Chapter eight

Carla glanced out into the hallway outside her daddy’s study. No sign of the thieves. The party was still going full force. She put a hand over her heart*. Protect what’s in the safe, and it will protect the family. What the hell had Daddy meant by that?*

Her father had died in her arms before he could elaborate. Carla had lost it, falling apart when he had collapsed, concerned only about calling 911 and saving her daddy’s life. Now, she realized she should have checked the safe and its contents right after his death. But, she’d been so busy planning the party in his honor, and work finally offered her more of a chance to do live shots. Her heart fluttered, wings of anxiety causing her center to itch. She didn’t really want cops involved until she knew what her daddy had been hiding. *Protect the family and the family name. At all costs.*Vicente Calabrese’s moto. She would do as daddy had asked. No matter what the consequences.

The box was gone. She had to go after it. Despite the throbbing in her head making her vision a little wonky.

She glanced back. Just in time to see the secret door to the outside quietly start to close. Her body stalled. Her blood pressure dropped to her feet. The whole room got eerily quiet. *What the? I’m seeing things.*She rubbed the knot on the back of her head while scanning the room.The masked pirate who had saved her was nowhere to be seen. *Are you kidding me?* Her heart picked up speed again, realization washing over her like a shower of ice. Only a handful of people knew about the hidden doorway and even less knew how to access and open it. Their estate used to belong to an alleged mob boss and legend had it that he’d escape the constant FBI tail by going in and out through the secret door, which exited from daddy’s study to the back side of the house.

Carla used to use the same door to welcome Nic into the house without her father knowing. She used to sneak Nic upstairs and into her room, and when it was time for him to return to his house on the back of the property, he’d sneak back out the same way.

Pain pinched right under her lungs making it almost impossible to breathe.

*It can’t be Nic*.

*It has to be Nic.*

This realization hurt more than the butt of that thief’s gun.

She’d searched heaven and Earth for him right after he’d broken up with her. Sick, losing weight, depressed, she had pulled every string she’d had available, tapped every source in town, but he had been nowhere to be found. So, why on earth would he be back after all these years? And, why not tell her who he was?

Her father had just died.

Then, thieves stole something that mattered dearly to her dad. Something she’d promised to protect. Something that might be able to ruin her family.

And now, someone who knew about the secret exit was going after the thieves and the metal box. It had to be the man who walked out of her life and vanished with little explanation.

Another coincidence? *No way in hell.*

Maybe Nic was in on it? He could have been the inside tip the thieves had needed to pull this off. Nausea rippled up from her center, causing her to gag.

She stumbled towards the secret door, slipping through it just as it closed. She blinked at the harsh sunlight. The pain at the base of  her head shot to the front of her face, making her eyeballs throb.

She didn’t care. She’d fight through the pain. She would let Nic catch the pirates who stole Daddy’s box and then she’d corner the thief who had taken off with her heart years ago and find out why he was back.

But no matter what, she would not let him hurt her again.