Chapter two

Nic took in the immaculately landscaped yard leading up to the Mediterranean-style mansion. Giant sabal palms lined the walkway. *Those cost a boatload*. A pathway of expensive pavers hadn’t been there before. *Business must be good*. Marco Calabrese wasn’t suffering.  *Not yet.*

Crime could be wrapped in such a pretty package. But he was determined to rip the cover off this perfect picture and expose the truth. And see Marco punished.

Even if he had to dress as a masked pirate to do it.  He itched his left leg. Men actually *wanted*to wear these costumes? The damn long-sleeved shirt had him hot and sweaty and the mask kept pinching the skin right under his eyes.

He’d grown into a jeans and boots kind of guy. Simple. Easy.

But the costumes did make Gasparilla the perfect day to step cautiously back into his former world. Heroin was making a comeback in Tampa, and his FBI superiors believed The Calabrese’s were the mastermind’s behind the network transporting and distributing drugs throughout Florida and across state lines.

Nic narrowed his eyes, scanning the party walk ups for faces he recognized. First, he had to find Marco. Then he’d decide if he would just observe first or go ahead and make contact. Marco shouldn’t be hard to locate. This was *his* party now.

A lanky man, dressed in black, thigh-high boots and a red and black feathered hat, brushed past Nic. *Looks familiar.*

“Vicente was an odd son of a bitch,” the man said. He was talking to a scantily dressed woman, who had to be at least twenty years his junior. “Wanting a party instead of a funeral.” The man had his face painted with a fake, blood-crusted scar across one cheek.  Sweat had left tracks in makeup already smudged in the sun’s heat. “Who does that?”

The woman, in fishnet stockings and expensive looking high heels, shrugged. “Vicente was famous for these Gasparilla parties. Hard to get into. Been trying for years. Thanks for the invite.” The young girl tripped over Nic’s foot as they rushed by, almost spilling the contents of her red solo cup. “Sorry.” She looked back, but her bloodshot eyes didn’t really focus on Nic.

“Well, Tampa has lost a legend, that’s for sure.” The older man slurred.

*Or, maybe a criminal mastermind.*Nic swallowed. Could he really do this? Vicente used to be the only father figure he had. He balled his fists, his throat dry as a December day.

“Where did Carla want us to set up?”

Those words stopped Nic mid-step, right in the middle of the paved pathway. He held his breath, glancing right and then left. When he didn’t see Carla, he exhaled.

A skinny news photographer with red, curly Ronald McDonald hair blew past Nic. A woman, dressed in a business suit and flats shoes followed behind. “I don’t know, George,” the young woman said. “Carla said to text her when we got here. I know she’s nervous. Maybe that’s why she isn’t answering.”

Nic picked up his pace, falling into step behind the reporter and photographer. He’d learned all about blending in and listening while at the FBI academy. While he didn’t want to run into Carla yet, and see the hurt he’d surely find in her eyes, he had to admit he was curious about her life now.

“Why the hell does Carla want to do a live shot today, anyway?” The photographer moved at a fast past. “Her father just bit it.”

“Bit it?” The reporter put up a hand. “That’s so wrong. Carla told me she was doing this to honor her father’s memory.”

Nic swallowed, trying to clear the lump in his throat. Vicente had loved anything done *in his honor*.

“You shitting me, Sam?” The photographer stopped in the walkway, screeching to a halt so unexpectedly Nic had to spin around him in order to avoid a collision. “She’s doing this because she wants to be on TV. Carla Calabrese is just another pretty reporter wanna-be who thinks she’s good enough to do your job."

*Ouch.* Nic’s gut rocked. He knew all about being underestimated. He had to keep walking or risk drawing attention to himself.

“Carla’s the real deal.” The reporter power-walked by Nic, nodding at him.

Nic nodded back.

“She helped the station on that vaccine story Rachel broke, remember?”

It only took the tall guy two steps to catch up. “Carla got this job thanks to her rich daddy who buys lots of car ads on our TV station. Now she’ll probably get promoted thanks to her daddy’s death. Would hate to see those checks stop.”

The reporter shook her head and rolled her eyes. “So cynical.” She dialed her Smartphone. Then her shoulders dropped, and she held the phone out. “Voice mail again.”

This time the cameraman rolled his eyes. “If we’re not set up in time, it’s on Carla. Your girl is about to find out reporting live on TV is not as easy as it looks.”

Nic’s heart swelled with pride, despite his best intentions to control all emotions today. Maybe he could stay and see Carla accomplish one of the dreams she’d shared with him when she was only fifteen. Back when she would sneak out of the main house and hide with him behind the maid’s quarters, roasting marshmallows over the open fire pit he’d built for them. Back when they both shared dreams of what they’d do when they could escape their respective prisons. His - a one bedroom holding cell guarded by a beat down, angry mother. Hers - a mansion run by controlling men who always called all the shots

“You going in, or what?”

The voice from behind lifted the hair all over Nic’s body. *Tony Vitali.*Marco’s best friend. “Yes.” The door *was* wide open. Here he was just standing in it like a damn fool. Reminiscing. *Shit*. He had to be more careful. “I was admiring the work done in the foyer.” The grand staircase leading down from the second floor had been redone in dark wood that had to have cost more than his yearly salary.

“Yeah,” Tony said “Before he died Vicente had the wood brought in from Italy. The best shit money can buy.”

Nic cringed. Tony still sounded like a Jersey boy dumped on Bayshore by accident. Apparently, Tony’s blue blood and expensive private school upbringing had done little to polish him.

“No one had taste like Vincente,” Tony said.

“When it came to material things, yes.” *But, not when it came to the character of men.* Nic felt the heat of Tony’s stare on the back of his head. He clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth, determined not to say more. Even though he had a mask on, he didn’t want to risk Tony recognizing him. Not yet. The investigation would be compromised before it began. “Excuse me.” Without looking back, Nic stepped into the entryway.

Tony sidestepped Nic, shoving him out of the way as if he didn’t even matter.

He froze, anger erupting in little explosions of heat all over his skin. But he swallowed his response. *Be patient. You will get your payback. All in good time.*

Tony headed to the bottom of the staircase where Marco Calabrese stood greeting guests.

Nic’s heart beat so loudly he wanted to press a hand against his chest to stop it. He inhaled deeply, exhaled and repeated the practice a few times. He had to control the cortisol dumping into his system and silently observe. Marco was taller and beefier than Nic remembered. He was wearing the pirate costume his father had worn every year at their Gasparilla party, a long, black jacket trimmed in gold, black loose pants, and tall black boots. But it was Vicente’s distinctive black and gold-trimmed pirate hat, and his gold eye patch, that set the outfit apart.

So, Marco was making it clear to everyone who walked through the door today that *he* was taking over for his father. Stepping into Vicente’s boots, so to speak. Just as Nic had suspected.

Marco offered a strong handshake to the men who greeted him, a lingering kiss on both cheeks for the women who followed. Like he was the king of this party. Like he was the King of Tampa Bay.

         Nic moved to the side of the doorway, out of the way of incoming guests.

Tony tried to pull Marco away from an attractive older woman.

Marco jerked out of Tony’s hold, not even giving Tony a glance, and went back to his conversation.

Hate rushed up into Nic’s throat, the acidic taste so strong he wanted to gag. Neither of those arrogant narcissists had changed.

*But he had.*

Vicente used to tell Marco and Tony that he had the power to give and the power to take away.

*Now, I have that power too.*

*Better to observe a little longer.*