

Chapter 10

Cara saw her manager enter the lab out of the corner of her eye but as she was in the middle of an experiment, she greeted her and continued to work. “Hello Valerie... be with you in a minute.”

The woman closed the door to the hallway and without the preface of a greeting said, “There’s a meeting you need to attend.”

Cara replied, “You’ll have to excuse me, I’m-”

“Yes, yes keep working,” Valerie interrupted, glancing irritably around the lab as if it were an unsavory place. “I don’t know how you people work with all those microscopic bugs and chemicals.”

“Carefully,” Cara answered. “We work carefully.”

“Anyway...” Valerie went on, “I read the summary of a talk being given this afternoon and the person seems to be presenting the exact same work you told me *you* were doing. Did you get an invite?”

“No.”

Valerie peered into her phone. “I’ll forward the meeting announcement... there,” she said.

“I’ve sent it to you,” and continued to talk but Cara didn’t pay attention. Instead, she thought through each of her recent interactions with Valerie and concluded this was the first time she’d had reason to suspect that her manager was involved in the setup to remove her. Cara didn’t try to assess whether Valerie was an innocent person being used or a knowing participant. She’d leave to Rachel.

“The meeting’s in forty minutes,” Valerie called over her shoulder as she exited the lab.

Cara waited until the seminar was about to begin before approaching the small meeting room. The first indication of a snare was that no one looked surprised to see her when she walked in, even though she’d not been invited. The second clue was that none of the twenty or so people in the room greeted her despite some of them knowing her well. Instead, they stared.

The third oddity was the presentation screen; it was brightly lit but no title slide was shown. A completely blank screen gaped at them from the front of the room less than one minute before the talk. Then suddenly a person she’d never seen before rushed to the podium and began the presentation. A few slides in, Cara saw the algorithm she’d deduced from her experimental work and the next ten slides unabashedly described the analytical process Cara had been developing for over a year.

She felt a room full of eyes upon her and the vibration of the tiny monitor on her chest. Cara pretended to look down at her phone and closed her eyes. She found the window waiting for her there and through the window was the tree. Gradually, the pulsing from the monitor subsided, the presenter’s voice faded, and with each slow breath she took, the tree grew more magnificent. When the meeting was over, she greeted the people on either side of her with an unconcerned smile and stood up to leave. She saw consternation on the faces she passed on her way out. It wasn’t until she was a good distance away that the stress of the experience grabbed hold. Her mind went numb, her vision blurred, and familiar sounds came at her from weirdly wrong directions.

Finally, inside her office, she locked the door and sat at her desk. To evade the gaze of the pinhole camera in the ceiling above her, she opened the bottom desk drawer and pretended to search inside it. Head bowed and legs trembling, she closed her eyes and in the way that was still completely *inexplicable*, she sought and found solace in the tree.

Cara left work that night feeling completely drained. *At least I'll have a relaxing couple of hours at the teashop*, she told herself as she waved goodnight to the guard in the lobby. The parking lot was well lit and almost empty so she easily spotted her car but she stopped short because there was a large, unidentifiable object right beside it. Cara squinted, straining to see what it was. Then it moved! A huge, black dog began walking forward, its eyes locked on her.

She backed up, intending to retreat ever so slowly but then the dog burst into a sprint. In a panic, she turned to run and tripped on the curb, falling face first on the sidewalk. In less than a breath, she sprang to her feet, and flew through the revolving doors to the guard in the lobby.

"There's a big," her voice caught as she gulped, "*dog* outside... next to my car!"

"A what miss?" asked the guard.

"Dog!"

Visibly alarmed, he called the security office and asked someone to investigate. Minutes later, a second guard came from the parking lot and into the lobby.

"There's no dog out there now," he informed them. "Parking lot's quiet."

All three went outside and indeed the area was devoid of movement. One vehicle caught her attention, a red pickup truck parked at the far edge of the lot. She knew all the cars of the people who tended to work late and she'd never seen the truck before.

"What kind of dog was it?" asked the second guard.

"I don't know. It was big and black with pointy ears."

He looked at her doubtfully. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she replied, wondering how it was possible for them to miss hearing the throbbing of her heart monitor.

The second guard held something out to her. "Is this your bag, ma'am?" he asked. "I found it near the curb."

"It is... thank you."

"We'll see you safely to your vehicle," the first guard assured her, "and keep an eye out. The guard station will call you tomorrow if they spot anything," he said and then turned to the other guard. "Are there coyotes around here?"

"Not in *here*," the man answered. "This place has three layers of fencing and the middle one's electric. Nothing gets in."

"Unless it's brought in," she murmured.

Inside her car, Cara tried to recall the change in route to the teashop but her mind drew a blank. She drove to the gate, hoping she'd remember on the way, but the gate wouldn't open. In holding her arm up to make the ID bracelet more visible, she saw it wasn't there. The heart monitor began to thump as she reached up her sleeve and found to her great relief that it had simply drifted up her arm. She raised it up and the gate creaked open.

The monitor kept thumping...leaving no doubt as to the level of alarm she was experiencing.

Once she was outside the gate, Cara pulled off the road and parked. She closed her eyes, slowed her breathing and gradually the thumping subsided. A minute later, she sighed with relief when the route to the teashop popped into her mind.

A quarter mile down the road, she noticed the headlights of a large vehicle bearing down on her. It began to tailgate aggressively so she slowed, hoping the driver would pass, but instead it

stayed behind her swerving and beeping its horn. They entered a brightly lit, four-lane section of the road, and when Cara stayed right, the other vehicle moved alongside her. It was a red pickup truck.

The truck began swerving again and just as it swung dangerously close, a black dog lunged from the window. Cara screamed and slowed but the truck slowed with her. She slammed on her breaks practically coming to a stop. The truck stopped and began to back up.

She scanned the road for help but no one was in sight. The truck came to a stop in front of her car, straddling both lanes. Cara slammed on the gas thinking to pass on the right, but the truck hit the gas too and ran her into a ditch. Stuck in mud with a back wheel spinning, she watched as the truck made a U turn, picked up speed and headed straight for her. She let go of the wheel and waited for impact but it veered at the last second. Wheels screeching, the truck u-turned again and as it neared, it slowed to a crawl and came to a stop behind her. Cara checked that her doors were locked and began frantically searching for her phone. She heard the truck door open, the frenzied barking of a dog and

CRASH!

Something had struck her rear window. Frozen with fear, Cara expected the person to approach, but instead she heard the truck start up and as it drove by, her eyes locked onto the license plate. She began rifling through her bag reciting the number aloud until she found her phone and recorded it. She tried to place a call but the phone had no signal.

Out of nowhere, a police car appeared with its lights flashing and parked behind her. Dimly she recalled that there was a manned speed trap on this stretch of the road and wondered if she'd just passed it. A tap sounded on her window and when a policeman peered in, Cara stiffened. Instinct told her this man could not be trusted.

When Cara was little, their next-door neighbor was a police officer. Sergeant Nolan was kind and funny and had a big shepherd name Max. For her entire life, Cara had felt proud and protected when she saw a police officer because of that good man... until now. Cara rolled down her window.

"Good evening Ma'am," said the policeman. "Do you know what the speed limit is here?"

Cara couldn't remember even though she'd driven the road a thousand times. "No..."

"It's twenty miles an hour because of the school. See," he said, and pointed. "Sign's right there."

Cara clenched her teeth to prevent an impulsive response. Then she released the breath she'd unconsciously been holding and managed to answer calmly, "Officer, it's nine o'clock at night.

The lower speed limit only applies if the children are in school *and the yellow light is flashing.*"

"Well ma'am, a basketball game's finishing up in there and there're kids leaving as we speak."

She wanted to shout, '*the sign's not flashing!*' Instead, she said, "Oh, I didn't know. I guess the red truck that went speeding through here didn't know either."

"I've been here all night, ma'am, and no red truck has gone by. But since your driving has endangered these children, I'm going to have to report you. Could I see your federal ID, state ID, and your car pass? If you work for the Corporation, I'll need to scan your that ID too."

When the policeman went back to his car to run her identification, she tried her phone again but still there was no signal. Was he jamming her? Ten, twenty, then thirty minutes dragged by in which Cara envisioned every imaginable worst-case scenario. She thought he might return with a big dog. Maybe she was about to disappear. Should she take the memory drug to wipe her memory of the Resistance? She pulled a pill out and held it in her hand.

After forty minutes he sauntered back, flashed a self-satisfied smile and said, “I’ve charged you with speeding in a school zone and driving with a cracked rear window. The Corporation will be informed and the amount of the ticket will be subtracted from your next month’s pay. You have a good night now,” he told her. “Drive safe.”

Cara drove to an all night convenience store and called Rachel. After giving her and Bae a detailed description of what had just transpired, they instructed her to come to the teashop. Rachel met her at the door with a hug and sat her down with tea and a sandwich.

Bae scratched his head. “I don’t get why you’re so surprised,” he said to Cara. “Women aren’t protected by the police. You used to be under the protection of the Corporation, but not any more. They’ve cut you loose.”

Rachel’s face was flushed with anger but her voice was gentle. “Bae, one day Cara can learn about the world outside her experience, but right now, we focus on what’s relevant to the mission.”

“This *is* relevant,” Bae countered. “She didn’t even know she *led* a life of privileged protection, let alone that it’s over.”

“It’s true,” Cara admitted. “I’m very confused by what just happened.”

“See!” Bae exclaimed. “Rachel, it’s dangerous for her to be in the dark.”

Rachel looked grim. “All right, but then we move on,” she said firmly, then spoke to Cara.

“You know the facts; you’re just not applying them to yourself. The Corporation owns the DM and the DM controls the police. Normally those facts don’t adversely affect people who work for the C but this incident shows you no longer have a protected status within the Corporation... and that policeman knew it.”

“The powerlessness you just experienced is what most women navigate every day,” Bae added.

“How do they manage?” Cara asked.

“The brave ones support each other,” he said. “Women help women. Not all, of course. Some women eliminate the competition from the safety of a man’s shadow.”

“And men?”

“Men don’t support women off the *approved list* if they want to stay in the moneymaking club. You could be half Martian and half rhododendron, but as long as you manage to *look* like them and *talk* like them you’re *in*! Just don’t make any mistakes... because they become lost and afraid if they look at you and don’t see their reflection.”

“Bae, *we’re moving on*,” Rachel commanded and handed Cara a communicator. “From now on, either Bae or I will be available to you *day and night* through this Comm. I have to leave right now to go talk with Tristan but when I get back, we’ll test the link and make sure it’s working properly before you go home. While I’m gone, do your neurofeedback training and Bae, get her something stronger than tea.”

As Bae poured Cara a glass of wine, he said, “Now...on to the practice room!”

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the drink. “But you don’t have to take me, I know the way.”

“You’d find it eventually but please, allow me. The aisles shift as shipments come and go. *I* get lost sometimes,” he laughed.

In the warehouse, an employee hailed Bae and the two men spoke in Chinese for a few minutes.

Once the man had gone, Cara wondered aloud,

“How *many* languages do you speak?”

“As few as possible,” Bae joked, “which turns out to be Korean, Japanese, Russian, Mandarin, and English. I need to speak the languages of our buyers and suppliers well enough to avoid misunderstandings... *and* to pass coded messages between our operatives in Asia.”

“I didn’t know there *was* an Asian Resistance,” Cara revealed. “Not until your father mentioned it a few weeks ago.”

“That’s because you don’t know any Asian people,” he commented mildly.

Cara frowned. “Of *course* I do.”

“You *work* with a few, but they don’t let you know them because it’s not safe.” Then he waved his hand good-naturedly. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not criticizing you,” he assured. “You’re safer than most. I’m just describing how things are, especially in the Corporation.”

They’d arrived at the practice room and Cara went to the computer to log in.

“If you need anything,” Bae said, “I’ll be in the office.” He looked at her empty glass. “More wine?”

“No, thank you... I do have another question, though.”

“I’d expect no less,” he ribbed.

“I’ve been wondering...” she began hesitantly. “Is the ‘Eastern Wedge’ real or did NetNews make it up?”

Bae chuckled. “Are you asking me if the Eastern Hemisphere has a spy organization?

Because... *of course* they do. Every major country has one.”

Cara frowned.

“Or are you asking if the ‘Wedge’ is as it’s portrayed in NetNews? A demonic cult.”

“Yes,” she said. “The latter.”

He looked thoughtful. “Well, there *is* an Eastern Intelligence Agency or ‘the Wedge’ as NetNews calls it. It’s been infiltrating and destabilizing companies in the West for decades, long before the war.”

“How?”

“In the way all imperialists do,” he said. “But don’t tell *them* that, they’re supposed to be good Communists.”

“You’re saying... the Wedge commits corporate espionage?” Cara demanded.

“Before getting *too* self-righteous,” warned Bae, “the Wedge couldn’t have embedded deep enough to commit espionage without the Americans who helped them for a fee. It was your fellow Americans... the ones who thought they deserved better than a home, multiple cars and a boat... who sold you out. It’s amazing how many people in this country still blame the Wedge for the fall of American manufacturing. It’s true, the Wedge helped whole companies to go under, but they’d never have gotten anywhere without the American traitors who assisted them.”

Bae winced. “What kind of person becomes a traitor for pocket money? They aren’t starving; they just can’t afford to pay off their second home.” He grumbled something to himself and then said, “You don’t need an economics degree to see that when the leaders of your country are allowed to steal grandma’s savings, you’ve got a failed system.”

Her thoughts spinning, Cara turned to the computer. “I should do this before it gets too late.”

“Yes...” Bae said awkwardly. “Look, I’m sorry if I’ve overloaded you...”

“I’m the one who *asked*,” Cara noted, making a weary attempt at humor.

He smiled and started to leave, but before disappearing into the warehouse he turned and said, “We hate this war and the atrocities spilling out of it as much as you do. The people perpetuating the madness, in the east *and* the west, are lunatics.”

When Rachel returned from consulting with Tristan, instructions flew from her like rapid gunfire.

“The earpiece is non-negotiable,” Rachel told Cara. “You’ll wear it all day, every day except in the shower. Whenever you encounter any kind of hostility, all you have to do is tell us what’s going on and follow our instructions on how to handle it.”

“But make sure you’re within fifteen feet of a person if you want us to hear what they’re saying,” Bae added.

Cara fitted the piece inside her ear and checked in a mirror to be sure it wasn’t visible. “When they do interrogate me, what sorts of questions will they ask?”

“It’s not what they’ll ask, it’s the techniques they’ll use that should concern you,” Bae replied. Cara sighed and closed her eyes. “Give me an example.”

“The interrogators manipulate people by using a person’s own rules against them. They know the rules instilled in girls at the Children Centers so they’ll use those on you to their advantage,” Bae said.

Cara suddenly felt wide-awake. “What rules?”

“They know the Centers teach girls to be ‘polite young ladies’ at all times, and that a ‘polite young lady’ is never *ugly*. They used that word a lot, right? Don’t act ugly, don’t look ugly, don’t talk ugly...”

“Yes... they did,” Cara agreed.

“The power of this type of manipulation lies in how vague the word *ugly* is and how broad, therefore, the range of transgressions can be. *Ugly*’s more than a word; it’s a concept without boundaries that insinuates negative messages, not just about looks, but about your worth as a person.

It’s flexible too in that the definition of ‘ugly’ can change at the whim of the person in power. ‘Ugly’ today can mean *you’re not the look we want* i.e. you’re ugly on the outside. But tomorrow, it can mean *you’re all wrong*, not only in what you say and do, but in who you are, how your mind works... i.e. you’re ugly on the inside.”

Cara flinched. “Ugly meant *bad girl*. Boys who got in trouble were *weak* or *stupid*.”

“Instilling shame in children is a setup for lifelong manipulation,” Bae explained.

“It won’t work on me,” Cara retorted.

Bae looked perplexed. “I think you underestimate shame. Maybe the inverse of ugly will make more sense to you because the same game is played using words like *pretty* and *nice*,” Bae explained. “Girls in the Centers are told to be pretty and behave prettily. You’re taught that’s what it takes to survive. But the person with the power can define ‘pretty’ anyway he wants, and because you have to *be* that or be rejected, it’s a *chokehold*. They can reproach you for an expression on your face, whether it was there or not. Then, later in life a disgusted look from an authority figure may be all that’s needed to shut you down and you don’t even know that what you’re feeling is shame.”

“But the *manipulators* are allowed to be as ugly as they want,” Rachel added.

Bae nodded. “And they will be.”

“Well,” Cara shrugged. “Now I know. I’ll be ready.”

“Awareness isn’t enough under pressure,” Bae cautioned. “The visualization technique you’re learning will help but your safest bet is to contact us and we will guide you.”

“In an interrogation,” Rachel continued, “you can expect at least one Fake Friendly... someone who pretends to be sympathetic. The Friendlies are irritating but easy to spot. They shake your hand and say they want to help you.”

“The bad cop will try to confuse and upset you,” said Bae. “They’ll try to get you to lash out.”
“How?” Cara pressed.

“They’re going to accuse you of breaking a federal or state law,” Rachel told her, “because that’s a solid reason to remove you for good.”

Cara rubbed her head tiredly. “This is what doesn’t make sense,” said Cara. “They could make up something like that at any time. What are they waiting for?”

“Tristan thinks they’re looking for a *real* incident on which to hang their fictional tale,” Rachel replied. “A truth they can twist. If they need to, they’ll try to precipitate an incident but currently, there’s no indication of what that might be. We just have to keep our eyes open.”

“What kinds of things do they *say* to people in an interrogation?” prodded Cara. “What do you think they’ll say to me?”

“They usually tell women they’re crazy and ungrateful,” Bae answered.

“I can hear HR now,” Rachel said, and assumed a mocking tone. “Cara!” she mimicked.

“We’re *terribly disappointed* in you. This is RECKLESS. I’m *shocked*. *Shocked*... by your careless disregard for others, your *selfish ingratitude*... and after all the Corporation has done for you! Where would you be, Cara? *Who would you be*, without the Corporation?”

A high-pitched beeping sound came from the computer and when they turned to look, they saw that the heart monitor software was drawing steep peaks across the screen. Cara closed her eyes to slow her breathing. When she was able to focus on the tree, the beeping stopped.

“Impressive,” Bae murmured looking at the graph. “You turned that around fast!”

“It *hit* fast too,” Cara grumbled, eyeing Rachel. “Hopefully the interrogators don’t know me as well as you.”

Rachel put a hand on her shoulder. “What they know or don’t know doesn’t matter. We’ll be right there.”

Cara worked late again the following evening to ensure that her experiments ran to completion. For five hours she’d sat at the bench, ready to reset the software manually if an instrument crashed. The entire run would have to be repeated if she didn’t restart within seconds, resulting in the loss of costly reagents and time on a tight deadline.

She’d been babysitting automated experiments that should have required no oversight for over a year now, because if she didn’t, software or hardware failures occurred. There was an added concern that someone might try to alter or eliminate the experimental data. To address that, Cara backed up her work in three ways, analyzed results right away and sent a progress report to her manager before leaving each night.

If she had to leave the lab for a few minutes while an experiment was underway, she set up a camera on the instrument to alert her if someone came into the lab. To avoid a poisoning, Rachel insisted that Cara keep her belongings in her backpack and never let the bag out of her sight. Food, water, computer, phone... and even her coat had to be rolled up and placed into her pack so no one would discover the items in the inside pockets.

Cara had spent many a night sewing pockets into her clothes according to Rachel’s instructions. Whether a tailored suit or jeans and a sweatshirt, there was always an inner pocket to hide anything she’d received from the Resistance. One item kept in an inside pocket was the antiviral

that the Resistance produced. Although the packaging was identical to the Corporation's antiviral packet, the pill ingredients were different and if one of her pills were chemically analyzed, they'd want to know why she was carrying an illegal substance in a hand sewn, hidden pocket.

Given that no eating or drinking was permitted in work zones, Cara wondered more than once how she would have managed without the break lounge and its wall of windows that looked into her lab. Would she have eaten her lunch and dinner in the hallway, peaking awkwardly through the little window in the door? Or sat somewhere, her eyes glued to the live footage from the camera atop the instrument? Strange and stranger, a camera in a room watched by cameras. She'd heard that's how it was in the African war front... enemy cameras watching each other. When Cara stepped into the lounge to eat dinner, she was startled by the eerie stillness that met her. The air handler was silent. Every night at eight o'clock, the air circulation in some parts of the building was cut off, but not in the labs or break rooms. She stuck her head back through the door to the lab and found the ventilation was off there too. A mild thumping from her heart monitor alerted her that she was spooked. Instinct told her something was amiss; her mind argued it was no big deal.

She stretched her limbs for a few minutes, trying to decide whether or not to alert Rachel. Given that she'd have to scan the lounge for cameras and listening devices before talking to her, she decided to do the check just in case.

She dropped her bag under a table and bent down as if to look through it, but instead pulled a counter-surveillance detector from a hand-sewn pocket. With the detector concealed in the palm of her hand, she pretended to read the posters on the walls until the scan had completed. Finding no spying devices in the lounge, Cara sighed and sat down to eat her dinner.

Having finished, she popped a piece of homemade fudge in her mouth *but it was bitter!* She gagged but fought the urge to spit until her head was below the panel of windows. The heart monitor buzzed wildly and Rachel's voice resounded in her earpiece.

"Cara, what's going on?"

Cara choked on spit when she tried to reply and started coughing.

"I'm sending someone round to check on you," Rachel said tensely.

"I'm fine," Cara finally said when the coughing subsided.

"Can you speak without them hearing?" Rachel asked.

"Yes," Cara answered. "I'm in the lounge...I've already scanned... and I'm facing away from the surveillance cameras in the lab."

"Don't hide," Rachel commanded. "You have to act like nothing's happened. Open your computer on the counter under the window overlooking your lab; pretend to start a video chat but talk to me instead."

Once Cara was staring at the blank screen of her computer she said, "Ready."

"Keep a neutral face while talking... Why was your heart monitor peaking?"

"There was something added to my food that tasted terrible," Cara answered.

"How could that be?" Rachel demanded.

"No way that I know of," Cara replied hoarsely. Then a vague recollection floated into her thoughts. "Unless..."

"What?"

"I went to the supply closet and I may have gone *without my bag.*"

"Check the camera," Rachel said. "See who came into the lab."

"I went out before I started working, before I'd set up the camera," Cara admitted.

“I see... Well, mistakes happen,” Rachel replied pragmatically. “Here come the instructions. Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t eat *or* drink *anything else* until you’re home. Repeat to me what I just said.”

Cara did so.

“Now, look at your computer as if you’re watching a video and calm your breathing. After that, we’ll discuss next steps.”

A minute later Cara said, “The monitor *finally* shut up.”

Rachel chuckled. “It did and my friend who spotted you in the lounge said you look fine. So... do your best to appear *relaxed*. You can be sure they’re desperately trying to get a visual of you from the lab. Fake a little laugh as if I said something funny and describe the taste that’s in your mouth.”

Cara smiled. “Bitter.”

She heard Rachel sigh with relief. “Do you feel sleepy?”

“No.”

“Promising... but we still need to do a blood test. Pretend to drop something on the floor,”

Rachel instructed, “so you can do a stick without being seen.”

Working beneath the counter, Cara ripped open the blood-sampling kit concealed in her vest.

Seconds later she was back in the chair and said to Rachel, “Done.”

“Wonderful. Put a grin on your face. Happy, happy, happy,” Rachel rallied. “It’s probably crushed aspirin intended to freak you out.”

“It worked,” Cara said, smiling for the cameras.

“While I arrange to have someone collect the blood sample,” Rachel continued, “you need to wrap things up and head home as quickly as possible.”

“I can’t leave until the spectrometer run is finished,” Cara warned.

Rachel grumbled something Cara couldn’t hear. “Then you’ll have to hum to me,” she ordered.

“What?”

“Hum *continuously*, so I can hear that you’re all right while I contact people. Hum, sing, recite... anything you want, but do it *nonstop* until you’re safely in your apartment. Start now.”

Cara began humming the “Star Spangled Banner” as she packed up her things and went back to work in the lab. Fifteen minutes later, she heard Rachel give an elated whoop. “I’ve just thought of a way to use this attack to our advantage! I’ll have to run it by Tristan first, so hang tight... and keep singing.”

Just as Cara was finishing her work, she heard Rachel again. “I’m assuming you’re in view of security cameras, so I want you to *listen* to my instructions and when I ask you a question, answer *yes* by humming, “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” To answer *no*, hum the riff from Beethoven’s 5th. Do you copy?” Rachel waited for the song. “Good. Your blood sample pickup will meet you at the elevator in the lobby of your apartment building. You’ll enter an empty elevator, he’ll follow you in and say, ‘My knees aren’t working today.’ You’ll respond, ‘arthritis is a painful thing’ and you’ll hand him the sample. Do you understand the instructions? Good. I’ll tell you the rest once you’re safely in your apartment.”

An hour later, Cara was still humming as she scanned her apartment for surveillance devices.

Then she sat down in a chair and said, “Apartment’s clear. Don’t ask me to hum any more.”

Rachel burst into the happiest laugh Cara had ever heard.

“Wow. What’s the news?” Cara asked.

“It was aspirin,” Rachel announced, sounding very pleased, “and negative for all the scary drugs. Do you still feel OK?”

“I’m fine. You spoke with Tristan?” Cara urged impatiently.

“I did and he agrees with my plan,” Rachel said excitedly. “Oh my, Cara. I think we’ve had a lucky break. But brace yourself.”

“For... *what?*” Cara asked warily.

“You’re going to report this incident to your manager,” Rachel told her.

Astounded, Cara said, “Say again?”

“It sounds crazy,” Rachel agreed, “but if we hand them what they’re looking for, we control when the process begins.”

“You want to *precipitate* my removal,” Cara restated.

“Yes,” replied Rachel. “I told you they’re waiting for an incident they can use against you, something you can’t deny. You can’t deny a thing you reported. They’ll jump on this.”

“And this helps us... *how?*” Cara demanded.

“If they think they’ve won they’ll get sloppy,” Rachel explained. “Since they control how an incident like this is handled and reported, they’ll feel confident and safe... and leave themselves open.”

“They’ll make a monkey out of me,” Cara mumbled.

“Yes and you’ll *swing* through the trees over their heads!” Rachel declared. “I’ve just learned that your manager’s having an affair with the dopey HR guy and *they meet up on site*. We’ll make use of that, but cautiously.”

Cara began pacing. “They’ll know I can’t prove anything. They’ll say I’m crazy. They’ll say it *didn’t* happen.”

Rachel’s tone turned serious. “*Yes*, they will. This food poisoning incident, the dog sighting in the parking lot, the speeding ticket... plus all the stuff they’ll make up, is all they need to say they’re removing you *for your own safety as well as others*.”

Cara leaned against the wall. “I know I shouldn’t still be confused by this but... I’m doing a good job. All my work’s been delivered *on time*, I’ve done nothing wrong... What evidence is there of a *dismissible* offense?”

“None,” Rachel answered.

Cara slowly slid down the wall into a crouched position. “I don’t feel ready.”

Rachel’s voice was calming. “If you make the complaint today, tomorrow they’ll cement a plan with their lawyers and before the week is done, we’ll extract you. A day later, you’ll be five hundred miles away. How does that sound?”

“Impossible,” Cara answered truthfully, and then sighed. “Tell me what I need to do.”

“Message your manager immediately,” Rachel answered, “and inform her that someone put a chemical in your food. She’ll respond tomorrow, Sunday, with a bunch of questions for you to answer and I’ll tell you what to say. Tomorrow night before you go to bed, you’ll leave five days of work clothes hanging in your closet, and pack the rest of your things in garbage bags for our janitor to pick up.”

“Because when I go to work on Monday, I might not be coming back,” Cara said.

“That’s right,” answered Rachel. “They’ll confront you sometime this week for sure. Given it could happen Monday, we’ll talk over your exit strategy again tomorrow. Things have changed.”

“What has?”

“You’ll be leaving town with another person.”

“Dr. McCarten, we’re concerned about you.”

Cara sat awkwardly, her left leg crossed defensively over her right.

She sensed she was slumped in her chair and thought to straighten, but reconsidered, since appearing deflated might be useful. Cara slouched a bit more and then in her sweetest tone asked, “How do you mean?”

“I’m afraid I need to wait for someone in Corporate Relations to join us before I tell you more.”

Cara heard Rachel speak softly in her commlink, “Answer yes, no *or not at all*.”

Cara noticed as she always did when she sat in her manager’s office, how large the desk was for such a small room and how that resulted in Valerie sitting bizarrely far away. Cara felt like a small child at the end of a banquet table.

Valerie cleared her throat as she picked up a stack of papers on her desk. “I suppose I could get started with these,” she said and launched into an extensive list of grievances against Cara provided by unnamed people.

“Most significantly,” Valerie proclaimed, “three people report that you’ve made racist comments about your colleagues.” The woman removed her glasses. “Dr. McCarten, do you think one race is better than another?”

“No.”

“And yet,” she waved the pack of papers, “people claim so. Others report that you’ve cracked jokes about their religion. Do you think religion is a joke, Dr. McCarten?”

“No.”

The manager began thumbing through the documents. “Are you trying to tell me that *all* these people are lying?”

“If you hand me the papers,” Cara answered, “and allow me to read the names of the people and their allegations, I might be able to answer your question.”

“Yes, *no or nothing*,” warned the voice in her ear.

Valerie gave Cara an icy stare. “You,” she pointed, “have shamed people because of their religious beliefs and race. It’s a *fact* that people have accused you of these *illegal* acts.”

“Well... I suppose I *am* prejudiced,” Cara said.

Her manager raised a surprised brow.

“I have an aversion to people who’re intentionally dishonest,” Cara admitted, “but I have that prejudice regardless of race or religion.”

A warning voice spoke in her earpiece. “Your anger’s showing. Stick to *yes or no*.”

The manager shuffled the papers irritably. “*Yesterday!*” Valerie shrieked, then cleared her throat to regain control of it. “Yesterday... you reported that ‘someone put a bitter tasting substance’ in your *fudge*.”

“Yes.”

“And you maintain,” Valerie continued, “that the substance was somehow placed into your food at approximately seven PM on Saturday during the few minutes that you left the lab?”

Rachel’s voice sounded far away. “Say yes.”

“Yes.”

There was a knock on the door, and when it swung open, a short man in a gray and white-striped, seersucker suit presented himself on the threshold.

The manager greeted him with a brilliant smile. “Please come in, Mr. Dobson.”

“Good morning Valerie. Hello there, young lady!” The man grabbed Cara’s hand and shook it exuberantly. “I’m so glad to meet you!”

“Mr. Dobson, we’re talking about the incident,” Valerie said.

“Ah yes, pardon me,” he said. “Please continue.”

They turned and cast an unwavering gaze upon Cara.

“The problem is,” the manager’s voice held an excitement she didn’t try to mask, “the security guards reported that no one was in your building Saturday night except you and themselves.”

Cara hesitated; she’d forgotten what she’d been coached to say.

“Back doors,” Rachel’s voice prompted.

“Can they be sure?” Cara asked. “There’s a way for people to enter the building without getting clearance. The back doors can be propped open-”

“My dear!” Valerie rushed to interrupt, “we have failsafe features built into our security system. Doors that are supposed to be locked after hours set off alarms when they’re opened and a red flag pops up on their security monitors until the issue is resolved.”

“Begin video capture,” Rachel hissed in her ear.

Cara smoothed her hair to one side and pressed the button on the back of her barrette. She felt a tiny vibration as the camera began to record.

Valerie had turned to Mr. Dobson. “Would you like these back?” she asked, handing him the papers.

“Yes, thank you!” he replied agreeably.

She heard Rachel’s quiet voice again. “We’re rolling. Tell her *now*. Door alarms.”

Cara’s tongue felt paralyzed, but somehow her voice pushed itself out. “It’s *not* failsafe because there are people who know how to tape the alarm switch so that it stays inside the mechanism when the door is opened, making the door appear to still be shut and locked. People do this all the time to go out for a smoke and...” Cara paused to look meaningfully at her manager. “To do *other* things.”

Valerie turned red and Mr. Dobson stared at his shoes.

“Dr. McCarten, I am *SHOCKED!*” Valerie exploded.

Cara heard Rachel chuckle.

“I’m *shocked* and *disappointed* that you would stoop to accuse your colleagues in this manner. I’m afraid your belligerence in this meeting is completely unacceptable. I’ve been very patient with you but this is too much. You will go with Mr. Dobson.”

“Dear,” Mr. Dobson patted Cara’s shoulder. “I’m going to take you to someone who will help you. Someone you can talk to.”

Rachel’s voice said, “Look sad. Droop.”

“Now, now... don’t be like that,” Mr. Dobson crooned. “It’s all right. Just come with me and, I promise, we’ll get this all sorted out.”

Cara dutifully followed him down the hall to the elevator and from there they traveled to the twelfth floor. She heard Rachel grumble, “Audio’s good but I’m losing visual. Cara, I’m sending someone up to the twelfth floor with a signal booster.”

Mr. Dobson stopped at a door with a gold-plated plaque and Cara, fearing Rachel had lost the visual signal completely, read the sign aloud. “Corporate Psychiatry?”

“Yes dear,” Dobson spoke reassuringly. “You have nothing to fear. Just come with me.”

She heard Rachel say, “Ask to use to the restroom.”

Cara pointed to the bathroom across the hall. “May I?”

Mr. Dobson appeared flustered by the request but tried to hide it with excessive exuberance. “Of course! Of course!”

Once inside the bathroom, Cara flipped the deadbolt on the door and scanned the room for hidden devices.

“Room’s clear,” she said in a low voice.

“Good. I need you to stay right where you are until Luis can boost my visual. He’s on your floor now, shouldn’t take long. Go ahead and turn on the necklace camera. Let’s see what *that* image looks like.” A moment later, Rachel said, “Oh yeah, that’s pixelated too. Take this opportunity to drink some water.”

Cara blinked a few times. “I didn’t bring any.”

Rachel surprised her with a laugh. “You’re in a *bathroom*. The tap water’s bad but a mouthful won’t kill you. Do that and then center yourself. You’ll hear from me again when this is fixed.”

Cara drank from the tap and then tried to meditate. The image of the window with its bright yellow curtains appeared in her mind and though she couldn’t see past it to the tree, the window alone, its curtains billowing in the breeze... calmed her somehow. Then Rachel spoke again.

“We have great visual from both cameras now.” Her voice paused. “You there?”

“Yes.”

“I need to set the sound level,” Rachel told her. “Use a normal, speaking volume and repeat the audio message at the end of your hologram until I tell you to stop.”

“*Their behavior has nothing to do with me,*” Cara began to recite. “*I will not respond. Their behavior has nothing-*”

“OK. Sound’s all set,” Rachel announced. “Let’s look at you in the mirror. Oh boy... you’re a mess.”

“My outsides match my insides,” Cara mumbled.

“None of that, you’re doing great! Just smooth your hair without touching the barrette. That’s it. Chin up chickadee... You ready?”

Cara straightened her shoulders. “Ready.”

“Let’s steamroll the bastards.”

When Cara went back out into the hallway, Mr. Dobson looked exasperated. He hurried her into a waiting room and then whispered something to the receptionist. The receptionist stared at Cara for quite a while before she stood up and led Mr. Dobson into the nearest office. The door closed, leaving Cara alone in the room.

“Get up,” Rachel ordered. “Scan the room for cameras. Quickly. If there’re none, I want to see her computer screen and the documents on her desk.”

Cara fast-walked around the room, pretending to look at the art on the walls. Finding no hidden devices, she stood behind the receptionist’s chair, allowing Rachel to take pictures of the items on the desk. The voices behind the door were in a heated discussion, so Cara sat down in the chair to get closer to the monitor.

“Look!” Rachel hissed excitedly. “She left her messaging system open!”

Cara began slowly scrolling through the messages on the computer so Rachel could film what was there. She managed to display three days of messages before one of the voices in the next room moved towards the door. Cara popped out of the chair just as the door opened and pretended to admire the painting behind the desk.

“I love watercolors,” Cara remarked, pointing to the painting.

The woman responded through gritted teeth, “*No one’s allowed near my desk.*”

“Oh! Sorry!” Cara replied, her legs trembling as she crossed to the other side of the room. “I was just so taken by the artistry-”

Cara stopped speaking when the receptionist covered her ears with padded headphones.

“I don’t think you’ll be friends...” Rachel noted. “Go to the office door so I can read the nameplate.”

Ignoring the glaring receptionist, Cara wandered over to another painting on the wall, then took a step closer to the door.

“Edgar Cady, Corporate Psychiatry,” Rachel read.

“This painting is nice too,” Cara said to the receptionist who responded with a cold stare.

Suddenly the office door opened and a man with a shiny, red face stood in the doorway.

“Dr. McCarten! What a pleasure.” He extended his hand amiably. “I knew your father very well!”

Fury rushed through Cara’s veins. *I’m going to punch him*, she thought, feeling her face burn hot.

“No, no, no...” Rachel’s calming voice said. “Shake the hand,” she instructed. “Thaaaaat’s it. Plan his death later. *Right now*, focus *only* on your breath and my voice.”

“Come right in, young lady. Oh, Dobson,” he turned to look at the man still in his office. “How about if I have Denise call you when we’re all done?”

“Splendid,” Mr. Dobson cheerfully replied and gave a happy little wave to everyone before he left.

Cara followed the psychiatrist into his office but after she’d sat down, he remained standing.

“I’m Dr. Cady, Chief Officer of Corporate Psychiatry.” He paused as if waiting for some kind of reaction but when none came, he continued. “I want to assure you that everything we say here is confidential. Your privacy is *protected* under Ethics in Section Nine of the Employee Manual.

So,” he sat down and leaned towards her. “Please feel free to speak openly, ask any questions-” A voice from the intercom interrupted him.

“Dr. Cady,” said the voice, “you’re needed immediately.”

Contrary to what he said next, Dr. Cady did not look surprised. “What on earth is this?” he sniffed as he went to the door and stuck his head out.

“*This* is some kind of ruse,” Cara heard Rachel say.

An unknown man’s voice spoke from the waiting room saying something Cara couldn’t hear.

“I’m with a patient!” Cady exclaimed. “I can’t be disturbed.”

The man’s voice spoke again.

“Yes, yes,” Cady replied irritably and turned to Cara. “I’m so sorry. There’s an emergency but I promise I’ll be *right* back.”

“Of course,” Cara answered.

“Thank you for being so understanding!” he said and in leaving the room, he shut the door. A moment later, the door swung open and the receptionist appeared with a complete personality change.

“Can I get you something to drink?” she asked graciously. “Tea, coffee, water?”

“No thank you,” Cara assured her, and stood up. “Would you show me to the restroom?”

“You may use the one in the waiting room,” the woman answered, but when Cara tried to pass through the door the woman tripped on her own feet and grabbed Cara’s blazer to regain her balance. Cara had to grasp hold of the doorjamb to prevent them both from falling.

“Oh my! I’m so sorry!” the woman babbled, and then she started brushing off Cara’s clothes saying, “Oh dear, I’ve crumpled your nice suit. Let me straighten you out... There! Good as new! I really do apologize! Are you sure I can’t get you some water?”

“No,” Cara said, flustered by the exaggerated fuss. As she entered the restroom, she heard Rachel say, “Something’s up. She may have planted something on you.”

After scanning the bathroom and her belongings for listening devices, Cara checked her bag and pockets but nothing was missing.

“Well...” Rachel growled, “she’s up to something.”

“Maybe she meant to attach a listening device and didn’t manage it,” Cara proposed.

Rachel began muttering curses. “Did you have *anything* in your outer pockets?”

Cara paused. “A new packet of antiviral,” she answered, “but it’s still there and unopened.”

“What!”

Cara’s heart sank. “With everything that’s going on, I was afraid I’d forget to take it. I knew I’d remember if it was in my coat pocket.”

“Cara,” Rachel’s tone was serious, “*the rules are for a reason.*”

“I’m sorry...” Cara said anxiously and stored the pack of pills safely in the inner pocket of her vest.

Rachel sighed. “Look, I know you’re tired, but an inquisition is about to start. Until we get you out of there, you can’t afford to make changes without running them by me. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, *that’s behind us,*” Rachel affirmed. “Take the time you need to slow your breathing before you go back out.”

When Cara reentered the office, the psychiatrist had not yet returned. She noticed an open briefcase on the floor next to the doctor’s chair that hadn’t been there before.

“Don’t stare at it,” Rachel told her. “Sit down and start looking for something in your bag. I’m guessing they called him out of the office because they couldn’t hear you well enough through the surveillance cameras in the room so they put a more sensitive device in that open case.

Okay, now casually look around the room for a magazine. When you spot one, go get it... and then take an interest in an object on the wall. That’s it. Start there and move slowly all the way around the room. Remember to read anything with writing on it; the camera distance is set such that *if you can read it*, I can too. I also want to take pictures of what he has on his desk so when you get to that part of the room, stand in front of it, pretending to look at what’s on the wall beyond.”

Once Cara had finished this task, Rachel said, “Okay, sit down again and while you pretend to read the magazine I’ll recap how to handle his questions. Essentially... we’re going to throw all the irresponsible, avoidance tricks they love to use... right back *at them.*”

When Dr. Cady returned, he apologized profusely, and immediately launched into a grueling, two-hour interrogation. He used an overlapping question technique, repeatedly asking for the same information in slightly different ways. Cara answered every question with an irrelevant fact or non-sequitur supplied by Bae and Rachel through her earpiece.

About an hour into it, the sweat that had been beading up on Dr. Cady’s brow began to drip down his face. Close to the two-hour mark, he became visibly agitated, his hair was disheveled and his ruddy cheeks had darkened to a cooked-beet maroon.

Cara heard Rachel say, “This guy’s thinking he doesn’t get paid enough.”

Dr. Cady suddenly stood up and cleared his throat.

“My dear,” he began, “what I have learned from our conversation is that *you are very confused.*” He mopped his brow. “I’ll be making recommendations for your treatment but rest assured, we’re going to take good care of you.” He led Cara out to the waiting room saying, “Please, make yourself comfortable. Mr. Dobson will be here in a jiffy.”

After whispering something to the receptionist, he rushed back into his office and shut the door on his coat. There was a ripping sound followed by cursing as the door opened a crack and then slammed shut. Cara stared blindly at the closed door listening to the receptionist page Mr. Dobson on the intercom. In her earpiece, Rachel’s voice was jubilant.

“You did it Cara. The information you collected from the receptionist’s computer is a *gold mine.* Over the last two days, she communicated with several upper Tier people about removing you. The emails are damning. So! Slow your breathing... thaaaaat’s it... just focus on my voice, because *this is what’s coming next.*”

Very fortunately, Roger has been flapping his mouth about you so we know that security guards have been ordered to your office. Dobson will take you down there and tell you to gather all your things. You must pretend to be in shock... as if you had no idea they would force you to leave. When the security guards escort you out of the building, they’ll insist on driving you home. You’ll politely refuse this *generous offer* and explain that you have *dental surgery.* ‘Oh! Look at the time!’ you’ll say, ‘I need to leave right away to make my appointment!’ They won’t interfere with prescheduled events with people outside the Corporation, but depending on their level of suspicion, they may follow you to the dental practice. If they do, no worries, we’ve got you covered. All you have to do is keep your cool and drive to the office.”

Cara looked in her rearview mirror and saw a Corporation Security vehicle two cars back.

“I’m definitely being followed,” she said.

“We know,” Rachel answered.

“Do they suspect something?” Cara asked anxiously.

“We’re not sure,” Rachel replied, “but that’s not for you to worry about. Just pay attention, you’re close.”

“I think I see it,” Cara announced. “Slesinger, Gruenstein and Lawrence... Doctors of Oral Surgery, Endodontics and Family Dentistry.”

“That’s it,” Rachel confirmed. “Park on the street and go in the front door. Once you’re inside, follow *their* instructions.”

“I lose your signal when I walk in,” Cara recalled.

“That’s right,” Rachel said. “They communicate via a VPN and block all other transmissions.”

“I’m walking in...” Cara reported.

“You’re in good hands,” Rachel told her and then the commlink went dead.

“Hello Dr. McCarten,” greeted the receptionist. “I see you filled out everything electronically, so you’re all set. Have a seat, they’ll be right with you.”

“Thank you.”

The door to the practice area opened and an assistant invited her back to an operatory room.

“The feeders out front are full of cute little birds,” Cara said, reciting the line she’d been told to provide, and he responded,

“Yes, spring has sprung.”

As he closed the door to the hallway, a second door opened and a man dressed in surgeon's scrubs said,

"Follow me. Quietly."

They left the room through a well-lit passage wide enough for one person. Cara could hear people talking on the other side of one wall and guessed that the walkway ran parallel to the main hallway in the practice. The passageway emptied into a room that was part kitchenette part security office with a sink, refrigerator and a counter dedicated to a sixteen-screen security system. As he closed the door to the passage, a woman flew in the back door.

"Hello Cara, I'm Jess," she said as she locked the door and dropped the shade. "Well... that's who I am *today*. I'm *the one* who's going to sneak you out of here and for *that*, you need a disguise," she said, stuffing a bag into Cara's arms. "Just put these clothes on overtop what you're wearing. The wig's ugly but that makes it more fun." Then Jess gave Cara a great smile. "And *now*," she said, handing Cara a star shaped pin, "on behalf of the Resistance, I want to thank you for all that you've done."

Overcome with emotion, Cara accepted the gift and sank into the nearest chair.

"Thank you."

Jess smiled. "Coffee is what you need. Doc, will you explain everything while I grab food and caffeine for the road?"

"Yes," he agreed. "In the car, there's a new phone for you and travel clothes to change into once you're safely on the other side of town. I'll need your Corporation communicator and mobile; it's not safe for you to carry them anymore."

"Oh, right..." Cara said and handed over her Corporation bracelet and phone. "What about *them*?" she asked, pointing to the live image on the monitor showing a Corporation vehicle parked in front of the office.

"*They* will trouble you no more," Jess laughed.

He nodded. "The receptionist will inform them that your surgery required sedation and your designated driver picked you up at our back entrance," he said. "There *is* one concern though... Did you take an antiviral pill today?"

"Yes, just before I walked in."

"May I see the pack?"

"Of course." Cara pulled it from an inner pocket.

"Hmmm..." he said, examining the packaging. "*Look's* fine." He glanced at her. "Rachel asked me to take one of the tablets and have it analyzed."

"Really?" Cara said, feeling a pang of anxiety.

"Just a precaution," he said. "You know Rachel; she checks everything. Do you have questions about your exit plan?"

"I only now am wondering... Why am I *not* incognito when I go into the sports bar?" Cara asked.

Jess looked at the surgeon. "That's an interesting twist," she admitted. "First of all, don't worry, your image won't be transmitted to the DM in or around the bar because the security cameras have fake feeds. It's why the bar's so popular; regulars know they can't ID'ed there. Which reminds me... You've left town through the tunnels before, right?"

"Yes, a few times."

Jess looked relieved. "That *really* simplifies things... Back to your question; the reason why you must look like yourself is because the asset said he'd only leave the bar with an operative he recognized."

“Do I know him?” Cara asked.

“No,” Jess answered, “but he knows who you are from the Corporation.”

The surgeon handed Cara a picture. “This is the man you’ll be looking for and he’ll be dressed just like this. Note his coat and shoes; they’re distinctive. We’ll have people in the bar ready to help you if necessary, but you must be the one to make contact and lead him out.”

“There is *one little snag*...” Jess conceded. “We just learned that the asset may try to help two additional men escape with him. If that turns out to be the case, you’ll escort him and his two companions to the tunnel entrance. From there, everything’s the same except *you’ll guide the companions* through the north tunnel and Mason will take the asset out the west branch. Once you’re out of the tunnel, though, you switch. Katrin’s people will take care of the two men and you’ll head for the mountains with the asset. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“Be ready for some disgruntlement,” the doctor warned. “I imagine his companions will be afraid to be separated from him since he’s their ticket to safety. You may have to calm them. Explain that separate exit strategies are necessary for their safety as well as his.”

He gave Cara an ampule of liquid antiviral. “You hand this to him when you make contact.”

“Yes,” Cara said, “and I call him Lenny, but who is he? Am I allowed to know?”

The surgeon glanced at Jess, and then sat down across from Cara. “He’s the son of the CEO of the Corporation, Alfred Dyer.”