

HIS *Return*

Hamilton Investigation & Security

HIS Series, Book Three

(Three Chapter Excerpt)

Jake & Emily

Sheila Kell

*Cunningham
Books*

HIS RETURN

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Prologue

THREE. TWO. ONE. Midnight.

Emily Hamilton knew exactly what she would do since she'd turned eighteen—seduce Jake Cavanaugh. She'd loved Jake since the day he'd walked through their door twelve years earlier. Sure it began as a child's infatuation, but it morphed into a love of him as a man. When she'd turned sixteen, she'd attempted to capture his attention, dressing to impress him, flirting, acting like a woman instead of a silly teenager.

Yet, he'd continued to call her "sprite," the stupid childhood name he'd given her. When he'd done so, she'd escaped to her room and cried. He hadn't seen her as a woman.

Sometimes she'd catch a weird look in his ice-blue eyes before he'd frown, which she took as disapproval. Emily banished whatever outfit she'd worn when he gazed at her that way. She'd tried everything to turn that gaze to desire. She'd seen it flash through his eyes a few times, only to quickly disappear before a look of indifference flooded them.

In an attempt to keep him to herself, she'd told women who had shown up to see him or phoned, that he was in his bedroom with another woman. Jake never understood why some women stopped speaking to him. But Layla Stevens, his on-again, off-again girlfriend, always came back.

In her heart, Emily knew he wanted her, but he wouldn't act on it because of her age. In fact, last week she *accidentally* fell into his arms, hoping he wouldn't push her away. Being that close to his body had set hers on fire like she'd never felt before, giving her a hint of what could be between them.

She'd witnessed the blaze of heat in his gaze too as he'd pulled her into a sensual embrace. Emily had wanted to cheer because she thought he'd finally kiss her, and he almost had; instead, he'd groaned and pushed her away saying she was too young. She'd wanted to scream, to beat on his chest and make him quit denying them. There was only a four and a half year age difference between them and many people had an even larger one.

"I'm no longer jailbait, Jake," she whispered to her empty bedroom. He'd called her that often enough, but now, he no longer had a reason to ignore what was between them. She didn't care that she'd make the first move. He'd follow along. She felt it.

Stripped down, she rubbed a jasmine-vanilla body cream on her petite body. It was advertised to heighten sensuality. She wanted all the help she could get. She double-checked her appearance in the full-length mirror, pleased that her long blonde hair had cooperated with her and fell in smooth waves down her back. Finally, she dusted on a light touch of makeup. He'd always said she looked best with little to none.

Satisfied that she'd passed her inspection, Emily picked up the short, light pink, silk robe from her bed, slipped it on and reviewed her plan, searching for potential flaws.

Could she actually do this? Could she seduce her brother's best friend?

The creak of the front door opening and closing reached her ears. She cracked her door open a few inches listening for footsteps on the stairs and a specific bedroom to be occupied.

Hearing Jake enter his room, she closed her door without a sound, tiptoed to her bed and then sat on the edge of it, waiting for him to settle in for the night. She released a pent-up sigh of relief. Her brother, AJ, hadn't come home with him, and her father was out of town. With only the two of them occupying the house, it couldn't be more perfect.

A crash and then a curse reinforced her belief that he'd been drinking. He, AJ, and a couple of their college buddies had been out celebrating their graduation. Jake had majored in international studies, specializing in Middle Eastern affairs. Emily knew with the languages Jake now spoke and the countries' problems he'd studied in depth that he would be a valuable asset against terrorism. This worried her, especially since Jake and AJ would leave to join the FBI in the morning. Would they deploy him to some far off land? Would she ever see him again? She shuddered at the thought of his being in harm's way.

She pushed those images from her mind, banishing them for the evening. She couldn't allow herself to be brought down that miserable path. She had a mission of seduction and love to tackle, so she had to stay on track.

What if he turned her away or treated her like a child?

Her rapidly beating heart plummeted to her stomach, squashing the dozens of butterflies that had been fluttering around. Their pitiful attempt at convincing her to abandon her plan, to let Jake leave without knowing her feelings, without an opportunity for him to humiliate her by turning her away, failed.

Emily stood and straightened her shoulders. "I am a Hamilton, and Hamiltons don't back down or quit." It was now or never. She exited her room and walked down the hall to Jake's bedroom. After inhaling a deep, calming breath, holding it a moment before releasing it, she opened his door, stepped in and silently closed it behind her. The room was dark with only a sliver of moonlight shining in the middle of the room through a part in the curtains. But, she knew her way around, knew where each piece of furniture was located, but most importantly, knew where his bed stood.

Her body trembled as she slowly approached him, her pulse jetting through her body. At the last moment, she missed crashing into his luggage. "Jake." She hadn't expected the slight hitch that entered her whisper.

Oh, how she loved this man. She'd remained a virgin for him, wanting him to be her first and only lover. She couldn't help but wonder if he would appreciate it.

His only answer to her call was snoring.

Emily nibbled on her bottom lip. *What to do? What to do? He's supposed to be awake.*

She attempted to view his expression, but the moon had slipped behind a cloud, plunging the entire room into near darkness.

Feeling for his shape, she touched his shoulder lightly and called out his name again, but that also failed to rouse him. This had to happen tonight. She wanted him to know she was his before he left for training.

Although inexperienced, she knew a way to wake him, hoping he wasn't in a deep alcohol-induced sleep. Emily removed her robe and slid into bed beside him. His body heat drew her closer while nervous energy rippled through her, and her body quivered. She whispered his name and then hesitantly glided her right hand up and down his naked chest. The excitement of finally being this intimate with him ran rampant through her with overwhelming anticipation.

Jake didn't wake to her touch, but his muscles tensed under her palms. She would not back down.

Emily pressed a light, lingering kiss to his neck, savoring his taste. She whispered his name in his ear, nipping at the lobe with the hope to turn up the heat inside him enough to rouse him. Jake's response was unintelligible, so she continued her assault, lightly kissing him and whispering his name. As she explored his body, he moaned, reached out and pulled her close, rubbed his hands up and down her back, and then he clutched her buttocks tightly in his hands, feeding her desire.

The moonlight entered the room again, casting a shadowy light on Jake's face and his closed eyes. His hand moved to her breast, and passion gripped its shimmery hold, intensifying her burning need for him. She didn't resist when he grabbed the back of her head and pulled her to him, slanting his lips over hers in a deep, heated kiss with an intensity that left her breathless and craving more.

Their first kiss, his warm lips on hers, had been better than she'd imagined. And, she'd dreamed of it for years, and pursued it just as long. In her romantic fantasy, they were in the gazebo, alone, a light rain sliding off the roof, driving the remainder of the family indoors. Jake would walk to her and pull her into his arms, slowly lowering his lips to hers, telling her that he loved her.

Pulling away to look into his eyes, disappointment tugged at her that they remained closed. Her heart hammering in her chest, Emily called to him again, receiving no response, but one of his hands kept running through her hair while the other fed the tingling taking over her body as he played with her breast and taut nipple.

Emily glided her arm downward, and her small hand encircled his growing hardness, feeling the shuddering response flow through him before she began caressing the length of him. He groaned, and his hands tightened in her hair, pushing her head down, leaving no doubt of his request.

Never having attempted the task, she'd heard about it, read about it, but had never been curious enough to attempt until now. As heat pulsed stronger between her legs, she maneuvered herself down his body, uncertainty attempting to shove its way through her. She wanted this to be perfect for Jake.

His tormented groan spoke to her, giving her the courage she needed to pleasure him with her mouth. Exhilarated, she continued the movement of her hand on his fully rigid cock, slowly and tightly, her tongue swirling around the engorged head before she took him into her mouth.

Jake's head fell back on the pillow, and he mumbled something that sounded like, "God, yes, Em!"

Passion and love pounded through her blood, urging her onward when she heard her name. She continued the rhythm, reached down and cupped his balls, and moaned when he urgently pulled her up his torso.

With a growl, he covered her lips, devouring them, leaving the throbbing between her thighs in desperate need of relief. He pulled her astride him, reached down and slid a finger inside her. "You are so hot and wet." The words were slurred, but she understood him.

She halted. This wasn't right. He wasn't fully awake. Releasing a heavy sigh, Emily climbed off Jake. "I'd best go." Disappointment dropped to the pit of her stomach. This had been her chance, and she'd blown it.

A hand clamped around her wrist. "No. Stay."

She couldn't make out his face in the dark, but his words were clear. A cheer raised itself inside her, and she slowly climbed on top of him.

Emily's breath caught in her throat at the heady sensation that Jake would finally make love to her, leaving her euphoric and anxious. She'd closed her eyes and tensed as he guided himself to her slick entrance, slowly sliding inside her, making her feel like a woman. She almost cried out in disappointment when he withdrew, leaving her empty, lost, her future with him fading away. Then he'd slid himself inside her again, withdrawing and nudging inside her deeper with each move until he was fully sheathed. After the initial discomfort ceased, a new wave of heat flooded her.

He groaned, clenched her hips and moved her slowly up and down his length, setting a rhythm that sent warm pulses to her core and each stroke increased the intensity. Her attempt at reining in her erratic heartbeat and breathing failed miserably. She finally knew what it was like to have him inside her body, and she loved it.

With a hand behind her back, he'd pulled her down for what she'd expected to be a kiss. Instead, he took her sensitive nipple into his mouth, tugging, sucking and nipping, building urgency inside her, awakening a sexual hunger that was new to her.

She arched her back and sighed in pleasure, turning herself over to him completely. The dreams of his hands on her, his filling her had never been this wonderful, this satisfying, tempting her to the very peak of ecstasy.

Shifting, she saw his eyes half open, hooded, and she placed her lips on his and outlined his bottom lip with her tongue, tugging on it with her teeth, teasing him as she whispered his name.

"You feel so damn good. Just like I knew you would, Em."

Her heart filled with joy. He may have mumbled, but it was her name on his lips. Goose bumps burst forth on her flesh.

Mumbling something new, he shifted his position, driving deeper and deeper, overwhelming her senses, and confining all her need in one place, ready to explode.

Her breath caught in her chest as she reached the brink, spiraling out of control. The immense orgasm ripped through her body and soul, carrying her away on a cloud of bliss, leaving her sated and weightless, a limp, rag doll draped atop him.

“Fuck!” He pumped into her a few more times and then shuddered and groaned as she felt him release himself inside her.

A moan brought her head up, but the darkness had returned, preventing her from seeing his face. She knew making love with Jake would be incredible. “Jake.”

“Mm.” He pulled her closer to him, tucking her against his chest with a possessive arm. “You’re mine now.”

With thoughts of their wedding playing in her head, Emily fell asleep wishing she could stay together like this forever.

A loud noise jarred her awake to the early morning light filtering through the curtains. She opened her eyes and smiled, remembering she’d spent the most glorious night with Jake.

“You bastard!”

Emily jerked her head to the booming noise and bolted upright in bed, belatedly grasping the sheet to cover her chest. *Oh God.* “AJ!”

Sitting beside her, Jake’s bewildered look at seeing her, and then his wide-eyed surprise when he noticed they were naked, brought reality crashing down around her. He hadn’t been awake, or at least not fully awake. *But he’d cried my name and told me to stay. He’d said I was his.* She paused, struggling to hold on to her emotions. *Maybe he regretted sleeping with me.*

Tears pricked her eyes, and despair weaved its way through her heart. This could not be happening. Her brother was ruining everything.

At AJ’s approach, Jake jumped from the bed, quickly stepping into his pants. He stood, and she waited for him to tell her brother to mind his own business, but AJ plowed his fist into Jake’s jaw before he could speak. Panic rushed through her. *No. No. No. This is not how things were supposed to happen.* She was to wake to Jake’s handsome face while he whispered sweet nothings to her, and they made plans for their life together. Heck, he’d taken her virginity. That was what went next.

Rubbing his jaw, Jake looked at her once again and drew in his eyebrows, confusion written all over his face. Sorrow swam into his eyes and it shot right to her heart. He opened his mouth to speak to her, but instead, a loud breath escaped him, and he doubled over after he received a punch to the gut.

Emily jumped from the bed and wrapped the sheet around her. “AJ, no! Stop!”

“Stay out of this, Em. This son of a bitch has gone too far.” Several punches followed that statement, all from AJ to Jake. He wasn’t fighting back. He just stood there taking the beating.

Tears streamed down her face; her stomach had soured, ready to toss everything. She pushed past AJ and threw herself over Jake, who lay on the floor, bleeding. She screamed at her brother again, “How could you? This is not your business, AJ. I love him.”

He scowled at her and then looked back at Jake while rubbing his hand. “Grab your shit and get the fuck out of our house and never return, or I’ll tell Dad that you tricked Em.”

She’d never heard her brother sound so angry. “I’m eighteen, AJ, and he didn’t trick me or force me. I came to him.”

AJ turned on her. “I don’t give a fuck! Come on, we’re leaving.” He reached for her, and she jerked away.

“Dammit, Em! Get away from him.” His strong arms pulled her upright.

She cried out for Jake, but he remained quiet, only looking at her with an expression she couldn’t decipher. Fighting her brother every step of the way out the door, she continued to rant at him for butting in and at Jake to not leave without her.

AJ hurried her into her room and blocked the door so she couldn’t exit.

“Get out of my way.”

“No. Emily, I’m sorry, but this is for the best.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Christ!”

“Best? Best for who? You? Because it certainly isn’t best for me.” He’d always teased her about her crush on Jake. Why couldn’t he understand? She was old enough now for her brothers to leave her alone to let her live her life.

The slam of the front door shocked her.

She raced to the window and flung it open. “Jake!”

He looked up for a moment, then entered his car and drove away.

With a shaky hand, she covered her mouth and dropped on her bed. “No.”

Sobs erupted from deep within her, tremors of despair flowing in her veins as she murmured his name.

Jake had left her.

One

Four Years Later

JAKE CAVANAUGH WONDERED if it was true that one's life flashed before their eyes moments before they died, but he hadn't planned on finding out the answer this early in his life. He had to find another escape option, or the next morning, he would be murdered by terrorists in a gruesome fashion, so they could brag to the world that they had outsmarted America.

"Oomph." He tried not to show how painful the punches to his gut affected him, but he had yet to recover from the torture he'd received regularly over the past few months. Each strike shot severe bolts through his already broken-down body, radiating through each muscle, each body part, with an excruciating intensity. He hung with his arms in chains above his head, his feet high enough off the floor so even his toes couldn't touch the concrete. He remained trapped while the leader took his fists to Jake's stomach.

"Who are you really?" Mohammed bin Shakaran turned the beating over to the man who had been his guard since they'd caught him snooping. He'd realized Jake wasn't truly one of them, that he didn't believe in their mission and was a threat to their plan. A plan he had to get to Arthur immediately, but he couldn't see how he'd make it in time.

The force of a solid kick connecting with his gut sent him swinging back from his attacker. Jake sucked in a deep, hissing breath between clenched teeth, and, with significant effort, he held his grunt back, barely, the hellacious pain in his body almost overwhelming him. He'd never thought he'd consider something like this, but he wished they'd beat a different part of his body. If it weren't for the give, the swing of the chains, he had no doubt that he'd be suffering internal bleeding instead of only deep bruising.

He needed to make a jailbreak. He couldn't allow the terrible things to happen tomorrow the way this group planned it. Lives were at stake. Needing a clear head, Jake shut his eyes and struggled to block out the white-hot pain overtaking his body and mind.

Inhaling a deep, ragged breath, Jake opened his eyes and saw a chance to free himself. His guard, Mohammed something or other—in actuality, his name was Greg Jenkins, another American, who'd turned against his country—Greg moved closer with a gleeful smile on his face. It was his turn to use his massive fists in this session. Forcing his weak, right leg to move, Jake kicked out at the man, pushing him back and off-balance, leaving Greg holding his throat where Jake's foot had made contact. If he'd had the strength in his legs, his torturer would be breathing his last instead of only gasping for more air.

With the man temporarily out of commission, Jake worked the chains to free himself.

The leader moved within his reach and with a will of power that until that moment he had no idea he wielded, Jake lifted his shaky legs and encircled the waist of the maniac. He squeezed with all the strength he could muster, trapping the man while continuing to work the chains. He'd almost succeeded in releasing his wrists when Greg pulled his leader free of Jake's grasp and then proceeded to beat the shit out of Jake.

Fists rained down on him, hard and unrelenting. Skin split, ribs cracked, and Jake was sure he'd be lucky to ever reopen his eyes.

When they finally gave up on his saying anything new, they released him from his bonds. Jake crumpled to the straw-covered floor, in too much pain and agony to move to attempt another escape. He had to find the wherewithal to do it. If they'd leave him there in the barn, he could steal a horse until he could acquire a phone or any way to call in to the bureau. Although, in his current health, if he made it on the back of a horse, he'd probably end up dropping the phone and then hearing it crunch under the horse's next step.

"Tomorrow." The leader's evil laugh grated on Jake's nerves; a shiver danced down his spine with what the comment meant. "You'll be an Internet sensation. Shame you'll miss it."

Miss it, my ass. I haven't given up yet, asshole. He might not be able to move, but the night was not over. He would find a way out of here.

Unable to walk, they dragged him back to his little prison. The big burly man shoved him forward, and the sound of Jake's knees cracking on the concrete floor reverberated in the tiny room. He bit back a groan at the sharp pain that rocketed up his legs, jarring him all the way to his molars. With determination, he fought the darkness rimming his vision, refusing to pass out, refusing to let them win. Slowly, he turned his head to face Greg, wishing the venom in his eyes could actually seep into the man's bloodstream.

"American pig." The man that had once been an American from Wichita, Kansas, had given up everything to believe in the fight. "You all think you're so smart. We'll succeed and purify the world, beginning with you." The jihadist slammed the door to Jake's room and locked it from the outside. The lack of retreating footsteps told him Greg stood guard. They knew he wouldn't give up attempting to escape, no matter how weak and injured he happened to be.

Jake had no idea how long he stayed on the floor, curled into a fetal position against the pain. He somehow managed to stand and shuffled across the room and dropped on the edge of his rugged cot, placing his bruised and swollen face in his dirty hands, wincing at the pain in his wrists. Resignation attempted to overtake him, but he fought it and won. A knot wove its way to his belly, tightening with each moment he wasn't free to warn his boss about tomorrow. This was not how things were supposed to end.

For four long years he'd worked hard to be the best undercover agent the FBI had ever known. He'd become someone he barely knew so that he could make a big difference in the world.

He shook his head, grimacing at the pain. It didn't matter how well he'd infiltrated this group or that he'd found their plans if Mohammed bin Shakaran was to win. He scoffed, his focus drifting to a time when perhaps his need for punishment stemmed from. His best friend's sister. Emily. He groaned at the memory.

Hell, he'd thought it was an erotic dream. The woman of his dreams. His little sprite had surprised him with her passionate responsiveness, drawing him deeper into his dream, allowing himself to push aside his reserve. If he couldn't have her in real life, he'd be damned if he'd kick her out of his dreams.

He closed his eyes. But it hadn't been a dream. Standing up for her is what he should've done. That was what he'd wanted to do, but he'd broken the Hamilton family's trust and knew they'd never forgive him.

Then again, he wondered if she'd ever forgive him. Her devastated face haunted him, and he knew it wouldn't be easy to regain her trust.

He caught his breath at the painful squeezing of his heart. It was too late to apologize and let the family know he loved them and appreciated their taking him into their home. He had no idea how AJ had explained his absence to everyone if he even had. All Jake knew was that he had shattered his relationship with them because of his actions and by leaving without a word. He'd acted just like his father, and they deserved better. Emily didn't deserve to be abandoned that way, without an explanation from him, without trying to make amends.

After he'd left the only home he'd ever felt loved in, Jake had appeared on the doorstep of Arthur Hall, a family friend who was also the FBI Deputy Director. He'd recounted to Arthur what had happened, not in detail of course, and asked Arthur to help him disappear for a while. He'd planned to let things cool off and then return to repair the damage he'd caused. Jake had been expected at FBI training the next day, but couldn't face AJ there. He'd needed time to think, to figure out what to do.

Arthur hadn't been pleased with his actions, announcing that he should beat the hell out of Jake himself. Emily was like the daughter he'd never had, but, eventually, he'd sat with Jake discussing his options. "I have something that could work, but I'm not certain you're ready for it."

"I can be ready for anything." He'd fly to the moon at this point for a quick way out of his dilemma.

He'd briefed Jake on a new group that the bureau believed was linked to a large terrorist group, but they had no proof. It was a group of refugees who had set up their own settlement of believers who wished to establish a true Islamic state. They were based on a large plot of land in the desert of Arizona, and had been extremely careful. They were law-abiding citizens, but the FBI believed the group that had formed was actually a terrorist organization. They hadn't crossed any lines and had not, as far as the FBI could find, had any contact with other terrorist groups. That lack of evidence kept the bureau from storming the compound and breaking up the group, arresting everyone to keep them from harming Americans.

The agent who had been assigned to go undercover had broken his leg, so Arthur had been contemplating an alternate plan. The agent who'd accepted the assignment had to disappear from society with no ties to the FBI or any family or friends plus they had to pretend to believe in their Muslim leaders.

In college, Jake had specialized in Middle Eastern studies, anything Islamic, to include studying the Quran to ensure he'd be useful in the war on terrorism. He firmly believed that every person had a right to their own religious beliefs, but committing atrocities in that name was something he wanted to help defeat.

Excitement had flooded him. His reasons for wanting to disappear no longer mattered. He was a perfect fit for this assignment. “I can do this, Arthur.”

The deputy director had run his hands through his hair. “We’ll conduct your training in secret to ensure no one knows you. This is too important for any slipups or leaks.” He’d narrowed his eyes at Jake. “I won’t release you from training until I’m sure you’re ready to tackle this assignment. It has to be more for you than just wanting to disappear.”

“Arthur, even if I weren’t in my current situation, I’d want this. Give me the chance.” The thought of destroying a terrorist group and thwarting a possible plot against America fired his blood, pushing his determination to make a difference.

Arthur made a few phone calls and then Jake had been whisked away to a secluded location with only two agents who provided his FBI training and mission preparation. By not entering him into the system as an agent, a necessity in case of a system breach, and with no future activity in his own name, he wouldn’t expose his family. His cover as Jake Jenson, aka Abdullah Alim Shah, had passed through the background checks the paranoid community leader had conducted on more than one occasion.

That same damn agent who had been the initial undercover agent, Bryant, had later joined them, and when Jake had been captured, he’d thought the man would get word to their boss for a rescue. That was when he’d found out the agent was a true believer and wanted the group to succeed, leaving Jake to his fate.

He swallowed hard. It had started out with his seeking space from Emily. Little had he known, that he couldn’t immerse himself in a mission deep enough to forget the memory of their time together. Each night it replayed in his mind, wrapping him in happiness and love.

Jake’s head popped up at the sound of voices outside his room, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying. Not that it mattered at this point. He couldn’t transfer any new information to the FBI unless he could get the hell out of there.

Infiltrating the group had been simple as they’d been eager to grow the community with not only Muslims but also converted Americans who weren’t afraid to live that life. After more than three years, Jake had started to believe it was just a band of overzealous jihadists who wished to live together until Judgment Day. The only thing brow raising had been the arms training that everyone had been required to complete. The leaders waved it away, stating it was so they could protect their compound from outsiders who didn’t understand their ways and wished them harm.

Finally, Jake had discovered their plans to attack numerous locations simultaneously in the U.S., to make their statement. Once it happened, the world would know America brought in a terrorist group and allowed them to live in plain sight, growing their number of followers into the hundreds while plotting against the U.S.

Jake had just discovered the plans when he’d been captured. He’d been careless, so engrossed in what he’d found, he hadn’t heard the leader sneak up behind him. Unsuccessful interrogations had turned into

torture. Untrusting, they wouldn't release him even though he'd answered their questions to what should have been satisfaction. Once he'd realized they had no plans to let him go, he'd attempted his first escape. He'd failed, but hadn't given up and tried again and again, failing each time, but the only bright side was they hadn't figured out he was FBI, and Bryant, keeping his own cover, hadn't outed him, which meant one less humiliation to the bureau when they murdered him.

He snorted. Bright side? There was no damn bright side.

The voices rose. Jake listened intently and released a heavily burdened sigh. They spoke of his execution. It was set to air live on the Internet. It would be the kickoff to seventy terrorists' attacks throughout the U.S. He shuddered at the impact of that many explosions.

Jake removed the orange jumpsuit and bit back the excruciating pain in his body as he reclined on the bed, wishing he had the energy to attempt another escape. He was so emotionally and physically exhausted, he couldn't think of another way out, couldn't even put together a possible plan.

He swallowed hard, his pulse throbbing rapidly against his neck. He hoped his family never caught wind of the video. A beheading was gruesome and something he hoped Emily would never witness, especially if it were his death.

His death. *Will I feel pain?* He touched his throat. *I hope they made one clean cut. Will anyone care that I've died? Will Em care?*

He needed to speak and reached out to the one person he'd been closest with most of his life. It didn't matter that no one was there to listen. He just had to say the words. "Well, AJ." Heavy emotions mixed in Jake's raw voice as he spoke aloud knowing no one would hear him. Taking a deep swallow, he pushed past the lump in his throat and continued, "This may finally be it. If I can't escape, I won't have a chance to tell you how sorry I am for what happened. You were the best friend any man could have. I'm sorry I ruined it. I swear if I'd have realized what had been happening, I would've stopped it."

He rubbed his hand over his face and then stroked the scraggy dark beard that he hated. He had to get his emotions off his chest. "I know you may not believe me. You were right when we were in college about me wanting your sister. She'd grown up at some point, and I knew I felt more for her than just a sisterly affection." He took a deep breath, ignoring the pain to his ribs. "But, you were also right that I should've stayed away. But, brother, she's all I've thought about these last four years."

A smile touched his painfully dry, cracked lips. "I don't know when she grew from the little pixie in ponytails who followed us around, trying to steal kisses from me to the young woman she was when I left. I imagine you noticed, as I did, that she had a special smile for me."

Thinking of Em made his body feel light with less pain. He grabbed onto that relief. "I don't know if you want to hear this, but it was the toughest thing for me to do not to kiss her every time I saw her." The image of their kisses, even in his dream, had kept him warm at nights, before and after his capture, thinking of how they'd feel when he was awake, and his lips against soft ones, drinking in her sweetness.

“I’m not sure when I fell in love with her. Hell, I didn’t realize it until I was here and had sorted out my feelings.” His throat tightened, making him unable to swallow for a moment. “I love her with every fiber of my being and know I will love her in whatever afterlife there might be for me. Take care of her, AJ.”

Jake closed his eyes; a shiver bled into Jake’s body, and an unchecked tear slid past his temple into his hairline.

Composing himself, he slipped his hands behind his head, linking in his dark hair that was in desperate need of a wash and cut, and a chuckle erupted from within him. “Do you remember the time we caught Matt skinny dipping with his girlfriend, Caitlyn? I’m not sure how he found out it was us who took off with their clothes.” Shaking his head slightly, he winced at the pain radiating through it with each movement. It had been hilarious watching Matt come back to the house cupping his jewels and searching for clothes for his girlfriend. Of course, Senator Hamilton hadn’t thought it as funny. “I guess we deserved all the trouble the twins gave us as we gave them back more. If not, it sure wasn’t for lack of trying.”

Jake was on a roll and couldn’t stop. He had things he needed to say, and while he lay upon the cot, allowing his body to recover enough to escape, he continued, “I know I’ve told you before, but I can never thank you enough for rescuing me after my mother died and my father left me to fend for myself. If you hadn’t found me and convinced your father to take me into his home, I have no idea what would’ve happened to me. I can’t imagine I’d have found a foster home so loving and caring. Not many people would want to associate with the son of a murderer.”

His heart squeezed at the thought of his mother. Remembering the smile she would give him each morning spread a warm, loving feeling through him, having her love lifting his spirits briefly. He hadn’t spoken about her in years, but she was regularly on his mind. “Mom, I hate how your life turned out with and without Dad. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you. I know I was young, but I was puny for my age. Maybe if I’d eaten all of my vegetables like you told me to, instead of feeding them to the dog, I might’ve been strong enough to break down my bedroom door.” A humorless laugh escaped him. He wouldn’t think about that night.

“You always told me to do something that makes a difference and helps people who need it. I had hoped to make you proud when I stopped this group from killing others for no reason.” He fought the heavy sob grappling to be released and then stiffened, feeling his mother’s comforting presence. *I will not allow despair to overtake me.* “I will try to escape one more time and salvage this mission.” He had to or the consequences were dire. “But, if I fail and there is a God and a heaven, I will see you tomorrow. I love you, Mom.”

His mother’s presence lingered, and he used it to beat back the darkness. Without thought, he did what he felt she would want him to do, what they had done together daily. He slipped off the bed to his knees, clasped his hands together and did something he hadn’t done since she’d passed. He prayed. He prayed for the family that had treated him as one of their own. He prayed for Emily and her future. He prayed for

another opportunity to escape and save all the people who would unknowingly walk to their death tomorrow just for being in the place targeted by this vicious, unstable group.

Jake started at the sound of the lock to his room turning. Terror seized his body, tightening every muscle, pumping his blood fast through his veins while his heart pounded in his ears. This was it. This was the end. But he'd be damned if he'd show his fear.

The guard grabbed his arm, but Jake wouldn't go without at least one last fight... one last attempt for freedom. He may be beaten down, but no matter how resolved to his current fate, he wouldn't just give up. He wanted to live.

He rammed his elbow into the man's stomach with everything he had. With his guard bent over, groaning, he attempted to stand and run, but that final surge of energy faltered. Dizziness overcame him, and he would have fallen to the floor if not for the man who caught him. He struggled in the guard's hold.

"Dammit, Jake!"

He snapped his head up at the angry whisper in his ear and looked at his guard. Either his mind had decided to play tricks on him in the end, or AJ Hamilton stood in front of him, dressed in full combat gear and a grim expression on his face. "AJ," his voice, all choked up, cracked, "is it really you or am I hallucinating?"

"It's me. Can you walk?"

Irrepressible relief washed through Jake, and he struggled with the strength to stand on his own. "I may need help, but I'll make it." He'd make it even if he had to crawl to leave this hellhole. "Did Arthur send you?" He had wondered how long before his boss would figure it out and dispatch someone to find him and extract him if necessary.

AJ wrapped an arm tightly around Jake's waist. "Don't mention that fucker's name to me right now." He paused at the door. "Hold on."

Two large figures emerged from the darkness, and Jake tensed. The idea of a successful escape surged an unexpected dose of adrenaline through his veins, but he wasn't sure if he could overpower either of the men, but damn if he wouldn't try. "I think I can handle one on my own."

AJ chuckled. "I don't recommend taking out our escort. Besides, you never bested either of the twins."

The twins? The other men he'd grown up with, Brad and Matt, had also come for him?

Brad looked Jake up and down. "Motherfucker." He shook his head, anger tracing his features. "Ready?" He stepped over the prone body of Jake's guard to lead the way.

Both he and AJ nodded. With his best friend supporting his weight, they quietly slid through the building, around bodies on the ground, to the back of the compound and out to safety. Jake stumbled, his legs threatening to collapse on him, and his world grew fuzzy, but AJ held on to him. He fought with everything he had to remain conscious, but he started failing. It had been too long since he'd eaten and not long enough since his last beating.

“Shit! Matt, grab his other side. He’s passing out.”

Someone put an arm under his shoulder, helping AJ support his weight.

“We’re clear.” The affirmative came before shooting and yelling commenced behind them.

As the darkness pulled him down, Jake realized that he luckily hadn’t found out the answer to his question of if one’s life flashed before one’s eyes before they died. He’d gladly wait to find out.

WAKING was the last thing Jake wanted to do. Being conscious meant it would be time for his execution. He preferred the darkness and his dreams. In them, he wasn’t alone.

“I told you only two at a time,” a woman’s voice remarked disapprovingly over a series of beeps. “I count five.”

“You can count six now.”

Jake’s heart pounded at the familiar, deep voice. It was the man who had always been there when he needed him, the man who’d given him a chance at a life with a loving family and to grow into a man his mother would have been proud of knowing.

“Oh, Senator Hamilton, sir, I, um, well, I guess it’ll be okay as long as you’re all quiet and allow him to rest.”

In his dream, his family was there until the end. His only hope was that he didn’t bring Em into it, knowing it was about to turn into a nightmare. Before he allowed himself to pull her in, he slid back into oblivion.

Sometime later, the beeping and whispering brought him back to the surface. He tried to swallow against the lump constricting his dry throat. It must be time for them to take him away. The fog in his mind began to clear, lifting the fuzziness from his memories. AJ had rescued him, hadn’t he? Or had that been just another dream?

Jake slowly opened his eyes, but bright light forced him to slam them shut, but not before he’d captured a glimpse of his blessed surroundings.

Reopening his eyes, Jake surveyed the hospital room. Two men huddled near the door, their backs to him, in deep discussion. He only captured bits of two sentences: “Not all of them,” and “Be careful.” He turned his head to the side and saw AJ asleep in the chair beside him. Even after what had happened, his family had risked their lives to save him. His heart squeezed at the time lost with them, the love he had missed.

“Jake, you’re awake.”

At Senator Hamilton’s statement, AJ started and almost tumbled out of the chair.

Jake bit back a smile at the sight and turned his head to the speaker, fighting the racing of his pulse and heavy beating of his heart. He focused on the man who’d been a father to him. “Sir,” he responded, unsure what else to say. What did the senator know about him and Em? What had AJ told him?

“Here.” AJ pushed a button on a remote beside the bed that moved the bed to a position where Jake sat up, and then his best friend put a cup with water to Jake’s lips, pouring slowly so the drink could wet his parched throat. “I’ll let the nurse know you’re awake.” He set the cup on the bedside table and exited the room.

“Special Agent Cavanaugh, I’m glad to see you.”

He turned his gaze on Arthur. The man had aged while Jake had been on assignment, gray flecks peeked out of his short, brown hair, his face lined faster than what he would consider normal for four years. He wondered if it was the pressure of the job or something else. His pulse spiked, and he tensed. “The attacks! I couldn’t get you the information in time.” His stomach soured, threatening to toss the water back up. He’d survived, but how many had died because he’d failed to do his job?

The FBI deputy director walked to him and patted him on the shoulder. “It’s okay. We got them, son.”

He loved how both of these men called him son and treated him like he belonged to them, something his own father had never done. “But, how?”

“You told us.” Arthur chuckled. “You were pretty adamant even though you couldn’t hold consciousness to finish a sentence. Once you told us about Bryant, we were able to pull the information from the weasel. You’re a hero, son.”

Jake groaned. How the hell could he be a hero? He’d been captured, had to be rescued and had almost allowed hundreds, if not thousands, of people to be murdered. “I’m no hero.”

“Semantics.” His boss winked at him. “As for your rescue, your father, and your brothers refused to leave your rescue to the FBI, and since I’d kept your existence secret, I agreed with them, despite drawing significant anger for not contacting them sooner.” Arthur flicked his head toward Blake. “After they had extracted you, we raided the compound. We believe we captured most of the terrorists sent out for targets throughout the U.S. We had one minor attack, but we’ll get all the information we can and ensure they can’t start over.”

A heavy weight lifted from Jake’s chest. He hadn’t failed completely. He caught and held his breath for a moment. “How many died?”

Arthur turned sorrowful eyes to him. “Only the bomber, but there were several serious injuries.”

“Thank God.” He wished no one had been hurt at all, but at least they’d survived.

A woman with gray hair pulled into a tight bun leaned into the room. “The doctor is on his way to examine him.” She quickly disappeared.

“We’ll talk more when you’re ready.” The deputy director smiled and exited the room.

Senator Blake Hamilton placed his hand on Jake’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re okay. I’ve missed you.”

The emotion in the man’s eyes and voice almost broke Jake, making him feel like the vulnerable child he’d been when he’d first met the man. After what he’d done, Jake didn’t believe he deserved the love this man was showing him.

“Sir.” Jake spoke with difficulty, a multitude of emotions clogging his throat, threatening to release in the form of tears that he no longer needed to shed. “I’m sorry.”

The senator squeezed his shoulder, and a smile lit his face, which relaxed Jake and allowed him to feel only the love this man was attempting to provide with that touch and smile. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. I’m happy you’re finally home.”

Further conversation was halted when a doctor entered the room. This was the man who had helped him? He looked like he’d just graduated high school. Jake was still alive so that was saying something for the kid.

Being allowed to finally leave the ICU relieved Jake. That was until he’d been wheeled into a private room where five men stood waiting for him. Five rather large, imposing men who resembled each other and who hid their expressions so well that he couldn’t tell if they were happy to see him or pissed that they’d had to rescue him. Maybe they wanted to let him know that even though they’d rescue him, he was no longer welcome in the family.

Jake tensed and did a full sweep of the room. He closed his eyes and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. No Em. He wasn’t ready to see her, to explain things, to tell her the truth and beg for her forgiveness.

After the nurse settled him comfortably in the bed, checking all machines connected to him functioned properly, she left, leaving him alone with the men.

The Hamilton brothers’ expressions had changed to angry scowls. *Fuck.*

“Well?” Jesse, the oldest of the Hamilton brothers, always took the lead when the men were together. When their father had to travel, he’d taken the role as head of the family seriously. Sometimes, too seriously.

A long, awkward moment of silence sat stagnant in the room while Jake glanced at each brother, gathering his wayward thoughts. Shame, love and relief battled for prominent position in his emotional bank. His brothers had risked their lives to rescue him even after what had happened. He had to speak with AJ and find out if everyone knew the truth.

Jake cleared his throat and locked gazes with his oldest brother. “I can’t thank you enough. You saved my life.”

Jesse waved his hand nonchalantly. “Yeah, yeah. That’s what we do for family. What I want to know is what do you have to say for yourself for running away?”

A vise grip tightened its hold on his heart, squeezing it in its nasty claws. Was there even a right answer to that question? No matter what, he’d abandoned the family that had basically raised him. Jake looked at AJ, hoping to read his expression to learn what the others knew.

AJ solemnly nodded. “They know.”

Damn. Now he had to figure out if they were more pissed about him sleeping with their sister or his leaving without a word. The fuzziness in his head from the medications needed to clear so he could think more deeply and say the right things and not blurt out the first thing that came to his mind. He hadn’t

prepared to explain himself to all of them at once. Hell, he'd only thought of apologizing to AJ and Em. He had hoped his brother had kept it to himself. No such fucking luck. He should've known. They were too close-knit of a family to keep that kind of secret from each other.

Lying on the bed in a damn hospital gown that left his bare ass clinging to the not-so-soft sheet didn't boost his confidence. Not to mention the needle sticking in his arm, taped down with tubes chaining him to a machine. Hell, he may as well be unarmed in a gunfight with all six brothers pointing their weapons at him.

"Emily told us she came to your room, and AJ stated that he kicked you out." Jesse's lips narrowed into a thin line of disapproval.

What could Jake say without being beaten to a bloody pulp? That was what he'd have done to someone he'd found with Em. Yet, he knew his anger would be born more of jealousy than of a big brother protecting her.

"You should've contacted us, Jake." Devon, the second oldest Hamilton brother, stepped toward him. "We searched for you, worried about what had happened to you."

Jake closed his eyes against an unfamiliar ache welling inside him. He'd never truly expected to be away from them this long. Many times he'd considered sending word, but he couldn't risk his identity being compromised and possibly putting their lives in jeopardy. "I thought Arthur might eventually tell you."

"Don't mention that goddamn motherfucker," AJ growled. "He knew we were looking for you. He knew the toll it took on us. On *me*."

The hitch in AJ's voice on the last statement didn't go unnoticed.

AJ cleared his throat and turned to his brothers. "I'll call Em and let her know he's alive."

"No! Don't tell Em." Jake gripped the bed sheet tightly at AJ's statement, hoping they would allow him this.

Their gazes drilled into him. His body trembled, but he wasn't sure if it was from his weakness, the medicine or from the anger in their eyes; either way, he couldn't control the noticeable movement. "I don't want her to see me like this." He hadn't meant it as a plea, but that was how it sounded to his ears.

The looks that passed between his brothers worried him. He struggled to interpret them. Would they let Em see his beaten body? The brothers he knew would protect her better than that, but they also wouldn't want to keep this heavy secret from her.

Jesse appeared to make the decision for the group. "We won't hold this from her for long so you'd best get better fast."

He sighed and dropped his head briefly, relieved at their kindness. "Thank you."

The men filed out of the room, AJ bringing up the rear. He stopped at the door and looked back. "Jake, I'm sorry." He cleared his throat. "I, um, don't know what to say. I—"

Stunned, he looked at his best friend and couldn't allow him to suffer through his apology. Knowing he wanted to give it was enough for him, so Jake cut him off. "I'd have done the same." Catching him as he turned back to the exit, Jake hesitantly asked, "Where is Em? Is she all right?"

Before the door closed, he heard AJ answer in a pain-filled voice, "She moved away."

Moved away? Em would never have left her family. She loved them too much to live elsewhere. What the hell had happened after he'd disappeared from her life? Good God. Had she married someone and moved away with him?

The nurse barreled back in while he'd attempted to leave his bed to chase after AJ. He had to know. AJ couldn't just drop that bomb and walk out. It didn't take much for her to have him back down and injecting something into his IV bag. He wanted to fight, but his fight had been exhausted long before the men he'd considered his brothers had appeared.

He had to find out what was happening with Em. What if she didn't want to see him? He hadn't thought of that occurring until this moment. How would he handle it? He had to apologize to her whether she wished to hear it or not. Apologize for leaving... for being the bastard his father had been by abandoning her.

Her name escaped his lips in a soft whisper as he succumbed to the drug rushing through his veins, leaving him unconscious.

Two

PLEASE, PLEASE LET me have this right. I can't afford to screw up this early in my job. Emily Hamilton's small, hesitant steps were a direct result of how much her confidence wavered.

She grasped the overflowing manila folder, which contained printouts of her first full-client audit, protectively to her chest. She'd triple-checked her figures, and the results were the same. Her coworker had made two major errors with reporting the client's money. She hadn't figured out where the money had disappeared to; that would be her next step if her boss wanted her to dig deeper or hand it over to his assistant who seemed to have her hands in everything.

As a new accountant, not even a CPA yet, Emily couldn't afford to report anything incorrectly in her work. And to turn in her colleague for something as grievous as this wasn't how she'd expected to begin her career. She'd been extremely lucky to be offered this job at Wright Accounting in New York City. Although she didn't know for sure, she suspected her father had something to do with it. He hadn't wanted her to leave Baltimore, but he also knew she wouldn't stay. There were too many memories of growing up with Jake. Falling in love with Jake. Making a fool of herself and being rejected by Jake.

The crushing pain in her heart that she'd fought to break away from these past four years returned. She'd thought immersing herself in college and her family would help clear him from her mind, purge the memories. But, every time she looked at her daughter... their daughter... she couldn't escape, and she loved her daughter all the more for who her father was.

Even though it had been so long without contact from him, she wouldn't allow herself to believe him to be dead. No matter what had happened between them, she wanted her daughter, Amber, to know her father at some point. Sooner rather than later would be preferable. If only her brothers could find him. Then what? How would she handle things? He'd walked away.

Reaching Mr. Wright's door, she heard two distinct male voices inside his office and stopped. With Teri, his bossy administrative assistant away from her desk, Emily didn't mind waiting. A small, sitting area that reeked of power and wealth, because her boss wanted to impress his high profile clients, reached out and invited her to sit on one of the soft leather chairs. She picked her foot up and then dropped it back in place. If she sat, that'd be when Teri would return from wherever she'd disappeared to and berate Emily for slacking off.

She hadn't planned on eavesdropping, but she'd been curious about how her boss handled his clients, how he spoke with them, what they talked about, how he explained things. One day she'd have her own firm, and she'd learn everything she could here. Mr. Wright was reputed to be one of the best in the city. He'd kept his business small and was selective about his clients.

Two words reached her ears, and the world crashed around her, panic followed right behind it. *No. No. No.* Hurrying back to her desk, she fought the shiver worming its way up her spine before she was confronted with Teri, who was leaving Emily and her colleague's work area.

Taking no time to worry why the woman was there, Emily prepared to depart. "Teri, please tell Mr. Wright that the daycare called and my daughter is sick." How easy the lie spilled from her lips. She had to leave. Now.

Teri Sheppard pursed her bright red lips. "You know, if this becomes a habit, Michael will let you go." She loved to flaunt she'd been given permission to call their boss by his first name. Or if not, she did it anyway, out of his earshot. Emily couldn't care less. Especially now.

Quickly shutting down her computer and grabbing her purse, Emily ignored the woman standing beside her desk. After raising her eyebrows at Teri and receiving no answer, she maneuvered around her and out the door. She almost wretched once she'd reached freedom.

What the hell was she to do now?

Everything continually played out in Emily's mind on the subway ride when she picked up her daughter and on their cab ride home. Maybe she should call her brothers. She bit her lip, nibbling while she considered the option. No. She would handle this on her own. If not, how could she show the family that she could live independently if she had to run to them whenever a problem arose? She loved their overprotectiveness, sometimes, but they needed to understand she was a grown, twenty-two-year-old woman and mother. Now she had to prove it.

"Mommy?"

Her three-year-old blonde-haired daughter stared up at Emily, her head cocked to the right and her hands on her hips. Emily reached down, and little chubby arms automatically grabbed hers to be lifted. She slung the toddler on her hip, and Amber's arms wrapped around her neck, almost choking her. "Sorry, baby, Mommy was thinking. Now, what did you want to tell me?"

"Nemo did *twick!*" Amber squirmed to be let down. "Come *tee.*"

Although difficult, Emily held back her laugh. A big smile did push its way through. Nemo was a beta fish and did nothing but swim in place or hide, and had also been replaced three times without her daughter's knowledge. "What trick does he do?"

Amber pointed at the SpongeBob influenced, decorated fish bowl with a pineapple house in the middle of the bowl. "Float."

Dammit. Not another one. Grabbing her daughter's hand, she pulled Amber away before she realized the fish floating was not a trick. "I see. How about we start on dinner? You want to help Mommy?"

"I want *pasghetti.*" Nemo forgotten, she raced to the kitchen and grabbed her small, ruffled apron that matched her mother's. "*Hep* me."

“Here, baby, let me do that for you.” Good grief, it was like putting an apron on a kangaroo; the girl never held still. “How about you grab the noodles from the pantry?”

Amber nodded. “I want *PongBob*.”

Emily sighed. She should never have purchased those noodles. Her daughter wanted them for everything. She’d have them as a full meal, plain, if allowed.

After a quick, messy meal, Emily relaxed on the couch with her little girl lying across her lap. Amber stuck her chubby thumb in her mouth while watching *The Backyardigans*. They had to purchase more DVDs. No matter how many times her daughter watched them, Emily didn’t think she could sit through this particular one another time.

She brushed a piece of hair from the little girl’s face. “Big girls don’t suck their thumbs.” Being called a big girl like her cousin Reagan, Emily’s oldest brother Jesse’s seven-year-old daughter, seemed to be important to Amber, so Emily used the tactic whenever she needed it. Okay, it wasn’t the best way to break habits or behavior, but it had been working.

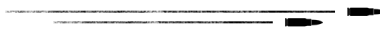
A small pop sounded as the thumb was removed and hidden in the cute pink shirt Santa Claus had given her for Christmas. The clothes hadn’t gone over well at the time, but now that she wanted to pick out her own outfits, which rarely matched, the shirt became a favorite.

By the time the movie ended, the thumb was back in Amber’s mouth, and she was sound asleep.

After settling Amber in bed, Emily’s mind returned to her dilemma, not that it had fully left it. If what she’d heard was true, she had to report it. She really had no choice. But, by working there, would she be considered an accessory? A party to the crime?

Settled with her decision, she fell into a fitful sleep and woke with a tension headache knotting her neck, making her wish she could stay in bed, under the covers, and sleep until everything in the world was right.

The following morning, after Samantha, the mother of another girl at Amber’s daycare left to drop both girls off, Emily made the call she’d been dreading. “I need to report a possible Ponzi scheme.”



THE cool wind accompanying the dark stormy clouds gliding toward Central Park provided Emily a temporary reprieve from the oppressive heat wave that had hit the city. The scent of rain in the damp air and thunder rumbling in the distance sent many park visitors scurrying to find cover before Mother Nature ended the drought.

Maybe this isn’t such a good idea. She scanned the area, battling strands of hair that whipped in the breeze, impairing her vision. Being too nervous during her conversation, her tattling, she hadn’t thought to ask what the man she’d be meeting would be wearing, even though he’d asked about her clothing.

She sank on the newly vacated park bench, in her fitted gray skirt. Keeping herself from fidgeting and appearing guilty instead of nervous was more difficult than Emily had imagined. Yet, she’d done nothing

wrong. She was actually doing the right thing. Still, guilt ate at her, gnawing its way through her stomach that churned painfully at the knowledge she would soon ruin possibly hundreds of people's lives, but they'd truly already been ruined, just no one was wise to it yet. Except those involved in the scheme.

"Are you certain about this, Miss Hamilton? This is a serious accusation," the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission employee had asked her during the phone call.

She'd hesitated. What if she'd been wrong? She'd lose everything she'd just started building for her small family, and she would make a fool of herself, ending her career as an accountant before it truly began. She had no proof. "Trust your instincts," her brothers had always told her. Her instincts screamed there was foul play, and her ethics refused to allow her to ignore it. "Based on what I overheard, yes."

Dipping her head, she glanced at her silver watch and with her mind so preoccupied she'd had to do a double take to actually register the time. The SEC agent, Paul Thompson, was late. She'd wait five more minutes before she'd abandon this idea.

More people raced by, some in business attire, some in workout clothing and some in outfits she couldn't even describe, but none looked in her direction or stopped to address her.

The fraying of her nerves stripped the serenity she'd usually felt when in the park with Amber. This was the little girl's second favorite place in their new hometown. Nothing could compete with the animals at the zoo.

Giving up her wait, she stood and looked skyward, hoping she'd beat the rain since she hadn't thought to carry an umbrella with her. She'd rushed here after replacing her daughter's fish. She hoped this one didn't do any float tricks.

"Miss Hamilton."

The rough male voice, close to her left side, startled her. She reached her right hand inside her black purse, grasping the pepper spray her brothers had insisted she promise to keep with her at all times. While Emily knew many moves to protect herself, courtesy of those overprotective brothers, her tight skirt and four-inch stilettos prevented her from doing one of the most important things—running away as quickly as possible.

Knowing better than to respond to her name from someone unfamiliar, she stood and turned, acting as if just scanning the area, and glanced at the man who had spoken. That was the plan until her mouth dropped open at the sight of the drop-dead gorgeous, blond-haired man in an expensive, charcoal suit beside her. He was not what she'd been expecting. He looked more like a CEO than an underpaid, overworked government employee. This couldn't be him. Her hand tightened its hold on her weapon.

A crooked, charming smile stretched across his face, and his green eyes captured her in a sensual embrace. "Let me try this again." He held up official identification for her to see. "Miss Hamilton? I'm Paul Thompson from the SEC. We spoke earlier." He replaced the identification in his pocket and held out a large hand in an offer of handshake.

Embarrassed, she closed her mouth, removed her hand from her purse and shook his as a smile crept on her face. “Please call me Emily.” The wind gusted, almost pushing her into the man, which may not have been such a bad thing.

“Would you like to sit?” He gestured to the bench she’d vacated. “I’m not sure how long the rain will hold off, but since you just wanted to meet each other first, this won’t take long. When you’re comfortable, we can go to the office.”

Nodding, she sat on the bench, smoothed out her skirt and dropped her hands on her purse, which now lay in her lap. The butterflies in her stomach bounced off the walls, increasing her anxiety about the meeting, about the subject, about the potential fallout.

He sat and turned to her. “I looked over the audits of your employer, and frankly, I couldn’t find anything that stood out.” He held up his hand, forestalling her from commenting. “But, I’m sending it to the forensics team. I’d like any evidence that you have before it possibly disappears.”

Emily’s relief at his believing her that something might be amiss was short-lived when he asked for anything she’d collected. She thought they’d do that when the time came. Would her not bringing the SEC anything prevent them from exposing her boss? “I didn’t hang around to look for any evidence. I only know what I heard.”

“Are you sure you didn’t recognize the voice or see who it was?”

“I’ve told you that I didn’t.”

The menacing look that developed on Paul’s face had her reaching into her purse again, clutching the cool, metal cylinder for comfort. A chill slowly crept through her. Something was off about him.

“Ah, but you downloaded information that you shouldn’t have.”

Her pulse raced, and her hands grew clammy. She had no idea what he was talking about. She’d told him everything. “I didn’t download anything.” Why was he accusing her of that? Did he think she was in on it?

“Let me try this again. Files were downloaded on your computer. Until you provide me with the information you stole from your employer, your daughter remains with us.”

Her heart stopped for a moment. *Amber*. Emily’s breath caught, and her heart jumped, almost clogging her throat. “What do you mean?” *Ob God*. They couldn’t have her daughter. Was this some kind of a sick joke?

Scooting closer to her, Paul lowered his voice, creating more turmoil to run rampant through her system. “Let’s just say that little Amber checked out of daycare early today. She’ll be returned to you as soon as you comply.”

No! No! No! This was not happening. Emily jumped up from the bench, her hand moving from the weapon to her cell phone, quickly auto-dialing her daughter’s daycare as she turned to sprint to find a cab.

Blood surged through her veins, everything around her turned to a blur. Her only focus was to get to Amber and make sure her baby was okay.

A strong hand on her forearm halted her forward momentum. "Don't do anything foolish."

Narrowing her eyes, Emily wished she could claw out his for having anything to do with her daughter.

Please, not my beautiful sweet, innocent daughter.

"Big Hope Daycare."

"Maureen, it's Emily Hamilton. I just wanted to check on my daughter." Her throat closed. She'd contacted a crooked SEC agent, who obviously knew what her employer had been doing.

"Your cousin picked her up already. He said you wanted her home. Funny, I didn't remember a man on your pickup list, but it was in the computer."

A wave of fear rolled down her body. She closed her eyes. "Thank you, Maureen." With trembling hands, she lowered her phone. "Where is she?"

He flashed a crooked, now, not so charming smile. "She's safe. Now, where is it?"

Emily had to think fast. She didn't have whatever it was he wanted. This was pure madness. She had to do something to get her daughter back. She wanted to scream for help, but feared he'd run, and she'd never see her daughter again.

Her cell phone now at her side, she discreetly slid her fingers over a preset number that when answered would be silent on the other end. She slid it in her pocket, out of sight, in case Paul noticed it was on and took it away.

She cleared her throat. "How do I know you have my daughter and that she's unharmed? How do I know that once I give you what you want that you'll release her?" Emily spoke loudly enough that Paul darted his gaze around and then narrowed his eyes at her.

"I'll let you speak with her, but I am serious about this. If I don't return within the hour, you will not see your daughter again, so I'd recommend no games with a passerby."

Rage and fear for her daughter made her struggle for control. Everything her brothers had taught her about survival jumbled in her mind. All she could think about was her precious Amber in the hands of a kidnapper. And Emily didn't have what they wanted in exchange for her. "Until I speak with her, I won't believe it's you who has her."

The SEC agent removed a cell phone from his pocket and dialed. Staring into her eyes with hard threatening ones, he spoke, "Her mother wishes to speak with her."

Emily reached for the phone with shaky hands. "Hello."

"Mommy? *Tinky* man picked me up."

At the sound of her daughter's voice, Emily almost collapsed with relief that was quickly replaced by a resolve to find a way to save her daughter. "I'm sorry, baby. I had something to do. The stinky man will bring you to me soon. Will you be good for Mommy until then?"

An exaggerated sigh came across the phone. “*Otay. I big gurl, not baby.*”

Paul snatched the phone from her and ended the call.

Emily grabbed at it. “No! I want her back! You have no right to her.”

He leaned close. “Cry out an alarm and I run. Remember what happens if I don’t return.”

She wanted to slap the smirk off his face and then shoot it full of pepper spray before running as fast as she could, but she couldn’t do it. She’d put Amber’s life in danger by doing the right thing and calling this man to oust fraud at her workplace. “You’d best not hurt her, or I’ll kill you myself.”

He chuckled. “Enough dramatics. Where is it? And don’t even try to tell me the office.”

Obviously, they’d searched her desk. He said it had been downloaded, so it must be small like a CD or thumb drive. She had to delay him until she could think of how to get herself out of this mess. “It’s at home.”

“See, that wasn’t so difficult. We’ll take a ride to your place.”

After a short walk and climbing into a cab, Emily still wasn’t sure what she should do. Bringing him into her home wasn’t smart, but she had to get help, and all she could think of was the silent alarm and her handgun waiting for them at her home. He wouldn’t be able to run then and Paul, if that was even his real name, would tell her where her daughter was being held. He’d obviously never seen a pissed off mother bear, and especially not a Hamilton one.

Nowhere close to calm, but with a plan in place, Emily watched the storm break. The rain shower turned into a heavy downpour, rapidly filling the potholes on the roads, leaving puddles behind that would be splashed upon unsuspecting pedestrians from passing cars. In the distance, a split limb of lightning cracked the sky, lighting it enough to see the dark gray clouds moving away. She’d swim through the streets of New York City for her daughter, buck naked if it were necessary. She closed her eyes, and a tear slid down her cheek. This had to work. She couldn’t imagine anything happening to her baby.

Stepping from the cab in front of her home, Emily was thankful the rain had slowed to only misting in the air. She took a step forward and then abruptly stopped, shock reverberating through her. *It can’t be.*

Outrage warred with mirth, but with her current situation, distress overrode them both. She now had to depend on the one man who’d abandoned her when she’d needed him most.

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