

Chapter Sixteen

“It’s time to leave my dear,” the smooth charismatic voice cooed into Sydney’s ear. She’d learned to fear that voice and the torment it brought.

For days the two of them stayed in this luxurious mansion. They were completely alone and isolated from the rest of the world. At times, her captor could be the most charming man she’d ever encountered. At other times -

When she was alone, Sydney fleetingly thought if she were here for a nice vacation, she might enjoy the house and the view. As it was, each day brought a new threat. A new pain. A new fear.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her voice raspy from lack of water and pain.

Bill Crane, otherwise notoriously known as The Night Slasher, caressed her face with a long, slim index finger. She instinctively wanted to flinch away from his touch, but found through experience that would be unwise. Instead, she met his gaze.

“You’re almost as defiant and strong-willed as your younger sister,” he said. “It’s a shame, really.”

“What is?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

“That this will all come to an end soon and the two of you, along with your sister’s new husband, will have to die.”

Sydney swallowed.

“What are you going to do?”

He smiled at her, his teeth perfect and straight. Unnaturally so.

“We are about to take a trip,” he said.

“Where?”

“Key West. I’ve always wanted to visit Key West,” he mused. “Ernest Hemmingway is my favorite writer, did you know that?”

Sydney shook her head; the movement sending renewed pain down her spine. She watched as he moved toward the large windows overlooking the pounding waves of the ocean beyond.

“There’s a hurricane coming this way,” he said. “So I’ve had to cut our little game short.”

“A hurricane?” Sydney asked, a panicked feeling rising in her throat.

“Yes,” he smiled, though he never looked over toward her. “A very big, very nasty storm. It will be a fitting end to this game.”

He turned toward her and sat down in the chair opposite her own.

“It’s the biggest storm to ever form in the Atlantic. Mandatory evacuations are in place all over South Florida. Everyone has to be gone by sundown tomorrow.”

“It’s headed toward Palm Beach?”

He laughed and Sydney thought this is what insanity looks like. It’s sitting in the chair opposite me, plotting my death with his sick mind.

“Actually,” he said. “It’s headed straight for Key West.”

Chapter Seventeen

“I guess we can see what kind of clues he’s put in the house, then I’ll sign everything over to the victims’ families. Do you think he believes I would keep it?”

“I think he’s got some kind of a sick plan for us at that house. Let’s just hope it doesn’t blow up when we open the door,” Ryan answered as they pulled up in front of a massive home that looked to be about forty thousand square feet.

“Who lives like this?” Cassandra asked, punching in the code to the gate that was written on the deed. “I mean really. Even if you have a large family, you could live in a place like this and never see anyone else. Just stay in your wing and maybe see the other person at mealtimes. You could house multiple families here.”

“I don’t know. Maybe if you’ve been raised in that kind of luxury you can’t imagine any other way. It’s definitely not for me, that’s for sure. I like quiet and cozy. If I ever had a family, I would want to see them, and not just in passing.”

Cassandra took in the luxurious landscaping as the Jeep winded its way down the driveway toward the massive structure.

“It’s like Old Florida,” she mused. “The architecture,” she clarified. “It’s very Key West, only on a massive, massive scale.”

Ryan looked over at her.

“Maybe Vanderbilt or Rockefeller Old Florida,” he smiled. “I bet more than one famous world figure has graced this home at some lavish party sometime.”

“How much do you think it costs to keep up a place like this?”

Ryan shook his head.

“You’re asking the wrong person. You’d need a staff for the grounds, a staff for the pool, a staff for house, probably a driver, security. I’d guess at least a million a year.”

Cassandra gave a low whistle.

“Can you imagine spending a million dollars a year, just to keep your house up?”

“You know what’s really scary about that?”

“What?”

“This was probably someone’s second home. I bet they had another house in New York or someplace similar that was their primary residence and used this as their winter home.”

“No!” Cassandra continued to crane her neck to see everything they passed. “Seriously? Who has that kind of money?”

“Billionaires,” Ryan answered. “And families like Crane’s who had old money and real estate passed down to them over the years and they just kept investing and growing their wealth.”

“The rich get richer ...”

“I suppose you could look at it that way,” he agreed. “Though these days billionaires seem to be cropping up left and right via technology. I mean, look at the Snapchat guy. One day he’s a college nerd fooling around with apps and the next thing you know, he’s a billionaire in his mid-twenties and married to a supermodel.”

Ryan pulled the Wrangler to a stop in front of the house.

“Ready to see your house?”

“Let’s go,” she said, not waiting for him to get out and open her door.

Cassandra waffled through the keys and found the one labeled “Front Door” along with instructions for the security code.

Slowly, they opened the door and walked in taking in the extreme appointments of the home.

“This is incredible,” Cassandra whispered. “Do you think-“

Ryan looked at her and finished her sentence.

“That he kept Sydney here?”

Cassandra nodded.

“I don’t know, but nothing would shock me.”

Cassandra took a few steps further into the home, gasping at the magnificent and expansive view. But it was not the view that stole her attention.

“Ryan,” she called. “You need to see this.”

Ryan followed her voice, stopping when he saw the large formal portrait grabbing her attention.

“Is that?”

“Crane,” he answered. “Much younger, but yes. That’s him.”

“Is that his parents?”

“Yes.”

“So this home ...”

“Is probably his family home. Or second home.”

Cassandra sat down, her legs wobbly beneath her.

“But I thought all of his family money was confiscated and put into a trust for the families of his victims.”

Ryan sat in the chair opposite from where she was seated.

“No. I told you, Crane is smart. He has untold wealth spread out all over the world. This house was probably held in some sort of corporate trust that was owned by multiple business entities that could never be traced back to Crane.”

“Why would he send us here?”

“Maybe this is where he was holding Sydney.” Ryan noted the look of hope in Cassandra’s eyes. “I doubt she’s anywhere near here now though.”

“Do you think he’s booby-trapped the house then? Are we going to walk around, hit a trip wire and kaboom?”

Ryan shook his head.

“Despite what I said earlier, I don’t think that’s what he’s got planned. It’s too easy and not personal enough for him.”

“Then what? He’s obviously leading us somewhere. They want everyone evacuated from the area by tomorrow night. You saw the traffic. It’s already a nightmare.”

“I don’t know, but because he gifted this house to you, I –“

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

Cassandra studied Ryan’s face, noting the worried expression.

“You think he’s suicidal.”

“I think he’s a man who has nothing to lose.”

“You don’t think he plans on coming out of this alive?”

Ryan’s look intensified.

“I think he would rather be dead than be incarcerated again.”

“And he intends to take you with him.”

Ryan nodded his head.

“And what about Sydney and me?”

“Collateral damage.”

The open and airy space suddenly seemed to be frigidly cold to Cassandra. She got up and walked to the doors, opened them and stood on the stone balcony. Within a few seconds she felt Ryan’s hands on her shoulders.

“What do we do? Start looking for clues? Where do you look in a forty thousand square foot house?”

“One room at a time,” he answered. “Why don’t we start with the kitchen.”

“Hungry?”

“I could use something to eat,” he affirmed. “How about you?”

Cassandra nodded her agreement.

It took them thirty minutes to find their way into the cavernous kitchen. It was like something out of a magazine, except it was big enough to fulfill any needs of a very busy restaurant.

“Look how massive those refrigerators are! How many refrigerators do they have?”

Ryan walked over to the first set of industrial sized refrigerators and opened the door, which revealed it to be well stocked.

“I think they have two refrigerators and two freezers.” He walked to the second set and opened the doors.

“How much meat does a person need?” she asked, taking one of the roasts from the refrigerator. “Looks like a five pound tenderloin and there are at least ten of them in here.”

Ryan took the meat from her.

“Thirty minutes and we could eat like kings,” he smiled.

“I’m game,” she answered.

“I’ll prepare the meat if you’ll make the salad,” he offered. “Why don’t you grab one of those bottles of red on the rack as well.”

“But what if it’s one of those really expensive wines?” she asked. “You know, the ones that cost thousands of dollars a bottle?”

“Technically,” he said. “You own it. At least until you give it to the Feds.”

Cassandra grabbed the first bottle she saw, announcing it was “From 1990.”

Ryan opened the bottle like a pro, before seasoning the tenderloin and preparing it for the grill. Cassandra started making the salad, tossing in whatever she could remember seeing in restaurant salads.

She paused as she reached for the olive oil, garlic and balsamic vinegar. “You don’t think this is our last meal?”

“No,” he assured her. “I think you will have many, many more meals in your future.”

Cassandra made a mental note that he said “you” and not “we.”

The two kept themselves busy making the meal, not talking much other than to ask for a spice, or handing over a cooking utensil.

Finally, they found themselves with a beautiful tenderloin and a salad that would make any chef proud.

They carried their plates onto the deck and sat next to one another watching the ocean.

“You can see the clouds of the hurricane far off in the distance,” she said.

“Yes. The first fingers of the storm will reach here by morning, though the worst of it is still 48 hours away.”

Cassandra took a bite of her steak.

“It’s good,” she said. “You’re a great chef.”

“You’re going to be okay,” he assured her once more. “We’ll find Sydney before the storm hits and I’ll take care of Crane. You are going to be fine.”

Cassandra’s gaze met his.

“You keep saying I’m going to be okay. I don’t think I’ll ever be okay again,” she admitted, reaching for his hand. “And I know I won’t be if you’re not with me.”

Chapter Eighteen

Ryan reached over, brushing a stray strand of hair away from Cassandra's face.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said.

"Promise me. "Promise me you won't do anything stupid. Promise me that we'll both come out of this okay."

"Cassandra"

"No," she said, swiping an errant tear from her cheek. "I can't lose Sydney. But I can't lose you either. I know all of this was a setup by Crane. I know we haven't known each other very long. I know the situation is impossible."

She paused, weighing her next words carefully.

"But I also know that I have fallen in love with you and the thought of something happening to you –"

Ryan stood up, brining Cassandra into the circle of his arms and holding her tightly.

"I feel the same way," he said, his breath warm against her ear. "I love you, too."

Cassandra looked up at his handsome face and smiled.

Ryan lowered his face to hers and kissed her. This kiss was different. It was long, passionate and deep.

For several long moments, the two stood on the balcony, holding and kissing one another. Their breathing became labored as their bodies pressed close to one

another.

When they finally came up for air, Cassandra gazed him intently.

“We should find a bedroom,” she said.

Ryan kissed her again.

“Are you sure?”

“We’re married. We don’t know what will happen tomorrow, or even if there will be a tomorrow for either of us. I want to be with you. I need to be with you.”

Without further words, Ryan took her by the hand and led her toward the stairs. They found the first room on the right and went in.

Cassandra’s stomach felt as though nervous butterflies were rapidly flying around inside. Ryan seemed unsure of what to do.

“It’s been a long time,” he said.

“For me too,” she answered.

“I don’t want to do anything you’ll regret later.”

“I will never regret being with you.”

With her words, Ryan leaned in and kissed her again, the kiss becoming more intense than anything either of them experienced before.

It would be a night neither of them would ever forget.