooner rather than later. I guess I'll have to make the most of what little time I have left with her."

The screen went dark, but the sound of Sydney's cries filled the cabin of the boat before being silenced.

"Let's go," Cassandra said, putting the boat's key into the ignition.

"Cassandra -"

"We're going to find him," she said, her voice void of emotion. "And when we do, I'm going to kill him."