

CHAPTER TWO



Daisy hugs me tightly. “Liberty Garcia, what’s happened to you? You look a mess.” Daisy is a powerful woman. Small, with straight auburn hair, and lots of determination. She cares about those she loves.

“Isabella’s on the phone. She wants to make sure you got here okay. Go ahead. Talk to her.”

Daisy turns to Bruce. “Bruce, take Liberty’s luggage upstairs to the front bedroom on the left.”

Bruce lifts the backpack and his biceps bulge. The surprise on his face is priceless. What will he think when he finds out the weight is gold bars and doubloons?

I pick up the landline to talk to my friend and Daisy’s assistant. “Isabella, I made it all right. Can you let Uncle Carlos know?”

Isabella hesitates. “Liberty, I don’t know how to tell you this, but someone shot Uncle Carlos the night you left.”

My knees buckle, and I grab the kitchen island. “No,” I say, shaking my head. “This cannot happen. Not Uncle Carlos. Is he alive?”

“Yes, he is lucky. It’s been on all the news here in Miami.

The national networks picked it up. Didn't you watch the news when you rested for the night?"

"No, I went straight to bed. Too tired to watch anything. What can I do?" I put my hand to my mouth.

"I'll send you an update tomorrow." Isabella sobs. "I have to go now." She ends the call, and I look at the phone in my hand for a second before putting it down.

Harry stands by Daisy, his hand resting gently on her shoulder.

"What happened?" Daisy's eyes fill with concern. "What did Isabella say?"

"Uncle Carlos has been shot," I wrap my arms around my waist. "I feel so helpless." A chill runs through my body, and I shake. Tears run down my cheeks.

"Follow me." Daisy motions to Grace and Harry.

Bruce's gentle tone breaks through the sobbing. "We need to get you upstairs. You're in shock. Let me help you." He puts his strong arm around my waist and holds on tight, almost carrying me up the stairs and to the guest room.

He helps me sit on the bed as Daisy eases down beside me and pulls a blanket over my shoulders. Harry stands behind Daisy. Grace leans against the door. Bruce steps back and waits just outside the door, ever vigilant. Why so much protection?

This cannot be happening. I remember hearing something like a gunshot when I drove away. Uncle Carlos shut my car door, and my loud cries deafened any noise. When did it happen?

I shiver as Daisy pulls the bed linens back and helps me get my feet under the covers. She tucks the blankets around my body.

A cell phone rings. Bruce yanks the device from his pocket and leaves the room. When he returns, he aims his attention at me. "Matt called. A strange man at the restaurant asked questions about you. Matt sent him on a wild goose chase to Bristol.

You're safe for now. He's bringing your car over, and I called security at the gate to let him in."

"Thanks." Daisy swallows hard, and I can tell she's concerned. "Can you tell Eric to take Matt back to the restaurant? We all need to hear Liberty's story." She takes my hand. "Now, want to tell us what happened?"

All the events tumble in my mind. I know I must tell someone, but does it matter now?

I scoot to the head of the bed and Daisy places several pillows behind my back. I pull the blanket up to my shoulders and sigh.

"Comfy?" she asks.

I nod and swallow a big lump in my throat. Daisy reminds me of my mama's snuggles after a scary dream.

I take a deep breath and let the air out slowly.

"I'm a creature of habit, and each night my clothes are laid out for the next day with my phone and purse. When Uncle Carlos suggested I pack a bag with several gold doubloons and leave it in the safe room, I did.

"I knew when someone banged on my door at 3:30 in the morning and yelled, I needed to go to the safe room. I grabbed my clothes and headed for the closet. I placed my toe on the exact spot on the closet floor, the door silently glided open, and I slid through the space, locking the door behind me.

"Uncle Carlos had told me if something like this ever happened, I should call him and let the phone ring three times. That would be the signal I needed help. I called him and quickly changed my clothes.

"My papa and Uncle Carlos built a large vault for the doubloons and other treasures in our house. Most were too large to put in a bank safety deposit box. They'd built an exit hatch, which I unlocked and opened. When I climbed into the tunnel, I closed the covering behind me, locking it in place. Then I began

crawling through the tunnel to meet Uncle Carlos at the other opening.”

I close my eyes and shiver. “I hate crawly things, and I prayed none was in the tunnel with me.”

The thoughts of that night make my stomach roil. Is that the last time I’ll see Uncle Carlos? Isabella didn’t say he was dead. She said he’d been shot. Either way, it’s tragic. I sob, and my body shakes at the thought of losing him.

“Take your time,” Daisy says softly. “I know this is hard on you.”

After several minutes and a glass of water, I calm enough to finish telling them the events of my trip from Florida to Tennessee.

“Uncle Carlos had marked a map for me and given me an itinerary. He had places for me to spend the night and even a place in Nashville where I could trade in the car for the one I have now. That’s how I got rid of the Florida license tag.

“I followed Interstate 81 and got off in Abingdon. Do you think the person following me knew I’d come to Shady Valley?”

I look at the group of people standing in the room. “This is horrible. Why did someone try to kill Uncle Carlos?”

“My guess is for what you’re carrying.” Harry rakes his hand down his handsome face. “Do you know who is following you?”

“Not really. When my father died, I searched his files for the employment records of anyone I thought might’ve killed him. The police still haven’t found Papa’s murderer. Uncle Carlos told me about the last employee they hired—his records were not in the file. I looked everywhere. The police think he came into the house after he killed Papa and stole his own employment records. I assume so he’d not be traced.

“My father kept detailed records. He kept records electronically and a paper file. Papers were moved around on his desk the night he died. His desk was always neat and organized.

DEATH BY DOUBLOONS

There were no fingerprints in his office or at the murder scene on the boat. I know because the police did a sweep on both.”

“Did you check his computer records?” Harry put his hands on his hips.

“Yes, I did. The records for Adam Dunnigan were gone. He was the last person Papa and Uncle Carlos hired.”

Daisy touches my arm. “Your papa’s been dead for what, two years? Why did it take someone this long to try to get the doubloons?” She tucks a light auburn strand of hair behind her ear.

“I wish I knew. No one has bothered us since Papa’s murder. Now, I’m pretty sure the murderer is after the doubloons.”

“Why do you think that?” Harry moves to the foot of the bed.

“Uncle Carlos told me the last hire had insisted he receive a third of the treasure, even though he only worked two weeks. His contract stated he would be paid a certain amount of money, but no treasure.” I reach for a tissue. I haven’t thought about this since my father’s death.

Grace quietly leaves the room and returns with a cup of tea, setting it on the table next to the bed. “Drink this, Liberty. It will calm you. You’re safe here with us. Bruce and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Thank you.” I pick up the warm cup, enjoying the heat on my cold fingers, then down the cup of tea.

Grace holds out her hand for the empty cup. “Let’s get this all sorted out tomorrow.”

“Good. I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

Daisy shoos everyone out except Grace. They help me get dressed for bed. By then, my eyes have become very heavy. I can’t keep them open.

“Sleep well. We’ll talk more in the morning.” Daisy pats me on the shoulder and pulls the coverlet over me like I’m a little girl.