Chapter three

Avoiding eye contact, Nic swept past Marco and Tony, not offering either one a handshake. He planted himself against the opposite wall of the Calabrese mansion entryway near a table of refreshments where he could watch and listen without looking suspicious.

He poured himself a glass of punch, scanning the room.Now that he’d found Marco, he would observe a little, see if he could pick up any information before he made his presence known. He didn’t want to create a scene. Not yet.As long as he kept his cool, he should have no problem staying undercover.

Tony was cheek kissing an attractive, well-groomed older woman who had just entered the house. The woman had beautiful gray hair, perfectly done, and she had a proud arch to her back. “You sure you okay, mom? Being here and all?”

*Ah, Sofia Vitali.* Tony’s mother. Still beautiful even though she had to be 60 something.

“Carla needs me here.” Sofia Vitali’s voice was both soft and commanding. Like she didn’t have to speak loudly to have her orders followed.

Nic had read about the sudden death of Mr. Vitali, Sofia’s husband, a couple of years ago. Sofia and her husband had been the Calabrese’s closest family friends.

“Take the Tiramisu to the kitchen, mom.”  Tony gently pushed her down the hall toward the kitchen. “Carla should be there. Let me know if she isn’t.”

Nic’s heart skipped a beat. He glanced down the hall but couldn’t see into the kitchen.

“She’ll be glad you made her favorite,” Tony said.

Tony’s mother glided gracefully down the hallway, as if she had clouds on her feet, not the weight of a family friend’s death on her shoulders.

Out of the corner of his eye, Nic noticed Tony tug at Marco’s upper arm. Again. Finally, Marco moved to the side of the staircase, away from the incoming guests.

Closer to Nic.

“I need to talk to you. It’s important,” Tony said.

Reading lips had been part of his FBI training. Tony’s thinned lips and balled fists made it easy for Nic to gage Tony’s irritation.

Marco whipped off the pirate hat. “I’m hosting a party in my father’s honor.” He tossed it onto an antique hallway table.

“Business can’t wait.” Tony planted a hand on Marco’s shoulder. “Your father knew that.”

Marco batted his hand away. “My father is no longer in charge. I am.”

*Interesting.* The two used to be thick as thieves. Equal in their arrogance and superiority. Now, Tony seemed to be Marco’s subordinate.

Tony took a step back. “The delivery will be in on Friday.”

Nic held his breath and inched forward.

 Marco nodded, rubbing his chin with one hand. “Leaving Miami when?”

Nic’s pulse picked up speed. Now this is exactly the kind of intel he’d had been hoping to gather.

“Thursday night. Late.”

Nic made a mental note of Tony’s reply.

Both of Marco’s hands landed on his hips. “I’m going down to check out the operation.”

Tony’s shoulders dropped. “You’ve never wanted to come *check out* *the operation* before.”

“I’ve never been running things before.” Marco folded his arms across his chest.

Nic took a small sip of the punch, wishing the buzz of other conversations would dull so he could focus better on this one better. He took a step closer.

“You don’t trust me anymore? Now that you’re *in charge*?”

Nic digested the strain between the two. What could this mean? The two had grown up best friends, their families operating two legal businesses that went hand in hand. The Calabrese’s owned a number of successful car dealerships in Tampa Bay, and the Vitali’s owned a trucking business that hauled new cars from the Miami and Tampa ports to different cities around Florida. The Vitali’s also owned a series of distribution warehouses where cars were stored and then shipped to car dealers. One of their biggest warehouses was in the central part of Tampa. Industrial area. He’d done his research. But, the way Tony was now fisting and un-fisting his hands told Nic this conversation wasn’t about a normal shipment of *vehicles*.

“I trust you. We’re like brothers.” Marco flipped his pirate hat back on, probably an indication this conversation was ending.  “I’m still checking out the warehouse and distribution center this run.”

*This run.* Businessmen *hauled* cars. Criminals *ran* drugs. Nic left the table and walked back toward the foyer. Walking past both men, Nic could actually feel the bad energy circling around them. He blended into the crowd of people at the front of the staircase, but kept close enough to continue to read their lips.

Tony grumbled something Nic couldn’t quite make out. Then, he said, “Where is Carla? I’ve been calling her. She’s not picking up her phone.”

“Maybe my sister doesn’t want you stalking her.” Marco turned his back on Tony and started greeting guests again.

Tony shot Marco a look that carried bullets. “*Stalking*her?” Again, Tony put a hand on Marco, forcing him to turn back. “She’s going to be my wife.”

Nic’s knees buckled, but he steadied himself with a hand on the staircase handrail. *Carla is marrying Tony? Stop. What she does is no longer your business.*But his heart literally hurt, like Tony’s hands were squeezing it.

 “Wife? Tony, Tony, Tony, you know I don’t want to get married any time soon.”

The muscles in Nic’s back tightened. Carla’s distinctive, raspy voice sucked the breath right out of him. He literally stopped taking in oxygen. *Don’t turn. Don’t even look at her. Don’t*… He turned and looked up the staircase.

His eyes popped wide, and his stomach turned circles. He couldn’t breathe. He was sixteen again.

The woman who had made him feel passion for the first time, who had made his insides rush, the woman who had seduced him out of his virginity, making him fall in love with her unconditionally, was gliding down the stairs, long, black hair cascading over her right shoulder, a sincere smile on her still beautiful face. A modern-day Scarlett O’Hara, with just as much gumption. That was written all over her proud features and in the tilt of her head.

She was still thin, but with new curves he didn’t recognize. She was rocking a tight red wrap dress. Her eyes looked enhanced with makeup she never used to wear, but the eyeliner made her blue eyes pop. Carla no longer looked like his teenage lover. Carla Calabrese had grown up to be the kind of woman that stopped conversations when she entered the room.

A shiver of anticipation flickered through him. Like a flame. He took a step forward, falling out of his undercover character and diving head-first back into his past. All he could think about was touching Carla, running his fingers through that hair, just like he used to do late at night while she’d slept in his arms. When no one in the world was watching.

“I’m a career woman.” Carla looked down at Marco and Tony, not even glancing Nic’s way. “And today, I’m working. That’s why I’m not answering my phone.” She ran a hand over her dress and then through her hair.

Even though she already looked perfect.

“I’m nervous.” She licked her lips. “So please, don’t distract me today, okay?” She blinked in quick succession. “This means a lot to me.”

The Carla Nic remembered had always been on a mission. But she used to be more confident. More flirty. Why were her hands shaking? Or was that his imagination?

“I was just concerned about you.” Tony’s cheeks reddened. “Mama is, too. She’s in the kitchen. You need to go see her.”

Carla shook her head. “Not right now, Tony.”

“Carla,” Tony said.

Nic didn’t like his tone.

She lifted a hand like a stop sign. “You are not my daddy. You are not my boss. And, you are not my husband.”

“Not yet.” Tony looked so hopeful, staring up at Carla from the bottom of the stairs, a big shit-eating grin on his too-good looking face.

Made Nic sick.

Carla gave her hair a flip, a habit she had yet to outgrow, but Nic caught the flicker of real nervousness in her eyes as her gaze darted around the foyer. Looking for what?

Nic’s gaze followed hers.

“I will always worry about what you do.” Tony started to climb the stairs at a pace Nic thought was somewhat threatening.

What the hell was Tony going to do? But there was no way Nic could interfere at this point without calling attention to himself.

“Down boy.” Marco walked up to the base of the stairs. “Stop panting around my sister. Let’s go find the mayor.”

Tony kept making his way up the stairs.

Carla hesitated, punching a hand to her hip. “Listen to Marco.” Carla brushed past Tony with a body spin.  “I’ve got to keep my head in the game today.” She looked so determined, her feet pounding each step. “Doing a live shot today. I can’t mess it up or I’ll never get another chance.”

Tony stopped, turned, and followed her back down the stairs. “You don’t even need to work." He looked like a child who couldn’t get his way.

Carla hesitated, her gaze raking the foyer. “I’ve got to find George.” Her gaze accidentally met Nic’s.

*Shit!* Nic sucked in a deep breath.

She stalled on the steps, her smile fading, her hand covering her heart.

Nic’s pulse drilled through his head like a jackhammer. Did Carla recognize him, despite his disguise? He took a step back, trying to get behind a woman. *Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.*Why did he let himself get distracted so easily when it came to her?

“Are you okay?” Tony was at Carla’s side.

“Oh my God.” Carla took a step forward, her gaze never leaving Nic’s. *Big mistake.* The foot she put down missed the next step.

Carla stumbled forward trying to catch herself by reaching for the railing, but her hand missed its mark.

Nic knew he had less than a second to run up the stairs and catch her. Or, watch her fall and probably hurt herself. He bolted up the stairs.

Tony reached for her at the same time, but Carla’s forward momentum propelled her out of Tony’s reach. Her feet tap-danced for control, but her body flew forward - full force into Nic.

The momentum knocked him backwards. He grabbed onto the wooden railing and anchored himself. He threw his other arm around her waist. Gripping the banister, he used his upper body strength to stop their fall. His foot on the next step braced him.

Her arms encircled his neck and her soft, sweet-smelling hair swooshed forward. S*he smells like Gardenias. Just like she used to.* Her scent aroused Nic instantly.

Without thinking he pulled her up and into him, closer than appropriate, sliding his hand down to the top of her backside. Like he used to. They still fit like two pieces of a puzzle. Except for her new womanly curves. *Good God.*He closed his eyes, sank his nose into her hair, and inhaled, knowing what he was doing was risky. He was crossing the line but he couldn’t help himself.

Carla relaxed into his embrace.

He exhaled too.

But then she froze.

Maybe she recognized him? No, she couldn’t. It had been twelve years.

“What the hell?” Tony pushed between them, dislodging their two bodies. “Are you okay, Carla?”

Carla jumped back. But she wasn’t smacking Nic or calling him out for the way he’d held her inappropriately. Then, she looked up at him, blue eyes under long lashes, her gaze full of questions. “Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

“Always, il mio amore.” He automatically responded with the endearment he used to use. That she would remember. *Shit!* Nic checked his mask. It was still safely in place. She wasn’t reacting. Maybe, maybe she’d forgotten. That would be the best thing. For right now.

He had no idea what Tony or Marco would do if either recognized him. Tony would probably want to kick his ass for putting his hands on Carla. That he didn’t need right now.

And, he had left on bad terms, ordered to never return to the Calabrese estate, or face the most serious of consequences.

He couldn’t ruin the investigation before it even began, so he gave a little bow, told Carla he was glad she was okay and quickly slipped back into the party crowd.

But he knew this reunion wasn’t over.  After touching her, after the way his body still responded to hers, after the way she relaxed into him, he knew he had to get her alone. He had to know if she still longed for him. He had to tell her the truth about what happened a decade ago. He had to tell her what he was doing now. He had to protect her.

No matter what the cost.