

The Heist



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Dedication

Two very special people have inspired and assisted with the creation of this story. The first is my God-daughter whose namesake is the heroine.

Kara - You will achieve anything you set your mind too. Don't lose your determination, tenacity and drive to success! Love your fairy Godmother.

And my editor Louise. Your knowledge and wonderful manner has helped bring this story to what it is. I can never thank you enough for your assistance and patience. Thank you!

To my readers – thank you and I hope you enjoy The Heist.

Chapter One

"Shit!" Kara froze on the spot. She squatted, wide-eyed, on the ground as reality sunk in. She'd set off the damn alarm. It was hard for her to swallow past the lump in her throat. "Dammit!" she swore again, anger welling inside at her stupid blunder. The voice in her head screamed for her to move as she pulled her sweaty hand back fast and scrambled to her feet.

She pushed her long dark hair out of her eyes as she snatched her black bag and set off running. When an ear-piercing scream sounded from the alarm she looked along the corridor, pushing her slight teenage body to run as fast as she could.

She'd done the one thing her father had told her to avoid. He would be furious and yell at her for activating the alarm. His voice rang out in her ears: *Don't set off the alarm. You do...and you're stuffed.* All she wanted to do was get to him and explain.

There was more security in the place than they had anticipated. Kara estimated she had ten seconds to get through the corridor before the doors went into lockdown mode and trap her inside. Visions of the red beam that flashed up as her fingers inched towards the jewel ran through her head.

As she slung the bag over her shoulder, her father's words sang in her head. *If an alarm ever goes off, we have to separate. Don't come looking for me, coz I won't be there. You have to find your own way back to the house. Don't come looking for me. You activate it – you deal with it. It will be a test for you to outrun them.*

A harsh lesson but he thought it was fair. It was always his way or no way at all. Kara was merely a runner, but nevertheless she enjoyed it. It gave her a buzz although right now she couldn't believe she had stuffed up the job. She cursed herself more as she jumped on the ladder, hoping to land her feet on a rung.

Her sweaty hands slipped. She was going so fast her feet barely had time to push her forward as she clambered to the top. Her heart raced as the alarm rose another octave. She fought not to clamp her hands over her ears to block out the incessant screech of the alarm. Her head pounded with the noise.

She knew where she had to go. Get to the top of the ladder, run along another corridor, leave via the fire exit and then run across the rooftop to make it to the next building. It seemed a simple enough task, but not when you were running as fast as you can, carrying a bag full of jewels. It didn't help any knowing the place was moments away from being swarmed with security.

Kara sucked air into her lungs fast as she continued to climb. Just as she placed a foot from the ladder's top rung to the cement floor, she heard someone yelling through the alarm.

"Freeze!" a male voice called and she came to a grinding halt. Her shoulders rose and fell as she continued to breathe hard. She slowly moved and looked over her shoulder. "I said freeze. Now don't think about doing anything stupid, just climb on back down here. Nice and slow," the man said.

She could see the gun pointed at her. She recognized the uniform. Security. He was short and podgy like a real cop though. She knew her time was almost up if she wanted to make a half decent escape. She took another slow glance over her shoulder.

"Alright. I'm coming down," she called. "But this bag is really heavy. I'm going to

have to put it up here so I can get back down again."

"Christ. You sound like a kid. How old are you?" he called, readjusting his line of sight.

"I'm sixteen."

"Sixteen! A sixteen-year-old robbing the most secure gallery in this state...you gotta be kidding me!" The security guard lowered his gun. "Well come on now. Come on down. Nice and slow."

Kara looked over her shoulder for the third time as she clenched her fingers on the ladder. She watched him lower his gun to his holster.

Stupid man. Even at her age she knew that if she were ever to be in the same situation with the positions reversed, there would be no way she would ever lower a gun on a criminal.

"Alright. You got me. You're clearly too good for me...I'm coming down," she called as she pushed with all her strength to get her up and over onto the ledge. She would be out of shot if she got to that ledge and she had to be quick about it. The stupid security guard had cost her enough time. Her legs reached for the ledge. Sounds of him yelling at her to stop echoed behind her as she took off along the next long corridor.

Upon hearing the crack of his gun she threw herself up against the wall, hugging it as she tried to focus on the corridor towards the heavy fire escape door. Bullets made popping noises as they pierced the air conditioning ducts above her head and she flinched at each shot fired.

Her arms matched her long stride as she pushed herself to run as fast as she could. By the time Kara pushed against the heavy door, the security guard had made it to the top of the ladder. He'd fired his gun again in her direction but didn't take time to perfect his aim. Small pieces of plaster flew from where the bullet hit. She listened to him yelling at her as she cleared the door and made it to the rooftop, looking to her left and then her right.

She wished someone would turn off the damned alarm; it was breaking her concentration. As she ran across the rooftop, she knew the stupid, fat security guard would be following her. For a fat guy he sure could move. He must have scaled that ladder thinking they were giving away free coffee and donuts.

She turned her attention to the neighboring building and wriggled free from her backpack. She reefed on the cord to get it open and pulled her crossbow free. Using both her hands to position the arrow, she smiled grimly. She'd fashioned the cord herself. Attached to the end of the cord was a claw. Lifting her knee up, she brought her heel down, hard, to push the three-pronged claw into the wall, anchoring it securely. Then she lowered herself to one knee and steadied her aim. This was her one and only shot and she definitely didn't want to cock it up.

She looked down the crossbow and lined the point of the arrow to her mark; the brick wall on the neighboring rooftop. Kara exhaled quickly and pulled on the trigger. The kickback knocked her feet out from under her and brought her butt to the rooftop. She scrambled to see the arrow break into the strong wall before she grabbed her bag and threw it over her shoulders, pulling hard on the shoulder straps to make it sit snug against her back. Sounds of the security guard's shoes slapping against the smooth floor reached her ears and she quickly glanced back to the door. She grabbed hold of the cross bow and took a deep breath before she pushed off running. Everything rushed by so quickly.

The gravel on the rooftop crunched under her feet. She could make the jump easily; she'd done them many times before. It had become one of her favorite aspects of being a thief. The rush. The rush she got from running and jumping to make her escape after a successful heist. Only this would become her first failed heist.

It felt like someone had knocked the wind out of her as realization set in. She kept herself running as her thoughts returned to the security guard. Nearing the edge of the building, she focused on where she was going to place her foot for the take off. She followed the cord as she ran and held on tight. There wasn't enough time to wipe the sweat from her hands. She knew the jump was risky, but it was her only option.

Prior to the robbery, Kara and her father had surveyed the area for security, access and where they could be the safest. She'd marked where she could place her foot but the loose gravel caused her to slip as she drew closer to the edge. Sounds of the hinges on the heavy, fire exit door as it opened grated on her nerves. New resolve washed over her, her line of sight glued to the mark. There was no other option—she had to make it.

Only a meter away from her take-off point, she heard the security guard yell at her again. She didn't stop. Didn't look back. The only thing she heard was, 'I'll shoot', and the click of the hammer in the gun.

Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion as she pushed herself to keep running. Kara's head lashed back and she released a scream that matched the alarm as the bullet pierced her skin. Her hands dropped to her thigh as she skidded on the gravel. She couldn't stop the momentum. Her leg fell dead behind her. She put her hands out to try and save the gravel from scraping her face. Skin from her hands, arms and body peeled away as she skidded to a stop. The air in her lungs punched out as she hit the rooftop hard. She gasped for breath as her brain registered the pain searing through her body. Everything went silent. She thought she was going to pass out.

Fear gave her the strength to move. She feared what would happen to her if she moved, but more if she stayed. Rolling onto her back in agony, Kara slowly lifted her hands. They were red raw. Hands, wrists and forearms were covered in blood.

She fought to fill her lungs with air again as she slowly lowered her hands to her leg. She tried to sit up but could only manage to curl on her side. Bile rose to the back of her throat as her body went into shock. Her hand shook as she strained to look at the bloody hole in her thigh. She could see the wound through her trouser leg. Through her tears and screams, the security guard kept his gun pointed at her. He moved towards her with a sideways gait. Something inside her willed her to get up. She winced in pain as she slowly got to her feet. She staggered and teetered on the spot as she placed a trembling hand over her gunshot wound.

She looked at the security guard. His face was pale.

"Am I your first?" Kara took her hand away from the wound. It hurt to have her hand there but it hurt just as much not having it there.

The security guard slowly nodded. Her breath rasped as her lungs pounded. Pain pulsed through her leg. Her hair was sweaty and stuck to her face. Her arms stung from the grime, blood and the fact that most of her skin was shaven away.

"Don't make me shoot you again." The guard kept his gun aimed at her, albeit not very steadily. Kara continued to hop on the spot as fiery sparks of pain shot throughout her body.

She winced even more when she touched the wound. Tears continued to make their way through her squinted eyes and marked her skin as she looked at the wound. Her hand danced gingerly above the wound as she tried to see where the bullet came out. The pain was too much to bear. She gasped through clenched teeth as the security guard stepped closer. "For a pretty young thing you sure are stupid. Don't try to get away again, all right? Just stay here and I won't have to shoot you again," he said as he sidestepped closer.

"I can't go anywhere. Look at me!" A trickle of blood dripped from her fingertips but all she could think about was her father. He would have left the meeting point by now. She was on her own. This was the first time in her life she was completely alone.

She looked at the cord that led to the next building. There was no way she was ever going to make it now. She slowly looked back to the security guard.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Coz I'm bored. Coz I wanted to ask the hot security guard out on a date. Why do you think, dipstick?" She was not in the mood for small talk. Her mind was racing for an escape plan her body could stand up to as her tears continued to flow. She looked around the rooftop for any assistance. Another door? No. A fire escape down the building? No. She could hear the sirens of police cars wailing through the streets. Time was fast running out. But she didn't think it had all run out. Not yet. "So...I guess this means you'll start a scrapbook about yourself," Kara started through her sobs. She wasn't crying about being shot. She was crying from the pain. "'Security guard shoots thief'...I bet there's going to be a lot of headlines about you. You'll be able to pull all the women in."

"I don't do this job to get my name in the paper honey." His eyes and gun never wavered from her.

"Yeah...you just like to shoot people. So what's wrong with you? There must be something wrong with you or you would have become a police officer, not a security guard. But hey, it's probably a good thing you don't want to be in the papers. Most likely you won't even get a mention. Soon as the cops arrive, they're gonna take all the glory. They'll make out you were in the lunch room pigging out on donuts."

"The hell they will," he started, dropping his aim as her insinuations registered and then refocused his gun on her. "I'll make sure they know the truth."

"Yeah. 'Failed cop shoots teenager'. Sure thing, you'll be a hero then." Kara continued to search around the rooftop. Her only option was the crossbow and the original plan. She could hear security orders being called through the building and the security guard's radio.

"Radio five come in. State your location," the radio operator said.

He didn't bother to answer; just continued staring at Kara.

"Where the fuck am I going to go!" she yelled at him as she shrugged her shoulders, trying to be careful not to move too much since her body ached so. She could feel the energy draining from her as she struggled to stay focused.

The security guard stared at her before lowering his gun and foolishly turned his back. "Yeah...I'm on the roof with the thief." He put his gun back in his hip holster and Kara seized the opportunity, lunging for her escape plan. It was a miracle she didn't pass out from the pain as her injured hands tried to hold on as tight as possible. She cast herself off the edge of the building and let the rope glide her across the alleyway.

She yelped in pain as the security guard clawed at her. He had managed to grab hold

of her shoe and wrapped both his hands around her ankle. She tried to release some of the excruciating pain her body experienced with a blood-curdling scream. In an attempt to free herself from him she twisted and wriggled on the cord, yelling again as she willed her injured leg to kick at him.

"Get off me!" she screamed, trying to kick at his hands.

"Oh no. You stay right here." He reached for his radio. "Quick! We are on the roof; the little bitch is trying to get away."

Kara forgot about the pain for a split second as instinct forced her leg to connect with the security guard's neck. He matched her cry of pain as he released his grip. She felt her hands split open as she held on for dear life, unaware she was praying she would make it to the next building.

She swung her legs to gain the momentum she needed to get free but it only made her hands hurt more. She sucked air through her teeth to try and lessen the pain as she watched the wall get closer. The security guard continued to yell at her as he shook the cord.

With a huge amount of effort, she managed to hook her good leg over the side and hauled herself up. She let out a long and slow breath and straightened herself up to look back at the security guard. He'd stopped yelling and smiled at her. Confused by his change in demeanor, her hand shook as she pushed her hair away from her face, slowly turning around to look at what the security guard had seen. A line of black-clothed, armed security guards were standing there with their weapons cocked to the ready and she was their only focus.

She shook her head and let it hang low as she turned back to face the security guard.

"Shouldn't have done that sweetheart," he called. One of the officers made his way cautiously to Kara and stopped short behind her. She heard one of them say she had been shot.

"Put your hands up and don't make any sudden moves unless you want another bullet hole in you," the team leader instructed.

She slowly raised her bloodied hands to her head, abstractedly registering the sound of gravel crunching under the officer's feet as he got closer. He patted his hands over her backpack and body. When his gloved hands bounced across her wound, her instincts were to lash out. She screamed in agony and rushed her hands to her leg. The officer pounced and crumpled her to the ground.

Both released a painful-sounding gasp of air as the police officer tried to pin Kara to the ground. The more he pushed to grab hold of her hands, the more she flinched and fought back. She screamed as another security officer tried to grab hold of her legs, screaming again as she lashed out in pain when a hand clamped over her leg. She sent him reeling towards his comrades as another two jumped to keep her down.

"Stop moving and it won't hurt," one of them yelled at her, but she couldn't stop screaming or moving. The pain was so intense it engulfed her whole body.

"Holy shit...she's just a kid!" she heard another yell.

She threw her head back in pain and looked at the officer. Only his eyes were visible. They were the most striking blue eyes she had ever seen. Crystal blue and they looked as if she could see straight through them. She strained to look through her tears before everything went black.

Chapter Two

Someone was telling her to wake up but they weren't calling her name. Through the fog that engulfed her mind, she forced herself to wake up and open her eyes.

The bright light above her head had her blinking rapidly in an attempt to shield them from the angry glare. She was so confused and couldn't help it when she burst into tears. Who was calling her? Where was she? Where was her father? Even though her mind was cloudy she couldn't stop it from racing. The pain she felt before was now a numb dull ache. A nurse leaned over and peered down at her. Kara blinked again to adjust her eyes as she tried to lift her hand to her face, but something prevented her from lifting it far from the bed.

"How do you feel? You can't move your arms because they have you handcuffed to the bed," the nurse said. She moved her arm in disbelief when she heard the nurse, but sure enough, the sound of handcuffs chinking against the metal bed frame echoed in the stark room. "So how do you feel? Are you in much pain?"

Kara sobbed as she nodded. She wanted to cover her face. She was never allowed to cry in front of her father and didn't want to be seen crying in front of a stranger. "Well, where does it hurt?" The nurse's voice was stern, her matronly concern apparently vanishing now that her charge was fully awake.

"Everywhere. My hands, my head, my neck hurts...my leg's fucking killing me." She looked at the nurse, her view focused now. The woman was quite stocky. Anyone from across the room could initially mistake her for a male nurse. She had red wiry hair which was pulled into a tight bun and she looked very plain.

"That's enough of that language, thank you very much." The nurse tsked her disapproval.

"Well, you asked, and I'm fuckin' well telling you!" Kara looked at her arms—they were bandaged from wrist to elbow—and tried to pull against the handcuff. In trying to move her elbows, sharp spikes of pain raced down her arms, causing her to flinch. Hurriedly stilling her movement, she looked down to her heavily bandaged leg.

"There's no point in trying to get up...you're only going to hurt yourself further." The nurse moved to the head of Kara's bed and helped her to sit up, pushing a fluffy pillow behind her. Despite being fussed over, the first thing Kara saw in the room was a man sitting in the corner. He wore a dark suit, nursed a newspaper over his knee, and held a notepad in one hand and a pen in the other. He looked young.

Too young to be on the force. "Who's he?" Kara directed the question at the nurse without taking her eyes off the man. "By the looks of the suit, please tell me he's not here to sell me something."

"I'm Mr. Brad Holt. I was the one who took you down on the rooftop. I have been chasing you for quite a while now. We have enough evidence to charge you with at least five robberies."

"You don't have anything...except for bad taste in shitty-looking suits Holt!" She winced again as she gingerly lay back against the pillows, noticing how the nurse flinched as she swore. "You're a Sister of nursing, not a Sister of the convent!" she barked as she turned her attention back to the overhanging light.

"Look...there are two ways we can do this—" Holt started.

"Yeah...and they're both gonna end with you fucking off!"

"Now you listen to me...this can either end the best way possible for you, or very, very badly. Now which is it going to be?"

Kara's eyes flickered briefly in his direction as he stood and then she continued to stare at the light defiantly, refusing to answer his question.

"I will be back later to see if you have changed your mind. Until then, you will be under police guard. There is no way you will be able to think about making an escape again. I will see you soon enough."

Kara glanced over to see him turn and walk towards the door.

"What day is it? How long have I been out for?"

"You have been out for nearly a day. By the way, you made the headlines." He tossed the newspaper to her and she watched helplessly as it landed on her shins.

"Are these really necessary?" She jiggled the handcuffs. "I mean...look at me. I'm not gonna go anywhere with this leg for a while. Even if you let me have one hand free. I have an itch in the worst place possible, so unless you or big Bertha over there are gonna risk sticking your hand somewhere I don't want my own hand to go, then you'll have to take these suckers off. What were you doing over there anyway? Watching me sleep?"

Holt silently looked her over before opening his mouth. "I was reading about you, waiting for you to wake up so we could have a talk, about who you are and what you do."

"Are you a cop? You don't look very old." Kara squinted to get a better look. "They must have taken you away from your mother too early." Holt didn't answer. She watched him sigh and shake his head as he dug his hand into his pocket. "So what's going to happen to me?" she quietly asked as he freed her right arm.

"Depends on how you behave. So far you're not winning anyone over." He shoved the keys back in his pocket. "If you cause any shit, these will go back on."

"But causing shit is what I do." She smirked as she pawed at the newspaper, flicking it to make it stand up. She scoffed at the headline. "'Security guard shoots thief'...pfft, gimme a break. I gave him that friggin' headline. Well, he's got his scrapbook started. Look at him...grinning like an idiot. He'll probably ask for his pay out in donuts!" Holt shook his head and turned on his heel. "If the wanker hadn't shot me, I would have shoved that tazer right up his a—"

"Hey!" Holt interjected. "Why don't you shut that gutter mouth of yours and give the rest of us a break? In answer to your question, I am not a police officer, though I have been very interested in your work. The company I work for has been tracking a number of break, enter and steals. The intelligence along with the pattern of the heists led us to protect this particular building with more care," he explained. "It was when our security system revealed a very good bypass that we tripped the alarm and happened to get lucky when we found you there. You were not the one who tripped that alarm. Had security not seen a loose wire, you would have been home and hosed."

Kara felt her face break into a grin; she hadn't tripped the alarm after all.

"I wouldn't be so happy about that fact. Sooner or later, even the best stuff up."

"Are you saying I'm one of the best?"

"Look, we have been able to keep the police out of this so far. There are a number of

things we need to discuss. With your full cooperation things can go smoothly for you. But should you choose to make this difficult, we will have no option other than to bring the police in and have you charged to the fullest extent of the law. But for now, I would like you to get some rest. I will be back in a couple of hours to see you. Have a think about what I said and we'll hopefully talk when I get back. Alright?"

Kara flicked the front page over and continued reading the story. "Wankers...spelt my name with a C. Should be able to sue them for that. They haven't got their facts right. That's misleading the public."

"Do we have a deal?" Holt enunciated slowly.

"I don't do deals. I make a decision based on the best outcome for myself."

"Like I said...do we have a deal?"

She pulled the corner of the newspaper out of the way to look at him. "Can you bring me some fries when you come back and I'll give this back to you." The pen he had been holding was now rolling in between her fingers.

His hand flew to his pocket. "How'd you do that? You were handcuffed..."

"Bring back the fries and I'll tell you. You are the one who said I needed my rest, didn't you?"

"I can see why you work alone. No one would be able to stand being around you for more than two minutes. Keep the pen...do the crossword." And with that he was gone.

Kara watched as a podgy redheaded man walked into the room and sat on the chair in the corner.

"You security?" The man looked up from his own copy of the day's newspaper and nodded. "Nice." Kara returned her focus back to the newspaper article. She was looking for any information about her father. There was nothing and nor should there have been. He'd left the scene.

Whatever the nurse had given her was starting to take effect. She could feel the newspaper slipping out of her hand. It felt like she was swimming. Within seconds she was out cold.

When next she woke, Holt was back in the room. She raised her hand to wipe the drool from the corner of her mouth.

"Even in your sleep you don't shut up." He smiled at her.

"What was I saying?"

"Not much. You were swearing at yourself mainly. I think you might have been dreaming about the robbery. Had that last alarm not been tripped, I might still be looking for you. So who's your partner in crime?"

"I don't have one. I work alone," she lied. Careful not to hurt her hands, she rubbed her eye. "Hmm. You may as well give them to me...I can smell them." The sweet aroma of freshly cooked hot fries filled the room.

"I'll give them to you when you give me information." Holt placed the bundle of wrapped fries on the end of the bed.

"What do you want to know?"

"How could one girl your age manage five heists on her own? There is no possible way."

"Well believe it. Someone from that newspaper should come and interview me!"

"Oh, they will. We are going to take you to trial for at least five robberies, so let's not fuck around. Either you cooperate and have a glimmer of a normal life in years to come, or you can take your last glimpse at the world because you certainly won't have access to anything. In my job, you are classed as a high threat. With the old adage being keep your friends close and your enemies closer, you would fall under the enemies sector and we would like to keep you very close. Either you go to jail where you can be monitored closely in a harsh environment or you can listen to our proposal. Personally, my mind boggles at how you are such a high threat at the age of what? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"I'm sixteen."

"If your skills developed in the wrong environment, who knows where you would have wound up. Like I said before, I have been following you for a very long time."

Kara swallowed hard. She never thought about what would happen if she got caught. She never thought about being caught, period. The reality was starting to sink in.

"You asked me before how I got your pen from you. When you took the cuffs off me, you turned just slightly to get the paper. That's when I took it from you. You really should be a bit more aware."

"Thanks for the tip. Now tell me who you are working with."

"Christ. If you are going to keep asking me the same question and expect a different answer, then you may as well go now. I work alone! I don't trust anyone else. They'd either snitch or stuff it up. This way, I only have myself to blame."

"Had yourself to blame," he corrected.

"Well, yeah. Not much I can steal in here, except maybe a bedpan. That wouldn't go for much though." She laughed. There was no way she would ever tell the truth. If they knew who she worked with, he wouldn't be playing this game of questions with her. "Aren't you going to ask me when I first started stealing? Why I do it? What my next plans were? You might need your pen for this though." Kara held out the pen for him to take.

"Okay." He moved the chair next to the bed and handed her the fries. "So what was the first thing you stole?"

"I stole a chocolate bar. I desperately wanted one but I didn't have any money." She ripped at the paper until her fingers touched the hot fries. "It was looking so good. I just had to have one. I waited for the shopkeeper to bend down and get another sort of candy bar off the bottom shelf when I swiped it. Simple. Then when she asked for money for the candy bar, I said I didn't have any and she shooed me from the shop. I can still taste it now. It was the rush, the thrill of possibly getting caught. Then it just grew from there." She shoved some fries in her mouth.

"Keep going. Where were your parents in all this?" Holt didn't look up from his notepad.

Kara shook her head. "I never knew my mother. My father never knew I did this. He didn't know about any of it." She wondered if he could tell she was lying.

"So where is your father now?" He raised his head to pin her with his pale blue-eyed gaze.

She toyed with the corner of the bed sheet before ripping the paper covering the fries. "I don't know." At least she spoke the truth this time. She honestly didn't know where her

father had gone and when she would see him again.

"Well, where was the last time you saw him? Maybe that will lead us to him."

"Why? The last time I saw him was at a burger joint. We didn't say much. He has no involvement in this...in anything I have done."

"That may be the case but you are technically still a minor. We have to contact him about the court hearing and see what happens from there."

Kara shook her head and turned away. "He won't have anything to do with me, especially now. Look. Are you done with the questions? I'm kinda tired and my leg is still killing me. I think the nurse only gave me water in that last needle."

Holt looked at her before speaking. "Sure. I'll get the nurse for you. Do you think you could answer one more question for me?"

"That was a question." She nodded when Holt stared at her without expression.

"Are you lying about working alone? Most of these heists would have been near impossible for one person. Are you covering for someone?"

Her attention returned to the bed sheet corner. She stared at it. "So you think I couldn't do it on my own? Pfft...typical. I could do most of the stuff with my eyes closed. I really like cracking safes. That's a test of skill. But I also really like the chase. The race against the clock gives me a thrill. Me racing against the actual heist and then the race of the chase."

"Well, Kara, this is where it all gets interesting. All the security footage from the past five heists has been tampered with. We have evidence to prove you did it, but I have my doubts you could have done it on your own. Who is your partner?"

That was the thing. Although her father was the mastermind behind the heists, it was she who did most of the setting up and work.

"I told you...I don't have a partner. You are only going to put me in juvie anyway, so what's the problem. If you did have enough on me then you wouldn't be asking me these questions. I've had enough now. I think it's best if you leave. If you don't, the only way I will be speaking to you is through a lawyer."

"Sure. I think I have enough to go on now. You get some rest and I'll come back tomorrow. It's getting late anyway."

The nurse returned as Holt stepped back from the bed. Kara turned her head as the nurse prepared the needle.

"I'll be here. I'm not surprised I got caught, though. I knew it was only a matter of time. It's the whole being shot thing that I wondered about but never thought would happen." The drug started to take effect.

Kara stared up at the light again and watched it become more and more blurry with each blink. She didn't know how long she was out for when she was woken by the cleaner. Muffled noises covered by the clinking of the mop bucket wheels as it moved reached her ears.

Her body felt groggy, her mind heavy. She took a deep breath as she looked toward the security officer then blinked to clear her focus. A large figure held the security guard in a headlock. Both struggled for a short time before the guard slumped forward in his seat. She thought she was dreaming and strained to see the figure again as it moved towards her. The realization that it was no dream finally registered in her groggy mind and she gasped as she pulled her free arm over her face to give herself some protection. She opened her mouth to

scream but the cleaner's hand clamped down hard.

"What did you tell them?" She recognized his voice.

"Dad?"

"What did you tell them?" He slowly removed his hand.

"Nothing," was her barely audible reply. She had nowhere to go. She felt like she was on the rooftop again. Kara watched as her father pulled out a syringe.

"What's that for?" Her eyes widened as she watched the needle get closer.

"It's nothing. Just relax," he said in a monotone voice. It was the last thing she remembered.

Chapter Three

Kara was again woken; this time someone was shaking her arm, calling her name.

"What?" A different nurse was shaking her awake, the action scattering her dream about her father and the security guard into the dark recesses of her mind. Her hands flew up to silence the person calling her name and struggled to sit up to see the vacant chair in the corner of the room. "Where's the copper wannabe?" She rubbed her eyes with a balled fist.

"He's on a lunch break. Mr. Holt will be back soon."

"Great." She struggled to keep her eyes open. It was imperative she keep her head clear so she didn't say anything while she slept.

"Ahh, how are you feeling today? Any better?" Mr. Holt sounded disgustingly upbeat.

Kara looked beyond him and stared at the man behind him. He looked the same age as Holt but with a nicer suit. He smelt nicer too.

"Not really. Who's he?"

"This is Mr. Cross. He is one of our associates and will take the necessary notes of our meeting. Now, do you remember anyone coming into your room last night?"

"No. Should I?"

He just stared at her, obviously waiting for her to reveal the truth. But that was half the problem; she didn't know if it was truth or not. Did her father come and drug her? Was it all in her head? She decided the best course of action was to keep her mouth shut.

After a few moments of silence, Holt grabbed the nearby chair and spun it around. He sat himself down, settling his arms on the backrest.

"So...I need to talk to you about your future. As I said before, it's your choice. You have two options. You can either keep going in the direction you are going, we charge with you what we have and you end up with say maybe five years in juvenile detention. Or, since you are only sixteen, we can have you signed over to us as a ward of the State and we will become technically responsible for your welfare."

"Sure. What works for you?"

"You know, I don't know why you are being so cocky about all of this. You have so much potential but your snotty everyone-owes-me-something, shit-on-everything attitude is going to be your downfall. You need an attitude check." Kara stared at him as he lowered his voice. "Well it's true. The world owes you shit. We need to talk about your court case because we might be able to work something out that will be to your advantage and at the same time show you are capable of being reformed. Otherwise, the alternative is juvenile detention, where you will most likely be overlooked and not given the attention you need, only to become a repeat offender when you become an adult. Can you see where your life is headed?"

His words felt like they slapped her in the face. She'd never been asked what she wanted to do with her life. She'd never even bothered to think about it herself. Scared, though she hid the emotion well, she laid her head back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. "We can offer you the life skills you obviously do not have."

"Don't look at me while I think. It's distracting," she snapped. She had no idea what her life would turn out like. "What's the offer then?"

"All we ask in return is that you work for us."

"Is that all?"

"Well, no. The reason why I kept asking if you worked alone...the company I work for is very interested in getting to know you and your partner."

Mr. Holt moved towards Kara. "Obviously I can't tell you who the company is until I know which way you're going to be persuaded, but they are very impressed with what you have been able to do. They are very keen to see if you would like to work with them in protecting their assets."

"Protecting their assets? You mean hire a security guard? Why would they want a teenager?" Was she being baited?

"That's the thing. They don't want someone to watch over their assets, they already have that covered," Mr. Holt said. "They want someone to steal their assets in order to prevent real thieves from taking them. You have displayed an amazing talent in this area."

"Okay...well that makes no sense to me whatsoever." Kara shook her head, confused.

Smiling, Mr. Holt continued. "I know, but in a strange way it does. Of all their assets, it's protection they crave and if they know they have someone working for them, they can take out the real thieves and keep their commodities in a safe and secure environment. It also shows that if one of their own cannot get in and do the job, then a real robber has no chance."

"So what would be involved?"

"Well, for starters they would train you. You would work with state-of-the-art equipment and some of the best people in the security business. This would give you a chance at a normal life, doing the thing you seem to love but on the right side of the law."

"Are you for real? This all sounds like something from a bad novel. How can this be legitimate?"

"For a person who doesn't seem to care much about anything, you are taking a big interest in this. Dare I say I have your attention?" Mr. Holt smiled.

Kara shifted uneasily. "You might. But if I am to go along with this, then there are some conditions I would want to make sure were met."

"Sure, fire away. Tell me what they are and I'll take it all back to them."

"Okay. Number one: I work alone. I don't need someone to hold my hand and I certainly will not be there to hold their's. Number two: let's talk money. What are they offering me? And number three..." She paused for a moment. "I want an education. My education so far has been stealing. Watching how people interact and waiting for the right moment. I've never really been to school and that is what I want my future to be. I know I'm not stupid, but I want the education. Those are my first three things. See what they say and come back to me. I would like to get that first and then I will work for the company." Her demands, she knew, bought her the necessary time she needed to think about her future and all the possible repercussions.

"I don't think they are going to have any problem with those requests." Mr. Holt placed his pen inside his jacket. "We'll come back tomorrow and discuss this again." He looked at Mr. Cross although his comments were still directed at her. "For now, try and get your rest. Have a think about what we have said. I think this will be a great move for you and for the company."

"So when do I have to go to court? What will happen there?" Kara was careful of the

tone she asked the question in.

"It all depends on what your final outcome is. Most likely you will be released into the company's protective custody."

"So this company...they will own me?"

"Not necessarily. It depends on how you look at it. Technically, they would have custody of you until you are eighteen. If you did anything illegal or breached your bail conditions, they would be responsible. But you are not planning to do anything like that, are you? It would be wise not to if you want any chance of living a remotely normal life. Anyway, we have given you plenty to think about so you get some rest, have a good hard think about it all and then we will discuss it again later."

As she watched them leave her room, her head reeled, trying to contemplate what it would be like to have a normal life. She thought she'd covered the fact she was nervous pretty well. Worried about the court date and what the outcome would be, she wondered where her father was. Would he come after her to take her home? Her mind wandered to her home. A small two-bedroom unit with enough hot water to only last a full three minutes, if she was lucky. She hated living like that when she saw others better off. She'd never had any friends her own age and was worried sick about life in a juvenile detention facility. Kara was resigned to the fact she was on her own and the next decision would be the basis for all her future decisions. She closed her eyes and tried to stop her mind from racing.

She couldn't sleep that night. She bounced around the idea of taking Mr. Holt up on his offer in her head for hours before finally falling asleep. She replayed the failed heist in her dreams, looking for other ways she could have escaped. Each dream ended with her being caught.

When she woke, she took it as a sign. She knew her number would eventually be up. She had a choice. She knew the option she had to take.

Kara reached forward to shake Mr. Holt's hand, though Mr. Cross didn't offer his, choosing instead to stay silent in the background.

"ACORP is very happy with this arrangement," he said, nodding at her. "The directors are very keen to meet you. Did the nurse say when you could be discharged?"

"About four days." She flicked through the pages of her contract. "So when I graduate, I will work with ACORP full time?"

"Correct. We have enrolled you in one of the best private schools available. A lot of ACORP's employees send their children to this school. We have a one-bedroom unit set up ready for you to move into, situated between headquarters and the school. It has a small kitchen and just about everything you will need. Because of the nature of the job we require you to do for us, your identity will remain hidden. As a result, your apartment is monitored twenty-four-seven for your own protection. We will be able to see who comes and goes. You will need to tell your neighbors you have moved away from home in the country so you can further your education.

"The story you will tell people at school is that you were living with an aunt and things just didn't work out, so the next best thing was to get a place of your own. The unit is nothing flashy but I'm sure it's something you will get used to. We also ask when you have friends

over to keep all information pertaining to ACORP concealed. An innocent mistake leads to questions and then protective action must be taken. We would like to see you mix with people your own age, so be social but not so social your friends know everything about you."

"Sure, tell them what they need to know." Kara nodded her agreement. "Anything else?"

"We ask that you maintain a credit average and that you attend all programs set by ACORP. If you don't, then we will review our position and go from there. We have a big day planned for you, where you will meet with the directors and the people you will be working with," Mr. Holt said. Kara thought he was cute in a nerdy kind of way. He was always smiling, except when he was swearing at her. She couldn't help but snicker to herself when he swore. He looked too straight-laced to swear. "It might be a difficult adjustment for you to both train with ACORP and do your studies, but we have every faith in you and will be available to guide and assist you in every step of the way."

"You sure do like your job, don't you Mr. Holt?" She smirked. She'd never been paid so much attention in her entire life. Although she liked it, she was adamant about keeping her freedom.

"Yes, I do. I aim to please."

She looked at Mr. Cross. "Do you mind getting me a drink? I'd like to have a private talk with Mr. Holt here."

"Sure."

Both Kara and Mr. Holt watched him leave before she spoke.

"Look, I just wanna say thanks. I know this could have turned out any number of ways, but this is the best possible outcome for a person like me. I just hope I don't let you down."

"I don't think you will. You are being given an opportunity to do things how you want them done and you know I'll be there to kick your ass if you stuff up. I took you down once before, I can do it again."

Chapter Four

The paperwork for Kara's guardianship under ACORP went through without a hitch. She was released and taken to her new home. It was on the second floor of a five-story building. She ran her fingers over the wrought iron railing as she walked to the main entrance. The street was wide and dotted with trees on the sidewalk. It was the most perfect street she had ever seen. Holt opened the door and waited for her to enter. Although she had mastered the use of her crutches, they rubbed against her not-yet-healed forearms, causing her pain.

"Tell me there is an elevator." She laughed.

"There is," he said, moving along the corridor. "Just one level up and you will be home."

Kara didn't know what to say. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't understand what she had done that was so special for this company to want her. She looked along the hallway before coming to apartment number seven.

"This is it." He handed the key to her. She smiled as she took it and pushed it into the lock. Half expecting to be greeted with the smell of a musty, closed up, dank tiny unit, she pushed the door open. Instead, she was met with a bright, airy, surprisingly large modern unit. She moved inside and took a good look around.

"The only thing is, this road gets quite busy in the afternoons so it can be a bit loud." He went to open a window.

"That's fine." Kara looked in the kitchen. It was small, but it was all that she needed. "This is perfect." She moved into the bedroom. There was a double bed and a walk-in robe. The bathroom was fresh and clean; she knew she was going to spend hours in there. She returned to the lounge room. There was a desk and a computer already set up.

"The bookshelf is for when you start school," Mr. Holt said. "Now, you will have an expense account for each week. It is your job to manage it. There will be no stealing or racketeering to get more funds. You blow it on crap then you have to live with it until the next week. The majority of your school funds will be paid for, but food, clothes, any social activities, extra expenses such as pens and paper for school, you will have to budget for."

"Thank you so much," was all she could manage to say. "I won't let you down."

Kara settled easily into her new apartment, spending the next two days making it her own. Her expense account was something she could easily live within the limits of. She promised herself she would put a portion of it away for a nest egg should anything happen, but that still left her enough money to live comfortably. Never before had she felt so at ease in her life. She had made the right decision.

On her first day at ACORP's headquarters, she met Stephanie.

"And how are you going with the unpacking? Holt won't be too long but at least I can show you my domain!" She smiled as she held the door open for Kara.

"I can see why you have an interest in all these gadgets, Stephanie," Kara said as she kept her hands on the crutches to stop herself from touching any of the electrical equipment.

"It's the best job. Everyone wants to pretend to be a super hero with access to all the

high-tech gadget stuff. I have bugs and cameras in just about anything you can imagine."

"Can you show me some?"

"Sure. See those earrings? One is an infrared tracker. It can suss out where the alarms or safes are. The other one is a mini camera. It can be set to take photos when you want or it can take pictures every five to seven seconds. Good way to keep a track of where you are in case you ever get into trouble."

Kara stared at the earrings as the big doors to Stephanie's lair opened.

"Hello, Miss Stephanie," Mr. Holt said, walking towards them. "How is everything today?"

"It'd be great if someone would sign the papers for the new naked laser prototypes," she snapped without looking to him.

"Yes, that will all be done in time. Meanwhile, how are you Kara? Excited about today?"

"What's today?"

"Today is where you will show us what you are made of. Today we are going to give you a little test."

"A test?" Kara hated surprises, but she hated knowing something was being set up specifically for her even more.

"Oh, it's nothing to be worried about. It's just something we feel should be done to gauge where we should start with you."

"Start with me?"

"Yes, yes, now come along."

She looked at Stephanie who shrugged her shoulders. "You'll be right kid. Just get your game face on." Stephanie reached out and shook her hand. Kara smiled as she placed her hand into her pocket. She had no idea what Stephanie had passed to her, but she had no reason to doubt her.

Minutes later Kara was inside a sparse room with three desks and three chairs, nothing else. No windows and only one door. Two young men walked into the room followed by Mr. Holt, who waited for them to take their places at the two spare tables. Once everyone was in their places he removed papers from a folder and placed them on each table.

"The point of this exercise is not necessarily speed but more your ability to get the job done. It will highlight to us the areas we need to concentrate on. Now, the goal is to get through this as quickly as possible. You each have a map. It shows the layout of one of our centers. It also shows the locations of the pieces we would like you to steal. We have given you a list of the tools you can use in order to get to the pieces, but what you use is entirely up to you. Just to make it a little more challenging, we have two of our technicians who will compete against you. They have not seen this map so they don't have an advantage over you. You each have the same equipment to get through this. Whoever is the first to get through it without being detected—"

"What do we win?" Kara asked with a smile. "A big fluffy toy? Oh puhlease. Let's just get this over with. I have to get a few things organized for school."

"Fine. There will be no talking to each other during this test. And each of you is expected to take notes."

Kara stared at the two men before she smiled. "Hi." Both were wearing suits, glasses and had sensible, straight haircuts. They both nodded and gave her a quick smile before they returned their glances to the floor. She gave Mr. Holt a concerned look while she waited for the signal to begin.

"Okay. Your time starts now."

Kara unfolded the map and placed it in front of her before she pulled the other pieces of paper free. She let out a long sigh as she took all the drawings and lists in. A quick look at the others saw them busy writing in their notepads. She had never masterminded a heist before, that was always her father's doing. But she had to prove to them she could do it. She studied the maps for air vents, windows and pipes, paying attention to where the security cameras could see and what they could see. Reading the information about the set ups proved fruitless with the little education she had.

Frustration rose in her as she stared at the pages of confusing words and diagrams. Once again she glanced at the other men. The only noise she could hear was the sound of their pencils scratching furiously on paper. Looking at the map, she shrugged. Desperate to find a clue she looked at the equipment list.

"Done," one of the men yelled and slammed his pencil on the desk. He glanced at her and then triumphantly held his paper out towards Mr. Holt. Kara shook her head. She was not going to be swayed.

"Sorry. You would have tripped the alarm with that second move." Mr. Holt handed the paper back. "You two, keep going."

Kara thought about saying something, but part of her kept her from opening her mouth. Normally she didn't care what anyone thought about her, but for some reason she felt like she was letting Mr. Holt and the company down. She sighed and tried to make out the jumble of letters before shaking her head in defeat.

"Something the matter?" Mr. Holt leaned over her shoulder to look at her blank notepad.

"Umm...yeah." Kara nodded, glancing at the two men who had stopped writing to listen. "I'm sorry, but you know I have very little education and that makes reading maps and stuff a bit hard for me. When I look at robbing a place, I like to get in and suss out the place for myself. See what they have. I know what I have and what I'm able to do. I have never tried a place with this much security or possibilities. I'm sorry."

Straightening his back and looking down his nose, Mr. Holt looked at the two men and tilted his head, motioning for them to continue. "That's not a problem at all. This was an exercise to see what your strengths and weaknesses are. You yourself are aware of the disadvantages your lack of education has. We can now work on that. How do you think you would have got into the building?"

Kara looked back at the map and papers before smiling. "Through the front door."

Mr. Holt didn't try to hide his scoff. "Through the front door?"

Kara noticed the two men had stopped writing and smiled at each other when she announced her strategy. "Yeah, through the front door. It's the only way. Be one of the herd. It's the best way to go undetected and then you have access to just about anything. With all that other junk you have to take...slows you down and you run an even bigger risk of getting caught."

"I can see the logic in that. Cocky but logical. Excellent work Kara. All right. Best get you back to Stephanie so she can run through a few gadgets with you. I think you and Stephanie are going to get along well. She's still a bit of a wild child at heart."

"So...how did you get involved with ACORP?" Kara fought the urge to touch all the wires and gadgets spread over the tables.

"Pretty much the same way as you. I was a young kid interested in surveillance and hacking into computer systems. I got into ACORP's mainframe purely by accident." Stephanie handed her a wristwatch. "You'll need this. It's standard for all ACORP employees. I was in the mainframe for three whole weeks before anyone realized. When they did and knew I was poking around in there, not stealing any of its information, they hired me. I was about seventeen at the time. I have been here for ten years and I wouldn't change it for the world. You going to put that on or just hold it forever?" Kara slipped the watch around her wrist and tightened the band. "It's a tracker. Standard. Nothing special about that watch at all. ACORP like to know where its employees are at all times. If you lose it though...well, that's the beauty of it. We can track it down. Unless of course you fall into a river or a pool and don't get out for like three hours. Then it ruins all the circuitry so don't be doing that."

Kara pulled out the small metal piece Stephanie handed her and placed it on the table. "What is that?"

"That, my dear, is another tracker. It's activated by body heat. Once your body temp gets to a certain degree, it sets it off. I wasn't sure how you were going to cope during that test, so I gave it to you thinking if you got stressed and took off, I would be able to find you."

"Ahh, did you make it?" Kara was amazed at all the technology.

"I sure did and you didn't run. I'm proud of you already."

For the rest of the afternoon, Kara couldn't shake her thoughts about her father and his whereabouts. He was the only other person to say he was proud of her for doing a good job. This would be the first time he wouldn't be proud of her. She had to force herself to go home instead of going to their old home.

Over the years, Kara had tried several times to find information on her father, but all the leads had turned cold. She found the copy of her mother's death certificate and was satisfied she was indeed dead, but her father was still under the radar. Failing in her investigations to find her father, Kara focused on her education where she learned new skills and became a strong, independent woman. Getting her education proved harder than she thought when the other students found out she was being tutored in addition to fast tracking her catch up. They considered her even more of an outcast.

Being the new kid at the school, with a tutor and being a girl that spoke her mind didn't gel well with many of the other students. Mr. Holt had regular meetings with the school principal. One particular incident involved Kara giving a boy three years older a shiner when he pushed her out of the way in the corridor. Her face met the cold hardness of her locker before she turned and gave him a mouthful about respect.

"You have to learn how to control the situation and your anger," Holt said to Kara as they walked away from the principal's office. "This kind of behavior is frowned on, not only by us but by society as well."

Kara turned her head to look at the boy sitting a few seats away from her, holding an icepack over his eye. "Well, that jackass needs to learn he can't just go around saying shit and expect to get away with it," she snapped back as she picked up her pace and walked two steps ahead of Holt. "If anything, he got what he deserved."

"Look, I know this transition has been hard for you but you are doing so well. You are coming top of your grade and are excelling in the tasks we set you. You are on the right track; you just need to keep your emotions from overflowing."

From that day on, whenever that boy saw her in the hallway, he gave her a wide berth and even ventured a smile when she walked past him, but she was never won over by him. Cross her once and that's the end.

Kara also threw herself into her other passion—sports. Particularly track and field events. She could outrun some of the boys and make it look easy, but when it came to sporting competitions, they had to fall to the wayside to allow room for her work at ACORP.

Her time was limited for the small amount of friends she made as she trained with ACORP's finest, learning all there was to be learnt about security codes, maps and strategy, and small explosives. Her desire to be the best allowed her to build a strong rapport with the directors of ACORP and its employees. She trained hard with them everyday while juggling her studies. Her two closest friends were Stephanie and the computer technical guy, TW. She had grown to trust them but not completely enough to reveal anything about her father. She did many things to test the limits of both her school board and ACORP with her actions and behavior, but knew she could confide just about anything with either Steph or TW and they wouldn't say anything.

In the weeks leading up to her twenty-sixth birthday, she was inundated with files and forms to complete before she could officially start at ACORP. Kara had made the decision that when she left high school she would take time off from study and concentrate on ACORP's tasks before deciding what she wanted to do in the future. She loved study, but she also wanted to live up to her end of the deal. She moved out of the apartment and found a modern two-bedroom house to live in. TW and Stephanie helped her move and arrange her furniture when she felt it was time to get on with living her life with a bit of distance between her home life and work life. She'd saved a large portion of money she earned from ACORP and bonuses and purchased a small property on the edge of a small town about two hours drive from the city. She loved to go there on weekends and when she had holidays. It was all her own; she had been the one that achieved this, no one else. The day of her birthday arrived and TW had arranged for her to meet him at his office.

"Put this on and no peeking." TW handed her a blindfold before resting his hands on her shoulders to guide her. Her shoes clicked on the tiles as she walked along the darkened corridor.

"All I can tell is that I'm walking along the south end of the building." Kara laughed as she waved her hands before her.

"How can you tell that?"

"Each wing has a different sound. Haven't you bothered to notice?"

"You are such a geek sometimes," he shot back.

"At least I know where I am. Why are you taking me to the warehouse?"

"Alright, we are here. Keep them covered. Now, it's not much but we just wanted to

give you a good birthday."

"You know I'm happy just being with my friends," Kara said as she heard a door open. "I hope you didn't go to too much trouble." She knew her co-worker Stephanie would also be waiting as she walked slowly through the room. The pair of them had always done something special on her birthday since she came to the company.

"Okay, you can take off the blindfold now," TW said as he lifted his hands. Kara smiled as she stuck her thumb under the blindfold and peeled it off. She looked around the huge and normally vacant room. She couldn't help but burst into giggles when she laid eyes on the inflatable jumping castle.

"Oh wow! Look at it!" she said as she moved towards it. She spotted a small table with a cake, present and a number of blown-up colorful balloons. "You guys are too much!"

"Well, we thought since you have been with us for a decade you deserved something special," Stephanie said, giving her a hug.

"Ha! Come on, what are you waiting for?" Kara kicked off her shoes and ran to the jumping castle. Taking a dive onto it, she bounced as Stephanie and TW joined her. She smiled from ear to ear as every part of her body mashed into the rubbery walls and floor. Since she'd missed out on most of her childhood birthdays, TW and Stephanie had gone out of their way to make each of them memorable.

"This is so cool," she beamed as she jumped towards Stephanie. "I love it you guys! Ha! I feel like a kid again!"

"Well, it's your first official day of business at ACORP, so we wanted to make you remember it for something more than that," Stephanie said as TW bounced towards them.

"Is it time for cake yet?" he asked. "Then we are having wrestling championships on here."

"Ha! You'll be the little boy crying in the corner too," Stephanie quipped as Kara climbed down. "Get the knife but don't cut the bottom or your wish won't come true."

"My wishes always come true." Kara smiled as the knife sank into the icing. "Here you go."

Stuffed with vanilla cake, she watched Stephanie lunge at TW and take him down to the floor of the jumping castle. He cried out as she pressed down on his chest to pin him there.

"Argh," he cried out as she tightened her grip.

"Say it!" Stephanie commanded.

"Never," he cried out as Kara laughed in the background. Stephanie and TW were close in age and had the same interests but she never understood why they hadn't asked each other out. It wasn't her place to try and set things up because they were such good friends and worked well together, anything beyond that would alter everything. She didn't want to see anything change. They would work it out if it was meant to be.

"Say it!"

He cried out again as she dug her elbow in. "You are invincible and much stronger than me!"

"See...it's all about you admitting it." Stephanie smiled as she released her grip, allowing TW to breathe easier. "Quick Kara, your turn."

"Nah, I think he's had enough for today. Besides, as much as I want to stay, I really do have to get home for an early night, so does wimp boy there. We have a busy day tomorrow."

But thank you so much for everything. Every year you guys go above and beyond. I love you both so much for what you do for me."

"Now don't get all teary on us," TW said, trying to stand up straight after his mini beating.

"Nah, no tears," Kara said, holding out her arms for a hug. "You guys are the best."

"Good luck with tomorrow," Stephanie said as she packed the cake for Kara to take.

"Who needs luck when you have this girl on your team?" TW quipped.

Chapter Five

Kara adjusted the straps on her backpack as she crouched behind the shrub. "We are good to go when you give the word." She moved her hand to her earpiece and listened intently for the go ahead. As soon as she heard the words 'You are right to go', she was up and off in a flash. Silently running along the dark alley until she reached the backdoor, she dropped her backpack to the ground and reached into her pocket to pull out a lumpy-looking device with a protruding stick. She lined up the stick with the lock and clamped it down with the plasticine. "Fire in the hole." Quickly moving further along the alley, she turned her back and clamped her hands over her ears.

A loud but contained bang echoed into the night while a wispy small cloud of smoke hovered around the door. She knocked the lump off the door and pulled on the handle. "Too easy." She smiled. Her heart pounded with the surge of adrenalin as she collected her bag and moved inside the building. "Moving to the pick-up point," she murmured into the microphone, throwing the bag over her shoulder and then set off in a jog. She pressed a button on her watch to activate the stopwatch. She liked to know the time she kept while processing a job. Once she made it to the end of the corridor she clicked the button on her watch again. "Here," she said without much of a puff.

"Jeez, you must have floored it girl," TW said with a laugh. "Remind me never to say 'I'll race you' for anything."

"Okay. Starting transmission now." She lined a small rod-like piece of metal she pulled from her watch against the infrared security screen.

"Alright, give me a minute to work my magic." TW tapped the keys on his keyboard.

"I can't believe security goes home at four-thirty and then there is no one for three hours. What's so special about that time?"

"Unions...if they work a for a certain amount time after their shift has ended, they are entitled to overtime. Obviously their boss doesn't want to pay it, so it goes unguarded." Kara waited patiently while TW continued to click on the keyboard.

Kara scoffed. "They pay for the most state-of-the-art security systems, which we are able to crack in less than five minutes, yet they won't pay a person fifty dollars more a week to be here to stop people like me? It doesn't make sense. Might have to put that in my report."

"You do that, but first how about you type in nineteen, seventy-four, twenty, thirteen and then seventy-seven? You should soon be staring at a pretty diamond necklace. Why don't you grab that and think of it as a little birthday present for about the next thirty minutes?"

The keypad beeped as Kara pressed the numbers and listened to the door seal loosen. She pulled on the door and stepped inside the room. "No internal security," she said with disdain. Her eyes moved straight to the glass box. A stunning diamond and silver necklace almost blinded her. "Jesus...happy birthday to me!"

She listened to TW snickering in her ear as she slowly surveyed the joins of the box and the bottom seal. "Why would you not have this wired?"

"Because that door and system you just got through is supposed to be the ultimate in security."

"Ha!" Kara laughed. "Yeah, it's great. I have the necklace. Wanna time me? Besides, I have a dance to get ready for."

"Alright, go!"

The race on, she set off around the corner and took long strides down the corridor before making it back to the alleyway, the sound of squealing tires reaching her ears as she ran towards the street. She knew it was TW coming for her. As she made it to the footpath she could see him gunning towards her. With a touch of theatrics, she stopped, smiled and waved before he slammed on the brakes and stopped before her.

"Beat you," she laughed as she climbed into the passenger's seat.

"Some old woman was crossing the road back there...couldn't really mow her down, could I?" he scoffed.

"Excuses, excuses." Kara laughed as she moved into the back of the van. "Okay, we have about twenty minutes before this thing tonight, so I'd better get organized and dressed. How many security vans have their back full of computer stuff and then a little cabinet for a woman's clothes and makeup?" She pulled the curtain across then crossed her arms and peeled her top off. Crouched down in her bra and pants, she pulled her long black dress from its plastic bag and off the coat hanger before she slipped it over her head. "Do you think you can pull over for a bit? I have to put my makeup on then do my hair and I don't want it to look like I've done it while rolling around in the back of a van," she joked as she unlaced her boots and wriggled out of her pants.

"Sure, there is a nice quiet road just up ahead."

"Thanks Jeeves." That was the great thing about her relationship with TW. He was like an older brother. The only feelings they had for each other were purely plutonic. She didn't need to worry about him trying to sneak a peek of her in her underwear, but on the other hand she never really gave him the opportunity either. In the years they had worked together, he may have caught her semi-naked twice, if that, and he was more embarrassed than she was.

She waited till the van stopped before pulling faces at her reflection, carefully putting her liquid eyeliner and lipstick on perfectly. When she slipped her feet into the heels that made her ankles scream but made her body look even longer and slender, she couldn't help but groan. "See what we have to go through?"

"It's all good," TW said, looking back at her. "You look stunning." And she did look stunning. The dress hugged and flared in all the right places. Her lean athletic body could not be hidden in the folds of the material.

"Thank you. One day you are going to be in a suit and I will get to laugh at you," she responded to the compliment as she brushed her hair. "Okay, you have to do a check on this brooch." Kara wriggled the diamond and emerald brooch clasped to her dress between her breasts.

"Sure," TW said, moving into the back with her. He reached up and flicked on one of the monitors. An image of him appeared amidst a lot of fuzz. "Nope, something's not right there. It should be as clear as a bell." Kara didn't flinch when his fingers slipped behind the brooch while his eyes remained glued to the monitor. "Just a little bit more." She started to smile at the fact his fingers were gently easing between her breasts and he was oblivious to it all. Kara looked down at his fingers working to move the small wires on the back of the brooch. "Ha! There! Perfect; should be ready to transmit as well. Gotta love a gadget that can monitor and transmit at the same time," he said. After a brief moment of silence, Kara glanced up at him and smirked. A look of dawning horror crossed his face as his hand lay motionless

in her cleavage. She laughed out loud when he pulled away as if he had touched a hotplate. "Oh jeez, I'm so sorry."

"It's alright. If you had done it on purpose you would have had a bloody nose by now." Kara laughed again as she watched him physically squirm. "But it's all good now?" She waited for his response. "The brooch TW!"

"Oh...um, sure. Yep, it's all good to go." Kara watched him dart his gaze everywhere but at her before resting on the safety net of this monitor. She wasn't entirely sure, but she believed he was blushing. As she rolled her eyes and mentally sighed, she sometimes wished he would remember nothing's personal while on the job.

From the top of the stairs the ballroom looked stunning. Fairy lights dripped from the ceiling to give the room a cozy glow. Waiters whizzed around the room with hor d'oeuvres and drinks, the low murmur of conversation drowned out by the string ensemble of violins and cellos. It felt as if every man was staring at her. Her strapless dress crossed over her chest, projecting the illusion that her breasts were twice the size they actually were and showed off her well-toned athletic physique. The material cinched under her breasts and splayed out at the waist, whimsically floating behind her. Her hair tickled the back of her neck as she looked slowly around the room. To get away with what she planned, this would be the most important heist of her career. She gripped her clammy hand more firmly around her purse and took her first step down the stairs.

Afraid her thin high heel would get caught on the soft material of her dress, images of her hurtling to the bottom of the staircase flashed across her mind. With each step she took she held her breath. She smiled at a waiter hovering near the foot of the staircase and felt relieved when he reached out his free hand towards her.

"Thank you. These shoes are fabulous but clearly not made for walking too far, let alone climbing down stairs." She did her best bimbo giggle as she made it to the floor.

"My pleasure. Would you care for a drink?"

"After those stairs, yes please." Kara thanked the waiter again for his kind assistance, collected a flute of champagne and wandered off. She tickled her fingertips over her neck, savoring the small sip of champagne as it fizzed in her mouth and demurely lowered her gaze to the floor to gather her composure.

She adjusted the brooch before speaking in a hushed, low tone. "Tango Whiskey, you with me or am I all alone at the dance?"

She smiled as she heard laughter in her ear. "No, you are not alone at the dance and that shrimp is looking mighty tasty."

"None for you unless you want to get frocked up and get in here." Kara placed the flute down and turned. "Target spotted Tango Whiskey. Moving in."

Kara glided across the room, unaware her movements were at that very moment being monitored by a third party.

He watched her as she moved across the room, unconsciously licking his lips as he stared at the way her dress floated behind her. Mesmerized by the way her hair gently bounced on her shoulders, he couldn't help but wish his fingers were there instead. So caught up with the apparition in the room, when he swallowed his drink he coughed and spluttered a

little. He had never been so taken by a woman before. There was just something about her. His gaze returned to the material clinging to her bust, which then floated delicately around her hips and then effortlessly behind her as she sauntered around the room on spiked heels. He pushed past a small group of people to keep her in his line of sight, his mouth watering as he watched her hips sway. His hand instinctively splayed in his pocket and he imagined it resting on her behind, ready to give it a quick squeeze. He almost groaned as he thought about how it would feel to have her butt resting in his palm. Just as he was wondering what had her attention, a waiter moved into his line of vision and he lost sight of her.

In hindsight, grabbing hold of the waiter by the wrist to get him out of the way was not the smartest thing he could have done. The tray of cocktail shrimps the waiter was holding went crashing to the ground, the harsh jarring noise causing everyone to stop and stare.

He reached for the waiter and apologized while he still looked for Kara. "I'm so sorry. Are you all right? It is entirely my fault. I'm sorry." As the waiter reached for his tray, he moved to his left in the hope of spotting the goddess again. When he heard a painful yelp come from the waiter, he realized he had stepped on the poor man's hand. He shuffled on his feet in an attempt to stop any further embarrassment to either himself or the waiter. "Oh jeez. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Tell your boss it was all my fault. Better yet, I'll go see your boss later and tell him it was all my fault."

He shook his head in consternation. Renowned as being the always cool, calm and collected man, tonight he was reduced to a gibbering and incompetent fool. Awkwardly stepping over the waiter and shrimp, he stumbled towards the dance floor as he tried to catch a glimpse of her again. He circled on the spot, searching for her black dress or her gorgeous brown hair, all to no avail. She had disappeared. Not one to give up, he turned around and pulled out one of the chairs, seating himself on the edge of the dance floor as he determinedly scanned the room.

Since the waiters now kept their distance, he was forced to go to the bar for another refill. He leaned back against the bar and brought the glass to his lips. The ice chinked as the sweet smelling bourbon soothed his tight throat and calmed his nerves.

He'd ordered a double when Kara made her way to the dance floor. He didn't see where she came from, but it didn't really matter. She had reappeared just as quickly as she first disappeared, although she was now hanging off the guest of honor's arm. He watched as she threw her head back and laughed. Tension growing at the base of his spine snaked its uncomfortable tendrils up his body until it tickled his thoughts with a sense of urgency. He needed to know her name, needed to get close enough to hear her speak. He'd never met anyone who had taken his breath away.

Kara smiled as she turned and placed her hand on Mr. Marc's shoulder, waiting for his lead. She had made it to her target easily enough. Thank goodness she looked so innocent and wholesome that his hired goons didn't think anything of it when she asked for a dance. Mr. Marc's team had successfully infiltrated one of ACORP's holding areas with the assistance of a disgruntled former employee and stole a computer chip with valuable information. Kara had not been privy to the information about the snitch but it was now her job to get the chip back.

Because the top of his head only came up to her shoulders when she stood next to him,

she tolerated what he said as a result of his short man syndrome purely for the job.

"This is a fabulous party Mr. Marcs. I bet all the women are jealous because I get to have the first dance." Kara felt her skin crawl as she tried to leer at the aging, balding and fattish man before her. It made her sick to her stomach that she had to be so fake.

"Well, my dear. I do insist on the prettiest girl of the night giving me the first dance. They should be jealous. Just as every man should also be."

Kara threw her head back and laughed the fake snicker she had spent hours perfecting. She heard the words 'hold him there' through her micro-earpiece.

The brooch had begun its transmission of a security card inside Mr. Marcs' jacket. Kara needed to be within close range to collect the data, which would give her access to the vault that held the missing computer chip.

"Hold him there...almost done," TW said. "Right, you are good to go."

Mr. Marcs licked his lips in an attempt to entice her. "Perhaps later...could I interest you in looking at a painting I had done recently? I think you would find it most delightful." Kara forced herself to smile and nod at the smarmy bastard before her. She knew he was a thief and she wanted nothing more than to show him what a 'pretty little thing' could do.

Her whole body turned to stone when she felt his podgy fingers descend to her left ass cheek. She curled her hand forward, forcing his hand to recoil.

"Please Mr. Marcs. Don't touch my ass without my permission," she sneered.

"Oh. I'm just an old man trying to have a bit of fun."

"Well, I don't appreciate it and I thought you were better than that."

"Is that old bastard trying to cop a feel Kara?" TW boomed in her ear.

"May I cut in?" came a low, deep, strong-sounding voice.

Chapter Six

Mr. Marcs refused to let go of her hand as Kara stepped back and turned to see where the voice came from. Her eyes looked directly at a very broad chest. She tilted her head and saw the most amazing green eyes she had ever seen.

She had never seen this man before but already liked what she saw. He looked dashing in his tuxedo but visions of him wearing dirty denims and a crisp white shirt flashed through her mind. She liked a man with fair skin and dark hair.

Kara said 'Yes' while Mr. Marcs said 'No' at the same time.

"Looks like it's ladies choice," the deep, strong voice said as its owner stepped in and took hold of her free hand. They stood looking at each other, waiting for Mr. Marcs to let go of her hand. Instead, he moved between them, his hand circling around her waist in a proprietary manner. It made her skin crawl.

"What's happening? What's happening?" TW kept asking. Kara tried to step back but was unable to move as Mr. Marcs tightened his grip around her waist and over her hand.

"Look, we don't want any trouble. You got to dance with her first and I'm sure she'll save you another spot on her dance card. You have to share the wealth a bit, you know. No one likes a greedy old man." The thinly-veiled slur had Mr. Marcs releasing her hand and although he looked ready to retaliate, he wisely refrained from making a scene. Within seconds, she was being whizzed around the dance floor in the arms of her sexy savior.

"I guess I have to thank you now," she started.

"No...no...this is thanks enough. By the way, I'm Lachlan. Lachlan Mitchell. I work at Avex as a financial advisor. I've not seen you at one of these events before."

"Well, you wouldn't have. This is my first one." Kara knew TW was listening in on their conversation while recording it. She glanced over her shoulder to Mr. Marcs who followed her around the dance floor. "I work for Telection. I'm sure you heard of it. We are in security and surveillance."

"Excuse my ignorance, but no, I haven't heard of your company before. I'm definitely interested in hearing more though." Kara laughed one of her fake laughs before TW started whispering in her ear.

"What?"

"I didn't say anything," Lachlan said, turning his full attention to her.

"Oh sorry. I thought you said something." She could have sworn TW talked to her although she didn't quite hear it. The sound of low screeching caused Kara to gasp and shake her head. She had never had interference with her earpiece before. She winced against the slight screech and at the same time tried to maintain a normal composure so Lachlan would not become suspicious.

"Is everything alright?"

"Oh yes. Sorry, just a bit of a cold shiver. You know...someone watching you...thinking bad thoughts." Kara tried to block out the music in the great hall and focus on what TW was saying.

"Yes. I wonder who could be thinking those." Lachlan pointedly looked over her shoulder and returned Mr. Marcs malevolent stare. He smirked as he slid his hand along her

back. "You smell like vanilla."

"Sorry? Are you smelling me? I don't know what is worse; being groped by a geriatric or being told I smell nice. That's very Hannibal Lectorish." She was secretly attracted to his scent too. A fruity, strong, bold scent with a hint of...fresh rainforest? Whatever, she liked it.

She could feel the latent strength in his arms as he moved her around the dance floor effortlessly. Terrified she would step on his foot and make a fool of herself, she forced herself to think straight.

Lachlan laughed. "That's funny but so not true. I think it would be worse to be fondled by an old man."

"Yeah, I think you're right. Although you might want to ask me again when there's only Mr. Marcs or Hannibal in the room." The interference in her earpiece finally stopped and she was able to hear TW telling her to commence the operation. "Look, I appreciate the sentiment but I really must be going."

"But I've only just met you. It might be another lifetime before I get to meet you again." He refused to let go of her.

Kara smiled and slowly wriggled free from his grasp. "Then so be it. You know where I work, I know where you work. If we are meant to see each other again, then it's meant to be. I really have to go. I have a lot of work to do tonight."

"You have to work tonight? Who works on a Saturday night?"

"I do. Thank you again. I really did enjoy the dance...and I like the way you smell too." Kara winked at Lachlan before holding onto her dress so she could leave the dance floor quickly.

"Tango Whiskey, I need someone to make sure I'm not being followed, copy?"

"I'm on it Kara. There was a huge amount of interference when that guy came up to you. This is the reason why we transmit the information. It might have been lost had we stored it on you. By the way, he smelt nice?"

"Shut up," Kara said in a low tone as she pushed her way through the crowd of people hovering near the bar. She prayed Lachlan wasn't following her. Time was ticking and the last thing she needed was to fob off some gorgeous guy so she could do her job. She glanced over her shoulder as she exited through a side door and then made sure the coast was clear in the alleyway. Again she looked behind her to ensure she wasn't being followed before moving towards the tow truck. As her shoes clicked on the roadway, she tsked TW for his choice of vehicle.

"I mean...come the fuck on. A tow truck?" she said as she reached his window. "Tell me again you got the information, coz if you didn't, you are the one going back in there to get groped by that old geezer!"

"Of course I got the information and hey, you of all people should know we have to be inconspicuous."

"Yeah...but a nice car would have been inconspicuous. This is just tragic."

"Look at it this way Kara. They – they being Mr. Marcs and the man that 'smells nice' – will be expecting you to be in a flashy car. They would never believe it if they saw you in a tow truck."

"Can we at least get this shit moving? We have a long night ahead of us and the sooner it is started, the sooner it will finish."

"Is this how you are on all your dates? No wonder you don't have many."

"Oh and you do? Puhlease. Sitting with your mother in front of the television does not count as a date TW!"

"To her it does!"

They continued to bicker back and forth as they set off to retrieve the goods from a storage facility owned by Mr. Marcs. She told him to keep his eyes on the road as she pulled on her black pants under her dress.

"TW! The road...you know, the stretch of bitumen where you keep the car on? Do us a favor and keep this scrap heap on there." She pulled the dress over her head and dove into her shirt, leaving as little time as possible to sit in her bra next to TW. She laughed at him. "Stop it pervert."

"You're the pervert. I've seen you checking out my ass."

"Oh sure. Yeah, I've been watching it grow. You gotta lay off those donuts. You don't have the metabolism of a young schoolboy anymore. Or should I say a young schoolgirl? How old was that last girl you were seeing TW?"

"She told me she was twenty-one—"

"And you believed her?" Kara interrupted. "Honey, when they say they have to be home by midnight, it's a fair indication they are not telling the truth."

TW ignored her comments and changed the subject. "Alright. If you're finished then maybe we can go over the game plan one more time."

"Sure. Talk."

"Alright. So we are good to go? You know what you have to do and I know what I have to do. Just a piss in the park," TW said.

"You know, I've never fully understood that expression and now is not the time for an explanation. Do you have the access card?"

"Certainly." TW handed her a small plastic card. "Can't be one hundred per cent sure it's going to work, but there is only one way to find out I guess."

Kara carefully took the card and reached for her backpack. She always liked to be present when Stephanie packed her bag; it gave her the opportunity to decide what would be included.

"Okay. Time?"

"Eleven-thirty-nine. I'll be with you every step of the way. I'll head over to the van now. Like I said, just a piss in the park."

"Please stop saying that!" Kara shot back as she slammed the tow truck door closed. She turned around and looked along the road. It was uneasily inactive. No cars. No sounds. She made her way along the long, leafy, well-maintained embankment, continually checking her left and right, what was behind and in front of her.

She snuck behind a tree and peered around to see three security guards hovering near the access door she needed to get through. "I need a diversion. I've got three here and they are all blocking me."

"Sure thing...I'm on it." The sound of a few clicks whispered in her ear before the security alarm sounded, forcing all three guards to run in the direction of the alarm.

"Nice work," Kara said, checking to see if more were coming.

TW's voice praised himself in her ear. "All in a day's work."

Running in full stride, she set off towards the access door. She looked around her as she reached into her pocket and pulled free the access card. The coast still clear, she held it up to the computer box to be scanned, smiling when she heard a loud click and saw the door pop open.

"We are in that park now TW." Kara reached for the door handle and pulled it back. "Alright. I'm in. Time for you to do your magic."

"Less than thirty seconds. ACORP have got a new record. You are going to become their model employee." She could hear him clicking buttons through the earpiece.

"Who says I'm not already. Now stop talking to me...I need to concentrate."

"Okay, surveillance tap in place. You should be in a long corridor...go to your left and head all the way to the end."

"Yes, I do know the plan TW. For God's sake! You are not being paid by the word. I need quiet and that does not include having your heavy breathing in my ear. You've got the surveillance swap happening yet?"

"Okay, okay and yes, you have fifteen minutes."

Kara knew she had free reign over where she wanted to go now that TW put all the surveillance cameras on a time delay. She could be in and out without the surveillance crew even knowing she was there.

She hugged her body close to the wall and dashed along the corridor. Her back pressed to the wall, she inched her head around the corner to look for a clear passage.

"This is a bit too easy TW. There are no security guards here at all."

"Don't get too eager...that's when things start to fall apart."

She swiped the card at the next security station. "Why do companies think that if they only use security cards at each door they are protected?" The system beeped and the lights turned to green, granting her access. She set off running along the next corridor, getting closer to the vault. "Alright. Heads up. There are guards at access three."

"Okay, use the canister in your bag. Don't forget to put your mask on first. It will knock them out for at least twenty minutes. They'll be down for the count the second they smell it. That will give you enough time coz you will be out in ten minutes max, right?"

"That's the plan," Kara puffed, reaching into her bag. She clamped the mask over her face and pushed the button on the canister. It hissed as white smoke began to waft out of the a small opening. She looked towards the guards before tossing the can in their direction. The can clunked on the ground as more fumes billowed around the security guards.

"I wonder if they get compensation for being knocked out?"

"Who cares?" Kara muffled through the mask. "I am more concerned about being shot." She scurried towards the third access, jumped clear of the security guards and searched through the fog for the access panel. "Christ, it's hard to see. Will they be alright?"

"They'll be fine. Come on, time is getting away, Kara. You need to pull the lead out."

"Yeah, I know. It's easy for you, all you have to do is sit on your ass and monitor the security cameras. You don't have to do the running or fighting, or go through the stress of getting into a place like this so shut up...I don't need you bitching in my ear! I'm in."

"Okay. There should be one more pass and then you will be in the zone."

"Right." Kara set off running again. She pulled the mask free, the sound of her

heartbeat loud in her ears. Her chest felt tight for some reason. None of those fumes got inside of her mask, did they? She struggled to keep her mind focused on the next security door. Her legs felt heavy as she stumbled towards the last door. "TW...I don't feel so hot. I'm here at the door, but I feel like I'm going to pass out or something."

"Just a few more minutes and you'll be clear Kara. Focus. Where are you? I can't see you on any of my screens. Take some deep breaths, you'll be fine."

"I'm at the final security door. I'm near the vault. I should be fine. I'm just telling you I don't feel one hundred per cent. In fact—" She threw up, the acid taste of bile coating her throat and lining her mouth. "Oh, that's so much better now," she said sarcastically.

"You okay?"

"Yep, will be." She wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"Okay. Just take it one door at a time. You can do it. This is what you live to do," TW coaxed. Kara let out a long sigh and placed a clammy hand on the wall near the panel. The instant she did it, she tsked herself. Pulling a cloth from her bag, she wiped where her hand had been.

How could you be so stupid? Get it together Kara. No evidence, no trace and certainly no fingerprints. She replaced the cloth and wiped her brow with the back of her other sleeve. "Okay TW. One more panel to go, then we are with the mother load."

"That's okay. How you doing? Keep talking to me. The more you talk the more I know you are okay."

"Yeah...I'm okay." Kara blinked hard to stop the control panel from blurring. "Okay, I'm in. Tell me what to do."

She stood before a computer switchboard that filled most of the wall.

"Okay, there's a box on the right-hand side. Well, not so much a box but more of a panel that is covered by Perspex. Underneath it are three chips. They should be red, green and pink. I need you to take the pink chip and replace it with the one I gave you. This is where you need to have delicate and swift hands. If the computer registers that the chip is missing or faulty in any way, it will activate the alarm. I didn't want to have to tell you this, but...if that does happen, the room gets sealed off and all air gets sucked out. So no pressure."

"Yeah, thanks for that." She swallowed hard, gagging again at the taste of her bile. "Just change the chip. That's all I was told. No one said anything about air and lungs being sucked out. Just change the chip. Can't be that hard, can it? How long do I have before it activates the alarm?"

"Five seconds."

"Five seconds to replace the chip? Time me; I bet I do it in three." Kara shook her head gently to try to clear it. She blinked hard as she took the chip from the plastic case in her bag and positioned it between her fingers. "Okay, alright. Getting ready to make the switch." She breathed out slowly and calmed her mind and fingers. "Opening the plastic hatch." With a steady hand she brought her thumb to the small tab jutting out from the plastic cover that was shaped like a dome. She held her breath as she applied the necessary pressure to make it pop open and then slowly exhaled as she carefully pushed it back away from the chips. Gingerly pulling her hand away, she shook her hand as she focused on the three colored chips before her. "Okay, the pink chip."

"Yeah. You can do it. You have done it so many times during the practice runs you can

do it in your sleep. Just keep a clear head and you'll be fine."

"It's done. While you were giving me one of your shitty pep talks, I got the job done."

"Shit, I was going to time you. I didn't even get a chance to press the stopwatch. You'd better get your butt out of there now. I'll time you to see how long that takes you."

"Already on my way." Kara turned and smiled as she watched the door to the vault close behind her. Even when she felt like crap she still had the balls to get the job done.

"Okay. You have six minutes up your sleeve, but now I'm asking you nicely not to dawdle."

"You are the one that shuffles along like an old man TW," Kara shot back. "Besides, I hope those guards are still out of it or I am so screwed. Oh shit..."

"What's going on? Confirm your location Kara. I repeat, what is going on?" Working from the back of the van, TW swiveled around to look at the computer. The dot from her tracking watch was not moving. "Confirm your location Kara."

He repeated his call several times before she spoke again. Although static prevented him from understanding what she was saying, he could tell she sounded out of breath.

Minutes went by before Kara came back into range.

"TW come in. Pick up location has been changed. I repeat...pick up location has been changed."

"Where are you? What happened? Confirm new location. Do you still have the chip?"

"I have the chip. Confirm pick up location as plan B. I am almost there. Am being tracked. Repeat...I am being tracked!"

With little delicacy TW threw the laptop onto the passenger seat as he turned the key in the ignition. The engine turned over and he set off slowly. The sound of Kara puffing in his ear increased his sense of urgency. He planted his foot against the accelerator but quickly eased the pressure when he heard the tires spinning. He had to get to next pick up point, and fast. It was only a few blocks away yet it felt like he was stuck in a traffic jam. He knew he was never going to hear the end of it regarding his choice of get away vehicle as the tow truck rumbled along to the next stop.

She could have sworn she heard TW say the gas would knock the security guards out for at least fifteen minutes. What they weren't counting on was another group searching for the same thing. Her mind whirling, trying to make sense of the unexpected development, she opened the door slightly and saw them coming. Kara only saw three men but that didn't mean anything; there could quite easily be more. She quickly hid around the corner of the other corridor and searched her bag for something to defend herself with, unobtrusively watching the three men move towards the vault door that had given her access only moments before.

She waited till they were out of sight before she moved back to the door, looking for the security guards. There was a man looking down at them, checking their vitals. She was stuck. The sound of a fuse burning just before a dull pop reached her ears and she turned back to the vault; they had gained entry by blowing up the access panel. *Why didn't that kind of shock to the system cause the room to go into lockdown mode?* When she saw the three men staring at the huge panel of computer equipment, Kara reached over and touched the access panel, activating the

alarm. The vault door slammed shut. The ear-piercing squeal of the alarm made her heart jump as the full realization of what she had done sunk in. The fourth man pushed through the door as she leaped behind it.

She held her breath as she surreptitiously moved around it, all the while praying he would not turn around and see her. She yanked on the door with all her might to close it then reached out and smashed the access panel, effectively locking the door. The sound of the alarm was deafening, the persistent screech pounding inside her head in time to the throb of her growing headache. She raced along the corridor, running in the opposite direction of her entry point into the building.

An alternative escape plan was worked out for every job they did, just in case something went wrong, like this. The bag jangled loudly over her shoulder as she ran as fast as she could towards the elevator shaft. Using the elevator shaft had become her favorite way of escape. The space in the shaft was clear, straight down to the ground floor exit. She could pry the doors open and then slide down the cables, then use the elevator hatch to gain access inside the elevator. Her heart beat in time to the screeching of the alarm. She kept her eyes focused on the elevator door before her, not bothering to look back.

Kara pulled two hooks from her bag and stopped short of running into the elevator doors. She lined the first hook into the small gap before placing the other one. Widening her stance a little for greater purchase and automatically locking her knees, she tightened her grip on the hooks and pulled the doors apart. Her muscles flexed as the doors shifted slowly and she groaned with the effort. When it was open enough, she wedged her foot in and clipped the hooks back on the bag strap before using her bare hands to widen the opening. She quickly looked over her shoulder; time was of the essence. The doors were finally open enough for her to slip through.

The doors sandwiched against her as she pulled her bag through, her body the only object holding the doors open. She reached for her gloves. If she grabbed hold of the cables now, her hands would be shredded beyond recognition by the time she reached the next floor. Taking a quick look up and down the shaft, she spotted the elevator car below her. She inched her body into the shaft as far as possible before reaching for the cables. She heard male voices getting louder as she called for TW once again.

After no response, Kara reached out and teetered on one leg, her hand reaching for the cables. The cables slipped through her fingertips and she had to grab hold of the doors to steady herself before attempting again. This time the swaying cables moved into her hand as her fingers clasped around it.

As she turned and let her body fall onto the cables, she could see two men running towards her. She pulled her leg through the opening and the doors slammed shut. She called again for TW as she slid down towards the car, secure in the knowledge that the car was not going to move because the building had gone into lockdown mode.

Heat built against her hands and she told herself to hold on for another ten seconds. She would be fine. Loud banging resonated throughout the shaft and she looked up to the floor where she had made her escape. She descended to the top of the elevator quicker than she anticipated and kicked the hatchway door in to gain access to the car, not waiting to see what was happening above her.

Automatically bending her legs when she dropped down inside the car, she said 'thank

you' out loud for a relatively easy run to the elevator, knowing she was far from being home free. She reached for the hooks again, unclipping them from the strap and jamming them into the door. It was harder to get them into the crevice from the inside. Kara pulled hard but one of the hooks bent and came away from the door. She took no time in pushing it in as far as she could by hand and then stepped back. The hook went in when it was met with the heel of her shoe then she grabbed hold of the hooks and pulled. Her head dropped back as she gritted her teeth and groaned, putting all her strength into getting the doors open.

As before, she wedged her foot into the tiny gap she created so she could get a better grip on the doors. Voices from above, yelling at each other, drove her to use all her strength. She slid her body through the gap sideways before reaching back for her bag.

Once she passed the bag over her head and held it in her right hand, she pulled the rest of her body through leaving only her foot wedged in the gap. She reached into her bag and grabbed another canister, triggering the mechanism before tossing it into the empty car. Her foot pulled free, she ran as fast as she could. Digging her hand into her pocket she pulled out what looked like a stick of gum. She ripped off the wrapper and rolled it into a ball before splitting it into two. A door that was the only barrier between her and freedom stood before her. Once she had stretched the explosive over the top hinge of the door and then the bottom, she rubbed the mass with the back of the wrapper before moving away and crouching down into a tight, protective ball.

"Don't fail me now," she said just as the double bang of explosion ricocheted down the corridor. The door hung in place only by the lock. Kara pushed the door out of the way and jammed her finger against her earpiece, yelling in the hope TW could still hear her transmission.

"TW, do you copy? Escape mission aborted. I repeat...escape mission aborted. Go to new location. Go to new location." The only sound Kara heard were her shoes hitting the pavement. She did well to avoid being seen. The spotlights had been activated and showed every inch of the grounds. She had to get off the grounds and meet up with TW.

If she wasn't at the pick up point by the time he got there, he would leave her. The alarm echoed through the night air as Kara hugged the wall. She looked back to the door. The men had followed her. The gas should have held them back for a good while. She set off in a sprint towards the trees.

"TW come in. Pick up location has been changed. I repeat...pick up location has been changed." Relief washed over her when she heard TW ask where she was. "I have the chip. Confirm pick up location as plan B. I am almost there. Am being tracked. Repeat...I am being tracked!"

Kara's legs started to ache. She was used to running, but not at a sprint for a long period of time. She jumped over the low shrubs and pushed past the spiny long hanging branches of the trees. She tried to control her breathing so anyone following her could not hear her. Her heart pounded as the hair on the back of her neck stood up. That was close. Too close. She heard the grinding of gears on what she hoped was the tow truck as she ran towards the security fence. For a company dealing with technology, she was shocked when she discovered they only had a high brick wall to stop intruders.

Why wouldn't you electrify it? Nevertheless, she was glad it wasn't. She reached for her hand suction cups and jumped, the sound of a dull thud an indication her body had collided

with the wall. The handgrips held her in place.

"Come in TW. I need transmission confirmation. Location for pick up has been changed." Kara puffed as her arms carried all her weight. She was so tired. Her body ached all over but she loved the thrill of the chase. The adrenaline kept her moving.

"Confirm that. Getting into position for new pick up point. How you doing there Kara?"

Kara jumped over the edge of the wall and hit the ground heavily. Her hand instinctively moved to her pocket to ensure the chip was still safe and secure. Through her deep breaths, she could hear a male voice swearing on the other side of the fence. She set off towards the road; the tow truck was just before her. She set off running after it, reaching the passenger-side door and swinging it open.

"Hey!" She looked down the barrel of a handgun pointed at her face. "What? Did you think I wouldn't make it? Put that away. You are going to hurt someone with that one day."

"Oh thank God it's you. Are you all right? Are they still chasing you? Talk to me."

"No. I lost them at the wall." Kara leaned her head back against the seat rest and tried to catch her breath. Her chest rose and dropped sharply as she puffed. "You gotta get this piece of scrap metal moving or we're gonna get caught. I don't know if he got a good look at me but he knows someone has what he wants."

"You saw the guy? Do you know who he is?"

"Yeah, I saw him. I've already seen him twice tonight. He's the guy who smelt nice at the dance. Lachlan Mitchell."

Chapter Seven

"Avex is a smaller component of the Croshwell Group, headed by one Lachlan Mitchell. Although Avex deals with security and maintenance, when he said he dealt with financing, he wasn't lying. His job is to bankroll Avex. Once the Croshwell Group has all the information it requires to steal the goods, the companies involved stand to make double if not triple the money back when Avex goes in and saves the day." A number of security pictures on the projector flashed across the white wall as Mr. Holt addressed the people in the meeting. "There is a large financial backer involved and we are in the process of finding out who exactly that backer is. But for now, we have information on Lachlan Mitchell himself. He is originally from England, born and raised there. Kara had a small interlude with him while getting information from Mr. Marcs' security card. Something to note people: he smells nice."

Normally Kara didn't care about what people thought, but her cheeks flushed nonetheless. Everyone in the room was looking at her.

"He's sexy though. I can see why you would think he...smelt nice, Kara," Stephanie whispered, even though everyone could hear her. A big picture of Lachlan remained on the wall while the team was given their assignment.

"Now might be a good time to alert everyone to the real Lachlan Mitchell. He is ruthless in his pursuit for what he wants and has been known to kill for it. Extreme caution is needed when dealing with this man. He will stop at nothing to get what he wants."

Kara felt sick to her stomach. Had she'd known he was an alleged killer, she would have never have danced with him. She would never have allowed her feelings and initial attraction to become engaged had she known he was a coldhearted thug.

"The Croshwell group have been searching for one of highest-prized artifacts—the Meridian Veil. They have some very clever people on their team, nevertheless not as clever as ours.

"Created in the thirteen-hundreds, the last time the Meridian Veil was valued was in nineteen-fifty-six. It was priceless then and is doubly so now. To lose this would be devastating to ACORP and its shareholders. This is one artifact we pride ourselves with maintaining and keeping in our possession. We use this as a catalogue for potential clients and it always secures the deal. Currently it's located here." Mr. Holt used a laser pointer to highlight the fourth floor of an eight-story ACORP building. "Security is at a premium and we cannot allow this group to infiltrate our security measures. Your job is to obviously get in and get it before he does. As Kara says, beat him to the punch line. If they think the Meridian Veil has been stolen, we can track the intelligence they receive to ensure we are always one step ahead of them."

"It's just like a pis..." TW trailed off as both Kara and Stephanie glared at him across the table. "Well yeah, shouldn't be too hard."

"Security is at every level. The first challenge is to get into the main room; the next one is to get into the case housing the Meridian Veil. It's like a huge Perspex box surrounded by shatter- and bullet-proof walls sunk into both the ceiling and floor. Our plan is for you to bypass the room and drop straight into the Perspex box. But in order to get you there, the only safe way is via Kara's favorite way," Mr. Holt started.

"The air conditioning shaft," they all said in unison.

"Yes. She will go in through the front door and use the elevator to get to the second floor. TW, you will follow her exactly two minutes later and feign a heart attack. This will draw out security. The Museum's policy is, if security on one level is called for duty, the floor above moves down and takes over the new post. That changeover gives Kara about forty seconds to get into the air conditioning shaft."

Kara entered the museum wearing a sharp, all-black outfit with cargo pants. The commotion behind her indicated that TW had started his act. Security guards rushed past her into the main foyer as she walked on. With a quick look around her to ensure the corridor was clear before turning her attention to the air vent, she pushed her long ponytail over her shoulder and crawled into the small space.

Reaching down for the grill, she placed two clamps on each end of it while Stephanie's voice rang in her head. "These are great grips, Kara. Because you are not on the other side and able to put the screws in, these grips will hold them in place."

Kara forced herself to focus. Once she reached the top of the air vent, two floors up, the heist would begin. She heard TW gasping for air in her ear as she shuffled along the duct.

"Nice job there, TW." Kara smirked; she wouldn't change her job for the world. She heard Stephanie's voice in the background.

"Alright, what seems to be the problem here? Sir, can you hear me?" Her voice came through Kara's earpiece loud and clear. "Yes, I'm an ambulance paramedic. I'm here to help you. Can someone please tell me what is going on? Do you have tightness in your chest?"

"By the sounds of it he should win an Oscar for this performance," Kara whispered.

"Okay, thank you, thank you. Can you all step back? I need some space and this man needs some air, so can you please all step back?" Stephanie instructed.

Kara gently turned onto her back to look at the bend she had to maneuver around to get to the third level. She slowly and gently placed her feet on either side of the vent.

"Okay, we are going to get you out of here and take you to the hospital. Did you come here with anyone else, Sir?"

"You should get an Oscar for your performance too, Steph," Kara chuckled.

"All in a day's work...all in a day's work. Oh shit."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Alright, move it people. Sick man on board, gotta move him out," Stephanie said before saying in a low-tone, "Kara, we have company. I just saw him and three others. They are dressed as security guards but I know it's him."

"Who him?"

"You'll be able to smell him again. It's Lachlan Mitchell."

Kara's heart skipped a beat. She was used to racing against the clock but not against another team. Especially when the team leader is alleged to be a killer. She pushed with her legs and got to the third level.

"Can I get out and run to the room?"

"No, stick to the plan. There are ways around this. Both of you have to get into the room first. We have given you everything to get in and out; it's up to you now. You just gotta act fast, so get going."

Kara didn't slow down while Stephanie was talking to her. She heard TW asking what was going on when she heard what she assumed to be the ambulance doors closing.

"Just stick to the game plan Kara and you'll be fine," TW said.

"I'm on it." She was working up a sweat as she pushed herself to go faster. "Are they armed?"

"We don't know. We haven't been able to see them on the security cameras. TW is working on bypassing their interference.

"You can't see them? What the hell do you mean you can't see them?" Kara puffed. Her head was clouding.

"It means I can't see them but I'm looking. Just stay focused and get to the fourth floor."

She wriggled through the air duct on level three at record speed. Her arms ached as she dragged herself along. The cool air blowing against her damp skin gave her goose bumps.

"Okay; I can see where you are. You are almost there. You should be able to see a grill in front of you."

"Yup. I see the grill."

"Well done. We still don't know where the others are but TW is working on that. Now, you need to move forward another two meters and then you are right to start cutting."

"Okay...I'm in position. About to start cutting." Kara pulled on her goggles and moved the blue flame of the acetylene torch close to the floor of the shaft so the sparks wouldn't fly up and hit her.

"Tell us how you are going," TW asked.

"You just tell me where those others are."

"They have jammed our transmission. Thank God they haven't intercepted this frequency."

"So you can't see them? Fuckin' fuck fuck." Her nerves were starting to get the better of her. Part of Kara wanted to go faster and get the job done but another part of her mind got sidetracked by thinking what Lachlan and his team were planning.

She moved to the metal grill vent and surveyed the room. Given the limited area she could see, she had no other choice than to ease the cut metal up, effectively opening it like the lid on a tin can. She poked her head through the hole she made and saw she was inside the Perspex box. The end of a rope was suctioned into place and she poked her legs out of the vent. Slowly, hand over hand, she scaled down the rope and looked around as she placed her feet on the floor. Her heart stopped.

"I'm in...and I have company." Four men dressed entirely in black from head to toe, with their faces covered, stood on the other side of the clear wall. She knew the tallest one was Lachlan.

It was like time had frozen. She stood staring at them staring at her.

Even though he was wearing a balaclava, it was his eyes that gave him away. And he could see exactly who she was. She felt naked before him. The burn in her cheeks indicated the beginnings of a blush as she straightened her back and forced herself to look away.

"They are there?" TW's yell in her ear brought her back to reality. "They are in the same room? Get moving Kara! Christ!"

"No. I'm in the box; they are on the outside looking in. They must have stunned every

security guard in the place because the four of them...they are all here. Hi." Kara waved and smiled at Lachlan, taking in the odd moment.

He seemed so suave, so gentlemanly, so not a thief, but she forced herself to remember that she too knew how to build confidence in a person and then betray it.

"Get the Veil and get out," TW yelled. "Get back in the air vent and get to the —"

"What?"

One of the men turned on a powerful drill that drowned out every sound in the box. The three other men beat on the glass, trying to assist its breaking. Kara couldn't even hear the voice in her head, let alone TW or Stephanie.

She reached into her pocket and crouched down next to the final, smaller box, placing her lock picking set on the floor. Vibrations from the drill reverberated through the floor. As she pulled out a long, thin metal stick with a hook on the end and a long piece of fuse, she glanced back at the men trying to gain entry. It was quiet. The drilling had stopped. She could finally hear TW.

"Where the hell are you? What's going on?" he screamed. "Have you blown the second box yet?"

"I'm here. I'm just working my magic. They are drill —"

It started again. She heard the thick Perspex squealing as it was shaved away. Her heart beat faster and she felt perspiration trickling along her palms. Carefully, she wiped her hands on her pants. If the fuse got too wet it would not light. The men were now shouting at her, but it only made her work faster so she could get the hell out of there.

Holding the length of fuse gently in her left hand, she lined up the lock of the smaller Perspex box that housed the Meridian Veil. Reaching for her small tool kit she thumbed a thin steel rod out and carefully eased the fuse into the keyhole. She continued to ease the fuse in by touch until she felt a shunt on the rod. Normally she would wait until she heard a click, which meant it was packed in as far as it could go, but with all the drilling going on she had to trust her touch.

Confident she'd reached the end of the lock with the fuse, she placed the rod back in her pack, quickly folded it up and replaced it in her trouser pocket before turning to the men. They had all stopped and stared at her. Without the squeal of the drill, the silence was deafening. She padded her chest with both hands, moved them to her hips and then slapped them against her butt.

Shrugging, she moved towards the men. She signed with her hands as she asked, "Do you have a light?" before breaking into laughter and flipping them her middle finger.

One of the men slammed his fist against the wall.

"Gotta catch me first, fucker!" Kara smiled, turning back to the fuse. She heard Lachlan yell at the other three to keep going with the drilling as small sparks flew along the fuse she laid. "You ready guys? I'm almost done." She stepped back and covered her ears.

Kablammo!

The box was successfully split down the side, exposing the Meridian Veil. The remnants of the safe looked like the skin of a banana peeled back. She looked at the men and smiled. Her smile faded as she realized the drilling had stopped once again. They were packing the hole with explosives. She swore out loud and wasted no time in grabbing what she came for, stuffed it into her backpack over her shoulder and jumped to grab hold of the

rope to climb back into the vent. "You wanna make sure I can get out of here. I've got the goods and they are just about to blow up the place. I know he's not going to let me get away after rubbing his face in two fail heists. Shit!"

Kara scaled the rope in a matter of seconds, flipping her legs to grab hold of the air vent. Hanging upside down, she saw them prepare for the impact of the second explosion. She climbed into the air vent and set off. The force of the explosion caused her to stumble forward, but she was up and going in a matter of seconds.

"Are you alright Kara? Come in Kara. Get to the roof."

"Yeah, I'm alright TW. Just gotta get me out of here. I'm between the fourth and fifth level."

"They might think you're going back down to the ground level. They might try and head you off there."

"Oh no. He's going to come after me. He knows exactly who I am now and where he's seen me before. He's not gonna let this one go. I can hear them. They are following me."

"Just get to the roof. The roof is your escape. You have to be faster than them. Don't worry about being smarter, you have already proven that. Go Kara, go!"

"I'm going, I'm going!"

She didn't care how much noise she was making as she scuttled through the vents, all she cared about was getting safely away.

Kara kicked the air vent cover off and climbed out onto the roof. Wisps of hair licked her face as she looked towards the back of the building. She reached under her backpack to pull a claw attached to a rope and jammed it into the bricks.

The sight of a pair of legs poking through the air vent caught the periphery of her vision as she clipped her harness onto the rope. She said a silent prayer that the harness and rope would hold her and get her to the ground safely as she stepped back off the ledge. Bouncing her feet for the first few steps, she looked up as someone called her.

Lachlan was staring down at her. For the first time in ages she felt frightened. If he did anything to her rope, she would plummet to the ground and die. Kara didn't think twice about her actions when Lachlan pulled out a knife and jammed it into the rope. She released her hands from the building's edge and hurtled towards the ground. Lachlan lurched over the edge and grabbed for her, but only grabbed the rope.

He called out to her again as she tugged on the belay device in an attempt to slow down. The smell of singeing nylon caught her breath. The small, metal grip bent against the strain. Her hands shook as she tried pulling on it again, but she was moving too fast. Instinctively, her natural reflex was to grab at the rope to try and slow herself down.

The heat from gripping the rope was too much for her to bear as she screamed out and let go. Her speed increased before she grabbed the rope again. She remained suspended by holding on with one hand. She looked up and could see a dark shadow coming down the rope above her.

"Shit! TW, he's following me. Where are you?"

Chapter Eight

The rope went taut as she hung suspended. She grabbed hold of the rope with both hands as she felt it move.

"TW, what are they doing? Jesus. What are you doing?" Kara yelled, letting go of the rope again. Her eyes widened as she watched the ground draw closer at great speed. She coiled her fingers around the rope and gritted her teeth as searing heat from the rope burned painfully into her palms. When she connected with the ground, she thought she heard something snap just as her earpiece dropped out of her ear. Stunned and breathless, she gingerly got to her feet.

Within seconds Lachlan was next to her. She turned to run but he was too quick and latched onto her bag with both hands, pulling her back. His strong arms wrapped around her torso and locked her arms to her chest.

"Well, well, well. I was hoping to see you again, but I didn't think we meet at this sort of event." He was wearing the same aftershave and for a millisecond she relaxed while his intoxicating aroma settled on her brain. She took comfort from the strong arms holding her body tight.

"Let me go!" Common sense prevailed when she realized the direction her thoughts were headed and struggled to free her arms. She kicked her legs out trying desperately to throw his balance.

"Don't struggle; it will only make it worse for yourself." His voice quivered when her foot connected with his shin, his grip momentarily loosening in automatic reflex. It was all she needed to twist out of his arms, regaining control by quickly grabbing his wrist and bending the lean muscular limb behind his back.

"Don't struggle; it will only make it worse for yourself," she whispered into his ear, echoing his smug words as she stretched his arm to the point of pain, bringing him down to his knees. "I know just about everything there is to know about you, except who you work for."

"You think I'm going to tell you? You've stolen something I was sent to retrieve and I'm going to get it."

"Ha! Even if you did get it, I'd make damn sure I got it back off you. I got it first, didn't I?" Kara lightly ran her fingers over the balaclava then pulled it off his head. She pushed her hand through his hair and pulled his head back, tilting it up so she could look into his eyes, albeit upside down. "Who do you work for?"

Lachlan brought his free hand up and clamped it around her neck, forcing her face against his. Kara struggled to stay on her feet, wincing from the pressure inflicted by his steely grip. She brought her knee up and connected with his lower back, hard. He pulled her forward as he cried out in pain. "Right, I've had enough of this foreplay," he struggled to say. He kicked his leg out and knocked her to the ground. For a moment she thought she saw stars when her head hit the concrete. Before she regained her senses, Lachlan was on top of her. He linked his hands into hers and held her in place. "Tell me who you work for and I might let you go."

"I work for myself," she lied, wincing at the feel of rough ground shaving away skin

from the backs of her hands as she continued to struggle against him.

"I don't want to hurt you Kara, if that is your real name. But you have stolen something I need and now that I know you have it, my guess is that we will be seeing each other again very soon."

"You can't be serious? You'll be lucky if I don't kill you."

Lachlan shifted her hands so they were held securely in place with one of his own. She felt him trail his freed hand down her arm, continuing on down her side. His fingertips brushed past the underside of her breasts and she saw him smile when she tried to hide a small shudder. Quickly and without warning, she lifted her head hoping to head-butt him but he neatly avoided the maneuver.

"Oh...bit of life in you yet. Now don't do anything silly that might end up with you hurting yourself. You are the first person who has discovered my true identity and funnily enough, I don't want to bump you off. I want to get to know you better. You do realize you have an amazing talent, don't you? I might even be interested in offering you a position on my team.

"I almost died when I saw you coming out of that air vent. You did it so gracefully, but then you had to ruin it all with the finger moment. That was less than ladylike. Funny, but a little crass." Kara struggled to see where his hand had gone. "So my proposal is this. I'm going to take the Meridian Veil and you will have to come and find it. Simple. And when you do find it, I'll be there waiting with dinner for you."

"How do I know the whole dinner thing isn't a trick? A set up before I even get into the building? Poison my meal? Don't make me hurt you Lachlan."

"You have nothing to fear. I like your style. If anything, I'm sure you will prove to my boss you could become a valued member of my team. Think about it and oh, don't worry. This won't hurt a bit."

The last thing Kara saw was Lachlan spraying a small vial of something in her face before everything went black.

"Kara! Oh thank God we found you." Stephanie sounded like she had run a marathon. "We have been searching everywhere for you. We didn't know what happened. Some jerk blocked the ambulance in, so we got stuck. Lucky the owner of the car was close by, damn fool. Thank God they thought we were a real ambulance or they might have done something to us too. It's okay TW, you can go now, she's come back to us."

Kara instantly felt nauseous from the rocking of the ambulance. "Where is he?"

"Lachlan? He sprayed with you with something to knock you out. This was lying by your side and he left you a card." She held up a small bottle with her gloved hand. "You are very lucky he didn't do anything worse than that."

"What was the card?"

"Just his business card. Pretty cocky for a thief to leave a calling card."

"Where's the Meridian Veil? Don't tell me he took it." Kara looked at Stephanie, waiting for her reply, but at the same time not wanting to know.

"You just told me not to tell you."

"Shit! I have to get it back."

"Not today you won't. We have to go back to HQ. The mission was a failure, Kara."

"It was not a failure. I got the damned thing and then he —"

"Made you lose your head. There is no way Holt is going to send you back in there. You have been compromised. You may have lost your earpiece, but it wasn't that far away. We were able to record everything he said to you. We know he told you to go after him and the Veil. Holt's not going to sacrifice you to get it back. He just won't. You did a bloody good job, but it's over now."

The hell it is.

Kara shook her head as Mr. Holt spoke of the failed mission. "You are a very lucky girl. He's killed for less, but nonetheless he has the Meridian Veil and we have formed a team to go in and get it back. Kara, you need to go and see the medic about your ankle."

"There is nothing wrong with my ankle—" she started.

"Go and see the medic about your ankle," he repeated firmly. With as much dignity as she could muster, she turned around to do his bidding. She knew damn well she was not included in the new team. The knowledge ate away at her. Taking a left turn at the corridor, she bypassed the nurse's station and headed for Stephanie.

"What the hell is he thinking? He knows no one else can do the job. Fair enough, I lost the Veil...but at least I had it! Lachlan just didn't play fair."

"On a first name basis now, are we?"

"You know what I mean Steph. This is wrong—it's so wrong. It should be me going in, not anyone else."

"But it's not, Kara. There are some things you have to learn to let go of and this is one of them." Kara shook her head and silently watched Stephanie tinkering with her gadgets as her thoughts churned endlessly in her mind.

"What is Holt talking to them about? I am the only one who saw what happened inside the vault box. I should be in there helping them prepare. I hate to say it, but I even think I should be leading the team."

"Whoa...now come on Kara. You have no experience in the team department. I'm sorry to say it, but it's true. If you think you can contribute then you need to speak to Holt, but later, not now."

"But later is going to be too late. What is he telling them? And don't tell me you have no idea because you would need to know exactly what they are doing in order to fit them out properly with the necessary tools. Don't lie to me Steph. I need to know what they are planning to do. Just for my peace of mind."

Stephanie looked at her. "You know that book you lent me? I want to get it back to you. What are you doing tonight?" Kara straightened her back as she automatically recognized the code speak.

"Nothing. I was just going to have a quiet one and nurse my ankle."

"Right. I'll come around and drop it off tonight, but you really need to let this one go. Okay, Kara?"

"Yeah, I'll let it go," she said under breath as she walked out of the room. "When I have the Meridian Veil back."

"How are you?" Kara asked with enthusiasm. She had been impatient for Stephanie to

arrive. As she shut the door, she flicked the edge of a table activating an audio jammer. She nodded at her guest. "Okay, it's on." Even though they worked for a surveillance company, they knew not to take any chances when it came to obtaining information they were not privy to.

"Just to be sure..." Stephanie reached into her bag and placed a white box with a red button on the coffee table. "There. Now, I cannot stress enough how important it is you pretend you know nothing about what is in these folders. The only way I was able to get them out of the building was to say I was working on a new prototype. I'm sure they are following me, but Holt gave the authorization for me to take them. There is information in these files about where Lachlan Mitchell hides out and who his boss is. The thing no one has been able to figure out, all the heists are written in code."

"Really? How long have the cryptanalysts had it?" Kara was shocked that ACORP's team of code-breakers hadn't been able to figure it out.

"They've had them for over three weeks."

"Over three weeks? Show me." She practically snatched the folder out of Stephanie's hands.

"Aren't you going to offer me a drink?"

"It's serve yourself around here girl. You know where the glasses are." Kara smirked at Stephanie as she took her place on the lounge and opened the file. She read through each page, desperately retaining as much information as possible. The notes on the security and surveillance of the places Lachlan's team had targeted drew her attention. Something about them looked familiar, a similarity she couldn't place her finger on it. There were photos taken from security footage cameras. In the centre of the shot, Kara noticed an older-looking man wearing a dark jacket and dark glasses. "Who is this guy?"

Stephanie joined her on the lounge and picked up the photo. "Hmm, is there anything in the notes? They probably just thought he was a passerby and didn't take any notice."

"Well look, he's in three of these other photos. He looks different but you can't escape that nose. That nose..." Kara pulled all the pictures closer to her face. She reached over and flicked on the side table lamp and held the photos underneath.

"What is it? What's wrong? What do you see?"

"It's not what I see...it's who I see and I think I see...no. It can't be." Kara put the pictures back in the bundle and looked back at the notes.

"No Kara, you saw something. What was it?"

"Nothing. I'm not going to say anything unless I know for certain. Can you leave these here for me or can I make a copy?"

"You'd better make a copy—" Before Stephanie could finish, Kara was up and out of the room heading towards her study. As the fluorescent light on her copier filled the room, Stephanie leant against the doorframe. "So...are you going to tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell. I just think a vital piece of information has been overlooked. I don't know if it's because we have green people on the team or whether it's just plain incompetence. I get blown off a job because of one tiny little fuck up...it pisses me off."

"I can tell." Kara was grateful that Stephanie chose to let her photocopy the documents in silence before packing them away.

The file returned, Stephanie looked at her, concern written over her face. "Look. Just

promise me you are not going to go and do something stupid with this information."

"I'm not going to go and do anything stupid with this information," was the monotonous reply.

"Don't you dare take that tone with me. You know I hate it. Now promise me!"

Kara held her hand up to pledge Stephanie. "I, Kara Procter, promise I will not do anything stupid with this information."

"Good. Now you need to get some sleep. You've had a big couple of days. By the sounds of it, you may have to make a presentation to Holt concerning what you saw in those pictures but refuse to tell me about."

"If I think of or see anything, I will let both you and Holt know," Kara said as she walked in the living room. "But it's getting late. And you're right; I am starting to get a bit tired."

Kara knew Stephanie knew she was lying, but for whatever reason took her at face value.

"Alright, I'll let you get all rested. Don't spend all night reading. Okay...on three." Kara reached over to the table's edge while Stephanie picked up her audio jammer box. "And laughing, one, two, three." They pressed the button at the same time and broke into laughter. "That's one of the worst jokes I have heard in a long time. Where do you get them?"

"Off the internet." Kara laughed again. They always ended their nights with a joke. If they were under surveillance, it would have seemed like they were having a girl's night in.

"Well, thanks for the nail polish. I'll get it back to you soon but other than that, you put a video on and rest that ankle."

"That's the plan." She smiled as she opened the front door. "You have a good night too."

Sleep was the last thing Kara had on her mind. She knew that nose in the photo; she had the same one. Her father was alive. For hours she stared at the photos under the magnifying glass, trying to make sense of her disbelief. Why hadn't he had made an attempt to contact her over the years? And Lachlan Mitchell was his runner boy? Her emotions ran riot; should she be glad, happy her father was still alive, or pissed off because he never came for her?

The magnifying glass thudded on the table top as she let it drop from her grip. She breathed out heavily as she reclined back into the chair, throwing a leg over the armrest. It was imperative she get to Lachlan and talk to him. She wanted information about her father. Her mind reeled as she tried to think of a way to get in contact with Lachlan without ACORP or her father finding out that she worked for them.

What was once the beginnings of a headache now threatened to become a blinding migraine. Kara rubbed her temples, refusing to listen to her body as she tried to plot her way through the maze she now found herself in. There was only one way out that she could see, and that was to make a trap. Kidnapping Lachlan and forcing him to give her the information she needed was the only way. She had no doubts about her ability to carry the plan through, but while he remained ACORP's target, it was going to be all the more difficult.

Lachlan was waiting for her; she just had to catch him by surprise. She felt the element of surprise would be more his style, none of this 'contact' and 'let's meet' business. She placed

both her hands on the table and slowly got to her feet. Everything she was contemplating would land her in hot water with ACORP – but only if she got caught.

Chapter Nine

For the first time ever, walking through the doors of ACORP seemed painful. Questions clogged Kara's thoughts. Did they know the man in those pictures was her father? Were they keeping it from her? Would she get away with her plan to get to Lachlan? What would happen to her if she got caught? Should she talk to Holt about her plans? Would he help her or would that be the end?

"I said hello, Kara." TW looked at her strangely.

"Oh hey. How are you? Sorry...got a million things going on up there." Kara smiled and pointed to her head.

"I can tell. So what's going on up there?"

"Bah! You don't wanna know. Believe me; you are better off not knowing. So...are you on the new game plan? What's the deal? Going after Lachlan Mitchell or after the Meridian Veil?"

TW muffled his snide laugh and looked around as they got into the elevator. "You know I'm not allowed to discuss any upcoming missions with people who aren't on the team."

Kara felt like she'd been slapped in the face. Seeing the hurt on her face, he quickly added, "But if you are to know anything, you have helped the team immensely to get to where it is. All the background work you did...it put them in a really good place."

"Quit kissing my ass TW. You and I both know I should be on that team. No one has given me a half-decent reason why I'm not!"

"There is a reason for everything Kara. You just have to learn to get over things."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Because you haven't got the message. You have to let this one go!"

"Fine!" Kara jabbed at the number five repeatedly in a bid to get the elevator to move faster.

"I think you've pressed the button." His attempted joke was met with a glare. "Hey, don't get cranky at me. I'm not the one who..."

"Who what, TW? Go on...say it! I'm not the one who lost the Meridian Veil. Well, when you get your ass out of the way of the computer monitors and into the red zone...don't even talk to me about failed missions. It must be hard to be so humble when you're so fucking perfect!"

TW looked up to the ceiling and shook his head for the remainder of the elevator ride. As the doors opened, Kara stormed out and headed straight to the boardroom with TW in tow.

"Morning. Kara, I believe you have to go and see Stephanie." Kara looked around the boardroom. It was a ploy to get rid of her.

"Fine." Kara shook her head and turned on her heel, pushing TW out of her way.

"This is bullshit. Pure and simple. Well, I'm not going to stand for it!"

"And what do you plan to do about it? I hope you're not planning anything stupid Kara," Stephanie teased.

"Not at all."

"Oh yeah? Why don't I believe you? Come on, it's me you are talking to here. Just

don't do anything stupid, like mess up your connections with the company or with Holt or with your life."

Kara looked at Stephanie and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Well, if you do decide to do something stupid, make sure you take this." Stephanie held out her hand towards Kara.

"What is it?" The small container given to her looked like an eye shadow compact.

"It's a mini explosive. The colors are the explosive and that button on the back of the mirror, that's the detonator. Always good to have one of these in your kit. If you get into trouble, all you have to do is press, drop and run like hell. Best not to stick around when you let one of these little babies off the leash."

"Thanks Stephanie, but I really don't know what you are insinuating. It's a video and some popcorn for me tonight."

"Either way. If a movie and popcorn turn into a date of some weird description with someone you are not supposed to have any contact with...well, make sure you pack that and your favorite color of lipstick too."

Kara nodded and turned on her heel. She never left home without her favorite lipstick. Tonight, she was going to get answers. Answers from Lachlan Mitchell.

Kara checked herself in the mirror. The blonde wig she wore was curled and pulled into a low ponytail. Black liquid eyeliner accented her eyes while a dark pencil made them look smoky. She pulled on her heels and stood back before the mirror, critically inspecting her reflection. She liked what she saw. Black shiny stilettos, a knee-length black wrap-around dress with a black lace-up corset over the top. She adjusted the top of the corset as she turned around, craning her neck to look at her bottom. A smile lit her face and she nodded in approval. She thought she looked appropriately dressed to kick Lachlan's ass. Grabbing her clutch purse, she headed for the front door.

Kara scanned the streets as she crawled her car around the block. She made her way to the front of the restaurant and pulled a twenty-dollar note from her purse. Before the parking attendant could speak, she thrust the money into his hand.

"I have to wait for one of your guests. Lachlan Mitchell. He wants me to wait in his car." She smiled sweetly at him.

A leisurely look from her head to her toe, she saw the moment the valet decided she must be a hooker. "Um sure. I can show you to his car."

"That'd be great. Thanks darl'."

She flicked her blonde hair in a manner she hoped conveyed slut and sex before trailing behind him into the underground car park. They found Mitchell's chauffeur in the back of the car, cigarette in one hand and a glass of bourbon in the other. He struggled to get out of the car, stammering in surprise as he looked Kara up and down.

"Lachlan told me to wait at the car for him." She nodded at the valet attendant for him to leave.

"Sure, we can get in the back if you want to be more comfortable," the driver sneered, licking his lips.

"After you," Kara said coldly. As the chauffeur turned and began to duck his head to get back into the car, her hand connected with the side of his neck, bringing him to his knees. The glass he was holding shattered into a thousand tiny icicles as it hit the ground. The next punch put him on his back. Quickly looking to her left and then right to ensure no one had seen her, she curled her fist around his shirt collar and dragged him along the concrete thoroughfare. She breathed out hard, her muscles straining under the extra weight she was lugging, and moved as quickly as she could to dispose of the scummy debris. She kicked against the janitor's door and dragged him by the feet till he was completely in the room. Ripping some duct tape with her teeth, Kara looked around as she placed the tape over his mouth. She checked both his wrists and ankles were securely taped together.

Donning the chauffeur's shirt and hat brought bile racing to the back of her throat. She dry-retched at the stench of body odor, her eyes watering as she tucked her hair under the cap. It smelled liked the man hadn't showered for at least three days, either that or the air-conditioning in the car failed to work. How did Mitchell put up with it, and why?

She sneered down at him before slamming the door shut and setting off for the car. Once she got into the driver's seat she opened all the windows just a crack. Although it was important she avoid being seen, she couldn't bear being stuck in the car with that putrid smell. She'd die if she couldn't get some ventilation going. She activated the Global Positioning System and found the route that would lead her back to Mitchell's house.

Nice neighborhood.

Within minutes the car phone rang. Her hand twitched in hesitation before picking it up.

"I'm done," Lachlan said without waiting for her to speak. "Bring the car around; I want to go home."

Kara collected her thoughts as she turned the key in the ignition. She was forever grateful for the dark tinted windows, especially if they were going to be followed once she picked up her quarry.

She raised the tinted screen between the front and back seat as she pulled up at the front of the restaurant. The valet attendant opened the door and Lachlan climbed in. She watched him smell the air before jamming his finger on the intercom.

"Fucking hell, Conrad. If you smoke in my car one more fucking time, I swear to God I am going to make you smoke a whole packet through your butt hole! Got it?"

Her grip tightened on the steering wheel as she took off towards Mitchell's house. It was the only safe way she could think of to gain access to his estate without being detected. Something pricked at the back of her mind before she realized she hadn't detected any signs of being followed, even when they neared the estate.

Kara slowed the car as she turned into the driveway and up to the guarded fence. The guard opened the gates without question. *Good to know. Just show the car and they will let you through.*

She mapped the driveway as she drove along, mentally calculating how long it took her to drive. Significant things, like where she could hide if she had to make her escape on foot, were filed away for future reference. She didn't realize how slow she was driving until Lachlan spoke.

"What's the hold up Conrad? You're not driving Miss Daisy here. I would like to get

home tonight, if at all possible, and as for drinking on the job you old wino...I'm deducting a week's pay. Get to a meeting."

Kara pressed her foot against the accelerator. The mansion didn't come into view until she rounded the line of trees. She pulled the car up at the base of a flight of stairs that led to the front door. A man she assumed to be the butler came to the car and opened the door for Lachlan.

"Put the car in the garage and go to bed. You need to sleep off whatever it is you have drunk or taken. Don't let me catch you like this again or it's your ass," Lachlan said before slamming the door shut. >From the corner of her eye she watched them walk up the stairs before she drove off. Following the gravel road, she assumed the large structure next to the house was the garage. She rolled the car into a vacant space and looked around. For a criminal he didn't believe in much security, or security that she could see anyway. Kara turned the key in the ignition, shutting the engine, and looked around her again before getting out of the car. Senses on alert, she backed against the wall and made her way out in the darkness of night back towards Lachlan. She couldn't wait to get out of the shirt as she pulled off her wig.

Taking refuge behind the bushes, she caught sight of a guard who collected the chauffeur's discarded shirt and cap.

"Conrad! Conrad!" the guard shouted, looking around him.

Keeping close to the house, she untied her corset and stripped off her dress, leaving her in only her lingerie. Her skin prickled at the caress of the crisp night air. Her clothes rolled into a tiny bundle, she hid them near the door and walked to the pool's edge. She dove in and skimmed across the bottom as she kicked to get to the other side.

Her long hair spilled out behind her as she glided through the water, finally coming to the surface. She gulped for air and opened her eyes after the water had run off her face, only to come face to face with the barrel of a pistol. Silently she blinked through the water in her eyes as she bobbed in the ripples, patiently waiting for the events to unfold.

"Who the hell are you?"

Kara looked past the pistol to the guard holding it and snarled, "Who the hell are you to stick a gun in my face? When the agency hears about this, they will never send any of their girls here again."

"I've not seen you here before."

She rolled her eyes for emphasis. "Duh...I'm not meant to be seen. The only thing I'm meant to see is the bedroom. I came out here for a breather. Your boss is upstairs now and when he hears about how you stuck your fucking gun in my face, I'm not sure he'll be your boss for much longer."

The guard lowered his gun, the smirk on his face warning her of his intention just before he lunged and grabbed a fistful of her hair. She quickly breathed in a lungful of air before she felt herself being pushed under the water's surface. Her legs kicked, churning the water as she tried to get above. Her nails dug into the back of his hand in an attempt to get him to release his grip. Her panic subsided and she levered her legs on the pool's edge, pulling on his arm as she quickly calculated how to maneuver the guard to her advantage if he showed no signs of letting her up.

The guard pulled her head out of the water and smiled at her. "Do you think my boss

gives a rat's about you, my love?"

Audible sounds of whooping as pocketfuls of air were breathed in to replenish oxygen-starved lungs broke the still night air as Kara mutely stared at the guard. Without warning, she pulled her nails free from his hand and swung her arm up to connect with the side of his head. Before he had time to react, she landed another punch to his head. She grabbed his wrist, squeezing it until he released his gun and it dropped into the swimming pool. "You should have killed me when you had the chance, fucker."

She punched him again, the force of which compelled him to release his grip on her hair, although he took a small clump as he let go. Adrenalin surging through her veins, she pushed off the wall and swam to the ladder nearby, nimbly climbing out. She turned around and jumped in front of the guard, her fists up in a boxing stance. He smiled in amusement at her.

"Don't call me your love," Kara spat as her fist crunched into his nose.

Reeling back, his hands clutching his face, the guard yelled profanities. She struck again. This time she moved behind him and grabbed hold of his head, digging her fingers into his eyes. She brought her knee to the middle of his back and leaned forward, pushing him to the ground. He wriggled and fought against her as she slipped her arm around his neck and tightened her strangle-hold. He slapped her arm, trying to make her release but she held on till he went limp in her arm. Moving off his back and rolling his body like a tree log, she felt for a pulse. It was beating fast as she lowered to check his breathing. Whispers of his breath tickled her ear as she saw his chest rise and fall evenly. He was out cold.

A quick look around her showed that his buddies weren't nearby; the noise of their little interlude hadn't alerted anyone. Slipping her hands under his armpits, she dragged him over to a deck chair, arranging his body so it looked like he was sleeping. She slapped his face in the other direction and then looked toward the mansion. There was no indication that the occupants had been alerted to what had just happened outside. Crouched down, she ran back to where she hid her clothes and dressed quickly, twisting her hair to get rid of the excess water before she wiped her eyes with the hem of her dress. The last thing she needed during a meeting was to look like something dragged from the depths with big panda eyes.

Her wet hair flicked over her shoulders, she made her way to the fuse box. The plan was to take out the security system's power. She took off her shoe and flicked the platform out to reveal a pair of pliers hidden within the heel. Working quickly, she knocked the metal guard off the fuse box and began clipping away the plastic wrapping to expose the wires. >From the heel of her other shoe, she pulled out a small black box and stuck it to the outside of the fuse box.

Before she touched the wires, she shook her hands and blew on her fingertips to make them dry, then moved the wires so one was hovering above the other. She reached for her clutch purse and pulled out a length of cord, which she partially wound around the blue wire. Deftly, she used the pliers to gently join the cord to the red wire and feed them both into the black box to bypass the video surveillance. Each cord was gently wound into place. If she had to make her escape, all she had to do was yank the cords free and all the security would be focused on the house, granting her free access to make her getaway.

Water from her hair seeped through her dress as she watched the little light on the black box. She wiped under her eyes with both hands, noticing from her hands her liquid liner

had run. It took a moment to get herself looking semi-normal again before she reached for the doorknob, shaking her head as it turned freely to allow her access.

"Lock the door dick," she said under her breath as she quickly scanned the darkened room. She was in the kitchen. Kara tiptoed towards the light streaming from under the door at the other end of the room.

Pressing her palm against the door, she listened for a sign of anyone nearby. On hearing nothing, she pushed the door open and looked down the corridor. It led to the main area where the two staircases met. She couldn't help but look around in awe. Everything seemed to be dripping in gold. The chandelier that hung from the ceiling looked to be several feet wide.

She lightly ran her fingertips over the staircase railing before she raced up the stairs two at a time. At the top, she paused, puffing as she waited to regain her breath. *I should get to the gym more often.*

As she neared the east wing, she saw closed doors on either side of the passageway. The first door opened on to the library, the second and third to guest rooms. She ducked through the fourth door, into yet another guest room, as the butler made his way back to the first floor. The whole mansion smelt like Lachlan's aftershave.

Once she was certain the butler was out of earshot, Kara continued on until she finally came to Lachlan's room. His designer clothes lay on the plush carpet like discarded rags. Quickly and quietly, she closed the door to the ensuite and the sound of a running shower. She reached into her clutch purse and pulled out what looked like two hairpins. Bending one open, she linked it over the edge of a vase of flowers, the other she placed on the edge of a painting. They could speak freely now. She couldn't help but snicker as Lachlan's booming voice resonated out of the shower in an awful rendition of *Delilah*.

Kara moved to the ensuite door and looked inside. His bathroom was as big as her whole apartment. Her eyes automatically strayed to the shadows moving behind the fogged glass shower door. The thought of a thin piece of glass between her wet and his naked body was something she couldn't block from her mind.

The moment he flicked the water off she snapped her focus back to the present and struck a pose, leaning nonchalantly against the doorframe with her body weight on one leg. All she had to do now was wait for him to step out of the shower and notice her. With his back to her, he stood in the middle of the bathroom and wrapped a towel around his hips, covering his glistening buttocks. Kara hadn't realized she'd sighed out loud until he spun around to face her.

Chapter Ten

"How the—? Jesus...I thought you were Jones again," he started. "What the hell are you doing here? How did you get in and why are you dripping wet?" The gap where the edges of the towel didn't quite meet highlighted a shadow of what was hiding underneath.

"All these questions Lachlan... I'm here because I have a proposal for you—a mutual arrangement of sorts. I got in through the side door and you don't have to worry about why I'm dripping wet. I took a dip in your pool to get by one of your guards. Very unromantic. And who the hell is Jones?"

"Jones is my butler. Do you think I could get dressed before we discuss this so-called mutual arrangement? That is, unless I need to be naked for it?"

Kara smirked and shook her head. She took her time looking at his dripping body from toe to head. "I think it would be best that you do get dressed, unless of course you feel you will pay better attention by being naked? I have put in scramblers to ensure that only you and I are privy to this conversation."

"And to what do I owe this pleasure?" Lachlan strutted passed her towards his walk-in-wardrobe with her following close behind.

"For the record, I am only following you to ensure you don't pull a gun on me like your little security guard did while I was in the pool."

"He pulled a gun on you? Well, that hardly seems fair. An attractive woman swimming practically naked in a pool and he pulls a gun on you? What an asshole. Consider him fired."

"That's what I told him before I beat the shit out of him." Kara smirked again. "You really should make sure it's your chauffeur actually driving your car. Someone might want to go and pick him up from the restaurant car park. That is, if you want him to continue driving your cars."

He turned and looked at her. "Is that how you got in?" She knew he was scolding himself for being so careless. "Nice job." Lachlan turned his back and let the towel drop to the floor. Kara grinned as he pulled on a pair of black silk boxer shorts over his creamy buttocks. "Do you like what you see? You have been smirking at me every second you have been here."

"Can't I admire something nice? And let's just back up here...your butler has seen you naked? Is that in his job description?"

Lachlan laughed at Kara's sense of humor. "No. Jones is my most loyal employee. Been with me for years."

"Speaking of employees, that is what I'm hoping to discuss with you."

"Would you like to have a drink while we discuss business? I'd kill for a bourbon."

"I believe so would your driver. A suggestion in one word: rehab, but yes, I would appreciate a drink, although I'm not going to ask you to kill anyone to get it. Bourbon. On the rocks." She watched him move to the decanter and glasses sitting on the mini bar set up in one of the corners of his bedroom.

It was Lachlan's turn to smirk. "My kinda gal. Care to take a seat?"

Kara took his drink and the offer of the chair. "Thank you. You know you can take the charm back a notch. It's me you are talking to now. I know your game Lachlan."

"I can't help it if I ooze charm."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Look. Did you come here to talk or to take the piss?"

"To talk. And if you want me to stop taking the piss as you call it, then stop baiting me. For starters, I must warn you every step you take is being traced. The company I work for is very interested in a number of things you have planned. To date they have been able to track every one of your heists and beat you. I can give you the upper hand."

"What's in it for you?"

"I need information about your employer," Kara said, reaching into her purse and pulling out a small envelope. "This information is for me and me only. What we discuss goes no further than beyond us."

He took the envelope she passed to him and pulled out a small photocopy of James Procter. "What's it to you? Looking to change employers? I told you I would gladly offer you a position."

"No. I'm not looking for a new employer," Kara said, taking another sip of the sweet bourbon. "I believe your employer is my father."

Lachlan returned Kara's stare even while he sipped from his glass. "You know, I can see a slight resemblance. It's the eyes."

"Let's not trip down memory lane just yet, shall we?" Kara started, putting her drink down loudly on the glass-topped table. "I want information about him. No comparisons of how I look like him or how our mannerisms are similar."

"Well, I can't say that he has your nice ass," Lachlan said, feigning to shudder.

"How did you meet him? Do you mind if I make notes?"

"As a matter of a fact, I do. What happens if I refuse to help you?"

"Too bad. I need to make notes and if you refuse, I will take you to my company myself and hand you in. I have gone the last ten years of my life not knowing if he left me on purpose or if he did come back and just couldn't get to me. If anything, I want to be able to show him that I am a better person and thief for not having him in my life. It was shown to me that my life was headed in the wrong direction. I had no education because of him. He thought the only education I needed was how to pick a lock. Everything I have achieved since he ran out of my life has been my achievement."

"How do I know this information is just for you? I will need some sort of guarantee. You know full well if it were me asking you these questions, you would not be happy."

"How do you want me to guarantee this information is for me and for me only?" Kara took another sip of the bourbon.

Lachlan sat back in his chair to ponder her question.

"There is one way. The Meridian Veil. I told you to take it before, yet it's still within my possession."

"Operatives from the company I work for have put together a team to retrieve it. It's being retrieved right now as we speak. You didn't do a very good job of concealing it."

"Then why are you here? Shouldn't you be off getting it?"

"I was not included on the team."

"Oh really? That must have hurt." Kara looked at him blandly. "By the way you

handled yourself with the Meridian Veil...when I stole it from you...you looked to be in complete control. Was it because you lost it that you weren't included on the team?"

"I didn't lose it. I know exactly where it is. As I just said, it's being retrieved now."

"Then why not go and get it?" Lachlan eyed her over.

"Because there are bigger things at stake."

The cold ringing of Lachlan's mobile phone interrupted their conversation. "Hello? Yes sir...how are you? Oh really? Just right now? Hmm, well that creates a new opportunity, don't you think? Certainly...as always sir." Lachlan closed his phone and put it on the table. "That was your father. Seems a group of people have stormed one of our hideaways and taken the Meridian Veil."

Kara smirked. "This conversation was so easy when I played it out in my head."

"So what is more important to you? Finding information about your father, or my safety, or the Meridian Veil?"

She took a moment before she spoke. "I guess they would all be as equally important."

"Very diplomatic answer. Now answer from the heart. I know you must have one in there somewhere," he said, trying to test her.

"If you are expecting me to say you are on the top of my list of importance, you can forget it. I have read your file, Lachlan, and I know you are an only child, as am I. We both know that single children look out for number one and that is themselves. My main concern is to find out information about the father who left me—" She stopped abruptly, as if she realized she was about to reveal too much. "Either you help me and you get some benefit from it, or I will find out the information myself. It's all a matter of time."

"In all the work I have done for the man, he has never once said he had a child, much less a daughter. Or an attractive one at that." She stared at him with a stone cold face. "The fact that I keep paying you compliments either really gets on your nerves or it doesn't at all."

"I don't let trivial small comments plague me." She moved in her seat. "So you have a choice to make. Get a heist completed for a change or I'll take you in myself."

"Let me ask you a question. Does your father know you are alive? Does he even want to meet you? Does he know it's his own daughter who has been breaking down his heists and beating him to the punch line?"

"That was more than one question and I don't really care to answer them. He made it quite clear what his stance was when he left me to take the wrap for one of the heists."

"Let me guess, you stuffed it up?"

"The alarm was activated."

"You stuffed it up." Lachlan nodded and smiled. "Don't worry. We've all been there. Well...I have been there, I just didn't get caught."

"And I'm sure you haven't been shot on the top of a twelve-story building either, so don't bitch to me about everyone being there! Alright?"

"You were shot? Wow. I find that...very...sexy."

"This meeting is over." Kara pushed the empty glass out of her way and got to her feet. "Hopefully the next time I see you will be on the news announcing your arrest."

Lachlan jumped to his feet and stopped her from moving closer to the door. "Don't be too hasty to end this meeting. I thought we were just getting started. I must say, no actually, I won't say."

"Probably the wisest thing you have done in a long time. Now get out of my way." Lachlan stepped towards her. She didn't budge from where she stood.

"I like how you are not intimidated by me," Lachlan whispered. "Tell me about yourself."

"I have dealt with your kind before. You need a strong-looking woman by your side but when it boils down to it, you just want a pretty little thing you can order around, use when you want to use them and send them on their merry way when you have had enough. I am your kind of guy's worst enemy. I am a blow to the ego not to the loins. I do things my way and I don't tolerate being treated like I'm second-class because I am a woman. I have worked damned hard to get to where I am today. I have worked to get an education and have graduated with honors. I have become one of the strongest team members within the company and I don't have many friends. And I am extremely interested in keeping it that way. Friendships become complicated when too many questions are asked. Now if you have enough information for one night, I would like to go."

"So you are just hoping to walk out of here?"

"No. I am going to take one of your cars," Kara said, just standing there watching him. "And you are going to come with me."

Kara put the car into reverse and looked into the rear view mirror. She reached into her bag, pulled out a lipstick, took the lid off and turned the base till a silver cylinder was exposed. With her thumb, Kara clicked a small button on the bottom of the lipstick base.

"I just enabled a cloaking device. We've got fifteen minutes before the GPS resumes its transmission to satellite. Ready to go?"

"Lead the way."

With a quick, curt nod of her bewigged head, she reversed the car out of the garage and drove to the end of the driveway.

"I have arranged for another car at the next stop. You don't need to know all the details but we should be there in ten minutes. Then we'll get you to a safe house."

"This is all rather exciting, isn't it? Makes me feel like I'm on a real heist. I haven't felt this way about a job for a long time. You have my word. You give me protection and I shall tell you what I know about your father."

They drove to a strip club. Kara slipped out of the driver's side and met Lachlan at his door. "Can we go in just for a little while?"

His question was met with a sneer. "We don't have time. I'm sure we are being followed right now. We have to go through here now. You said you would do everything I said."

"Yes. Yes I did." A black car pulled into a parking space across the busy intersection.

She linked her arm around his and held onto him. "Come on love. Let's go see if your favorite is here tonight."

"Let's." Lachlan paid the bouncer and they walked in. She scanned the room looking for familiar faces. With her blonde wig, it would take anyone who knew her a few moments to register that it was indeed her. A quick look at Lachlan and she impatiently grabbed his hand, pulling him through the small crowd. Since his eyes had wandered to the various breasts that were on display for the cover charge they paid instead of being alert to his surroundings, she

had no choice but to be doubly vigilant.

"Focus Lachlan," she scolded over the loud thumping music. "They are only breasts."

"But they are all fabulous. You can't tell me you are ashamed of having them."

"Not at all. It's always good to have something extra to distract the weaker sex."

Pulling him away from joining the ranks of leering men and the occasional woman was harder than she had anticipated. It felt like she was dragging a naughty child away from the chocolate aisle.

Kara pushed against the heavy back door and stepped into a poorly-lit alley. A quick look up and down and she found her car. "Come on. We have to keep moving."

"I'm right behind you. Favorite place to be actually." Lachlan chuckled as he stepped into the alleyway.

She swung around and grabbed hold of his wrist. Her swift movement threw him off balance and caused him to trip over the uneven step into the club. She rammed her forearm under his chin and moved to within two inches of his face.

"You wanna stop with the snide comments? I am only tolerating you because you have something I want. And if you refer to that something as any part of your body, I will hurt you. Do we have an understanding? This is a business deal. Be professional!" She barely gave him the leisure of nodding. "Get up. You are wasting time."

Kara set off running towards her car with Lachlan in close pursuit. Both stopped at the driver's side.

"I want to drive," he said.

"Not a chance," she retorted, pushing her way into the seat. She barely gave him enough time to get into the car before taking off.

"Don't drive too fast. You're going to be obvious." Her foot instinctively pulled back from the pedal as she checked to see if they were being followed. "How long will it take us to get there? Now might be a good time to continue with your questions. Is this car secured?"

"Yes. I disabled the GPS system myself. Whichever direction we go in, the coordinates that are sent back belong to a seventy-four-year-old woman. According to the company, I don't do much driving. Actually, when we get to the next place, we have to get some food."

"Nice. I could go for some dinner."

"It's only going to be fast food. Hope that suits your acquired taste."

"It will be fine. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable with my compliments. You really need to let it go and accept it." She turned her head slowly and blinked at Lachlan. "I'm just saying, is all. Can you watch the road? You are starting to freak me out slightly."

Kara turned her head to look back at the road, but not before she looked him in the eye and gave an evil smirk, saying, "Good."

Chapter Eleven

Kara pulled the car into the gas station. "The car needs gas. We can get some food while we're here. It should only be another hour until we get to the safe house." Lachlan nodded. "You stay in the car while I get the gas and then you can come inside with me to get what you need."

"What? You're not going to leave me in the car with the windows wound down a little like a good little lap dog?"

"Not yet," she said with a sneer as the gas pumped into the car. She looked around her and then at her reflection in the window, flicking her hair as she pretended to laugh at something Lachlan said. "Right. Come on." She reached out and took hold of his hand. "Let's play the happy couple, shall we? And if you start anything, so help me God!"

Lachlan's answer was to sling his arm around her shoulders and pull her close. She hated being in contact with him. Her thoughts always wandered when he touched her—at least the sensible and logical ones did. It was like her brain shorted out.

The pair of them smiled at the attendant as they made their way to the refrigerators situated at the back. Lachlan kept a silent look over the surveillance.

"Cameras only," he said as Kara grabbed milk and bread.

"Good. Take these." She passed him a bag of crisps, the bread and milk before gathering more food. "Is there anything else you think you need?"

"Do you have supplies?"

"Yes. I have completely fitted out the house with everything we could ever need."

"I doubt you will have everything I need." Lachlan smiled.

"God. How do you get any work done? Really? I'm asking you. You are too busy thinking about your dic—"

"Cops." Lachlan leaned forward and kissed Kara on the lips. There was no chance of her moving away. His lips felt great. Moist but not wet. She felt his lips open slightly and fought to stop hers from instinctively doing the same.

Her head spun. When he snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her in close against the crunching crisp packet, she didn't protest. Her eyes opened and she saw the reflection of the two officers in the security mirrors. She kept her lips firmly closed to Lachlan's probing tongue. Kara pulled back and turned her head to wipe the edge of her lips on his shoulder.

"Move one of your rings to your wedding finger," he hissed furiously near her ear. "We are newlyweds." She snapped her head back and glared at him before relaxing her features into a loving smile.

"Howdy. Traveling through?" one of the policemen asked as Kara let the produce spill from her arms onto the counter.

"Yeah, newlyweds. We're traveling across the country on our honeymoon." Kara smiled and reached for Lachlan's hand.

"You make a nice looking couple," the other officer commented.

"Well, I'm a very lucky man. I have the girl of my dreams by my side." He leaned down to kiss her forehead and she felt a chill run up her spine. She wished the attendant

would hurry up scanning their items. Lachlan reached into his pocket and pulled out two twenty-dollar notes and handed them to the cashier.

"Keep the change," Kara said, grabbing hold of the bags and handing them to Lachlan to carry. "Good night officers, be safe."

Lachlan nodded and led the way to the car. "I wanted the change. I didn't get to where I am now by giving my money away."

"Oh spare me. How much money do you have? Besides *dear*, we are newlyweds. We are supposed to be too in love to care about money! Why didn't you just say you were my brother or something?"

"Because you are not supposed to kiss your sister like that, even though you did keep your mouth shut!" Kara giggled after which Lachlan started to laugh. "Can we get going now?"

"Yes. Yes we can, but first this is where I get a bit kinky. When I pull out onto the road, I want you to put this on." She handed him a blindfold. "The place I am taking you is my own private place. I don't want people like you knowing where it is, let alone know how to get there."

She couldn't stop looking at his lips. He kissed her like it was nothing yet she wondered if he enjoyed any part of it. Her mind strayed. Would she be kissed like that again? What would she do differently next time? Would she respond? "Please put it on. Might be kinky to you, but necessary for me."

"I understand, even though you didn't exercise the same discretion when at my house. If this is your definition of kinky, I'd hate to know what your opinion of mine is," he said as he wrapped the blindfold over his eyes and placed his hands on his knees. "I must say, all in all, your father would have been very proud of the way you handled yourself during the Meridian Veil heist. Imagine if we teamed up?"

"Ha!" Kara scoffed. "We would never agree on which side to steal for."

True to her word, it was another hour before they reached the safe house. "You can take off the blindfold now."

Looking around, Lachlan couldn't see anything. The moon's light barely peeked through the treetops.

"I need some assurances this is not a set up," he started. "I insist you wear this." He reached over and placed a watch on her wrist. "If indeed this is a set up, the band will be activated by me and a succession of steel pins will pierce the skin. After that painful little experience, you probably won't feel anything because you will be electrocuted to death in a flick of a finger. It's one of my side hobbies. Creating little gadgets that can kill someone in the blink of an eye."

"Sure. I have nothing to worry about since I know this is not a set up and I believe I have more at stake than you do."

"Very good then. I shall take it off when you have completed your end of the bargain."

Kara nodded and stepped out of the car. Lachlan carried the bags as she opened the door and turned on the lights to the cottage.

"I'm sure it's not what you are used to but at least I know I'm safe here. I have cameras set up at every entrance. If we are going to have any uninvited guests, we will know about

them in advance. I have scramblers built into the walls and the windows are bulletproof. The only real concern we have is if the place catches on fire."

"Good to know." Lachlan set down the bags and groceries. "You own this?"

"Yes. Yet another difference between you and me. I worked hard for everything I have now. None of this was given to me."

"I appreciate everything I have too. What I appreciate more is the things I don't have and how hard I have to work for them to become mine," Lachlan fired back.

"Do I have to keep wearing this?" She thrust her arm towards him.

"Just for a few more moments, yes. After I take it off, if you try to do anything silly I will shoot you myself. Unlike your experience on top of a building, I will make sure the job is done properly."

"You don't trust anyone, do you?"

"Do you? You can't build trust in our game. You of all people must know that. Your father left you to take the fall for a heist. Where was he while your hand was resting in the cookie jar? Seems like a bit of a prick thing to do. I could understand it if, for arguments sake...back in the vault with the Meridian Veil. Had you cocked up there, sure, I would have left you there too, but you didn't. I couldn't believe it when I saw you drop down from the air conditioning duct. It was like my heart had stopped. I have never failed in any of my heists until you came along. When I saw you on the dance floor, I must admit I had no idea you were a thief. I'm usually pretty good at picking people who are. The way you stormed in and took the Meridian Veil right before our eyes...it was like a ballet. So well executed. I was pissed at myself for days for not thinking of something so simple."

"Well, men always like to go for brute force first, then logic and the easy way after." Kara switched on a row of computer monitors along the west wall. "Shall I put the coffee on? We have much to discuss."

"First question...does my father know where I am and what I do for a living?"

"Technically, that's two questions and they really should be directed at him."

"Shut up. So the answer is you don't know." She put her pen down on the table in frustration. "How about: have you told him anything about me, even though you didn't know who I was until a few hours ago?"

"I might have mentioned something about an attractive girl at the benefit the other night, but that's nothing unusual."

"Well, what if you said something that would make him check the surveillance? Do you know if he checked the surveillance?"

"I have no idea. I give him a rundown report then leave. That's how we do business."

"Do you know where he lives?" Kara stared at her notepad. A thousand questions ran through her mind. She had to force herself to focus and ask them one at a time.

"No."

"Christ. Do you know anything?"

"None of his employees know anything about his private life," he replied. "He is in the world of stealing artifacts and information, yet none of you have attempted to find out anything about him."

"How did you come to meet him?"

"I met him when I was trying to steal an artifact from him." Lachlan rested both arms on the table before leaning back in his chair and lifting his hands to rest them behind his head. "He said he had learned of a young man running busts in the same area he liked to haunt. He sought me out, came to me. He obviously thought I had talent and he wanted to nurture it." She stopped writing and took a deep breath before continuing with her notes. He was toying with her. Provoking her. No matter what he said, she was stronger than he and she would beat him at his own game. "Hmm...stronger than I thought. If someone I'd just met said their father preferred someone else over his own flesh and blood, I'd be over that table and throttling them. But I bet it stings a bit though."

"You know nothing about me or the circumstances of why my father did the things he did." Kara spoke quietly without looking up from her notepad.

"I know you are quite agitated; I told you before we left I might not be able to give you the answers you want, but I'm trying. Whenever we talk, we talk via satellite phone first, to arrange a time and place to discuss the next mission. I organize the team; we meet; we discuss the operation so everyone knows where we are at and then we do the mission. When done, your father rings me and arranges another time for a debriefing; I meet, talk to him about the mission, he praises me, tells me he will contact me again soon and then I'm on my way again. It's a vicious cycle but I have come to love it." Kara threw down her pen on the table in frustration. "What? I'm telling you what I know."

"Yes, but what you know doesn't help me." She kicked off her shoes and walked towards the kitchen. On auto-pilot, she poured herself another cup of coffee and held it to her lips.

"Surely there must be something I can help you with." She jerked in surprise; she didn't realize he'd crept up to stand behind her.

"I just want answers," she started. "It's not as if I could rock up to him and say 'Hey Dad, how you been? Been a long time since you left me to be shot'." Kara shook her head. "I just have to think of another way to find the answers."

"We will have to think of another way. You got me out of the way of your company. I only said what I said then to test you and your loyalty. The least I can do is get you an answer."

"How much trust does he put in you Lachlan?"

"For a thief, a surprising amount. What did you have in mind?"

"If you set up a meeting with him, I just want to know what he knows about me. There is something unsettling and unnerving about the whole situation." She chose her words carefully as she spoke.

"How do you mean? Do you think he knows about your whereabouts, has been following you all this time without making contact?"

"In a word...yes. I am prepared to steal the Meridian Veil for you in exchange for your assistance to get near my father. You seem to be the only one he trusts, therefore you are my ticket to that information."

"How are you going to steal the Veil?"

"You don't have to worry about that. Since you need some insurance, I will get the Veil for you. Can you please take this off my wrist now?"

"I believe I can do that for you." Lachlan ran his fingertips over her hand, stopping at

her wrist. Kara looked away while Lachlan uncoupled the buckle. The feel of his stare was potent. She turned back to look directly into his eyes. They were striking. She liked the color of them. After he removed the device she rubbed her wrist.

"Thank you," she said with a smirk and turned towards the computer monitor. Before she knew what was happening, Lachlan grabbed her and held her in a bear hug, her arms pinned at her side. "What the hell...?" She bent forward trying to get free from his vice-like embrace.

"Tell me what you really want," he seethed, tightening his hold. His hold was all too familiar to the way he held her after they made it from the rooftop. He could hurt her if he wished. Kara kicked out, connecting with his kneecap. Lachlan moved his hand and grabbed hold of her wrist, twisting it. She winced as she brought her elbow up into his face.

Yelping in pain, Lachlan lifted her off her feet, inadvertently giving her the chance to bring her head back and hit him in the mouth. She fell from his arms and spun around with a kick to the ribs.

Lachlan clutched his side and doubled over before lunging at her again. His cheek connected heavily with her breast. Without thinking, he brought his head up and connected with Kara's. Her teeth punched through her lip and blood trickled down from the edge of her mouth. Instinctively she brought her hand down, hard, on the side of his neck, forcing him to release his grip once more. Concerned about how this was going to end, she continued to roll out the punches.

"Kara...stop...I was only..." But she didn't stop. Kara punched him until he backed into a corner of the room. Many of her swings connected with his body while he did well to deflect the ones that didn't get him. She turned and kicked his leg, forcing him to fall to his knees. Stepping behind him and grabbing hold of his hair, she held him in a headlock with her other arm. "Please...I can't...breathe..." His elbow swung out, winding her. She reeled backwards towards the kitchen, turning to get away when he pounced once again, pushing her against the wooden counter top. His whole body melded into hers, pinning her there. "Don't fight me Kara."

His knees pressed against the back of her thighs while his hips kept her body in place. He clamped his hands over hers and stopped her from punching him again. Her long hair hung disheveled in her face as they both struggled to catch their breath. "Have you got it out of your system yet? I wasn't going to hurt you." His breath was hot on her cheek. She gathered her strength and wriggled one hand free from his grip to reach for the fruit bowl, bringing it to his head. Lachlan moved to duck the oncoming bowl, the action allowing Kara to break free and she raced toward the wooden cabinet in the main room.

The next thing she felt was a sharp pain shooting through her knee as she crumpled under Lachlan's weight.

"Stop fighting me, it was a joke...I am not going to hurt you!" Lachlan shouted as Kara cried out in agony. She put all her might into one last punch that landed on the side of his face. Her fingers cracked as Lachlan expelled a breath and slumped over her. She rolled him off her and reached for her knee.

"Asshole," she cursed, looking at him with contempt.

"Hmm..." Lachlan groaned as he realized how much his body ached. He told himself

not to open his eyes until he had done a mental body check. He started with his feet and felt a hot water bottle tucked in around his soles. His legs hurt. The blanket felt rough against his arms. His ribs and stomach hurt. *She sure knows how to pack a punch.* His head pounded from something cold next to his face. He opened his eyes slowly to find the room was lit by one light on the other side of the cottage. Lifting his arms from under the blanket, he moved the ice pack off his pillow and gently fingered his newly acquired bruise. He threw back the blanket and gingerly swung his legs off the edge of the bed.

"What? Did you drag me to the bed?" After what they had just done, he was amazed she would do such a thing, and pissed off because she did.

"Yeah...the trunk of the car was too far away," she shot back. "Besides, you are a necessary evil. I couldn't leave you on the floor."

"How's the knee?" He moved towards her holding his ribs.

"How's the cheek?"

"Sore."

"So is my knee."

"Sorry about that. You shouldn't have put up a fight."

Realizing from the look on Kara's face that she was not impressed, he tried to change the subject. She looked like she wanted to beat the crap out of him. "What are you working on?"

"A plan to retrieve the Meridian Veil. They will keep it housed in this building." Kara rolled out the blueprints of the building's structure. "All I have to do is get to here and we should be laughing."

"Laughing? Nice. And where do I come into play for all this?"

"You don't. This is one of the buildings I'm contracted to keep protected. As long as I know where it's being moved to, I can always steal it back." Kara smirked.

"If we are going to go partners in this, I need to have the same access as you."

"We may have agreed to go through this together but I certainly didn't agree to give you full access to everything. You will be given what you need, when you need it. Now, the Meridian Veil won't actually be housed there until Tuesday. It's being moved around as we speak. For obvious security reasons, it is never in the same place for longer than twelve hours at a time. If we get in and have a look at the surveillance, we can make Tuesday's job a breeze."

"What can I do to make you trust me?" Lachlan began to feel uneasy.

"Stop being yourself." Kara laughed.

"Have you had anything to eat yet? I could eat a horse." He tried to change the subject again. "I know you don't want to entertain the thought of me going on this heist with you, but it will be the only way or I won't be party to it."

"There's food in the kitchen," she snarled. Kara knew he had a point. He didn't need to do anything for her. He could just as easily steal the Meridian Veil from ACORP himself, but she wasn't about to give him any hints on how to do that. Lachlan returned to her side from the kitchen and passed her a sandwich.

"Are we going to go through the plan?"

She bit into her sandwich. "One thing I will give you is your perseverance."

"I think you are one to talk. If it's any consolation, I would be proud to know my daughter could put a guy's lights out if necessary. Regardless of whether you want to be in your father's life and vice versa, you know how to handle yourself. To me, that is the one thing I would want my daughter to be able to do."

Kara let a little smile come to her face. "Thanks. Sorry about the punch to the face, but how the hell was I to know what you were thinking. I react with my gut feelings and my gut was telling me to take you out."

"Well, you certainly did that." Lachlan moved his chair closer to the table as he took another bite of his sandwich.

Kara sighed, moving the blueprints closer for him to see. "Okay, the key here is the new security guy. Tomorrow night I will go in as a repair man and you will be a security guard. It's easy enough for me to get my hands on a uniform for you so you don't have to worry about that. We'll do it about eight—that's when the shift change happens. The new guy will come on while the older ones go off to the titty bar before going home to tell their wives they were putting in overtime. If we can get in and do what we have to with the security then we should be fine. We can plan something from there."

"Sounds like a plan, but how are we going to get in?"

"The easy way," Kara smiled. "I will arrange with my company to be there when the Meridian Veil arrives. I'll spin something to my boss, saying I want to be there to make sure it arrived safely. Something about my own peace of mind."

Chapter Twelve

Kara's impatience got the better of her and she tapped her foot, staring balefully at him as he walked towards her. She was undercover as a construction worker; it wouldn't do to stand there with one hand on her hip, looking at her nails. With that thought of how she would have preferred to spend her time waiting, she shook her head and got out of the van, toolbox in tow.

"How long does it take to park a car? Lachlan, do we need to go over the plan one more time? If you trip that wire on purpose, I will—"

"You will what?" He stood in front of her dressed in an ACORP security guard uniform, his hands on his hips.

"I'll kick your ass and you know I will, now focus. Let's just get in and out. Show them what we can do."

"Okay. Ladies first," he said with a cheeky grin. She would have liked nothing more than to slap the smile off his face, instead she shoved past him towards the security station.

"We've had a call to say one of the vending machines is on the blink. You know what those shift workers are like...they need their caffeine." Lachlan flashed his security badge to the security officer. "It's okay...I'll be with him the whole way."

Kara stared at the ground and kept her hand balled around the handle of her toolbox waiting for their clearance. Had the security guard bothered to look at her long enough, her cover would have been blown.

"Sure thing. Make sure he follows procedure."

"Absolutely." Lachlan nodded to his 'colleague' before heading towards the door. Once out of earshot they both sighed with relief.

She walked with a slow swagger and tried to bow her legs.

"I feel like a crippled cowboy," she muttered to Lachlan. "Just a few more feet." Her hand curled around the doorknob and she pressed her palm against the door after quietly putting the toolbox down. A slight vibration reverberated against her hand and knew she had hit the jackpot. A quick look up and down the corridor before she made her way into the room, she backed against the door, peeling off the itching beard with relief. "Thank God."

She rubbed her face and wasted no time in pulling off the flannel shirt and dirty denims. Underneath she wore a black and purple latex dress that clung to every inch of her body. She ran her fingertips under the hem of the skirt that still clung to her hips, wiggling on the spot as she tried to make it move down to her thighs.

Carefully, she pulled off her wig, making sure she didn't take chunks of her own hair with it. Her long hair fell down her back and she shook her head gently, loosening it further from the makeshift bun. Deftly running her fingers through the ends to loosen any tangles, she let her hands skim over the shoulder straps down to her breasts. The low cut of the dress showed off more cleavage than she was used to. She slipped her fingers under the tight seam to adjust the position of her breasts under the bodice.

"Can't believe men fall for this," she muttered, shaking her head. Squatting down, she threw the construction work clothes into a bag and pulled out her shoes. Shiny black with a silver steel heel. They would hear her coming long before they saw her.

She opened the door and ushered Lachlan inside. The room became smaller and ten times hotter when Lachlan closed the door.

"Wow. I mean...wow!"

"Shut up and help me with this," Kara snapped. She thrust the electric screwdriver at him and started working on the screws herself. Sweat beaded on her forehead and her hair stuck to the nape of her neck. She glanced at her watch and started the timer. "We have three minutes. We should be in and out before then and no one will even know we were here. I'm done. God, it's hot in here."

"Damn you woman. You do that to me every time and yeah, you are looking pretty hot in here."

"Shut up and you fail to do better every time," she snapped back at him. "Tell me when you are done." She crouched, wiped her brow with the back of her hand and pulled the computer plate carefully from her bag. She examined the plate closely, ensuring the connections hung freely.

"Done."

"Nice...can you get rid of that side panel? And I'll need some light."

"I only have one pair of hands Kara."

"Christ, you're a whiney bitch. Fine then." Kara opened her mouth and held the small flashlight between her teeth. A bead of sweat started to make its way down between her shoulder blades. She shivered from its tickle.

"Lucky light," he muttered.

"Whaph?" she struggled to say. "Buph shu up. I'm almoph bun. Bere." She'd clipped the last connection into the server. "Go wiph va panel." She whizzed her screwdriver to refit the panel.

"Nice work," Lachlan said.

She took the torch out of her mouth and stood up. "Thanks. It's always pain free when you work with me, chuckles. Although I have to say I'm glad it's you who's my partner in crime, so to speak."

"Aww, you gonna get all emotional on me?"

"Hardly. Can we get out of here? This dress is strangling me. I can hardly breathe, it's like a sweat box in here."

"Sh..." Lachlan snapped. Kara instantly held her breath. He knew better than to tell her to shut up without good reason. Without warning he kicked the bag behind the door and pulled her in close. "Just go with it."

There was no time to react as Lachlan pushed his lips against hers and kissed her feverishly. His hand reached up and squeezed her breast, the latex covering making it squeak. She grabbed his hand and tried to prize his fingers off, but all she succeeded in doing was getting him to kiss her harder and tighten his hold on her. "Someone's just outside the door," he whispered in her ear.

His tongue snaked into her mouth and rolled over hers. He moved his right hand down along her back and squeezed her buttock before pulling her close to nestle in his pelvis. He tasted as good as he smelt. The bulge in his pants made its presence known against her stomach. Her hardening nipples felt like they were being pinched under the tight material, causing them to harden even more.

Kara didn't know one hundred per cent if someone was on the other side of the door, but she really didn't care. She was beginning to enjoy herself. His hands wandered freely over her body, leaving a tingling mass of nerves in their wake as his kisses excited her more. Without being aware of what she was doing, she brought her leg up and wrapped it around his hip, holding him closer to her. Her fingers worked their way through his hair as she held him close and kissed him harder. The thought of preserving her lipstick for appearances sake flew out the window; all she wanted was his kiss. She wrapped her arm around his neck as the door swung open.

"What the hell is going on in here? You know no one's supposed to be in here," a gruff security guard boomed. They recognized him instantly. He was their target.

She pulled away and used the back of her hand to wipe her mouth. She blinked in the bright light and waited for Lachlan to do all the talking.

"Sorry. It was the only chance and place I could get with this pretty woman. You know she charges by the minute." Lachlan smiled as she pinched his arm hard.

The security guard looked from Lachlan's lipstick covered mouth to Kara, who was trying to maintain a sickly sweet smile. She licked her lips as she moved towards the security guard, unable to look at Lachlan after the way he'd kissed her.

"Must be damn good if you charge by the minute." The security guard smirked then wiped his nose back and forth along his index finger. "Tell you what, you give me a piece of that action and I'll let you fuck her on the Director's desk."

She had always been a sucker for a guy in uniform, especially those in dark overalls and heavy boots. There was nothing she liked better than beating them at their own game. Have them realize the pretty little thing they thought they could handle was more than they could chew, and then some.

Mutely accepting the unintentional challenge, she turned her head to look at Lachlan and winked. "Let's go then." She pushed the guard back with the palm of her hand, grabbed Lachlan by his shirt and pulled him into the corridor. Her heels clicked loudly on the tiles and her hips swung as she sauntered along the corridor. Still aroused from their impassioned embrace, the latex of her dress moved sensuously against her skin with every step she took, her nipples so hard it felt like they were about to punch holes through her dress. Although she knew exactly where she was, Kara turned around to look at the security guard who was following them and asked how far the room was.

He stopped in his tracks and took his time looking at her body from head to toe before answering. "It's a little while yet. Can't you wait to have me?"

"No. It's you who cannot wait to have me. I'm on a time limit here." Kara pouted while Lachlan silently stood alongside her.

"Oh, are you now? In and out, is that the plan? You gotta be somewhere else?"

"I have a busy night ahead of me, yes. Can we wrap this up soon?" It was an opportunity that neither Lachlan nor Kara could give up.

She winked at Lachlan as the security guard held the door open for her. Would he ever kiss her again like that? For a guy she didn't have much time for, she had started to see him in a different light; her opinion was changing.

"You wait out here bucko," the guard said, holding Lachlan's arm in a firm grip as he moved to walk into the room. "I don't do sloppy seconds."

Lachlan stood back as the security guard watched Kara slink into the room and closed the door behind them.

"So where do you want to do this?"

She turned around to face him. "Here is perfect." His hands moved to the front of his overalls and began opening the buttons. She smiled as she moved forward and at great speed, brought the heel of her hand to connect with his nose. Lachlan burst in through the door to find the security guard reeling back with a bloody nose. The guard looked at his blood-covered hand and lunged at Kara who was already in a fighting stance, her fists raised. Two lightening-quick jabs and he was crying out in more pain. Given the size of him, he sure didn't know how to fight.

She jumped on his back and grabbed him in a headlock. He thrashed around violently, trying to dislodge her from his back but she did well to stay on. With a strangled cry, he threw himself backwards onto the table, the momentum and force of collision causing her to loosen her grip. They both lay momentarily stunned before he struggled free and tried to grab hold of her legs. She kicked out and connected with his stomach, the force of the impact doubling him forward. Taking advantage of the situation, Kara swung her heeled foot around and connected with the side of his head.

The sound of his rasping breath sounded unnaturally loud in the sudden quietness of the room before he sunk unconscious to the ground. She pushed the hair out of her face and breathed her own sigh of relief.

"Nice of you to stand there and be a spectator, Lachlan." She rotated her ankle, wincing at the movement.

"Hey! I know better than to step in when you have things under control."

"Damn right." She slid off the table and pulled her left earring free before pointing it to the walls.

"There." She kicked her shoes off and ran to the far corner. "It's behind there." Kara ran her fingers over the wall and searched for any sign of a cavity.

"Here. Step back."

Kara replaced her earring and removed the other. "Gotta love technology. You can get the happy snaps of this adventure when we return to the main gates."

"Have you still got that set to intermittent?"

"Not for long." Kara pushed one of the diamonds in her earring and turned it towards the wall. "This thing has been set to take photos every ten seconds. Sends them to the computer back home via satellite and keeps a track of where we have been. But they are about to go into overload with the amount of stuff I'm sending back through. Make sure you smile."

She took photos of the whole boardroom, working every conceivable angle including the air vents and under the boardroom table.

"Oh come on. How many photos do you need? Haven't we enough already? I don't know why we don't take the damn thing now!" He moved forward and took hold of her hand. The unexpected move and almost intimate touch made her flinch and her first reaction was to pull away. Slightly shocked by his gesture, she wished she hadn't pulled away so quickly but it caught her off guard and she needed to concentrate on the job, not her feelings for the bad guy.

"Stop it Lachlan. You know this is our one and only chance at this. We have to do it

properly and I've already told you, it's not here. It will be here Tuesday." The noise in the background stopped them both dead and they looked over their shoulders to the stirring security guard.

Kara ran to get to the security guard and stood over him. "Now...what to do with you?"

"I can't believe you did that."

"You probably would have shot him," she retorted as she dragged the security guard along the floor by his shirt. "I'm sorry." She directed the apology to the guard just before she brought down her fist and knocked him out again.

"Nine times out of ten I like to beat the system rather than the people, but there's always that one."

"Jesus...is that why I have the shiner I have?" The only reply he got to his question was a sly grin before she took the security guard's pass.

"We need this more than he does. What are you staring at now?" She looked down at herself to make sure she hadn't accidentally exposed herself.

"Nothing. There is something disturbing about seeing you clad in latex, looking like every man's fantasy and watching you knock a guy out. As I said...disturbing. Now what are you doing?"

"He thought he could easily get a piece of me," she said, justifying her actions to herself. "You don't just walk up to someone you don't know and have a good old feel. Well...I don't." Even as she said the words she had already made an exception considering where Lachlan's hands had wandered in the past few moments.

"Come on. You don't need to do this." Lachlan grabbed hold of her arm by the elbow and led her from the room.

"We'll use the back access out of here." Kara held onto his arm for balance as she put her shoes back on, then moving on replaced her earring.

"Sure thing. Ladies first."

She turned around to look at him. "I know you are going to look at my butt, so you can walk with me, thank you very much."

"I'd be happy to walk alongside you."

"Don't come back here, okay?"

Lachlan lifted his head and moved towards the bathroom area. "Sorry, what?" He moved shower curtain back and she quickly covered her breasts with her hands, cursing as she turned her bare back to him.

"Jesus. I just said *don't* come back here and what do you do?" Lachlan audibly cleared his throat. "What, the computer room wasn't enough so you thought you'd come back and finish what you started? Why are you still standing there? Go away."

"Umm, yeah...sorry." He pulled the plastic shower curtain between them, stammering his apology. "I'm sorry Kara, I honestly didn't hear you. What I did in the computer room...we had to look legitimate, you know that. I'm sorry if you thought it was anything more." Lachlan looked at the shadows she made against the thin plastic. Had she the same thoughts currently running through his head when she stood in his bathroom waiting for him

to step from the shower? "Are you hungry?"

"Not really, but don't let that stop you. Ow!"

"What's wrong?" He could hear her sucking air through her teeth.

"Nothing, this dress is pulling every little hair on my body," she said. "I've been thinking... Why don't we just take the Meridian Veil while it's in transit? I've not done a moving secured-hold in ages."

"You like a challenge don't you?" He was glad she'd spoken about something else. It took his mind off the fact that he wanted to kiss her again, to hold her in his arms and be with her.

"That I do." Kara pulled a T-shirt on over her head and slipped on her blue jeans, pulling up the zip before she pushed back the shower curtain. Lachlan stood in the middle of the room. It looked like he was waiting for her. He looked very handsome, even wholesome, in his blue jeans and black shirt. She couldn't stop her eyes from devouring his body. Like her, he stood barefooted, looking over her body in exactly the same manner she was looking over his. "I reckon getting it in transit would show you exactly what I can do."

She walked to the office part of her home and went directly to the printer to retrieve the photos, holding them up against the light for a closer look. "The photos turned out good. Marvelous how well those earrings work."

Lachlan looked over her shoulder. Tingles ran down her spine as she felt the warmth of his body from standing so close to her. It took all her effort not to turn around and force herself on him.

"They are brilliant. I think it's time to get some rest. We can go over the plans tomorrow – have a clear head." Kara moved away to put down the photos. "You can sleep on the bed. The couch folds out into a bed. I'll sleep there. You don't snore do you? You were pumping out the z's before."

"I'm never awake to know if I snore or not, but I've never been told before."

"Well, if you wake up with a pillow over your face, then you know you are a snorer. I have to use the bathroom." She gathered up her pajamas and walked to the bathroom. She was glad she had designed her home to have a toilet in a different room.

Finally, a moment to herself. She wasn't used to living with someone. The simple task of going to the toilet was no longer simple. Defeated, she dropped her chin to her chest and took a deep breath. As much as she hated to admit it, Lachlan was very good at his game. Very confident, but that could be taken as a fault.

Ruefully shaking her head, she cringed at the thought of him seeing her topless. Had she been quick enough to cover herself up? If she'd been prepared for his glances, she might have played it up a bit – teased him even. But he didn't give her a chance. She didn't realize her mind had wandered back to his kiss until a loud knocking interrupted her thoughts.

"Are you okay? You've been in there for a while," he asked quietly. "Just making sure you are okay."

"I'm fine. I'll be done in a minute." By the time she returned, Lachlan was under the blankets on the couch. "What are you doing?" She eyed his clothes hanging over the arm of her rocking chair. *Is he naked under the blankets?* An electric tingle coursed its way up her spine at the thought. What would his reaction be if she bent forward to kiss him? Would he turn

away? Or would it be the same as it was only hours before?

"I don't think it's fair you should have to sleep on the couch. After all, it is your place."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, unless you turn your back so I can get dressed again to cross the room and then get undressed again" –her heart skipped a beat, he *was* naked – "then I'll stay here thanks. I'm good. Quite happy."

"You are such a liar. You know you want to be back in your own bed with a blonde by your side." Kara laughed.

"By my side? While in my bed, I'd rather she be somewhere else, preferably under –"

"Enough!" Kara's hand shot up to make him stop. "Get some sleep." She flicked the switch on the side lamp then made her way over to the bed and sat on the edge. The dull glow from the computer screen lit up the surrounding area with a soft glow. The only noise to be heard was the sound of the zipper on her jeans being lowered from under her nightshirt. She raised her buttocks off the bed slightly and pushed the jeans down to her knees before sitting back down and kicking them off.

She swung her legs onto the bed and tucked them under the blankets, enjoying the sensation of her body sinking into the soft mattress. Every muscle seemed to melt into each other as she let her breath out slowly. Within minutes, she could hear low, steady breathing coming from Lachlan. She rolled onto her side and tried to force herself to sleep.

Frustrated, she brought the blanket right up to her chin and crossed her arms as she raised her knees to her chest. She shivered at the thought of a sexy-looking, practically naked man less than ten meters away from her. Her fingertips traced over her breasts as they idly wandered down over her stomach and stopped between her legs. She could feel her wetness through her white panties. Resisting the urge to explore the moistness, she shifted her hand and rolled onto her back, letting out a long, deep sigh.

"You okay?"

"Yep. Just getting comfortable. Goodnight." She retraced the night's events as she stared at the ceiling beams, her arms firmly by her sides, but for some reason couldn't get past the kiss. *It was all for show. He didn't want to kiss me for me. He was just taking advantage of a work situation.* She felt like slapping herself for thinking anything could have eventuated from it.

Chapter Thirteen

Lachlan woke to the sound of pans clanging together, wiped his eyes and rolled to face the back of the couch.

"Why are you up so early? What's the time?" His voice was husky with sleep.

"Time for you to get up. I have a plan for you today." Kara put a frying pan on the stove and reached for the eggs. "Do you prefer them poached, fried or scrambled?"

"I don't care when it's this early." He continued to complain as Kara cracked three eggs into a bowl. "What's this plan of your's. I didn't say anything about going ahead with any plan."

"We are going to meet my father today." She flicked the fork to scramble the eggs. Lachlan popped his head up and looked over the top of the couch. "Actually, you are going to meet him. I'm not going to meet him but I want to be there when you talk to him."

"And when did you think this up?"

"When you put that device on my wrist. You got your security, now I need mine. Breakfast this morning is scrambled eggs. You will ring him and talk to him about the last heist. Give him your report. I don't want his suspicions raised since you haven't had any contact with him for a couple of days. You need to give him some reassurance and then see what his next plan is."

"But he's the one who contacts me, not the other way." Lachlan sat up and rubbed his hand over his stubble. The noise made Kara stop and look at him. "I have already given him the rundown of the last heist. He usually doesn't contact me for about a month."

"Then you need to give him a reason to contact you." Kara dragged her gaze away from his sexy disheveled look and concentrated on pouring the egg mixture into the pan. For a moment, the desire to walk over to the couch and wrench the blanket off him so she could glory in his nakedness was so palpable, she was afraid she had already taken a step towards him to do exactly that. What she would have done if she woke up next to that sinfully sexy face boggled the mind, despite knowing what she felt for him wasn't returned. Professional that she was, she firmly reminded herself what they were both there for. The job.

"Such as...?" Lachlan started to get dressed under the blanket, the rustling noise hinting at forbidden images.

"Go back to him and tell him something extra about the heist. Something you were aware of but wanted to check out before proceeding with the team members you have," she suggested. "Ask him for a raise. Anything. I need to know we are dealing with my father."

"I can't just waltz in and ask him any old thing. 'Hey there, thought I'd ask you out for a beer, see how life is treating you'." Lachlan scoffed at the idea as he got to his feet. "He would know something wasn't right and come after me."

"Then you need to think of something plausible." She pushed the bread into the toaster, refusing to be swayed from her plan.

Lachlan put his plate in the sink before turning to her. "Are you sure you want to do this? What if he sees you? Are you sure you can handle watching him from a distance?"

"I have that under control," Kara said dismissively. "When you ring him, get him to sit

outside a quaint little café; I will be waiting with my long lens camera. I will have audio thanks to your little ring there. Under the stone is a tiny chip that slips into the claw, allowing me to hear everything that goes on." Kara held out her hand. "The ring."

"You have this all planned out, don't you?" he said, handing it to her.

"Yes...yes I do." She inserted the chip then reached across her computer table, flicked a switch and held up a pair of headphones to her ear. "Say something."

"Something," Lachlan said deadpan.

"Funny! It's working." She handed him back his ring. "And don't try to be a smart ass either. You knock that chip out or do anything to sabotage this...mark my words Lachlan, I will make you pay."

"I don't doubt that for a second." He slipped the ring back onto his finger.

"You can call and arrange the meeting with him from here." She tossed him the phone. "The line has a scrambler on it. If anyone tries to trace it, it shows a signal from a porn store in the city. No codes, no secret languages, just the details of where you want to meet him."

"Sure." Lachlan punched in the numbers then watched her face as the phone rung. "Yes, hello Samantha. It's Lachlan...is he in? Mr. Frankham, how are you?"

Frankham? Is he talking to my father? Who is Mr. Frankham? Lachlan's brows furrowed when her look of puzzlement crossed her face as he continued his conversation.

"Yes, I do apologize for ringing you, but I believe it is in your best interest to be aware of something that has aroused my suspicions.

"Yes, it's about Michaels. I would prefer to speak in person about this and investigate it myself. Great, I was thinking the Royal Café on third...? Great...two it is then." Lachlan pressed the button, disconnecting the call, and handed the phone back to Kara. "What's wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You were talking to my father? But his name is Procter – unless he's changed it." Kara walked away with her thoughts; there was no way she could have got the identity wrong, was there?

"Frankham is my boss, has always been my boss. He is the guy from those photos. If you are convinced that those photos are of your father, then obviously he has changed his name. I just have to remember to call him Frankham and not Procter, or he's gonna know something is up." When she didn't smile at his light-hearted attempt at humor, he continued on. "All you need to do now is be in place. I never really did like Michaels much anyway. Will be good to get someone new and fresh on the team."

"I bet he feels the same about you." Kara smirked as she packed equipment into a big, silver, hard-case bag. She picked up her backpack and threw it over her shoulder. "By the time we get there, it will be time for you to meet him."

"What happens if he doesn't show up or wants to move?"

"I always have a plan B." Although shocked to discover her father had changed his identity, she thought she hid it relatively well. She had never made an attempt to cover or hide her name. Regardless of name change, why hadn't he tried to make contact with her after all these years?

Lachlan looked her up and down again as she started the car. "You look like you need to have a shower. What were you doing in the bathroom Kara?" She turned the car around

the corner and pulled off the road. Her attire consisted of a pair of ratty old jeans, a dirty, ripped and smelly overcoat, sneakers that were full of holes and had no laces, and the wig she wore looked like it had never seen a brush.

"Relax. It's all part of the plan. Just be sure to tell him you are taking a few days out and that's why you are at this end of the city," she said as Lachlan shut the door. "Good luck." As soon as he was a couple of feet away she pulled the car back out onto the road and drove around the next corner. She parked behind a tow-truck in a No Stopping zone before leaning into the back to grab her bag. Lachlan made his way to the café as she reached for what looked to be her foundation compact and placed it on the dashboard. It was in actual effect a sound amplifier that worked for long distance reception. She pushed the button just as Lachlan coughed, the unexpected loud sound making her yell out and move the earpiece from her ear.

"Jesus!" She riffled through her bag with one hand, searching for her mini-binoculars. Sounds of a chair scraping along the ground echoed in her ear as she sunk lower into her seat. Her heart beat faster as she waited for the moment her father would arrive. The sound of Lachlan's cell phone ringing startled her, the earpiece dropping out of her ear at the jolt of reaction. She composed herself quickly, reinserting the earpiece to hear both conversations.

"...café. The coffee is better there. That's not a problem, is it?" Kara caught only part of the conversation, which would normally have bothered her, except for the fact she recognized his voice. It was her father. It felt weird listening in on a conversation where she wasn't involved.

"Not a problem. I can see you are across the road." She heard Lachlan get to his feet. "I will be there in a moment." Hearing the beep on both phones, Kara threw the hand-held listening device onto the back seat and pressed the top button on her jacket to activate the mini one. Now that they were changing location, she wanted to be in closer range to keep a watchful eye over them. She threw the mini-binoculars back in the bag and covered the back seat with a blanket. Once she was certain no one could see her, she got out of the car with a ratty bag in her hand.

Shoulders hunched, head lowered, shuffling along the street like one of society's rejected, she kept Lachlan in sight as she took on the persona of a homeless person. She watched him from the corner of her eye. There was still something about him she didn't trust. People moved away from her as she hugged the wall, pretending to search for food. As she rounded the corner she could see Lachlan entering the small café with a collection of tables *à la fresco*.

Kara stuck out like a sore thumb as she moved against the rich scene of the café lifestyle. People chatting stopped to look at her as she shuffled along. Someone even said she was a long way from the homeless shelter when she moved closer to the café. She couldn't see Lachlan. Her earpiece amplified the chatter and noises such as cups chinking, the cappuccino maker hissing and chairs scraping over the floor. Her fingers pressed against the earpiece as the palm of her hand cupped her cheek, giving the impression she was suffering from a toothache, disguising her wince at the noises bombarding her ear. She prayed they weren't sitting too far inside the café.

She continued to steal glances inside before returning her gaze to the ground. Sidestepping as people moved through the doors, she was desperate to get a glimpse of

Lachlan or her father. The sound of someone clearing their throat surprised her into moving around quickly. A waiter stood before her so she moved to a table and took a seat.

"Can I help you? I think you might have the wrong café. The one across the street is the one that gives away free coffee, not here," he snarled politely. He was dressed in black and looked only to be fifteen-years-old, but oozed with attitude.

"I would like a coffee," she said affably.

"I just told you, the café across the street is the one that takes all sorts of patrons. Have a look around you. Do you see anyone of your kind here?" The waiter moved closer to her. "Please go across the street and don't cause a scene."

Kara turned her gaze to look the waiter in the eye before she snatched several packets of sugar and stuffed them into her pockets as she looked for Lachlan again. "You are the one that is causing a scene. I said I want a cup of coffee."

"And I told you, I am not going to serve you," the waiter reiterated with more force in his tone. Several customers had stopped drinking to look at the commotion. She needed to get closer but at the same time stop attracting the attention she was getting. Should she stay or should she go? It was a split decision to get to her feet and push past the waiter. When she did, she finally heard Lachlan. She stopped and stood before the waiter.

"Why don't you do your fucking job asshole and get me a cup of coffee." She dropped some change on his tray. "I am not going anywhere. You are a waiter, now wait!"

She took her place at the table again and smiled as the waiter scurried away. There was no way she would drink the coffee once it came. The likelihood of him having spat in it was very high.

"Good to see you again son," she heard her father say. The word son spiked her blood pressure and she ground her teeth. "What's this information you have been holding out on me?"

"It's not so much as information I have been holding out on you but more that I wanted to conduct my own investigation in order to have something solid before I came to you," Lachlan said. "These heists you have been sending us on...there is someone, or a team, that seems to beat us nearly every time. I get the feeling you might somehow be involved. Are you testing us? Do you not trust our loyalties?" Kara couldn't believe what she was hearing. Where was he going with it?

"No. I have no other affiliations. I do know of the teams involved in certain heists and yes, we are targeting the same items as them," her father started. "In fact, it's the company who owns these artifacts that are involved. They are simply testing their own security by getting their own team to break in and steal their valuables. The only test I am putting you through is to see if you can get in and beat them at their own game." Her mind felt like it had gone into overload. Her father knew everything about ACORP and their programs to protect their items. "So no, there is no reason to have any fear..."

"Here!" The waiter had returned and practically dropped the cup of coffee on the table in front of her. Kara leapt backwards, almost pushing the chair over in her haste to avoid getting wet. "Drink it and get out."

She tried again to catch a glimpse of Lachlan and her father, but the table she thought they were sitting at was now empty. She bumped the table as she twisted and turned to see where they had gone, causing more coffee to spill on the table. The waiter turned on her and

walked into her line of vision. "Did you do that on purpose?" he snarled, all pretence of politeness gone. "Look at the mess you have made."

She tried to look over the waiter's shoulder but he sidestepped her, his stance aggressive as he blocked her view again. "I said, look at what you have done!"

Her heart raced as she desperately tried to locate the pair of them. She couldn't hear anything other than the waiter. "Are you deaf or something, you stupid piece of trash?"

Kara widened her stance and planted her fists on her hips before opening her mouth and saying articulately, "No, I can hear you perfectly well, you little maggot." She grabbed hold of his wrist and twisted it towards her, forcing him to sit in one of the chairs while she resumed her seat, her movements lithe and elegant in direct contrast to her homeless image. Her grasp tightened as she held his wrist in place. All he could do was let out a small gasp of pain.

"Don't utter another sound until I have finished, do you understand? If you do, I will break your wrist. I would like nothing better than to have your sad ass fired. If you find your job serving others so distasteful, then do us all a favor and find something else. People come here for coffee, not attitude.

"For your information, I am working undercover. Do you see that building over there?" His face paled as his eyes widened. She wanted to laugh out loud at the scared look on his face. "I have a sniper waiting on the second floor. If necessary, all I have to do is say the word and he could easily take you out just for pissing me off. So I suggest that before you come into work tomorrow, ask yourself, 'Am I going to piss anyone off today?'. If the answer is yes, you need to find yourself a better job. Something in the Post Office perhaps? Now get the fuck out of my way and don't you even think of spitting in anyone else's coffee today."

The waiter moved to stand and Kara squeezed on his wrist, making him squeak at the pain she inflicted. "By the way, my sniper can see you even in the back of the cafe. We have surveillance all around here. What you are going to do is clean up this mess, go about your job and not breathe a word of this to anyone. If you do, there will be a bullet in the back of your head before you even finish your sentence. Understood?" The waiter nodded slowly and tears welled in his eyes. She released his wrist before she flicked her finger over the mess on the table. "Clean it up."

He leaned over the table with his cloth. His hands shook while he tried to catch a glimpse of the non-existent sniper in the building.

"Don't try to see him either. He's too clever for that. It's one of the things that annoys the crap out of him; people trying to look. Then he just shoots them for the hell of it."

She heard Lachlan's voice again, through her earpiece and without it. They were coming out of the café. Kara got to her feet and moved away from her table.

She heard Lachlan laughing and turned around to look at him. He was walking with her father and they were headed in her direction. The desire to drink in the image of her father warred with the need to get away as quickly as she could without raising suspicion. As she rounded the corner, she ran into two big men, the force of the collision such that it sent her reeling backwards. Her bag dropped to the ground as she let out a yelp of surprised. The two men stood over her. Furtively looking around her, she pulled her jacket close around as she spotted both Lachlan and her father. They were looking at her.

One of the men proffered his hand in a gesture of help, but she pushed it out of her way

and scrambled to her feet. Both Lachlan and her father were continuing to walk towards her.

"Stop her," her father called. Kara didn't even think as she scooped up her bag and tried to take off. The other man grabbed hold of her by her jacket and held her there. "Why are you trying to run away? You should apologize."

She noticed for the first time her father didn't speak slang. He was articulate. Her heart raced so fast she thought she would pass out. *What if he recognizes me?* She lashed out at the man holding her. "Hey, don't be afraid. We are not going to hurt you."

"Let her go man, she obviously doesn't want to be here," Lachlan said, stepping between Kara and her father. Once she felt the grip on her jacket loosen, she took no time in running off down the street, making her escape.

Kara fought back tears as she ran past her car to the end of the street and then turned the corner, leaning heavily against the fence as she waited for the coast to clear. Crouching, she felt inside her pocket for her keys to make sure she hadn't lost them in the struggle. Several forced deep breaths later and time to register what had just happened, she peeked around the corner to find them gone. She stripped off her jacket and wig, pulling her hair free from the ponytail before she rolled the jacket up and got up to stand.

Once she was certain no one was about to see her movements, she took another deep breath before walking calmly around the corner and towards her car. She recognized the weedy waiter scuttling towards her, too busy glancing over his shoulder to notice what was happening around him. Kara couldn't help but smile. He looked stressed and quite agitated. It was pure mischief that made her point her fingers at him and yelled *bang* when he got close enough. The kid yelled and took off running. She laughed out loud; she could have sworn there was a burgeoning patch of dampness near his groin. No matter what the situation, her sadistic streak found a way to show.

Kara let out a sigh of relief when she saw Lachlan waiting at the rendezvous. As soon as he climbed into the passenger seat, she planted her foot on the accelerator. He barely had enough time to close the door let alone get his seatbelt on.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm great... satisfied." She kept her eyes on the road before her.

"I saw you having fun with that waiter," he said with a smile.

"Which part?" She laughed as she looked at him. "The part at the café or after?"

"The café. What exactly did you do to him?" Lachlan laughed as she relayed the events and what happened after. "You don't take your job all that seriously, do you?" His mood changed quickly from light and upbeat to one of seriousness. "You got very close to your father...are you okay?"

"I told you, I'm fine." It was the last thing Kara said until they returned to her cottage.

Chapter Fourteen

Kara picked at her dinner. The afternoon replayed in her mind over and over again. Even Lachlan's attempts to get her into a conversation failed.

"Alright, I'm going to go to bed then. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow," he said. "Are you sure you are okay?"

"I will be when you stop asking me," Kara shot back and then sighed. "Yeah, I'm going to bed soon too."

She shoved her plate away from her, then stood up and cleared the dinner remains. As she climbed into bed she told herself to not think about the situation anymore, although she knew it was useless. She looked over to Lachlan lying on the couch before she shut her eyes. "Night."

"Goodnight Kara."

Woken from Kara's muffled moans, Lachlan wrapped his blanket around him as he moved towards her bed. Through the shadows he saw she had kicked off her blankets, leaving herself exposed. The pale skin of her arms and hands led him directly to the source of her moans.

He smiled until Kara distinctly called his name. Hastily taking a step back, he held his breath while he waited for the inevitable verbal abuse to be hurled at him for watching over her. Instead of the expected barrage of insults, Kara giggled and called out his name again. Lachlan muffled his own snickers as he headed back to the couch, unable to shake the image of her lying on her back with her body exposed, practically begging for a man's touch.

"I hope I'm as good in her dreams as I am in real life," he whispered, giving himself a nod of approval.

Lachlan woke to the sun streaming in through the window when Kara pulled back the curtain. He groaned as he covered his eyes with his arm. >From underneath his arm, he caught a glimpse of her dressed in a dark knee-length skirt, crisp white shirt, black jacket, black fishnet stockings and the same black pumps from last night.

"Come on. Time to get up and get stealing," Kara said with a smile. "Come on...rise and shine! How did you sleep?"

"I think the more appropriate question should be how did you sleep?" Lachlan rolled over to his side, but not before he made a mental picture of her legs in those tights.

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know what I mean," he said, refusing to get up. "You must have had some wild dreams last night. You were calling out and everything."

"I was talking in my sleep?" Lachlan smiled as her cheeks took on a rose color. "What was I saying?"

"Well, it wasn't just what you were saying but also what you were doing." His voice was muffled by the blanket as he buried further into the couch. "You don't remember do you?"

"I can't remember anything. Was it about the Meridian Veil or a heist?"

"Not quite," Lachlan chuckled. "But it did involve me." Kara didn't move from her spot. He guessed she knew what he was referring to.

"Remembering now are we? My only question is, was I any good?"

Kara scoffed as she made a play of pondering his blatant question. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Ha! I know you know what I'm talking about. There's nothing to be embarrassed about." He laughed and rolled onto his back. "If I were you, I'd be dreaming about me too."

Kara pulled the pillow from under his head and brought it down over his face. "You can be such a jerk sometimes," she said, trying to fight her own laughter.

"It's all good. In a weird way, it's kind of flattering. I was dreaming about you too," he said, turning to face her.

"You did?"

"No." He laughed as she brought the pillow down over his face again.

Mr. Holt looked at Kara, one brow raised to emphasize his skepticism. "Do you really want to do that? We have it back in our possession now."

"I know. That's why I need to see it. To really prove to my mind that it's back in the right hands. Please, Mr. Holt? It's one of those things I feel I must see in order to move on. This is my first real failure with ACORP and—"

"You have never had a failure with this company Kara, let's get that clear from the outset. And since this means so much to you...I'll see what I can do."

She couldn't help but feel a little guilty about lying and setting up Mr. Holt, but it was only going to be a temporary measure and she would get the prized item should anything happen to it. He knew something about her father and was withholding the information. It was all the justification she needed.

Kara smirked at Lachlan as she walked through the door of the cottage. "Don't tell me you used tears?"

"Pfft, never." Kara laughed. "Come on, we have to get going."

Lachlan gazed at Kara's legs behind his sunglasses as they drove towards their next destination.

"So I go in; you create the diversion; I get the Meridian Veil; I get out; you get out; and we are on our way." She reached forward to turn on the radio.

"You make it sound so easy."

"That's because it is easy." Kara shrugged. "Okay, I have lined up the cars. The guys at the auto dealership are going to look after my car while we do the job. They think it's here to be detailed. I have a funky convertible whereas you have the van."

"Next time, it will be the other way around."

"Is there going to be a next time?"

"You never know Kara...you never know." Lachlan smirked. He looked out of the window as they pulled into the car dealership. As he climbed out of the car, he noticed all the salesmen staring at Kara as she sauntered over to the office to get the keys.

Moments later she returned, tossing the keys through the air to land in Lachlan's

outstretched hand. She nodded and walked towards her car. He couldn't help but feel jealous when one of the salesmen opened the car door for her. She thanked him as she climbed in and drove the car towards Lachlan.

"I'll see you in about two hours, right?" She looked at him over the top of her sunglasses. Because she was seated in a low-slung convertible, Lachlan couldn't help but see down into her blouse. She was wearing a white demi-bra that pushed her breasts up and out. All he could do was nod. "Alright. I'll see you then. Just remember not to point the gun at me or I might have to hurt you."

"Oh...wait. I forgot to give you something." Kara opened the door and stepped within an inch of him. He swallowed hard. She looked up and kissed him gently on the lips. Groans from the salesmen as she lifted her arm around his neck were heard in the background. When he began to kiss her back he felt her other hand snake around his wrist. He pulled back when he heard a clicking noise.

"Just some insurance." She stood back so he could see. He looked at the silver chain clasped around his wrist and then back at her, his gaze questioning. "The same sort of deal you did for me. You don't turn up, I press this button and a toxin will be released into your bloodstream. The effects are instantaneous. I could kill you before you even knew what was happening. It's not my thing unless I'm pushed. You try to take it off, it will activate itself. Don't keep me waiting. I hate waiting—makes me nervous—and I start pushing all the necessary buttons."

She slid back into the driver's seat and blew him a kiss before she spun the wheels of her car and took off. Gravel spat up at Lachlan, leaving him in a cloud of dust. He wiped his shirt and looked around for his van. It didn't take him long to find it and he shook his head. "Oh no..." The damn thing was bright purple and looked like it had spent the better part of its lifetime in a commune of hippies.

"How come she gets the nice car and you get that?" one of the salesmen called out to him in jest.

"Coz she's the boss," Lachlan called back. The salesman nodded, as if that one statement explained it all.

Kara turned the radio on to distract her from her own thoughts. *How much of that dream did I say out loud? What did he really hear?* There was no point worrying about the situation because there was nothing she could do, but nevertheless worry she did. She reached into her handbag and pulled out her lipstick, applying another coat of her favorite color before she flicked her hair and gave herself the once over in the rear view mirror.

She got out of the car and looked down the street. Would Lachlan get there early? A truck with the ACORP logo turned around the corner and as she made her way up the stairs at the front of the building, she kept an eye on it.

Thick glass doors slid open as she approached. Directly looking at the security camera up above, she smiled. Holt would be keeping an eye on her. There was nothing to worry about. All she had to do was act surprised. It was the first time she had a plan where someone else carried it out. The butterflies in her stomach had gained steel-capped boots as she neared the receptionist's desk.

"Hi, I'm Kara. I have clearance for the arrival of Project Bravo." She smiled innocently

and showed her security pass. Once the pass was back in her bag, she reached up to adjust her earring. Her fingertips touching the diamond activated the audio to Lachlan.

"Sure, it's the third room on your left. Just follow the corridor."

"Copy that," Lachlan said.

"Thanks so much." Kara smiled again before walking off at a leisurely stroll. ACORP's buildings were loaded with bugs, which meant communications with Lachlan would be very limited. It was imperative she got all the information they needed in order to pull the heist off successfully before all communications ceased. She recognized the security guard coming to meet her. "Hi Sam. How are you? You're looking well. How's Tracey and the kids?"

"Good Kara, they are good. How are you keeping? You are looking very good if you don't mind saying."

"I don't mind at all." The smile she gave him was a truly genuine one. She liked Sam a lot. "Are you going to be there when Project Bravo arrives?"

"I surely am." Sam nodded as he led the way. "Mr. Holt told me to expect you. Did you want some coffee?"

"That would be great but I can get it. Would you like some?"

"I'd better not, not while I'm on the clock. But we'll catch up again soon. The Veil should be here in the next five minutes so I gotta run and meet up with the others."

She said goodbye to Sam as she listened to Lachlan's next transmission.

"Christ Kara, I'm sorry. I got stuck in traffic. I'm almost there. Are they on schedule?" She raised her hand over her mouth as she coughed twice, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "Copy that."

Kara took her place at the table and waited. It was the part she hated the most on any job. Waiting. The pressure and stress of wondering if everything was going to schedule, or if one of the variables had changed and whether she had factored that into her final plans. The second hand of her watch tick around slowly. It was killing her to wait. She sucked in her breath when three security guards walked in carrying a large safety box followed by a tall man she had never seen before wearing a suit.

"Good afternoon," the tall man said. "You must be Kara."

The box was placed on the table before her as she nodded. "So it's in there?"

"Indeed it is. Give me one moment and I will have it ready for you to sight."

When Lachlan's voice announced he was in position, she pushed her hair off her face with the back of her hand, inconspicuously running her fingertips over a small floral hairpin. The touch activated the board in the computer room, disabling the all security cameras in and around the building, giving Lachlan a clear path.

"Take your time. I hope I never have to see it after this." Her eyes fixed on the box, she flashed a fake smile as she waited for it to be opened. Lachlan was only seconds away.

"There it is," the tall man said. "The Meridian Veil. Priceless when it was made. Beyond priceless now."

Kara smirked. "Is there such a thing as beyond priceless?"

Once he had parked the van, Lachlan tucked the balaclava into his pocket and counted the smoke bombs again by rolling them over his fingers. As he walked towards the glass doors, he checked again that he had the fake security guard's pass.

He looked at his watch. Three more seconds and the security cameras should be disabled. Once security registered the apparent meltdown, the building would go into lockdown meaning no one can get in or out without a security pass. "Come on...come on..." he coaxed. The glass doors juttled. It was his signal to get moving and he ran towards the doors.

They were starting to close and as he increased his run, the doors seemed to close more quickly. He lunged for the doors but they slammed shut just before he could get through. His nose crunched against the heavy glass leaving a smear of blood as he fell to the ground. Dazed, he looked into the building and saw it filling with smoke. A masked person moved through the corridor. He slammed his fist against the glass door but no one turned to look at him. Lachlan leaned a hand against the door to stagger to his feet, then beat his hands against the glass to try to get anyone's attention. People were falling down to the ground, choking on the smoke.

"Kara! Abort! Abort! Operation has been aborted. Get out of there. Someone else is coming! Kara! Abort!" Unable to think of another way in, he swiped the security pass. The red light flickered denying him access. There was only thing left for him to do, and that was to get out of there.

Her heart skipped at the tone of Lachlan's voice, only able to hear a part of the transmission through the sudden static assailing her ear. She smiled and maintained an outwardly calm composure. "Thank you so much for letting me see this. Your generosity of time has been wonderful. I am at ease knowing it is once again safe, but now I really must let you secure it properly. Thank you once again."

The security guards didn't have time to reach for their guns when the door swung open to a reveal masked man. Three rounds, one for each guard, were fired off. Tranquilizer darts. The tall man cowered behind Kara before he lunged forward to close the box.

"I don't think so." She didn't recognize the voice as the masked man moved forward. "Get your hands off."

Both Kara and the stranger watched the tall man's hand shake as he tentatively let go of the box door. The intruder was quicker when the tall man pushed her in an attempt to slam the small door shut. A dart of serum hit him in the neck. He slumped forward over the table before sliding to the floor. She looked at the masked man before lunging forward to finish what the tall man couldn't do.

"Not a smart move." He smiled as she looked at the dart protruding from her arm then back at him. Her vision went blurry. "It's nothing, don't worry about it." Her eyes rolled as she tried to look at the man. Her mind still alert to what was happening, she realized she had no control over her muscles. They felt like jelly. She looked at man as she crumpled to the floor. Through a dream-like haze, the last thing she saw was the box being carried out of the room.

Chapter Fifteen

Kara opened her eyes slowly as she heard the noise surrounding her. She rolled her head to the left and immediately recognized the woman lying next to her. It was the receptionist.

"Hey. Are you okay? Where are we?" It felt like she was moving through quicksand, extremely slow and difficult.

"I'm okay. Just a bit dry in the throat from the smoke bombs. We are at the hospital. How are you feeling? You took one of the tranquilizer darts. I knew you were coming around. You were calling for your father about two minutes ago."

"I was? How are the others?" She had hoped it was all a terrible nightmare.

"I don't know, I haven't been told anything. Mr. Holt came by to see you three times already but you have been out to the world since it happened."

"Do they know who did it? Where's Mr. Holt now?" Her mind raced to Lachlan. Where was he? She swore it was not her father who took the Veil. Oh, how her mind was groggy. "Do you remember much? The Meridian Veil. He took it, didn't he?"

"Yes." Mr. Holt stalked into the room and stood at Kara's side. She looked up at him, blinking hard. "How are you feeling? Thank God you are all right. Did you get a look at the man who did this?"

"He was wearing a mask. He didn't have an accent that I can remember. It all happened so fast."

"Yes, we are investigating how this could have happened. But for now I want you to rest. Someone is going to come and see you about some counseling."

"That won't be necessary. I'm fine, really I am. I just want to get out of here and get that damned Meridian Veil back once and for all."

"So do we all. There will be a meeting tomorrow morning, but what I want you to do now is go home and get some rest."

When Kara discharged herself from the hospital, she knew she would be under ACORP's surveillance. It was standard procedure, to make sure she wasn't involved. With that in mind she decided against going back to the cottage to see if Lachlan was there. Her greatest fear in trusting someone to do the heist for her had come true and she wound up being shot again, albeit a tranquilizer this time. Her head filled with confusing thoughts. Did her father take the Meridian Veil and shoot her, or was it her imagination or a by-product of the drug still coursing through her veins? She hailed a taxi and directed the driver back to her car at ACORP.

She watched the roads for any sign of Lachlan's van. Nothing. She glanced at the crime scene tape preventing anyone from accessing the building as she searched in her handbag for her car keys.

When she climbed into her car something in the back seat caught her eye. "What the—?"

"Shh, just drive."

Lachlan.

"Where the hell have you been? What the hell happened to you? Don't you know I'm

under surveillance? I swear they will see you. I can't take you back to the cottage."

"Then we will have to go to your place. Just drive or they are going to know something is up. This car is safe, isn't it?"

"Yes, I put a counter surveillance gadget in my bag. If this car was bugged, I would know." She turned on the ignition and looked at his reflection in the rear view mirror. "I must warn you though, the tranquilizer has left me still feeling groggy so if needs be, just jump over and grab the wheel," she teased.

"Great!" Lachlan moved further into his seat where he remained silent until they reached her house.

"Just let me get the garage door so I can put the car inside. Then you'll be right to get out. Okay?"

Once the roller door hit the ground, enclosing the car in the garage, Kara hurried around the back of the car and opened the door to help Lachlan out. Judging by the grimace on his face and the way he struggled to stand, he must have been in a cramped position in her car for quite some time.

"You have no idea how long I have been in that position waiting for you," he said as he rubbed his legs, shaking them out.

"Let me guess...for about as long as I have been lying in hospital sleeping off a drug I was shot with. What the hell happened to you?"

"Everything was going to plan but the door shut five seconds before they were supposed to. Something obviously went wrong. I saw the foyer fill up with smoke. I had no idea what happened. I told you to get out of there."

"Yeah, but by the time you told me to it was too late. What the hell happened to your nose? It's given your other eye a shiner to match. You look like a hung-over raccoon."

"I'm sorry I failed you." Lachlan wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her in to his chest. She didn't protest, she was just glad he wasn't injured or worse, caught. Her muscles began to relax as his strong arms held her close. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you." Kara clung to him for the longest time. The situation was so wrong. He was the guy she was supposed to be beating, yet it felt so right to be so close to him.

"So what happened to your nose? It looks painful. Is it broken?" She moved her head so she could get a better look at it without moving her body away from his.

"It looks pretty good, doesn't it? Think Maxwell Smart, only one hundred times worse. It would have looked pretty funny to someone watching." The teasing glint in his eyes evaporated quickly and the air around them thickened with unvoiced desire. Was it her imagination or did it get a few degrees warmer? He gazed down into her eyes, his eyes filled with warmth and more. "Don't hate me for what I'm about to do."

He tilted his head and gently grazed his lips against hers before turning it into a kiss. She returned his kisses being mindful of his injury. Her tongue traced around his lips before pushing gently inside. Lachlan's hands moved to hold her head at the nape of her neck as he began to deepen the kiss.

"Be careful...I don't want to hurt you," she whispered between kisses. Her mind matched her weak muscles. A tiny voice that kept repeating 'What are you thinking?' faded into the back of her mind.

"You won't." He moved his hands along her back and through her hair. Kara took a

step towards the car and put her back against it, taking Lachlan with her. His hands on her hips, he stepped forward and pressed his body against hers before taking her lips in a kiss again.

"Finish what you started in that computer room," Kara whispered as she trailed kisses along his neck.

Lachlan's hand brushed across her breast when he reached up to tilt her face toward his. He took a deep breath before saying, "I love how you look when you kiss me Kara." Her reply was to snake her hand around his neck and pull him in for a deeper kiss, mindful of his nose. She wanted him. To taste him. To feel him. To know what his naked body felt like pressed against hers. She wanted to know what he felt like inside her. She tingled under his touch. The heat from his body matched the heat growing between her legs. Her hips flexed against his. His hands automatically moved around and took hold of her buttocks, holding her close to him.

"Kara... We can't."

"Yes we can. We have to now." She opened her legs in mute invitation, hitching her skirt up her thighs.

"We can't...we shouldn't." His fingers gathered more material, raising her skirt higher. "We just shouldn't."

"We shouldn't? Or you just don't want to...?" She ran her fingers along the zipper on his pants and eased it down. "Hmm, that's certainly not the case from where I'm standing." She brushed her fingers over his silk boxers, feeling his cock harden. "You were saying?" Lachlan opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. "You can tell me to stop and I will at any time." Silence. "I thought so."

She licked her lips before leaning into him again. A firm hold on his pants and she pulled them down over his hips, a groan the only sound coming from Lachlan. Kara grabbed his butt, giving it a healthy squeeze before letting go to take off her jacket.

By the time her jacket had hit the floor, Lachlan was working the buttons on her shirt to expose her pale breasts lovingly encased by the white material of her half bra. She smiled as he took both breasts in his hands. "Kiss me. Kiss me hard," she breathlessly commanded. "But not too hard, I don't want to hurt your nose."

"Don't worry about it." His pupils dilated until his eyes were nearly black with desire as he rolled his thumbs over her hard nipples. "Put your hands on me."

She grabbed hold of his shirt and pulled it open, sending buttons flying. Her nails dug into his chest and she dragged them gently down to his boxers where she snuck her fingers under the waistband and flicked *it*. Teasing him. Should she take them off or not? Her mouth left hot, moist kisses on his chest. He moaned when she gently bit him then ran her tongue over his nipples. She snuck her hand inside his shorts again, teasing him as she moved slowly towards his cock, tickling the short hairs surrounding it.

Kara felt his fingers fumble for the zipper on her skirt and she released her grip to help him. "Can I leave my heels on?"

"As long as you keep the fishnets on."

"Lucky they are the crotchless kind." She let the skirt fall to the floor with a triumphant grin on her face.

"God woman..." He stepped out of his jeans then kissed her on the neck. His hands

returned to her butt and breast while she raked her fingernails over his back. "I want you."

"So have me." She leaned back and waited for Lachlan to make the next move.

He took hold of her chin and tilted her face towards his. His fingers feathered down her neck, between her breasts, over her stomach and lingered over the small triangle of hair. A moan escaped her when she felt him tease her moist opening. She felt his fingers part her labia in their quest to gain entrance to her womanly core.

"You are so wet." She opened her legs further in reply and pushed her hips towards him. "So wet!" He didn't hesitate to thrust his fingers inside her. Kara squirmed and looked him directly in the eyes as she felt him move his fingers in and out repeatedly, building up a steady rhythm. "You are so nice and tight." She clamped her muscles around his fingers. "Ooh, I like how you did that." Lachlan wiggled his fingers against the front wall of her vagina and she shuddered in response. He pulled his hand away and slowly got down to his knees. Kara lifted her foot to rest on the armrest of the still-open car door, her hand firmly gripping the top of it for balance.

"You smell so good." Lachlan inched his face closer to the apex of her thighs, his fingers once again tickling her labia. "Just relax."

"I am relaxed." She wasn't lying. It still felt like there were some residual drugs running through her veins. Although her mind was groggy she was relishing everything he did to her.

More.

She wanted more.

Her head swam as she felt his fingers open her. The sensation of his warm breath against her inner thigh and then on the spot she craved he would suckle had her shuddering in delight.

Kara reached down to place her hand against his cheek and guided him carefully to the spot that craved his attention. She whimpered when his tongue rolled over her clit and down in the folds of her pussy. Her hips moved forward slowly as his fingers toyed with her opening, her head rolling across her shoulder when he slipped two fingers in and he began sucking her clit. The smell of his aftershave made her head swim even more. It felt like her soul had risen up out of her body. Her body tingled and she moved her hands to her breasts, toying with her nipples before dropping one hand to his shoulder.

"Don't stop...keep going," she whispered breathlessly, trying to hold her balance and at the same time not grind her hips against his face. Another tingle started to spread from the base of her spine to her shoulders and along her neck. She pulled at her labia to make her clit stand out on its own, freeing Lachlan's hand to clamp over her breast. His tongue darted over her fingers and over her clit, watching her as he did so. In response she pulled his hand away from her breast and began sucking long and slow on his fingers. The heated warmth of his mouth covered her clit and fingers, humming as he sucked, sending soft vibrations through to his fingers inside her. She wriggled against his fingers until he pulled his mouth away. "I need you inside me. Now. But first, just give me a second."

Kara lowered her leg and leaned inside the car. Lachlan ran his hands over her exposed buttocks and pulled her labia apart with his thumbs. "Hang on; we have to take care of something first before you can get inside me." She clawed quickly for her handbag. There was always a stash of condoms on hand, be it for her personal use or to give to a friend. Be

prepared was her motto and she was always prepared.

She pushed her hips back to get out of the car, dangling the condom in front of him with a smile before she took a seat. The head of his cock was already wet with pre-cum. Delicately biting the top of the wrapper, she ripped the packet open then unconsciously licked her lips as she pinched the tip of the condom and placed it over the head of his cock. Lachlan's breath shuddered at her touch as she slowly eased the sheath down the shaft, applying an even amount of pressure as she continued. When she was done, she let her hand move along to cup his balls.

"Normally I would let you play with my balls all you like, but right now I'm dying to get inside you." His voice was gravelly, husky.

Kara pushed him back with her free hand and stood before him. "Well, I guess that means I had better oblige, hey?"

Lachlan took her in his arms again and she could taste herself on his lips. She took hold of his hips with both hands as he brought his hips to hers and looked down to watch the tip of his cock press against her. Lord almighty, he had a good-looking cock. Her breath hissed out slowly as the tip began to move inside. He pushed himself against her hips and her insides quivered. With a blissful sigh, she gently rocked her hips, encouraging him to delve deeper. She moved one hand to the small of his back and caught his rhythm while she raised her other arm and linked it around his shoulders before kissing his neck.

Lachlan increased his pace as she urged him to push harder. "I want all of you inside me. Push it all the way in." He wrapped his arms around her waist and slowed the speed of his thrust as the tip of his cock pressed against the entrance of her womb. Kara squirmed, savoring the sensation that was building within. His slow, long and deep thrusts had become quicker but still deep. "Yeah, like that!" She moved her lips to his neck just under his ear.

"You are so wet." His fingers dug into the flesh of her hips. "You feel so good."

"You are the one that is making me feel good." She flexed her pelvic floor muscle to grip his cock tighter. An intense pulse ran through her body and she knew she wasn't far from coming. She lowered her foot from the armrest and stood on the ground, the movement making Lachlan lose his access.

As she moved to sit on the edge of the back seat of her car, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing is wrong." Delightful little pulses coursed upwards from her center as she sat. "I just want to make it easier for you to fuck me hard." Kara shifted further along the seat then lay down. She brought one foot over the headrest of the driver's seat and rested her other foot on the assist grip near the roof. She looked over her belly and stared at his cock bouncing gently as he watched her. The desire to play with his balls was great, but the desire to have him inside her again was greater.

As she moved into position, her legs spread wide, the view that was presented to him had him hold his breath in appreciation. The small patch of hair above the entrance to carnal pleasure was disheveled and wet. Lachlan slowly lowered himself and brought his face towards her glistening flesh, savoring the taste of her with another long lick. The lips of his mouth mated with the lips of her labia while his tongue went where his cock was only seconds before and he heard Kara cry out. Reluctantly pulling away, he feathered his lips along her belly up towards her breasts. He felt the nails of her hands leave furrows in his shoulders as

she clawed at him, hissing urgently in his ear, "Get in me!"

"You are too much." Without pausing, he rammed his cock into her again. Her hips lifted off the seat as his tip found the entrance to her womb again. He shifted his arm under hers and held onto her shoulder then thrust his cock into her over and over again with the same force and depth she demanded. She looked up at him and pushed his hair off his face as sweat beaded his face and torso. Needing to feel every naked inch of her, he pressed his chest against her and looked into her eyes as small gasp escaped her mouth. They were black like ebony with desire. He lightly ran his hand along her waist and hips, reaching for her leg, then with a firm but gentle grip, pushed it slowly towards her chest all while keeping up the rhythm he set.

He felt the walls of her vagina begin to ripple; she was close to orgasm again. She wriggled against his cock and with undisguised desperation, began to kiss him. His tongue worked feverishly into her mouth as her vagina flexed and swelled, the surprisingly strong muscles gripping his cock, milking him for his seed. Unable to hold back any longer, he pushed all the way into her, his balls slapping against her in the almost violent motion to find his release. Her legs locked around his hips and held him in place as she cried out her orgasm.

The change of position, the ripple of muscle around his over sensitized cock, the scream of ecstasy was more than he could bear. He groaned and pressed his mouth against her neck while his hand found her breast, relishing the feel of his balls contracting as hot fluid made its way into the protective sheath inside her.

He kept his hips as close to Kara's as possible while he shuddered against her. He didn't realize his grip on her breast was white-knuckle tight until he saw her flesh spilling through his fingers. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" He released his grip and replaced it with his mouth to give a tender kiss.

"You were great." Kara sighed, letting the last waves of her orgasm die down before releasing the grip on her legs. She let her foot drop to the car floor as she stroked the back of his head. His cock felt so good inside her; she didn't want him to take it out. Lachlan looked at her, her nipple still in his mouth, before moving his hips away from her. The movement pulled his cock out of her and she sighed at the loss. She felt him reach for the condom and pull it free before he let it drop to the cement near the car tire.

"I'll deal with that later." As he spoke her nipple dropped from his mouth, but he wasted no time in clamping his mouth over it again as she continued to look down at him. She giggled when she felt his hand caress her tender flesh again. "As much as I would like to spend hours right here—" he ran a hot tongue over her nipple again "—am I going to get to see your house, not just the garage?"

"Since I'm under surveillance. It looks like you are going to have to stay the night unless, of course, you want to take off over the back fence and through the Jones' backyard. I'd actually encourage you to go through the other neighbor's fence. Jones'—big dog—real mean...would rip your leg off without hesitation."

"Hmm. Best we get inside then, huh? I'm a bit hungry after that session."

"Session?" Kara laughed. "That was just a warm up for me sunshine. But if you need a breather, by all means. Take your time. Save your strength." She ran her fingers over his body as he propped himself up and slid out the door. He stopped when his face was only

mere inches from her drenched curls.

"I'll be back for more of you soon," he promised that particular piece of anatomy before he stood up next to the car door. He reached his hand in and helped Kara out of the car.

"Thanks. Now...clothes." She looked down at the ground to see her clothes scattered around. "What did you do with my bra?"

As she spoke, the reality of what they had just done began to sink in. She started looking for her bra, needing the time to collect her thoughts. He was the bad guy and she had slept with him. All his comments about getting her in the sack had come true. She felt uneasy. Not only had she let her guard down and accepted him into her homes, she had invited him into her body as well. Butterflies ran riot in her stomach as she searched for a way to close the conversation.

"I have no idea." She quickly looked in Lachlan's direction as he laughed, watching him pull his pants over his naked behind. He moved towards her, his hands once again encasing her breasts, gently squeezing them before circling to her back. "You don't need to be restricted by one of those things anyway. They only waste time."

Kara tried not to flinch when he touched her. "Alright. Time to get some food, I think." She subtly moved away from his sinfully sexy mouth as he leaned in for a kiss. It was difficult to think while his hands were all over her and she desperately needed to buy some time to think.

"Food sounds great. Just depends on what kind of food it is." He handed her her skirt as he laughed.

Kara pulled on her jacket as she walked into the kitchen, Lachlan close behind. "You do realize I'm going to have to move now? I can't have a criminal like you knowing where I live."

"Consider us even. You know where I live and I know where you live."

"Well, don't be getting any ideas of what you can steal from me." She corrected the buttoning on her shirt. "I didn't steal anything from you while at your house so I expect the same."

"Fair enough." He sat down at the breakfast bar. "How do you feel?"

"I'll be better when I have some sleep."

"Would you like to have one now? Tell you the truth...I need to have a rest too."

"Sure." Kara smirked as she reached for his hand. Their fingers laced together, Lachlan got to his feet and she led him towards the lounge. She pushed him to take a seat. Her plan was to get him to stay there and she would rest next to him. If he moved, she would know about it. "Just sit Lachlan." She hitched her skirt up around her hips and straddled him. His hands moved from her knees up to her waist as she wriggled to be close to him. She sighed as she positioned herself over his hips.

"God, you only have to say my name and it drives me wild." His fingers began working her buttons again.

"I thought you wanted to rest."

"I will...in a little while." He moved his head to her now-tender breasts and she shuddered at the contact from his warm mouth. Lachlan leaned back and let Kara push her lips to his. Her mind reeled. What was she doing? She had just given herself a hard time for allowing it to happen in the first place and here she was, heading down the same track again.

"I just need a little bit of time to get ready again." She trailed her lips along his neck and rolled off his lap.

"That doesn't mean you have to stop altogether though, does it?"

"No, it doesn't...but I am. Can't have too much of a good thing too early." Kara smirked as she sunk into the soft lounge, keeping her legs over him. She reached out her arms and beckoned him to move towards her. "Come here." As he lay down next to her, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "Just relax for a little bit."

She shifted her legs as she felt his fingers gently move under her skirt. "You don't feel like you need to have a rest. In fact, I would say you are more than ready for another round."

"Just coz it's wet down there, doesn't necessarily mean I'm ready."

"What does it mean then?" His fingers pressed forward and slipped inside.

Her breath hitched. "It means if you keep going with that, you might see me come again."

"I think I could handle that. Will you let me see you come again...I mean, at another time other than now?"

She had never been asked that question and it took her by surprise. "Possibly. If you play your cards right." She smiled again as she felt his fingers move out and caress her moist folds. His fingers slipped back inside and rested there. Her pelvic floor muscles gripped his fingers again, teasing him.

"What if I have no cards to play?"

"Everyone has an ace up their sleeve." She let her head rest back on her arm before Lachlan pressed his body against hers and kissed her deeply. *It's just a matter of time before I find out what yours is.*

"Alright. We will have rest time. But do you mind if I just stay here for a bit?" He was talking about his fingers.

"Sure. We have four more hours until the guys outside go home."

Kara woke as Lachlan wriggled in her arms. "What's wrong?"

"Bathroom."

"What time is it?" Her body ached from sleeping in the same position for too long.

"Time I was thinking about leaving. We both have a busy day tomorrow." He unwrapped himself from her arms and moved over her to stand.

Kara didn't bother adjusting her skirt as she scooted to her feet and took him by the hand. "The bathroom is this way." She flicked on the switch and closed the door behind him, leaving him alone. After she walked to the neighboring room and turned on the bedside lamp, she turned and saw Lachlan standing in the doorway. "Everything alright?"

"Certainly is. I'd better get going."

"Sure. I'll walk to you to the back door. They aren't allowed to monitor us from there. Only the front. They had to change their rules of surveillance when one of our operatives went skinny-dipping with her partner in their backyard. Big trouble over that one. Invasion of privacy and all that. So now they are only allowed to observe from the front, but you still need to make sure they aren't sitting around the other block." She wondered at the irony of it all, a spy suing because they had no privacy.

"You forget I'm also a spy Kara, not just a thief."

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t want you to be caught, that’s all. I will see you soon.” Lachlan kissed her tenderly. She’d never been kissed like that before. Her mind instantly demanded more as he opened the door and disappeared into the darkness of night.

Chapter Sixteen

Kara was greeted by two special agents as she reached the glass doors of ACORP. "Hello gentlemen. What's going on today?"

"Morning Miss Procter. You have to come with us. You have an important meeting to attend."

"Sure." She wasn't aware of any meeting she had to attend that morning and hoped it didn't involve Stephanie giving her information. The click of her heels on the marble floor was the only thing that broke the silence.

"Right this way. They are all expecting you," one of the agents said and held the door open for her.

"Thank you." She smiled and walked into the boardroom. Mr. Holt stood at the head of the table. She looked at TW and Stephanie before back to Mr. Holt.

"Take a seat Kara," Mr. Holt said in a cold, strange tone. Never had she heard him speak that way towards her before. She was in trouble. A quick glance at Stephanie saw her studiously focusing her attention on Mr. Holt. "We have had some news from your friend who shot you and stole the Meridian Veil."

"He's not my friend," she practically barked back, taking offense at his sarcasm.

"Well, he seems to think he is. A package arrived for you this morning. The person delivering the package asked for it to be delivered to the woman involved in yesterday's incident, where he went on to give specific information about the heist. Now, when someone walks off the street and starts to give information regarding any possible security intelligence where ACORP might be involved, silent alarm bells are rung. Security got footage of the man on tape but was unable to detain him before he left the building. We have the package for you. Naturally, as part of our protocol, we checked it for any devices, explosives or otherwise."

"Right...and you want me to open it here?" Kara looked around the room.

"No. We will give you privacy to do that. The reason you are here is the note that came with your gift. It has us all concerned." Kara looked around the table again as Mr. Holt clicked a button. The lights dimmed and a large screen slowly descended from the ceiling. An overhead of the letter was displayed before her eyes. "Everyone here needs to know the seriousness of this and respect both the company's position and the one who has been targeted."

As Kara scanned the first few sentences, her stomach dropped. It was a large projection of an ACORP profile. Next to the name of James Procter was a photo of her father. The picture must have been taken when he was in his twenties because his hair was darker and longer. His skin looked young and he was smiling. The name didn't match though. It was Gerry Procteramis.

"What's this?" Kara stared at Mr. Holt. "And why are we seeing this?"

"It is a matter of security for our whole company Miss Procter." Mr. Holt had never addressed her so formally like that before. "Your father was at one time an employee of ACORP for many years until he stole directly from the company and went rogue. That was when he went by his official surname of Procteramis. After several 'mishaps' on three heists, he went underground. The mishaps involved switches to real artifacts, botched jobs and other

companies receiving our communications and delivery information. Then he effectively disappeared off the face of the earth. During that time we believe he raised you and changed your surname. As you got older, we became aware of certain dealings and events that had commenced operation again. They had key elements indicating your father was involved. We believe the heists planned for our artifacts are indeed being led and orchestrated by your father."

"Is this why you took me off all operations? Do they have to be present to hear this?" Kara glanced at TW and Stephanie. If she had wanted them to know, she would have told them on her own terms. She felt guilty for not telling them before and she certainly didn't want them to hear it now. "I mean really? If you think I'm going to get all emotional because of a man who is trying to screw this company over happens to be my father...then you don't know me at all."

"Sure. Everyone...please." Mr. Holt waved his hand to dismiss TW and Stephanie.

Once they left the room, he spoke again. "Now Kara. There are some things you need to hear. Your father was the best. He was the best that ACORP ever had. He assisted with protocols and missions that set standards for all security around the globe, so much so that he became his biggest liability. He became obsessed with the items he was stealing. He knew exactly what the value of each item was and learned which companies were interested in acquiring them. He would steal from us and sell to the highest bidder. No sooner had he taken payment, he would then steal it back for us. It was a brilliant scam he played out several times before he got caught. He thought we were none the wiser and we weren't for five objects. Each item was valued at twenty-million dollars or more. He set up quite a nest egg for himself by the time he had gone underground."

Kara's mind reeled. She remembered living on borderline poverty. Granted, she never went hungry, but her father certainly never acted like he was a multi-millionaire.

"What's in the package?" she asked, desperate to find an anchor for her flyaway thoughts.

"I don't know the specific details. It was merely checked for any bombing devices."

"You think my father wants to blow me up?" She ran her fingers over the envelope.

"Would you like privacy to do that? I do suggest you open it here though," Mr. Holt said.

Kara lifted the envelope edge and let the contents fall onto the table. It was a file. Her father's file. She knew exactly what she was looking at as she had the same employee file with ACORP. "Why would he send me this?"

"Perhaps he wanted you to know. Perhaps this is his way of saying he knows you work for ACORP? That being said, we are ensuring extra safety measures for you. We trust you will keep your confidence with the company that has given you so much should your father make contact with you."

"Of course," she muttered distractedly, her mind racing. "Continue with what you were saying about him."

"Very well, since then we set up a profiler to watch over him. Your father stayed relatively off the scene for many years after you were arrested. When the profilers learned that he was...well, training you, we knew it would only be a matter of time before you would join us. If you were being taught by the best, we knew you would have been exceptional and you

have never once failed those expectations. His current profiler is brilliant. He has been able to get a huge amount of information about both your father's whereabouts and future plans."

"Who is his profiler now? I want to meet him. I want to hear it from him."

"Certainly." Mr. Holt reached over and pressed the intercom. "Susan? Can you please send Mr. James in? Thank you." Kara sat rubbing her forehead trying to retain all the information. She looked toward the door when she heard it open but couldn't stop her mouth from dropping open. Was she dreaming? "Kara, please meet your father's profiler, Lachlan James."

She stared at him as he moved towards her with his hand outstretched. "You have got to be kidding. You?" Her voice was barely a whisper as Lachlan moved towards her.

"Yes. Nice to meet you." The look he gave her was a wary one. "How are you Kara?"

"You really have to ask?" Kara stood on the spot, dumbfounded. She couldn't stop staring at Lachlan, who had by then taken a seat next to her and opened a file.

"I can see you've already started. Do you need me to finish off?" Lachlan looked at Kara. "Do you need a drink of water?"

"No, I think I need something stronger than that." Kara sighed and shook her head, unable to take her eyes off him. Her stomach felt like it had left her body and her fingers tingled as she continued to stare at him. Her mind was a whirlwind of thought and emotion.

"We can confirm Mr. Procter has the Meridian Veil in his possession. We are in the process of locating its whereabouts. As I'm sure Mr. Holt was going to explain, it was your father who shot you with the tranquilizer dart and stole it right from under our noses. We are not one hundred per cent sure if he knew it was his own daughter he was aiming for."

Kara could see Lachlan's mouth moving, but none of his words made any sense. Her mind reeled at the fact she devised and began to carry out a plan to steal one of the company's prized artifacts...with one of its employees nonetheless. She felt foolish and irresponsible. *Was he ever going to go through with the plan? Did he know my father was going to steal it and didn't tell me about the alternate plan? Was there an alternate plan? What the hell is going on?*

She couldn't silence the voices in her head. Rage was building inside her. All she wanted to do was bring the heel of her hand to Lachlan's nose and make him feel the way she felt.

"Miss Procter, are you alright?" It was only when Mr. Holt's concerned question was voiced did she realize she had been quiet for too long.

She shook her head, trying to make some sense out of everything that had happened. "I'm sorry, but can you just stop for a second please? I can't believe this. He's supposed to be the bad guy. This doesn't...I just have to...I need to get out of this room. I need to get out of this building. Can I have an hour? I need to just...think."

Looking to Lachlan, Mr. Holt nodded. "Sure, I can meet back here in an hour. Take your time Kara; I want to ensure you are okay with everything we are telling you." Both Mr. Holt and Lachlan got to their feet as Kara left the room.

She pressed the elevator button repeatedly waiting impatiently for the car to arrive and the doors to open. As she entered the elevator she heard Lachlan call out her name, but she refused to look at him. Desperately she clicked the ground button over and over again until the doors closed. Just before they completely shut, a hand wedged itself between the doors, reopening them. Kara frantically clicked the button again.

"Get out. I can't speak to you right now. I can't even look at you." She turned to the wall as Lachlan stood alongside her. Quickly whirling around as a question popped into her mind, she looked at him, afraid of hearing the answer but needing to confirm what she already guessed just the same. "Actually, there is something I need to know. Is your name really Lachlan James or Lachlan Mitchell, or is it something completely different?"

"It's Lachlan James. I only go by Lachlan Mitchell for my work. Please don't be angry with me. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't."

"Sure you did." She turned away and faced the wall again, her arms wrapped around her midriff in an unconscious gesture of self-preservation. "Don't come near me Lachlan."

"Hey, try and see it from my side. I wanted to tell you but had I done that, you would have freaked. Don't be angry with me Kara. We had your best interests at heart here." Lachlan placed his hand on her shoulder and she flinched at the contact. She moved further into the corner. "Kara..."

"I told you not to talk to me. I need time to get my head around all this."

"But you don't have to do it alone. We are all here to support and help you. You know I'm here for you." She scoffed at his comment. "You might not believe it but all I can do is say I do care for you deeply Kara, and I want to see you get your answers. But you must realize there are correct ways to go around it and this is that way."

"Sure...and the sex? Is that the right way to go about things? I don't date colleagues. Nothing but trouble can come from that," she snarled, her hurt feelings rising to the fore. "You have made me feel like such an idiot."

"Kara, come on now. My feelings for you haven't changed. I would like to see more of you." Although his voice took on a cajoling tone, he didn't touch her. "I think we make a good pair."

"Oh please. This sort of shit belongs in romance books. It's not going to work with me." Kara finally turned around. "How do I know you weren't getting close to me so you could undermine me here at work? You slept with me to try and build some line of trust with me? Ha! Well, that's shot to shit isn't it? I bet you didn't tell Mr. Holt about what we did, did you? To think about what we did now makes me cringe."

Silence fell down on both of them when the elevator doors opened and Stephanie stepped inside. "Hi guys. What's happening?" When neither of them responded immediately, she looked at them with suspicion.

"Nothing. Just having a break from a meeting," Lachlan eventually said.

"Oh hi. We haven't been formally introduced yet. I'm Stephanie, from tech. I was given the rundown on who you are and what you do." Kara stared at Stephanie before turning her attention back to the buttons lined up next to the doors. "Oh sorry. I can get the next elevator if you like. I'm sorry..." Stubbornly looking to the front, she didn't see both Stephanie and Lachlan look at her, though she did feel the force of their gaze. She had had enough for one day.

"No, that's fine. You can stay in here with Mr. James, Stephanie. I'll take the stairs." Before either of them could respond, she slipped through the doors just before they shut.

After she headed out the side door and into a long line of trees that were losing its leaves, she stopped and took a deep breath of fresh air. Autumn was her favorite time of year.

Although the air was crisp the days were still sunny. The cool air seemed to calm her nerves and allowed her to think clearly. She pulled her scarf high around her ears and snuggled against the soft material.

Stupid. That's what she was for believing everything that came out of Lachlan's mouth. Images of them working on the plan to steal the Meridian Veil floated in front of her vision, no matter how hard she tried to shake the memory free. Then she heard him call her name.

"Go away!" She heard his quick footsteps getting closer.

"Kara, please...let me explain." He sounded slightly puffed. *Good.*

"Why? So you can feel better about yourself? I don't think so. Why would I believe anything you say now anyway? You've given me no reason to trust you. Just exactly how long have you known your 'boss' was my father? Were you spying on me too, or is there another profiler for that?" The betrayal she felt resulted in a flood of questions that refused to be banked. "What about the Meridian Veil heist?" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Did you intentionally fuck it up, or did he truly beat you to the punch line again? Does your report state I was going to steal the Meridian Veil for you as part of my deal? I can't believe this."

"Kara, if you just let me speak. Calm down." Lachlan held his hands up in a pacifying gesture.

"Don't tell me to calm down. This is me *calmed down!*"

Lachlan furtively looked around at their surroundings and although there was no one within earshot, he kept his voice down as he began to plead his case. "Kara...against everything I stand for I did *not* mention anything about the planned heist. They truly believed you wanted to see the Meridian Veil for your own peace of mind. You have nothing to worry about on that score. If anything, it was my own test to see where your loyalties lay.

"Initially I didn't know you were involved with ACORP until I submitted a report to Mr. Holt. He showed me your file and that's when I first learned about you and your background. To say I was very surprised when you sought me out to help find information about your father is an understatement. You have to look at it from my side. You are the daughter of one of the most brilliant thieves in the world and the fact is, you were headed along the same road he'd been down. We still don't know why he started to steal artifacts from ACORP in the beginning. You, on the other hand, didn't get the opportunity to be painted with the same tar of corruption. He beat you to it. You can now move on and focus on your job."

Kara couldn't help but stare at him. Her nose and cheeks felt frozen. She didn't know what to do. Stay and listen to more or leave and ignore everything he said. Undecided, she turned on her heel and headed towards the next tree, but Lachlan stayed close behind her.

"Don't walk away from me Kara. The stuff at your house...it wasn't supposed to happen but I'm glad it did. I wanted it to happen and I think you did too. Only difference is now you know we are on the same side. I could tell you were having some concerns about being with 'the bad guy'...well, I'm not."

"Don't follow me Lachlan." She refused to look at him, her gaze firmly directed at the ground. "I have nothing more to say to you."

Kara sighed heavily as the elevator doors opened and she stepped out onto the eighth

floor of the ACORP building. She looked down the corridor towards the conference room and ran her hands over the front of her top to smooth it. A deep breath to calm fluttering nerves and she walked towards the room with her head held high. At the end of the day there was nothing she could do. What was done was done. She swallowed hard over the lump in her throat and pushed on the door handle. Lachlan got to his feet as she entered the room.

"Don't..." She put her hand out to signal him to stop. "Please, there is really no need."

"How are you feeling now?" Mr. Holt asked.

"Awful, but given the circumstances I think that's understandable. I do have one question though. Have I also been profiled?"

Mr. Holt stared at her in surprise. "Only your employee file that is open for our directors to see is available. The sessions from when you first came to us have been held under strict confidentiality. Up until now you have never given us any reason to suspect your intentions or loyalties. Is there something you would like to share?"

"No...I just wanted you to answer that question. I believe you when you say I haven't been profiled. It was just a thought that popped into my head. I want you to know I am grateful to ACORP for giving me a life I would never have had if I stayed with my father. My loyalties are still with ACORP." She glanced at Lachlan. "All I ask is that this meeting be speedily dealt with so I can get back to work." She returned her gaze to Mr. Holt, acting as though Lachlan was a non-entity.

"Certainly. Let's get started then," he said. "We have received intelligence that Procter is in hiding in Greece."

Kara felt the steady burn of Lachlan's gaze but she refused to acknowledge him and kept focused on the information in front of her. "That has always been his style. Get in, get the goods and clear out of the whole area until he is ready for the next heist. Through my dealings, when I drop off the goods, he would sight them and then have them sent off to his warehouse."

"Have you ever been inside this so-called warehouse?" She stared at the pictures displayed on the projector.

"No—"

"Then how can you be sure they are still there? Chances are he told you this as a temporary measure and the actual items are not stored there at all. Why would you tell one of your employees where you keep all your valued possessions? What if you went rogue and tried to steal it from him? Sounds like a trap to me," she interrupted then sat back in her chair.

"Mr. James has worked with your father for many months and built his trust to the point of—" Mr. Holt made the mistake of defending Lachlan.

"Trust means nothing in this game! It's a trap." Kara snapped at Mr. Holt, impatient with their willingness to take things at face value in this particular case. "And please don't refer to him as my father. That may be the case biologically, but I have a hard time accepting the fact he has come back into my life after being absent for the past decade. Let me spell it out for you...as far as I am concerned, I have not had a father since I was sixteen and the situation is not likely to change. Now, how heavily guarded is it?"

The two men glanced at each other before Lachlan spoke up. "Standard security for the surrounding areas but as it gets closer to the actual building, security is beefed up." The projector displayed another picture.

"Again, another very good tactic in deception." Only then did Kara look Lachlan in the eyes. "I'll bet fifty dollars there is nothing in that building. Sure, the Meridian Veil might have been there for a short time but I'm positive it's not there now."

"Well, it's good you are in a betting mood Kara because you and Lachlan will be devising a plan to get into the building to see exactly what is going on," Mr. Holt said, putting his hands on the table.

"What? You want me to go in there with *him*?" She pointed disparagingly at Lachlan.

"No, I can't go into the building. I'm too well known within his organization. Our concern was how you would react when you found out the planned heist would be against your father," Lachlan said. "You are the best ACORP has and we need to know you are capable of doing this. That your head is in the right place."

"You don't have to worry about where my head is at."

"I will be working from the side lines. I'll be on the support team, so I will be by your side in spirit."

"Mr. James will give you the full rundown of the layout but you two will work together on the plan. We expect to be in the building by next Tuesday." Mr. Holt got to his feet. "The resources at ACORP are at your disposal, but please be mindful of what you use. If Kara's predictions are correct, we will have a lot of explaining to do. Think practically. And Kara? There is one other thing I wanted to discuss with you. I know you have been offered this in the past but in light of what has happened, I would like you to be armed when you go on missions now."

"I must admit I have been giving that option some thought recently...what about a tranquilizer gun?" She could never entertain the thought of being responsible for killing a person. "I would feel a lot more comfortable with a tranquilizer gun."

"Sure, that can be arranged. I'm positive your aim has improved." Holt smiled at her, a glint of humor twinkling in his eyes. Kara looked away but couldn't stop a small smile from tilting the corner of her mouth. "You can fill Mr. James in on what happened."

Kara had no intentions of telling Lachlan anything about what she continued to say was an accident. It happened at her first target practice session. The gun fired and one of the workers at the firing range was shot in the back of their leg. She also recalled how uneasy she felt when she was called into the office and grilled for her actions. But it was all true. All she wanted to know was how long it would take for a person to go down.

"As much as Kara continues to say it was an accident, I still maintain if you wanted to know how long it would take for the drug to take effect, all you had to do was ask." Mr. Holt closed the door behind him as he left the conference room, a smirk on his face the same as the one Kara was trying to hide.

She wished Mr. Holt would stay and not leave her alone with Lachlan.

"I think I can figure out how that ended." Lachlan moved a seat closer and placed a profile pack before her. "I have this for you."

"Thank you." She snatched the pack and got to her feet before flipping it open. She leafed through the pictures and reports before turning around to face Lachlan. "Was this your idea? You and me working together?"

"No." Lachlan sighed. "Look, I know it's going to take some time for you to get over what has happened, but this was not my idea. Holt thought we were the best two for the job

and I tend to agree with him. If you would only see reason."

"Reason! Everything I see is crystal clear," Kara spat. "Was this your intention? To build it up like this and then just let me find out, without a hint of warning? There was ample time for you to tell me the truth."

"Oh, come on. As if you would have believed me at any time until now." Lachlan raised his voice. "I did what I had to do. You of all people should be able to understand that." She stared at him, resisting the urge to turn her back and walk away. The discomfiting thing was part of her did believe him.

"Well, we'll see, won't we?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, we'll see. If you attempt to screw me and ACORP over when we go through with this hoax warehouse... You are supposed to be his number one man and yet he's shown you nothing. All you have is some outside photos. Come on. Blind Freddy could see this for what it is—a trap, and his dog could smell it too."

"Well, we'll send Blind Freddy in to find out what's going on then, shall we? I want to give you some time to go through the information pack, make some notes. I have a business card in there with my number. You can ring me any time with whatever questions and concerns you may have, then tomorrow we will start planning. Sounds good? Alternatively we could always discuss it over dinner."

Kara looked at him with horror.

"There is no way possible I will be going to dinner with you." She slapped the information pack closed and stalked out of the conference room. Passing Stephanie in the hallway, Kara gave her a look of 'don't stop me now' before she called out they would catch up later.

Chapter Seventeen

The ice cream lid was ripped off and the spoon jammed into the softened mixture as Kara kicked her shoes off. Her current frame of mind made it quite impossible for her to enjoy the mouthful. She pulled at her jacket while the spoon hung from her mouth then leaned over and grabbed hold of the faucets, giving them a hard twist.

The past few days were surreal. Had they really happened? She slowly pulled the elastic free from her hair and let it fall over her shoulders.

The spoon was stabbed into the tub of ice cream again before she let her skirt fall from her hips to the floor in a soft whisper of fabric. Carefully stepping out of it, she kicked it to the wall and placed the ice cream on the vanity countertop. Her arms crossed, she grabbed the hem of her top and pulled it free before it joined her skirt on the floor. She stared at the bubbles frothing as she unclasped her bra then stepped carefully into the bathtub. Gently lowering herself down, the warm water began to relax the muscles in her legs. With a long appreciative sigh she leaned back into the tub before reaching for the ice cream again. Kara stared at the ceiling as she spooned the sinfully creamy dessert into her mouth. Her mood was starting to lighten and then her phone rang.

"Goddamit!" She threw the spoon into the tub and gripped the sides, hauling herself out as bubbles sloshed everywhere. Her towel wrapped tightly around her body, she slid across the floorboards towards the phone to answer it aggressively. "Hello?"

Her fist clenched at the sound of Lachlan's voice. "Hi, did I interrupt something?"

"Actually, I was in the bath." Her bad mood was coming back stronger than before.

"That conjures up some nice imagery, but I guess I shouldn't have said that."

"You are right. One, you are not supposed to say things like that about colleagues and two, you pulled me from a bubble bath. You never pull me from a bubble bath and expect me to be in a good mood. What is it? How did you get my number anyway?"

"If you didn't want people to call you while you were having a bath, why didn't you take the phone off the hook? Holt gave me your number. Do you want me to call back? Are you standing there...you know...?"

"No, I have a towel, pervert! Get on with it. What is it you want that couldn't wait till tomorrow?"

"I'm just making sure you go over the profiles and notes. Any questions? I just wanted to see how you were. How you are with—?"

"With what Lachlan? With the profile I'm going to look at it after I have some dinner?"

"You haven't eaten? Neither have I. Would you like to get something?"

"Let me finish...I will get to the profile and make notes and questions to ask you tomorrow. I am not going out with you and the reason I don't take my phone off the hook is because I don't give out my number. Neither should ACORP. But now I know you have it, I can promise you it will be off the hook from now on."

"Kara—"

"I will talk with you tomorrow."

"Kara...I know it's going to take time for you to—"

Click.

Kara hung up. She pulled the cord from the wall and headed back to the bathroom. She was not in the mood for it.

It was about an hour later when Kara pulled herself from the bathtub for the second time. Her hair wrapped in a towel, the belt of her fluffy robe tie snugly around her waist, she tucked her feet into her slippers. She looked at her fingers and tsked herself for the poor state of her nails then quickly turned her attention to picking up her profile pack. Once it was spread across her coffee table, she stood tall and looked down at what was before her. Blueprints; maps; locations; photos; buildings; guards; security systems; reports. She picked up the report and headed to the kitchen to inspect the contents of her fridge. In all the recent fuss she hadn't gone grocery shopping and only had the bare basics. With a boring cheese sandwich and a glass of water, Kara returned to the couch. She flicked the first page of the report before biting into her sandwich. It took her a while to get her eyes to move away from the large print on the front page. It read: *Wanted for grand theft, treason and embezzlement.*

The first section of the report was Lachlan's findings and her father's dealings. She flicked through the pages to find his profile.

Name: James Procteramis.

DOB: 15 November 1950.

Location: Unknown.

Family: Daughter, Kara. Employee of ACORP. No other known relatives.

She leafed through the pages, scanning for anything distinctive. There were files of his employment at ACORP and a report of when he was suspected to be rogue.

Procteramis was found in Sector C. The clearance level for Sector C is only available to the Directors of ACORP. When questioned, Procteramis claimed he had been given permission to access files. Sector C contains information pertaining to ACORP's artifacts, locations and security measures. A report has been filed and protocol has been followed for this rogue agent.

The only thing Kara found referring to herself was the preliminary report of her own. It stated the information she provided them when she was arrested. *Denies all knowledge of a partner. Is overconfident and because she has had the training of her father, it is quite possible she has conducted these heists solo.*

Her head was swimming by the time she had reached the last page. Was she predestined to work for ACORP? Had they been tracking her while she was doing heists for them? Was Lachlan telling her the truth? Did they even trust her or have they been keeping her close to see if she would turn rogue too?

Sleep was a long time coming.

Kara blinked as the alarm clock buzzed close to her head. She was still holding the report in her hand. It was the worst night's sleep she'd had in a long time. It was the kind where you felt you hadn't slept at all. Although tempted to curl further into her bed and call in sick, she threw back the doona and headed to the bathroom.

Within an hour she was showered, dressed, had breakfast and was on her way to work. Armed with her notes and profile pack, she hoped she would be the first in the conference room. Silent curses rained over Lachlan's head when she saw him leaning over the table, his back towards the door.

"Good morning," she said coldly as she entered the room.

He placed his coffee cup on the coaster, turned around and smiled. "Good morning. How are you?"

"Fine. I have my notes. There are several things from the report I would like to discuss."

"Did you plug your phone back in? I rang it a couple of times before I went to bed."

"The number is being changed today and I'll be speaking to personnel about releasing my home phone number too. I have a cell phone if you need to speak to me. I am entitled to a private life." Kara needed to make her boundaries clear. "Now that I have said that, I highly doubt you are going to let any of it stand in your way. Let's get down to business." She rolled out her blueprints and put her notepad next to it. "I looked at the type of surveillance and groundcover he has at this building." She ran her fingers along a long section of the building. "Since both you and Holt are set on getting in there, I think the best tactic is to enter it this way via a garbage truck. Every form of transport that enters the compound is checked and run through by his employees...except the garbage truck. It is the only form of transport that could get our team close enough without being detected."

"Kind of like the Trojan Horse?"

"If you wish to glamorize it...yes. Once inside, we need to have decryption systems, code breakers for electronic locks on doors, possible glass cutting equipment. The whole bit. This here is going to be the trickiest part." She pointed to a spot on the blueprint. "From the photos, it looks like there are sensors, infrared and pressure checkers."

"Pressure checkers?"

"Yeah," she said without looking up. "They are put into the flooring and anything heavier than what it is set to will trigger an alarm and alert security that something is happening in that sector. Any possible movement to their product will not go unnoticed."

"Sounds like you will need some explosives too." Lachlan nodded his approval. "I love your work. You did this all last night?"

"There wasn't anything on television. It really wasn't that hard. You just have to know how each component works into the next. Once you get one, the rest will follow. It's really not that brilliant." Although she was determined not to get into any unnecessary conversation with him, Kara couldn't help but let the words flow out of her mouth. "I'm sure you would have got there in time. Or you would have been shot."

Lachlan shook his head. "My intention is to get the team in and out of there safely. I will be wired into you. You are leading the team from the inside but all decisions are for both of us to decide. Don't shut me out on such an important job Kara."

"I am going to do my job. I don't go into a job hoping to fuck it up." Kara stared at him. "Are we done?"

"We should make a time to meet with Holt ASAP." He paused for a moment before he continued speaking. "Will you have dinner with me?"

"Make a time with Holt and message me. And no, I don't do dinners. I told you that. I'm going to see Stephanie about setting up a lab to suit the conditions of the building and get the team to have run throughs." Kara was out the door before Lachlan had a chance continue the conversation.

As soon as Stephanie and Kara walked to an empty level used for mock buildings, Stephanie pinned her friend down with a question. "So what's going on there?"

"On where?"

"You know exactly where. With Lachlan? By the way, I haven't received clearance from Holt to do this yet. You do know you can't be here when I set up."

"Yeah, I know. You like to leave little surprises for me...trying to test me. Ha! Bring it on. And as for Mr. James, there is nothing going on there."

"But there was at one point. You only get shitty if you have been with a guy and then he does something. Then you cut them off. What happened? You didn't sleep with him, did you?" Kara looked at Stephanie. "You didn't! Oh...we haven't had an office romance here for years. I want details."

"Whoa! There is no romance. There will be no office gossip and if there is, I know which techno geek couldn't keep her finger off the intercom or intranet buttons!" Kara looked at her slyly. "You know I'm armed these days."

"No one is going to hear anything about it from me. Oh my God. Was it good? Are you going back for more? I can't believe you weren't going to tell me!"

"Calm down. There is nothing to tell. Something happened when it shouldn't have and there is no way it will happen again. You know full well my policy of honesty. He was supposed to be the bad guy. How do you think I felt when I saw him coming in the room the other day? My first instinct was to shoot him. It truly was. I thought 'Holy shit! How did you get through the main doors without a tag?' and then he comes out with all this about being a double agent, working for both ACORP and my father."

"Your father! I knew he was working for someone else, but not your father. Jesus Kara. How are you with that?" Kara shrugged and Stephanie stopped walking. "I mean, you are effectively going in to shut down your father. Surely that's gotta do something to you. Closure? Revenge? Anything?"

"I don't know yet. I am going in to close down his operation, not him."

Stephanie lowered her voice. "But what if it comes to that?"

"Then it's a decision I will have to make given the circumstances. Hey, I'm gonna let you get on with it. I have to go and fill out a few reports about who I want on the team. Talk to you soon."

"Yeah, I still want details regardless if anything is going to come of it. If it counts for anything...you make a good looking couple."

She shook her head as she left Stephanie in the huge, stark space, not wanting to think of Lachlan and her as a couple. Not only did the trust issue haunt her, the fact she would be dating someone from work bothered her. It would be breaking one of her rules. She'd never dated anyone from work.

The thought of seeing him during the day and then all night left her feeling smothered. There was no way she could have handled it. Sure, she'd been asked out before but she never followed through because she knew it was a bad idea. Or was it? She stopped walking as her brain stopped her heart from thinking then tsked herself for even going against her judgment. It was a bad thing. A very bad idea. So why couldn't she stop thinking about the bad idea?

She shook her head and forced herself to focus on getting a team together.

She knew exactly who she wanted.

"Really? I get to go in there, all guns blazing, next to you?" TW failed dismally to contain his excitement.

"Yes. But I don't think you'll be given a loaded gun. You'll be my computer guy. I don't know why you and Stephanie don't work together. You have skills that complement each other very well. Lachlan will be running communications from outside, so do you think you will be able to handle it?"

"Are you kidding me? I have been waiting for my chance to prove I can handle something like this. Oh, my head is reeling. I have visions...do you know what sort of security there is?"

"Put your head between your legs if it's too much for you. Remember to breathe. You will be debriefed along with all the others. We are setting up a profile for you, so it will have all the details you will need to know. I have every faith you will be able to get us in and out without a single alarm being tripped. Don't let me down. Just be cool. Okay?"

"Be cool. Sure thing. I'm cool. Cool as cool. I'm cool..."

Kara stared at the gibbering mess before her. "You've already said that. Now don't make me change my mind." Through the periphery of her vision she saw Lachlan walking past the big glass window of TW's office. It always looked like a pigsty but in actual fact was very neat for the amount of equipment he required. She got to her feet. "Remember, cool. We will let you know when the meeting is on. Lachlan."

"Ah, there you are. There are a few details Holt would like us to go over before the meeting, so I made reservations at the restaurant across the road. We need to keep up our strength."

Kara couldn't quite believe him. She bit her tongue to prevent herself from screaming him stupid and just shook her head, silently counting down from ten and breathing deeply through her nose.

"No. I don't think so. If you have a work matter to discuss with me, then we can do it here."

"But you gotta eat."

"Not with you I don't. Look Lachlan, if you are trying to make nothing into something, it is not going to work. I'm sorry, but I've said it before and I'll say it again. I don't date people from work."

"Who said anything about this being a date? I just want to get some lunch while we work on the plan."

"I don't think it's appropriate to take workplace instructions out of the office environment. Procter could have someone watching you." Lachlan stared at her, not saying a word. "What?"

"You just referred to him by his last name. The last name he shared with you."

"I did?" Kara tried to think back to what she had said. "Well, it's true. He could have someone looking for you. I just don't think it's wise for us to go and have lunch. I have reports to fill out anyway."

"Okay, then I will bring lunch to us. Regardless of what you say." He lifted his hand to silence her. "You can eat it at your desk."

"Fine." She turned on her heel and headed towards the conference room. "I'll be in

there. Knee deep in forms. We can have our run through when Stephanie gives the go ahead."

She stood with her hands on her hips, facing the wall. "You know you shouldn't be here Kara, not without Lachlan." Stephanie watched her to make sure she wasn't looking. "You are not supposed to be seeing anything new."

"Why? Lachlan has seen the warehouse and knows exactly what it looks like. I have seen the maps; I know the security measures that are in place—"

Stephanie cut her off. "It doesn't matter. You need to wait outside. I still have to set up a few more things and if you are in here, you will see them and be ready for them. I can't have that."

Kara went off in a huff and tsked when she saw Lachlan and TW walking towards her. "I know, I know. I'm sorry we're late."

She simply rolled her eyes and turned to knock on the door. "Save it."

"Ahh, so are we ready to go?" Without waiting for a response, Stephanie spoke directly to Lachlan. "Okay. Lachlan, let me get Kara sorted out first and then you and I will go into the communications room." Inside ACORP's warehouse was a smaller scale building with the same security measures in place as the warehouse they were targeting. Kara and TW were on a time trial to break the codes and find the easiest access possible for the team. "So you feel alright? You ready?"

"As always." Kara smiled.

"And how are you?" Stephanie turned to TW.

"Roger that, I'm good to go. Ready spaghetti." He opened his mouth to continue but Stephanie prevented him from saying more.

"This bag has everything you need and more." Stephanie handed the bag over. "Okay, you can put your in earpiece now." When Kara pushed it into place, she heard Lachlan testing the connection. "Although I'm linked to you as well, Lachlan is the only one of us able to speak to you."

"Okay Kara, TW? You are able to proceed whenever you are ready." Stephanie smiled encouragingly, excitement lighting her eyes. "Good luck and keep those eyes peeled."

They took their positions at the first door. "Piece of cake this security box." TW laughed as he pulled out his pliers. When his hand moved over the box, a bright red light flashed and an alarm hooted three times.

"Piece of cake, hey?" She slapped the back of TW's hand gently. "Look before you touch anything. Set it up again Stephanie." The red light stopped flashing and TW moved his hand towards it again. "Look. What did I just say? No touching...what do you see?"

"I set off the alarm again you are going to hurt me."

"No, I'm not going to be the one who hurts you. Just think...if you set this alarm off in a real situation, it will be other people who will hurt you. Just be cool and think of it as inside job. You have done hundreds of these before."

He looked closer this time and they both saw a short wire sticking clear of the bottom of the device.

"Cool, I see it now." TW reached into his pocket for another wire clip. "It has been disabled, but just enough so if anything else touches it, even a change in wind force, could

trigger this little baby. I'll have you inside soon enough." Kara watched him clip the wire and run it through what looked to be a small version of a laptop with less buttons that TW got her to hold. It made tiny beeps as a current pulsed through the wire. "There." He had the cover in his hand and the pliers over the circuit board. The red LEDs next to the display turned green and the door lock released.

"See, you just have to focus." She handed him the small laptop.

"Good job." Lachlan's voice sounded in her ear. She had forgotten he was even there. Tingles ran down her spine. She was alert to the sound of his breath in her ear. "Proceed to the next door."

They stepped into the corridor and Kara surveyed the scene around them. "TW...we need to keep an eye out for a little red dot." She looked up at the ceiling and along the skirting boards. "If you see any red dots, tell me. Don't touch them or cut their lines, they are infrared beams."

"I know what they are Kara."

"Sorry." She shook her head. He was the one who told her about them. "Do you see any?"

"No, but I see that instead." His voice sounded unusually shaky.

Kara turned to face the wall.

Her heart pounded.

She had never come across that before.

Chapter Eighteen

"What the hell is that?" Kara moved towards the wall. "Are you seeing this Lachlan? This wasn't on any of the reports."

A chunk of the wall from the ceiling to the floor was missing, only to be replaced with hundreds of infrareds in a vertical line.

"Is there another way into the vault if something like this proves to be too difficult?" She looked for a trigger as she slowly walked along the wall, looking up and down the corridor for an alternative route.

"Nope, haven't seen this before, but then I guess Stephanie didn't want to make it too easy for you." It sounded like Lachlan was almost laughing at her. "I thought you were always up for anything."

"Right." She pumped herself for the challenge. "TW, you're gonna have to help me with this." She put her bag on the ground and thought for a moment. "Okay, obviously we have to get past these infrareds, but if you look closely, you'll see if any of them are compromised, whatever is packed in the ceiling will be dumped all over us. My guess is a chemical of some kind." TW's face blanched. "Don't stress, we will find a way. I think we need to neutralize the chemical before we get past these." She pointed to the infrared beams.

"I disagree. I say we go the other way." TW shook his head. "The tango with chemicals should be our last option."

"And what if the other option is worse? We would have wasted all that time. Come on TW, you know we have to do this way."

"Why don't you try the other option Kara?" Lachlan's question was an unwelcome intrusion.

"Like I just said, if it's a worse option, all that time is wasted and the likelihood of an alarm being tripped is greater."

"You don't know that."

"Then why was it set up this way? Is there something on the report you forgot to share with us?" Kara was practically yelling.

"Lucky this thing is not set on a noise alarm," TW muttered under his breath.

"If this proves to be the only way in, then we need to know how to get in. Unless you have something constructive to say Lachlan, then I suggest you let TW and I get on with the job!" She crouched to her knees and searched in her bag. "TW, this is your domain...get working! What's the best way?"

"I don't think this is the best way Kara." TW crouched next to her. "There are too many variables. I think we should take the time to investigate what the other options are."

"Fine." She got to her feet, her hands on her hips. "I hate to do this to you, TW, but you are under my command here. This will *not* be a run through the next time we are decked out in our finest. You need to be ready and willing to do what I say, *when* I say it. I am doing everything I can to ensure your protection." She realized her hands were resting on her hips and quickly moved them. "If you are not willing to follow through with what I ask, then I will have no choice but to remove you from the team."

"Kara, I suggest you go through with TW's suggestion." Lachlan's voice sounded in

her ear again. She shook her head.

"We have to do it my way or how else are we going to learn from this? This could be a dummy trap for all we know."

Before she knew what was happening, TW grabbed his pliers and threw them towards the infrareds. The instant the pliers intercepted the beams, the ceiling split open and gushed with colored water.

Kara stared at TW as she lifted her bag out of the water.

"That's it. You are off the team." Her voice was a calm, even tone. She walked towards the exit. "Count me out. I've had enough of this bullshit."

Not bothering to change out of her wet gear, she stormed towards her office to collect her keys. She threw her bag across the room and only stopped when she heard something break inside. But she didn't care. Rage coursed through her veins and she just wanted to get the hell out of there when she heard Lachlan calling her. Her keys firmly in her fist, she walked through the other office door. She viciously jabbed the elevator call button then headed for the fire escape when she heard him get closer.

"Kara!" Her name echoed in the stairwell. "You can't leave; you need to be on this team."

"Why? Why do you need me if you are going to undermine everything I say and do? You need to be the one going in there and leading that team. You are the one who thinks he knows it all."

"I was just trying to get you to think outside the square. Just because there is a challenge before you doesn't mean you have to go through it!"

Her boots squelched as she stomped towards the car and slammed the door shut behind her. He hadn't bothered to chase after her and for some reason that made her all the more furious.

"So what was the hissy fit all about?" Stephanie walked through the front door without waiting to be invited in. "And don't tell me it was all about work."

"It's not all about work Steph, it's the way they carry on with their shit. TW needs to learn to take orders if he wants to go out into the field and Lachlan needs to learn to back me up. We are supposed to be joint team leaders." Kara spoke quickly as she walked towards her kitchen, not looking to see if her friend followed her. "It's just so frustrating. I know I've worked by myself for a long time and part of it has to be about me giving up a bit of the control, but shit! A spade's a spade and if we can't get our way through something like that, what are we going to do then? Waste everyone's time and effort? Do they honestly think something is going to be in that warehouse?"

"Do you think there is something in there?"

"No, I don't. I have made my opinion known to everyone, from Lachlan to Holt, but they just don't want to leave anything unturned." She took a deep breath and began to feel better about the whole situation. "Sorry to dump you with it, but you did ask."

"I don't mind at all. As long as you feel better." Stephanie moved to her side. "Shall we see you at work tomorrow?"

Kara shook her head and looked away. "I have to get my head around this. It's unsettling to be in a position where you have to work with someone who has done nothing

but deceive you and then goes against you every step of the way.”

“If it’s any consolation, Lachlan told me he was going to step back and let you take over. Both he and TW realize they overstepped the mark.”

“So they sent you to deliver the message?”

“Let’s put it this way, they both knew there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell you would open the door to them.” Stephanie laughed. “You will get through this. I can only imagine what it’s like to learn about your dad the way you did. But to be thrust in there, almost like bait, to bring him down...you must feel a huge weight on your shoulders.”

“That’s the thing Steph, I don’t. I don’t feel anything. I’m treating this just like any other job.”

“Do you think that is wise?”

“What choice do I have? It will consume me otherwise.” Kara flicked her hair, pretending a nonchalance she was far from feeling. “It’s the only way I can deal with it.”

She felt both TW and Lachlan stare at her as she walked through the door with Stephanie.

“Alright, all this shit aside, let’s get into it. Lachlan, you are with me, Kara and TW. You get ready. I want to be in and out of here within the next two hours.”

TW looked at Kara as she pulled on her backpack. “Hey, I’m sorry if I caused you any offence. I know I was being a prat. I think I just got a bit carried away with the whole thing. You were breathing down my neck and...”

Kara scoffed at him. “Breathe down your neck? TW, I can promise you that when I do breathe down your neck, you will wish it was your mommy riding you to do your homework instead of me. Oh, and let me just state for the record...you pull any of that shit again and I will take you down myself.”

Stephanie came through their earpieces. “Alright people, let’s get this show on the road.”

“Alright, so we have the garbage truck organized...you do know it’s going to be half full of waste?” Lachlan took a big mouthful of his club sandwich before looking around the room.

“The lengths we have to go to for our job.” There was laughter in the room at TW’s comment. “But hey, if it’s going to get us closer to the goods and make our deal a little easier, then we’ll do it. Right guys?” Everyone in the room nodded in support.

“Kara and I are leading the team. Kara will go in with you and I will remain outside on communications. We have both visual and audio link up, so what you hear, we will hear. What you see, we will see. The aim is to get in, disable the security system and take back what is ACORP’s in the smallest amount of time with the least amount of disruption.”

“Sounds easy enough,” TW announced.

“Let’s not forget who we are dealing with here.” Kara stood up to speak. “It is my belief we are, in fact, not going to find anything in this warehouse. We are following Mr. Holt’s instructions, backed by Mr. James here, and are going to go in. I’ve made no secret that I suspect this is a trap, so we need our game faces on. No stupid heroics. No getting complacent.” The room fell deathly silent as she walked around the table. “You may have

looked through the profiles and thought this was going to be a walk in the park. May I remind you Mr. Procter's knowledge and dealings with explosives was second nature? We do not want to take any of you out in a body bag. We watch each other's backs. We do not go into any rooms that haven't first been cleared and for God's sake, watch where you walk. Sounds simple enough but everyone forgets the basics when they are pumped for action. Let's get in and out without being noticed. That is the best compliment a thief or a hacker could have."

"Kara's right." Lachlan moved to her side. "We want to get in, get what we need and get the hell out of there. We have back up plans if needed."

"Hopefully we won't need to know about them," TW said.

"Hopefully not." Kara picked up her folder. "We shall see you all here tomorrow morning at three-thirty." She remained standing next to Lachlan as the room cleared. "If anything happens to these people, I will hold you personally responsible. I do not believe what we are looking for will be stored in the warehouse. But since you need to have hard evidence, we have no choice but to go through with this."

"Well, I think you're wrong. You can pull out if you wish."

"No. I can't let these guys go in there without me. TW doesn't even have real field experience, but he is the best computer technician we have. There is not a computer system in the world he can't hack. I need to be by his side when he does his stuff."

"That's very thoughtful of you. Deep down, for your sake, I hope you are right. Do you have plans for dinner?" Kara looked at him. "I was just asking in general...I wasn't going to ask you out."

"No. I'm going to go home and get an early night. Going into a potential bombsite is not something you want to do when you have had a late night."

"Okay, you have a good night then and I'll see you later."

"You too." Kara picked up her bag and walked out of the conference room, into the path of Mr. Holt.

"Ahh, Miss Procter...Mr. James, just coming to see the pair of you to congratulate you on a fine plan," he started as Lachlan walked into the corridor.

"We haven't done it yet." Kara looked at Lachlan.

"But I'm sure it will be a success. You two make a great pair. You work very well together. I can see many more projects coming your way. Make ACORP proud tomorrow. I expect a full report."

"No problems." Lachlan smiled at her. She returned his gaze with a stare. "See, everyone in the office thinks we should be working together all the time." She didn't even bother with a response before she turned on her heel and walked away. As she reached her car in the undercover parking area, she heard someone running after her. "Hey, you forgot this."

Her gaze automatically dropped to his hands, looking for something and finding nothing. "What? What did I forget?"

"You forgot this." Without missing a beat, one arm snaked around her neck while the other circled for her waist and he pressed his lips against hers in a kiss. Her defenses melted away as her tongue met his. In a blinding instant, it felt like she was with him back in her garage. Where everything felt right. There was no good or bad or sides to be taken. Her hands moved along his arms to the back of his head. She cupped him close, pushed her

tongue further into his mouth. His chest pressed against hers as she moved her back against the car.

Lachlan's fingers moved through her hair and held her body close to his as she broke their head to feather her lips along his neck. "What do I have to do for you to trust me?"

"No..." Kara tried to clear the fog in her head. "No. We have to stop this." She couldn't stop herself from tasting his neck, running her tongue down the sinewy muscle. "I shouldn't... We shouldn't." He began to kiss her neck and her legs felt like jelly. Her head rolled back as she shivered from his gentle but hot touch.

"If you don't want me to keep going...all you have to say is stop." Lachlan trailed hot wet kisses along her neck to rest on her erogenous zone near her ear, the vibrations of his voice shooting electric sparks of desire down her spine.

"We shouldn't be doing this. I can't let you keep going. You have to stop Lachlan." She opened her eyes, pleaded with them. "Please, stop."

The plaintive tone of her words registered and he pulled his lips away but still held her close. "Are you okay? I just had to be near you again. You don't have to stress, it was just a kiss."

Kara gazed into his eyes as she wiped the corners of her mouth. "But that's where it starts. If you do that again..." She pushed her hand against his chest and he took a step back, releasing her from his embrace. Without breaking visual contact, she pressed the button on her keys and opened her door. Her skirt bunched up as she sat behind the wheel and then pulled the door shut.

"What? If I did it again...what?" He tapped against the window with his knuckle.

"I won't be able to stop. Good night Lachlan." She cursed herself for giving voice to the words in her mind as she put her foot on the accelerator. Every time she looked in the rear view mirror, his reflection was smaller until he disappeared from sight. How could she leave a handsome, smart and somewhat charming man in the car park at her work? It was for the best. There was no time for romance.

She just had to keep reminding herself.

Chapter Nineteen

Two hours before she needed to, Kara got out of bed. She wanted to be prepared for whatever was going to happen during the course of the day. Ultimately it was she who was responsible for what happened to her team while they were inside and she had never let that escape her mind. After a long swig of her coffee, she brushed her hair into a ponytail and adjusted her bra before slipping into her dark shirt and long dark pants, followed by socks and a pair of dark boots. As she pulled on her vest and adjusted the straps, she thought about Stephanie and her collection of gadgets and devices waiting to fill her vest when she got to work. She looked at her reflection in the mirror then set off.

When she pulled into her car space, she noticed Lachlan's four-wheel-drive already parked opposite hers. When she saw Lachlan intruding Stephanie's domain, she asked, "Do you sleep here?"

"Good morning to you too," he said as Stephanie dumped a box of leads at his side. "You know I have a home to go to."

"Morning Steph. You need a hand?"

"Nah. I've got it under control, but thanks anyway. If I let someone else help me, I lose my mind a bit thinking 'have I done it or haven't I?'" Lachlan looked at Kara and smiled. She couldn't help but smirk back.

"So where is the rest of the team?" She looked around at the number of waiting vests.

"We're here," TW announced, leading four other men through the doors. "At your service."

"Okay, let's get our bits and pieces sorted out and then we can get wired up," Lachlan said as TW nodded.

"Kara, I need you and your vest to come here," Stephanie called. "The rest of you guys, I have your vests waiting there. Don't touch anything. I will explain to you soon enough what they are all for. TW, I have made extra compartments for you and your gadgets."

TW pointed his fingers and mimed them shooting a bullet at her as he winked while Lachlan followed Kara.

"I think he likes you Stephanie," Lachlan teased, having himself a little laugh.

"How old are you?" Kara snorted as she removed her vest. "We are not in high school anymore. Steph...don't listen to him." She didn't move when Lachlan brushed against her arm and Stephanie shook her head, laughing as she took the vest from her hands.

"Me and TW?" Stephanie laughed again as she looked at him. He was standing next to his vest, trying to look at all the bits and pieces. He jumped nearly a foot off the ground when Stephanie yelled at him to stay away when she saw his hand inch towards one of the pockets.

"What did I just say? Don't touch!"

She turned her attention back to both Kara and Lachlan before laughing again. "Oh puhlease. Could you just imagine us as a couple?" She didn't try to hide her laughter as she focused on the vest.

"Now, what I have for you Kara is an exciting new feature. It's basically a cloaking device. Since all of your guys are going to be wired with extra stuff, chances are the security in the building is going to be able to sense the stuff that's not supposed to be there. This little

baby – and I’m only telling you guys this because it’s extra info the rest of the team don’t need to know – is designed to prevent people from tracking you. In other words, you can roam around to your heart’s content without being detected. One of my own designs.”

“Cool,” Kara praised. “You should get a raise for doing great work like this. When we get back from this job, I’m going to put you in my report and say you deserve more money.”

“Ha! Thanks. Just get me an assistant,” she laughed, handing Kara her jacket. She turned and looked at the five men standing next to their jackets. “Alright, it’s not Christmas. You all know what you are getting. Each jacket has the same deal; you are all wired up to be connected to us here. If anything fails in your jacket – not that it will – you can go to a team member and use what they have. TW, you can take over now. Obviously the two jackets designed to look like the security guards are slightly different, but they still have everything you need.”

TW smiled broadly as he moved in front of the team and held his hands out. “Okay...you are all wired into the one system. What you say everyone hears, so keep it clean. Lachlan has the power to mute everyone and speak to only one person. Video surveillance has been woven into the backs of our vests and at the front. And another has been placed inside the tip of our boots. That means we have to be careful about what we step in, if you know what I mean.” TW was the only one to laugh. “Seriously, the boot is also fitted with an infrared camera, giving us the ability to detect tripwires, if there is any. So that’s pretty much all from me. If you have any troubles, just come and see me.”

Kara nodded and stepped forward. “Okay, are there any questions? Our transportation is ready for us now so I suggest we get this show on the road.”

She looked at Lachlan who nodded and clapped his hands together. “Okay people. Let’s go.”

Kara collected a heavy bag and threw it over her shoulder. TW moved to her side. “Would you like me to take that?”

She smirked at him. “Oh, I’ve got it. It’s all the stuff I need for this job. Besides, if I carry it, I know where it is at all times.”

“Sure thing boss.” He walked towards the door with her.

Stephanie grabbed her hand. “Hey. Don’t forget your lipstick. For just in case.”

She looked at the bright blue color and smiled. “Hopefully there won’t be any need for an explosion.”

“You never know.” Lachlan moved behind her as they walked towards the door. “We might just have to have one.”

“Again with the brute force...what is it with men?”

Kara was the last person to enter the half full garbage truck parked at the compound.

“Remind me to think of a better way next time.” She gasped for breath. The stench was foul. It was all she could do to hold her breakfast down.

“Ha, Roger that. It will all be over soon.” Lachlan’s voice came through the earpiece.

“How you coping TW?” She saw only dark shadows nodding as she moved through the waste to take her seat. “Just breathe through your mouth.”

“But I can taste it,” he whined.

Kara started to giggle but the stench flooded her nose and made her gag instead. The

slow jostling of the truck mixed with the smell of decaying food and waste brought on a feeling of motion sickness.

"I'm sorry guys. Honestly, if there was any other way, we would be doing it. This was the best solution to guarantee our safety getting in and out again. Just another ten minutes and we will be out doing our thing."

"No problems Kara," TW said. "We know you would have found another way if there was one. Besides, it's nothing we can't overcome when you buy us all a beer."

"Sure thing. Beer it is. I'm sure I could find us a couple in here. Well, bottles that is." Every time she snickered, or tried to make light of the situation, she felt her stomach jump. She reached out her hand to take hold of TW's and said in a hushed tone, "You will make me proud."

She released her grip when she heard Lachlan's voice. "Alright. You are coming up to the last turn and then it's the security post. Sit tight people. We're almost there." The truck jolted as it shuffled over the grill and stopped again. The screeching of the brakes seemed ten times louder in the receptacle. Sure she was not the only one on the team holding her breath, she listened to the security guard clear the truck. With a sigh of relief, she dropped her chin to her chest when the vibrations ran through the thick metal as the truck rolled forward once again. "You can all breathe easily now; you are on your way," Lachlan reassured them. "Remember, during the early hours only two of the guards' stations are manned." Kara scooted to the front of the truck as they rolled to a stop.

The six of them got to their feet when the truck stopped and waited for the mechanical arms to tip one of the bins into the back. As the bin swung on the truck's arms, Kara grabbed hold of the side and tilted it forward so they could get in. TW helped her into the bin before the others clambered in behind her. They all hugged the sides as the bin was lowered back to the ground.

At the last moment, she grabbed hold of TW by his vest and pulled him down, knocking his feet out from under him as the bin lid slammed shut.

"Jeez, watch your head...you need that you know." His elbow connected with her stomach as she spoke.

"Sorry." TW rolled off her and onto his knees. They remained where they were until they heard the truck move away to the next bin.

"Alright Steve...you're up. Do your thing." Steve pulled an air rifle from his bag and twisted the silencer into place.

"Ready," Steve whispered, softly but clearly.

"Okay, on the count of three. One...two...three." On three she and another operative pushed their palms against the lid. Steve poked the barrel of the gun into the cool morning air. Only the sound of the trigger clicking and the dart puncturing the thigh of a security guard was heard.

"Won't even know what hit him," Steve whispered as they peered through the crack. The security guard staggered forward and hit the ground. Steve pulled the trigger once again when the other security guard came into sight.

"Alright, lid up," Kara instructed as she pushed through her legs to lift. "You two, go."

The two dressed as security guards jumped from their hiding place and ran to the fallen men. They grabbed hold of their legs and dragged the unconscious men behind their station,

hiding them from view. They adjusted their uniforms as they moved into position and motioned to the remaining team the all-clear.

"We are good to go." Kara's voice was clear and strong as she signaled the beginning of the heist.

"Copy that. Move into position." Lachlan clasped his hands together as he watched the monitors before him. The two agents posing as security guards flicked a couple of switches before one pulled a long cord from his jacket and fed it into the computer system.

"Access to computer system almost ready," he said as the other pulled out a small palm computer. "Link complete."

Lachlan spun on his chair to face another set of monitors. "Nice work guys. Let's see what we've got here. Okay, feeding the security monitors now. Lucky there was nothing to set the alarm off."

"Yeah, this time. Don't expect the next obstacle to be so easy." He saw through the monitor Kara hugging the wall of the building as she moved toward the door.

"Alright, good to go with security station number one." Lachlan dismissed her comments, refusing to be drawn into an argument. "TW...your turn. I'm now changing coms: Charlie, you are linked to security team; Kara and TW, you are with me."

He watched TW yank the shoulder straps on his bag as he tried to remove it, dancing on the spot when the straps refused to budge. It was only when Kara intervened by pulling on a cord did the straps drop to his elbows. He knew TW was nervous, but to say anything now would probably only succeed making him more nervous, preventing him from fully concentrating on the job at hand.

"Thanks." TW looked embarrassed.

"Just breathe. Just like we practiced, okay?" Kara smiled at him.

"Just like we practiced," he repeated. He pulled a glass-cutting tool from his jacket and handed her a small spray bottle. She pumped several sprays over his shoulder to ensure it was working correctly while TW placed a small torch in his mouth. "Hokay, buph wike pwackphiss." He took a deep breath and inched his hands towards the glass box covering the alarm. His hands trembled as the tool made its incision. A flick of his wrist and a small circle rested in his hand. Another quick turn and he held a larger circle of glass in his hand. "Hokay Kawa." She brought the nozzle of the bottle to the small hole and squeezed the trigger to release a small amount of moisture.

"Have you ever come across this before Kara?" Lachlan watched in fascination the video footage on the monitors.

"Only once. This is that once. It's an incredible idea though. Have a glass box to monitor any change in humidity around the alarm. If there is, then something's wrong and security is alerted. How's it all looking from your end?"

"Perfect. Eddie is taking the garbage truck back out. According to them, they are experiencing difficulties so they have to come back with a new garbage truck to finish their job."

"Nice..." Kara stood there, releasing a spray of mist every two seconds into the glass box. She watched TW reach in with a small pair of pliers and pull at the blue wire.

"Awmoph," he muttered as he loosened one of the tiny screws. "Awmoph." He

reached down and picked up a green wire off the ground that was connected to another small palm computer. Perspiration beaded his forehead as he gently eased the wire under the screw before tightening it again. He quickly shoved his tools into his pocket before spitting out the torch and turning to the computer.

"Okay, thanks to my lovely assistant, Kara, we should be a winner." TW tapped the screen and looked back at the wires. "Good. Everything is working. I think you'll find that what is behind this door is what you are hoping to win. Go on...give the lever a pull." Kara eyed TW as she reached for the handle. Her hands were shaking now. If this backfired, their transport to get out of there had just left, leaving them up the proverbial creek. She breathed deeply to calm herself and then held her breath as she pulled the handle down. On hearing the click she released her breath and pulled the door open.

"Okay. The electrical bypass is working. We have access. Damn good job there." Kara sighed in relief as she gave TW a slap on the back. "I told you you would make me proud, now let's get in there." TW grinned from ear to ear as they set off inside the building. "Okay, keep your wits about you. I'm expecting booby traps and I will be disappointed if there aren't any."

TW and Charlie moved closely behind Kara as pulled a pair of small goggles from the side of her backpack and put them on. They helped highlight any infrared activity that might not be visible to the naked eye. They shuffled along the corridor before Kara held up her hand, signaling them to stop.

"Do you see that?" She heard the creak of Lachlan's chair, accurately assuming he moved closer to the monitor for a better look.

"Negative."

"There." She pointed to a small hole in the skirting board on the wall and then its exact twin on the opposite side of the corridor. "That tiny hole there. It's an infrared beam."

"Good catch Kara," Lachlan praised. Although she scanned the wall for more, she only found the one. She slipped her hand into her pocket as she instructed Charlie to pull out the small square mirror from his vest. "We have to do this at exactly the same time. Hold the mirror by its edge and flip out the back part. We have to stand these up so the beam is reflected back on itself." When Kara crouched down next to it, Charlie followed her lead on the other side. "If one end of the signal is cut and not received by the other end, then we are screwed. You ready?"

Charlie nodded.

"Then on my count. One...two...three." Kara moved the mirror to the floor in sync with Charlie. The red dot beamed back on itself. She watched Charlie move his hand gently away from the mirror and get to his feet. "Good job. Shall we?" Keen to get in and out as quickly as possible, she didn't allow them time to sit around and praise themselves.

They came to the end of the corridor and turned to face the door.

"Okay, coming up to security station number two." She heard Lachlan clicking a few keys on the keyboards. "It will be on your left. Okay. Now, this one is a simple one. You just have to take off the top and cut the wires."

"Check it first, TW."

"No need, it's clean. It's one of the simplest security pieces. All you have to do—"

"Check it," she interrupted. "I want to make sure each alarm has been secured before anyone lays a hand on it."

TW moved to look at the wall fixture. She saw his eyes go wide when he saw a loose wire poking out. The sound of Lachlan sighing echoed in her ear but she didn't care. "What?" The look on TW's face was she needed to know that something wasn't right.

"There's a wire..." he started. "If I touch the top of it, I'm fairly certain they will be picking our bits off the wall with a spatula."

Kara moved next to him and looked at the wire. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small hand-held monitor. The moment she flicked it on, it started beeping.

"It's clear, huh? I don't know about you, Lachlan, but personally I would much rather not eat gelignite. It has a tendency to ruin one's day." She turned to TW. Lachlan started to answer her but she drowned his voice out by talking to TW. "Can you deal with this? Give me an honest answer. I need to know if you can do this, because if you can't, we need to get out now. I am not going to risk the lives of my team because someone overlooked this."

TW stared at Kara with wide eyes, shaking his head slightly. She could see the beads of sweat balling on his forehead.

"Can you do this? We can pull out now if you can't. There is no dishonor in pulling out."

There was silence while everyone waited for TW's answer. "I've never dealt with gelignite. I've only dealt with circuits."

"Right. We are out." She turned her back and faced the wall. "Repeat. Mission aborted due to an oversight."

TW called out 'no' as Lachlan's voice bounced over the airwaves.

"No Kara, we cannot abort. We are almost there. It could be a dummy wire."

"Then you get your ass in here and play with the wires," Kara shot back. She heard TW try to say something but Lachlan's yelling drowned his voice out.

"Can you please move closer to it so I can have a better look?"

"You know, when you yell at people it tends to push them into doing the opposite of what you want. We are out. You said you had this checked and you didn't."

She heard TW say something again and looked at him. "Shut up Lachlan, I can't hear."

"I said, I can have a go." She stared at him, wanting to abort the mission but at the same time finish what they had set out to do. "We have got this far. It could be a trick."

"It could also be the real deal. You have limited experience in this. I am not going to risk your life for this."

"Okay, okay!" She heard rustling of paper as Lachlan spoke. "What is the alternative? There is another entrance on the other side of the building. If there is booby trap there, then we will abort the mission. Okay? You just have to get to the other side of the building. There will be another security station there."

She stared at TW sympathetically, wanting him to know that it wasn't his fault. "I'm sorry, but you are too valuable to lose over this. Despite your flaws, there are a number of other people I would prefer to see splattered all over the wall." She turned to Charlie. "How are you doing?" He nodded, his eyes fixed on the wire. "Alright, how do we get there?"

"Go back along the corridor and go past the entrance, you just have to go the long way around," Lachlan said.

Kara shook her head as she led her small team. She moved slowly through the corridors, keeping an eye out for anything that could pose a problem. "This can't be right. We can't possibly have got this far with nothing going off."

"We have it all under control. Video surveillance is on a loop and you guys have the sensory part in hand. You just have to keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary."

"This *is* out of the ordinary." She was trying hard to keep a rein on her temper. "For a place that is supposed to be housing some of the most priceless items in the world, there is a surprising lack of security. I don't have a good feeling about this."

"Well, you'll be able to see for yourself soon enough." It sounded like Lachlan was trying to control his temper too.

"Okay, we are here. There looks to be three switches." She looked at each one separately. "We are each going to take one and give you a closer look. I want you to look for anything that doesn't seem right. Loose wires; blinking lights; scratches; anything. And speak up. This is not the time to be quiet."

She could have sworn they heard her heart beat as she checked along the floor and the ceiling for any kind of indication of handwork leading to any of the triggers.

"What do you see?" Lachlan asked.

"Charlie...you answer first," Kara instructed.

"I see another glass box; it has a button lever inside. Looks like a fire alarm."

"Anything along the walls?" She looked at her own device.

"Nope, nothing. No wires hanging out. I believe it to be a true fire alarm."

"Right. TW, what do you see?" Lachlan asked.

"Mine is a rainbow of colors. Heaps of wires, but it's all for show. If one of these gets wiped out, then the trigger Charlie is manning will go off. I can fix this with my eyes shut. I believe the one Kara is standing before is the problematic one." Her heart skipped a beat. "I believe these are all linked up. If the wires are altered, the water will trigger that wire which in turn will trip the switch to release the acid."

"There's no pipeline. Where's the acid going to come from?" What had they missed? Her eyes trailed to the floor. She dropped to her hands and knees before pressing her cheek against the floor. Looking along the timber paneling, she saw tiny holes in the surface.

"It's in the flooring."

Chapter Twenty

Relieved she'd found it but concerned nonetheless, she shook her head. "Comments Lachlan? Is the floor pressurized from about half way along the corridor to the doors?"

"Christ!" Lachlan cursed. "The clever bastard. Now do you think there's nothing inside? Why else would he go to all these lengths?"

"Like I keep telling you. To stop anyone from getting inside to see there is nothing there. If people think it's all in here and they get burned, they are not going to go looking for it elsewhere, are they?" She got to her feet. "The combination of gelignite and acid should be a fair indication! Christ! Why was none of this in your report?"

"Because I didn't know about it. This must have all been changed in the last week." There was a moment's silence in which Kara could almost visualize Lachlan staring at the monitors as he thought. "That see-through door at the end there is where you need to be."

"I can't see how long the holes go for." She quickly pasted a composed look on her face after TW gave her a worried look, turning her attention to the piping running across the ceiling. "I guess our next option is to get across via the ceiling. Can the senses detect anything? There's nothing lurking up there, is there?" She tried to get a better look at the ceiling through her goggles.

She watched in bemusement as TW and Charlie looked at each other before back at her. "Via the ceiling?"

"Yep. Only way to avoid an acid bath. I kinda like my skin, so I plan to keep it." Kara smiled. "Come on. You always said you wanted a challenge. Now I'm offering it to you." She zipped her vest all the way up and secured her pockets before jumping up to grab hold of the pipe. Hooking her legs over she shimmied along, looking over her shoulder to the floor vents. "I think they have stopped. The holes in the floor. I don't see any more. Anything Lachlan?" She held the scanner closer to the door, listening for any inconsistency in the beeps.

"There's nothing in that door," Lachlan said. "If there is, I'm not getting a reading. Nothing on the door frame either."

"TW, you come across now." Kara looked around as she linked her legs around the pipe and slowly let go with her hands to uncurl before the door handle. She looked up in time to see TW jump up and catch hold of the pipeline only to have his grip slip and fall back down. When Charlie helped by giving him a leg up she couldn't help but scoff at the ridiculous image at the same time she heard Lachlan try to stifle his laugh.

"Typical. All brains, but no brawn," she called out cheekily as she reached slowly into her pocket and pulled out a piece of plasticine. When she had stuffed it into the lock she looked back at TW. "Hey TW, use the muscles you have to hold on. There's going to be a little fire in the hole."

She clenched her legs around the pipe as tight as she could, clamping her hands over her ears. Her stomach muscles tensed as she pulled her body back up to clear the lock. *Bam!* Slowly lowering her hands from her head, she looked back at the lock. A fine mist of smoke came from it as she reached down. "Okay TW, keep coming." She blew on the now-obiterated lock to clear the smoke.

Carefully reaching out her hand she pulled the lock from the door. TW reached her as

she shoved the lock into her pocket and zipped it closed. She eased her fingers into the hole and pulled on the door. TW reached down and pulled it open with her. Shimming as close to the doorway as she could get, she looked inside the room.

"You guys alright? Talk to me," Lachlan said. "There, can you see it Kara? That's the room you need to get inside."

"Yup, we can see it."

Charlie yelled out and she twisted to see what the commotion was.

He dropped his hand from his head before saying hurriedly, "Someone's coming!" He jumped up and grabbed hold of the pipe as she took her chances and jumped into the room.

"Move TW!" She motioned for him to do the same as Charlie swung his way along with his hands. Kara reached out and grabbed TW by the vest, pulling him towards the door. "Grab the top and swing!"

"Do something Lachlan, get them away from here!"

She reached into her pocket and pulled the handle free, replacing it in the hole in the door as Charlie jumped inside. Quickly latching it on, she pushed the door closed as far as it would go. The three of them pressed their backs to the wall as they heard the security guards round the corner. On hearing two of her team member's voices, she breathed easily.

"See? There's nothing to be worried about. We told you we didn't hear anything," one of the operatives said.

"It's okay, they were only coming to see what the noise was," Lachlan said. "Good job there Charlie. Time we got you away." An explosion sounded outside the building. "I have set up small bombs all around the perimeter as a diversion, leaving us relatively alone."

"Great, you and your dynamite." Kara looked at the handle. The tremors from the explosion had caused it to slip. She held her breath before saying, "Don't let any more off."

"What? You want me let more off? Okay..."

"No, you moron. I said don't let—" *Bam!* The sound of another explosion drowned her voice out. She grabbed her coms switch and yelled at the two undercover security guards to get out as she helplessly watched the handle slip free of its hole and land on the floor with a loud cracking noise. Cautiously moving her head, she saw through the door the security guards running away towards the explosion. Her eyes widened as she watched the overhead sprinklers drop their load, triggering the release of green gas which quickly obliterated her view outside as she hurriedly jammed the handle back into the door. She felt TW look over her shoulder before he grabbed her arm at the same time she heard Lachlan gasp at the video feedback he was receiving.

"We have to get out now," TW yelled. "We don't know how long it will take before that stuff gets in here. We have to move—*now!*" The sound of the two undercover security guards coughing and yelling roused her from her stupor and they set off towards the other side of the room and the next lock. It was coded. Kara watched in silence as TW pulled one of his favored gadgets from his pocket. He quickly looked over his shoulder at her before concentrating on what he was doing. "This could take a while."

"Is everyone okay?" Lachlan asked.

"We will deal with you later. Right now, we are trying to get into the last of these rooms so we can get the hell out of here. Make sure the truck is back for us." TW's hands were comfortingly steady as they all watched the display flash with red numbers. She asked

impatiently, "Is it meant to be this long?"

"Not usually." TW looked at the dial on the handheld device, the needle bouncing back and forth as though participating in an invisible game of tug-of-war. "Unless..."

"Unless what?" Kara and Charlie asked at the same time.

"Unless they have a scrambler on the other side that's going to mess with our decryption. It could take minutes, or it could take hours for this to decipher and even then there's no guarantee that we're free and clear."

"Just about all security has moved to the back here, so sit tight. I have to let off another one at the front to give you some room." Lachlan's calm voice of authority infuriated Kara.

"Hey tool! With you letting off all these little firecrackers, what do you think that chances are they'll let the truck back into the compound?" She'd had enough. When Lachlan didn't respond, she continued on with her verbal attack. "Didn't think of that, did you? Too busy thinking about how you can blow shit up to worry about us. How about you stick one of those up your..." It was the first time she had lost her cool during a job. It was also the first time she had to share responsibility of its dealings. What she couldn't control was Lachlan.

"We have a code," TW announced.

"We have a plan to get you all out of there," Lachlan said quietly.

"Is it the right code though? We only get two shots at this, right? If the code is entered incorrectly twice, doesn't this part of the building go into lockdown?" Kara looked at the numbers. She blinked hard before looking at the display panel again. The combination was her birthday. The date, the month and then the full year. "Check it again." She pulled the gadget free and TW grabbed it back from her, gently placing against the wall again.

"You have to be careful with this stuff, Kara." Charlie looked at her silently, his brow raised in curiosity.

"I thought you said you had the code," Lachlan's voice intruded.

"We are checking it again." She was still staring at the numbers in disbelief. Her full birth date was displayed once again. With trembling fingers she reached out and pressed the numbers on the keypad. A beep sounded and a pressure valve hissed as the door slowly opened. "We are in."

She looked inside the dark room and flicked on her torch. A light source coming from a small solar light in the ceiling barely lit the room. TW moved close behind her while Charlie kept their backs.

"What do you see?" Lachlan whispered.

"I can hardly see anything. I don't want to go any further until we have checked it for booby traps. Can you feel how spongy the floor is? Charlie." Kara reached out for him to be by her side. She continued looking around as Charlie pointed his scanner around the room.

"There's nothing in here." TW found the light switch and flipped it on. The bright light hurt their eyes. Kara forced her eyes to adjust as she took in the room.

"There's nothing but old tacky paintings in here!" she yelled angrily at Lachlan as she moved further into the room. The sound of Lachlan slamming his fist on his table echoed through their earpieces. As soon as she had moved underneath the sky light she stopped dead. "Don't anyone move. You may have scanned the room Charlie, but that little baby of yours failed to see the trap down there."

Charlie and TW looked at the end of the room. The entire wall was a fish tank full of

fluid.

"What the hell is that?" TW asked as she reached under her backpack and pulled out her crossbow. She quietly clicked it into position as she slowly raised her head and looked up at the solar light again.

"My guess is that we're looking at a shit-load of acid there. I'd bet any money that once our weight is taken off this floor, that there fish tank will shatter and we'll find ourselves bathing in the crap."

"Alright, get out of there," Lachlan yelled. "Get out now."

"I'm on it. Just make sure the security guards are all at the front of the complex."

"Sure thing, the truck is trying to get back into the compound now. There's a slight hold up, but it should be fine."

"What's on the roof?" Kara motioned for TW and Charlie to move closer to her. "Is the roof safe?"

She tapped her earpiece.

"Lachlan?"

A screeching sound resonated throughout the three of them. "Argh! Shit! Just what we need...to be deaf as well. Lachlan!"

The earpieces were silent. "Well, this is my call..."

Kara lined up her shot before she lowered her head and looked down at the ground as she released the trigger. The sound of shattering glass ricocheted around the room. The crossbow had fired directly through the ceiling light and was now clawed precariously onto the roof.

She yelled at TW and Charlie to take hold of her as she released the mechanism to propel them through a shower of glass. No sooner had their feet left the floor, the glass wall fell away, releasing its lethal weapon to wash over the flooring. TW clung to the small opening and pulled himself through as she continued to cling to the crossbow with a death grip.

"You're next," she yelled at Charlie. "I can hold on, but you need to hurry." He wasted no time in pulling himself to the rooftop. They all heard Lachlan yelling in their earpieces but none of them spoke. Charlie reached down and grabbed hold of her hand and pulled her up. "We are clear." She gasped, trying to replenish her lungs and at the same time steady her erratic heartbeat.

"What the hell happened? I was talking to you and then you had all dropped out." He sounded frantic. "You are on the roof, correct? Okay...on the south side there is a fire escape ladder. Get down there and head around the building back to the bin."

With no time to lose she set off, crouching, looking for the ladder.

"Kara!" TW called out to her but she didn't stop. "Kara. Look at your arm." Curious at the TW's concern, she slowed down, wincing as she brought her arm around into view. "Here, stop so we can have a look at it."

"You know, it didn't hurt until you told me to look at it," she said with surprise. TW ripped her sleeve open to get a better look at the gash running down her forearm.

"How can that not hurt? It's obvious a piece of glass sliced it," he said. "Jeez, look at the blood you're losing. Charlie, quick. Give me something to wrap around her arm." Kara

couldn't help but cry out in pain as TW pulled out a long piece of glass. The sound of her muscle, skin and blood squelching made her feel sick to her stomach. "How you doing? Don't you pass out on me; do you think you can trust me enough to carry you out of here if you did?" TW joked.

Her face paled as she shook her head gently. "I just want to get out of here."

"Yeah, I know and we will. You just gotta sit tight while I fix this for you." TW tried to tie the material from Charlie's shirt carefully around her wound. "There. That will have to do for now. Let's get out of here."

Charlie scaled the fire escape first while Kara put most of her weight on her good arm as TW followed close behind. "Make sure the truck is there, Lachlan," TW demanded as they ran around the building.

"Yep, it's almost in place. The other two guys are waiting to help out." They heard Lachlan pound the keys on the keyboard. "You alright Kara? Not long now honey."

Her back straightened when she heard the words. *Honey?* She knew all the other team members heard it too, but none of them mentioned anything.

"The truck is nearly at the pick up point. Shit! Security coming. Behind you."

Without pausing, Kara ran across the laneway leaving TW and Charlie behind. "Get going! Don't worry about me. Get to the truck." She puffed as she ran. Her head felt so dizzy she just wanted to sleep where she dropped, but she kept running. Blood flew off her fingers as she pushed herself to reach the next building. Her back pressed against the wall, she looked down at her arm. Her shirt was soaked. No wonder she felt dizzy.

"Kara! Where are you going?" Lachlan and TW yelled in unison.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Just get the others out of here. We're reverting to plan B; we have to confuse them in order to get past them. Now go!" Kara looked around the corner when she saw TW and Charlie get into the garbage truck. She pulled her head back as two security guards ran towards her, watching their backs as they ran past her before she slunk around the corner and set off again, only to be seen by two more guards.

"There!" one yelled as she pumped her legs furiously.

"Oh shit!" She looked for another place to hide.

"Get to the east side Kara. You can do it." Lachlan's directions surprised her; she had forgotten he was still monitoring everyone's movements. She could feel the guards closing in on her as she jumped a small hedge that lined the road and took off along the fence line. Her arm screamed in agony as she forced herself to run as fast as she could. Her breath burned in her throat as she gasped for air. The muscles in her legs felt like they were turning to jelly. Escape was so close she could taste it.

She screamed as she felt the back of her jacket being pulled back hard.

"Shit! I'm coming Kara," Lachlan yelled.

Kara continued to thrash about as she was dragged to the ground. She struck out at the hand grabbing hold of her wounded arm, forcing him to release his grip. With a valiant effort she struggled to get to her feet as another hand roughly pushed her down behind her shoulders. A sharp pain between her shoulder blades knifed through her as the guard held his foot there.

"Don't move! Keep your hands where we can see them!" he shouted. She winced as she moved her hands while he pushed down harder with his foot.

"Get off me!" she screamed, trying to protect her arm. "I'm injured, I can't go far now."

No sooner had he lifted his foot, she spun around and took his other leg out from underneath him. The guard landed heavily on his back as she jumped to her feet. She stomped on the guard's wrist as he tried to grab her ankle. The guard's cries were matched by hers when the other security guard lunged at her, knocking her to the ground. With her good arm she tried to strike his face, but missed and collected the side of his head instead.

"Keep her down!" the first guard yelled, getting to his feet. He moved over her body, pushing the other guard out of his way as he put one leg either side of her torso. He stared down at her with a malevolent glare as he wiped the blood from his mouth. "Think you are so smart now, huh?" Kara didn't hesitate to bring her foot up sharply to connect with his groin. When he doubled over, she punched his face with her left fist as the other guard leapt for her again, catching her arm before she could give him another serve. "Oh, you little bitch!"

He grabbed her by her hair and she screamed in pain as she clamped her hands over his, digging her nails in to try to get him to free his grip before she gave up and blindly searched her vest for anything to fend off the guard.

Her fingers danced over a small cylinder containing a sedative. She pulled it free from her vest, bringing it to her mouth, and pulled the lid free before jamming the canister onto his leg. Quickly, she pressed the bottom of the canister to release the sedative stored inside. He cried out and let go of her hair. It was a chance to get away. The security guard fell to the

ground and gasped for breath. He had received a pre-measured dose of a nerve tonic, making all the muscles in his body spasm for about a minute. By the end, his body would be so exhausted he would feel like sleeping. That is if he didn't pass out.

The other security guard caught her around the middle of her back as she tried to clamber to her feet. Wind rushed out of her lungs at the force of the tackle and she struggled to breathe it back in. One hand held her by the scruff of her neck while he brought the other to her front. He lifted her awkwardly to her feet, dragging her with him as he moved along the path, off the grass and onto the pavement where he let her fall hard. She cried out again as her head hit against the concrete. Her world dimmed. The last thing she saw was the security guard kneeling down by her side, smiling.

Her head pounded as she rolled it around on her shoulders. The dull pain in her arm beat in time with her head as she registered her hands were tied behind her back.

"How's ya head?" a male voice asked. With effort she blinked her eyes in the bright light and turned her head to the sound of his voice. "I said, how's ya head?"

"It's sore. How's your balls?" She desperately tried to see who else was in the room.

"Bet you think that's pretty funny." Without warning he lunged forward and grabbed her hair again, yanking her head back. "Well, I liked how your face looked when you hit the footpath honey."

"That's enough," another male voice scolded. She recognized the voice. Her head pounded more as she turned to the second voice. "Step back. I said, step back." The guard loosened his grip before taking a step back. Now was not the time to open her mouth and possibly blow Lachlan's cover. "Who you are working for and what you were hoping to find in there?"

Kara wasn't one hundred per cent sure of what game Lachlan was playing at, but she knew better than to give up her story straight away, regardless of which side he was playing for.

"I was looking for guards to sell cookies to." Her cheek stung at the sudden impact of his hand. She lowered her eyes, rapidly blinking away the sheen of tears as she focused her gaze on his shoes. "I take you don't want to buy any either?"

"Don't be a cocky little bitch. How many of them are you? And just so you know, if you choose not to talk...let's say we have ways and means," he spat. "Clear the room. *Now!*" Sounds of several feet running were heard before a door slammed. Lachlan knocked the light above her head, causing it to swing and giving her the opportunity to have a quick glimpse of the room. "How many of them are you?"

"I'm the only one."

"What did you say?" He took a menacing step forward.

"I said I'm the only one. The one and only. It's all me. Besides, there was nothing in there anyway. No harm was done."

"If you were the only one then how did you let off the little bombs around the compound?"

"I have my ways." Kara tried to look into his eyes but he moved away before she could. "How long are you going to keep me here?"

"For as long as it takes." He moved a chair to sit an inch from her face. He whispered,

"You are in serious shit, but there is a way out of it. I have to let you know something. The mess you made in the warehouse...he wants to come and see you. The others don't know about the relationship you have with him. Here." Lachlan reached behind him and gave her a small knife.

Her mind reeled. "My father? He's coming to see me?" Kara lowered her gaze to the floor and stared at her knees as she focused on freeing her hands with the knife. "Well tell him he owes me at least ten years worth of birthday presents."

"Put your hands in your lap and pretend your hands are still tied. He doesn't know it's you."

They both fell silent when they heard the door creak open.

"Very well. You just sit tight and wait for us to come back." Lachlan got to his feet. "You! You watch her. And *only* watch her. We don't want her hurt anymore than she is. Understood?"

His movements were drowned out by the sound of the other person walking towards her. She flinched as someone ran their hand over her shoulder.

"Don't you fucking touch me!"

"Hey! What did I just say?" Lachlan moved quickly to her side. "I told you not to touch." His hand connected with the guard's chin. "You just don't listen, do you? I might have to tie you up and let her have her way with you. You know, finish what she started." He threw the guard down to the ground as someone standing near the door coughed. Kara's heart started to thunder so loud she was afraid everyone could hear it.

"Leave us," the man said. She shivered at the sound of her father's gruff voice, a voice she hadn't heard in over a decade. Apprehensively she looked towards Lachlan as he reached to pick the security guard off the floor by the scruff of the neck.

"Would you like me to stay with you?" Lachlan asked her father.

"No. I want to see what this little missy has to say for herself, messing with my things." She heard him walk towards her and then stop behind her chair. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. The door slammed shut behind Lachlan and the guard. Her breathing was shallow as she waited for him to speak.

"Do you have a name?"

"Yes."

"Well, I would like to know the name of the person who thought they could come on to my land and steal my possessions from me." He remained behind her as he spoke.

"They are things you have stolen from others. I hardly think you would miss them."

"So you have a name...who do you work for?"

"Don't you want to know my name?"

"Why did you think you could steal from me?" he questioned her, refusing to answer her. Kara shifted in her chair as she felt her hair move. "I must say, you did very well. Very impressive. If you weren't trying to steal from me, I would have employed you."

"I don't want to work for you." She snarled at the thought of him touching her. He still had no idea who she was.

"Who do you work for? I could pay you ten times what they are paying you now."

"Who says I work for anyone? I might work for myself."

"I don't think you do. There are too many things to be overseen by just one person. A

partner perhaps? There must be someone who works by your side."

"I used to have a partner once; many years ago now. It's like an ancient memory. You know, one of those memories you have to think really hard to distinguish if it's real or not. He left me for dead. I'm sure you've had first-hand experience at that though. I know you've had partners in your life before, but you use them until they put one foot wrong and then you dump them. Go on to find the next person."

Her head snapped back as he pulled hard on her hair. "Who are you?"

"I'm someone from your past!" She winced at the pain. "Someone who knows your career very well. You wanna know how I know your system so well? I was taught by the best, but the best was too stupid to think his own daughter wouldn't turn up to show you a few things!" Her head jolted back as she jumped up from the chair, his grip tightening in her hair. In one fluid movement she grabbed his arm and flipped his body over her shoulder. Kara yelled out in pain as her injured arm took some of his weight. Pinning him under her leg, she held her knife to his throat. His hands fell to his sides.

She looked him directly in the eye.

For the life of her, she could think of nothing to say.

His face was old. So much older. His hair was almost completely grey, his eyes sunken and sad. He just laid there and stared at her.

"I'm not a ghost Dad. It was a nice touch to use my birth date as the security code to your precious vault. What? You didn't tell people you had a daughter?"

"Kara?" He stammered in surprise.

"Don't say my name!" Kara spat as she pushed the blade against his skin. "Don't you dare say my name. Bet you never expected to see me again. What? Did you think I went to live on the streets after you left me? I was a child! You left me to take the fall for everything you did! Not once did you ever come to my defense! So what? You expect this to be a happy reunion? My life is better for you not being in it!"

"I can't believe it's you," he said quietly.

"What? You can't believe it's me? That I'm here, not a junkie like you probably expected me to be, with no education or money or social skills? Or you can't believe it's me who had foiled your little warehouse scam? I know all about you dad. I know you worked for ACORP. I know you were living in the lap of fucking luxury when you were sending me off on shitty little heists instead of sending me to school, forcing me to live just above the poverty line!

"There were reasons for that. If you let me explain—"

"It's too late for explanations now. This is the consequence of your actions. You should have explained it to me when you sent me off to do that heist. You know the one. The one where I wound up shot! Don't tell me you didn't know about it because you came to the hospital to drug me...to make sure I didn't open my mouth and rat on you! You are a sick bastard. All you ever cared about was yourself. You didn't give a damn about me, your own daughter! I was not one of your henchmen you could just dispose of, but you did just the same. I bet you never even gave me a second thought when you left that hospital. As long as you were safe, you could live without a daughter that clearly seemed to slow you down."

"It was not like that at all. If you let me explain—"

"No! There will be no explanations. You made no attempt whatsoever in explaining

things to me when I was a kid. Or when I was a teenager. Or when I was picked up for my involvement in one of your heists. I bet it makes you real proud to know your own daughter was able to get inside your false lair and prove once and for all you have nothing in there."

"You may not have known I was in your life, but I was there." He struggled to speak as the blade nicked the skin near his ear.

"What do you mean? You had spies after me?"

"I knew which school you went to but after that I lost track of you. The rule of a great thief is to be undetected. I was unable to track you down until I found you at ACORP with the Meridian Veil. I couldn't believe it was you. You looked just like your mother. I had to think twice before I shot you with that dart."

"So what you are saying is that not only did you willingly drug me once, given the opportunity you had to do it again. Your own daughter." She felt the rage building in her stomach.

"I know you would have done the same had you been in the same situation. Look at us now." He looked at her calmly, oozing confidence.

"There is no way you are going to walk out of here a free man."

"But I did all of this for you."

Kara scoffed as she looked around the room. Her arm ached as she bore more weight on it to hold him in position. "Everything you did you did for yourself. You were number one. Everything and everyone else fell to the wayside...including me."

"I came back to get you, but you had already gone to the rooftop..." She looked him in the eyes. "I got to the lower level just as you made it to the roof. I thought you were clear. I left to get to the other building to meet you there, but you never came. I had to leave. I should never have let you take the fall for that heist, but if I had been caught I would have gone to jail. You would have been all alone. I couldn't let that happen."

She stared intently at him, trying to read any hidden meaning in his eyes. "But you did let it happen. I was still all alone. Mum was gone by the time I was two. You were all I had. I was left with no one. The company you screwed over took me on board. I guess they didn't want me to do the same thing."

"I'm sure you have made them very proud. You were able to avoid temptation. I never could. You have made me very proud."

"Don't you dare say I have made you proud." She pushed harder against this chest.

"Everything I have achieved, I have achieved without you. Because of you I had no education. Because of you I could not speak to people for fear they would walk out on me, like you once did. I am responsible for who I am today, not you. I got an education. I can face people and every situation without fear. Biologically you may have helped create me, but you are not my father."

"That's all any father wants in his daughter." He smirked, a mixture of pride and smugness wreathing his face. "Knowing his daughter can handle herself and won't put up with shit."

The door swung open and Kara turned her neck sharply to see who it was. Lachlan stared down at the two of them. "What the hell is going on here?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Get back or I'll slice his throat!"

"No Kara. You have done enough. The Feds are on their way." Lachlan reached out his hand towards her. "We have him. He's not going anywhere." TW stepped out from behind Lachlan and moved towards her.

"Hey, come on Kara. Put down the blade. We can hold him. The Feds are just around the corner." TW gave her a reassuring smile. Kara looked down at her father before she motioned Lachlan and TW over to take him. She waited to see their hands around his arms before she lifted herself off him. "How you feeling?" TW asked as he looked at her arm.

"I've been better. How are you?" she said as Lachlan pushed her father into the seat and picked the rope off the floor. TW blocked her view of her father when he went to look at her arm.

She winced as the pain registered in her brain again. "We need to get you some medical attention for this arm and quickly. Can I just say though...you were amazing up there. So cool, calm and collected." TW smiled before his face was suddenly devoid of emotion and color.

The piercing report of a gun filled the room followed by the sound of Kara screaming. She grabbed hold of TW as he crumpled towards the floor. Lachlan pounced on her father, wrestling for the gun. Both fought for the gun as she turned TW onto his side.

"Jesus Christ!" A stream of blood had run through the hole in his vest. She pushed her hand under his jacket and pressed it against his skin, her hand slipping on the blood as she told him to keep calm. "I need you to breathe for me TW. Just focus on your breathing." Another shot rang out. She pulled her hand free and grabbed the neck of TW's vest, dragging him across the floor towards the door and safety. Searing pain shot through her injured arm as she forced it to drag TW across the floor. The world faded slightly and spun a bit quicker as she turned back to watch Lachlan and her father. Lachlan was under the weight of her father, still struggling for possession of the gun above his head when she looked back before reaching for TW's radio.

"Man down. I repeat...we have a man down. A gunshot wound with the gun still in play." She wasn't sure if anyone was on the other end to receive her call but she had to try. TW was struggling to breathe. "Don't you pass out on me! I'll be forced to draw terrible things on your face if you pass out on me." He smiled as she pulled him towards her and put her hand back over his wound. "This is going to hurt. Stay with me."

Another shot rang out. Kara snapped her head back to the fight across the room. Lachlan was underneath her father and they both were motionless. Her heart felt like it had stopped. She didn't know which one of them had been shot, if at all. Was it the man she was beginning to love or was it the man she had come to hate? They seemed to be moving in slow motion.

Lachlan landed a right hook on her father's chin. The force of the blow would have had anyone seeing stars. She winced as she watched the second right hook collect his face again. Her father slumped forward over Lachlan. He grabbed the gun before pushing Procter to the side, unsteadily rising to his feet.

He looked around the room and when he saw her and TW, he rushed to where they were. "For an old man, he can sure pack a punch." He grimaced as he rubbed his chin. "What the hell happened? Did TW get shot?"

"Didn't you see?"

"I only heard the shot, I didn't realize he hit someone. Shit!" He dropped to his knees and checked TW over. Now the action was over, Kara couldn't help but let the tears run down her cheeks.

"Where the hell is the ambulance? I radioed it through. Just stay with me TW, okay? Just a little longer..." His grip on her hand loosened. "Hurry the fuck up with that ambulance!"

"They are telling me it's on the way." Lachlan looked over her shoulder towards her father. "Are you okay?"

"TW, you keep talking to me. Keep talking to me." She lay down to face him. "Keep talking to me." She only looked up when Lachlan pulled her out of the way for an ambulance officer to attend to him.

Stepping back, she didn't fight Lachlan's arms circling around her shoulders. Her hand instinctively moved to her injured arm to protect it. She turned her head and looked at her father.

"Has he been shot?" the paramedic asked, also looking at her father.

"Not yet." Her whisper was barely audible as she stared at him unconscious on the floor. The ambulance officers moved to his side and laid him gently on the stretcher before covering his face with an oxygen mask.

"We need to get someone to look over that wound Kara." Lachlan moved his arm from her shoulder, holding her at arm's length to see for himself.

"I'll live. I could have done without that slap though." She rubbed where she had been struck, trying to lighten the mood. The moment she laughed, her head went light and she stumbled on her feet.

"Hey, hey! A paramedic over here please," Lachlan called out as he took hold of her around the waist and helped her to sit. "I think you're trying to be a hero and cover up this injury."

The paramedic and Lachlan both gasped in unison when the wound was cleaned. The gash in her arm was deep and she felt every thing touching it, from the officer's gloved hand to the saline solution and the blood that continued to flow from it. "We need to get this tidied up. You are going to need stitches."

Her body ached all over from the few minutes she was able to sit still. The middle of her back throbbed while her leg muscles felt like dead weights. "We are going to tape it just for the ride to the hospital."

"What? No stitches now?"

"No, I don't do stitches on the road," the paramedic laughed. "But you will be taken care of. I've cleaned it up the best I can. It's a deep cut but it's clean, so we have that on your side. I'll tape and bandage it and strap your arm to a splint so you can keep it even till we get to the hospital."

"Okay, thanks." She looked away and gritted her teeth when he started touching the wound again. "How long is this going to take?"

"Always with a deadline, aren't you?" Lachlan smiled as he came around the corner of the ambulance.

"No. I just like to know when things are going to be done." She returned his smile, glad of the distraction he offered.

"Okay, now you have to keep this even. If you have to hold the splint, then do so. If you lower your arm, the blood flow will start again, which is not good. If you hold it too high...well, that won't be a problem because you will be in too much pain to do that. I can take you to the hospital now."

"Does it hurt?" Lachlan asked.

"Like hell," she said as the ambulance officer climbed out the back.

"Here..." Lachlan placed his hand gently on her chin and turned her head slightly for a better look. "Let me kiss it better." Kara didn't pull away as his mouth inched towards hers. She held her breath slightly to try and calm the nerves that surfaced from the thought of kissing him again. *Will he kiss me the same way as he did in the computer room before the security guard showed up? Would it be more passionate? What would it mean?* The sound of the ambulance siren made them pull apart.

"You okay?" he asked as she moved her head to watch the back of the ambulance pull away from them. Visions of how her father taught her how to manipulate a pair of handcuffs to get free flooded her mind.

"Oh shit!" She jumped from the ambulance and took off running after the other ambulance which had just passed the compound gates. Lachlan jumped in his car. By the time she had reached the main road, the taillights of the ambulance seemed to twinkle teasingly before turning the corner. She ran as fast as she could while trying to hold her injured arm straight and push with the other. The paramedic called out to her as she sprinted off.

"Get in!" The car Lachlan was driving screeched to a stop by her side. Kara reefed the door open and jumped in.

"Go! Go!" she yelled, trying to breathe and at the same time keep the pain at bay. "He'll get free. Follow him." The car sped along the main road, only two tires touching tar as they rounded the corner. "Jesus where is he?"

She scanned the alleys and side streets as they zipped past. "*There!*" She put her hand on the dashboard as Lachlan planted his foot on the brake. Before the car had come to a complete stop, she jumped out and ran along the street pushing past people, slowing to a jog as she neared a side street to find the back doors of the ambulance wide open. Warily approaching the driver's side, she looked into the cab, gasping and covering her mouth at the nightmarish scene in front of her. The driver's throat had been slit. Lachlan pushed past her and checked for a pulse. She watched Lachlan move to the rear of the ambulance to the other paramedic slumped over the gurney.

Turning away from the grisly scene, she scanned the alleyway, searching for any sign of where he might have gone. Despite evidence to the contrary, her father was a thief not a murderer, of that she was certain.

Once again she had been left without knowing what happened to her father. She couldn't fight the sense urgency she felt as she hunted along the alleyway. Trash was pulled out of the way to ensure every possible hiding place was left in the open. She worked herself

into a frenzy, her short gasps for air turned into grunts as she reeled trash away from the walls with her hands, or kicking it out of the way.

"Kara...Kara!" Lachlan forced her to stop. "The surrounding blocks will be flooded with police. They will search every block, every dwelling, until they find him. Given the circumstances...I have to get you out of here."

"I'm not leaving until I know where he is." She pushed a bin out of the way with her foot to begin her search again.

"Do you really think he's going to be in this alley Kara? We have to go and let the professionals deal with it." Lachlan moved to her side.

"I have to know where he is Lachlan...I have to know." Once again she couldn't fight the feeling of loss washing over her. She was so close to finding her father. Even though they would never have a civilized father-daughter relationship, at least she knew where he was. The more Lachlan talked to her, the more she knew there would be another opportunity to get him again. She didn't realize Lachlan was right behind her until he took hold of her hand and turned her around. The SWAT team decked out in full black uniforms and helmets were flooding into the alley.

"I need you to come with me," he said, looking her in the eyes. "I need to know you are safe. Please...if you only do one thing that I ask...it's this."

Kara's world felt like it was standing still as SWAT team officers raced past them. She barely heard their calls to each other as she felt Lachlan squeeze her hand. She pulled her hand free and looked at the ground before turning her head to the sky, focusing on a small figure at the top of the tall building's fire escape.

"He's up there!" Kara shouted, pointing towards him. In a blink of an eye the figure was gone and she was running with the officers towards the fire escape. She heard Lachlan call out to her but she didn't stop, bounding up the stairs two at a time instead. Her thighs muscles screamed in pain but the thought of her father getting away again kept her moving. She overtook several SWAT members by pushing them out of the way.

"Come on...keep moving." She planted her hand over the letter A on an officer's jacket and pushed him up the stairs, fighting the urge to be sick when they reached the top of the eight-story building in record time. The officer dropped to his knees and swung his gun in a sweeping motion across the rooftop looking for the fugitive. Kara fought to get air into her lungs as she staggered towards the rooftop exit and grasped the handle. It was locked. She walked slowly behind it to find nothing.

"Clear," the officer gasped before another arrived at his side. "There's no one up here."

"It wasn't my imagination, I definitely saw someone." She puffed as she looked behind her, noticing a small silver claw embedded into the side of the building. Slowly moving towards it, the rope came into view. He had made it safely to the next building and was nowhere to be seen. She let out a string of long and colorful curses that made the officers stop and look at her.

"Control, the roof is clear. Target has escaped to neighboring building. I repeat...target has escaped to neighboring building," the officer said as he moved to Kara's side.

She swore again as she turned on her heel and made her way back to the fire escape, scolding herself for not traveling with him in the ambulance when she first had the chance. She made her way back to where Lachlan was waiting and shook her head when they met.

"He's gone. He got away again!"

"It's not your fault." Lachlan put his arm around her shoulder and walked by her side. "Don't think that this is your fault Kara."

"I don't."

Lachlan smirked at the obvious lie. "You are a terrible liar. You will get another chance. His time will come." Kara could only nod as she stared at the ambulance again as she walked past. "I have to get you back to the office. Holt wants a debriefing."

Lachlan did not let her out of his sight as he loaded her into the waiting ambulance.

"Don't be silly Kara," he said. "You are all pumped up by what has happened today. You have a serious injury that has to be dealt with properly. Do you want me to come with you?"

Kara shook her head. "No. I'll be in at work after this though. I need to be at the debriefing. I'll get myself seen to and then I'll be in."

"There's no need to hurry. I'll hold them off till you are there." He brushed his hand over her dirty cheek as she nodded.

"Thank you."

"Now, no sprinting off this time. You have to stay in the back of the ambulance," the paramedic said as he closed the doors on Kara. "Do you need anything for the pain?"

"No, I'm okay for now. When the stitches are going in, ask me then."

True to his word, the debriefing was held up till Kara arrived. The events of the day flashed before her eyes as she explained everything slowly to Holt. Lachlan described the events that happened during her captivity, waiting for her father to arrive.

"We have to step back and let the Feds deal with it now." Holt kept a watchful eye over Kara. "You did very well, both of you did. You make quite a team. Now, if you feel you need to discuss anything with a counselor, I have one on standby all night. For now I want you to go home and decompress. How are you feeling?"

Kara shook her head. "No different than what I did yesterday. He's still not in my life. I just wish I knew where he was now."

"We will find him," he said. No matter how many people said it, it was something Kara would not believe until she had proof. "If you need, call." Kara took the business card Holt presented her. "I'd like to have another meeting just with you alone tomorrow Kara," he said, looking at Lachlan. "There are few things we need to discuss. I'll schedule the meeting for fourteen hundred."

"Sure." She got to her feet in preparation to leave. Although her body ached, she didn't want them to know how much. And the last thing she wanted to do was tell some stranger her troubles. She knew what the solution was and she wasn't going to stop until she found her father and put him behind bars. "I have to go and see TW. I don't know if he's gone into surgery yet or what has happened to him." She fought hard to stave off her tears. It was rather ironic; she could take a beating from a man without shedding a tear, but when it came to her friends being hurt or in trouble, she couldn't hold back her emotions.

"Sure. I'll ring ahead to find out what's happening," Lachlan said. "I'll grab the car. You wait for me out the front. Hey...think positive." She nodded abstractedly, her thoughts

now firmly focused on TW. They rode to the hospital in silence with only the faint sound the radio playing in the background. "He will be fine. He was able to get treatment quickly and should be out of surgery by the time we get there."

All Kara could do was nod as she stared out the window. She felt sick to the stomach as Lachlan parked the car. The walk to the ward felt like she had run a marathon. They rounded the corner and into TW's room.

The sight of colored tubes and cords running from his body to a collection of beeping machines was distressing as she moved a chair closer to his bed. The back of her legs ached as she gently sat down. She reached over to take TW's hand in a gentle grip and softly called his name, feeling more than seeing Lachlan move to stand behind her.

"I am so proud of you." She choked on her tears and took a fortifying breath before continuing on. "TW...can you hear me?" Tears rolled down her cheeks as she prayed for him to open his eyes.

"They've got him in an induced coma," Lachlan said in a low-tone. "It's the best way for him to recover. You have to wonder if they can actually hear you."

"He knows." She strived to retain some semblance of composure. "Okay. I will be back soon. I want you up and fighting back next time I'm here, okay?" She supported her body with her arms as she leant forward and pressed her lips to the back of his hand, quickly wiping away her tears before standing.

"Come on Kara, I'll take you home."

"Are you sure you will be alright?" Lachlan asked as the door closed. Kara just nodded.

"I'm sure you are going to freak out about this and I want you to know my intentions are honorable, but it would give me peace of mind to know you are okay. So, I was thinking about hanging around a little tonight."

"That would be fine." She knew Lachlan was expecting a different answer.

"But I think it would be for the best...did you just agree?"

"What time were you thinking?"

"Umm, sevenish? Give me a chance to go home and get changed. I can bring some dinner. What do you feel like?"

"Whatever you feel like...as long as it doesn't have meat in it."

"You're a vegetarian?" He scoffed at the notion. "Sorry, I just find it hard to believe a person who would readily beat the shit out of a man would be so caring deep down."

"I would rather see the animal run free." She reached for her bag. Her pain must have registered on her face, prompting Lachlan to encourage her to go seek help.

"Are you okay? Do you need to see a doctor...even the nurse here?"

"No...I'm just a bit sore, that's all. I'll be right once I get home and into my trackies," she said. "I don't mind what you bring for dinner but can you bring some ice cream? Cookies and cream sounds good right about now."

"Sure thing. I will see you at seven." The warm smile Lachlan gave her plucked at already overstretched emotions as she walked from his car to her house.

Pain shot through her shoulder as Kara reached up to pull free her ponytail from the

band in her hair. She stood before the mirror and slowly leaned forward to unlace her shoes but her thigh muscles ached so much she was forced to sit down and kick them off. Her body had started to move into shut down mode, barely leaving her enough energy to take off her shirt and stand to undo the buttons on her pants. Pain raced through her again like quicksilver as she tried to reach behind for the clasp on her bra. Hearing a knock at the door, she pulled her dressing gown tight around her body. "Yeah, I'm coming." She gave Lachlan a sleepy smile as she opened the door. "Hi."

"You look tired." He was carrying a shopping bag of groceries and a pizza box. "How are you feeling?"

"I was trying to get ready for a shower but I couldn't..." She trailed off, embarrassed at what she was about to reveal.

"Couldn't what?" Lachlan set the food on the coffee table.

"I couldn't finish getting undressed. It wasn't that sore before, but something's not right with my shoulder," she admitted reluctantly.

"Can you show me?"

Kara turned around and pushed her gown to fall from her shoulders down her back. She heard Lachlan gasp before he moved towards her. Her skin shivered as his fingers lightly ran over her shoulder, across her neck and then down her spine. "Jesus. You have a perfect print of the security guard's boot on your back. He must have kicked you awful hard."

"The pain's not there though, it's in my shoulder." Lachlan gently pulled on her gown, pulling it free from her arms to inspect the rest of her wounds. There was a big bruise on her buttock and one on each thigh. The one on her buttock was a deep shade of purple with a blue edging. She felt him trail his fingers back to her shoulder.

"Did you get the doctor to have a look at this when you were there today? You might have a fracture but look at you, you even have a hand print around your neck." She felt his breath on her neck as he stepped closer, her body automatically responding to the nearness of his.

"I had x-rays when I was there today, so if there was fractured they would have found it. I'm just heavily bruised."

She heard him press the buttons on his cell phone. "Best to get the nurse to come here I think." Kara pulled on her gown slowly to avoid the sharp pain as Lachlan told the nurse her address. "She's on her way. Do you want me to get you anything? Something to eat? I bet you haven't eaten all day."

Kara nodded and slowly made her way to the couch before gingerly sitting down. "Thank you for this. I'm not used to someone being on the lookout for me...I guess I'd come to think it was each person for themselves."

"Does that mean you will go out on a date with me then?" Lachlan smiled.

She shook her head and returned his smile. "I didn't say it changed my view about not dating people from work."

"One day you will say yes though...we both know that." Lachlan laughed, taking a big bite of the cheese pizza as she picked up her piece. They ate in silence until the nurse arrived and took Kara into her bedroom.

Lachlan stood in the hallway, nervously chewing his fingernail as he waited for the

nurse to return. The nurse opened the door twenty minutes later to find him standing in the hallway.

Taking his fingernail out of his mouth, he asked, "How is she?"

"She's in a fair amount of pain. The injuries she sustained, given her forearm has been attended to but particularly the boot to her back, would have taken its toll on even the strongest man," the nurse said in a hushed tone. "I have given her something for the pain and something to relax her muscles. She is going to need therapeutic massages tomorrow to keep her muscles relaxed, but she said she will organize that."

"Thank you so much for coming on short notice." Lachlan showed her the door.

The nurse waived his thanks as she stepped out onto the porch, saying, "I was placed on standby for this. We are just glad she wasn't hurt more. We were expecting worse."

Lachlan closed the door after saying his goodbyes and headed straight for Kara's room. The bedside lamp gave off a warm glow as he moved to her side and took a seat on her bed. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was slow.

"Can I get you anything before you go to sleep?" He reached out and brushed her long hair alongside her face. Ever so slowly she opened her eyes and looked sleepily up at him. She looked so innocent, so little tucked up in her bed. It was hard to believe she could take on a burly security guard and turn him into a gibbering stain on the floor.

She gently shook her head as her hand reached out from under the blanket for his. "Can you stay with me? I don't mean for anything to happen that way, but can you just stay with me? I have always felt funny about taking any sort of pill and when they make me feel sleep...makes me feel very nervous." Her voice was quiet, almost child-like as her eyes fluttered closed. "You don't have to if you don't want to..."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. "No, that's fine. Kara? Kara?" She had fallen asleep. He looked around the room before looking back to the empty side of her bed. Did she mean sleep in the same bed, on the floor, on the couch, or in the spare room? Once more he looked around the room before heading out to the lounge room. He knew better than to crawl into bed next to her. He wanted to spend more time with her rather than be cut from her life, so he decided opting for the armchair was his safest bet. All the lights bar the bedside lamp were flicked off before he finished positioning the armchair next to her bed. He kissed her forehead, whispering, "Goodnight." Had she registered his feather-light touch? With a sigh he sank back into the chair, flicked off the light and took hold of her hand before closing his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kara wiggled her fingers gently as she awoke. Feeling fingers interlaced around hers before she opened her eyes, she looked hard at the fingers in front of her face to bring her eyes into focus. Her gaze followed along the arm to see Lachlan sleeping awkwardly in the armchair. His neck was kinked in what must have been an uncomfortable angle and a thin line of saliva soaked a spot on his shirt. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, fearing he would lash out if she woke him suddenly. His head moved abruptly and his hand pulled free of hers, causing her to jerk her arm. A small cry of pain escaped her at the unwitting movement.

"Shit! Sorry...forgot where I was for a second." The hand that was holding hers was now rubbing his neck.

"How are you feeling? Why did you sleep in the chair?" Her voice was groggy.

"Because you fell asleep before you could tell me where I was allowed to sleep. How are you feeling?" He leaned forward, stretching his upper torso as he yawned.

"I haven't moved too much yet. I'm feeling so groggy that all I want to do is roll over and go back to sleep, but I have to get up and get ready for this meeting. I don't want to be walking like I'm made of cardboard when Holt sees me." She tried to summon the energy to get out of the bed.

"Here, I can help you. You don't want to rush it." Lachlan got to his feet and pulled back the blanket. He leaned forward and looped his arm around her shoulder to help her sit. Kara grimaced as she came forward. Lachlan looked down her back and under her spaghetti strap negligee. "That bruise looks like it feels. Painful."

"Yeah, I don't feel like going for a jog this morning." She giggled, the action causing more pain. "But thanks for staying. I appreciate it."

"Not a worry at all. What do you feel like for breakfast?"

"Umm...I could go some more ice cream but reheated pizza is the lesser of two evils." She stood unsteadily on her feet.

"Pizza it is then...what do you want to do first?"

"I need to go to the toilet. But you don't have to help me with that." She walked to the kitchen to collect a plastic bag to place over her forearm to protect the dressing and stitches. She snickered as Lachlan reached for the tape to secure a watertight seal over the bag end. "This is an attractive look."

Lachlan let go of her arm as she reached the bathroom door. "Sure is. I'll go get the pizza organized. Just yell if you need a hand."

Kara scoffed at his offer as she walked gingerly to the toilet and lifted the lid. "I won't be yelling. I might have a shower in a minute then pizza."

She listened to the sound of the microwave being opened before she moved off the seat and pushed the door so it was ajar. Slowly she rolled and wriggled her shoulders, the movement making the spaghetti straps fall down her arms. When her negligee dropped to her ankles, she lifted her arm slowly and twisted the hot tap, her muscles flexing painfully as she moved. She leaned her palms against the shower wall for assistance, stepping one leg into the shower as the water hit hard against the tiles when Lachlan called to her.

"Don't come in here!" The sound of running water drowned out her voice and the next

moment Lachlan was in the bathroom with her. Pizza in hand, his eyes grazing her body. She turned around to stop him from looking at her breasts but still felt the heat of his gaze as his eyes feasted on what was on display. "Get out." She yelled as she turned, the suddenness of movement and the water-slick tiles causing her to slip.

In a split second Lachlan lunged to catch her. He grabbed hold of her by the waist and pulled her back towards him as the plate with the pizza smashed into pieces on the floor. He maneuvered their fall so he would hit the floor first, cushioning her impact. She yelped as her arm banged on the cold, hard tiles. In her haste to get up, his hands inadvertently touched her breasts. She pressed her back against him and placed her hands over his.

"I told you not to come in here." She was cringing in pain. "Don't get up...I don't want you to see me like this."

"Clearly I didn't hear you and I have seen it all before."

"Didn't hear me or didn't want to hear me? And I don't want you to see it again unless I let you."

"I didn't hear you! I'm sorry. Are you hurt? Can you get off me?"

"Close your eyes then." She reached for the towel but fell short. "I can't reach it." The hairs on her body stood on end as she felt Lachlan's hot breath on her neck.

"Okay, just sit tight." She felt him push his heels down against the tiles and lift the back of his legs to shift them towards the towel. Her back instinctively arched as her legs fell either side of his. Lachlan propped his body up on his elbows causing his fingers to dig into her flesh. She winced as he moved before letting herself relax against his body. "Almost there."

It was a futile attempt to stop herself from reacting to his breathing as he puffed to get her to the towel. She bit her bottom lip and pushed her legs together. The room had started to fog from the heat from the shower.

"Yep, I think I can reach it from here." She lifted her arm hopefully. "Nope, a little further."

Lachlan groaned and continued to slither his body across the floor.

"I've got it. Stay still." Kara laid the towel over the top of her and tucked it behind her. "Can you help me up? Just push against my shoulders."

She released the pressure of her fingers and pulled his hands towards her shoulders. She inched them towards her breasts before removing her hands. His fingers gently caressed her hard nipples before reaching her shoulders. She turned her head and rested her cheek on the side of his face near his lips. "Why do you do these things to me?"

"To you? You're not the one lying on the floor with a naked woman on top of you and not allowed to do a damn thing."

"I so want you but I can't...it's just not right. If something is to happen relationship-wise, we have to take it slowly."

"I understand, but if you want to do things slowly then you have to get off me or something will be making an appearance soon."

"I'm sorry." Kara fought through her pain to lean forward to sit on his chest and adjust her towel. Little did she know she had gifted him with the sight of her naked buttocks resting against him and he had forced himself to look at the ceiling while she pulled the towel tight around her knees and got to her feet. "I'm sorry Lachlan. Be careful of the plate."

All she heard was a grunt as he crawled off the floor towards the door. She stared at

the floor as Lachlan closed the door behind him. Yes, he'd seen her naked before, but it was different now. He was no longer the bad guy; he was someone she had to work with. Before it was supposed to be a one-off encounter, but if she let her true feelings be known, she knew it would end up as a disaster.

Kara stood under the hot water for as long as she could stand. Patting her skin dry, she opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Silence. Her towel firmly wrapped around her as she walked into her room, she opened the cupboard and picked up a pair of black underpants then pulled on her black wrap dress. She didn't bother with a bra since her back and arms hurt too much.

She called out to Lachlan and when he didn't respond, she walked into the lounge room. He was nowhere to be found. She walked into her kitchen. Still no Lachlan. Sighing heavily, she resigned herself to getting ready for her meeting with Holt.

She had a nervous gut feeling about this meeting. After the preceding events, she had assumed that Holt wanted to discuss her father in private. Kara curled her hand around the door handle while she knocked gently but firmly. She opened the door when she heard him call out 'Come in'.

"Ahh, good morning. And how are you today?" He smiled at her, motioning her to a chair at the table. Kara returned his smile and nodded, hoping no signs of stiffness would be evident. There was a stranger who sat opposite her and she politely said hello. "This is Special Agent Rick Andrews. He is with the Federal Government. There are a few things we would like to discuss with you. Do you mind if this conversation is monitored?"

"No, not at all." She shook her head still uneasy about where this was heading.

"Great, first question then. Do you enjoy your position here at ACORP?" Agent Andrews asked.

Without hesitation or looking at Mr. Holt, Kara nodded. "Absolutely. I love my job here."

"Good answer," Mr. Holt laughed.

"Is there anything you would change about your current position? Anything at all given the circumstances of the incident involving your father and that he is still on the run?" Agent Andrew pressed.

"I would like to continue looking for him but I do know that ACORP's resources are limited. I know my father travels extensively overseas and I am restrained by that."

"Would you like to continue looking for your father?" he asked.

"Yes...yes I would," she said unflinchingly. "I need to know he has been stopped. Can I ask where this is going?"

Agent Andrews looked at Holt before speaking again. "We would like to offer you a proposal. We like your work. You have several fans already within the Agency who are keen to get to know you and adapt some of your skills. In fact, we have a very attractive offer for you," he started as Kara turned to look at Holt questioningly.

"I think this is a wonderful opportunity for you Kara," Mr. Holt started. "As much as I don't wish you to go, I truly think your time is limited here. I don't want to become a restraint to your skills and knowledge."

"Would my position here at ACORP be available if I decide to come back?"

"Absolutely," he said. "I want you to know there will always be a position here available for you."

"Okay, can I have ten minutes to look over the proposal...by myself?"

"Sure," Agent Andrews said, getting to his feet.

Kara flicked through the folder. The first page was a letter of offer from the Federal Government Agency detailing her position and salary. She would make in a month what took her six months with ACORP. Her eyes scanned the details of the proposal to track her father and where he had been. Without a doubt she knew what she had to do. She walked to the corridor and motioned them back inside the boardroom. "I don't think there's any need for me to think about this any further. As much as I have loved and thank ACORP for giving me every opportunity, I know I can do bigger and better things. I would also like it noted that ACORP is to have ready access to any information pertaining to the man who is hell-bent on taking everything from this company."

"I'm sure certain information can be provided to ACORP. One thing you will come to appreciate Kara is the clearance level we are allowed to have," Agent Andrews started, adjusting his necktie.

"And I'm sure you will come to appreciate there is a lot at stake here and surely they have been efficient in providing all the details you have requested. I would like to see that same courtesy extended to them." Her comments brought a wide smile to Holt's face. "It all comes down to how bad you want me. I have tracked my father down before and it's only a matter of time before I do it again. It's a case of me competing against you and you know I hate to lose."

"Kara won't lose," Holt said, moving to her side.

"I will have to make a phone call and speak to my superiors about this," Agent Andrew said.

"I suggest you do. Like you, I would like for this to be a smooth transition."

"We will give you a moment," Holt said, moving to open the door for Kara. "We will be out here waiting for your answer." She moved through the door and stood in the hallway, turning to watch Andrews through the windows speaking on his cell phone. When he turned his back to them she smiled. "I know they are going to move heaven and earth to get you on their staff Kara; you have nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried. I just want to make sure this company gets its just rewards." Kara smiled. "Thank you. For everything. I can't imagine what my life would have been like if I hadn't come to work here."

"You were always going to go places, Kara, you just didn't know where until someone took your hand and pointed you in the right direction," he said, staring at Andrews. "This is the right direction for you."

They remained standing in silence as Andrews closed his cell and motioned for them to come back inside.

"Well, I have spoken to the Director of our division and he's more than happy to accommodate you."

"Excellent." Kara smiled and extended her hand. "I believe we have a deal."

"Great. Mr. Holt and I have some details to iron out but welcome to the Agency,"

Andrews said, clasping his hand around hers.

"I have one extra thing to ask you both. Can you please keep this information confidential? There are several people I need to tell in person first before it becomes generally known."

Kara moved as quickly as her aching body would allow towards Stephanie's lair. She pushed the door open to the sound of an alarm blaring, causing her to clamp her hands over her ears.

"What the hell is that?" She was barely able to hear herself.

"What?" Stephanie caught sight of her in the doorway.

"I said 'What the hell is that' – the alarm silenced – 'for?'"

"There's no need to yell Kara." Stephanie smiled as she stretched her arms out for a hug. "How are you? I wanted to ring you last night but Lachlan told me you were going home and the best thing for you was to rest."

"Yeah, I needed the rest. I'm doing well – not the best I have ever been, but I'm doing well. Have you heard any news about TW? I'm planning to go and visit him but I wanted to come and see you first."

"I haven't heard anything other than he's in a stable condition. They brought him out of the induced coma and he's awake, but really groggy. They are keeping him doped up to ease his pain. But you will be seeing him in a while so what do you have to tell me? Something juicy I hope."

"Well, it's kinda juicy." She seated herself at Stephanie's desk.

"Uh-oh. Every time you sit at my desk you have something bad to tell me."

"No I don't."

"Yes you do. Remember when you finally came clean and told me you took that bottle top bomb I made to fit over the top of a Cola bottle to school, and then you flushed it down the toilet when you were in the tenth grade? I'm sure it was funny to watch all those princesses run out of the toilets drenched in toilet filth, but you did exactly the same thing. Spill." Stephanie took a seat next to her.

"Okay. I wanted you to hear this from me first, but you have to keep this to yourself. I have been offered a job with the Federal Government and..." She watched Stephanie's deadpan reaction.

"You've accepted, haven't you?"

"Yes." Kara wasn't sure how Stephanie would react.

"Well...I think that is an exciting move for you. I'm so proud of you!" Stephanie leaped of her chair and gave her another hug.

"You know if they have a spot for a techno girl... I'm going to give them your resume."

"Ha, just don't forget about me, alright?"

"You know I could never forget about you. You are the one who supplies me with my favorite lipstick." Kara laughed. "But yeah, I wanted you to hear it from me and now that you know...I have a few other people to advise. I know you like to be the bearer of interesting and sometimes gossipy information, but I'm asking for you to keep this to yourself until it becomes official."

"So is there one person in particular you are hoping to tell?" Kara knew exactly who

Stephanie was referring too.

"Yeah. I want him to hear it from me. I haven't seen him since this morning and that was before my meeting. I don't think he knew anything about the job offer."

"Well, good luck with it. Do you know which way you are going to jump?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

The nurse was checking over TW's chart when Kara poked her head around the door to find him with watching television.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" she joked. A wide smile spread across his face. "Are you able to have visitors? Only thing is I don't have a beer in my bag. Can I still come in?"

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you. You can come and visit me any time." He held out his hand to her. "How are you feeling?"

"How am I feeling? You were the one who was shot and you are asking me how I am feeling?" She laughed, standing close to the side of the bed.

"Yeah, but I have been under for the majority of it. You have been awake through your ordeal. Jeez, look at your neck. All I remember is walking into the room with Lachlan, seeing you with your dad... I mean..."

"It's okay. Technically he is my father so you can call him that."

"Well yeah, I remember seeing you with him and then going down for the count. I don't really remember anything after that. I remember you leaning over me and then everything kinda went black. No one has come to see me about anything of this."

"No one has come to see you?" She couldn't believe what she just heard. "Christ. I can't believe that."

"I remember Holt coming in to see me, but he didn't tell me anything. I remember seeing him for a second and then I was asleep again," TW said. "But did you get him?"

Kara lowered her eyes and took hold of his hand. "Tell me I didn't take this bullet for nothing. Tell me that you got him."

"I'm sorry. He made his escape in the ambulance and then—this is where it gets really bad. I don't want to distress you."

"It's going to distress me if you don't tell me."

"He allegedly killed a paramedic and injured the other one before he took off. They are looking for him and I've been offered a job to help track him down with the Feds."

TW squeezed her hand. "You're leaving? But you can't leave me."

"I'm not leaving you. I will still see you." She laughed, trying to lighten the mood despite knowing he was being serious. "I have to make sure he pays for what he did."

"When did this happen?" TW asked. "When did this happen?"

"About two hours ago. I was waiting to hear how you were. I wanted you to hear it from me."

"Does Stephanie know?"

"Yes, she does. She was the first person I told." Kara nodded before narrowing her eyes. "What's going on with you and Stephanie?"

"There's nothing going on and besides, even if there was, you'd only get jealous." TW smirked. "So no matter what I do or say...you are going." She nodded. "Well, after this debacle who's going to want me to be on their team?"

"You want to go on more heists?"

"No!" TW's hand hovered over his wound as he let out a shaky laugh. "I'll be quite happy to watch it all happen on the screen before me. So when do you leave?"

"We are working that out but I'm thinking they want me to start as soon as possible. We need to track him down now." Her tone changed to one of seriousness. "I am going to make sure he gets what he deserves for everything he has done. The stuff he has done to me in my life is one thing, but what he did to you is unacceptable. He will be brought to justice."

"I know you will find him again Kara." He gave her hand a healthy squeeze. "So who else knows? Have you spoken to Lachlan yet? After all, you are his honey."

"After everything you have been through you still remember that!" Kara let go of his hand and moved to a flower arrangement.

"It's was so obvious something was going on." TW grinned unashamedly. "I was having a bet with myself which of you would be the first to stuff up and say something. I actually had you pegged to be the one to crack."

She shook her head. "Yeah, he is one of the people I still need to tell, so I'd better let you rest. I can come and visit you again tomorrow if you like?"

"I would like that. Besides...it's almost time for my sponge bath."

"Oh, that poor nurse." She laughed. "I hope it's a male nurse." When TW pulled a face she laughed even harder. "Alright, I'm so glad you are okay and that your sense of humor is still around. I will see you tomorrow."

"Sure thing. Hey Kara, you need to ring him today," TW said as she reached the door.

"Yeah, I know." With a wave of farewell she turned into the corridor and reached for her phone. She keyed the number with her thumb before moving it to her ear. "Hey, it's me. I need to see you. I have something I have to discuss with you."

"Yeah, about the meeting."

"Umm...I'm just on my way home now, so if you want I can meet you there."

"Great. Okay, I'll see you in a bit then."

"Okay...bye."

Kara let her bags drop to the floor as she surveyed her lounge room. Remnants of her dinner lay scattered across the coffee table. She untied her hair and let it fall over her shoulders as she collected the pizza boxes. Before long she'd cleaned the whole table and put the glasses and bowls in the dishwasher by the time he arrived at the door.

"Hey there." He was looking unsure of himself.

"Hi." She carried more garbage to the kitchen.

"So what's happening? How was the meeting?"

"Can you shut the door? I need to talk to you about something important." She placed two drinks on the coffee table then sat with her legs tucked under her as she waited for Lachlan to close the door.

"It must be a big thing if you wanted to discuss it here and not at work."

"Well, it is a big thing for me. Hopefully it will turn into a big thing for you too." She took a sip from her glass.

"Okay, enough of this cryptic crap. Just tell me." Lachlan pushed his drink out of the way. "What's your news?"

"I have been offered a job to continue the search for my father." She eyed Lachlan over as he reached for his glass and took a long drink. "I want to track him down and bring him to justice. I can let go of what he did to me but I cannot allow what he did to others, so I have accepted the position."

Lachlan returned the drink to his lips and drank the remainder before putting the glass on the table. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Well, I can't go on not knowing where he is or what he is doing," she started. "Just about everything I have done for ACORP has been to track my father in one way or another. This way, I can keep a better track of him...plus I've cleared it so ACORP keep getting updates. All the information we get, you will get too."

"Why are you doing this? I don't see why you need to be telling me this."

"But I do need you to know. You know we are better as a team and there is another reason why I'm taking this job." She tried to look Lachlan in the eye.

"You're taking it?"

"Yeah." Kara cocked her head slightly as he spoke. "That was kinda the other thing I was hoping to talk to you about. Just let me explain before you say anything. You know full well I have trust issues and I haven't been the most open-minded person when it comes to relationships. I know I have stopped both of us from pursuing anything." She watched for his reaction but he continued to look blandly at her. "Do you understand?"

"I am trying to understand." She got to her feet and moved to the seat next to him.

"Now I know my father is alive and I've been given the opportunity to bring him to justice, the part that includes you is since I am no longer working with you...I was thinking we could go out for a meal or something."

Lachlan moved to face her. "You mean as in a date?"

Kara smiled and nodded. "I would like to give whatever it is you think we could have together a go."

"And what if I have changed my mind?" Lachlan scoffed in a joking way.

"Then you can get out!" Kara shot back with a laugh.

"I don't want to leave. This is a great move, actually. You get what you want and I get what I want."

"And what is it you want?" Kara leaned back into her chair, causing her shirt to gape open at the top. She tilted her head to look at Lachlan.

"I think you want the same thing as me." He moved back into his chair to look at her and placed his hand on her knee, skimming it towards her inner thigh. She smirked as she opened her legs wider for him.

"Don't you think we should go out to dinner first? Like a normal date?" She closed her legs around his hand.

"We are not a normal couple." She felt him try to wiggle his fingers between her toned muscles.

"So we are a couple already, are we?" She loosened her grip.

Lachlan's chin dropped to his chest before he looked at her with a devilish grin. "Do you have to argue everything?"

"How about we just go on a date and then we will see about being a couple later?" Lachlan pulled his hand free and moved it to cup her face.

"How about we have a shower before we go on our date?"

"I think that would be good." Kara reached over to pull him in for a long deep kiss. She was less than impressed when his cell phone rang.

"Just give me three seconds...hello? Oh hi...yeah...no, I'm not free tonight...the bad guys can rest for the night, tomorrow we will get them. I am kinda busy right now...alright, thanks...good night." Lachlan pressed the button to turn his cell off completely. "Sorry. Now you have my undivided attention. Bring that mouth back to me."

Their lips were about to meet again when the tune on Kara's cell sounded. Lachlan let out an exasperated sigh.

"Won't be a moment." She got to her feet and moved to her bag. "Hello? Hi, yes this is Kara..." As she spoke she removed her top. She was braless, her unfettered state a beacon that drew Lachlan towards her. "And when did this operation commence?" She kicked off her shoes as she swapped arms to allow Lachlan to remove her shirt. His fingers moved along her collarbone causing her skin to prickle. "Umm...and where do I fit into this picture?" She cocked her neck and held the phone between her shoulder and ear as she reached for Lachlan's belt. "Right, well I don't have clearance until Monday...yes and I appreciate you are calling me, but I would rather wait until I have the proper authority..." She ran her fingers along Lachlan's erection as she unzipped his trousers. His lips pressed against her neck as she continued to speak. "That would be great. Thanks so much, I will see you at eight on Monday morning. Great. You have a good weekend...goodnight." Kara held down the button on her phone as she twisted her body into Lachlan's. "God you feel good, but what happened to dinner?"

"You are my dinner." She laughed as she slid her hands under his boxers and grabbed hold of his buttocks, pulling him towards her. "You got to see me all wet when I got out of the shower...it's only fair we even things out a bit."

"Well, if we have to be fair about it..." Kara stepped back and reached for the zipper on her skirt. She pushed it over her hips and let it skim her thighs as it fell to the floor. Taking hold of his hand, she pulled him along the corridor towards her bathroom. "This time I get to be on the bottom and do the groping."

"We'll both be doing the groping." Lachlan laughed as he pulled off his boxers and moved in close behind her.

"I know this is racing but I would like to take it slow." She looked back over her shoulder at him as she reached for the door handle. "What a time to be bringing this up but I'm sure you understand."

"I understand. If you want me to stop and go slow, then you just need to say so."

"Yeah...I want it slow." She walked backwards into the bathroom. "And then I want it hard and fast."

Lachlan smiled as he walked towards her and kicked the door shut with his heel. "Just the way we both like it."