



Hamilton Investigation & Security

HIS Series, Book Seven

Chapters 1-3 excerpt

Matt & Caitlyn

Sheila Kell

*Cunningham
Books*

HIS HEART

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Publisher: Cunningham Books
Editor: Hot Tree Editing
Interior Design: Polgarus Studio
Cover Designer: CT Cover Creations
Cover Models: Zeke Samples and Sami Bossert
Photographer: Eric Battershell Photography

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ISBN 978_0_9978489_9_1

Printed in the United States of America

One

ANOTHER DAMN FAMILY wedding he'd been required to attend. Matt Hamilton put on a smile and wished the happy couple the best. Christ, he wanted his family to be happy, but would it never fucking end? The sappiness of all the couples nearly drove him insane.

Matt had suffered through four of his brothers and his sister getting married to the one they couldn't live without. Now, his father, U.S. Senator Blake Hamilton, was tying the knot after too many years alone. Everyone had their own fucking happy ending except him. And his twin, Brad.

He exhaled a long breath. If only he could go back and do things differently....

Dammit, his future still looked bleak without the woman he loved by his side. After all these years, all he wanted was for her to forgive him, even though he'd probably never forgive himself, or welcome him back. It was his fault tragedy had struck her. If only....

A hard slap on his shoulder brought him back to the present festivities. "Hey, man, how you holding up?" Brad's question was filled with concern. He knew Matt's aversion to weddings and the harsh memories they evoked. Like when they were young, he and his twin had few secrets between them.

"I'll survive." Taking the focus off him, he issued a sly grin before he spoke next. "Pity there aren't any bridesmaids for you to chase today." Their father's bride—their new stepmother—only had one attendant who wasn't married, and she was old enough to be their mother. Of course, knowing the horndog Brad was, that might not be a roadblock to him.

"Don't I fucking know it. Hell, I'm off to The Square. Want to come? We can hit up Square Pizza, then grab a beer somewhere. There're lots of college girls hanging out at the bars." Brad waggled his eyebrows in emphasis.

Unfortunately, the lure of the entertainment hub of Oxford, Mississippi didn't bolster him. The burden he carried was too great, and being in Oxford, where he'd fallen in love and then had his heart destroyed, weighed on him. "No. I'll pass." Matt raised an eyebrow in question. "Aren't you a bit old for college girls?" he joked. Hell, they were thirty.

Brad ignored his question and gave him an inquisitive stare before shaking his head. "Shit. This is about Caitlyn, isn't it?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Every fucking wedding has brought you to this brooding mood. I don't know whether to be pissed at you for hanging on to her memory so long or feel sorry for you for doing the same. Listen, you're here, so why don't you visit her father, find out where she lives, and go see her?"

"It's not that simple and you know it." Nothing had been simple with his and Caitlyn's parting.

"Yes it is," Brad stated hotly. "You're just too much of a fucking pussy to settle this shit."

Anger surged through Matt. He shoved his balled fists in the front of his khaki pants pockets to keep from swinging at Brad. How dare his brother—his twin of all people—tell him to settle this shit? He knew what had happened and how Matt had been at fault.

Eight years ago, Matt was engaged to be married, and the thought of his own wedding had made him happy beyond all means. His heart sank at the thought and rolled around there to crush the joy he'd once felt. But things had gone horribly wrong, and Caitlyn Robinson had called off the ceremony.

Before blasting back a reply, Matt's gut churned. Brad was right. Hell, he needed to salvage a future worth living, and that meant he needed to settle things with Caitlyn. But he wasn't sure he could handle her rejection one more time. Not from her... the woman who, even after eight long years, was still the only future he wanted.

Saying he could just forget the reason for their estrangement and move forward was impossible. Her final words had held him captive all this time. Sure, he'd dated—though he used that term loosely—during the intervening years, but no one came close to replacing Caitlyn in his life or, most importantly, in his heart.

"Hey, guys, what's up?" AJ, the youngest Hamilton brother, approached, holding his nine-month-old son, Alex, in his arms and grinning like everything in the world was perfect. Since he'd become a father, AJ's smile had grown twofold and remained permanently in place.

"Just planning single guy stuff. Remember that? The fun? The women?" Brad mocked as he wiggled his eyebrows playfully.

AJ narrowed his eyes at Brad, but his smile didn't falter. "Maybe you aren't familiar with the married stuff—a great woman in your bed every night and children who bring joy to your life."

"Someone criticizing you. Someone always telling you what to do. Someone always in your business," Brad retorted like they were playing an I'll-one-up-you game he planned to win.

"What's going on?" Jesse, the eldest of the brothers, joined them. Not expecting a wedding when Matt and his brothers and sister had made the family trip at their father's insistence, most weren't prepared for the dress attire a wedding usually required. Not Jesse though. Seemingly prepared for just about anything, he'd packed a blazer in his luggage. Who the hell wanted to wear a blazer in this summer heat? Not Matt. Luckily, his father and the bride hadn't wanted to wait until they all were in suits or dresses; they wanted everyone to come as they were for their wedding in the gardens of the Oxford family home.

Matt shrugged and nodded between the two of his brothers who were dressed similarly to him in khakis and a short-sleeved polo shirt. Golf attire. That'd been their plan anyway until the ceremony changed their schedule. "They're arguing married versus single life." Although watching from the sidelines, Matt crossed his arms over his chest and widening his stance as if to dig in for a good long fight. "They just got started slinging mud, so this should be good."

"There's no contest. Married life kicks ass," Jesse offered, wearing a broad smile. "It won't be long before you two"—he pointed to Matt and then Brad—"tie the knot."

"Fuck no," Brad answered forcefully. "No way would I give up my freedom for some chick. There's too much pussy to go around, especially now that you guys are off the beat, leaving much more pussy for me."

"Watch your language," AJ commanded while rubbing the back of his sleeping son whose head lay on AJ's shoulder.

"Shit, sorry," Brad apologized in a low-pitched voice.

Heads shook in hopelessness, but no one bothered to inform Brad that he'd cursed in his apology for cursing in front of Alex.

Matt didn't respond to Jesse. Once, he'd been willing to give up his freedom, but he wasn't sure he saw marriage in his future. From experience, Matt knew that if the right woman came along, Brad would jump at the chance to marry her and make her his. His twin just hadn't fallen in love yet. It'd happen. Matt hoped sooner rather than later though. He'd like to see Brad as a father.

Fuck. How could he let it escape him that if Brad fell in love, that would mean another wedding? He didn't think he could endure it, because he was confident Brad would ask him to be his

best man. They had promised to do that years ago. Christ, they'd still been in high school. Like him, Brad would remember and ask him to stand up with him. A shiver of dread snaked up his spine.

The crazy number of weddings taking place in the last two years did nothing but drive home that he'd been too chickenshit to resolve what stood between him and moving forward. He'd never searched for Caitlyn, but her moving away had always been on his mind. Yet there he stood—a big, bad, former Navy SEAL who wouldn't confront his past.

Releasing a sigh, he scoffed at himself for the internal emotional rant. Yeah, he'd been thinking like a big, bad former SEAL who needed a kick in the ass.

Resolved to take whatever hits Caitlyn gave, he made up his mind. He'd find her and apologize one more time. Then he could close that door and move forward. Maybe. But he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

First, the team had a job scheduled for when they returned from this short family retreat. He hadn't been involved in the planning, but surely someone could replace him from the mission. "Hey, Jesse, if you can spare me on this next assignment, I've got someplace I need to be."

Jesse eyed him suspiciously, and Matt tried to keep his facial expressions neutral—unreadable—like he'd learned long ago in the navy. Granted, Matt had never backed out of a mission before, so he expected the curiosity. He just hoped he didn't get any questions. Sharing the reason why he wanted the time would open up too many other inquiries from Jesse and his brothers, if they found out. Brad would keep it quiet, so best he kept it between the two of them for now. Then, if things went well, he'd share the happiness with everyone. If they didn't, he wouldn't have their pity any more than he had eight years ago.

"Yeah, we can make it happen." His older brother paused for a moment, still studying Matt. "Anything you need help with?"

Matt shook his head. "Nah, just some hunting I need to do." Hunting was exactly what he'd be doing, because after Caitlyn had dumped him, she'd disappeared, and her father had kept her location secret. After his brother Devon's wedding and advice, Matt had shown up on Adam Robinson's doorstep in hopes of making amends. For the longest time, he hadn't been able to face Caitlyn's father after everything had happened.

Adam had stated he'd never blamed Matt and wished he'd been visiting all along, because he missed his company. His card playing too. Years ago, they'd sit and play gin rummy while Caitlyn did her college coursework on days or nights that Matt just needed to be near her.

God, he still missed her terribly. Her smile. Her scent. Her laughter. All of her.

With a nod, Jesse said, “Well, we’re here if you need us.”

A lump formed in Matt’s throat. He and his brothers, now that they all worked together at Hamilton Investigation & Security, remained tight like they had when growing up together. They had each other’s back at HIS and in their regular lives. However, he had to do this alone. He had to face it without his family watching, no matter how much he wanted them with him. “Thanks.”

They shook hands, and before any could ask questions, Brad exclaimed, “Good. It’s settled. I’m out of here.” He dipped his head in farewell, then turned and strode away.

“I think I’ll get going also,” Matt echoed, ready to be away from the celebration. But, like a dutiful son, he once again congratulated the happy couple before he climbed into one of the minivans that had been rented in town to drive the family from the small private airport. He’d need to get his own vehicle if traveling would be involved to find Caitlyn. He wouldn’t leave his brothers and their families high and dry without transportation for long.

Leaving the Oxford family home, he exited out the magnolia and oak tree-lined driveway. Some had grown large enough that their branches almost touched across the top of the drive, creating a canopy of shade and coolness. Lord knew they needed a bit of cool in July down south. He cranked down the temperature for the air conditioner.

Driving west on MS-6, he approached the Water Valley exit, his nerves jumping through his system. Visiting Caitlyn’s father was one thing, but asking him her whereabouts was something he’d avoided in the past, because he couldn’t bring himself to hear again that she didn’t want to see him when every part of his broken heart wanted to see her. No longer. He would find out where she’d gone into hiding and show up on her doorstep, like he had Adam’s.

After the things she’d said to him—blaming him—he wasn’t sure what to expect from her. Yet he’d try. Hell, it could only go one of two ways—she’d forgive him, or she’d kick him off her property, maybe with a weapon. He’d prepare himself for all possibilities, knowing that since he hadn’t seen or spoken to her in eight years, she could be a different person. No. He wouldn’t believe she would’ve changed from the sweet and caring woman he’d fallen in love with.

As Matt pulled up to the old wood, A-frame house in need of a coat or two of paint, and parked, two years of memories in the house rushed at him. From the moment he’d caught sight of Caitlyn at her freshman orientation, she’d been his. Although he couldn’t say for sure when he realized how much he loved her, he believed it was pretty much love at first sight. Corny as fuck, but true in this case.

A shot rang out, and he reacted instantaneously. Hand on the door handle, he was out of the minivan and at the front door in a matter of seconds.

With blood pumping like wildfire through his veins, Matt slowly eased the front door open and peered inside to assess the situation, hoping like hell what he found didn't require a weapon since he was unarmed. His heart nearly stopped. Adam lay on the floor while a man aimed a handgun at his prone form. Adam lay bleeding, his light-colored shirt turning red.

Biting back his desire to charge in, consequences be damned, Matt crept up behind the man with the weapon and tackled him. The handgun flew through the air as they grappled to reach it, each tossing a punch at the other when a hand was free. Pain ricocheted through his skull, and his head snapped back from a direct hit to his face.

Motherfucker, Matt's mind screamed and his blood raced through his veins.

It took a moment before he came back to himself. Angrier than a hornet's nest, he rolled on top of the gunman and pinned the guy's arms under his knees. Matt's hands were at the attacker's throat for just a moment before he suddenly slumped forward, stunned and dazed, losing his grip. The gunman took the advantage and kicked Matt off him, grabbed his weapon, and bolted out the door.

Struggling to his hands and knees, Matt shook his head, trying to clear it. He had no idea what had just happened to him, but fuck, he didn't like it. The shooter had escaped, and Matt wasn't in a frame of mind to chase him. He could barely keep himself from being too dizzy to stand.

Once he grasped his wits, he focused on Adam and getting him the help he needed. Matt removed his cell phone from his pocket and dialed 911 before he made it back to Adam's side and began applying pressure to the gunshot wound. He couldn't do anything about the obvious torture the man had suffered. It appeared some of Adam's fingers were broken. Also, there were knife slices over the exposed flesh of his arms. Christ, how long had he endured this? For what?

"Talk to me, Adam," Matt urged.

"Don't tell her that it happened like this," Adam rasped as blood trickled from the cut on his lip.

His gut clenched at the beating the man had taken, but he made no promises. It had been damn lucky Matt had come to visit when he had. Hell, a few minutes later, Caitlyn's father might've been dead by the hands of the shooter.

Matt mentally kicked himself. He should've come sooner instead of pretending to enjoy the wedding. Yet how could he have known something like this was happening? Crime existed in Water

Valley, but not typically to this level of attempted murder. The sheriff had to catch the shooter before he tormented someone else, or worse, killed them.

“Who did this?” Matt probed calmly. It was what he was known for—his calm in the face of a storm, his peacefulness amidst the horror. His brothers and SEAL buddies had dubbed him “the peacemaker.” Yet Matt’s blood boiled and temper rose, belying any semblance of internal peacefulness and calm as he stared down at Adam’s battered body.

The 911 operator responded just as Adam slipped into unconsciousness. “I need an ambulance. I have a gunshot victim....” He relayed the information and address before dropping the phone and applying pressure to the bleeding wound on Adam’s side. It hadn’t been in the heart or gut—a possible mortal wound. The fucker had still been toying with him by just inflicting more pain.

Finally free of the sheriff deputies and their questions, he drove to the hospital, wondering again what had happened to Adam. He had no idea what the shooter had wanted, but the asshole had been pumping Adam for something.

Picking up his phone, he called his twin. Thank the fuck Brad had pretty much goaded him into coming now. When his brother answered, his voice had almost been drowned out by the loud music in the background. “If you’ve chickened out, I’m coming to kick your ass.” Matt knew he wouldn’t actually do that, but he’d continue to prod until Matt made a move on seeing Caitlyn again.

“You drunk yet?” Matt asked.

“On my way, and I’ve got two pretty coeds hanging on my arms.”

Matt didn’t doubt it.

“Hang on, Matt, while I go some place quieter.” With the phone away from Brad’s mouth, Matt barely discerned, “Excuse me, ladies. I’ll be right back.” A shuffling noise sounded as the background noise dropped. “Well, did you get her address?”

“No, and I didn’t ask. Adam was being attacked when I arrived.”

“Holy fuck.” Matt could hear the outrage in his brother’s voice. “What the fuck happened?”

Matt relayed the information, ending as he turned into the hospital emergency room parking lot, and felt like a weight had been lifted. He still held the concern of Adam’s attack and finding Caitlyn, but knowing his brother knew always made him feel lighter. It sounded girly, but it was a twin thing. At least that was the excuse he’d always used.

“Do you want me there?”

Did he? He internally shook his head. Not for this, at least not yet, but he appreciated his brother had asked. “No. I’ve got this. Thanks, man.” He hesitated. “Brief Jesse for me.” It was early, but inside, he knew he’d need support of some sort—just the family or a team. He’d call his oldest brother later once he found out exactly what had happened and the identity of the threat to Adam.

They ended the call and before he could step from the car, Caitlyn came to mind.

Hell, she needed to know about her father, but he still didn’t know how to get in contact with her. She’d go ballistic that this happened. Adam had been his only hope in finding her. Maybe when Adam came around, he’d be helpful. However, it wasn’t how he expected his reunion with her to be. *I missed you, but oh, by the way, your dad had the shit beat out of him and then was shot.*

But life sometimes sucked. He’d learned that lesson on many occasions—losing Caitlyn, losing friends in combat, losing some of himself.... He’d tried to run away from the loss of Caitlyn when he’d joined the navy and then, eventually, qualified as a SEAL, where he’d run into a world that guaranteed success and failure. And he’d experienced both. Hell, he’d been on the team that had brought down a major terrorist leader, but he’d also been on a team that had been ambushed and lost half of its members. He swallowed hard at the memory that never faded and shoved it away. He couldn’t go down that road right now.

He’d learned to deal with life. At least as best as he could.

After too many worrisome hours to count, Adam’s surgery had been successful. Once he was out of recovery, Matt sat at his bedside, hoping the man would wake and tell him everything. He’d woke a time or two but had been too drugged to maintain a coherent conversation. If the sheriff’s department was going to find out who Adam’s attacker was, Adam had to survive and tell them. Hell, the deputies had been by once already and were eager to find out what Adam knew. Matt hadn’t had much to offer, except a description, but a shaggy hair and beard had covered most of the guy’s features. Since Matt really hadn’t gotten a good look at him, the description was vague. The thing was, from that flash of his face when Matt had his hands around his throat, the man had seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place him. He didn’t share that with the deputies, knowing they’d hound him for more until Matt was sure to snap.

“Catie.” Matt heard the faint word coming from the bed. It was the nickname Adam had given to Caitlyn when she was a baby. Well, then it was Catie-bug, but Caitlyn had told Matt that her father had finally dropped “bug” when she’d entered college. Matt had quickly put together that she liked the endearment, and in her mind, her father could do no wrong.

He leaned closer and watched as Adam's eyes fluttered open, nearly clear of the drugs that had put him in a deep sleep. "Adam," Matt acknowledged, hoping to gain the man's attention.

Caitlyn's father turned his head toward him. "My Catie, he's after her."

Fear sliced through Matt at the thought of anyone hurting Caitlyn. "Who's after her?"

"Travis Ripley's brother, Luke Ripley."

Son of a bitch. He wanted to scream to the heavens. Now he knew why the guy had looked familiar. He'd been the brother of her rapist. He'd seen him in the courtroom of the trial. How could he have not noticed? Granted, Matt had only slipped into the trial for one day since Caitlyn had told him to stay away. How could he have allowed a threat to Caitlyn get away? *Fuck!* He wanted to roar and rip the place apart.

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment before he released it on a steady sigh. *Calm*, he reminded himself. "Does he know where she is?" That would explain the torture. But had Adam caved? Matt guessed not, since the shooter had still been there interrogating Adam, but he could've been just taunting him like his brother had supposedly done to Caitlyn during the trial.

"I didn't tell him."

Kicking himself for not noticing the scratchiness in Adam's voice earlier, he reached for the pitcher beside his hospital bed and poured a cup of water, then pushed the button to lift the bed. He held the plastic cup to the man who had almost been his father-in-law's lips. "Drink. Slowly," he directed.

Fuck, all he wanted to do was run out of here, grab Caitlyn, and race for the hills. But he still didn't know where the hell she was. And if Adam hadn't shared her location, she was safe. For the moment. Matt was well aware though that Ripley had already taken extreme measures to find Caitlyn, so there was no telling what else he was capable of.

"You've got to go warn her and protect her," Adam demanded.

"Okay." His response was automatic.

Adam's face registered surprise at Matt's quick agreement. Maybe he'd expected Matt to fight him on it, but that would never happen when it came to Caitlyn's safety. "You didn't even ask why he wants her."

Matt shrugged. "I figured you'd tell me."

"Well, I would. I am. Travis is up for parole again, and if Catie testifies, he won't get out. By the sounds of what Luke kept saying, they don't want her there and will do whatever it takes to ensure she doesn't make it."

“When’s the hearing?”

“A few months out. They’re obviously preparing early.”

“They?” Matt asked, surprised.

“I could be wrong, but I thought someone else was in the house.”

“I didn’t see another person.”

“I didn’t either, but like I said, I could be wrong. If I’m not and they got into my office and found her address....” He let the words trail off.

Fuck me. This just kept getting worse. “Do you want me to look through your office?”

Not addressing the question, Adam turned to hold his gaze. “I don’t know how she’ll feel about you just showing up, and you can’t tell her how bad I am,” he instructed, wincing as he spoke.

She’d probably be pissed off to see him, maybe throw something at him. No, that would be a massive underestimation considering how they’d parted, but no matter how she reacted, no way would he lie to her. “Let me worry about how she feels, but, Adam, I won’t sugarcoat your injuries. You could’ve died if I hadn’t arrived. Hell, they had to remove a bullet. Sure, it wasn’t a serious wound where it hit anything vital, but that’s no walk in the park. I’ll try to wait and let you tell her, but if I need to tell her so she understands the depth of this threat, I won’t hold back. She needs to know that fucker is out and looking for her.”

Adam appeared to think it over for a moment. “Just don’t bring her home.”

With a shake of his head, Matt countered, and a laugh tried to push its way out. It wasn’t an appropriate time to laugh, so he held it close, but telling her she couldn’t come home was laughable. “As much as I want to, I can’t guarantee that.” Adam had to know Caitlyn would want to be by her father’s side. At least the Caitlyn he knew would. And if she remained as tenacious as she used to be, nothing he could do would stop her. Short of tying her up and locking her away. That definitely wasn’t the way to go if he was also seeking her forgiveness.

“Just protect her,” Adam pleaded. “Promise me.”

“I can’t do that until you tell me where she is.”

“She’s going to kill me for sharing, but”—Adam turned back and pushed the button to lower the bed and then looked at the ceiling as if contemplating his next words, before continuing—“she’s in Winchester, Kentucky.”

“Winchester? What the hell is in Winchester?” He hadn’t even heard of the place. Had she just dropped a pin on the map and moved to where it landed? Oh shit, had she married? He hadn’t

considered that possibility, but he had to explore it. It had been a long time, and they weren't engaged any longer, no matter how much he wanted that to be the case.

All he knew was that over the years he'd realized they'd had something special. A love that existed for eternity. No matter how he changed or how he perceived her changing, that love would only grow. Yeah, he knew it sounded like a sissy talking, but his heart still beat for her, and no matter who she was now, he'd still love her.

Adam turned back to him. "It doesn't matter. Just get there and protect her."

That, he could promise. Now that he knew where to find her, he wasn't letting her go so easily. He should've fought for them the first time instead of allowing guilt to lead his actions. "I'll do everything I can to keep her safe."

"Don't let that bastard get to her. She suffered enough because of his brother."

"I won't." He'd failed her once where that fucking family was concerned—hell, twice now for letting that asshole escape tonight—but he wouldn't fail her again.

Two

LUKE FUCKING RIPLEY, whose brother had ruined both his and Caitlyn's lives with a single, reprehensible act. Caitlyn's life had been irrevocably changed, and Matt had failed to do anything to protect her. He had no clue what Luke's plans were once he had Caitlyn, and could only assume the worse.

The fallout of that fateful night swam in his head. While Matt had experienced a hangover, his fiancée had rested in the hospital, broken and brutalized. She'd turned into a shell of her original self, and it had destroyed him. In his next stored memory from when she was out of the hospital recovering at her home, she'd blamed him and later disappeared.

He wanted to scream at the injustice of it all. She hadn't deserved to be raped and beaten. If Matt had been where he was supposed to be, it wouldn't have happened. That "if only" slipped back into his mind, and he wanted to rip it out and strangle it until it couldn't breathe life around him.

The past was the past. He couldn't change it. He couldn't forget it either. But, like he'd already convinced himself, he could move forward and change the direction of his future. He had a chance to make things up to her by protecting her this time. His heart pounded and his gut churned. Nothing could happen to her. He wouldn't allow it.

Changed into jeans, a black T-shirt with the HIS logo—the words HIS in the crosshairs of a weapon—and claiming his tennis shoes, Matt finished tossing his clothes into his suitcase, uncaring if they wrinkled. He didn't need much for his trip to Winchester, but he also wouldn't be coming back to the family home for a long time. It actually now belonged to his sister, Emily, but it was still dubbed and used as the family retreat, as it always had been.

Adam had finally coughed up Caitlyn's address in Kentucky. The man's fear had dictated breaking his promise of secrecy to his only daughter. He wanted Matt to keep her safe, no matter what was required.

Hell, Adam wanted all of HIS to be there for her. Something Matt wished also but knew it wasn't possible. The team had assignments. But, he'd speak with Jesse about the few team members who weren't going out in the next couple of weeks. All the brothers and his sister were partners, but Jesse still mostly ran HIS. They needed a person who kept track of who was where and made any quick decisions on behalf of the family. Jesse fit that bill 100 percent.

Showing up and convincing Caitlyn that he was there to provide protection was going to be easier said than done. She might kick him out on his ass before he even had an opportunity to explain. And she'd have every right to do so.

No matter how she felt about him, Matt had to get her to understand and let him help keep her safe.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Matt placed his elbows on his thighs, then sank his head into his hands, his fingers in his hair. He'd fucked up so badly in the past. No matter what people said, her rape was on his shoulders. She'd been right to blame him... to run from him. How the hell could he convince her he was sincere and wouldn't allow harm to come to her this time?

Hearing a noise in the open doorway, he looked up at his twin. Brad studied him before he walked into the room they shared. "You're thinking about it again, aren't you?"

He knew "it" referred to the rape. His twin knew him well. Too well. With a heavily burdened sigh, he nodded. "I should've been there. Christ, I was drinking with my friends instead of being where I was supposed to be. With Caitlyn. She waited for me—" He sprang from the bed, his nerves on edge. "If I'd been there, it wouldn't have happened."

Brad narrowed his eyes and nearly bore a hole in Matt's skull. "According to Caitlyn, Ripley had a weapon when he cornered her. What would you have done?" He didn't give Matt a chance to answer. "You didn't have your SEAL training then. You were just a college kid. Plus you'd been drinking. What would've happened is that you'd have gotten yourself shot. And then it still would've happened. Hell, she could've been killed."

Matt's back straightened, ready to launch a defense. "That's because he got scared off."

Brad snorted. "Yeah, you and your drunk buddies happened to come by. None of you noticed him as he slipped away. So tell me, how would you have stopped it if you didn't even see him after he attacked her?"

Anger surged through him like a volcano getting ready to erupt. Only Brad had ever pushed him to lose his calm. “Stop it!” he shouted. “She had every right to blame me.” He forcefully gestured with his thumb to his chest so Brad didn’t misunderstand.

Brad sighed and his shoulders sagged. “She was distraught, Matt. It was easy to blame you, and you took it all. You wallowed in your own self-pity and left her without a fight. I have a feeling she won’t still feel that way when you see her. Caitlyn was too good of heart. She’ll come to her senses. Probably already has set things straight in her mind.”

If only Brad was right. It was a fucked-up feeling being pulled in two directions—craving forgiveness and not deserving it—neither giving him the freedom of his hell that he sought. The hell that had started when he’d agreed to another round of shots with his college buddies, who were celebrating their upcoming graduation, and ignored the time he was to meet with Caitlyn for their date, knowing she would ask for him to repay her for that time with more loving in bed that night.

Needing to focus on now and not the past, he shook his head to clear what had been. “I’ve got to speak with Jesse about a team. I’ll see you later.” Not waiting for Brad to respond or try to give him more advice, he exited the room, descended the stairs, and walked into the large family room where he found Jesse and his family lounging on the sofas.

“Jesse, can I speak to you a minute?”

His older brother whispered something in his wife, Kate’s, ear, then stood and approached Matt on the other side of the room where it was surprisingly void of people, considering how many had packed themselves into the house.

“I’m going to see Caitlyn,” Matt stated matter-of-factly.

Jesse nodded, but didn’t mention Matt had already told him that when he’d filled Jesse in on all that had happened earlier with Adam to include his concerns for Caitlyn’s safety. “You want a team when she visits her dad? Because we both know she’ll demand to visit him.”

His brother had read his mind and, like the rest of the family, knew Caitlyn well. Hell, they’d dated for almost two years before he’d gotten up the courage and asked her to marry him. His brothers had teased him incessantly. As for protection, there’d never be enough as far as he was concerned. But he’d take what was available. “I do.”

With a thoughtful look, Jesse held out his hands to count on his fingers. “I can spare Ken, Danny, Steve, and Neftali.” He held up four fingers on his right hand. “They can fly in today and be ready for when you return. That should be enough.”

“I’m coming, too,” Brad interjected as he bound into the room. “No way would I leave Matt out there without me at his back. No telling what the fuck would happen to him.”

Even at the stab to his manhood, relief slipped into his bloodstream. Brad may be cynical and try to piss him off from time to time, but he was still the best friend Matt had. While he’d be happy for any of his brothers to have his back, he’d prefer Brad beside him in danger.

Danger. God, he hoped there wouldn’t be any danger.

Luke Ripley hadn’t extracted Caitlyn’s address from her father during the torture session. But bringing her back here worried the hell out of him. While Adam’s attacker could be in hiding since he had to know that Adam identified him, he could be sitting and waiting. Maybe Matt could convince Caitlyn not to visit. He groaned. Who the hell was he kidding? Even though he hadn’t met the woman she was today, he knew without a doubt that she would still want to visit her father. The two had been close. Hell, she was closer to her father than he was with his old man. He and his father had a good relationship, but nothing like Caitlyn and Adam.

“Where do you want them?” Jesse’s words interrupted his thoughts. He really had to start paying more attention and not allowing his mind to run away on that broken train track it kept finding.

Great question. He thought for a moment before responding. “I think here, protecting Adam to start. Ripley doesn’t know where Caitlyn lives, so I can travel up and collect her without him knowing. Hopefully I can convince her to stay home, and then we can bring half the team there to help.”

Jesse snorted. “Unless she turned into one cold-hearted bitch—which I wholeheartedly doubt—she’s coming to visit her dad in his condition. I just don’t see her staying away. No matter how long it’s been.”

Matt nodded. “That’s why I want them waiting here. Plus I don’t want Adam attacked again.”

“I can get a second team here in a few days,” Jesse added thoughtfully, “so take a team with you when you take her home. If that bastard has any sense, he’s in hiding far away from here. But if he’s watching for her to come here, we can nail his ass to the wall.”

“Good.” Matt’s emphatic response left no room for confusion of his position.

“What did the deputies have to say?” Jesse asked.

Shaking his head in disgust at the sheriff’s department in Adam’s hometown, Matt responded dryly, “They’ve knocked on a few doors and have an APB out on him but aren’t holding their collective breaths that they’ll find him.”

“I still can’t believe Luke would try this now. This isn’t Travis’s first parole hearing,” Brad stated.

“I overheard two deputies talking. After they’d finished, I asked for confirmation, and they reluctantly gave it to me. They talked to Travis Ripley’s son who was paroled after ten years in prison. While incarcerated, the kid bragged that when he was released he’d get his dad out of prison. Don’t get excited; he has an alibi for when the incident occurred. He must’ve hit up the uncle since he had no resources and he’s playing his parole cool.” Caitlyn wouldn’t be expecting anyone to be after her. She wouldn’t be prepared for danger, for a possible attack. Hell, Luke had already shot her father. He might try to do what his brother promised when he’d raped her, and kill her.

“Jesse, I’d like a team trying to track him down,” Matt requested. “Adam thought someone else was in his home, so the son and brother could be working together.” Knowing resources were limited due to the scheduled workload, the worse that could happen was his older brother said no.

Jesse slowly shook his head. “I wish we could, but we can’t do it. Too many assignments. I’m already bare-bonesing them to give you two teams, and they’re only short-term.”

Matt started to shake his head in disagreement.

“Don’t shake your head. You’ll need two teams until he’s captured. Now, what we can do is put Devon on it. If he finds something, then we’ll reevaluate. The uncle might slip up. For groundwork, we may send one person from Adam’s security detail now to investigate, but we won’t pull the entire team from either Adam or Caitlyn until Luke Ripley is captured and we’re sure the son is clean in this.”

Warmth flooded him at the love Jesse was demonstrating with his actions. He didn’t use the words, but making sure Matt and those he loved were protected said it all. They’d had to do this so many times in the past two years with women the men fell in love with. He could only hope he had the same happy ending they did.

Dammit, he’d had her heart once and he’d have it again. In no way would he stop until he was certain it couldn’t happen. This time, he wouldn’t allow their current circumstance to stand in his way. He was a big boy and needed to act it when they were reunited.

Remembering Jesse had spoken to him, he nodded. “Okay. Thanks.” What else was there to say? He had what he needed. Sure, he wished they had a team tracking the bastard down since he doubted the sheriff was putting his limited manpower on just Luke Ripley, but Jesse was right; it was best to be in place to protect Caitlyn and Adam. Who knew? The asshole might come back to them, and HIS could capture him.

Matt could only hope.

“I’d best get on the road. I’m driving since, by the time I connect flights, it’ll take nearly as long with security and transfers and then renting a car. Plus, I don’t want to deal with the hassle of transporting a weapon—even in pieces in my luggage—and I won’t have her with me without them. So, I’ve got about seven or eight hours to drive.”

“Christ, you’ll get there in the middle of the night and freak the shit out of her,” Brad stated unnecessarily.

“I plan to get a hotel close by and see her in the morning when she’s awake.” When he wouldn’t have the possibility of getting shot as an intruder. Growing up where Caitlyn did, he could almost guarantee she had a weapon at her home. Hell, she could shoot him if she was still pissed at him, but he’d gamble on her not being—that the years had made her wiser. He expected her to still hold some resentment, but shooting him? He didn’t think so, but he could never understand a woman’s mind.

“Smart move.” Jesse nodded.

“Listen, say goodbye to everyone for me.” Matt’s statement held a question in it for his brother’s acceptance of the task.

“I’ll do it,” Brad piped up.

Matt shook his head with vigorous force. “Oh hell no. You’d just as soon punch everyone in the mouth.”

“Fuck you,” Brad retorted. “I love this family. It’s the rest of the world who can kiss my fucking ass.”

Matt internally shook his head. That about summed up his identical twin. One day they’d work to overcome his problem. But not today. Today, Matt had his own issues to tackle.

Safe in the rental car that had been delivered to him, he cranked up the air conditioner, inhaled the new car smell it still had, and drove. Once he merged onto MS-7, his mind took its own route of times when he and Caitlyn had been planning their wedding. She’d been so excited about having it in the garden at the Hamilton Oxford house, like his father had just done.

Caitlyn had even picked out her dress and had refused to allow him to see it. She’d said it would be bad luck if he saw it, so he hadn’t pushed, even though he didn’t believe in that tradition or supposed consequence for breaking it. They’d only been three short weeks away from their wedding. Sure, she’d still be a college student, but he’d have graduated the week before they married

and started his new job in Oxford. They hadn't cared about being so young. They'd only wanted to be together.

He passed a home with dozens of pink azalea bushes lining the front yard near the road. Pink. Not bright pink, but closer to a pastel pink. That'd been the color she'd wanted for her bridesmaids' dresses, flowers, men's cummerbunds, and bowties for the men's tuxedos. Brad and Matt's friends had grumbled but agreed, because they'd had a look at the bridesmaids and couldn't wait to meet them, spurred on by the thought of hooking up.

When blue lights flashed behind him, his mind returned to the present, and his pulse raced. *Shit!* He didn't have a permit to carry his weapon in Mississippi. Since Devon, one of his older brothers, always handled administrative things, like clearance to carry weapons, Matt had never learned the rules associated with what states required extra paperwork. With the exception of rescuing Elizabeth, they hadn't had the need for their weapons down South until today. He'd have to call Devon and find out if he was good. Something he probably should've done before this moment. The question was whether he was good if he got pulled over by this state trooper.

A whistle of remembrance blew through him at his answer to his own question. Mississippi, Kentucky, and Maryland did have reciprocity laws, but he'd rather not test his theory. If Matt got caught and had needed something other than his Maryland permit, he could pull his father into the situation, but he wouldn't do that to his father's stellar reputation. He slammed his hands on the steering wheel and slowed, easing the car to the shoulder of the road. *Fuck.* He'd just see how it played out.

Relief whooshed through him as the cop sped by, leaving Matt alone. After calming his breathing, he pulled back on the road. He had to pay attention to his driving. This time his thoughts were of nothing but getting to Caitlyn without a stop by a state trooper or, heaven forbid, arrested. He'd do neither of them any good if his butt was in jail.

"Caitlyn," he said out loud, "I'm coming, whether you like it or not."

Three

“HOW CAN THIS be possible?” Caitlyn Robinson murmured. Sitting at the scarred, secondhand break room table at Helping Paws, the service-dog training organization she’d founded, she reviewed the financial statement laid out before her. Taking a sip of her lukewarm coffee, she grimaced, looked at it, and then stood. Putting her free hand on her lower back, she arched her spine and stretched before moving to dump the coffee into the sink and refill her cup from the fresh pot.

After adding a teaspoon of sugar and cream, she stirred the coffee while her mind whirled. *Where had the money gone? Had they really spent so much?* Damn. She’d thought donations were steady. What would the board of directors think? More importantly, what would they do? The thought of them asking her to step down for her failing flitted through her mind. The idea of a disappointing performance pushed courage through her veins in an effort to combat that possibility. The organization was still good for a long while, just not where she thought they’d be at this time.

Helping Paws, as a nonprofit charity, relied on donations to stay afloat. She’d done more than enough begging—her term when she asked for money—and thought she’d pulled enough to last them for much longer than the projections she’d just reviewed showed.

Maybe Rick had it wrong. When she’d hired Rick Marsh a few years ago to help train the dogs, she’d been impressed with his accounting background. With her inability to make heads or tails from accounting worksheets—her worst subject while earning her degree in business through an online university—she convinced him to take over the finances. She’d even convinced the board of directors to give him the lofty title of Financial Officer and paid him a higher salary than they could really afford.

He'd simplified the statements for her so she could see what kind of trouble they would soon be in if she didn't pull in more money. And that was her main job—keeping them in enough money to operate. While the consensus of this type of organization was that it cost nearly \$25,000 a year to train a dog—and they could take up to two years to train—she'd lowered their cost per dog to \$21,000 per year. Her goal was to slide it down to \$17,000 per year, per dog, like the organization she'd trained with before she began this leg of her journey in life.

She took a sip of coffee and allowed the warmth of the beverage to seep into her system. She didn't relish doing another fundraiser or going door-to-door to collect funds. Hell, the reality was despite a fundraiser taking money to arrange, they drew the right people, who were able to donate, plus the payoff was incredible. If you had the right people ripe for the picking. She grinned at that saying. Her Aunt Liz had said it often enough.

She could make this happen. First, what she needed was a grant writer to take on her cause. While she'd muddled through small grants, like the Wal-Mart Community Grant, she'd pulled in quite a number of donations. But they were small potatoes. The Wal-Mart grant was \$2,500. She needed complicated federal grants and had never pursued that avenue before, because she knew it would take a professional grant writer to get them through it. Besides, the money had always been there. Second, there were a group of devoted supporters who sent monthly checks like clockwork. She'd check on if they fulfilled their commitments.

Rick poked his head in to the room.

"Are these accurate?" She gestured to the papers now strewn across the table in no discernible order.

He fully entered the break room and closed the door behind him. "I'm afraid they are."

"It just seems we should have more there. Even the monthly donations appear to be down."

"Converting that space to a new set of pens for the dogs ran over budget, and so did the roof repair." He shifted. "Maybe you should stop paying me extra. I'd help for free. Besides, you've been picking up the more complicated financial analysis sheets better than before."

If it were only that simple that getting rid of his salary would make the difference, she'd consider it for the sake of the organization, but only for a moment, because she couldn't do that to an employee, no matter their situation. She shook her head. "No. You earn that money. I won't have you volunteer for financial services, but I appreciate the offer." Deciding upon her best course of action, she asked Rick for copies of the monthly donations lists and then added reluctantly, "Have

Tonya come see me. I'm adding searching for a grant writer to my too long to-do list, but in the meantime, we need another fundraiser.”

Tonya Beck, her only other full-time dog trainer, had majored in marketing and PR and knew her way around creating events that drew people to donate their money. Her payment was a small percentage of the overall take, which probably worked out better financially for Tonya, and not carrying another increased salary like Rick worked well on a daily basis for the organization.

Caitlyn had lucked out with those two employees. Not that she discounted the volunteers who'd arrive sporadically, but Rick and Tonya were more invested in the success of Helping Paws.

He nodded. “I can do that. Anything else?”

Taking another sip of coffee, she told herself to focus on the now. She'd take care of the finances later. She'd research the donation list. Someone had to have forgotten to send money like they'd promised. Trying to change her train of thought, she asked, “How's the training coming with Cooper, Bella, Sadie, and Gabe? I saw most of their future handlers here quite a bit last week.”

The veterans who were scheduled to receive a dog were encouraged to visit and work with some of the pups after they'd returned from their six-month foster care, where the pups received basic socialization skills before their official training could begin. This allowed Helping Paws to pair the best match of dog and future handler. Once they'd been chosen, the veteran was then encouraged to work with the trainer and the dog so they were all more comfortable with each other. It also strengthened the bond between the veteran and dog before they were on their own. It wasn't a requirement, and some vets lived too far away to come in on a regular basis, but the majority of the future handlers found a way.

While she managed the overall training, she'd allowed her two employees to take the lead on these four dogs, because they were closest to being ready. It had almost killed her to step back. She trusted them to do a good job, but she also missed working with the dogs at that level herself. Because she couldn't completely step away from training the dogs, she'd already started working with the younger ones that were still in the early stages of their development.

“We need a few more days to make sure they're good and ready. Then the new handlers can do their formal instruction with them.”

By formal, it was a ten days block where the trainer made sure the handler could manage the dog, and the dog would respond properly. It didn't matter if they'd been working with their dog all along, Caitlyn had required this final schooling since it provided the final evaluation of ownership.

Their dogs received instruction on working with veterans who had PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, and a host of other disabling injuries. Some had lost limbs; some had lost their hearing or their sight. There were just so many, and it broke her heart each time she had to deny someone because they didn't have enough dogs ready or enough money to train them. It's why she'd only focused on one group—veterans—for her dogs. Her chances of delivering were better than if she dealt with a broad group who needed service dogs. Of course she always referred them elsewhere, to a larger organization so they might get the help they required. If only she could snag a whale of a donor, she could then expand and help close the gap of need to availability.

A girl could dream. And this girl always did.

After her rape, she'd been adrift, not sure what she'd wanted to do with her life. Being a fashion designer no longer appealed to her. She didn't like being around a bunch of people she didn't know, and trust became an issue. A shiver snaked up her spine at the thought.

In the beginning of her life post-rape, many times she'd thought about ending her life. Then she'd met Brent Timms in a group meeting for people suffering from PTSD. The war vet had raved on how his service dog—who'd been lying quietly at his feet—saved his life. The more he spoke, the more she realized what she'd wanted to do... what she needed to do.

As a little girl, she'd always loved dogs and had trained all of hers. Yet, she knew she'd need specialized instruction before she could begin her own operation. So, she volunteered at a service-dog facility and learned all she could. After significant on-the-job experience and homework to learn the ins and outs from all angles, she felt ready to expand the program with her own operation. With money and Tonya, she branched out and opened Helping Paws, a 501C, with a slogan of "Working Pets for Vets."

The land had been bestowed upon her—the first big donation she'd received—so she only had to worry about taxes for the land, but each year when she went to pay them, she discovered someone had anonymously paid them for her. It always warmed her soul with the much-appreciated generosity of strangers.

She didn't promote her operation—it was too small. She already had more interest than she could ever hope to fill. Occasionally, she and the board of directors had turned down veterans due to concern that they wouldn't care for the dog properly. She took choosing a match for her client to heart and investigated every possible aspect of the dog's life once it left her care.

Drunks, those strung out on drugs, and plain old mean suckers got her concern and prayers, but they'd never get one of her dogs. Her latest reject—Neil Holbrook—had issued all kinds of vile

threats against her. She shuddered at the hatred he'd spewed. His behavior only confirmed that she'd made the right decision to deny him access to one of the animals. The dog would've probably lived in fear, and she couldn't have that.

Of course, in reality, she still lived in fear, even knowing her attacker was in jail. She'd mentioned to her staff to keep an eye out for Neil but didn't know what else she could do. She went to the sheriff to tell them of the threats, but they pretty much blew the situation off. The deputy she spoke with assured her they'd do extra drive-bys of her place, which meant they'd do absolutely nothing. A fat lot of good that would do if Neil decided to show up and actually do her harm. She had to remember that unlike in the city limits with the police department, the sheriff's department had limited resources and a large area to cover. Heck, when she'd called once for a possible prowler, it'd taken them eighteen minutes to arrive. It turned out to be a stray dog that jumped up on the windows, but still it had been a long, fearful wait for the cavalry.

But she couldn't let it halt her from doing her job or living her life. Neil could just be a blowhard. They had clients relying upon them, and she'd never missed a deadline. Her team knew what they were doing. They were some of the best and loved what they did.

Trying to remember the thread of conversation she'd been having with Rick and being pleased he didn't mention how long she'd spaced out on him, she sipped her coffee to appear as if she'd just been mulling over the topic and not letting her mind wander. Training. A few more days. That was right. "That's fine. I'll get them scheduled in so reservations can be made, since two vets live too far away to drive back and forth each day." She set down her coffee cup. "I like this group of clients. I think our dogs are going to excellent homes, and they'll be able to do a lot of good to improve the lives of these veterans."

Rick nodded. "I'll let Tonya know that you want to see her."

And he was gone, leaving her alone with her random thoughts. They flitted through her mind, giving her a worry or two, then moved along with a sense of foreboding left in their wake.

She shook her head to clear it. Focus. She needed to be with the dogs. They soothed her.

Putting her coffee cup in the sink, she turned and cleaned up the paperwork from the table, stacking it neatly. After glancing to make sure she had collected everything, she went down the hallway to her office. It wasn't fancy with its second-hand furniture, but she'd painted the room in warm colors and added artwork she'd purchased before she decided to be poor—she took a sickening low salary for her position—but happy.

Noticing more paperwork on her desk that she meant to file the day prior, she sifted through it and collected it all to put away. It was her least favorite job. She'd take cleaning a dog's pen over filing any day. Most people would consider her "poop over paper" philosophy backward, but she didn't care. She hated filing.

With her back to the door, she squatted behind her desk and opened a lower drawer on the four-drawer, black metal file cabinet that stood in the corner. A floorboard creaked. Thinking Tonya had arrived, she swiveled toward the door. "Tonya, can you—" Her breath caught. She froze and her heart felt like it skipped a beat before it erupted into an erratic rhythm. *Ob my God. He's here. After all these years....*

Images of them together—laughing, holding hands, and making love—flashed in her mind. This man stirred her to hope for impossible things and she'd ruined everything. With a racing pulse, she tried to appear unaffected by the hunk of man standing at her doorway. The man she'd done wrong. He'd changed in the years since they'd been apart. His T-shirt showed off that he was still broad chested, but his muscles were more defined than he'd been when in college. It's possible she drooled looking him over.

His face looked more masculine, if that were possible. Lord, he still took her breath away. Then she gazed into his gorgeous golden-brown eyes. It was all she could do not to melt into a puddle right on the spot.

She slowly stood and put the papers on her desk, leaving them damp from her sweaty palms. "Matt—" She cleared her throat from the croak his name had sounded. "—what are you doing here?" How did he know where to find her? Only her father knew, and that tossed the contents of her stomach. Something had to be wrong. Her father wouldn't have sent Matt to her just so they could see each other again.

"Caitlyn," he started as he walked into her office as if he owned it, "it's good to see you again. I'm here for two reasons. One, your dad was hurt."

Fear rocketed through her, setting off tiny sparks of panic. Her initial suspicion had been right. Her dad. Hurt. She opened her mouth to ask what happened and how badly, but Matt forestalled her.

He put up his hands to ward off her questions. "He's okay, but he sent me to you. You're in danger, and I'm here to protect you."

Danger? Protect her? Had he heard about Neil Holbrook? Surely not. Protect her. Had he lost his frickin' mind? This had to be some scheme to get near her. Maybe her mind wasn't thinking

logically with all that information tossed at her at once. How could a person embrace that in two seconds? But her dad? Ignoring the second reason he was there, she asked, “What happened to Daddy?”

He put his hands in his front jeans pockets, making him look vulnerable. “He was beaten up pretty badly and then shot.”

“Shot?” she squeaked, her blood running cold. She grabbed the edge of the desk for balance.

He nodded. “He asked for you to stay here instead of going to see him.”

Some strength jettied back in her at that statement. *Is that right? Humph.* Her dad should know her better than that. Not go see him? Impossible. She loved him and he was hurt. “Well, he can ask all he wants. I’m going to see him,” she informed him.

Matt flashed that grin she’d once loved. “I figured you would, so I’m here to escort you, and I have a team already at Adam’s, ready for your arrival.”

Confused and still a bit flustered at his being there and all that he was saying, she shook her head. She needed space from him. He affected her too much. “I can drive myself. I’ve done it plenty of times.”

“Not with Travis Ripley’s brother looking for you.”

This time, she was sure her heart stopped for a moment. A tremble she couldn’t control began to take over her body. “What—what do you mean? Why would he look for me? I don’t know the man, nor do I want to know him.”

With a shake of his head, Matt seemed sincere when he answered, “He’s the one who hurt your father, because he’s looking for you.”

“Oh God, oh God.” She slipped into her office chair before her wobbly legs collapsed on her and she embarrassed herself. *No. No. No.* This couldn’t be happening. She wanted Matt to be wrong. Very wrong. Only, he appeared stoic and resolute. Strength radiated from him.

He was beside her, handing her a water bottle that he must’ve pulled from the mini-fridge in her office where she kept plenty of beverages for her and the staff.

Her hands shook so badly she almost had the water sloshing over the top, but it did feel good going down. After two swigs, she calmed a little. Maybe it was Matt rubbing his hand up and down her back in a soothing manner. As if suddenly realizing he was touching her, she stiffened and jumped from the chair—away from him. Holy cow.

“Thank you for... the water,” she stumbled to say. What the hell was wrong with her? She’d gone all this time not being able to accept a man’s touch, and she’d allowed Matt to soothe her like

old times and put his hand on her. She shuddered at the idea of a man touching her. One man had ruined her life that way, and it hadn't been Matt.

Not moving from where he'd parked himself behind her desk, he said, "Now you understand why I'm here."

"But you didn't help last time" almost popped out, but she stopped the vile statement. He didn't deserve it when it was only her anger leading her thoughts. Instead, she took a deep breath and responded, "Again, I can do this myself."

Maybe if she said it enough, even she'd finally believe it.

Matt started to speak and she held up her hand. "But I'm smart enough to know that until this gets sorted out, I—" She cleared her throat, preparing herself for her next statement that would surely please him unless he really listened to what she actually said. "I agree that I need help in protecting me and my dad."

Having admitted it, her body felt lighter, but she worried about more than her safety.

[HIS HEART on Amazon](#)