



Hamilton Investigation & Security
HIS Series, Book Five
Trent & Kelly

Three chapter excerpt

Sheila Kell

*Cunningham
Books*

One

THE PERSON WHO invented maternity pants was a freakin' genius. Kelly Williams struggled to fasten her blue down jacket covering her bulging belly again. If only they'd invent a good maternity jacket that was as comfortable as her jeans, she'd be a happy camper.

At five months pregnant, she already felt as big as a house, especially since she'd had to abandon the clothing she typically wore. Although the initial joy of being pregnant, combined with shopping for all the cute maternity clothes excited her, the thrill was quickly wearing off. She missed her short, tight-fitting dresses.

"Kelly, I don't like leaving you like this. I wanted you to fly home with me for the wedding. In your condition, you don't need to be traveling alone."

Barely keeping from tightening her gloved hands into fists as her ire rose, Kelly instead reached out and clasped the hand of Brian Platt, her fiancé. The man didn't know the first thing about pregnant women if he thought she couldn't travel by herself. Pregnant women could do most anything. Sure, they shouldn't lift heavy items, but the airport has people who work for tips to do that and more. She squeezed his hand. "I'll be fine. It's only a week. Besides, you're the one who's going home early."

Walking beside her, with his leather, messenger bag strapped across his chest and his wheeled luggage in his hand, he grimaced. "I know, sweetheart. Something's come up, and I need to talk with Dad."

She loved Mike Platt. Growing up, he'd been like a father to her, maybe since she and Brian had been tied at the hip most of their life. As his high school sweetheart, she'd spent plenty of time at the Platt ranch escaping the craziness of too many siblings at her family's home. "How is he?"

Brian shook his head. "It's hard to tell. He's still weak and his cough is really bad. The doctors still don't know what's going on."

Her mind wondered if part of his undiagnosed illness might have something to do with his other son leaving without a word. Then she shook it off. He'd always been a strong man and while his son leaving might make him sad, it wouldn't bring down his health. Nibbling on her cold lip, she worried about her own family. Her father was about a decade older than Brian's father.

As she thought of her father, she knew she still wasn't ready to face her family. She'd put off her and Brian's wedding as long as she could. Being five months pregnant shortened her time line. Her parents would expect her to answer to not living up to the values they'd ingrained into her from the time she was a little girl. A fist clenched around her heart.

“Kelly, did you hear me?” Brian asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, no.” Smiling up at him, she asked, “What did you say?”

Leaning down, he dropped a quick kiss on her lips. “Just that I love you and can’t wait for you to be my wife.”

At the crosswalk, they looked both ways and began to cross on their way to the parking lot to get Brian off to the airport.

Her heart pained her. She loved him. She did. She just wasn’t *in love* with him despite wishing so hard that she did. She just hoped it would be enough. Guessing it had to be, she whispered, “I love you, too.”

Brian’s hand was ripped from hers when something pushed into them. Knocked to the street, her belly tightened. Her heart constricted in panic when she reached to support her baby as she landed on her side. *Oh God, please let Ashley be okay.*

Taking deep gulps of cold air, her lungs burned as she fought for each breath. With her racing heart full of fear, she pulled herself into a sitting position, looking around herself dazed. Her pulse pounded in her ears, blocking her ability to hear let alone think.

A woman rushed to her side with a phone to her ear talking. Kelly shook her head, fighting the loudness, trying to concentrate on the woman. Pulling the cell away from her ear, the woman asked, “Are you okay, honey?”

Kelly focused on the woman’s moving lips, letting her words register. It took her a minute to assess whether she was injured. There’d probably be a few scrapes and a bruise or two that she couldn’t see dressed as she was, but she appeared okay. But, the baby. “I think so…” Her heart picked up speed once more. Fear wove its way through her body. “But my baby… I’m not sure about the baby.”

The woman patted her on the shoulder in a gentle, motherly fashion. “Don’t you worry none. There’s an ambulance on the way. My name is Ethel. What’s yours?”

On autopilot, Kelly nodded as she looked around herself, taking stock of all that had happened. “Brian,” slipped from her lips. Where was he? What the hell had happened?

The woman clucked, offering her a sympathetic smile. “I’m afraid your husband is pretty bad off. There was an EMT on the sidewalk. He’s working on him until the ambulance arrives.”

Her gut clenched, nausea climbing up her throat. She had to go to him. Putting her hands down to help her stand, she ignored the tears blurring her vision. “I have to see him.”

The woman’s hand touched her shoulder again, but this time it pushed her down with a force she wouldn’t have expected from a woman who couldn’t be more than five-two, with heels. “No. You need to remain here. You don’t need anything to upset you and that baby.”

My baby. Wrapping an arm around her stomach, she brushed away an escaped tear and then craned her neck to see Brian. He was so far away from her. She shook her head, loosening more tears. She looked on, straining to see what was happening through her blurred vision, but he was surrounded by men, some stood, and some knelt, but all blocked her view.

Turning back to the woman by her side, she tried to smile and remember her name. Ester? Ethel? Ethel. “Ethel, what happened?”

“Oh, a car plowed right into the two of you on the crosswalk. Pulled out of a spot and gunned it. Your husband pushed you out of the way at the last minute.”

Kelly blinked slowly not bothering to correct her and appreciating the directness of the woman. She couldn’t handle anyone’s emotions but her own.

Brian had saved her from getting hit. She gulped as worry gnawed at her every nerve. “Did the driver stop?”

Ethel pursed her lips. “No. The bastard kept driving.”

A hit and run. The thought shook her, bringing back with it some semblance of herself. The news helped shake off some of the shock. *Son of a bitch.* They’d both looked both ways to make sure it was clear to cross. *Dammit.* Her frustration raised her pulse rate, and she reminded herself to remain calm for little Ashley’s sake. “Did someone get his license plate number?” The police could run it and find the asshole who hurt them. *Hurt.* That had her looking again toward Brian. She couldn’t sit here while he was injured. He needed her by his side.

Struggling to her feet, a burst of determination pulsed through her. She thanked the woman for her kindness but told her she had to see Brian. As sirens neared, she closed in on where he lay. His leg was bent at an odd angle, and that relieved her a little as a broken leg healed fine. Then she looked up his body, and her blood froze. With her hand to her mouth, she held back her gasp. Brian bled from his head. And she meant really bled. That couldn’t be good. He appeared to be laboring to breathe.

Oh God.

The EMTs jumped out of the ambulance and spoke with the man she guessed was the EMT on the sidewalk while they worked. As they did, she heard Brian ask about her. Pushing her way through, she steeled herself. She needed to stay strong for him. They could fix him. This was the twenty-first century with modern medicine.

She made it by his side when the EMTs lifted the gurney. They stopped for a brief moment, and she grabbed Brian’s hand.

“I love you,” he gasped. “If I don’t make it,”—pain masked his face—“take care of our little girl.”

Kelly's belly tightened again. Their baby kicked under her jacket. Relief at that small wonder rippled through her. Their baby was okay. "Don't say anything like that. You'll be just fine." Despite her determination to remain strong, her voice wavered.

"Ma'am, we've got to go," an EMT told her.

Not wanting to let go, but knowing she had to, Kelly dropped Brian's hand. "I love you."

After the ambulance departed with Brian, she stood frozen, fearful of what would happen. She didn't want to lose him. Ethel approached her and offered her a ride to the hospital. Normally, she'd give an emphatic negative answer to a stranger, but she shook so badly, she couldn't drive safely. She knew this, so, she accepted the ride with a police officer agreeing to meet her there.

Sitting in a corner all alone in the hospital waiting room, she remembered her last words to Brian.

Guilt plagued her. Anxious to finally marry and have a family, Kelly had settled for Brian, her high school sweetheart, when he'd come to Baltimore several months ago to win her over. Only he hadn't truly been her Mr. Right, and things hadn't turned out as she'd expected. They were having a baby, and she'd been reluctant to actually wed because she wasn't *in* love with him.

No longer able to sit, she stood and walked down the hallway. When she found a women's bathroom, she slipped inside and, after making sure she was alone, at least for the moment, she pulled out her cell phone. Cycling through numbers, she found the one she needed and hit the Call button.

"Hello," Mike Platt answered the phone. "Kelly, is that you? Do you have an update?"

Pain for Mike, heartache for herself, and devastation for her unborn child swirled through her. She closed her eyes, preparing to devastate Brian's father.

Before she spoke, Kelly rested a hand on her belly and promised to give her little girl all the love she had. She thought she'd shed all her tears already, but she'd been wrong. As tears streamed down her face, all she thought of was that her fiancé was dead.

Two

KELLY WILLIAMS, INVESTIGATIVE journalist for *Baltimore's News First* newspaper, parked her car, her nerves on edge about her visit to the North Branch Correctional Institution. Coming here alone was not only foolish but dangerous. With ominous clouds in varying shades of gray—from almost black to dirty white—hovering heavily in the sky, she stepped out of her vehicle, winter boots plopping onto the snowplowed parking lot with a crunch.

She took a moment to inhale deeply, relishing in the fresh scent, although laced with a dampness promising more snowfall. The air didn't have the cleanness of the Montana air she'd grown up with, but a calm still rested inside her, helping take the edge off. Jacket snapped in place, gloves and hat on, she grabbed her identification from her wallet and moved to hide her purse in the trunk.

After using the remote to unlock the trunk, she shoved her keys in her pocket. Next, she deposited her purse, then slammed it shut before she had time to register why she had Brian's suitcase still inside. It had been a month since his death.

The gloom of the facility sent a shiver slowly snaking up Kelly's spine and branching out to her fingers and toes. She tugged her black cashmere scarf up higher and moved forward, remembering her goal of obtaining a new twist to a story she had previously covered. Adrian Copeland had been convicted of property insurance fraud and providing false statements to the insurance commissioner. She had followed his story closely and received high praise for her news coverage.

Oddly enough, Adrian had contacted *her* pleading his innocence, and that he needed her to help clear his name. It seemed strange that he'd asked for her as she had written about his crimes and the overwhelming evidence against him. *Why me?* had bounced through her mind since she'd received his phone call.

Adrian had reportedly hired William Darling, a seedy, conniving arsonist, to torch his businesses for the insurance money. William had testified against Adrian, though, with the promise of immunity for his testimony. Both men disgusted Kelly. Dishonest, crooked, and greedy only began to describe what the criminals stood for. Adrian received eleven years prison time. William ended up receiving a worse sentence even after his testimony, though it hadn't been administered by the justice system. A man named Jason Brock had murdered him with a single gunshot to the head.

It appeared that Jason and Adrian had been placed in the same correctional facility. Both asked to meet with her today. Kelly's curiosity piqued to its highest level. What a story this would make!

With the bits of dirty snow and ice crunching under her boots, she made her way to the prison entrance gate. After having her identification scrutinized, going through doors and gates that had to be unlocked for her, and one unwelcome search, Kelly finally realized what she was doing. She was standing inside an actual prison. Her body quivered. *What am I getting myself into talking with a murderer?*

Kelly's fear dissipated when she saw Paul Lintz—an old friend of hers who worked in the facility as a correctional officer. He greeted her with a smile, then looked at her sternly. "I'm not happy about your being here. I take it your boss and the warden are friends since not only did you get a private room, but you're seeing two prisoners." He paused. "Two men that you should leave alone." With a sigh and a reluctant wave forward, he continued, "But, come on."

Her damp rubber soles squeaked as she walked down the corridor, and it echoed off the walls, amplifying the sound. Outside of legal representation, the meetings had been an unusual request, but she wouldn't balk at how it had happened. With a smile, "I imagine so," was all she managed in reply.

"You going to tell me why you're meeting with someone you had the pleasure of exposing in your articles?"

She cringed. According to Adrian, there was new information that the courts refused to consider. How could she pass that up? Instead of explaining it all to Paul and admitting how much she relished in the thought of having a new twist to the story, she shrugged and smiled. "I'm just curious."

"Hmph." Disbelief wrapped in his voice. "Well, I'm not comfortable having you alone with them. Especially a murderer like Jason, but I don't get a choice. I'll be right outside the door."

Being alone with Jason Brock wasn't something she looked forward to either. The man had admitted to killing William Daring. Her heartbeat thumped hard against her rib cage at the thought of being closed in a room with a convicted murderer. She couldn't stop her mind from screaming that she was taking a huge risk for a story.

After inhaling a deep gulp of air, Kelly stood straight and steeled herself against the unrealistic notion of what could happen. There was no reason he'd attempt to kill her, especially in here. Paul ensured her all was safe for visitors. She trusted Paul with her life.

She had to put Jason's crime on the back burner in order to remain objective and focused. He claimed to have heard William's last words before he shot him in cold blood. Something that Adrian Copeland felt should be made public. Damned that investigative journalist mind of hers. Of course she had to know.

They arrived at a locked door, and Paul looked down at her. His brows furrowed. "Be safe. I'll be right outside."

He inserted the key into the lock, turned it and preceded her into a room with a small table and two metal chairs. She inwardly sighed. Before she had much time to reflect on how the

government should do something to liven up the room, so visitors weren't reminded of the oppressive environment, the door opposite them opened. Dressed in a prison jumpsuit, a man entered with a guard. It was only then that she noticed Paul had stepped in front of her. Not blocking her view, but letting Jason Brock know she was protected. A fat lot of good that did when the two of them were alone.

But, when Kelly sized up the murderer, she almost laughed. Jason Brock, a thin man, stood only about five foot nine. Her body immediately eased. This was a dangerous murderer?

Believing what criminals said was tough since some would say anything to get their sentence reduced. Jason, however, wasn't asking for that. He claimed to just want to set the record straight. To clear Adrian's name. That made this even more intriguing. What exactly had Jason and Adrian discussed behind closed doors? Her blood surged, energizing every cell with a dash of euphoria at that thought. A new investigation always invigorated her.

She scooted around Paul and stood behind a chair. "I'm Kelly Williams. You wanted to meet with me." She raised an eyebrow at the prisoner.

"I ain't talking with either of them in here." Jason motioned toward Paul and the guard.

Shoved forward by the guard, Jason moved and dropped in the seat at the table. After the guard had cuffed him to the table, the guard turned away.

Paul touched her forearm to gain her attention. She turned back to him. "Remember," he said, "I'll be right outside the door." He glared at Jason, then turned and walked out of the room, as did the guard. The closing of the two doors seemed so final, it gave her a moment's hesitation, and nervousness attempted to gnaw at her. Kelly shook it off and sat in a chair.

Kelly leaned back. "Now, I must remind you that I am not legal representation nor am I a private detective. I'm an investigative journalist for *Baltimore News First*. I may or may not look into your story. The confidentiality level is yours to decide. Before we begin, are there any questions on that? Are you clear there are to be no expectations from this meeting?"

Jason nodded and grumbled, "I understand."

When he didn't say anything else, she started with her questions. "Why are you coming to me with this and not the police?"

The man's shoulders sagged, taking a pitiful stance to a whole new level. So much for the big, bad murderer she'd built up in her mind. "I did tell them, but they didn't believe me."

That figured, considering his status as a convicted felon. "So, why me?"

He looked bewildered. "You were the one who worked hard on the story of Adrian and William. I thought you'd want to know the truth."

Excitement sliced through her veins, leaving a tingle in its wake. They'd supposedly already had the truth. "What truth is that?"

“William said Adrian didn’t hire him.”

Her breath caught. Since Adrian also wanted to meet, she should’ve expected this, but it still came as a shock. And not so believable. Recovering, she responded dryly, “And, you came forward with this after you met Adrian? Makes it a bit hard to swallow.”

Jason shook his head. “I came forward with it because he doesn’t deserve to be in here if he didn’t do what they say.”

Interesting. When to trust the word of an unscrupulous arsonist? Did he tell the truth during the trial, or when he had a gun to his head? Truly, both were difficult to believe. William had been a career criminal who could’ve lied under oath. Then, with his life on the line, he said Adrian didn’t do it. But why change his story?

Narrowing her eyes, she wondered what was in it for Jason. Absolutely nothing as far as she could tell. His sentence was for murder, and he’d made a deal with the prosecutor for a shorter sentence. “What’s in this for you?” she asked bluntly. No sense wasting her time. The hope was he answered honestly. She almost laughed out loud at that thought.

“Nothing except peace of mind. I have a family, and I know what it’s doing to them while I’m here. Adrian has one, albeit a grown child, and his son doesn’t deserve the pain and anguish of his father being locked away for something he didn’t do.”

Touching, but still, she remained skeptical. That was what kept her sharp in her field. Needing to know more about this man, she changed tact. “What happened? Why’d you do it?” Kelly had read what had been available on Jason, but something inside—some instinct—told her that it hadn’t been what came from his heart. That, she wanted to hear.

A heavily burdened sigh escaped the man. “I’m a carpenter. Times were tough, and I’d been out of work for close to six months. My wife, two girls, and I were about to be put out of our home. Heck, we’d barely had enough to eat.” He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing with the effort. “Every day I went out to find work, and every day I failed. Then one day I found an envelope in my car—my locked car—with a thousand dollars and a note that I had a job if I wanted it.” Leaning forward, he dropped his head low to reach his chained hands. “If only I’d known.”

While he took a moment to recover, Kelly assessed his body language. The man was troubled, possibly filled with guilt. Maybe he regretted what he’d done and what his family was now dealing with due to his incarceration.

She was about to speak when he looked up and continued, “I had no choice. I took the money to the bank and bought ourselves a little more time under the roof of a house I helped to build. Nothing happened, but I was nervous since I didn’t wait to see what job it was before I spent the money. Two days later, I found out. A second note appeared in my car, with another grand, telling me exactly what I needed to do and that it would pay me ten thousand dollars.”

He shook his head. "I went home, realizing the first money had only delayed the inevitable—unless I did this job, I'd be a victim myself. It turned my guts inside out. I couldn't return the first grand. It was already spent. So I knew I had no choice. That night, I kissed my wife and girls goodnight, then grabbed our gun and left the house."

"You found William at his apartment?" That much she remembered.

Nodding, he continued, "Yeah. All I could think about was my sweet babies and wife about to lose their home and criminals like William roaming the streets. The note told me I needed to knock off William because he torched some businesses and more were to be set on fire." Jason shook his head.

"William pleaded for his life and asked why he was getting knocked off. I told him someone wanted him dead for torching businesses. William laughed in my face. Although I never mentioned a name"—Jason stared boldly at her, pleading—"I didn't know any, he said that he promised to keep lying about Adrian hiring him to do the jobs. When I said there were supposed to be more, he laughed and said that was doubtful since his boss only wanted to ruin Adrian. Now that he was in jail, it didn't matter."

Jason shifted in his chair. "Then he laughed again. Laughing like I was some idiot or something. I was so confused that I didn't notice when he reached for the gun. There was a struggle, and well, the gun went off. I ran. Hadn't thought of fingerprints. They wouldn't have had them on file if I hadn't had a drunken fight while in college."

Jason closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry I ended that man's life. Criminal or not, he didn't deserve it. Now, my family's no better off than they were before, and I can't help them." Jason's voice broke near the end of his sentence.

"But why come forward now?" Kelly asked.

"I can't bring William back. I can't change what I did. But, if I can get an innocent man out of jail, well, then at least I accomplished some good in my life."

Before she could formulate an appropriate response, a knock sounded on the door, and Paul stepped into the room, scanning the table and Jason before looking at her. "Time's up."

Kelly nodded and watched a second guard unlock Jason from the table and walk him from the room. Her thoughts spun on whether to believe him or not. Even if she did, how would she prove his innocence? The police had ignored this new information, why shouldn't she follow suit? What reason would he have to lie though? Did Adrian promise him money in return for helping to set him free?

Releasing someone the DA convicted of a crime would go against their office's record, even if they actually found the guilty person or persons, so why put themselves out for a known criminal? She guessed justice wasn't always served.

Biting the inside of her mouth, she lost herself in thought. It was no secret that her articles bolstered his guilt. She'd never actually accused Adrian in her articles, but she'd put a great deal of circumstantial evidence out there. She'd been so positive he was guilty. Could she have been wrong all along? Kelly flinched. She'd listen to Adrian—truly listen and not patronize him—to see what came of this new information.

No sooner had she made her decision when Adrian was led into the room where she'd met with Jason. At fifty-three, Adrian was still a striking man with his dark hair that was mostly gray and dark brown, almost mysterious-looking eyes. Although thinner than Kelly remembered him, he still had an appealing figure for a man.

Assuming a standoffish, professional persona, she didn't stand for his entry, only nodded. "Mr. Copeland." She gestured to the chair across the table for him to sit, hoping the slight tremble in her hand didn't show. After sliding onto the chair, he leaned his forearms on the table, clasping his hands together before being cuffed to it by the guard.

After being left alone, he spoke. "Thank you for coming, Miss Williams. Did you speak with Jason?"

The eager, hopeful look tugged at her heart. *Stay strong.* "I did," she answered. "But, I'm not sure what you want me to do about it. And, I'm not printing a story with just his confession, and I see no way to corroborate it. In fact"—she leaned back in her chair, keeping herself far from him—"I'm surprised you contacted me about this."

His eyes widened. "You're perfect. If anyone can prove me innocent, it's you. I know from experience that you don't let go of a story, and you'd want your own evidence to prove me innocent."

In an instant, her hands shot up in a surrender movement. "Whoa. I'm not going to prove you innocent. I'm not the police or a private investigator."

"But you're a professional who prides herself in getting it right." He nodded. "Yes, I looked into you. And"—he stressed the word—"I think you want to get this right. It's got to be getting to you to know I might possibly be innocent."

Damn him. It was. Not that she'd tell him. "If the police don't believe it, why should I?"

"Because the police won't admit they were wrong. They only listened to that bastard William who lied." Anger lanced so strongly through his words, she felt it in her bones.

Still reeling from the onslaught of the vehemence in his statement, she questioned, "Why not hire a private investigator?" That was what she'd have done. She almost shook her head. No, she'd probably have gone to the press also. Yet, she might be biased.

“And pay them how?” He raised his eyebrows. “They took everything my ex-wife—the bitch—hadn’t already taken. My son is struggling to pull it all back together. I won’t take from him. Besides,”—he smiled confidently—“I think you’d do a better job.”

She probably would, if she made the time. Releasing a small sigh, she nodded. “I can’t promise anything, but I’ll listen.”

Relief washed across Adrian’s face. “That’s all I ask. And, in return, I have some information I overheard that you might want to hear. About the death of your fiancé.” He smirked, and her stomach lurched.

Kelly’s nerves tightened. Her confidence and strength instantly washed away.

Later, as she made her way to her car, still reeling from the interview, she tried to process what Adrian had told her about Brian’s accident. His death. Part of her doubted the validity of his statements, but she wanted to know who had taken her fiancé’s life so needlessly.

As she approached her vehicle, Kelly noticed the trunk was open. Hadn’t she closed it? She picked up her pace. Once at the back of the vehicle, she swallowed hard. An icy chill slid down her spine. Kelly looked around at the sound of squealing tires, wondering if that was her thief escaping.

Unsettled, and dreading what she’d find, she reached down and slowly lifted the trunk lid so she could see inside. A quick glance confirmed her purse had been stolen. There’d only been one other thing in her trunk, and it was also missing. Brian’s large suitcase that had been stowed there until she could deal with its contents. Deal with the memories associated with it.

Although angry at losing her purse, she shook her head in disbelief. Now, who the hell would want Brian’s clothes?

Kelly slammed her trunk closed and entered her car. Once seated, she blew out a deep, long sigh. Emotions, mainly hormone induced, spiraled out of control. Her eyes tried to produce tears, but she held them at bay. Jason. Adrian. Brian. Information overload. But, there was one other person that entered her mind, as it often did on occasion whenever she reflected on her life. Trent McKenzie. The only man she ever truly loved. Deeply.

Where was he now?

Three

SITTING ON THE secluded beach on the Gulf Coast they'd found, Trent McKenzie and Jamie Michaels laughed at all they'd done while traveling. Once he'd recovered enough to leave the hospital after surviving the bomb blast where he'd saved a little girl's life, Trent had prepared to hit the road on his bike and never return. Too many painful memories and problems awaited him in Baltimore.

As for Jamie, she'd been his constant companion these last few months. Initially, he'd balked at having company on his pity party tour, and that was truly what it had been planned to be whether he'd officially called it that or not. That had been Jamie's label for it. The woman believed in speaking her mind—no matter how blunt. But then, he'd learned why she'd been so insistent to join him on his travels.

Jamie, a nurse at the hospital where he'd been recovering from burns and wounds inflicted during a bomb blast, had approached him on more than one occasion about riding off with him. He'd brushed it off as a joke. On the day prior to his release, though, she'd tried one last time. "Trent," Jamie had said softly, "I know you planned to go off alone, but you don't really need to be alone. And, I don't want to be alone any longer."

"Jamie—" he'd started. It had shocked the hell out of him. She'd been a great nurse caring for him but hadn't acted as if she cared more than nurse-patient. Granted, as a red-blooded male, he'd noticed her beauty. She was attractive with long dark hair she kept tied back and her deep, laughing chocolate-colored eyes. No matter her good looks or her constantly cheerful attitude, he wasn't ready for a romantic relationship. He might never be again. Hell, who would want him as fucked up as he was on the inside and especially on the outside?

As for his trip, he hadn't kept it a secret that as soon as he'd recovered enough, he was taking his bike to the road and going wherever it took him. Getting away from it all was the only thing he could think about that didn't rip his walls apart. As a grown man, he didn't need shit bothering him. Better to let it all go and start over elsewhere.

She'd put her hands up to stop his flow of words. "I'm not asking for that. I'm talking about companionship. Just give me a month of seeing what I can of the country. After that, I don't think I'll be up for much." She had paused, and he'd been ready to interject again and decline having her as a travel partner. Then, she'd heaved a burdened sigh, and he'd waited for what he guessed he wouldn't like to hear. "You see, I'm dying of ovarian cancer."

That had stopped him in his mental tracks, and his heart had beaten rapidly for her. She'd seemed so full of life that he'd struggled to rationalize her words. It took him a few moments to

regain his senses and ask more questions to find out further information, even if he didn't like the answers. He'd steeled himself. "What about chemo? Drugs? All the stuff they do to help save someone with cancer?" He knew not everyone survived, but it happened.

While she shook her head and her eyes glistened with unshed tears, his heart ached for a woman he didn't really know. A woman who'd tried her damndest to cheer him on a daily basis. An impossible task.

"It's too late. I can try it all, but..." After she'd left that to hang between them, he didn't need to ask anything else. She'd answered him. Either way, she'd die soon.

He'd swallowed hard. How could he deny a dying woman her final wish when it was in his power to grant it, but only his selfishness stood in the way? Thinking back on how she'd taken care of him, changing his bandages and keeping him company to the point where he'd somewhat looked forward to her visits, ate away all his self-absorbed thoughts. An aching need to repay her, in any way he could, had overtaken every thought in his head.

So, after he'd helped Devon on a quick mission, he and Jamie had taken off with no real plan in mind. Eventually, she'd given him a list of places she wanted to see—The Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls and other major tourist destinations—and they'd seen each and every landmark that had been on her bucket list.

Only, he hadn't taken her back after a month. They'd both been so carefree—her not worrying about dying and him not worrying about what his next move would be.

"I love this one." Jamie leaned her phone toward him with a photo of Trent at the Grand Canyon.

Smiling, he pulled out his phone. "Oh yeah." He flipped through some photos on his cell and found one identical to it with her in it. "I like this one." Proudly, he showed her the picture. They'd done that at most photo sites. When they couldn't get someone to take their photo together, they'd take them in the same spot on each phone.

"Wait. Wait." She pulled her phone back close and snickered. "I've got it." Producing a photo of the two of them in the same spot, she smiled brightly.

For some reason, it created fits of laughter between the two of them. They'd had a good time at each stop, when Jamie wasn't too weak.

"I'm glad we took that tour through Yellowstone instead of trying to find all those magnificent spots ourselves," Jamie said.

Talking him into ditching the bike hadn't been easy for her, but in the end, he'd acquiesced, and they'd joined a tour. Like her, he was glad they had. She'd enjoyed it so much.

"What was your favorite place?" he asked.

She appeared to think for a moment, then turned to him. "Here."

A lump formed in his throat and guilt hit him square in the chest because he'd never felt so alive as he did at the moment.

"I still say you can't surf, not that there were enough waves here to do it properly," she teased.

Trent laughed. "You've got me. I have no clue how to fucking surf. But," he said and winked, "I looked good doing it."

"I don't know about that. As many headers as you took only made for plenty of funny videos."

"You didn't," he said aghast.

A big smile split her face, and she hugged her phone to her chest. "I did."

Reaching out, he grabbed for the phone. "Give me that. I want those videos deleted."

Jamie giggled, and he decided to tickle her instead which increased the volume of her laughter. Once she began to hiccup and could barely get, "Enough," out, he stopped.

God, he was going to miss her.

During the travels, he and Jamie had never become anything more than friends. They'd become close enough that he'd poured open his heart and she'd listened. And she'd given her advice. Advice that always made sense, but his gut twisted too much at what she'd tell him. He just wasn't ready to let the pain go. He might never be. It wouldn't be fair if he did and live as if his life hadn't been torn in two. Hell, each night he went to sleep, he'd be almost sick to his stomach at the fact he'd enjoyed the day. A day he didn't deserve to have attached to his life when he'd survived but Les hadn't.

Since they were on a secluded beach and it was only Jamie in sight, he'd removed his shirt to enjoy the sun. Because she'd nursed him in the hospital, he was never embarrassed for her to see his hideous back; she'd already seen the destruction the bomb blast had wrought that modern medicine hadn't been able to fix. It had been... freeing, sitting in the sun without hiding his torso. They'd raced in and out of the waves and relaxed on the sand underneath a beach umbrella. *Damn*, he thought as his mood continued to turn south. He caught himself before he plunged into a place he didn't want to be.

She's been good for my soul.

Resting his head on his arms, Trent had nearly blocked out the world. The sound of the surf washed through him, leaving him relaxed and clear-minded.

"Promise me something, Trent," Jamie said.

Uneasy at what her request might be, he hesitantly responded, "I'll try."

Turning to him, she placed a hand on his cheek. Her touch soothed him. "Forgive yourself and your family and go home to them."

He jerked back so quickly, her startled look almost frightened him. "I can't promise that."

Forgive what? Senator Blake Hamilton, since Trent found out he was his real father?

He'd grown up on the grounds of the Hamilton estate and finally knew why. The man had wanted to keep him under his thumb without anyone knowing his dirty little secret of how he had an affair with his assistant—Trent's mother.

"I don't think I want to deal with"—he hesitated before spitting out—"my father." He scrunched up his face. "The word feels like sand sliding across my tongue."

"You'll have to make your peace with him at some point. Whether you forgive him or not."

"I'm damn sure not going to forgive him."

"What about your brothers? The Hamilton brothers are innocent in this, even though you say the oldest, Jesse, found out and kept it quiet."

With the weight of her statements, his shoulders sagged in despair. "They've been good to me. They've always been good to me. Growing up, they involved me in everything."

"That's good then." She cocked her head at him. "Isn't it?"

Leaning forward, he dug his hand in the sand and made a small pile before answering. "I don't know. I don't blame them, but calling them my brothers after a lifetime of wishing they were.... I just don't know."

The sun began its rapid descent beyond the horizon, and they both sat, transfixed.

"Are you going to go back to work with them?"

Several years ago, the Hamilton brothers had started a business—Hamilton Investigation & Security, or HIS as it was commonly called, where they pooled together the talents of military and law enforcement to make a top-tier crew of professionals that were in big demand, and it paid so well between the private and government contracts, they could pick and choose. It seemed that lately, their time was spent chasing after men who were terrorizing women who'd ended up becoming Hamilton wives. Or, husband as with the men's foster brother marrying their baby sister. It was their little girl, Amber, who he'd saved.

"I don't know."

"You said they offered you a partnership," she said.

The sun slipped away completely, and they sat in darkness only manageable by the brightness of the full moon.

"I don't want it," he spat out.

Jamie sighed. "Fine. We won't talk about it."

They sat quietly for a few minutes before she spoke again. "We both know my time is close. Before I go, you have to promise me to at least deal with your survivor's guilt. It's what's eating you up, and I worry that once you don't have me to worry about, you'll never fully recover from it because you'll just run whenever you can."

Her words were a punch to Trent's gut. How could he forgive himself for not finding a way to save Les? Trent had trusted the Hamilton men to get them all out alive. He'd trusted himself. He'd failed, and the damn terrorist had blown herself up, taking Les's life with her.

In his mind, he didn't deserve to live after not saving his friend. "How can I ever forgive myself for not finding a way to help Les? To change spots with him? I don't know if I'll ever go back. I can't face them." The HIS mission may have been successful in saving Amber, but at a high cost. Les had been a good friend to all.

"Did your brothers say anything about it when you released yourself from the hospital and helped them rescue one of your brother's wives? Didn't they trust you?"

Flinching, he knew she was right about helping Devon—one of his half-brothers. God that word burned his tongue. "No. But that was different."

A coughing fit hit her, and he was reminded of her illness. His heart tore apart, knowing the end was near. He'd never had someone he was so comfortable with as a friend with the exception of Kelly Williams. And he missed her greatly. Kelly was the one person he knew who wouldn't judge him. At least he hoped. He couldn't take her censure.

"Trent, you're ready to face it all. The new family. The new father. And Les's friends and family," she rasped. "Promise me."

No way in hell was he ready to handle any of it. He'd rather just move somewhere and start over and forget about it all. No one person should have to deal with so much at one time. But there was only one answer to give at this point. He would have to lie to her. "I promise."

One thing Trent knew was that the beach would be their final stop. Jamie couldn't go on any further.

As the days went, when she began to weaken, he took care of her as she succumbed to her disease. Not having any close family, she hadn't planned to burden them—or him. Yet, he couldn't deliver her home just so she could die alone.

The rifles discharging in her veteran salute startled him. As an army nurse with two tours in Afghanistan, Jamie had earned that respect. He was glad he'd taken her home and arranged for it.

Jamie, I know that I promised you I'd go home, but I need more time. I can't face them yet.

With that thought, he turned from the funeral and silently left.

THE soothing sound of the waves crashing upon the shore and then receding, leaving the sand coated with white foam, seeped into Trent's soul, attempting to cleanse all that was wrong in his world. Sitting on the sand, legs pulled up and forearms on his knees, he braved being shirtless because, from his experience with Jamie, no one came to this little parcel of beach. They'd wondered

if it was privately owned and they were trespassing. Then they'd decided they didn't care. If it was someone's little chunk of paradise, they could come toss them off the beach.

In order to remove his shirt, being secluded was important to him since the bomb blast had done a number on his back, butt, and rear of his legs. In recovery, he'd suffered through many skin grafts, but, in his mind, he still looked like a hideous monster.

The true problem he faced was his soul, not his skin. Jamie had called it survivor's guilt. That was what he'd been feeling, why he didn't deserve to be here, why his soul had been ripped apart and destroyed. Because had he not walked into the situation, his friend Les, might've found a way out. But he had walked into the mix of things. Sure he'd saved Amber's life. Sure Les hadn't been in a position close enough to help; instead, Les had been closer to the terrorist. There'd been no choice. Had Les not stepped between them all and tackled the bomber, Trent and the little girl would also be dead. His picking up Amber, pulling her in his arms, and putting his back to Les before launching himself in the swimming pool, was how he'd been injured. It had hurt like hell. So much so that at times, he'd wanted to die.

God, he wanted to punch something, and punching the sand wasn't cutting it. *Slow, deep, calming breaths*, Jamie would tell him when he got himself into an emotional tangle. Hell, he'd come back here because of the peace he'd found when the two of them had been here. That calm wasn't coming his way today.

Inhaling deeply, the extra expansion of his lungs as he held his breath calmed him. Today the air smelled like an ocean should—clean, wet with a salty tease.

Sadness for Jamie seeped back into his heart. She'd been so weak at that point that he'd been mostly carrying her. The doctor he'd made her see hadn't approved of her activity but told her that he understood.

Long before the shadow came over him, he'd heard the squeak of feet walking in sand, but not in enough time to don his shirt. Whoever it was might be so grossed out they'd go away. Hopefully, it wasn't screaming as they ran. Just going away would be nice because he didn't want company.

All along he'd wondered if his new family had known where he'd been. They probably had. Devon surely tracked his credit card activity or whatever shit he did to find someone. His damn secretive CIA computer-shit training was spooky.

Trent had been curious how long the Hamiltons would let him be before they intruded with what they thought was best. If this was one, he expected it to be the eldest Hamilton brother. Jesse always took control of everything. His pulse skipped at the thought that he had to decide whether to acknowledge his relationship with the family.

But the intoxicating scent that wafted over him and tickled his nose as someone sat down beside him told him it wasn't one of his newfound brothers. It was a perfume he recognized, as was the blonde hair flapping in the wind he caught from the corner of his eye.

Realizing who it was, he smiled at the thought of her visiting him, but cringed inwardly a little. She was someone he hadn't wanted to see his burned and scarred back, although he knew deep down she wouldn't comment on it. Wouldn't get sick looking at it. Wouldn't give him the fucking pity look. That was the one thing he really didn't want or need.

Still gazing over the sea, the two sat in companionable silence. This was a woman he'd once made a move on, only to be rebuffed. True, his heart hadn't been in it, nor was it broken now, but unbelievably, she'd chosen the youngest Hamilton brother over him. Playboy AJ. Hell, both men had been players. But Trent had even taken a bullet to protect her, and she'd still chosen someone else. *Women. They need to come with instruction manuals.*

He guessed it only made sense to send her if the Hamilton men were being pussies about approaching him. They'd want to bring out the big guns, and with him, Megan was it. Actually, Kelly was, but Megan was within their sphere. The question in his mind was why were they searching him out now.

Unable to stand the suspense any longer, he greeted her, "Hey, doll. Did you finally have that kid?" He should've slapped his own self for that stupid fucking question. Without even turning to fully look at her, it was obvious she wasn't pregnant any longer. Plus, he'd been gone long enough that she'd had the baby months ago or it'd be a world record pregnancy.

She leaned back, propping herself up on her arms. "Yes. Not long after you left. You have a beautiful nephew—Alexander Jonathan."

Nephew? This whole family thing would take some getting used to—if he decided to do so. He'd been an only child all his life. Hell, he wasn't ready to deal with this crap because with the brothers came the father. A man he'd just as soon never see again in his life.

"Where's your keeper?" It amazed him that AJ allowed her to sit this close to him for so long. Her husband was a jealous and possessive shit, especially around Trent. He knew AJ didn't like when Trent flirted with her, but he couldn't help it—flirting was in his blood, and it took control of his actions far too frequently. He mentally shrugged. AJ would show up at any minute.

Through the salty breeze, a soft chuckle reached his ears. "He's at the hotel with Alex."

Utterly flabbergasted, he jerked his head to her. "He let you come here—alone?"

Tossing her head back, her hair sliding off her shoulders, she laughed. "Let? Like I allow him to dictate to me." Dropping her head to the side, she focused on him and smiled. He loved how it brightened her face. "When are you coming home?"

Home. He really didn't have a home any longer. Hadn't since his parents died. Roger McKenzie was his dad. The man had raised him. He didn't need a replacement father. Nor instant brothers. He blew out a breath. He wanted to joke with her—have fun like they used to do, but he couldn't do that with this conversation. "I don't know that I am." *Sorry, Jamie. Maybe one day I'll make good on my promise, but not today.*

"Look," she said in all seriousness, "this is between you and Blake. Don't hold your brothers responsible for this. You've been a part of this family all your life."

"And we now know why," he bit out more harshly than she deserved. Good old fucking Senator Blake Hamilton kept him as his dirty little secret. Wondering how Blake actually kept it quiet all these years with opponents trying to unseat him in the senate always digging up dirt, he almost missed her next words.

"Make peace, or not, with your father, but don't cut out the only friends you've had."

Knowing *his brothers*—there, he'd said it—weren't responsible, didn't make it any easier to act like nothing had changed, except their title went from friend to family.

Water slipped toward them as the tide moved in and waves slid inland. Maybe he should've taken off his shoes instead of his shirt. Stupid thing to think about considering the conversation, but now that he had company, he'd certainly feel more comfortable that way. "I'll think about it."

"There's something else. It's the main reason I wanted to be the one to speak with you."

Curious, he appraised her and raised a brow. "Go on." His gut turned in warning that this could get interesting.

"It's Kelly."

Instantly his blood turned to ice, and his entire focus became this conversation. "Kelly?" he questioned with a croak in his voice and his heart pounding.

Nodding solemnly, she continued, "Something's going on with her. I don't know what it is, and she won't open up."

Blood pressure rising rapidly, he took those damn soothing breaths Jamie told him to take as sweat broke out on his brow. "What kind of trouble? Is she safe?" he rushed out in one breath, wanting all the information yesterday so he could act.

"Honestly, I don't know that it's any trouble at all, Trent, but something has her spooked."

"I'll leave in the morning and drive straight through." *Kelly, baby, stay safe until I get to you.*

Shocked, she sucked in a breath. "Trent, that's sixteen and a half hours."

Shrugging, he was already calculating everything he had to do before he left. That long drive was nothing for Kelly's sake. Hell, if he didn't need transportation when he got back to Baltimore, he'd just hop a flight and store his bike. "I can make good time on the bike. Besides, it's Kelly."

A knowing smile spread across Megan's face.

Let her think what she wanted. Kelly was special to him. Precious. And, not to be touched. He respected her too much. That didn't mean his dick didn't think differently whenever he was around her. But what was important now was making sure she was safe.

"Tell me more," he insisted, as the need to be by Kelly's side simmered in his veins.
Well, Jamie, you got your wish. I'm going to face them. At least my brothers.