Chapter six

Carla stood her in Daddy’s study, facing the commissioned family portrait hanging on the wall, her hands shaking, her breath coming in short, tight bursts.

The blade of a knife broke Carla’s skin, and warm blood trickled down her neck. She held her breath, afraid if she made even the smallest move her artery would be sliced open and her life would be spilled onto the marble floor of her daddy’s favorite room.

 “Open the damn safe,” the shorter of the masked pirates said.

“I’m trying.” Carla fingered the wall until she found the slightly raised section. She pressed against the heightened area of wallpaper and instantly the grand painting of her family moved to the side, uncovering a safe buried deep in the wall. Only a handful of people knew about the button and the safe. How did these men find out? It had to be a tip from someone on the inside.

“Hurry up. You know the combination,” the taller pirate said.

Carla’s heart was beating so damn hard she felt it in her temple. Would they really kill her if she faked it and acted like she couldn’t open the safe? She closed her eyes and envisioned her dying father lying on the floor of this very study, grabbing his chest in the throes of a heart attack, begging her to protect the contents of the safe. *Protect the contents and that will protect the family.*Those were his dying words. *Protect the contents of the safe*. He hadn’t had time to say more.

A coincidence that two weeks later, at the party in her late father’s honor, two masked strangers were trying to get into her father’s safe? And *steal the contents?*

*No way.*

The blade dug in a little deeper.

She inhaled, afraid to move, her heart battering her rib cage. She had to stay alive through this and then figure out who these two men were, how they knew about the safe, and what they wanted inside it.

“Do it or die.” The pirate with the knife to her neck rasped. “No one will even hear you scream.”

Between the Gasparilla parade cannons, the marching bands and the DJ blaring music inside the house, no one would hear her scream. And if they did, they’d probably think it was part of the party. Her fingers trembled as she moved over the numbers of the combination. She would open the safe. She was already bleeding, and she knew her daddy would tell her nothing in the safe was worth her death.

A click and the safe opened.

The pirate with the blade at her neck shoved her out of the way, pushing her so hard so bounced off her father’s mahogany desk and collapsed onto the floor. Pain seared through the side where she’d hit the desk, and shock waves of fear rocked her.

She pushed herself up, straining to take air in. Her Dad had a gun in the top desk drawer. She didn’t know how to use it but—

“Move another step and your dead.”

It was as if all the air in her lungs evaporated. She looked up. The taller pirate, grungy in that reefer smoking kind of way, had a gun pointing at her. His steady hands told her he would have no problem killing her.

“I got it.” The shorter pirate yelled, raising a medium-sized, silver metal box up in the air, clutching it like a prize in his brightly tattooed hand.

“You sure?” the grungy gunman answered, never taking his eyes off of her.

“Well, fuck, I don’t see anything else in here that could be what we’re looking for.”

“Check.”

“The box is fucking locked. You want to take the time to unlock the box now or you want to get the fuck out of here? There’s a fucking party going on here.”

The door to the study rattled like someone was trying to open it.

“Screw it.” The pirate with the gun mumbled.  “Let’s go.”

The first pirate tucked the metal box under his arm and put his knife back into a sheath at his belt.

The second gunman cocked his gun, evil intention firing up behind his dark eyes.

He had a silencer screwed onto the weapon. Carla knew what was coming next. She was not about to die without a fight. She dove behind the desk, reaching up to open her father’s top drawer. It was locked. Which drawer kept the damn key?

A shot rang out.

She flinched. No pain. Taking a second to check for blood, Carla then tugged at more drawers, hoping one would hold the key to the drawer with the gun.

Another shot fired off. This one sounded different.

“Fuck, who are *you*?” That sounded like the shorter thief who had cut her.

Someone else must have entered the study. *The police?* *Thank you, Lord.*

“Carla?”

 “Here.” *The man who stopped my fall*.  “I’m okay.” Then, as an afterthought. “They’re armed.”

“I know. So am I. Stay covered.”

Stay covered? Who talked like that? *Oh, God.*Her stomach, already in knots, cramped more. Sweat rolled into her right eye.

“Hey man, if you let us leave, no one gets hurt.”  Even though she couldn’t see him, Carla could tell by the gravelly voice that was the shorter pirate with the knife.

“I can’t let you do that.”

Carla snuck a peak over the mahogany desk. The man who had rescued her was holding both of the thieves at gunpoint.

“Then, she’s dead.” The robber with the gun rounded the desk and jerked her up onto her feet using her shirt, almost choking her in the process. He pressed the cool tip of the gun against her skin.

Bile rose up into her throat. Her body stiffened, but her heart galloped as if it would burst out of her chest and ride away.

Her pirate stood in the center of the room, legs spread, muscled arms out, gun pointed in their direction, eyes behind the mask focused and unafraid. The confidence in his stare gave Carla hope.

“Okay, let her go.” The masked pirate lowered his gun, but didn’t holster it.

What was he doing? Her heart skipped.

“Take whatever you came for and get out,” the masked pirate holstered his gun but kept a hand on it. “Now. Before I kill both of you.”

The cool metal tip of the gun lifted off her heated skin.

Carla dropped to her knees, winded. Little stars circled in her vision. She put her hands on the floor to steady herself.

Then, she felt the energy around her shift. The guy above her brought the butt of the gun down on her head. She heard the crack first, then felt the explosion of pain rippling outward like electrical currents. The force of it brought her face to the floor.

The room went black.