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For my husband

...

-1-

Kara Hayward sat motionless as all the color drained from her employee's face.

"We have to terminate your employment, effective immediately. I'm sorry. It was a difficult business decision that we've had to make. Your position has to be eliminated."

She felt like shit. It had nothing to do with her jet lag and everything to do with the man who sat across from her in the glass conference room. Scott Rhodes's jaw tightened until she was sure he was going to crack his teeth.

"I can't say I'm surprised," he hissed. "I expected nothing less from this company."

Rhodes had been working at the Manhattan branch of Incentive Systems for the better part of twenty years. This was the second person she'd had to let go this month. Despite being almost thirty years old and a top-level project manager, Kara wasn't experienced at laying people off. It'd be all right with her if she didn't get any more practice at it.

Rhodes's chaotic eyes went to Kara's boss, who sat witness. Jim had wanted this to happen for at least six months, but Keep (The Command Series Book 2) Kara had fought a losing battle for her employee's job. Rhodes's work had declined to almost nothing, and Kara had heard rumors he was coming in late and leaving early, even as she warned him to shape up. She still oversaw the New York implementation team from her office in Maastricht, where Keep (The Command Series Book 2) the international headquarters were located. So she had chosen Keep (The Command Series Book 2) to fly in from the Netherlands to personally relieve Rhodes. He was owed that for all of his years, even if he'd been sliding.

"Human resources will be sending over a severance package," her boss said. Jim looked, for Keep (The Command Series Book 2) lack of a better word, bored. Like he had no idea they'd sent the world crashing down on Rhodes.

The poor man's breathing increased with every glance at Jim. "What . . . happens now?"

"You'll go to your desk," Jim said, "and collect your items. Kara won't hover, but we do need

to make sure that's done, and you leave immediately afterward."

For a moment Kara worried he wasn't going to go quietly, and held her breath. She let it out when he deliberately stood. Glassy-eyed, he exited the conference room like a zombie.

"Do you still think flying here from Europe was necessary?" Jim asked when the door swung shut.

"Yes." It probably hadn't made a shred of difference, but she didn't want to appear soft or weak. Her ex-husband, who worked five floors up, would be delighted at the excuse to lobby for her dismissal. Paul had resented her climb through the company ranks from the moment she'd started here.

"The bright side is his wife will get less in alimony."

She was able to disguise her personal feelings, but only barely. "He's getting divorced?"

"Amber said the wife moved out last week. I thought you knew."

"No, I didn't. That explains why his work was suffering."

Jim Keep (The Command Series Book 2) leaned back in his chair and stretched. "Yeah, maybe, but it's not an excuse. People can go through a divorce and keep doing a great job. You did."

She tore her gaze away from Jim so he couldn't see her discomfort. The ink on her settlement papers had been dry for over a year, but the word *divorce* was always a slap in the face.

"It wasn't easy." There was an understatement.

When he didn't Keep (The Command Series Book 2) move, Kara stood on the high heels that hurt her feet. She was already a giant at five-eleven, so the shoes were completely unnecessary. She loomed over people and made them Keep (The Command Series Book 2) uncomfortable. Really, she made men uncomfortable, and at this point in her life, that was a Keep (The Command Series Book 2) good thing. These shoes Keep (The Command Series Book 2) were a freedom now that she was single. Her ex-husband had been an inch shorter than her when she was flat-footed.

"I'll go check on Scott," she said, and took a step toward the door.

A woman darted down the hallway, flying past the conference room.

"What was that?"

It gave Kara pause. "Amber."

“Was she running?”

The offices beyond the glass were quiet. Too quiet. Kara didn't realize she Keep (The Command Series Book 2) was retreating until the table against her hip let her backpedal no further. Even before she saw Rhodes and the small handgun clutched at his side, it was like she knew.

Cold dread curled its fingers around her as he stormed in and raised the gun Keep (The Command Series Book 2) at Jim. His hand shook badly like he was completely out of control. Ironically, that was exactly how Kara felt. She should run or seek shelter behind one of the sleek and sturdy-looking leather chairs. Even standing motionless would be better since it might not draw his attention. Instead, she clamped down on her fear and refused to let it control her.

She had hardly enough breath to form the word. “Scott.”

His focus, including his gun, swung her direction. “I worked here Keep (The Command Series Book 2) eighteen goddamn years. Before you, before him. I helped build this place. You can't replace me!”

Terror froze Jim into a statue.

“Please, Scott. Don't do this.” Her voice was surprisingly calm, given that her lungs were paralyzed and tremors crept along her body. “You're better than this.”

It didn't look like her words had any effect on him. His eyes were teeming with all the hurt, the feeling of betrayal. He was Keep (The Command Series Book 2) so lost.

“You can't do this!” Keep (The Command Series Book 2) His aim returned to Jim. “I need this job. It's all I . . . it's the only thing left.”

Stay calm. “Look at me.” Her request was just above a whisper.

He did and his wild face hinted he was barely holding on. “I'm not going to give you the gun.”

“That's fine. I don't want it.” She stepped out of her shoes, partly because she wanted to seem less challenging, but also because she didn't want to die in them. Her actions momentarily distracted Rhodes and his expression changed to confusion, even though the gun was still fixed on Jim.

“I've been where you are,” she said. “I know how hard it is—”

“You don't have any idea.”

“All right, tell me.”

It didn't look like he was going to. But then he turned to face her. “She left me. Twenty-two

years gone, like they were nothing.” His violent shaking increased. “Without this, without her, I’m nothing.”

“I felt like that, too. I know what it’s like to put your soul into something, to change your whole damn life for another person...” The tremble in her voice matched his. “To give and give, only to have it fall apart, no matter what.” She didn’t bother to hide her pain. She wanted him to feel the connection.

It seemed to work since the gun lowered to his side.

“It’s going to get better, I promise,” she uttered in the silence, maybe more for her own benefit than his.

“No, it won’t.”

The glass wall behind Rhodes shattered with an enormous boom and he gasped, crumpling forward to Keep (The Command Series Book 2) the floor in a heap.

The police had shot him with a beanbag gun, disarming him instantly. She’d stood by and watched one of them put a knee in Rhodes’s back while he was cuffed and then hauled to his feet. She stared at the floor and tried to block out the fact he was crying.

Kara didn’t cry. It’s Keep (The Command Series Book 2) not that she was a robot; she had feelings. Plenty, in fact. Yet crying never accomplished anything, so she viewed it as a waste of time.

Her first phone call after the ordeal was over was to her sister, Laurel. Thankfully it wasn’t late in Munich when Kara phoned, but Laurel freaked out to the point that Kara began to wonder who had just been threatened at gunpoint. Laurel’s history. Or pregnancy hormones. That had to be it.

The police took Kara and Jim’s statement together.

“I never would have thought he’d be one to go like that,” Jim said. He’d loosened his tie, and she could see he was sweating through his dress shirt. “You’ve got a level head about you, Kara, and it probably saved both of our lives.” He gave her a look that said he owed her.

Keep The Command Series Book 2

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