

Chapter Twenty

“Here comes the rain,” Cassandra noted, reaching over and placing her hand in Ryan’s. “And the wind.”

“It’s going to get a lot worse. I really wish you’d reconsider.”

“I’m in this for the duration,” she said right before a bolt of lightning flashed in front of them.

“Marina is giving us a taste of what’s to come.”

Cassandra kept her eyes fixed on the road ahead of them. Once they got past Miami, the traffic was almost nonexistent. The poor souls on the opposite side of the freeway were not so fortunate.

Bumper to bumper cars were all trying to get out of the way of the massive approaching hurricane known as Marina. They had another twenty-four hours before it made landfall.

Ryan and Cassandra continued to drive for another thirty minutes, only slowing down when they saw flashing blue and red lights ahead of them on the road.

“What do we do now?” she asked. “They’ll never let us drive to Key West. They’ve got the entire road blocked off.”

“I don’t know,” Ryan admitted. “But I’ll think of something.”

He slowed the Jeep Wrangler to a crawl before stopping in front of the first police car who motioned for them to turn around and head back. Ryan shook his head and the officer, obviously perturbed at being disobeyed, started toward them.

Ryan rolled down his window and was rewarded by being pelted with rain.

“You can’t go any further,” the officer said. “The hurricane will hit in less than twenty-four hours and when it does, it will be worse than Andrew. Anyone who is still on these islands will more than likely die.”

“I understand that officer,” Ryan said. “But we don’t have a choice. I have to get to Key West. It’s a matter of life and death.”

The officer looked through the window at Cassandra.

“A little melodramatic aren’t you? I’m sure you think it’s a matter of life and death. I’m sure you believe that whatever it is you forgot back home is the most important thing in the world; however, it’s not as important as your life. I cannot let you pass.”

Ryan and the officer sat staring at one another for a few moments before Ryan pulled out his cell phone.

“Just a minute,” he said, looking over at Cassandra. He put the phone on speaker and dialed. “I’m sorry, but I just don’t see any other way.”

“FBI Special Agent Graham,” the voice said over the phone. “How can I help you?”

“Dave,” Ryan addressed his friend, hoping he would be willing to help.

“Ryan!” the voice on the other end practically shouted. “Where the hell have you been? You’re not answering my calls, no one can find you, it’s like you disappeared off the face of the earth.”

“Well, I’m calling now.”

“Where are you? Has Crane contacted you?”

“I’m South of Miami. Homestead, Florida headed toward Key West.”

“Key West? But isn’t there a massive hurricane headed for the Keys right now? Specifically Key West?”

“Yes it is.”

The phone was silent for a few seconds before Agent Graham's voice came through again.

"It's Crane, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ryan admitted. "And I've got to get to him."

"Ryan, I know you think you can handle this on your own, but this is simply too dangerous. You need to let us take care of it from here."

"I wish I could," Ryan said. "But I can't. There's no one else."

"I don't understand. Tell me what's going on."

"Crane has a hostage and he promised not to kill her, as long as I'm the only one who comes after him. I'm putting her life in danger just telling you this."

"A hostage? Who?"

"It's a long story," Ryan admitted, squeezing Cassandra's hand. "I promise I'll tell you everything once we are all safe. Right now, I just need you to authorize this police officer to allow us to continue on our route to Key West."

"Where are you headed in Key West?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Wait," Graham broke through. "You said 'we' a few minutes ago. Who's with you?"

"The hostage's sister, Cassandra."

"Are you out of your mind? You can't take a civilian into a hostage situation. Especially not when Bill Crane is the psychotic lunatic holding that hostage."

"I have to," Ryan explained. "She's been a part of his game the entire time."

"What do you mean the entire time? How long has Crane been in touch with you?"

Ryan clenched his teeth, but didn't respond. Cassandra reached over and took the phone from Ryan.

"Agent Graham is it?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"My name is Cassandra Thompson."

"Cassandra Thompson. Why does that name sound familiar?"

"Last Man Standing. The reality game show."

"That's right! You won the million dollar prize. How are you mixed up in all this?"

"Crane took my sister. He ensured me if I didn't play his game, by his rules, he would kill her. He sent me to Ryan and we've been following Crane's leads ever since."

"Including the graveyard an anonymous tipster sent us a few days ago."

"Yes."

"So you've been with Ryan the entire time, chasing Crane?"

"Yes and he's made it clear that this is our final destination. He's got my sister and I swear to you, I will get out of this Jeep and run the entire way to Key West if I have to in order to save my sister."

After another few tense seconds, Dave Graham spoke again, this time to the officer still standing in the rain next to the Jeep listening.

"Officer. I can have the FBI send you an official command, but I respectfully request you allow these two to pass."

"They're headed straight toward a death trap," the officer said.

"I understand that," Dave Graham replied. "Have you heard of Bill Crane, The Night Slasher?"

"Yes."

"He escaped and he's got a hostage. This gentleman is Ryan Donovan. He is probably the only person who has a chance to bring this sociopath down. I need you to let him pass."

The police officer seemed torn as to what he should do.

"Officer, like I said, I can have the official paperwork done and sent to your office, but we're wasting valuable time here."

“Okay,” the officer said at last. “I’ll just need to do something first.”

“Thank you,” Graham said. “Ryan, be careful.”

“I will and thanks Dave.”

Ryan hung up the phone and was prepared to shift the Jeep into gear when the officer held up his hand.

“Hold up.”

“But I thought you agreed to let us pass.”

“I did,” he said. “I just need you to give me the inside of your arm. Both of you.”

“What? What for?”

The officer pulled a black Sharpie from his pocket and uncapped it.

“Because I need to write your name and social security number on it for identification once the storm has passed.”

“So you can identify our dead bodies, you mean,” Cassandra said.

The officer’s eyes met hers.

“Yes.”

Ryan offered his arm first, before Cassandra held her arm across for the officer to write the identifying markers.

“Good luck,” he said and motioned for the officer inside the police vehicle to move and allow them to pass. “You’re going to need it.”

Ryan shifted the car into gear and slowly moved past the police cars and toward the open road.

The eeriness of the deserted road was not lost on Cassandra.

“It’s like it’s Doomsday,” she whispered. “And we’re the last two people on earth.”

“We should be getting to the bridges soon,” he said. “There are several connecting the mainland to the Keys.”

“Including the Seven Mile Bridge?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I always wanted to see that bridge,” she mused. “But not like this.”

Ryan squeezed Cassandra’s hand.

“We’ll come back again one day. When the weather’s better.”

Cassandra nodded, her eyes fixed on the writing on both their arms.

“I guess this is it then,” she said. “The end of the game. Do you think he’s actually at the Hemingway House?”

“I don’t know, but it will be a good place to start. I imagine Key West is like a ghost town right now.”

“How long until we get there?”

“About two and a half hours.”

Cassandra nodded.

“You think she’s okay? You think she’s still alive?”

“Yes, I’m sure Sydney is alive,” he answered. “I don’t think he’ll do anything permanent until we’re there to witness it. For all of Crane’s sociopathic tendencies, I believe he will keep his word about this.”

“Do you think your friend, Dave, will be sending help? I don’t want Crane to think we’ve broken his rules and kill Sydney because the FBI shows up.”

“Even if Dave wanted to, I don’t think they’d attempt it with the storm this close.”

“So we really are on our own with Crane?”

“Yes.”

Cassandra sat in silence for another twenty minutes, wondering how this would all play out.

Would Sydney be okay? Would Ryan? Would she?

Would any of them make it out of Key West alive?

