

HIS *Desire*

Hamilton Investigation & Security

HIS Series, Book One

(Three Chapter Excerpt)

Jesse & Kate

Sheila Kell

*Cunningham
Books*

HIS DESIRE

Copyright © 2014, 2016 by Sheila Kell

Publisher: Sheila Kell, First printing December 2014

Cunningham Books, First printing February 2016

Editor: Hot Tree Editing

Interior Design: Polgarus Studio

Cover Designer: CT Cover Creations

Cover Models: Marshall Arkley and Priscilla Lee Badger

Photographer: Eric Battershell Photography

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the publisher, Cunningham Books, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights.

Purchase only authorized editions.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

To the extent that the image or images on the cover of this book depict a person or persons, such person or persons are merely models and are not intended to portray any character or characters featured in the book.

ISBN_978_0_9909165_1_2

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

One

THE WOLF WHISTLE didn't surprise FBI Special Agent Kate Ross on her approach to the bench outside the federal building. She shook her head and rolled her eyes at her partner, FBI Special Agent AJ Hamilton. He couldn't go a moment without flirting. He'd done so with her when they'd first been assigned together. She smiled thinking of the bemused look he'd had on his face when she'd pinned him to the floor in response. Now seven months later, they were good friends.

Kate raised her brows and shook her head at him in amusement. "Seriously, AJ, you're going to get a slap or a lawsuit one of these days."

He grinned back and shrugged. "Nah. I'm all charm, Kate. Didn't you know that by now?"

She watched on in disbelief as his wink appeared to have placed a little pep in the leggy redhead's step as she continued on her way, tossing an encouraging smile over her shoulder. Kate expected AJ to jump up and follow the woman, but his butt remained glued to the bench, sandwich in hand.

Smiling, Kate plopped down beside him, finally having a chance to eat lunch. Although at the late hour, it could've been called an early dinner. They'd spent the day wrapping up a murder case of an elderly couple who had unfortunately been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She removed the plastic container lid on her Cobb salad and chuckled at AJ's peanut butter sandwich. For a twenty-five-year-old man, he still hung on to his childhood favorites.

"Date of the month?" Kate poured ranch dressing on her salad, silently cursing when she splashed a drop on her dark slacks.

"Month?" AJ laughed. "Try week. I may love women, but I need to be able to hold an intelligent conversation with them." He tore off a large bite of his sandwich.

Wiping, hopelessly at the white stain, she couldn't help teasing him. "When are you going to start eating adult food? Maybe that's why she kept walk—"

"You're charging the wrong kid with murder," a deep, masculine voice came from behind.

Kate tensed, chucked her fork in the container and stood with her partner. Even though she hadn't eaten all day, the thought of food no longer appealed to her. Jesse, AJ's older brother, walked around the bench and stopped in front of them.

He looked at his brother and gave a quick nod. "AJ."

He turned his gaze to her. "Hello, Agent Ross. It's good to see you again." Jesse's patronizing voice, the thin-lipped smile and hardened expression, assured her that he meant nothing of the sort as he stretched his hand out in greeting.

“Mr. Hamilton.” Kate tried to ignore the tingling feeling as his large hand swallowed hers in a strong handshake. *Please let the goose bumps be from the chilly breeze and not from his touch.*

Holding her hand longer than necessary, he tilted his head ever so slightly. “Haven’t I told you to call me Jesse?”

She drew in a deep breath, flattened her mouth and fought not to sigh heavily. She’d also told him to call her Kate. Neither seemed inclined to display that much familiarity.

Not waiting for an answer, he released her hand and cleared his throat. “You’re charging the kid with a murder he didn’t commit. Samuel’s innocent.”

Arresting teenagers such as Samuel, who they’d arrested earlier for the double homicide, always broke her heart. But this was a tough case. And his father, a sitting judge, had hired Hamilton Investigation & Security, HIS, to clear him as soon as he became a suspect.

Jesse Hamilton, a former FBI agent himself, co-owned HIS with most of his brothers, and because of his relationship with the FBI deputy director, he’d been granted access to the investigation from the beginning. For the last month, he’d questioned everything AJ and Kate had done, and any evidence they’d collected, going out of his way to annoy the hell out of her in the process.

“We’ve been over this before. All of our evidence points to him,” Kate stated. She didn’t state it was only circumstantial evidence. Jesse knew that. As did the powers that be when they’d ignored her request for further investigation.

“Jesse, Kate’s right. Samuel is our killer.” AJ dropped onto the bench, wiped a hand down his face, then looked at his brother. “Besides, we’ve been told to close the case.”

Jesse crossed his arms over his broad chest, his expression a mask of stone, his hard eyes narrowed. “And you’re happy with that? I thought better of you, AJ.”

Kate sat, prepared to watch these two devastatingly handsome men go at it yet again. She got to observe their dynamics of play out almost daily, and even though they were easily recognized as brothers, they couldn’t be more different. However, she preferred AJ’s fun-loving, flirtatious nature, to Jesse’s serious, aggravating personality any day of the week.

“Of course I’m not. Neither is Kate. But we have our orders.”

“You know you’re wrong, AJ. Hell—” Jesse pointed at Kate. “I bet even Agent Ross knows you’re wrong on this one,” he said in a sarcasm-drenched tone.

Kate stiffened and fisted her hands so tightly her nails bit into her palms. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” She failed to keep the bitterness from her voice.

AJ jumped up, closed in on his brother, pointing his index finger at him. “Watch it, Jesse.”

Kate didn’t need AJ standing up for her. She’d already shown she would not let herself be put down by this egotistical prick. She could handle *Mr. Hamilton*. She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand, effectively silencing her.

“I have a witness.”

Now that grabbed her attention. “A witness to what exactly?”

He shot her an incredulous look, and a sensation of unease dropped in the pit of her stomach.

“A witness to the murder. Someone *you* overlooked.” His voice dripped with disdain.

The jab of the accusation hit its mark. She spoke with as reasonable a voice as she could manage, “A witness *you* just so happened to find.”

He released a long, audible breath, which she interpreted as a heavy, frustrated sigh, at her. “Yes, Agent Ross. Why is that so hard to believe? I’ve been investigating crime far longer than you’ve been. I know what I’m doing. Hell, that’s what *I* stands for in HIS.”

The man sorely tested her patience.

“Let’s go inside and talk about this. Calmly.” AJ had tried to play peacemaker between the two of them many times but had ended up acting more like a referee.

“Oh, I’m calm.” Jesse’s lips twitched. “And I took the initiative for you, Agent Ross, and brought in both the witness and the correct suspect.”

Kate wondered if she could get away with shooting him. Nothing major, just a toe. Enough to let him know how much he irritated her. While she was relieved they would get a chance at another possible suspect and potentially righting a wrong, his arrogance rankled her.

On their walk through the park back to the government building, AJ asked Jesse about his daughter. AJ was proud of Reagan, his five-year-old niece. Like any loving uncle, he bragged about how smart and beautiful she was.

Kate could picture AJ on the floor playing a children’s board game with the little girl. She’d yet to meet any of his family, except Jesse. She was curious what the other brothers were like, but if they were like Jesse, she didn’t need to meet them.

Always the gentleman, AJ held the door open for her. They walked past their desks and entered an interrogation room with a beat-up metal table and four uncomfortable chairs. Her partner humbled her when he sidled his chair beside hers in a show of loyalty. She wanted to tell him not to bother, for Jesse would find a way to anger her no matter how close he sat, but she allowed him to feel needed.

Jesse walked them through his evidence without rubbing in the fact he’d found the alleged killer, and not the FBI. His treating her as an equal to AJ throughout the discussion surprised her. How long would it take for him to turn into an ass again? An ass with her. She caught Jesse’s gaze and found herself momentarily mesmerized by golden-brown eyes he’d yet to harden.

Once Jesse finished, Kate’s gut churned with anger, and she wanted to blast her superiors. They never should have ordered her and AJ to stop investigating. Had the two of them spent a little more time on this case, they could have found this witness and brought in the correct murder suspect.

“The kid says he was hired by the Facilitator.” Jesse picked up his paperwork, and tapped it on the table to straighten the edges.

Kate and AJ looked at each other. *The infamous hit-man.*

The Facilitator murder case—actually cases—was one of their dead-end investigations. He mocked the FBI by leaving his business card at each crime scene—“Facilitator for Hire.”

Disbelief at the young man’s statement made Kate wrinkle her nose before she caught the action and swiftly assumed her professional face. “You mean a hit-man asked a kid to do his job? I don’t believe that for a minute.”

“Maybe he’s branching out.” Jesse shrugged. “Most likely the kid is lying. I’ll leave that to you.”

AJ nodded and kept his focus on his brother. “We’ll take care of it. Thanks for this, Jesse.”

“I remember the constraints you have. I believe if you had more time, you would’ve found the real killer.”

Her jaw dropped at the compliment. At least she took it as a compliment for them even though he’d spoken directly to his brother and said, “you.”

“As you can imagine, Samuel’s attorney is on his way to the DA with this information in order to get the charges dropped.”

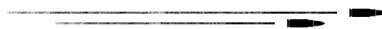
Kate tensed and suppressed the growl rising from her throat. “What? We haven’t talked to this witness or suspect yet.”

He closed his briefcase, then frowned in exasperation. “But *I* did.”

And there was the Jesse she’d come to know. “And the DA’s just going to take your word for it?”

He stood, scowled and leaned over to address her. “Yes, Agent Ross. He’ll take my word for it.”

A single shot would make her point.



KATE walked into the bar and stopped to let her eyes adjust to the surprisingly bright lights. She scanned the room automatically and heaved a sigh of relief when she saw her friends Josh and Mary at a corner table.

Making her way to the table through the leftover happy hour drunks attempting to block her path, she barely avoided someone spilling a drink on her. “Rylee’s not here yet?” she asked, sliding into a seat.

Josh shook his head and stood. “You need a beer, Kate?”

“Sure, that’ll be great.”

Josh refused to allow women to go the bar for drinks. He called it manners but Kate knew it had something to do with the female bartender. Smiling at her friend, and once blind date that hadn’t worked out, as he weaved his way to the bar, Kate turned to Mary.

“I’m glad you could make it tonight,” Mary said with true pleasure in her voice.

“Me too.” Kate’s frustrating day flashed before her, and she shoved it away. She would enjoy the evening with her friends.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you, but Mark called me, asking me to help him get back together with you.”

The bastard. Wasn’t it bad enough she’d given him a part of herself for a year and he’d betrayed her? They’d been in a relationship, which he’d crushed. No way did she want that again. “What? Seriously? He can’t possibly think I’ll forgive him after all the lying and cheating?”

Mary grimaced. “Believe me, I called him a few choice words and reminded him he was with you only for the money your parents left you.”

Kate chuckled. Mary had been her best friend since they’d grabbed for the same book in the library in their freshman year of college. Mary was her shy, reserved friend, who changed into a tiger when it came time to stand up for her friends. If only she’d be that way for herself. “And what did he say to that?”

“He said.” She paused and bit her lower lip.

“It’s okay. I know. Because of my problem, I was lucky he wanted to be with me. Something like that?”

Mary nodded, closely observing Kate’s reaction. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Why didn’t I realize it sooner? I can’t have children so no man is going to be serious about me unless he’s after my money.”

Mary reached over and covered Kate’s hand. “That’s not true. There’s someone out there for you. Just be patient.”

Josh returned, bringing the conversation to a halt. “Rylee’s here.”

Rylee Hawkins could always be counted on to dress in the current trend. That night she wore tight jeans and a faded T-shirt. Her light auburn hair dropped just below her shoulders. As a natural beauty, she could have easily joined her sister as a successful international model. Instead, she’d chosen law enforcement.

She carried herself with confidence as she walked through what could be described as nothing other than a gauntlet, with man after man trying his luck. She shook her head each time and continued toward the table.

Dropping in the chair beside Kate, she shook her head. “Good grief. I didn’t think I’d make it over here. Damn drunken men.”

The sudden loud sounds emanating from the band, as they sound checked their equipment, drowned out any reply she could’ve made. When they’d apparently tuned them successfully and they didn’t need to shout to be heard, Josh beat her to the punch.

“You’re just in time,” Josh said. “Let me grab you something before they start playing.”

The frustration that had lined Rylee’s face vanished. “Thanks, Josh.” She reached for her purse.

Waving away her action of getting money to pay, he winked and then returned to the bar.

The noise level increased as patrons continued to arrive. Although it was a Tuesday night, a crowd packed the Bayfront enjoying the band and drink specials. Kate searched the room for anyone she knew. Her gaze passed over a tall man with a woman plastered to his body. She stopped and turned back to him.

Dammit. Jesse Hamilton. The only man to make her seethe one minute and lust after him the next. The last man she wanted to see.

He stood there devilishly handsome, dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a blue polo that emphasized the muscular body his business suit had been hiding. *Holy crap.* She tried to turn away, but was held transfixed by the sex appeal emanating from him in those little things she loved, like the shadow of a beard and mussed-up hair. He appeared to be enjoying himself. Was he actually smiling? He looked nothing like the man she'd been dealing with since they'd met.

He caught her watching him. His smile widened in approval, and he winked at her. Actually winked. To her annoyance, heat crept up her cheeks. *Damn him.*

Thankfully the lights began to dim, but not before she turned to avoid his knowing gaze. "How was Vegas, Rylee?"

Rylee's jaw tightened and she closed her eyes, then released a long, deep breath. Her eyes snapped opened and she seemed as if she would speak, but then she shrugged as if to dismiss the question. "Fine."

Kate studied her. It wasn't like Rylee to avoid a question. Before she had an opportunity to ask more, and she knew there was more, Josh returned with a question.

"Who's the tall guy at the bar who keeps looking at Kate?"

Kate couldn't resist and glanced over her shoulder at Jesse.

"That's Jesse Hamilton. Kate's partner's brother." Rylee smiled playfully. "He and Kate are *perfect* for each other." She laughed and held her beer bottle up in a toast to Kate. Rylee knew how volatile their relationship happened to be and was enjoying this a bit too much.

Kate shook her head. "Not even close." She and Jesse? No way. She took a long draw of her beer. Sure his eyes had done something that flipped in her stomach. But? No!

"Kate, you should go for it. It's been awhile since you got any."

She almost spewed her beer across the table. It may have been *awhile*, but she refused to have this conversation with Josh.

Rylee leaned over. "You should go for it. Jesse's hot."

Her friends meant well, but this had to be the most awkward conversation to have. "He's already with someone."

Josh picked up his beer. "You're hotter than she is and he doesn't look like he's into her. Well, we can find someone else. What about that guy in the yellow shirt? He may have long blond hair, but he's built and smiling this way."

She glared at Josh until he realized it was time to stop talking, but he kept his mischievous grin when he turned to other conversation.

After several sets of the band playing, Kate glanced at her watch and noticed the early morning hour. Bidding her friends good night, she left, avoiding a final glance at Jesse.

Outside, she rubbed the chill from her arms. Even in early fall when it remained warm, a cool, crisp breeze blew off the Bay.

Her phone beeped. She removed it from her handbag, entered her password for messages and heard her sister Ariana's voice.

"Hi, Kate. Give me a call tomorrow. We've got a lot to catch up on. By the way, I booked our spa trip, and you are *not* getting out of it this time."

She smiled. Before she could delete the message, a knife-wielding bum, whose stench should have forewarned her to his presence, confronted her.

"Give me your purse, bitch," he hissed, pointing a knife at her stomach.

Oh fuck no! She kicked the guy in the crotch, his weapon falling with a clatter. He grabbed himself and fell to his knees with a high-pitched sound emanating from his throat.

Keeping her eyes on the man, she reached down to pick up the knife with her left hand, and he lunged. She tightened her right hand into a fist and came up with an uppercut to his chin. He staggered back. She tossed the knife behind her, out of his reach, and ignoring the explosive pain in her right hand, grabbed his arm, twisted it behind his back, and then slammed his body against the wall.

The bar door opened. A hand came from behind, clutched her arm and tossed her aside before she could react.

What the fuck? When did bums start having backup?

She moved toward the new threat only to stop short at the sight of Jesse, now holding the bum's arm.

"What is *wrong* with you? I don't need your interference."

"Well, hell. Here I thought I was being of service protecting a lady," he drawled.

"As you saw, I had everything under control."

Jesse looked at the bum, then released him. "What the hell, Lucas?"

Her mugger turned and looked at Jesse. His eyes widened and his shoulders dropped in a sign of defeat. "Shit, Jesse. I just wanted her purse. You know I wouldn't hurt her."

"Get the hell out of here, and I don't want to hear of you bothering her or any other lady again."

Lucas nodded, then ran down the street, not looking back.

Even in her heels, she could catch him. She stepped around Jesse to chase the criminal but only took two steps before a strong hand clamped firmly on her bare arm halted her.

"No, sweetheart. Let him go."

She rounded on Jesse. After a long pause, during which she fought for self-control, she demanded, "Let go. That dirtbag held me at knifepoint."

"I'll let go if you don't run after him. He's harmless."

Too far away for her to catch, she saw no reason to prolong her time with Jesse. She raised her hands, palms out, in an “I-give-up” gesture. “Okay. I won’t chase him, but you’d best hope he doesn’t hurt anyone, or I’ll put your ass in jail. I don’t care who you know.”

He chuckled and released her. “What the hell are you doing walking by yourself?” He crossed his arms over his chest. The muscles rippling under his shirt quickened her pulse.

Ignoring his question, she backed away, turned on her heels and took long, purposeful strides down the sidewalk away from him.

He caught up to her, his powerful body moving beside her with an easy grace. “You didn’t answer me.”

She stopped and whirled to face him. “Look, Mr. Hamilton, you’ve done your chivalrous act of the day, so you can leave me alone.” Kate had no idea why he was bothering her, especially since he didn’t like her.

He cracked a lopsided smile. His alluring eyes contained a sensuous flame that almost turned her insides to mush. “Let’s start over. It’s good to see you again, Kate.” He reached out his hand for a handshake.

Kate considered spinning and hurrying away, wishing she could outrace the carnal thoughts of Jesse faster than she could him.

Instead, she controlled her physical reaction to him and her traitorous thoughts of his touch. “Okay. Hello, Jesse. I walk alone because I can take care of myself. Good night.” With a brief forced smile, she walked away.

His full and masculine laugh sent warm shivers floating down her spine.

“Go away, Jesse.” She groaned when he appeared beside her.

He stuffed his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. “It’s not safe for a beautiful woman to walk home alone.”

She stumbled over a loose cobblestone. Did he say beautiful?

With impressive reflexes he caught her. “How much did you have to drink?”

Embarrassed, she steadied herself, her face feeling impossibly hot. “We’re not going to have sex,” she blurted, scarcely aware of her own voice. *Where had that come from?* She almost snorted out loud. It came from her mouth that couldn’t always control itself. How she’d kept it in check when undercover, she had no idea because when it came to any other time, the words expelled themselves through her mouth before she fully formed them in her mind, and sometimes they were better left unsaid, or at least said more tactfully. Like when she’d told the worker at the drivers’ license bureau she was in a hurry and it was taking too long. Funny how the computer broke after that and it took twice as long.

“Sweetheart, I don’t recall asking. But now that you mention it,” he said, an easy smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

It took her a minute to regain her senses, wishing she'd not allowed her mouth to run away from her. It was so unlike her, but after their confrontation that morning, the wink at the bar, and Jesse unnecessarily coming to her aid, he'd thrown her for a loop. "Let me go," she pleaded.

His thumb caressed her skin before releasing her arms.

She had to get to her apartment. Something was obviously wrong with her. Maybe she had too much to drink. She quickened her pace down the sidewalk, and he moved with her like a protective shadow. If he thought she couldn't handle herself, he would be wrong, so wrong. He might not think her a strong investigator, but she excelled at kicking ass.

"Do you walk home by yourself often?"

She refused to get into a conversation. After her mouth had already run away with itself there was no telling what she'd say.

Arriving at her doorstep, Kate pulled her keys from her purse and turned to him. She kept all inflection from her voice. "Jesse, thank you. Good night."

He reached a hand toward her. His fingers lightly traced a line across her cheekbone to her lips. A shudder of pleasure raced through her before she froze, not wanting to stop what she knew would come next.

He leaned close and brushed his lips lightly against hers. "Good night, Kate."

The clinking of her keys hitting the doorstep startled her.

Pulling back, Jesse grinned, reached down and picked up her keys, offering them to her.

Fumbling to insert the key in the lock, Kate took a deep breath to steady her hands. With one last look at Jesse, she entered and closed the door behind her, she leaned against it, then reached up to touch her lips that were still warm from his kiss. Closing her eyes, a strange inner excitement like a million butterflies skittering around inside her stomach and over each muscle filled her.

Something about Jesse aroused her, and it had done so from the first instance she had looked into those gorgeous golden-brown eyes a month ago. It rocked her to the core deeper than any other man had. The man was maddening, but she couldn't deny she wanted him.

A LARGE sinister smile slowly spread across the Facilitator's face while observing the interaction from a darkened doorway across the street. The purpose for the night's trip had been to quietly take out the target, but this unexpected change of events screamed for a more inventive plan.

He slid from his hiding place and moved silently down the street, keeping to the shadows, pulling out his cell phone. "I need you to drive in the morning."

Yes, tomorrow his revenge would finally begin.

Two

JESSE STOOD OUTSIDE Kate's door until the click of the deadbolt sounded. What had just happened? He'd kissed her, just a light peck, but a kiss nonetheless. He'd been damn lucky she hadn't slugged him.

A visceral need pounded in him to bust down her door, throw her over his shoulder and take her to bed for days. He doubted the caveman thing would work on her. Frustrated, Jesse adjusted the growing bulge in his jeans. How could she get him this excited so quickly?

His interest had stirred at their introduction a month ago, but he had a rule against mixing business with pleasure. She'd been his only challenge to that rule. He'd thought if he kept her angry, kept the venom in her eyes alive, that it would diminish his desire for her and prevent him from wanting to throw her to the ground, pushing himself deep inside her, riding out waves of ecstasy.

It had backfired. He wanted her even more when her cheeks flushed, her eyes smoldering in fury and her temper flared. Arguing with her was an aphrodisiac.

A shiver of want ran through him as he imagined his hands and lips all over her tight body. His erection jerked, straining against his zipper. He considered knocking, then shook his head and walked away. No, if she answered the door, she might shoot him after he'd stolen the kiss.

He'd pissed her off again tonight. Yeah, she could've handled Lucas, but Jesse couldn't help himself. He wouldn't let another woman get hurt around him, FBI agent or not.

Walking the few blocks to AJ's house, Jesse planned to crash there for the night. Since his brother knew he'd be there, he hoped he wouldn't find a naked woman partially covered in whipped cream on the kitchen table with AJ opening a jar of cherries again.

When he finally made it to his brother's guest room, Jesse still sported a hard-on. He needed a cold shower, but knew that only one person would truly satisfy him—Kate.

He'd been drawn to her with an unexplainable deep need. He had to have her and get her out of his system before he lost his sanity. The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of his mouth. Their case was over so he didn't have to break his rule of mixing business with pleasure. With the little he'd come to know about her, she wasn't the normal type of woman Jesse was used to dealing with so he had his work cut out for him if he wanted her in his bed anytime soon. Challenge accepted.

KATE had a dire need for caffeine. Her sleep had been interrupted by sensual thoughts of Jesse and that kiss. She chastised herself for entertaining any thoughts of him further. Giving her one little kiss didn't make up for the way he'd treated her since they'd met. That decided, she strode out in the brisk morning air.

She stepped into the short line at Morning Grind, her favorite coffee house, and briefly spoke with her friend Nolan who'd just finished his morning run. When Kate reached the front of the line, she ordered a cappuccino with an extra shot of espresso. She considered a third shot, but decided she wanted to be awake not wired.

As she waited, she took a deep breath and inhaled the heavenly scent of coffee beans. The relaxing atmosphere of the café was wonderful. She wished she could take the time to settle down in a cozy corner with a book, her dog curled at her feet and coffee for the day, but she had a hit man to catch.

At least she wouldn't have to deal with Jesse any longer. Their case was closed, and she since knew to never accept an invitation from AJ to any of his family affairs.

She picked up her coffee from the barista and left a tip for the smiling worker. "Thank you."

Turning, a striking woman, who looked vaguely familiar, blocked her exit. Although nothing warranted it, an immediate impression of a unnerving woman flashed in her mind.

Kate's cell phone rang.

"Excuse me." She scooted around the woman.

Once on the sidewalk she reached in her purse for her phone.

"How was your night out?" Ariana asked before she had an opportunity to speak.

Kate took a cautious sip of her coffee, her thoughts drifting to Jesse. She really had to get a grip. She didn't even like the man. Maybe Josh was right. She needed to get laid.

"As usual, we had a good time." She continued sipping carefully, waiting for the caffeine to kick in. "I got your message. Is something wrong?"

"No. I just have some paperwork for you to sign."

At the age of four, Kate had been orphaned and survived a bullet wound meant to kill her along with her parents. The Rosses had fostered her while she'd recovered. When she'd turned six, they'd officially adopted her and raised her as their own daughter. She couldn't have asked for better parents. Kate had decided she would be an FBI agent early in life. Jay and Kelly Ross, her adoptive parents, never pushed her to work at Ross Communication, as they'd understood her need to join the bureau. They respected her decision and supported her wholeheartedly.

Jay and Kelly had perished in a car accident the past year. Much to Kate's dismay, they'd split their fortune evenly between Ariana and Kate, and they were both millionaires. Their inheritance included co-ownership of Ross Communication, a multi-million-dollar radio conglomerate Ariana managed.

"You really should be more involved in this, Kate. This is your legacy now, too. Leave the FBI. You've caught your parents' murderer."

"Ariana," she turned to walk toward her car, "you know the company's important to me, and I have been thinking about it. When I decide anything, I'll let you know."

The long pause worried her.

“How did your interview with that Richard guy—Robert... no, Richard go?”

Kate frowned. “Ariana, I’m sorry, but I can’t talk about it. I shouldn’t have said anything to begin with.” Kate had made a mistake telling her sister where she’d had to go upon canceling their lunch, but it’d been the third time and Kate had wanted to explain so Ariana didn’t think she was just being blown off.

Richard Freeman was one of many men she and AJ had questioned as a suspect on the Facilitator case. A little over two years ago, Richard had been charged with the murder of three men, but the charges were later dropped. Kate had reviewed his case and found that Jesse had been the lead FBI agent. It had been his last case.

She had to admit, at the interview last week Richard had given her the creeps the way he’d stared at her with his beady eyes, but he’d alibied out for the murders. He couldn’t be the Facilitator.

They had more potential suspects.

A heavy sigh traveled through the line. “I understand. Are we still set for the spa?”

Jesse strolled around the corner, a phone pressed to his ear, and she felt her treacherous heart skip a beat. “Ariana, I’ve gotta go.”

Too late, he’d seen her. Panic set in. What should she do? Why was she acting this way? It had just been a little kiss. It didn’t mean anything, and she was a grown adult.

“No, Kate. You aren’t going to back out of our spa day again.”

A brief shiver rippled through her. Her pulse skittered alarmingly as Jesse’s lips curved into that sexy smile she remembered from the previous evening.

Even though she’d told herself she didn’t want to impress him, she became self-conscious about her appearance. Wanting to get an early start, she’d rushed to get ready. Now she wished she’d taken more time with her appearance. At least put on makeup.

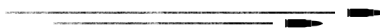
Jesse studied her, his gaze intent, as if he was searing her into his memory. The thrilling current moving through her irritated her. This was not happening. Not with *him*.

She made a quick, involuntary appraisal of his features. She didn’t want to tear her attention away from this impressive man. He carried himself with a commanding air of self-confidence. His massive chest perfectly filled the charcoal suit, white shirt and crimson striped tie.

Locked in his gaze, she forgot about her phone call with her sister.

Jesse finished up his phone call with, “I love you, too.”

Kate froze at his words, dread seeping into her gut. Knowing the caller could be anyone, a sister, a niece... a girlfriend... she swallowed her confusion and the rush of anger—if it was the latter—that threatened to hurry to the surface. Instead, she brushed off his words and raised her chin with a cool stare in his direction.



JESSE couldn't stop staring into her beautiful blue-green eyes. The need to taste her still had him on edge. Imagining what she hid under her plain black suit, which had hinted through the tight jeans from the club, made him want to step forward, clasp her body tightly to his and find the closest place to strip her down.

He felt the invisible web of attraction building between them. Her flushed skin and parted lips, damp from her tongue darting out to moisten them, were positive signs she was as affected by him as he was with her.

Jesse disconnected his call and stopped in front of her, his fingers itching to reach up and push back the hair that escaped her ponytail, then use it to pull her head back while he devoured her mouth. Certainly she would slap him if he acted on the impulse.

Her expression of desire exploded into heated anger. He would not be deterred from having her, even though the mission was trouble with a capital T. "Good morning, Kate."

"Good morning, Mr. Hamilton." She forced a bleak, tight-lipped smile.

Chuckling, he teased, "So, we're back to Mr. Hamilton." He hadn't missed her obvious examination and approval. She couldn't completely hide it, even with her civil politeness. There was definitely something between them. Something that had to be resolved. In the bedroom.

"On your way to the office?" He kept his voice calm and his gaze steady. He had to break through the invisible barrier she'd erected between them.

Kate nodded. "Yes." She surprised him by asking, "You?"

"I'm meeting with someone at the coffee shop."

She nodded and sipped her coffee.

A glint over her shoulder caught his eye. *Fuck.*

Tires screeched and adrenaline surged through Jesse's veins. He grabbed Kate's arms, pulled her to the ground and drew his weapon as the car neared and gunfire erupted.

"ARE you all right?" Jesse was covering Kate.

Son of a bitch! He'd done it again! Untangling herself from him, she automatically reached for her weapon. A searing pain engulfed her hand, but she ignored it, knowing he'd already slowed her reaction time by interfering. "Damn it, Jesse! Get off me."

"It's too late, sweetheart. They're long gone." He replaced his weapon in the holster under his suit jacket. "I would've thought you'd be grateful for my pulling you out of harm's way. A drive-by shooting isn't a great way to start the day."

Closing her eyes, she took a moment to accept what had happened. "You're right."

He quickly raked a gaze over her body when his expression changed to one of concern. "You're bleeding."

Drive-by shootings didn't happen in Fells Point. Not in this safe neighborhood. No gangs. No problems except beggars from time to time.

Since the car came from behind, she wouldn't have seen it until it was too late. As much as it needed her, she had to say it, "Thank you." Great. Now she owed the asshole her life.

Nolan jogged up to them from the direction of the coffee house. "I've got 911 on the phone. Do you need an ambulance?"

"No, Nolan. I'm fine." Warm, wet clothing told her where her coffee had landed. But it was the sharp painful throbbing that drew her attention. Kate held her hand, one in the other, and blood ran over both from the gunshot wound to her right hand. *Ob God!* Her firing hand. How badly was it injured? She tried to wiggle her fingers and cried out in pain. *Nooo! I have to be able to shoot.*

The woman from the coffee house strolled up to them. "Oh, Jesse. I saw it all. Oh my God, you're bleeding. Here, let me see."

Kate rolled her eyes at the melodrama. Now she remembered where she'd seen the woman. She'd been the one at the bar with Jesse. Was that who he'd been speaking with on the phone? The person he was meeting this morning?

"It's nothing, Elizabeth." He shook off the woman's hands. "Kate, let me take a look at your hand."

Before she could deny him, he reached for her wrist and held it firmly. She flinched as he touched her wound.

He looked at her, pity in his eyes.

Nolan knelt beside them, handing Jesse a small towel. "It's a little sweaty, but it's better than nothing."

"Kate, I'm going to tie this around the wound until I get you to the emergency room."

"Jesse, I can drive you to the ER, and she can ride in the ambulance." Elizabeth glared at her.

Jesse kept his focus on Kate. "You look like you're about to pass out on me."

She hated that he was right. Her light-headedness and fuzzy vision were a precursor to unconsciousness. The red-hot pain in her hand didn't help.

"Nolan, I think I've ruined your towel." Her words slurred. Nolan looked at her with concern. He and Jesse put their heads together, but she couldn't make out what they said.

"I won't pass out, and I don't need to go to the emergency room with you, Jesse. I can drive myself." Why did those stupid words pop out of her mouth? The man brought out the worst in her even when she needed him.

He reached down to help her stand. Hesitantly, she placed her left hand in his and he pulled her to her feet. She gasped and collapsed into his arms as her left ankle gave way. Jesse winced when he grabbed her to keep her from falling, and that was when she saw the blood soaking the left sleeve of his jacket.

"I think you've just proven you're not okay to drive. It won't be so bad riding with me. I don't bite. At least not while I'm driving." He chuckled.

How could he be joking? They'd both been shot. Didn't he hurt also?

The wail of sirens screamed in the air.

"Since it appears your carriage has arrived, you won't have to ride with me after all."

She couldn't fight it any longer. The last thing she remembered was falling into a black hole and hearing Jesse cursing.

Three

AJ ENTERED THE hospital recovery waiting room and spotted Jesse pacing. Scanning the room, AJ quickly honed in on the only other occupant, a bombshell in a red business suit with incredibly long legs. She looked up at him then, with a disappointed look in her ocean blue eyes, returned her attention to her laptop. *Damn, she's hot.*

"It's about fucking time you got here," Jesse growled.

AJ turned to his brother. The bombshell would have to wait.

"Hey, Jesse. How's the arm?" He held his breath for a moment when his gaze landed on his brother's bandaged arm. *Thank God the bullet had only grazed him.*

Jesse grunted. "What are you doing to catch this bastard?"

His brother's surliness amused AJ. Jesse always had to be in control, which meant he'd probably refused pain medication so that he could stay alert.

"Thought you might need this." He handed Jesse a clean white shirt he'd found in the back of his SUV.

Disregarding the other room occupant, his brother changed out of his bloodied shirt. AJ frowned when he turned away in an attempt to hide the wince of pain and the trembling hands buttoning the shirt.

"I spoke with the nurse on the way in. She said Kate should be awake soon," he informed Jesse.

She'd been his partner for less than a year, but he liked her. He didn't know why, but he felt a different bond with Kate than most women. It wasn't sexual. It was more familial. He trusted her to have his back.

"Has BPD come by?"

Jesse shook his head. "No. I told the officer at the scene she was FBI, but he just shrugged and said someone would be here. I didn't argue because I wanted to get Kate here."

"What the hell happened out there?" AJ had been at home when he'd received the call that both his brother and his partner had been shot. Once he'd been assured neither had life threatening injuries, he'd rushed to the crime scene and argued with his boss to lead the investigation. Afterward, he couldn't get to the hospital fast enough. Hell, he'd even parked in a tow-away zone. He didn't care if they towed his car. He had the urgent need to see his brother.

Rubbing his hand over his face in what appeared to be an agonizing gesture, his big brother cleared his throat. "I was talking with Kate when a car raced toward us. I pushed her to the ground, but it was too late." He paused. "The driver was Ed Wright."

AJ nodded, took his phone from his pocket and called in for an APB to be placed on Ed.

With what sounded like a touch of distress in his voice, Jesse spoke, "It's her right hand, AJ."

The distress in his brother's voice had his curiosity piqued. He'd heard it before when one of their brothers had been hurt. But Kate? They didn't even get along. Then it hit him. *Sbit*. Jesse had to know this was nothing like his wife.

"Don't worry. Dr. Harris is supposedly the best orthopedic surgeon on staff."

"This wasn't a gang shooting. Ed's a petty criminal, but he's not a gang member."

"Jesse, the question is, were you or Kate the target. Anyone you can think of offhand who wants you dead?"

He shrugged. "There's a long list of people who want me dead. What about Kate? Any threats against her?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but after what happened with her first partner, she'll keep that to herself if she can."

Tension crept up AJ's shoulders and neck. He could've lost two people he cared about today. Now, he had a shooter to find who apparently had his sights set on one of them. AJ had to protect them, but as stubborn as they were, it'd be a battle to get either to agree to any type of protection because they'd insist they could take care of themselves.

Kate wouldn't have a choice. She'd get a detail whether she wanted it or not. Jesse, on the other hand, would elude any detail he was assigned. The only solution was to call his brothers. Jesse would be angry with him, but at least he'd be alive.

AJ slapped Jesse on the shoulder. "Let's get some coffee while we wait."

KATE opened her gritty eyes to an unfamiliar room. She reached up to rub them only to find an IV in one hand and a large bandage on the other. The memory rushed back to her. She'd been shot this morning. Her hand. Thank goodness she was at the hospital.

How did she get here? The last thing she remembered was.... *Oh God*. She was mortified. She'd actually passed out in front of Jesse.

"Kate, you're finally awake."

She turned her head, relieved to find her sister sitting in the chair near her. Ariana put the word beautiful to shame. Any time she tossed her long, silky dark hair over her shoulder, men's heads turned. If only Ariana would stop working so hard and take notice.

With a dry mouth, she croaked, "Water."

Her sister poured a cup of ice water and handed it to her. "Let me get the nurse." She left Kate alone.

Lifting her right arm, Kate looked at the large bandage on her hand. Her heart raced, thumping against her ribs, as if it were about to explode in her chest. How bad was it? Would this end her career as a field agent? She loved her job.

Before panic fully sunk its teeth in deep, Ariana returned with a nurse and a handsome, compact man who walked with a spring in his step and his eyes on Ariana's rear.

"Kate, I got lucky. This is Dr. Harris. He conducted the surgery on your hand."

The man smiled widely, his perfect teeth strikingly white against his tanned face. "Hello, Ms. Ross, I'm Dr. Harris, an orthopedic surgeon on staff at the hospital."

She nodded as her only form of greeting. "How bad is it?"

He cleared his throat. "You were extremely lucky. The bullet went through the webbing between your thumb and index finger, so no bones were broken. There is some potential nerve damage. It's hard to say at this point if you'll regain full strength in your hand." He gestured to her ankle. "The ankle should be fine. You only lightly sprained it. The swelling has already subsided."

Dread crept into Kate's belly. "But there's a chance my hand will be like it was before?"

"It's too early to say for sure, but I have complete faith."

She forced a smile while Dr. Harris examined her hand and instructed her how to care for it. All thoughts of possibly leaving the FBI for Ross Communication as she and Ariana had been discussing, vanished. She wouldn't quit until she caught the shooter. The son of a bitch would pay.

"From what I understand from your sister, you'll leave with or without my permission so I may as well get the paperwork signed so it's all in order."

Could anyone out-negotiate her sister?

He smiled at Ariana and left the room, and the nurse who'd patiently waited stepped closer. "Ms. Ross, there are two police officers waiting outside to see you. I was told to let them know the moment you were awake."

Kate closed her eyes. They were not going to be pleased when they found out she was FBI, and her boss would take the case from the Baltimore PD. "You can let them in."

Two uniformed officers entered the room and almost fought over who would hold the door open for Ariana as she exited the room. "Ms. Ross? I'm Officer Nathan Miller, and this is Sergeant Arthur Watson."

Officer Miller, in his young twenties, average height, lean and sporting a crew cut, looked to be the gung-ho officer hoping to make a difference. Sergeant Watson, much shorter and with a paunch and some serious hair loss, had to be riding it out until retirement, which should be soon.

"We need a few minutes of your time to discuss the incident this morning."

"You should know that I'm an FBI agent." She looked for her purse to get her badge.

Her statement didn't faze Officer Miller. He did at least have the decency to ask about her hand before he jumped into another question. "Did you see the car?"

"I'm sorry, I really didn't see anything. The car came from behind me, and it was out of sight before I recovered."

Shit. She'd be put on medical leave. She hoped AJ would get to lead the investigation. At least if he ran it, he'd share information with her and get her involved.

Officer Miller didn't take the hint the interview was over and asked more questions until Sergeant Watson dragged him from the room.

After the officers left, Ariana returned. "The nurse said there are two men waiting for you and one is an FBI agent. I think I saw them earlier." Ariana tossed something on the bed. "They've stepped out, but said they'd be right back to see if you're awake."

Only one was an FBI agent? She hoped that was AJ. Was Jesse the other man waiting? He'd saved her, but she didn't want to see him. Some unexplained, irrational emotion told her to run from him. Still. Icy fear twisted around her heart. They may not get along well, and she'd contemplated shooting him herself, but she didn't like the idea that someone could've killed him. "Was... was the other," she attempted to ask, then gulped, "was he okay?"

Waving her hand and looking around the room as if looking for a specific object, Ariana responded, "He seemed fine. He was walking around."

With anesthesia leaving her system and new drugs entering, Kate's hands shook and she felt weak. "Ariana, we're leaving." AJ would be at her door at some point so she wasn't waiting here.

"I expected that is why the doctor is completing the paperwork. These are for you." She gestured to workout clothes on the bed. "We can't allow you to escape gorgeous men in a hospital gown, now, can we?"

Dizziness assailed her as she stood. She reached to grab the bed and cried out in pain. Kate couldn't believe she was acting like such a coward. *Damn him!* She chuckled. That was probably the pain medication, but it was funny. She was running from him in her sister's running shoes.

Ariana drove her home, and they avoided speaking about her injury and Ross Communication. Instead, she'd learned her sister was dating a banker. It was time her sister found a good man who wasn't after her fortune and Ross Communication.

Ariana did her standard perusal of Kate's apartment. "You know you can live at the house in Chevy Chase. It's yours too. You don't have to live in this small apartment."

"I like this place. It has character." She was able to live off her FBI pay and the small legacy from her biological parents, so her Ross inheritance collected interest and could be passed along to other heirs.

Ariana frowned. "I'll never understand how you can leave what you had for something so small and without a housekeeper or cook."

"We've been over this before. I like this. You make it sound terrible, but it's a nice place in a nice area." Even though they didn't agree, Kate saw no need to take half of what was Ariana's birthright. Her birth parents had left her a tidy sum. No, she couldn't afford the mansion like she'd grown up in, but she didn't want it. She wanted what she had.

“They left you that money and half of the house and business because they loved you. Kate, you’re an heiress. You shouldn’t be living like this.” Ariana waved her hand around.

Kate changed the subject back to the banker. After assuring her sister for the fifth time she would be fine, she convinced Ariana to leave her alone.

Being alone wouldn’t last for long. A team from the FBI would appear to question her, give her hell for leaving the hospital, and AJ would certainly be one of them. She’d take whatever grief he dished out to her because it had been worth leaving to avoid Jesse.

Although she’d said, “Thank you,” to the man for saving her, she probably needed to say it again since she couldn’t guarantee she’d sounded sincere since she’d been upset with him and injured, but she didn’t want to see Jesse again. Maybe she could thank him through AJ. No, that was cowardly. She would have to face the man who kissed one woman yet told another he loved them, and thank him. Even if it wasn’t another woman, AJ had told enough stories for her to know Jesse was a player. She didn’t want to be attracted to him because she couldn’t handle more rejection, like he’d be apt to do once he tired of her.

Showing her appreciation. It was the right thing to do. She began to hate that she always tried to do the right thing.

HOW dare she sneak out of the hospital? Jesse had waited, worried, guilt riding him because he’d failed. He should’ve moved faster. He should’ve been more aware of his surroundings. All of his focus had been on Kate, and that wasn’t like him.

He parallel parked on Thames Street, then saw her in the park, a couple of blocks from her apartment. Sunlight glinted off auburn streaks in her brown hair, loosely flying around her face. He took a moment to drink in the beauty of her body, the one he’d had to pretend not to notice every damn day they’d work together the month prior. She didn’t know, but he’d seen her workout at the FBI gym, and the thought of those long, toned legs almost had him forgetting why he was there.

It suddenly occurred to him that in the workout clothing she wore, she didn’t have a weapon at her waist. *Dammit.* Someone might be trying to kill her, yet she stood outside without protection. What FBI agent would do that? He wanted to turn her over his knee. What the hell was wrong with her?

Jesse exited the car and walked toward the park.

She stiffened when she saw him, reached down, put a leash on a Dalmatian and then led the dog out of the park.

Intercepting her, he reached down to allow the dog to sniff his hand. “Who’s this beautiful dog?” Petting the dog, he hoped to calm himself. He didn’t want to immediately incense Kate, not like he’d intentionally done in the past.

He watched her luscious lips as she responded. *Damn!* He needed to pay more attention to his surroundings than on her. Didn’t he learn anything from this morning?

“Her name is Dottie, and she’s ready to go inside,” Kate responded flatly.

She didn’t want to talk with him. Well, she had another thing coming. He wasn’t letting her off that easy. “What are you doing out here without a weapon?”

The subtle narrowing of her eyes preceded her answer. “How I take care of myself is none of *your* business. Now, I’m going inside. Good-bye, Mr. Hamilton.”

So much for not spiking her temper right away. “I’m afraid it’s not going to be that easy for you, Kate. AJ will be here shortly. We have questions for you.”

“AJ I understand, but you don’t need to be here.” Pink crept into her cheeks, and she appeared more adorable than ever. “But, I did want to thank you again for saving me.”

“You’re welcome. How’s your hand?” *Stupid*. He should’ve asked her about it first.

“It’s fine.” She waved her bandaged hand around. “How’s your arm?”

A smile split his face at her concern. “It’s fine.”

The conversation lulled and Kate nodded, then turned and limped off toward her apartment. He silently walked beside her, wanting to carry her and take care of her.

At her doorway, Jesse spotted AJ with FBI Special Agent Trent McKenzie, *God’s gift to women*, walking toward them. The last thing Jesse wanted was for Trent to be around Kate. Why the hell had his brother brought him?

“The bad thing about Fells Point is the parking. I can never get close to where I want to go. We don’t all have your luck at parking, Jesse, and find front row parking everywhere.” Trent turned to Kate; his boldly handsome face smiled warmly down at her. “Hello, doll. It’s good to see you again.”

Jesse gritted his teeth when she didn’t slap him for calling her *doll*. So what, Trent called most women *doll*? Jesse didn’t want him calling Kate that. Had he and Kate been together before? He did go out of his way to flirt with her at the field office. Were they together now? Unexpected jealousy surged through him.

She flashed Trent the smile she’d held back from Jesse. “Hey, Trent. This is Dottie. I hope you don’t mind dogs because she’s a love bug.”

“It’s not a problem with me. I love animals.” He reached down to pet Dottie.

The dog growled at him, and Jesse couldn’t help but laugh. She had taste.

“Dottie!” Kate tugged the leash, pulling her pet closer to her. “I’m sorry, Trent. She’s never done that before.”

He shrugged, unfazed by Dottie’s actions. “No problem.”

When Jesse caught Trent watching Kate’s rear as her dog led them into the apartment, Jesse envisioned wringing his neck.

They entered her apartment and Jesse immediately relaxed into a warm and welcoming environment, his eyes drifting from the off-white living room set with Mediterranean theme color accents decorating to a stone fireplace. Intrigued, and nosy, he approached and looked at the framed photos on the mantel. One

was of Jay and Kelly Ross in winter gear on a rock in front of a rock canyon. The other was of a couple sitting on a beach. The breeze had been blowing through the woman's hair as the photo had been snapped. He turned. "Are these your parents?"

"Yes." His heart clenched at the pain in her gaze. Why did she affect him so strongly?

KATE sat in the chair to prevent Jesse from sitting close as Dottie curled up by the fireplace. Trent and AJ lounged on the couch while Jesse settled in the middle of the love seat. She attempted to look cool, calm and collected. She didn't want Jesse to know he affected her—his close physical proximity made her senses spin. In fact—"I don't mean this to sound wrong, but what's Jesse here for? Has Arthur hired HIS?"

He narrowed his eyes at her, and she fought back reciprocating.

"Calm down, Kate. Someone shot at one of you. I'd like to talk with you both," AJ answered.

Jesse knew more about what happened than she did. Maybe he could shed some light on it for her, which would make it easier for them to catch the shooter so she wouldn't fight it. For now. "I'm not going to be much help. I didn't see a thing."

AJ shook his head. "You know the drill, Kate. Let's walk back through it. Maybe something will return."

She nodded, even though she doubted she'd remember anything new. She walked them through the event, then looked at Jesse. When their gazes locked, warmth flooded her. Then she remembered his phone call this morning, his declaration of love to someone and turned away from him. She wished she had the nerve to ask him who he'd spoken to, but that would imply she cared, and she couldn't afford to care for a man who didn't settle for one woman.

"Kate, have you had any threats that you haven't told me about?" AJ scratched his chin that he hadn't stopped to shave this morning.

She shook her head. "No."

Trent leaned forward, putting his forearms on his thighs and clasped his hands, all business. "Kate, Jesse saw the driver—Ed Wright. This wasn't a gang shooting. One of you was the target."

No wonder they'd included Jesse. She looked at the bandage on his left arm and her stomach rolled over. Was it her fault he'd been shot? The thought brought out a surprising pounding of her heart. "Well, we can go through my case files, and we can go through what Jesse's been working on. I can—"

AJ raised his hand and stopped her midsentence. "We're well ahead of you. And we won't include you, Kate. You're out right now. Relax and spend some time with your sister. You always say you don't get to see her enough." He sheepishly grinned at her and then winked. "Maybe you'll finally introduce me."

She shook her head with a chuckle. She couldn't picture AJ and Ariana together. "AJ—"

"What about protection for Kate? If she's the target, you need to take care of her."

She should be pissed Jesse interrupted her, again. But, was that concern she heard in his voice? Couldn't be. "I don't need anyone to protect me. I can take care of myself." There was no need to waste other agents' time on her when there were criminals to catch. Her right hand may be useless, but she didn't think she'd have a problem with a weapon in her left hand. She wouldn't be accurate, but there were plenty of bullets in a clip.

"It doesn't matter what you want. We *are* assigning you a protective detail."

Kate's heart pounded against her chest. "No, AJ. As far as we're all aware, I have no connections to Ed Wright at all. The last thing I want is to pull an agent from where they're really needed." Ted had been enough for a lifetime. No one else.

The men stood.

AJ shrugged nonchalantly. "They'll still be there, whether you want it or not."

Kate ran her good hand through her hair. It was protocol, so he wasn't going to change his mind. It would only be a few days. She planned to go back to the office as soon as possible. She'd survive deskwork while she healed. They had too many cases to work for her to lie around like a princess. Her priority was her shooter. He needed to be removed from the streets.

"Okay, but no one stays in my apartment. They have to remain outside. No one steps in front of me."

AJ opened his mouth to speak.

"Otherwise I'll fight you on this, AJ."

Kate heard the weighty sigh escape AJ's lungs. "I'm sure you will anyway. No one in your apartment. I won't promise anything else."

"Promise you'll keep me updated?"

The glow of his boyish smile warmed the room. "That I will."

Kate ushered the men to the door, but it was too late when she realized Jesse had hung back.

Instead of following the men outside, he walked to the door, held it and then turned to her. "Would you like to watch an O's game with me tomorrow night?"

"I don't think that'd be a good idea. I heard you tell someone on the phone that you love them."

He nodded. "I did."

Okay, since she was too chicken to ask outright who it was, she needed to make herself clear. "I don't mess with men who are involved in another relationship."

He flashed an irresistibly devastating grin. "That's good to know. I don't mess with women who are involved in another relationship." He winked. "I'll be over at six o'clock with dinner, popcorn, and beer."

Jesse closed the door behind him before she could form a response. He could show up at six all he wanted. But she'd show him the door.

HIS DESIRE is available for FREE at your favorite ebook retailer!