

HIS  
*Choice*

Hamilton Investigation & Security

HIS Series, Book Two

*(Three Chapter Excerpt)*

*AJ & Megan*

*Sheila Kell*

*Cunningham  
Books*

HIS CHOICE

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# One

“WHO THE FUCK are you?” The tall man’s bellow carried with the frigid, early evening wind. Dark brown eyes, the color of the fattening chocolate bar she’d scarfed down for lunch, glared at her.

In her occupation, if looks could kill, she’d have been dead too many times to count.

Adrenaline rushed through her, charging every nerve ending. Flashing a press card in front of his reddening face, she shouted over the sound of the music blaring from the passing car, “Megan Rogers, *Baltimore News First*.”

Transforming before her eyes, Baltimore City Councilman Richard Thomas squared his narrow shoulders and the corners of his mouth curved into his photogenic smile. “No comment,” he stated into the recorder, aka her cell phone, she held before him.

The need to break his politician’s façade burned deep inside her. She loathed him, and his actions that evening deepened her disgust. She’d caught him red-handed making an exchange with a known dealer. And she had the photos to prove it.

*Front page, above the fold, here I come.*

“Did you just buy drugs from an alleged Magic Shop drug dealer?” she asked bluntly.

The councilman’s hard eyes narrowed into tiny slits, sending the wrong type of shiver coursing through her body.

He pointed a long, slender finger at her chest, shaking it with each word. “Look here. I don’t know what you think you saw, but I did not purchase drugs. I had best not see this false accusation of yours in the newspaper,” he angrily demanded.

True. She couldn’t prove he’d purchased drugs. She could print the photo of the two men passing something back and forth and let the public draw their own conclusions.

Megan’s ice-cold lips slowly broke into a half smile, then her heart raced when his six-three frame stepped closer. He towered over her in what she suspected was an attempt to intimidate her. She’d seen much worse in her line of work, but that didn’t mean she didn’t worry about the volatility of the person she was interviewing, especially when she caught them committing a crime.

Her gut told her he’d been doing something illegal. She’d followed this particular dealer, in the bitter cold for days, photographing his exchanges, hoping he’d lead her to his boss. Someone higher in Baltimore’s largest drug ring, Magic Shop, must know where her brother Kevin had been taken, even if he’d died at their hands. She swallowed down the pain and fury at the thought of her brother’s disappearance and centered her thoughts on the councilman.

“Then what are you doing in Washington Village speaking with Keyshawn, a suspected dealer in Magic Shop at this time of day? It’s not like there’s a council meeting out here. I’d think you’d avoid this area considering you once called it, and I quote, “The Sludge of Baltimore.””

The councilman dropped his hand, took a step back and cleared his throat. “I like to visit all areas of our fine city to help make better decisions that impact all of our citizens.”

She caught herself before she rolled her eyes. Typical political BS answer.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He turned and walked away.

The euphoria of breaking a big story surged through her veins. She fought her instinct to chase after him. She wouldn't get anything useful from him though. He'd have a great deal to say the following day when the paper published her story.

Megan's face carried a full smile.

An exclusive of this magnitude would please her editor, no, make her editor ecstatic. This scoop would allow her boss to stretch the deadline so it could appear in the morning edition. But, Megan needed to get to the newsroom soon.

She preferred to speak with Keyshawn first. She turned to find him no longer standing where he'd been. No! She needed him. He was her key.

After Kevin had disappeared, she'd immersed herself in his investigation of Magic Shop. If his disappearance was at their hand, she knew she'd never see him again. That didn't settle well with her.

Unmasking the Magician, the Magic Shop's mysterious leader, had been her brother's goal and it had since become hers. It'd take time, but she'd do it. She would find out what happened to her brother and break the big story he'd worked so hard to bring to light.

Megan closed her eyes against the tears forming. The past few months had been pure torture. Her brother's investigation notes were nowhere to be found. She had located the names of his sources, but they'd refused to speak with her for fear of reprisal from the Magician. They believed that he'd done away with Kevin, and they valued their lives too much to continue speaking to the press, even anonymously.

Starting from square one, it'd taken her most of the last month to earn trust from her new sources. Unfortunately, neither of them were in the gang. She wasn't sure how they got it, but Raven and Tyrone provided her with excellent inside information. That was how she'd found and followed Keyshawn, the dealer who brought in the most money.

She placed her phone in her inside coat pocket and zipped it. It had to be safeguarded. It held her photos, recordings, and notes on her stories. That reminded her to back up the information as soon as possible. It had to be somewhere else, just in case.... No, she wouldn't think that. She would not disappear at their hands. She would crack their group open and finish her brother's story.

She had to move forward to do that. Knowing she'd finally have to put Keyshawn's photo in print, her days of trailing him, hoping he'd lead her to his boss, Jimmy, were over. Since she had no idea what the man looked like or where to find him, she'd have to introduce herself to the dealer and hope he cooperated. Finding his boss would take her one step closer to finding her brother or his killer and expose the drug ring.

Throughout her time in the neighborhood, she'd noticed Keyshawn had quite the rapport with the local kids. She'd found it strange they all carried the same, small drawstring bag. But, after she witnessed their sly swap with the dealer, she knew she'd found out how he resupplied. The children were called runners, aptly named because she had tried to follow one and he'd lost her. She decided to add more cardio to her workouts.

Megan couldn't imagine money would be in the bags since children ran them. Keyshawn would have to go to his boss and turn in his profits soon. Maybe she'd missed an exchange, not realizing it was that versus a drug buy.

That night would be the night of her big break in exposing the leaders in this criminal organization. The night she hoped to find a lead to her brother.

She sighed. If it'd been easy, the organization would've been destroyed long before. Vengeance was a powerful motivator though. She wouldn't give up.

The beginning of dusk and deserted streets greeted her. As one of the most dangerous streets in Baltimore, no one willingly allowed himself or herself to get caught on Johnson Street at night, unless they were dealers or buyers.

She rubbed her gloved hands up and down the sleeves of her black, leather jacket. But it didn't help. Goose bumps still formed. Just standing there wasn't wise. She had to get moving. Though she'd worn a purple hat, scarf, and gloves, the gang's colors, to keep from standing out, it wasn't safe.

After checking the time on her Hello Kitty watch—dang Kevin and his sense of humor—she calculated how much time before she'd need to leave. Forty-five minutes should be enough time to track down Keyshawn.

Jamming her hands in her pockets, she turned in the direction he'd fled. Her destination was where he'd ended the previous day. Could she confront him around so many people? She'd have to play it by ear, preferring not to get shot.

Rushing down the sidewalk, Megan barely managed to remove her hands from her pockets in time to windmill her arms and regain her balance on the ice, before she landed on her backside. Her heartbeat raced. She needed to watch her step. No one tossed salt on the sidewalks in front of the abandoned buildings on this block.

She stepped off more carefully. Walking the familiar streets, her mind wandered. A different exchange she'd witnessed earlier in the day pushed its way to the forefront of her mind.

Two men she thought were city policemen accepted an envelope from a big, burly man she suspected was in Magic Shop. That man had scared her. He looked hard, angry and dangerous. She hadn't found the courage to follow him, though she wished she'd tried.

From the respect shown by the two men, he had to be important. Maybe he was Jimmy or another boss? Could he be the Magician? She'd photographed them and would show the photos to her sources tomorrow. Someone had to have his name.

Reviewing ideas of how she might approach that story, she didn't pay attention as she turned a corner.

"Oomph." She'd run into a wall.

The wall stepped back and a hand shot to a shoulder-holstered gun.

Danger prickled the hair on her arms, and her scream lodged in her throat.

*Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. Why had I let my mind drift, ignoring my safety?*

Once she regained her composure, as best as she could, considering the situation, she gazed up, and her heart skipped a beat. The sexiest man she'd ever seen stood before her. His tight, unshaven jaw and dark, brooding look only enhanced his appeal. She slowly turned to the short, mocha-skinned, well-built man beside him. He also held his hand on a holstered gun. Could this get any worse?

"Bitch, what the fuck are you doing here? Ain't no dealers here."

She inhaled sharply. She couldn't speak to the short man, couldn't answer him. Her heart beat rapidly, seeking its escape from her chest. The blatantly hostile look displayed on his face spelled big trouble.

Panic clawed at her. Her instincts demanded she run, but her limbs betrayed her. The dream where she was unable to scream or move had become a reality.

She turned back to the tall, sexy man. Her legs weakened as his gaze raked boldly over her body. His face remained impassive, but his eyes burned with interest. The tingling in the pit of her stomach surprised her. She gulped. This was not the time to lust after a man.

Megan couldn't take her eyes off him, her wall, even after his golden-brown eyes turned cold, hard as stone. His look rattled her, frightened her. Why shouldn't it? He was a man with a gun out in the slums late at night and looked ready to murder someone.

He stared at her but remained quiet, leaving the conversation to his scary friend.

"Get the fuck off the street before I make you."

Turning back to the short man, she swallowed, attempting to find her voice. "I'm... I'm on my way home." Her breathless response betrayed her fear.

She couldn't resist looking back at the taller man once more before leaving. She searched his eyes hoping something would break through the glacial stare. She was searching for something to make her feel safe. She shivered. Apparently that wouldn't happen. Why had she even thought that could be a possibility?

He stepped around her and walked away.

They were not wearing purple. The cold, purposeful way they moved into the night screamed for her to follow, but they walked in the opposite direction of where she'd hoped to find Keyshawn.

Observing the straightening of shoulders and respectful nods to the two men from the few people they passed, her investigative instincts fired to life. They must be important. The two men turned a corner before she moved her feet to follow. Megan hugged the walls on the opposite side of the street hoping to blend into the shadows. Her journalistic curiosity drove her. If they were important, she needed to know where they were headed. They could lead her to a boss or maybe even to Kevin.

She furrowed her brow and froze. The image of their guns popped back into her mind. Maybe they carried them only for protection like many others. Heck, she carried one in her purse. Her intuition told her that she might be wrong though, but finding her brother trumped everything else.

The naked desire she'd witnessed flash through the man's eyes stayed with her. Instead of repulsing her, it roused her curiosity... and her intrigue, which was a dangerous combination since she had no idea who he was and knew nothing about him.

But she couldn't put it completely aside.

She almost called it a day when they stopped. Slipping into the alley across the street, she watched one of the men knock on a door before she hid from view.

Muffled voices carried with the wind toward her. Antsy, she chanced it and peeked around the corner as Keyshawn appeared at the door.

Yes! She smiled, excited that luck had followed her. She'd have missed him if she'd traveled in the direction she'd planned.

One of the men grabbed Keyshawn's bicep then pulled him down the stairs. She pressed back against the wall as they shoved him down the street. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears. Her pulse raced. What would she do if they crossed the street toward her?

Megan released the breath she held captive when they stepped in the alley across from her hiding spot. Her senses heightened. Nothing good could come from a meeting in an alley.

Her brick wall of a man stepped to the entrance of the alley, turned to the street and crossed his arms across his broad chest in a don't-mess-with-me pose.

She immediately understood why when the man who'd accompanied him, punched Keyshawn in the stomach.

*Nooo! I can't lust after a criminal.*

Great. Once again she craved the wrong man. First, that snake of an ex-fiancé and then, the criminal. He took bad boy to a whole new level.

Taking in the scene before her, nausea hit her hard, pummeling her gut. She closed her eyes and took several deep, slow soothing breaths.

She had to concentrate on the story, not wrap her mind around one man.

Ensuring the flash on her camera phone had been turned off, she snapped photos of them in action. This meant they were enforcers for Magic Shop, or problem solvers. Keyshawn had obviously done something wrong. She wanted to know his transgression. Had he short-changed Jimmy in money or product?

Her mother would lecture her for days if she knew Megan felt Keyshawn deserved the punishment he was getting for his crimes. He ruined the streets and his product killed people. She preferred he had jail time to being beaten though.

A thought struck her and she stood straighter. That sexy criminal could be the man behind Kevin's disappearance for all she knew.

More than likely one of the two new men had been involved. She shuddered. She had more to fear from them than she'd originally thought. That bucket of ice-cold knowledge froze any lust she'd felt for the man.

Anger at them bled into every cell as she considered what might've happened to her brother. Kevin had been her hero, encouraging and coaching her as she'd worked to become an investigative journalist.

It'd worked. She'd become one, and it was all because of Kevin. But she'd lost him. Baltimore had lost his brilliance, his dedication in searching for truth and justice.

And the man she'd lusted over could be the reason her brother was missing. Rage rolled within her blood.

"Enough." Her bad boy's voice floated over to her.

The beating ended. Keyshawn lay on the ground, unmoving. The man she'd bumped into bent down and spoke to the dealer.

Suddenly realizing she'd almost left the safety of her hiding place as she'd unconsciously slipped forward to listen, Megan jolted her body to an abrupt halt and then retreated. She had to be careful to not be seen.

She flattened herself against the alley wall when they strode away. Oh how she wanted to follow them. They'd probably lead her to a boss faster than Keyshawn.

Keyshawn. She looked across the alley and wondered if he needed an ambulance. Even though he was a criminal, she couldn't leave him to die. Maybe if she helped him, he'd reciprocate.

Her opportunity passed before she could leave her hiding spot to cross the street. Two men appeared from the house and half carried, half dragged him inside.

His being on the street the next day was doubtful.

Noting the time on her watch, urgency overtook her. She had to leave in order to get her story on Councilman Thomas in on time. Her boss was only so flexible.

Without Keyshawn, her lead to anyone of importance moved to her pending file. However, she did have two new stories to investigate—the possible policemen taking a bribe and the enforcers sending a message.

She'd pick the organization apart bit by bit, if that was what it took for her to find her brother and for the Magician to reveal himself.

She nervously looked over her shoulder as she unlocked her SUV.

It was time to leave the area and her sexy enforcer behind.





## Two

“ARE YOU SURE he’s not going to hurt me?”

Elliott Brown’s whiny voice had AJ clenching his jaw so tight he expected some teeth to crack.

“I’ve already told you a hundred times, no. Quit worrying and do your job.” Behind the steering wheel, AJ Sands pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath and released it slowly in an effort to calm his nerves before he strangled the man in the passenger seat. “Do I need to go through it again?”

Elliott nervously cleared his throat and then shook his head. “No. I’ve got it. It sounds simple enough.”

Any moron could follow their plan, but AJ worried the idiot might prove to be the exception and screw it up, bringing down the type of trouble they didn’t need.

“I’ll do it.” Elliott nodded.

In the backseat, AJ’s partner, Hank, snorted. “You don’t have a choice, fuckhead.”

“No, no, I can do it.”

AJ’s gaze slid over the nervous man one last time. The expensive, navy blue suit covered with a gray trench coat had been tailor-made, but hung a little baggy on his lean five-eleven frame on purpose. Flecks of gray had found their way through his short, dark hair. With a freshly shaven face, he looked the part he played, a high-profile attorney.

The only detraction that could be a problem was if the wrong person noticed the redness around the new snake tattoo that peeked from under his collar.

AJ leaned close to the pseudo attorney. “You’d best get this right. There’s no room for error. Remember what’s at stake should you fail.”

Blackmail motivated people to do things they normally wouldn’t do. They needed Elliott, and the man had made it easy for them. His greed had landed him in this situation. Elliott had embezzled millions from his employer, and instead of taking the money and running, he’d remained to steal more. Some people just weren’t made to be criminals.

The agreement was that the incriminating evidence would disappear if he succeeded, plus they’d help him flee the country, help him disappear. It would go to his employer and the police if he failed.

He hadn’t hesitated. He wasn’t aware that his disappearing involved AJ doing away with him, not sitting on the beach in Bermuda. There never were any witnesses left who could identify anyone in the inner circle of Magic Shop.

“I’ll do it. I’ll do it.” He reached up to scratch his neck, his new tattoo.

AJ slapped at the hand. “Quit it, or you’ll make the red more noticeable.”

“I understand the surgery. But couldn’t I have had a fake tattoo?”

The surgery had been a success. No sight of scars. It could work. It had best work. “Suck it up.”

AJ checked his watch. Timing was everything. “Ready?”

After donning a pair of leather gloves, Elliott nodded. “I’m ready.”

Observing the man, who could easily land them in prison, step out in the bitter cold empty-handed, almost had AJ pulling the idiot back inside and saying, "Fuck it." But, the consequences of getting caught were preferable to the ones if they didn't complete this mission.

Easy money had lured AJ into this. It was supposed to be a quick in and out job. So far there'd been nothing easy about it, mostly because of the jackass before him. And now AJ and Hank had to depend on him. They were screwed.

"Goddammit, Elliott! Your briefcase."

A gloved hand reached inside the car and extracted the leather case. "Got it."

AJ leaned back in his seat and watched the man walk away. No matter what they had on the whiny idiot, he didn't trust him to pull this off. Elliott had been visibly shaking when he'd left the SUV, and AJ doubted it was only from the cold weather.

AJ stretched his legs as best as he could. At six-one, there never seemed to be enough legroom in the driver seat of a vehicle to fully extend them. The forest green SUV blended with the many SUVs and trucks in the small parking lot. They couldn't afford to draw attention to themselves, which meant cutting the engine and freezing their asses off.

The rectangular twenty-eight-story high-rise loomed behind them and set his nerves on edge. Elliott entered and, although he'd abandoned God years ago, he sent up a silent prayer for them to succeed.

Dark snow clouds hid the sun, leaving a gray shadow hanging over the city. The temperature had plunged into single digits with a windchill factor well below zero. His black turtleneck and black leather jacket did little to protect him from the bitter cold.

Had AJ known he'd end up in fucking Chicago, he would've dressed differently. Something about this city made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, and he knew better than to ignore that feeling. The uneasiness revolved around the unexpected risks he was taking.

As Elliott disappeared around the building, AJ looked at his watch and breathed a little easier. They were right on schedule. "What do you think? Think he can pull it off?"

"Humph. He'll make it. He's too scared to fail," Hank Masters answered.

"It's a good thing they don't have to change underwear too, because I think he might shit his pants before this is over."

Hank chuckled. "You're probably right." He turned and hoisted his short legs across the back seat, leaning his back against the doorframe. His large fist covered a yawn. "How long will this take?"

AJ needed his partner to remain alert. So many things could go wrong, and they needed to be on their toes.

"Not long. If we keep to the timeline, it'll be about an hour."

It would be an hour if everyone in the building who were being blackmailed or on the take didn't get cold feet and back out. They were necessary to move everything along safely, quietly and hastily. Trusting people he didn't know left a sour taste in his mouth though.

He hoped the man in their organization, whose sole role was to ensure the proper people assisted them, had done his job well. He supposed they'd know soon enough.

"Wake me when our boy returns," Hank muttered.

AJ swore softly. He knew better than to count on Hank.

He couldn't relax. Since he'd been a last minute add to this job, he hadn't been in on the planning session. They'd barely even briefed him on the escape plan. Should things go to hell in a hand-basket, his gut told him they would leave him and Hank in Chicago to deal with the fallout.

The fuck if he'd let that happen.

He had the map memorized. He always had his own backup plan. Always had, always would. He couldn't count on anyone but himself when things went south.

AJ Hamilton was his real name, but there was no way he'd allow his new employer to link him with his past or his family. He preferred for them all to stay alive, himself included.

The Magician, Baltimore's largest organized crime boss, was AJ's new employer. He took care of problems that affected the success of Magic Shop, the group's street name. A death order from his boss meant the person disappeared forever at the hands of his enforcers.

The organization's leader didn't care if his enforcers chopped the victim into tiny pieces and fed them to the fish or used acid in a steel drum to eliminate all evidence. So long as no one could identify or link him to anything related to the organization.

Those on the street knew that disappearances were a message from the crime boss.

AJ had yet to meet the man, but like many others, wanted to. He didn't like working for someone he didn't know. But sometimes you had to take what you could get.

AJ reported to Damian Powell, the chief enforcer. He couldn't say he liked the man much. Thankfully, he didn't have to deal with him often. People had learned not to cross the big boss, so he had a light workload.

For some reason, he'd been paired with Hank more and more often. Hank's message was to be noticeable, bruises or broken bones. AJ's presence signified the severity of the transgression and issued a nonverbal warning of what would happen if his partner's message wasn't heeded.

He rubbed his hand over his face, the stubble of his unshaven jaw scratching it. He had to clear his mind of his little pity party over his fucked-up life, or get caught off guard.

He'd been caught unawares when he'd bumped into the little number on the street. Something had passed between them that scared the hell out of him. Her look of innocence along with the fear in her eyes had pulled at him to protect her and keep her safe. Her cute Southern-accented voice had wavered when she'd spoken. Damn. What could he have said to calm her? *Don't fear me and oh, let's get a room?* Since his other head would've led the conversation, he'd smartly kept his mouth shut.

A smile broke out on his face. Dressed for Alaska, only her full, ivory face with a bright red nose and rosy cheeks had peeked out between the hat covering her forehead, and the scarf pulled up over her chin. He couldn't decide whether her large, dark blue eyes or the lips she'd kept wetting drew him more. Staring at her, a jolt had screamed through his body bringing his dick to attention. He'd not even seen her body and he'd wanted her.

He knew who she was, had seen her photo in the newspaper, and that troubled him. Concern for her walking around the neighborhood, alone, late in the evening made him lose focus. He'd barely remembered leaving her and completing his job, which was dangerous for him.

He'd been unable to control his restlessness until he'd found her address and driven past her home later that evening to ensure she'd arrived home safely.

Then he'd dreamed about her.

He shifted in the seat and adjusted himself.

How long had it been since he'd been with a woman? It was before he left everything and everyone behind for this life. Way too long.

The howling wind blew the swirling snow sideways, bringing him back to the present. He hoped it wouldn't affect their return flight. Use of the private plane allowed them to leave the city before the authorities realized a crime had been committed and set up roadblocks and monitor flights.

His chest tightened at not being privy to the plan once he, Hank, and their passenger arrived at the airplane. He shouldn't worry about failure since the team worked as a well-oiled machine. They'd achieved nothing but success in their past missions. He had to trust them. He almost laughed out loud. Trust them? Not possible.

The confidence in the walk of the man crossing the street assured AJ things had occurred as planned. Elliott had come through after all.

AJ's heart rate accelerated. The usual adrenaline rush of pulling off a job filled his every cell.

He straightened in his seat and started the vehicle. "Hank, wake up. It's time to play." AJ heard a grunt and shuffling from the back seat.

Fighting a shiver when the pseudo attorney opened the passenger door proved difficult. Damn this fucking cold weather.

"Let's go," the man sliding into the seat next to him ordered.

AJ didn't respond. They had no idea how much of a head start they'd have. He slowly exited the parking lot, turned right on S. Clark Street and then right on W. Congress Parkway.

"Buckle up. We could be in for a dangerous ride in this weather."

The passenger begrudgingly complied. "I want to arrive at the plane safely and get the fuck out of this city."

So far, so good. Driving as fast as safely possible in the worsening weather, he picked up his cell phone and dialed. "ETA four-zero."

"We're ready for wheels up when you arrive. Any problems?" his team leader asked.

"No. We're clear so far." The man sitting next to him stared straight ahead. Most wouldn't be able to tell the difference unless they looked for it. The suit fit well, and there was no redness on his neck. This was going to work.

AJ disconnected the call and checked the rearview mirror again. Tight muscles refused to allow him to settle until this ended.

Exactly forty minutes later, they arrived at the Chicago Executive Airport. He and Hank wiped down the SUV before they boarded the Gulfstream G650. The truck would eventually be found, but linking it to today's activities would be impossible.

AJ walked aboard and straight to the bar, grabbing a cold beer before he took a seat, where he sighed as he fully stretched his legs. It was Tim's time to take over.

Tim Treymayne, the team leader, had been entrusted with ensuring the mission went smoothly. He and another man usually drove on the missions, but for some reason, they'd asked for AJ and Hank to take their place today, while they'd remained on the plane.

AJ figured since this had to be the boldest and highest profile move they'd ever made, Tim wanted sacrificial lambs in case things went wrong. They didn't realize AJ wasn't anyone's lamb.

The team bribe guy, Ted Magee, lounged in the back of the plane, a drink in his hand. "Any problems?"

AJ shook his head wondering how much time went into preparing for a mission such as this, finding the people to blackmail or bribe. Ted had regularly bragged, "Everyone has skeletons in their closet, and I find them." Maybe it had been a threat.

This team's boss didn't accept mistakes. Every move was too important, and it took only one small error for the entire mission to fail. They'd done this many times over the past few years with nothing but success. So far, today's mission was no exception.

Each secret mission brought in more money than months of drug sales. Only this team, the bosses, and now he and Hank knew about this side business of the Magician's.

His muscles relaxed once they were airborne.

Tim made a call on the satellite phone. "It's done."

AJ let out a sigh of relief. They had successfully broken Denzel Wilkins, a high-profile drug kingpin, out of a federal prison.

## Three

APPLAUSE GREETED MEGAN'S arrival at the newsroom. Joy and pride instilled lightness in her step. She'd been the people's voice in fighting the scum on the streets. She'd made a difference in the world, at least in her tiny part of it.

In the back corner, her colleagues and friends, Kelly and Victoria congregated around her cluttered desk, each holding the morning edition.

Sporting a wide, warm smile, Kelly held up the newspaper. "Megan, this is excellent! The photos leave no doubt about his activities." She swiped a loose tendril from her face.

Kelly Williams was the most strikingly beautiful woman Megan knew. While she loved the straight blonde hair she'd inherited from her mother, she did envy the natural waves in her friend's auburn hair.

"How'd you discover this?" Kelly asked.

Megan removed her coat and shrugged. She sat at her desk, then placed her purse in the top drawer. "Following Keyshawn was easier than I thought it would be. He didn't check to see if it was safe before he made exchanges, and Councilman Thomas walked around as if he owned the street."

Witnessing that particular exchange had been luck. Now the councilman would be questioned, his reputation besmirched in the media, and she couldn't be happier. Maybe they'd finally force him to resign from the Baltimore City Council.

"You have great sources to get you lined up with this dealer," Victoria said. "I've heard of him. He's notorious for avoiding the police."

A knowing grin crossed her face. "I have amazing sources." Keyshawn was only a start. With her sources, she'd catch more than the little fish.

Victoria grimaced. "I wish some of your sources could help me. I need new ones, the ones I have are useless."

She and Victoria had been paired investigating Magic Shop. Megan was on the drug side and Victoria on the prostitution side.

"What's next for you, Megan?" Kelly folded the newspaper.

"I had hoped to continue following Keyshawn until he met up with his boss, but something happened last night that halted my plans. I do have a couple of photos of suspicious people I'd like you to look at, Victoria."

She hoped these were the photos that would help them break their stories. Something had to give and soon.

"Actually, both of you should take a look in case you've run across them in your investigations. If you don't know, I'll take the photos to my sources. I think two of the men I captured are police officers potentially taking a bribe."

She inwardly cringed. The police would want to talk with her. They wouldn't be happy about her article. Then she mentally smiled. It had been worth it though.

Victoria nodded. "Good. I haven't seen anyone interesting. I followed the pimps, but they've led me nowhere except the brothel. I haven't been able to sneak in. Their security is tight."

Megan nodded. "It's okay. I think I've got a good lead for us."

“Just be careful. As you’re well aware, the Magician has a reputation for being ruthless.” Kelly moved closer and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m just worried about you. We wouldn’t want you to disappear. We’ve gotten used to our Southern belle.”

Just because she’d been raised on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, her friends swore she had a southern accent, but she knew better. The truth was that they had northern accents.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Victoria asked, her hands on her hips, a silly grin on her face.

Kelly looked up. “We’ve seen you kick ass so we know you can take care of yourself.”

“Wait a second...”

The women broke out in laughter before Megan could finish.

Kelly smiled. “Megan, you really should’ve joined us last night. I think I found Mr. Right.”

Kelly’s beauty stopped men in their tracks. They also enjoyed the tight, short dresses she wore. Today’s dress was tangerine, complimenting her figure and complexion. Megan couldn’t understand how her friend could walk on high heels in the snow and ice. And, her legs had to be freezing. Megan wore thick stockings under her slacks and still felt the chill.

She swiveled her chair to face Kelly. “Sorry. I didn’t feel like going out. You know how I am in this weather. I don’t like to drive after dark unless it’s for a story.” Snow and darkness were a bad combination in Megan’s mind. She stressed enough driving during the day in winter weather. Driving at night had her muscles so tight it would take a masseur several days to unravel them.

“Since you refuse to come out with us, we’ll talk here,” Kelly said.

Two serious looks focused on her. Uh oh. They were ganging up on her. She silently groaned. Not again.

“Megan, we’re worried about you. You haven’t dated in months. We don’t like seeing you alone. And don’t say you aren’t lonely because we won’t believe you. It’s worse in winter since you hibernate in your brownstone. It’s time you move past Marcus and find a man.” Kelly was her friend first and foremost and, dang it, she was usually right. Okay, always right.

Marcus Bryant had been Megan’s fiancé until she’d found him in bed with her best friend, Merissa. He’d had the audacity to tell Megan he still loved her and wanted to work things out. How could he think she’d stay with him after she’d found him in bed with another woman? No matter what he’d said, he hadn’t truly loved her. If he had, he’d have remained faithful.

“There’s nothing wrong with my not dating. I haven’t met the right man. And I’m not lonely.” She wouldn’t admit it, but she was lonely. Bob, the longhaired cat she’d adopted from the shelter was great, but sometimes she wanted the conversation and closeness her cat couldn’t provide.

Her belief in men had shattered her heart. She didn’t trust herself not to choose another cheating, useless excuse for a man, or, apparently, a criminal. When she desired sex, one-night stands were the way to go. No strings. No heartbreak.

Victoria cast a withering look. “You don’t even try. When we go out, men throw themselves at your feet, and you send every one of them packing.”

“I know you don’t need a man in your life, but having one can make life that much more fun,” Kelly added.

Megan fought to keep from groaning out loud. They wouldn’t relent. “First of all, men don’t fall at my feet, they fall at Kelly’s. The leftovers come to me. I don’t want a man who speaks to me by default. Being second choice isn’t fun,” she insisted. “What do you expect me to do, drag each man to bed until one sticks?” She’d never let that happen. Not any longer.

“Being a smartass isn’t attractive on you, Megan. It’s time you at least tried. There are plenty of men who come on to you and not Kelly. If you’d try, you might find you have something in common with one of them. You can do things with men without having sex,” Victoria told her.

Megan couldn’t share with her friends that she didn’t want to do things outside the bed with men. They weren’t worth it. She’d tried exposing her heart only to have it crushed, destroyed, left empty. It would not happen again.

They meant well, but she didn’t want to do this. She didn’t want to have this conversation, particularly not after the elation for exposing Councilman Thomas. “Can we do this another time? I’m not in the mood to talk about my love life.”

“You never are.” Kelly frowned.

Before they could depart, Kristen Michaels, their boss and editor, approached her desk. “Megan. In my office. Now.” She turned and walked away.

*This can’t be good.*

Her friends leveled her sympathetic looks before they scattered.

Megan rubbed her lips with her pomegranate lip balm before leaving her desk. She walked in slow, measured steps attempting to overcome the sudden shakiness in her limbs and her racing heartbeat. Kristen wasn’t happy. What had she done wrong? Had the councilman threatened to sue like he’d said? Surely they wouldn’t hold her responsible.

Like her journalists, Kristen’s desk stood in disarray, covered in paper and newspaper. She leaned back in her black executive chair. “I’m assuming you saw the police detectives leave my office earlier.”

Not sure if it was a question or a statement, Megan dropped in a burgundy armchair and nodded, looking into a pair of sharp, brown eyes. Her boss had a reputation for being tough, but Megan liked her anyway. Kristen played fair and supported her staff even when they came to her with far-fetched ideas for investigations.

“I kept them from dragging you out of here. They expect you at the station in the next two hours. They aren’t happy that you captured a drug dealer in action, and we published it without informing them. Especially since it happened to be a high-profile citizen making the buy. Excuse me, *allegedly.*” She stressed the last word with a tight grin on her face. “They threatened to charge you with obstruction of justice. I don’t see how they can, and our lawyers agree.” She cleared her throat. “You did an excellent job on the article. You didn’t do anything wrong, or I wouldn’t have accepted it. If you’d reported it to the police before you wrote the article, we wouldn’t have had the exclusive on Councilman Thomas. They would’ve tried to keep it out of the news all together.”

Megan swallowed the lump in her throat. She’d expected some fallout from the police for not contacting them first, but not a charge of obstruction of justice. She didn’t care to go to jail.

“Until Kevin convinced me he had a good lead into Magic Shop and pestered me to let him dig further, I only allowed my journalists to report, not investigate them. I consider it too dangerous, and that’s saying something. Now I’ve got you and Victoria, who pestered me also about digging into them. Don’t get me wrong. I want to unmask the Magician but not at the expense of another journalist’s life. I’m still not sure I’m doing the right thing, but I know you’d go behind my back, so would Victoria, since she was sweet on Kevin. If it gets too risky, I’m pulling the two of you back.”

“Kristen, I won’t pull back,” Megan responded firmly, her muscles tensing, on alert. She’d do it on her own if necessary.

“I know you have a personal connection to this, Megan. I shouldn’t have allowed you to take it.” Her boss looked pointedly at her. “You can’t cross that line. Keep it professional.”



“No matter what happened to Kevin, our drug and prostitution problems are out of control. If one of us can find out who the crime boss is, our streets will be cleaner, safer.” At least until someone else stepped into his shoes. Baltimore would never be drug free.

“If either of you receives even one serious threat, you’re both off this project.”

She would find either her brother’s killer or the Magician, preferably both, threats or not. She owed it to her family. Nodding, she said, “Don’t worry. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t like you walking around the west side of Pigtown at night, alone. I know Victoria is covered with her judo or whatever the hell kind of belt she has, but are you taking precautions for your safety? I want you to be safe.”

Megan almost snorted aloud. Kristen wanted her journalists to get the story no matter what. The roughest part of Baltimore, a bit too close to the Orioles’ stadium, had been dubbed Pigtown, but it didn’t frighten Megan. Well, not all of the time. Then she realized again that no one worried about Victoria. Did they really believe she wasn’t capable of taking care of herself?

Clearing her throat, she responded, “I have a carry permit and a thirty-eight in my purse and pepper spray in my pocket.”

She’d been on several dangerous streets and had yet to have a problem. She dressed to fit in and never identified herself as a journalist, but she’d convinced a few, here and there, to provide her with helpful information, but most people avoided her. Keyshawn had been the exception. He had to have known she followed him. That raised the question of why did he let her continue to do it? She’d ponder that later. The police came first.

“That’s good. Hopefully, you won’t have to use either.”

She hoped so as well. Shooting a human being was not on her bucket list.

“What else do you have?” Kristen asked.

Megan showed her boss a photo, holding the one with her sexy, criminal man back until she decided what to do with it. “I’m almost positive that’s two Baltimore police officers. I’ll find out their identities and see if there’s a story there. Victoria is looking the photo over to see if she’s seen any of them in the Dog Pound.” She grimaced. Streetwalkers congregated in the area known as the Dog Pound, and she preferred to avoid it. Victoria could have that portion of the Magician’s business.

“It’d be great if you could prove bribery.” Kristen pushed the photo back across the desk to Megan. “We know many in the police department are corrupt.”

True. It angered her just to think about it. “If we don’t flush out the officers on the Magician’s payroll before I expose him, it’ll be my next project.”

“Why aren’t you playing the gang angle?”

“I don’t care about the gang-bangers who pick fights and create their small bits of havoc. They aren’t important in the scheme of things. I need the dealers who’ll eventually lead me to a boss. From what I’ve learned, it’s only problems that affect the drug or prostitution trade when the boss steps in.”

“What about other crime?”

“There are definitely problems in the area. Crime rates are high, but with corrupt police officers and the problem solvers making people disappear, the murder rate is only slightly higher than average in Baltimore. That’s mostly from gang fights. I’m keeping my eye on the police reports in case something happens that’s noteworthy.” Like disappearances.

People disappeared all the time and weren’t reported missing. A few evenings ago, two dealers disappeared because they’d broken one of the organization’s Cause of Death, or COD, rules.

Apparently, there were some rules that were never meant to be broken, even with criminals. Of course no one would share them with her. They had yet to realize she didn't give up.

"Did Kevin's notes ever turn up to give you his leads? What he'd found?"

She shook her head. Immediately tears formed, blurring her vision. If only he'd shared with her, they could've worked it together. She closed her eyes to clear them to remain in the here and now.

"Well then, keep your investigation on the drug trade, and let Victoria concentrate on the prostitution ring, and between the two of you, you'll find something worthwhile."

Megan nodded. "Any suggestions for dealing with the police?"

"Just be yourself. Yes, there are officers who're still pissed at you, but you can't let that stop you from standing strong. I trust these two detectives so listen to them. While you're there, see if you can find the officers in the photo. Discreetly."

"I planned to scope out those on duty. I also intend to show the photo to my sources to see if they have names for me. I know I've seen these two men before. My bet is this is a boss with them." She tapped her finger on the largest man in the photo.

Kristen leaned forward, her arms on her desk, her hands clasped. "What makes you think that?"

"It's a feeling."

The intensity of her boss's stare startled her. "Hmm." She leaned back in her chair. "Trust your gut, but be careful."

Megan gave her a slight smile and nodded.

"Megan." Kristen paused. "I've hired someone to replace Kevin."

She jumped from her chair, her heart pounding. "No, Kristen! What about when I find him?"  
*Alive or dead.*

The concern and pity in the other woman's eyes floored her.

"Megan, I have to fill that position," Kristen said softly.

Megan sniffed and looked down, losing the battle of preventing tears from sliding down her cheeks. "I know, but I have to keep up hope. He's my brother. I need..." She accepted the tissue handed across the desk to her, wiped her face and blew her nose.

"I can't wait, Megan. I have a newspaper to run," Kristen said more firmly, but her voice was filled with sympathy.

Megan walked back to her desk, understanding her boss's position, despite it being hard. She had to keep her mind on what needed to be done now. Kristen trusted the two detectives she needed to see. It didn't matter if they were happy that Megan had brutal police officers fired two years ago. She was proud of what she'd done. She raised her chin and smiled.

The police were the ones in the wrong. They let drug dealers stay on the streets. If they wouldn't uncover them, then she would. With that thought, the weight on her chest lifted and her confidence returned, at least in relation to the police.

As for the other part of their conversation, the arrow piercing her heart started the flow of blood, emptying it. *Oh, Kevin.*

Her friends swarmed her desk as she returned. The three of them had no secrets. They were a formidable group, part of a larger investigative team at *Baltimore News First*.

"Well?" Victoria pushed aside some newspapers and sat on the edge of Megan's desk.

"The police are threatening to charge me with obstruction. I have to go to the station today."

Kelly gasped. "They can't do that. You were just doing your job."

Victoria chimed in, "What did they expect you to do? Turn the other way because it was a councilman? No good journalist would've passed up the opportunity you had."

That was the truth, at least not any journalist worth a grain of salt. Her mother used that phrase, and Megan still didn't understand it. Yet she often repeated it. "I guess I was supposed to avoid it all in the first place." She frowned. "I believe they're unhappy because I exposed crime they're allowing on the streets. Maybe by exposing Keyshawn in the press, they'll finally do something. She heaved a sigh. "There's something else. Kristen has replaced Kevin."

Kelly wrapped her arm around Megan's shoulders. "We know this is hard for you, but know we love you and are here for you."

"Thank you."

"Let's get out of here and get some food. I'm hungry." Victoria rubbed her belly.

Megan had two hours before she had to report to the police station and refused to arrive earlier than that.

"That sounds good as long as we don't return to the earlier conversation." She looked each one of her friends in the eyes.

They nodded.

"Okay, let's get out of here."

Megan rose and put on her blue scarf, white beanie hat and heavy, white down jacket. She'd lived in Baltimore for four years and hadn't acclimated to the weather as people said she would. Her friends teased her about how heavily she bundled up to go outside on what they called "nice days." She couldn't believe the light coats they wore. When it came to the weather, she was still the girl from the South where it was rarely this cold.

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AFTER returning from lunch, Megan almost walked straight into her ex-friend, Merissa Attenborough. Her heart nearly exploded at the pain and anger that rolled inside her. "What are you doing here?" she asked tersely.

"I work here." She pointed to Kevin's old desk. "Right over there."

Bile rose in the back of Megan's throat and she fought to keep it down. Of all people to take her brother's place, it had to be one of the two people she couldn't trust. She wanted to rail at Kristen, but her boss wouldn't have known. Megan had always prided herself on workplace professionalism, but the big question was how was she to work with a woman she despised?

The home-wrecker had taken Kevin's spot. Nausea assailed her as she closed another door on accepting what had happened to her brother.

Avoiding her new colleague, she walked to her desk, settled in and checked her voice mail. Of course there was another call from Marcus. He wouldn't give up. She didn't know how many times she had to tell him it was over. And now Merissa would be near. Did he know?

"Hello, baby." She hated it when he called her baby, and she'd told him that while they'd been together. Yet he'd still called her that, and she'd never said a thing after the first time. That should've been a clue he didn't truly care for her.

"I had to call. Your article today reminded me about Kevin. I'm sorry, baby. I know how close you were. I liked him."

She tightened her grip on the telephone receiver. Her brother hadn't liked Marcus. Megan wished so hard she had listened to Kevin.

"I know you don't believe I still love you, but I do. I care about what happens to you. Please quit what you're doing. Even I know how dangerous this group is. I don't want to see you follow in

Kevin's footsteps. I want a chance to make things up to you." He sighed. "I know how you are about a story, and that's why I worry." He paused. "Think about it. Bye, baby."

She held the receiver to her ear a moment longer, not listening to the recording of instructions to save or delete the message.

"Something wrong?" Kelly startled her. She stood beside Megan's desk with a look of concern covering her face.

Megan pressed the proper button to delete the message. "No."

"It was him again, wasn't it?" Kelly whispered.

Megan nodded and then turned to her computer to check her e-mail and press releases. He wasn't worth thinking about.

Midway through her search, she stopped. It had happened again. Her investigative mind told her while these prison breaks happened infrequently and at different locations, they were all connected.

She turned to her friends. "Did you hear about the prison break in Chicago today?"

Before they could answer, Megan had decided what her next investigation would be. She'd get to the bottom of these escapes, no matter what it took.

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