

### Chapter Three

“Can you help me? Do you know where my sister is?”

“No.”

The man, who she assumed was named Ryan, walked over to a bar and poured himself a shot of what appeared to be whiskey. “Would you like a shot?” he offered.

“No,” she responded. “Thank you.”

While she felt better when he holstered his gun, she was still wary about this stranger who seemed like a caged animal about to be put down. She watched him for a few moments before speaking again.

“No, you can’t help me or no, you don’t know where my sister is?”

The tall stranger with piercing blue eyes tilted the shot glass back quickly.

“Both,” he replied.

“But I don’t understand. I was told –“

“I know what you were told,” he cut her off.

“You won’t help me?”

Cassandra watched as he picked up his phone and started punching in numbers.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling my friends at the FBI.”

“You can’t do that!”

“They’ll know how to help you.” She watched him press the send button. Not

thinking rationally, she made it to him in three strides, grabbed the phone, ended the call and threw his phone on the couch.

“What the hell-“

“Whoever has my sister said if anyone contacts the police, he’ll know and she’ll be dead.”

Cassandra watched as Ryan ran his hands through his dark brown hair and sat down in a nearby chair. He was clearly agitated and if she had to guess, by the looks of him, scared.

Frankly, he looked as though he was about to have a mental breakdown.

“Do you know who has my sister?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Should I be afraid?”

Ryan looked up at her, his eyes intense.

“Yes.”

Cassandra felt as though she would be joining him in that breakdown.

“Who has my sister?” she asked, her voice quiet. “And why did he bring you into this?”

Cassandra waited, but no answer was coming from this man who seemed to be battling demons she knew nothing about.

“It’s because of the show, isn’t it?”

Ryan looked at her, obviously perplexed by her question.

“I was on a reality show,” she explained. “A lot of weird fans.”

Ryan looked her over, raising one eyebrow.

“I just won a million dollars,” she offered. “Do you think he wants the money?”

“No. He doesn’t need your money.” He looked up at her. “What kind of a reality show?”

"It's new. It's called The Last Man Standing ... only a woman won. Sort of an endurance race mixed with clues for a scavenger hunt."

"That makes sense," he said, almost to himself.

"Why does it make sense? Who has my sister?"

Ryan looked at her intently, studying her before answering.

"A man named Bill Crane has your sister."

Cassandra thought for several minutes, racking her brain for a face.

"Why does that name sound familiar? Who is he?"

"The Night Slasher."

The name instantly filled Cassandra with terror. People all over the United States lived in fear of that monster for months, never knowing who or when he would strike again.

"But they caught him! He's in prison."

"Not anymore."

Cassandra's stomach was churning, her nerves on edge. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a bottle she'd already used half of and started rolling it all over her neck.

"What are you doing? What is that? I can smell it from over here."

"It's called Stress Away," she answered. "It's an essential oil blend that came in a kit my sister talked me into buying. I put a rollerball on it and have been using it ever since she went missing."

Ryan looked at her, his skepticism evident by the scowl on his face.

"Does it work?"

"Well, I'm not in a straight jacket yet" she answered. "So I guess it's working."

"Mind if I try it? I could use something to take the edge off. The whiskey's not cutting it."

Cassandra tossed him the bottle. He took the cap off, sniffed it and rolled it along his neck as he'd observed her doing.

“What’s your name?” he asked, handing the bottle back to her.

“Cassandra,” she answered. “Cassandra Thompson.”

Ryan extended his hand.

“Ryan Donovan. Sorry about being so rude before. I’m not usually so on edge.”

Cassandra shook his offered hand.

“Why did The Night Slasher send me to you? What do you have to do with all of this?”

Ryan took a deep breath, exhaling slowly before answering.

“Because he means to kill me.”

“Kill you? But it’s my sister who’s been kidnapped. I don’t understand. Why not just kidnap you?”

“I know you don’t understand. It took me a long time to figure how this monster thinks.”

Ryan motioned for Cassandra to sit. She followed his suggestion and waited for an explanation.

“Eight years ago I was a newly minted FBI agent, straight out of the Academy.”

“Like Starling,” Cassandra interrupted.

Ryan gave her a confused look, before realization hit him and he nodded.

“Clarice Starling ... Silence of the Lambs,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Sort of, but this isn’t a movie and unfortunately, sometimes the bad guys win.”

Cassandra watched as he got up and walked over to look out of the sliding doors to the downpour outside. The storm was getting worse.

“I was just supposed to help out on the Slasher case. Observe mostly,” he

continued. “No one had any ideas about who The Night Slasher could be or where he would strike next. Every lead turned into a dead end. They thought maybe a fresh pair of eyes could find something. They called me and another new agent, Dave Graham, in to take a look at the case files.”

“And did you find something?”

“Yes. As I went through the case files, I noticed something about him. He liked to play mind games and he liked to leave obscure clues. He also liked outsmarting the authorities.” Ryan looked over at her. “That’s probably how you caught his attention.”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault my sister was taken.”

“No,” he assured her. “I’m not saying that at all. I’m just saying that your appearance on that show put you on his radar. He noticed you. He realized he could use you in his game.”

“Use me how? I don’t understand what he’s getting out of this by kidnapping my sister if it’s you he wants to kill?”

“It goes back to my figuring out his code as I was looking at the case files. I became very familiar with his mind and how he thinks. My fellow agents started to be concerned about me. They used the word obsessed a lot. I got to know him, how he reasons. His mind is devious and I hate to admit it ... brilliant.”

“But you cracked his code?”

“Yes.”

“So what happened after that? You figured out who it was and you arrested him and now he wants revenge?”

Ryan laughed, though there was no humor in it.

“I wish it had been that simple. I started looking intently at the last two murders – there were 14 in all. He had a pattern of threes. Once I figured out the pattern of the others, I started deciphering what the last two victims had in common in relation to his code. I had been working 48 hours straight, with very little rest when my supervisor ordered me to go home and get some rest.”

Ryan started rubbing his hands together, his nervousness increasing as he continued his story.

“Once I got home, I was so wired I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t get the pattern out of my mind. Finally, about 1 am, I had a hunch and decided to follow it. I got in

my car and started driving, thinking, surely I could not be right. But as I pulled into the parking lot of this obscure little park, I heard a woman screaming. I called for backup, but couldn't wait. I didn't want to be responsible for another victim if I could save her. So I pulled my gun and ran to where I heard the screams."

"And you caught him?"

"No ... He caught me."

"I don't understand."

Ryan turned toward her, took a breath and pulled his tshirt over his head. He was very fit, with lean, tanned muscles. However, running down the middle of his chest was an exposed deep scar from his encounter with The Night Slasher.

Cassandra gasped and her hand covered her mouth as she tried not to imagine the wound a scar like that came from.

"He knew," Ryan said. "Somehow he knew I was going to be there. It was a recording of one of his previous victims playing on a portable speaker. He was waiting for me."

"How could he know?"

Ryan shrugged his shoulders and pulled his tshirt back on. "He just knew." He took a deep breath and Cassandra noted the change in his demeanor. "When I realized it was just a recording, I knew I was trapped, almost instantly I felt what I thought was a gun pressed against my back and I heard the words, , 'Hello Agent Donovan.'"

"He knew your name? How?" she asked.

"I still don't know. He's diabolically intelligent. Probably the smartest criminal mind I've ever encountered or ever will encounter. He has ways of getting information out of people without them even realizing they're giving it."

"What happened next?"

"I ran through a multitude of scenarios in my mind within a few seconds, all of them ending with me dead and him getting away again. I think that's what he believed would happen."

"But it didn't."

"No. He told me to drop my gun, which I did. But I also had a pair of handcuffs I'd stuffed into the waistband of my jeans. Before I dropped the gun, I

slipped one of the cuffs on my hand. I figured if he was going to kill me anyway, at least I'd handcuff him to a corpse until backup arrived. I turned around, managing to get the other cuff on him at the same time he was slicing my torso from sternum downward with the biggest, sharpest scythe I've ever seen. I think he made it himself."

"Oh my word! How did you survive?"

"I don't know. Sheer will maybe," he said. "I'm pretty sure he thought he'd killed me. Heck, I thought he'd killed me. I was prepared to die. As it happened, the cops were there about two minutes later. I was bleeding out, they arrested him and lifeflighted me to Georgetown, not really expecting me to live."

"But you did. You survived."

"Yes. Against all odds, here I am."

Cassandra thought for a few minutes, contemplating Ryan's story.

"I still don't understand what that has to do with me."

"He's using you and your sister as bait. He called a few minutes before you started banging on my door, saying he was giving me a present."

"A present?"

"You."

"None of this makes sense."

"Ever since my near death experience with Crane, I've kept to myself. I left the FBI, moved down here to Florida and live a pretty quiet, secluded life. I don't make friends. I don't have girlfriends. Hell, I even have an online business so I don't have to deal directly with other people. I didn't want to give him any ammunition he could use against me. I knew he would come for me one day and now that day is here."

"But how do my sister and I fit into this?"

"He knows I'm not going to let you follow his clues alone. He wants me to like you enough not to want to see you dead. He wants me to help you. He wants to use you as leverage against me."

"But you don't even know me. Why would you care what happens to me or my sister?"

“Because he knows me. He knows how I think. He knows what I’ll do. He’s a narcissistic sociopath. I figured him out and stopped his fun. I outwitted him and to him, I’m unfinished business that needs to be destroyed.”

“So he’s planning on killing you.”

“Yes.”

“And my sister?”

Ryan remained silent.

“You don’t think she’ll come out of this alive.”

Ryan’s look was intense.

“I don’t think any of us will come out of this alive.”