

## Chapter One

She'd been a thief a long time but bank robbery was a new low.

Bay North stood in line at the Concord Downing Bank and surreptitiously scratched under her wig. The damn thing itched like crazy.

She ran a hand down the pencil skirt of her cheap, gray business suit. It was a challenge trying to blend in with the Denver lunch crowd waiting to bank checks and open new accounts.

The suit, the foreign makeup and brown wig were her attempt at a chic disguise. She swallowed a snort. She wouldn't know chic if it slammed her in the head with a pair of designer heels. Out of necessity, she usually wore clothes she could run in.

Things might have been different if she hadn't been born a freak.

Her chest constricted. She fought to keep her hands relaxed, to not curl them into tight little fists.

Things weren't different. She breathed out. Imagined the rush of emotions bleeding away like a spent wave.

Casually, Bay cast a glance around the bank. The foyer was all marble, mahogany and old-world brass fixtures. Located in an historic building in downtown Denver, Concord Downing

catered to the city's wealthiest clients.

Behind the row of tellers, a door led downstairs to the vault. She didn't let her gaze linger but she noted every aspect of the heavy, reinforced entry.

A quick glance at her Rolex knockoff. In exactly one minute, two of the bank staff would open the dual combination lock. Then, another minute after that, the time lock door on the vault beyond would open.

Then she'd show that murdering bastard Gabriel Leven that she could give as good as she got. She'd steal one of his most prized treasures—the Scarlet Lady.

An antique ruby necklace of incalculable value.

*Come on, come on.* She tapped one cheap pump against the floor and watched the door out of the corner of her eye. Funny how time moved like cold honey when you were waiting. Even funnier since time was her commodity.

*Movement.* Two bank employees were heading for the door. *Show time.*

She gave the room another slow scan. Everything looked as it should. White-collar workers going about their business between chicken wraps and lattes.

One big man's shoulders strained against his ill-fitting suit. He looked like he wanted to shred his too-tight jacket. Not far from him, another muscle-bound jock stood against a pillar, his jacket not even managing to hide the bulge of whatever he had holstered at his side.

A skitter of unease rippled up Bay's spine.

What the hell was muscle doing pretending to fit into the bank crowd?

Swallowing hard, she looked directly at the door. The bank staff held keycards up to the scanners. The reinforced metal swung open and beyond she had the impression of a featureless corridor.

But from a night spent plying an off-duty bank guard with Wild Turkey and Coke, she knew that inside lay an impregnable vault housing safe deposit boxes for the rich and seriously rich. Protected by four armed guards.

None of that mattered. In another forty seconds the time lock door would open and she'd be home free.

She eyed the suits again. Were they watching her? Or were her nerves just strung too tight?

It didn't matter if they were Leven's men. She wasn't leaving this bank without his strand of big, fat rubies in her hand. She planned to dig a knife deep by taking something he treasured. And destroying it.

Twenty seconds to go.

*Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen.*

Her gaze swept over the spacious foyer with its gleaming marble and hushed atmosphere. Then it snagged on a man.

A tall, lean man who watched her with an intensity that made her blood freeze. Oh God, he'd found her.

*Seventeen. Sixteen. Fifteen.*

He stood in the middle of the cavernous space, not even pretending to blend in. His hands were by his side, but she sensed coiled readiness. Like a gunslinger waiting to draw.

*Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve.*

His gray gaze locked on her. A handsome face battered by life. He'd been after her for months and he never gave up.

He was a hunter. And she was the hunted.

*Eleven. Ten. Nine.*

She cast a frantic glance at the doorway to the vault.

*Hurry up!* She wanted to shout the words but she held her breath until her lungs burned. She looked back at Leven's hunter.

*Eight. Seven. Six.*

He launched himself at her.

God, he was fast. He pumped his arms, his movements strong and efficient. In those storm-cloud eyes, she saw the burn of something hot and scary.

*Five. Four.*

She stumbled out of line, but she knew she'd never outrun him. She only had one option for escape, but she needed the damn time lock open before she did it.

A powerfully muscled arm crossed the space between them. Fingers gripped her wrist.

*Three. Two*

"Nowhere to go, time thief," the hunter growled.

*One.*

Bay stole time.

The world around her froze. People petrified, all sound silenced. Through the large plate glass windows, the cars on the street were immobile. She looked at the oversized railway clock on the wall—motionless.

She was stealing time.

And she had work to do.

She studied her hunter. Three months he'd been after her and this was the closest he'd come. He was far more intelligent than Leven's usual thugs. She pulled his hand off her wrist and looked again at that rugged face.

Tawny hair fell over his forehead and his skin was deeply tanned. He looked like he belonged outdoors, climbing a mountain or captaining a ship. Without thinking, she touched a finger to his strong jaw and the intriguing dip in his chin.

When she registered the warmth of his skin, she snatched her hand back. *Idiot.*

His gray eyes still burned. She recognized what lurked there—saw the reflection of it in her own eyes every day—revenge.

“What did I ever do to you?” she wondered.

She turned her back on him and headed to the doorway where the two bank employees stood frozen. It gave the perfect line of sight to the vault and its half open door.

*Excellent.*

She cast one quick look back at her immobile hunter. Something told her he didn't like to lose.

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Sean Archer blinked. His arm dropped to his side.

He stood in the middle of the bank lobby, people moving and talking around him.

She was gone.

“Damn it.” He resisted the urge to hit something.

He'd had her, held her delicate wrist in his hand. He hadn't imagined such a powerful being would have wrist-bones finer than a child's.

He'd come close to her before, but it was the first time he'd touched her. He flexed his fingers, still felt her smooth skin.

*Snap out of it.* She was dangerous. She'd stolen time and he'd been vulnerable. Every person in the bank had been a perfect target. She could have slaughtered them where they stood without

any of them fighting back.

Just like what had happened to his team.

A shock of hot emotion stormed through him, churning his gut. For a second he was back in the Afghan desert—the scent of blood sharp in his nose, air hissing through his punctured lung, sand hot beneath his cheek.

A flurry of motion snapped him out of his nightmare.

The bank manager—a woman in a sharp black suit—looked sick, her face pale. Another employee stood wringing his hands in front of the yawning door leading to the vault.

Gabriel Leven had just lost his prized necklace.

Spinning, Sean aimed for the front door. He nodded at the men who'd come with him, and they fell in step beside him. Outside, he headed for two black SUVs parked on the street.

He wrenched open the door. "I need the horologion. Now."

The driver grumbled then slapped a small device into Sean's hand.

Sean turned his back on the man. Leven's men were sloppy and undisciplined. Nothing like the well-trained soldiers he'd served with.

*You aren't a SEAL anymore.* As the rest of Leven's men stood idly around the cars, one lighting up a cigarette, Sean thought about just how far he'd fallen.

Working for a criminal.

*No.* He was nothing like Leven or his men. They were just a means to an end. He needed Leven's knowledge and resources to rid the world of a dangerous threat it didn't even know existed.

He focused on the horologion. It looked like a cellphone with a slightly larger screen. He activated it and waited. Cooked up by the scientists Leven had working for him, this little thing

didn't measure time. It measured the residual trace of when time was stolen.

The horologion gave a discreet beep. He held it toward the bank. The beeping increased.

*Gotcha.* "Stay with the vehicles. I'll call you when I need you." He strode down the sidewalk.

He followed the trail through the city streets. Went through the atrium lobby of the Brown Palace Hotel, pushed through shoppers on the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Mall and ended up in the Lower Downtown district with its renovated warehouses.

The time thief was far from stupid. She always left a complicated trail. He'd almost caught her in New York a week back, but the trail had ended at the East River and he still didn't know if she'd risked disease by getting in the water.

She couldn't steal time again so soon after the bank. Or if she did, she could only hold it a few seconds. Thank God they didn't have endless power. But her trail was dissipating.

He glanced up. Union Station.

*Damn.* If she'd gotten on a train, he'd lost her.

Sure enough, the trail ended at one of the platforms. The light rail to Littleton had just left.

He cursed, shoving the horologion in his jacket pocket. He yanked out his cellphone and barked orders to the men. A team would be waiting at the next stop, but he knew she wouldn't be on the train.

A fine job he was doing avenging his men. He ran a hand through his hair. It had lost its military precision, now more unkempt than anything. Just the way he felt most days.

Something pinged along his senses.

He stilled. His instincts had been forged in his intense SEAL training and honed in war. They'd saved his life too many times for him to ignore them.

He turned slowly, careful to keep his shoulders slumped in failure.

She stood beside a pillar on the adjacent platform. Straight. Still. Watching him. Somewhere during their chase, she'd ditched the wig and suit for well-worn jeans and a non-descript gray sweater.

Sean really wished she looked evil. Like the thief who'd slaughtered his men. That thief had been a Taliban fighter, had looked like the enemy.

This woman looked fragile. Medium height, compact frame, honey-blonde hair that was ruler straight. Eyes the color of the palest moss green.

But she was tough. She'd evaded him for months.

He strolled toward the entrance, hands in his pockets. He hated losing sight of her, but he couldn't tip her off. The woman had sharper survival instincts than a wild animal.

In the main part of the station, the large arched windows flooded the area with natural light. He sank onto one of the old wooden benches. And waited.

It reminded him of all the missions where he'd hidden in shadows with his team. Lying in wait for their target.

She was smart. She waited ten minutes before she walked off the platform, head down, drawing no attention. A hood was pulled over her hair.

He bided his time until she was far enough ahead of him before he slipped into the flow of people.

Stripping off his jacket, he tucked it under his arm. Now she'd only see a dark blue T-shirt if she looked back.

He counted her steps, fighting the urge to spring at her.

*Wait. Wait. Wait.* He couldn't lose her again.



She turned left on Wynkoop Street, headed deeper into the renovated warehouses of LoDo. At one of the brick buildings, she went in the front door.

He grabbed the door before it clicked closed and eased inside. He paused in the entry, watching her.

When she stopped to unlock a door farther down the hall, he moved fast.

He grabbed her, yanking her back against him. He maneuvered them into the shadowed recess of the doorway, subduing her struggles.

He pressed his lips to her ear. "Gotcha."