



Hamilton Investigation & Security

HIS Series, Book Eight

Three chapter excerpt

*Brad & Madison*

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HIS FANTASY

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*To my valued readers  
You keep the joy in writing*

# One

A CHILL SLID down Madison Maxwell's spine and froze her thoughts. That unwelcome feeling didn't happen often, but when it did, something bad usually happened and had affected her in some disastrous way. *What's to come my way now?*

"Maddie, are you still there?" her sister, Rylee Hamilton, asked through the Bluetooth car speaker.

Giving herself a mental shake, Madison smiled at the thought of seeing her older sister again. Granted they were step-siblings, but they were closer than most sisters and shared their hopes, dreams, and secrets. Her smile grew. Lots of secrets. That secret sharing tapered off as they became adults, though. Lately, Madison hadn't shared all of her secrets with her sister. She still held a big one in her pocket from when she'd attended Rylee's wedding in Vegas. That was to say her second wedding for the family nearly a year and a half earlier. In a nutshell, Madison had slept with one of Rylee's brothers-in-law. The one who'd turned into an arrogant asshole. Madison adored the rest of the family, even though she hadn't seen them since the night she'd lost all common sense and slept with Brad Hamilton. She was too embarrassed to face anyone.

What if they knew how completely stupid she'd been? Had Brad bragged that he had a supermodel in his bed? After his words to her, she wouldn't put it past him. He'd done enough of it when next to her on the mattress after they'd had sex. Madison still didn't know if his boasts had been playful or his true character. She didn't take the chance at the time and had got the hell out of there.

She mentally slapped herself for her idiocy. *That's what you get for going to bed with a man you don't really know that well.* In fairness, she hadn't just met him. He'd all but kidnapped her when Rylee had been in trouble, forbidding her from helping search for her sister. Of course he said he was there to protect her and then let her know he couldn't participate in the rescue operation because he had babysitting duty. She hadn't been any happier about the situation. While housed together, they'd only exchanged hostile words and glares before he'd released her when Rylee—and presumably Madison—had been safe.

For the love of the bride and groom, she and Brad had tried to be civil at the wedding. The alcohol afterward had helped. She'd met an entirely different man. It had been like going to bed with someone she'd just met, which she'd never done before, but they'd been drinking, ignoring their brief past, and getting to know each other, and one thing had led to another....

Thankfully Rylee hadn't said anything about Madison's indiscretion. Either she was playing it cool, waiting for Madison to bring up the topic, or she truly didn't know the truth. Nodding to herself, Madison went with the second option because it put her mind at peace.

Unfortunately, she'd probably see Brad on this trip—her final trip from New York City—and she still wasn't prepared to face him after she'd cowardly run from his room. As a strong, independent woman, Madison turned into a wimp at the thought of seeing the man who'd rocked her world, then treated her like a celebrity to be awed by instead of the real person he'd had his hands all over. He'd told her that she was his fantasy come true. That's when she'd realized he'd taken the supermodel to bed and not Madison as his sister-in-law, of sorts. Her heart sank at the memory. She'd been such a fool.

"Yeah, I'm here." Madison pushed the entire drama away so she could focus on her driving and the conversation.

"You're sure you want to turn PYNK into a lingerie boutique? I know we don't have any interest in running the club, but our manager is good, so there's nothing to worry about. If you don't want it, we could sell it."

A wave of panic surged through her at the thought of losing her dream of running her own business and not the club. "Do you want to sell it?" *Please say no. Please say no.* Madison didn't know what she'd do if her sister made that choice. Although financially sound, Rylee had contributed most of her nest egg when they purchased the place. The last thing she wanted to do was lose it for her sister. Sure, Madison could purchase another place—smaller even—to open a boutique, but she'd planned out every bit of space in the current location of their small, exclusive women's club.

"Only if you do. I'm excited about the boutique, but I wanted to make sure you want to take on that much space."

Too much space didn't bother her. Heck, what business owner wouldn't love extra space? The great thing was that she and Rylee had purchased the place outright several years ago as their fallback for when they decided it was time to change careers. Only later did they realize that Rylee didn't have an interest in managing a nightclub and neither did Madison. It had been a steal they couldn't pass up at the time. In the beginning, Madison had thought it would be exciting, but she'd changed and wanted something else. Something without drunken women and then men trying to crash the party. And the protesters. God, she'd had enough of that. Why couldn't women sit and watch male strippers without going to hell?

"Are you kidding?" Madison said with a laugh. "I have all kinds of ideas for space utilization. I can't wait to show you the line Javier has created. The best news is it will be exclusive to our brick and mortar store and our online store." As a designer, Javier ranked in the top five in the US and was a friend in the cutthroat fashion industry. True friends were few and far between in that business. She'd been lucky to work with him early in her career, and he'd eventually become a true friend.

"Didn't you help him design the pieces? Wasn't that why it's in your store?"

“First, it’s *our* store. Second”—her smile grew with excitement at her accomplishment—“I did. I may not have the fashion design degree, but after years of modeling for top designers, I know fashion and lingerie.”

“He’s in love with you,” Rylee joked with a chuckle.

“Don’t even think it. Javier is happily engaged to a nice man named Justin. Javier just believes in me. He’s always been my biggest supporter, even when a photographer was on my ass during a photo shoot. What gets even better is that once the line takes off, he said we’d talk more about other pieces—we did limit it to a few items since I’ll be the only one selling them—and expansion. Imagine, there will be a line of clothing called ‘Madison.’” She almost squeaked out the words with delight. For some reason, she was happier than when she’d made *People* magazine’s most beautiful people list. There was satisfaction in this emotional storm she felt. Satisfaction and joy—lots of joy—yet fear lurked deep in there. Could she make the boutique a success? She was hoping her name would bring people in the door. Would it be enough to entice them to come in and meet her and then purchase merchandise? She hoped so, but always in the back of her mind, she worried. “It won’t be the only line we carry, but it will be the cornerstone of the store.”

“I’m so proud of you, sis. This is big. We need to celebrate. Wear your cocktail dress. We’re hitting the town.”

Laughing at her sister’s sudden thirst to party, she wondered if Rylee’s husband, Devon, took her out often or if she just missed girls’ night out. Madison did miss those fun times that seemed so long ago. “No. I’m tired, and I’m not even sure if I’m in Maryland. How about dinner at home another night? Maybe we can pop some champagne or something.” She hoped her sister didn’t ask how she could be so tired with only a three-and-a-half-hour drive. Sleep had eluded her the last few nights. She’d been too worked up over the change in her career and her move. It had been hard leaving a lucrative modeling career for something so uncertain.

“Done. Day after tomorrow since we’re meeting already.”

“Done. What’re you cooking?”

Rylee laughed. “That’s a really good question. I may have to pull Devon into the kitchen. He cooks better than I can.”

Madison wasn’t going to say one word about her sister’s cooking abilities or lack thereof. Rylee had been learning from her brother-in-law’s wife, Kate, but her sister had vented her frustration at not making successful meals every time. Since it had been so long since she’d had Rylee’s cooking, maybe she’d be pleasantly surprised. She crossed her fingers on the steering wheel.

“Actually, Brad has been my guinea pig lately.”

Madison started at the mention of Brad. “Really?”

“Yeah. Single guys need to eat, and he’s been great in trying out what I’ve made. He’s nicer about it than Devon.” Rylee chuckled.

Nice? Brad? She'd seen that on him for a short time, but her other experience with him hadn't been so pleasant. He'd been demanding and dominating. He'd been a true alpha. Could she be wrong about him? Had he just shown the wrong side of himself to her?

Out of the blue, Rylee assured her, "You're doing the right thing, Maddie."

"I know," Madison said. "I'm ancient in the modeling world. I've had my turn, but times are beginning to be tough." When she'd lost her multi-million-dollar cosmetic contract to a younger model, she'd known it was time to begin a new path. She couldn't blame the company, but she didn't have to like the decision. It's not like she didn't know the day would one day come, but no one liked being put out to pasture.

Finding herself gaining on a black town car, she checked her speed and noticed she'd been driving fifteen miles over the limit, so she eased off the accelerator some. Being pulled over for a ticket while leaving her old life behind and embarking on a dream wasn't something she cared to experience. Of course, she never wanted to experience it. She didn't need an omen like that to begin her new life.

"You're not ancient. Christ, you just turned thirty-one."

Madison laughed, but it was stilted. "That's ancient in the modeling world."

"They don't know what they'll be missing," Rylee stated, in support of her sister. "Would you do even one shoot if they called you?"

Thinking for a moment, she glanced in the rearview mirror. Empty except for woods and green fenced fields. Would she accept a job? She'd decided to leave the entire life behind—constantly starving herself and always being on display—but if Javier asked her, she'd do whatever she could for him. But only him. "Maybe," she said hesitantly.

A loud sound ripped the air and the town car flipped over the small bridge it had been approaching. Dumbstruck and watching with wide eyes, Madison's breath caught in her throat and seized her voice. One minute the car was driving and the next it was airborne before landing in the water upside down.

Only after a moment's hesitation at the scene, she sped up to bring herself to the embankment near where the vehicle had left the road. "I have to go, Rylee. The car in front of me just crashed." She hung up without waiting for a response from her sister and hit the SOS button on her rearview mirror. Never using it before, she had no idea if it even worked, but BMW was renowned for their quick response. "Come on, come on," she muttered, ready to physically help the occupants of the car in the water, but she knew she had to get help to them. Thankfully, it was a small creek and didn't look deep. But still...

After she relayed the accident to the calm voice that boomed over the car speaker, Madison stepped out of her car then, as an afterthought, reached in and grabbed her emergency tool from the glove box. Her mind briefly flittered to when she'd purchased it from a department store some time ago. It guaranteed an emergency escape from your vehicle with six different options including a seat belt cutter and a glass breaker to name a few. With it in hand, she left the vehicle and skidded her way down the incline by the creek. Her high-heeled boots weren't the best footwear, but she refused to go barefoot in the underbrush. Hell, there

could be snakes for all she knew. She shuddered at that thought of confronting a snake. With her determination to assist the passengers, something as small as a snake wouldn't stop her.

No one had exited the overturned vehicle, and with its tinted windows, she couldn't tell how many occupants it held. Her pulse raced at the thought of someone injured. She had no medical training.

Had their tire blown? That would explain the loud noise. Then, the driver must've lost control and hit the small bridge railing that boasted "Bridge ices before road."

Sliding down the last of the slope, she landed in the cold water. Her jeans automatically soaked up to nearly midcalf. Thank God it wasn't deep where the car had landed. Making her way to the upturned vehicle, her stomach lurched at what she was doing and what she might find. She could only hope emergency vehicles hurried. It wasn't like they were in the city. The two cars had been on a long stretch of country highway. A shortcut she'd learned from Rylee to get to her sister's house in Baltimore.

When she reached the vehicle, Madison internally crossed her fingers and yelled, "Hello. Can anyone hear me?" There was no response. She rushed to the driver side door and tried to open it. It didn't budge. *Stupid*, she told herself. She'd watched enough television to know that the door wouldn't open when partially submerged in water. That's why she had the emergency tool.

As the blood pumped fast through her veins, her heart pounded loudly in her ears, adrenaline rushing through her, giving her strength.

Madison held the tool in her right hand. Turning her face away, she bent down, even with the window, then swung hard at the glass on the rear-door window and hoped the tool did its job. Pain reverberated up her arm at the impact of the metal tip on glass. She knocked at the spider-webbed glass around a small hole to clear the window for access, fear and dread pulsing through her. She didn't know what she'd find, but her heart beat faster hoping the occupants weren't terribly injured.

Ignoring the biting cold, she knelt, shivering as the water covered her legs to nearly midthigh, and peered through the opening. Her eyes landed on an unconscious woman in the back seat, hanging upside down, her seat belt holding her in place. A sweep of the front showed the only other occupant was the driver, who was also unmoving.

The water lapped to over the top of the woman's head, her hair lost in the current, but not high enough to interfere with her breathing. Yet. Well, Christ. Should she move her? She had no idea if that would make any injuries worse. But what about the water? That couldn't be good. If Madison waited and the water rose, she wouldn't be able to help both the woman and the man, and then one would drown. She wouldn't allow that.

With an uneasy breath, she crawled toward the woman and froze. Her heart skipped a beat when the car skidded further into the creek. She searched frantically, listening hard for sirens, but there was nothing but the lap of water filling her ears. That and her still pounding heartbeat. Once the car settled again, she exhaled shakily and focused on the woman. With a trembling hand, Madison released the woman's seat belt. "Shit,"



she gasped, when the unconscious passenger dropped into the water. Madison hurriedly turned her to keep her face out of the water, praying there'd been no injury. Not daring to think of anything but making the woman safe, Madison refused to acknowledge her achy muscles or her shaking limbs as she tried to keep the woman from drowning.

With a grunt, Madison dragged the woman to the opposite bank, pulling her up on mud and rocks, ensuring she was fully out of the water. Dropping on her butt, Madison breathed hard and steeled herself for what it would take to remove the driver. He had to outweigh the woman by a good eighty pounds. She had no idea if she could she even manage it; her muscles were already screaming. Knowing she had no choice, Madison stood on her shaky legs. Then taking a deep breath, she looked at the car and took a determined step forward.

“Anyone else in the vehicle?”

Madison spun at the firm, deep voice. When her eyes fastened on the dark-haired, jean-clad man, panic skittered through her, and her breath caught. “You.”

## *Two*

BRAD HAMILTON SLIPPED when his foot hit the muddy embankment. He then wrenched his ankle trying to regain his footing. When he looked up, he did a double take at the woman dragging someone through the water. He needed to make sure he was right. For far too many nights he'd been wishing to be near her. Realizing his eyesight hadn't failed him, he tightened his jaw against the sudden rush of anger at her. Of course the fucking cosmos would throw her in his fucking path.

Madison Maxwell. Even though he hated doing that "talking thing" women wanted, they had a lot to discuss, but first, he had a more pressing matter to deal with than the woman who'd run away from him.

With a tire iron gripped in his hand, he hurried past her into the water. His body reacted sharply to the freezing cold of it. Water slid into his black tennis shoes, immediately soaking them and his socks. The lower parts of his jean-clad legs followed behind, making them heavy to lift. He considered a moment if the water was too deep for a passenger to survive. Come to think of it, when he'd called out to Madison, she'd never responded, apart from her surprised "you."

He raised his voice and asked her again, "Was there anyone else in the car?"

Madison nodded, her face pale and dirty. "Yes, the driver."

With a nod, Brad turned and smashed the front passenger window with the tire iron. After using the tool to clear the space, he got down on his hands and knees and crawled into the vehicle and cursed at the cold water soaking the arms of his shirt. At least the water hadn't risen over the driver's head.

With the sharp black suit the man wore, Brad surmised that he must be a chauffeur. Not that that mattered in a rescue operation, but it registered in Brad's mind. A curious snip wondered what had happened for the car to end up overturned in the muddy water.

Assessing the man, he reached out with two fingers, searching for the driver's pulse at his neck. When he didn't feel that steady beat, Brad adjusted the position of his cold digits, despite knowing he had the spot right the first time. Still, he checked. This wasn't something to be wrong about. After a minute, he removed his hand and sighed. Nothing.

He turned the driver's head toward him, and Brad's blood ran cold, but it had nothing to do with the temperature of the water. A slice of fear crawled through him. He'd left the women on the creek's bank—alone and undefended. With dread urging him on, Brad backed out of the vehicle faster than he thought he could move.

As he exited the vehicle, he yelled to Madison, “Get down!” Sloshing his way through the water to the bank, he cursed at how heavy his steps had become. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* His pulse rate accelerated as adrenaline spiked through his system. He didn’t have his weapon. Although, if he happened to be competing against a sniper rifle—which was what he suspected since the driver had been shot cleanly in the forehead—his weapon would be useless at that range. Plus, there was no cover on that side of the bank.

When Madison didn’t move, he pushed through the creek faster, screamed and waved his arm at her. “Get the fuck down!”

It took her a moment to react, and those few seconds felt like a lifetime to him. After the confusion left her face, she dropped into a squat and looked around. Her paleness seemed more of fear than that of a few moments earlier. Before Brad could reach the bank, he heard the sound of shots reach them through the air just as mud flew on the bank from the bullets. Who the fuck were they shooting at? Madison? The passenger? Him? It had to be the passenger since the shooter had already targeted the driver. Then, who the hell was the passenger?

Uncaring if the shooter struck out again, Brad left the water and launched himself on top of Madison, knocking her flat on her back. He registered her “Oomph” before covering her body with his, her wet sweater soaking his long-sleeved T-shirt. Christ, she could’ve been shot, and he hadn’t been there to protect her. His gut wrenched into knots at the thought.

She clawed at his arms, panic lacing her muffled words.

“Shh. Someone’s shooting. Be still.” Brad could only hope the passenger didn’t suddenly wake up and sit. Although something told him that was what the shooter hoped would happen. He and Madison had just been in the way. Now they were caught, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it at this point.

Madison stilled underneath him, but her body shook. Her fear broke his frigid heart. Was she shaking with fear of the shooter, her cold clothing, or of the closeness to him? He’d never done anything to make her fear him, but she’d been pretty pissed at him when they’d parted. Both times, come to think of it. As for the second time, he’d never had an opportunity to apologize—not that he was sure an apology was due, but the man should always apologize because chances were he’d done something wrong at one point in time—but now didn’t seem the time to rehash their brief history. Although it might be the only time he could pin her down.

“What about the driver?” she whispered, her words trembling.

“He’s dead.”

“What do you mean he’s dead? The accident wasn’t that severe, was it?”

How much to tell her? Hell, they’d already been shot at, so there was no use pretending. “He was shot.”

Her breath caught, and she paled even further.

Instinct told him to hold her tighter, but reason told him to leave her to deal with it. He wanted to be there for her even though she'd been the one to walk away, and it was difficult not having her in his arms while she dealt with what was happening.

When no further shots were fired, he lifted his head and scanned the woods surrounding the creek once again. Would the shooter come closer to make sure he made his kill? He had to have noticed they were unarmed. Brad weighed how long it would take him to retrieve his weapon from his truck, but that would leave the women alone, and he couldn't do that.

Blessed sirens sounded as emergency vehicles approached, and Brad took a deep breath of relief. He didn't, however, get off the top of Madison. Not until he was sure it was safe.

When the first sheriff's deputy arrived, Brad relayed there'd been an active shooter, which sent the deputy quickly back to his car, squatting behind the open door with his weapon drawn.

"You can get off me now," Madison whispered.

"Not yet. We don't know for sure the shooter left." Although his gut told him he'd departed before the police arrived.

The unconscious woman moaned lightly. Fuck. That was all he needed, another person to try to cover. Thankfully the woman didn't wake. She obviously needed an ambulance, but they wouldn't come through until the shooter was neutralized or confirmed on the run. The last was where Brad's money sat.

Whoever the shooter was, he was a professional. He'd hit the bulky driver right between the eyes while the car had been doing, he'd guess, at least seventy miles per hour. No one just cruised on this stretch of highway. Then again, the shooter had missed hitting them on the bank. Had that been a warning to them for protecting his target?

Time slowly passed while Brad and Madison waited for the next move by either the shooter or the police. The seriousness of their situation brought the Maryland State Police into the mix. After what seemed like forever—with the sheriff's office and the nearby city police—they pieced together a four-man team and sent them into the woods to check for the shooter. Brad guessed they didn't have much choice unless they just all stayed in their positions forever. While the thought of Madison underneath him again was something he'd hoped to happen someday, he didn't want it because of these circumstances.

Feeling her trembling beneath him, he silently tried to reassure her that it wouldn't be much longer before they could safely move. When his eyes met hers, he almost fell in deep. Even frightened, she had the most gorgeous eyes he'd ever seen. He'd love nothing more than exploring the connection between them. The strong connection he felt in their gaze. But, now was not the time or the place. "It's going to be okay," he quietly reassured her.

She nodded, and he couldn't tell if her daze was from the situation or their shared moment. Either way, he was there to soothe her and protect her. Being in the water and not able to cover Madison had ripped at his inner being. He'd never felt so helpless, and he'd been in plenty of tight situations.

The law enforcement officers came back from the woods, frowning and shaking their heads. Brad was given an all clear, and he grudgingly lifted himself from Madison.

Before he could offer her his hand, on her hands and knees, Madison crawled to the passenger of the car. "She's still out," she said, with worry tingeing her voice.

Cupping his hands together, Brad shouted to the law enforcement parked on the road, "We need EMTs. We've got an unconscious woman." Next, he knelt on the opposite side of Madison and felt the woman's pulse. Although it could be stronger, he wouldn't classify the beating as weak. On her temple, he noticed some drying blood. "Looks like she might've hit her head on the window in the crash."

Madison leaned over to see the wound and frowned. "I think I know who this is."

Giving the passenger's face another once-over, Brad grimaced. She looked familiar with her short blonde hair, but he couldn't place her. Maybe it was the wet hair or the slightly streaky makeup that he guessed came from her tumbling out of her seat into the water. "Who?"

"Senator Sharon Walden."

Stunned, Brad remembered meeting her when he'd been a Secret Service agent. Her husband was a U.S. Senator and had needed protection for the presidential campaign he'd just kicked off. While the extra security wasn't necessarily normal, it wasn't unheard of. When an agent had been sick, the senator had demanded the position be filled, and Brad had been placed on temporary assignment with that detail. At the time, the senator's wife had been a brand-new senator, but her popularity had already outshined her husband's. It never made sense to Brad why she'd run a senatorial campaign when he'd been planning the presidential run so soon after. Supposedly, she would resign if he won and be just the First Lady.

Brad shook his head. He'd never understand how his father had navigated the craziness of politics for so many years.

Looking over his shoulder, his gaze focused on the car with the dead driver. "You mean the woman whose name is on the primary ballots for President?" he clarified. Her husband had lost his bid for the White House but had promised he'd run again. Word was his wife was running, and he'd willingly accept the post of First Gentleman should she win the presidency. Something about that niggled the back of his mind, but it remained out of reach.

"Someone was really shooting at us?" A nervous lilt lifted Madison's voice as she asked the question.

"My guess is they were shooting at her." He nodded to the senator.

EMTs made their way down to them, carrying a backboard and a large bag since the gurney needed to stay at the top of the bank. He and Madison moved away to allow the EMTs access and climbed the embankment, but not before informing them, the sheriff's deputy, and the state trooper, who'd come toward them, of the dead body in the vehicle. At the top of the rise, they were met with more law enforcement and were obligated to remain and provide their statements. It wasn't like it mattered. The shooter was long gone, and Brad would bet his next paycheck they wouldn't find out who it was.

His blood boiled. The bastard had shot at Madison, whether she was his target or not.

“I heard a loud noise, like a tire blowing out, and then the car swerved off the road, hit the bridge incline and flipped over in midair, landing upside down in the water.” Madison spoke matter-of-factly, almost woodenly like she wanted to get it out and over with. He couldn’t blame her; he wanted to get out of here.

He still couldn’t believe of all the women to be put into his path on this trip, it’d be Madison. He wouldn’t complain about his luck. He just had to figure out how to use it to his advantage to get to know her better. Even if that involved just soothing her while the horror of the incident sank in for her.

“That was probably the shot that killed the driver,” Brad offered, as if the deputy couldn’t figure it out for himself.

The deputy, who’d been all but salivating over Madison, gave him an evil eye. What the fuck?

Because he liked to piss off people for no apparent reason, as his twin brother, Matt, liked to remind him, he said, “You can see none of the tires are blown out or flat, so it only makes sense.” He wanted to add dickwad, but thought that might be pushing it.

Uh-oh. The man turned on him. While that couldn’t be good for Brad, at least his eyes were off Madison. “How many shots were fired when you were”—he flipped back through his notes like it’d been an exhaustive interview—“in the water?”

“Three. A single burst of three.” He pointed to the disturbed spots on the ground near where the senator had lain. Christ, the man had only missed hitting her by inches. He wanted to pray to the gods—any of them—and thank them for allowing the bullets to have missed Madison.

Thankfully, his assertive, exact answer took the bluster out of the deputy. Good.

While they finalized their statements, the senator woke and, after the EMTs explained what happened, she insisted on seeing Madison, who then began to notice her messed up appearance. Sure her dark hair was an absolute mess, but it was an attractive mess. In an effort to clean her sweater some, she swiped a hand down the front and made it worse. Not that he wanted her to look bad, but her fretting brought a smile to his face. Until today, he’d always seen her looking perfect, from the top of her head down to her cute toes. The camera always captured an image of her that made him want her with every fiber of his being.

“She wants to see you, too,” a tall EMT informed Brad.

Fuck. The last thing he wanted to do was be brought to the senator’s attention. What if she remembered him? They’d never been introduced during that week he filled in for the other agent. He didn’t want to be dragged back to that time in his life. Things had been good with the Secret Service until.... Even now, years later, it remained out of his reach.

“Come on,” Brad said to Madison, with a hand to the small of her back, turning her in the direction of the ambulance, “let’s go over together.”

Nodding, she stayed beside him to the road where the ambulance had parked. They approached the vehicle and stopped at the gurney sitting right outside the open doors. He wondered if his discomfort—and not just from the cold clothing—showed on his face.

“Did you save me?” Senator Walden asked Madison.

Madison visibly gulped before she answered, “I only pulled you from the car.”

The woman reached out a trembling hand. “What’s your name?”

Shaking the woman’s hand, Madison seemed to gather herself and answered firmly, “Madison Maxwell.”

Studying Madison for a moment, the senator nodded. “The model?”

With a small smile and a slight cock of her head, Madison nodded. “Yes.”

“Thank you.” The senator squeezed Madison’s hand and released it.

“And you,” the woman had focused on Brad, “helped?”

The intense scrutiny by the senator bothered him. “Not really.”

“I know you, don’t I? What’s your name?”

Oh, here the fuck it goes. “Brad Hamilton.”

After a brief moment, her eyes lit up with surprise. “Secret Service.”

“A long time ago,” he said, hoping that’d be the end of his past. He only prayed she hadn’t heard about his departure from the agency and what had happened to him to facilitate it. He didn’t remember everything that had happened to him, but he had enough memory to make him jaded. In his heart, he knew someone had set him up. He just hadn’t been able to prove it without his full memory.

The senator nodded, and he refocused on the conversation around him. “I want to thank you for this. There’s a dinner I’m hosting in a few days. I’d like you to be my guests.”

Not only no, but fuck no. He couldn’t go to the Lion’s Den of DC and run into his old colleagues who’d surely be guarding some of her esteemed guests. Not with that cloud over his head. Hell, they might not even allow him entrance. Wouldn’t that be fucking grand? As for going to the dinner, his resounding answer was still no fucking way.

Madison’s eyes brightened. “Yes, thank you,” she said, as if answering for the both of them. Well fuck.

“Good. I’ll have someone send you the information.”

Utterly dumbfounded—an expression he’d not prefer to wear—Brad stood and stared at the two women who’d just decided for him. Had his not speaking first and Madison accepting had him somehow agreeing to the dinner? Hell, he’d just not go. They couldn’t come after him for that. Madison would be fine on her own in the den of vipers. Shit. She wouldn’t be safe at all with the sleazy politicians—his father excluded—and others in the political arena who attended such events and preyed on young women. Young hot women. Like Madison. She’d be great arm-candy for one of the men she needed to avoid. Yet, she was so much more than that, and his little time with her had proven it.

Christ, he'd have to go to protect her. That'd mean facing a past he'd put far behind him. All he had to say was that she'd best appreciate his monumental effort.



## Three

BY THE TIME everyone had asked their questions, and Deputy Waters—who she'd wanted to reach out and slap—had stopped trying to see through her damp, dirty sweater, Madison was freezing enough her teeth chattered. Although it'd been near seventy earlier in the day, the temperature had dropped, and it was closer to fifty, if not lower. Not only was she wet, but she wasn't wearing a jacket. She hadn't needed it earlier so had just tossed it in the car. More than likely she could've retrieved it before she spoke with law enforcement, but she hadn't wanted anything to prolong the event. Her nerves had been frazzled enough dealing with the aftermath of the incident. She'd had enough of this scene.

*Someone frickin' shot at me. Someone killed the driver.* Those thoughts slid into her body and stole her breath. Why did her body suddenly feel so weak? Her legs shook, as did her body, and dread slipped down her spine. It was over. Panic nearly set in at her body trying to shut down on her. She fought it, and with a deep breath, held herself steady.

*Someone frickin' shot at me,* she thought again. She couldn't get that out of her head. Sure they were probably shooting at the senator, had shot the driver, but she'd been there in the thick of it, and they could've hit her. Or Brad, who'd charged in like an avenging angel set on covering her. His method of getting her to the ground could've been gentler, but he'd run headlong into danger to protect her. She absently rubbed her behind that had taken the brunt of the impact of their bodies when he'd tackled her to the ground.

Then he'd lain on top of her, covering her, ensuring her safety. Having his warm body—albeit wet—against her, so snug, set her body spinning in a pool of lust that had been totally inappropriate for the situation. She'd felt the heat creep up her neck at her embarrassment.

She stumbled, and a hand grabbed her arm to steady her. Even though she knew she was safely ensconced in a law enforcement barrier, she started at the touch, her heart hammering. Turning, her gaze collided with Brad's concerned one.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a calm, caring voice that reminded her of when they'd first made love. He'd fooled her, and she wasn't going to let him fool her again, despite how brave he'd been, or the fact that he'd probably saved her life.

In an attempt to yank her arm back, she lost her footing again and found herself pulled up tight to his chest. His rock-hard chest that she'd pressed kisses all over that one night. "I'm—I'm fine," she finally got out in a throaty voice, one she didn't mean to use.

A chuckle escaped him, and she wanted to smack him for it. It was just anger, and not just at the situation, which wasn't fair to either of them.

"Oh, Maddie." The use of her nickname sent an unexpected spark of warmth through her. It sounded so loving coming from his lips.

Regardless of the comfort she was beginning to feel, she insisted, "You can let me go now." When he did, she stumbled back before regaining her footing. On shaky legs, she turned back to trek to her car. She wasn't trying to be ungrateful, but the whole situation was a mess and disturbing. She needed to work through everything—alone. She took two steps and nearly collapsed from the maelstrom of emotions and feelings that swamped her. With a speed she wouldn't have believed if she hadn't seen it, Brad was there and caught her in his arms. Fleeting, her anger with him evaporated.

"You're not okay. Let me help you." He pulled her to his side and wrapped his arm around tight so she could walk on her own accord, or he could assist her with his strength. "Where are you going?"

"My car," she said, confused by his question.

Brad shook his head. "No, from here."

Oh. That made more sense. "The Ivy."

"I'll drive. We can pick up your car tomorrow, or we can have one of my brothers pick it up and drive it into town. Safer to have someone pick it up tonight."

Leave her car? With all her samples in it? The thought gave a jolt to her stomach at the possibility of losing anything from her car. She'd just have to find a way to drive herself. She shuddered from the adrenaline dump tormenting her body. Who was she kidding? She couldn't drive. "Would you drive my car? I have things in there that I need." While she didn't need them right away, they represented the new life she was creating for herself. She couldn't let the items out of her grasp.

He studied her with an intensity that saw right through to her soul and almost knocked her wet socks off. Oh, she couldn't wait to get dry. And warm. The idea of getting warm with Brad turned her insides to jelly. No matter how he'd acted before, she'd once seen the good side of him, like she had today, and that man stirred her both emotionally and physically.

Rubbing her arms to generate some heat in them, she thanked him and repeated her question. "Thank you for protecting me. Thank you for helping me now. If you wouldn't mind, would you drive my car into Baltimore?"

As if just noticing she was cold, he turned toward her vehicle. With his free arm, he pulled out his phone, swiped and tapped until he put the phone to his ear.

"I need a favor. Can you get someone to drive you out to pick up my truck?"

He relayed their location as best he could since they were out in nowhere land.

Madison eavesdropped as, in a crisp tone, Brad explained what had occurred to whoever was on the other end of the phone line. It amazed her he could detail the incident without any emotions. She feared she'd break down trying to explain everything, especially about the dead man who she'd never met.

After a bit more conversation to include where to find his spare key, he ended the call. "Taken care of. AJ and Jake were already headed in this direction and should be here shortly. They'll pick up my truck and deliver it to The Ivy for me."

Maybe it was the waning sun or the adventure of the day, but the thought of lying in bed, in his arms, at The Ivy set her blood afire. The idea of him in her hotel room while they waited for his truck to be delivered conjured up images of their hot night together. Lying naked in each other's arms like there was no tomorrow. Her body heated just thinking about his large hands on her again. Yet, no matter how much he fanned her flames with only a smile, she couldn't allow them to move back to bed without more to their relationship. The term "more" confused her as to what she actually wanted, but she knew it had everything to do with Brad Hamilton.

They reached her car, and he opened the passenger door for her, settled her in, and latched the seat belt.

"I'll be right back."

Nodding, she watched in the side mirror as he jogged to his black truck, reached in and pulled out a small black duffel bag before he jogged back to her car. Opening the back seat door, he tossed the bag inside. Then, he slipped into the driver seat. He turned to her and caught her staring at him. "Are you sure?" he asked.

No, but she didn't have a choice unless she waited and had AJ or Jake drive her, which would increase the friction between her and Brad. She'd rather not get into an accident and hurt herself or, heaven forbid, someone else. "Yes. It's fine." Did her voice betray that it wasn't fine? She hoped not because he was being super nice and helping her when she needed it without being the arrogant prick she knew he could be at times. At least at one time.

He adjusted the seat. With her long legs, he hadn't had to scoot the seat back far, then adjusted the mirrors before he put his foot on the brake and pushed the Start button. Her key fob, located in her purse on the passenger floorboard, was close enough for him to successfully ignite the engine.

On the nearly hour drive into town, they didn't speak as the miles passed them by. Not a word, except when he waved at an SUV and told her it was AJ and Jake.

The brittle silence in the vehicle attacked her nerves. On the one hand, she worried about Brad in her hotel room and keeping them out of bed, but on the other hand, the events that had unfolded had her almost biting nails. She'd never been in such a situation. While it might be second nature to Brad to run into the spray of bullets and dead men, she didn't deal well with the concept.

“So,” she said, breaking the silence, “do you really think someone would’ve killed the senator if we hadn’t been there?” It was the only safe question she could think of. She didn’t want to know if he thought the shooter would kill them like he had the driver. She shuddered for the dead man who’d only been doing his job.

Brad glanced at her before returning his eyes to the road. She had a feeling he was struggling with what to tell her. The truth or some semblance of it. Finally, he nodded. “Probably.”

Her shudder deepened. “I know I said thank you once before, but I really mean it. I’ve never been so scared in my life.” The honest words slipped from her mouth, and she didn’t care if it made her appear weak.

“I’d be worried if you hadn’t been.” His soft voice calmed her jumbled nerves, and they lapsed into companionable silence for the remainder of the trip. She put the thought of someone being murdered as far back in her mind as she could. It didn’t work as well as she’d liked, but with Brad near her, she felt safe.

By the time they arrived at valet check-in at The Ivy, Madison felt herself again, the weakness had seeped itself from her bones. Getting warm had helped immensely.

“Suite One is all ready for you, Miss Maxwell,” Margaret—the clerk on duty—said as she handed her the keycard—two of them. Great, the clerk assumed Madison would be sharing her room. Well, she guessed that looked rather obvious since Brad had carried in his duffel bag.

To remain a much sought-after model, she’d worked hard to maintain her clean image in the public. She’d watched whom she associated with, watched what she did, and watched who was watching her. The paparazzi would have a field day with this tidbit of information, regardless of the truth of the situation.

Accepting the card keys from Margaret, Madison said, “Thank you,” then turned her suitcase to roll it to the elevator, Brad following at her heels.

The elevator ride was awkward. With each passing second, the walls seemed to close in on her. Not only were her nerves shot from everything she’d witnessed, but being so close to Brad was all too much. She’d tried so hard since they’d hooked up to avoid him, and had hoped to have been able to prepare herself for when the time came for her to see him again. That obviously hadn’t happened. The terrifying events from earlier had seen to that.

Madison was a mess of emotions. Her heart warred with her gratitude for the man who’d saved her, which heightened her lusty thoughts, leading to her confusion. And among all of that, a bubble of anger remained unsettled beneath the surface.

She’d have to admit he could do more to her without a word than any other man she’d known. Although, not all of it was good.

Arriving at her room, she slipped the card key in the slot and opened the door, walking in.

She rolled her suitcase to the bedroom and called over her shoulder, “I’ll change in here. You can change in the bathroom.” Although she wished she’d been alone so she could take a hot shower and warm her bones.

Once changed, she walked barefoot back into the living room where Brad lit the gas fireplace. The heat slowly reached her, bringing warmth to her weary bones. He'd changed into another pair of jeans and a red, long-sleeved T-shirt that molded to his exquisite frame. She caught her breath and chastised herself for her unruly thoughts about the gorgeousness of the man before her. *Remember what the man said to you.*

"Thank you for helping me earlier," she said again, unsure what else to say. Someone had to break the silence.

"Listen, Maddie"—he took a step toward her and stopped—"I'm sorry."

Her stomach fluttered, and she gulped at his words. "For what?" Why oh why did she ask that question? She didn't want to rehash anything that had happened between them. They'd had a little too much to drink, had sex, he'd been crude, and she'd left. End of story.

"I was only joking with what I said. I didn't mean to upset you."

She jolted. It was as if he'd read her mind. That was very unsettling. He seemed to know what she needed to hear.

*I finally banged a supermodel. I can check that off my bucket list,* were his exact words.

Getting to know Brad at the wedding reception, she'd foreseen that he could potentially be special. However, with his words, she'd seen that idea tossed aside. He'd slept with her not because she was Madison, Rylee's sister, but because she was a model and he'd wanted to "bang" one. She'd been such a fool, and bringing up his words made her almost forget how tender he'd been when they made love or during this afternoon's incident. Nothing like the first Brad she'd met when they'd been stuck in close quarters, each angry at the situation and not being able to help Rylee.

Her heart beat a staccato rhythm in her chest that pounded in her ears as she absorbed his apology.

While stepping closer to her, he continued. "I didn't sleep with you because you're a supermodel. I slept with you because I'm drawn to you, and we had incredible chemistry."

Her breath hitched at the thought of how drawn they'd been to each other—that time. She'd never slept with a man while under the influence of alcohol. Now she knew why that wasn't a good idea. You never knew the man behind the sexual appeal. She stepped back at his closeness. "Okay. So, you didn't mean it." Something inside her broke, and she felt the belief down to her soul. How could she ever have doubted him?

Nerves skittered through her bloodstream when he kept closing in on her. She'd backed up enough her knees were touching the couch.

"Maddie," he said in a low, gravelly voice, before his hand reached out and gently touched her cheek.

Heat surged through her body from his touch down to her fuchsia-painted toenails. This was a bad idea. Yet she struggled to ignore the pull of him and even hoped he'd kiss her like before, when they'd been all over each other at the hotel in Vegas.

"Maddie," he whispered this time. She had a split second to decide whether she'd let him kiss her or push him away. With her heart pounding, she chose, and he lowered his head, touching her lips gently.

Electricity arched its way through every nerve ending in her body and had her wanting to throw her arms around him after ripping off his clothes. Like before—before he'd opened his mouth and spouted those words that cut her to the core—this felt right. She figured the first time they'd been thrust together was foreplay of sorts, even though neither had seemed to notice how that interlude had fed into their desire for each other.

He drew back, and his eyes darkened as he looked down at her, a question residing in the depths of his mesmerizing golden-brown eyes.

Breathless and against her better judgment, she said, "Don't stop kissing me." After listening to her sister, deep down she knew he wasn't the crass guy she'd had a glimpse of that one time, but she really didn't know him, so maybe it was wishful thinking. Come to think of it, she never did hear a story in the *National Enquirer* or other ragtag magazine about them sleeping together. All she knew was that her body heated with the desire for his touch... his loving... his caresses. At the moment, she wanted it more than her next breath. How could that be wrong?

With a sly grin, his mouth covered hers again. She opened immediately, and his tongue swooped with the same force of when he'd tackled her on the bank. Her palms went up his biceps, and she felt the rippling muscles in her hands and the strength he held in them. Continuing her trek, she wound her arms around his neck where her fingers played with the short, dark hair. She kissed him back with all she had as her body trembled with desire. Their tongues brushed then dueled, and she felt each warm, wet stroke throughout her body.

Brad's hand left her face and wrapped itself in her hair behind the nape of her neck while his other hand reached to the small of her back and drew her hard against him. Her emotions and desire went into a whirlwind. The hard length of his erection told her that he wanted her, the mess of a woman standing in front of him, not the pin-up girl he'd joked about.

His mouth lifted ever so slightly, and she tried to pull him close again. "Maddie," he breathed against her lips.

Sensations rocked her body. She was so hot that fire should've been shooting from her veins. She was lost in him... his kiss... the moment.

With a groan, Brad pulled her even closer and devoured her mouth with his, his tongue all about domination. As he deepened the kiss, his arms slid down to her butt, and he pulled her up, lifting her feet off the floor. She'd been ready to wrap her legs around his waist when a knock sounded at the door and they sprang apart like a couple of teenagers caught making out on the couch.

"It's AJ," they heard from the other side of the door. "With Brad's truck."

Brad glanced at his watch. "Dammit. I should've known he'd speed to get here." He frowned at her. "It's best I go. I've been up here long enough, and I don't want to ruin your reputation." His words startled her as he touched her cheek again. He then placed a light kiss on her lips and left her suite.

She wasn't entirely sure she knew what had just happened. He'd thought of her reputation, and she'd been ready to toss it to the birds. Her heart did a pitter-patter at his thoughtfulness to keep her image clean. She'd worked hard to stand out positively in an industry rife with scandal. It'd helped her career, and she needed it just as much now to open the boutique.

No matter what happened, she could no longer pretend she didn't want them to be together, at least not sexually, because her actions and her body betrayed her every thought on keeping her distance from Brad Hamilton. But no good could come of a hot, torrid affair with him, except awkward moments with the family when their fire had burned out. So, her mind told her to stay away from him, and she would.

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## *About The Author*

Sheila Kell writes smokin' hot romance and intrigue. She secretly laughs when her mother, in that stern voice, calls it "nasty." As a self-proclaimed caffeine addict nestled in north Mississippi with three cats, she wears her pajamas most of the day and writes about the romantic men who leave women's hearts pounding with a happily ever after built on a memorable, adrenaline-pumping story. When she isn't writing, she can be found visiting her family, dreaming of an editor who agrees her work is perfect, or watching cartoons.

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