Chapter five

Nic positioned himself in the crowd of people right outside the Calabrese front door, his gaze darting back and forth between Marco and Tony outside and Carla and that cameraman, who were just inside the door.

Who should he follow? Marco and Tony had been talking more about that *delivery* as they’d strolled past him outside. But it was too damn loud and busy with the parade going on to hear details.

Cannons kept blasting randomly. Music blared in waves as the floats passed by, and people were laughing and carrying on. Nic would have to stay close to them to have any chance of hearing their conversation. He couldn’t even read their lips because they had their backs to him. Decision made. He’d have to miss Carla’s live shot. But, he would find a way to get her alone later for a talk he should have had with her over a decade ago.

He turned to follow Marco and Tony, when two pirates, dressed like hundreds of others, blew past him. One knocked Nic in the shoulder as he passed, drawing Nic’s attention. And ire. “Watch it.” He couldn’t lose Marco in the crowd.

“That’s her,” the pirate said.

*That’s who?* Nic instinctively turned back toward the open front door. Carla was standing right outside now with the camera guy.

“She’s not alone,” The other pirate shouted over the noise.

“It’s a party idiot. We’ll have to get her alone.”

“Okay, let’s do this shit.”

*Do what?* The two moved out of hearing range. *Damn it.*

He glanced back at Marco and Tony. They’d stopped to talk with the mayor of Tampa. The politician was well known across the state and his picture was in online articles and tweets daily. Maybe their connection with the mayor was something Nic should explore. Wouldn’t be the first time a mob family had a politician in their pockets.

But, curiosity tugged at Nic’s center. *What the hell do those two bozo’s want with Carla*?

The two pirates were approaching her and that camera guy. They said something, gesturing down the hallway.

Carla’s smile faded and her body stiffened. The two men must have hit a nerve. Or, she was just annoyed at them delaying her.

Carla strode down the stairs to the paved pathway, pulling George with her. She pointed to the right side of the front yard.

Nic’s gaze followed her direction. A riser? Probably where she wanted to do her TV report. The camera guy shrugged, nodded, and stalked off, looking at his watch.

Torn, Nic looked back at Marco and Tony one more time. They hadn’t moved.

When he glanced back, Carla had.

Nic blanched.

One of the pirates was gripping her by the upper arm and pulling her up the stairs and back through the front door. The man then forced her down the hall. *What the hell?*

People were mingling around Carla, but no one seemed to deem the men’s actions unusual. It was Gasparilla and many of the guests were pushing and pulling at each other in jovial fun or in a drunken stupor.

But Nic was trained to read what wasn’t obvious.

The way Carla pulled against the man’s grip, the way her gaze darted around, told him she was in distress. Why would she chance missing her live shot on TV? He took a deep breath. *She wouldn’t.* Something was definitely off here.

The way one of the two pirates kept glancing around too, as if checking to see if anyone was on to them, made Nic even more suspicious.

But when Carla opened the door leading to her father’s prized study, alarms went off in his head. When they were kids, that room had always been locked. No one but Vicente or his adult friends were allowed in. It’s where the great man had gone to work, and to relax. And, its where he kept most of his valuables, in a safe hidden behind a large painting of the family commissioned right before Carla’s mother had died of breast cancer sixteen years ago. He’d only been in the room at night or early morning. And only to sneak in or out of the house.

His internal radar went red. He should call in back up. But no crime had been committed. He couldn’t risk blowing his cover before he’d learned anything more about the delivery from Miami.

Maybe the study was now a media room?

Nic’s heart was racing. His body’s natural reaction told him all he needed to know. If his system was on high alert, it was for good reason.

The two men pushed Carla into the study and slammed the door shut. The party was continuing in the main foyer, friends and family seemingly oblivious to the suspicious occurrence right in front of them.

Nic moved quickly through the crowd, but not so quickly *he’d* draw attention to himself.

The two jerks were probably Carla’s friends. Maybe she was taking them to the private bar in the study, where the family kept the *good*alcohol. Maybe he was just a paranoid FBI agent who saw criminal activity wherever he looked. *Whatever.* He would open the door, make sure Carla was okay, and get back to the job.

When Nic reached the door and turned the handle, the door didn’t budge.

It was locked.

Well, shit. He stepped back stunned, his body temperature rising, his hand instinctively reaching under his pirate tunic, landing on his holster.

He was going in. One way or another.

He unsnapped the holster and pulled out his loaded gun.