Chapter four

Carla Calabrese knew she was in trouble the second her foot missed the step. She grabbed for the railing on the grand staircase but missed. Her heart tripled flipped. Her right foot landed on the step below, but slid. Clenching her stomach muscles, she fought to stay upright and avoid tumbling down the stairs in front of her guests. Just what she feared most, looking like a fool in public. She’d miss her live shot because she was a clutz. *How embarrassing*.

Flailing her arms wasn’t helping. She plunged forward. The man from below came rushing into her line of sight. Her body smacked into his. His tall frame stopped her fall.

 He grabbed her around her waist.

Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around his neck, almost bumping her head into his. Her hair flew forward, blinding him, she was sure.

The impact hurt, sending a tingling sensation through her chest.

He took a step back.

She felt him use his core to brace himself. It worked. She was no longer falling down the stairs.

An awkward pause.

Then the stranger moved in, his face getting lost in her hair.

In that one brief instant, the energy changed. The moment turned from impersonal, an unknown hero coming to her rescue, to something so intimate it caused the hair on Carla’s neck to rise. She should be pulling away. Asking him what the hell he was doing? But the way he pulled her into him touched off a memory. A memory she’d buried deep. Her first love used to hold her like this - like they were the last two pieces of a complicated puzzle. He used to rest his hand right on the top of her bottom, just as this man was.

No one had done it quite the same since*.*

It was this kind of familiarity that caused her to stumble in the first place. She’d locked eyes with the man, and even from behind a mask, those blue eyes seemed to recognize her. The way the stranger had then devoured her with his gaze, watching her with such focus and intensity, it reminded her of the way Nic used to look at her.

This man even smelled like Nic, all male with a hint of outdoors on his skin. Nic had always been outdoors.

She relaxed into the man’s hold, closing her eyes and fantasizing for one second that this might be the love who walked out on her without any explanation. That he’d come back to say, “I’m sorry.” Maybe, “I still love you.”

But when the mystery man pulled her even tighter, she froze. *Can he feel it? Would it matter?*

She’d only told a select few people about her recent surgery for breast cancer. She was still way to sensitive about the changes to her body. Ashamed the cancer had gotten her at such a young age. Like they’d think she’d done something wrong to bring it on.

“What the hell?” Tony pulled the man’s arm from around her waist and tugged her away, stepping in between them. “Are you okay, Carla?”

“Yes, yes, I am.” She was physically fine, not hurting from the surgery anymore. Now, she was just embarrassed about losing control, and scared someone would finally get close enough to know her secret. And if she was honest with herself, she was a little pissed off that Tony was still telling her what to do. “I’m just a little nervous about this party for Daddy and pulling off a live shot today.” *And, you keep pressuring me about marriage.* “When I saw you,” she said, directing her attention to the man who caught her. “You reminded me of someone. Have we met?” Surely if it was Nic, he would tell her. She covered her heart, breathless, hanging on the anticipation of what he’d say next.

“Always, il mio amore.”

Her mouth dropped open. Only one person had ever said that to her. She couldn’t breathe.

“There you are.”

Carla jumped when she heard George’s big voice booming from the bottom of the stairs. “Sorry. Sorry.” She pulled back and threw her hands up in surrender. “I was on my way to get you when—”

“Look,” George interrupted, “you got less than twenty minutes until your live shot.”

The edge to his voice told her he felt like a babysitter. And he was yelling up at her in front of her guests. Heat slapped both cheeks.

“I’ve gotta set up. Now.” he said.

“Right, Right.” Carla ran a hand over her hair as she pushed past Tony and her rescuer and raced down the stairs toward the cameraman.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” the man called after her.

She didn’t look back, afraid she couldn’t trust her footing on the stairs. Lord, is this what being a reporter on deadline was like? She couldn’t even catch her breath.

“Where you want me to set up the equipment?” George was actually tapping his foot at her. Why did all the men in her life treat her like this? Like she should just march to their orders? Just do what they said. When they said it. “I’m thinking, outside.” She’d lead him to the area she’d already picked out and then –

“Okay,” George interrupted again, “but you’re takin’ a chance going live in the middle of all the drunk crazies.”

She sighed. Isn’t that what the producer has asked for? All the drunken pirate revelry? What was George’s deal today? “There’s a platform I had setup out front so we’ll be elevated and the *drunk crazies* can’t get to us.” She still needed to touch up her make-up and prepare what she would say live.

She took a deep breath. Didn’t calm her racing heart. She was getting light headed. She still hadn’t eaten anything. Why had she agreed to do this today?  She might not ever get another opportunity and she knew it. And because Daddy might be watching from heaven. She stopped and glanced at her father’s portrait in the entry way. Her being on TV would have made him so proud. She could see the smile on his face in her mind. Heard him brag to his friends.

“Earth to Carla!” George gestured toward the door like a crossing guard on cocaine. “Show me this platform.”

He could find it himself.

“Carla, I need you for a minute,” Marco said.

*Great.* What did her brother want? “I’m busy.” Her legs still felt like boiled noodles from her almost-fall.

“The Mayor is here.” Marco was frowning.

Her brother never smiled or joked anymore. Not since Daddy’s death. “The mayor is always here.” A knot was forming in the center of her chest. Could this day get any more stressful?

“I’ll handle the mayor.” A hand lightly touched her upper back. “You take care of your business.” Tony was always one step behind her. Which usually annoyed her, but today she was glad for his interruption. He kissed the top of her head and then put his arm around Marco’s shoulder, leading her brother toward the front door. “And *we*need to finish talking about our business,” Tony said.

“After we talk to the Mayor.” Marco brushed Tony’s arm off his shoulder. “You know how important that connection is.”

“Yo, you coming, or what?” George’s cheeks looked flushed. “Sam’s already outside waiting. She’s here on her day off, you know.”

*Babysitting me, too. Way to make me feel guilty*. “I’m sorry. Let’s go. Wait.” Carla turned to thank the stranger who had caught her. “I’m sorry. I’m just very busy…”

Apparently so was her hero.

The masked pirate, who had saved her from a very humiliating fall, had vanished.

No time to look for him. She had a live shot to do. She wasn’t going to fail and prove her brother and Tony right.