 Chapter seven

From his vantage point in the center of the Calabrese study, Nic watched Carla’s eyes roll back. *Oh, shit.* *She’s going down.* She hit the floor with a thud.

His gaze flicked from her to the pirate who’d just knocked her out with the butt of his gun. The thief wasn’t pointing his weapon at Carla or at him. He and his partner were on the move. They both bolted past Nic, sprinting out of the study door.

Nic stalled. Did he chase them or stay with Carla? She wasn’t bleeding from the head but she could have a concussion. She wasn’t moving. She could even be—

No question what he had to do. He holstered his gun and sprinted to her side. He dropped to a knee and grabbed her wrist.

Her pulse was strong.

He exhaled, feeling almost sick.

Blood tickled from the nick on her neck. Not life-threatening. He dropped his shoulders and took a deep breath. He felt for the bump on her head. That could be a problem. She still wasn’t conscious.

He gently jostled her. “Wake up.” If she didn’t, he was calling 911.  Screw the mission.

Carla’s eyes fluttered open. Her lips parted and a moan escaped, slow like thick molasses rolling out of a jar.

*Jesus*.  His center tightened.  She was hurt, and he might be the reason for it.

She blinked a couple of times. “What happened?”

 “He pistol whipped you. Bastard. I was going to go after him but—”

She struggled to pull herself up. “Did they take—?” Her arms wobbled underneath her.

“Here,” he helped her sit. “Lean back against the desk.”

“God, my head is throbbing.”

Too close of a call. Time for back up. And an ambulance. She needed a Cat scan. “I’m calling 911.”

 “No, no.” Carla struggled to her knees. “I’m fine.” She pushed herself into a standing position.

She looked pale, and he could tell she was shaking, but he admired her courage. “You’re not fine.” He wasn’t going to let her risk her safety. “You need to see a doctor.”

“No need to get the police involved.” She stumbled a few steps and leaned up against the wall where the safe sat open. “They didn’t take anything.” She gestured to the opening. “Look.”

He glanced into the safe. Stacks of money and a bag of jewels remained. Okay, but he thought one of the robbers had something under his arm. It had happened so fast. No. He knew the thieves took off with a silver box. His stomach knotted as the reality set it. Carla was lying to him. He sensed it. She’d never lied to him in all the years he’d known her. She’d never lied to anyone that he knew of. So, why lie now?  Nic had to know. Was Carla involved in criminal activity, too? If Marco had dragged her into his *enterprises*, Nic would kill him.

Carla pushed off the wall and weaved her way to the door of the study, looking around. “They probably went out the back door.”

They had a head start, but Nic could catch them if he took a short cut to the outside. Carla’s back was turned. Pressing against the wall near the painting he found a raised nodule. Pressing hard on it, he heard the click, and saw the line of light indicating the hidden door had been activated. He prayed it still opened and shut as quickly as he remembered.

If he was to catch the thieves he had to leave now. Carla seemed to be okay and Nic didn’t believe for one second the thieves left with nothing important. When he’d grabbed Carla’s wrist, her pulse had been rocking. Those men had taken something vital – so critical - Carla was scared and willing to lie about it.

Nic was determined to find out why. That information might be the only way he could protect her. He dashed out the door without looking back.