



Hamilton Investigation & Security

HIS Series, Book 5.5

Blake & Elizabeth

Three Chapter Excerpt

Sheila Kell

*Cunningham
Books*

Prologue

THE CRACKLING FLAMES of the campfire had nearly died down when the real conversation began. Blake Hamilton's sons, along with foster son, Jake Cavanaugh, sat on the ground contemplating their futures without their big brother. With graduation from high school around the corner, Jesse had been accepted at the University of Maryland, and they were celebrating with a camping trip. It was only on the back of their Silver Spring, Maryland property, but they were alone. Or at least they thought they were.

Blake didn't mean to be a voyeur. He'd actually come looking for his daughter, Emily, who hadn't been happy her brothers got to camp out, and she wasn't permitted to join them. To her, there was no such thing as a "guys' night" for her brothers.

He'd spotted her behind some bushes with Trent McKenzie, the son he wished with all his heart he could claim publicly. But he'd made a deal with Trent's mother which allowed him to see the boy grow up even though he had to keep silent about his origins. It constantly wrenched his heart out when his wife turned Trent away, increasing the suffering from his mistake. No. Not a mistake. Trent had never been a mistake.

The two were peeking in on the group of campers, so his interest has been piqued as to what the topic happened to be and whether it would be deemed appropriate for her ears. The ones around the fire were healthy, good-looking, girl-chasing boys after all.

But they weren't talking about girls—not at the moment, anyway. They were worried about what would happen when Jesse left. The truth was, they didn't need Jesse like when they were younger. When Blake had been too busy with his career to be the type of father they'd needed, Jesse had watched over his brothers.

It wrenched at his heart that Jesse took on the role. Blake should've been there more. He should've been the father they'd needed. Going through so many nannies should've clued him in they needed him when he'd been working to secure future elections for himself.

He'd made individual time for all his kids, but watching them, he realized it hadn't been enough. It might be too late to be that father to Jesse, but things would change before it was too late for his younger children.

Using a stick to draw in the dirt beside him, AJ wore his favorite Orioles T-shirt and sighed heavily. At ten years old, AJ was buddies with an eleven-year-old Jake. Because of when their birthdays fell, they were in the same grade, and when he'd enrolled Jake, he'd managed to get them in the same class.

As a hothead, AJ was apt to jump first and figure out he shouldn't have later. When he wasn't jumping into the fire, he believed the world was his playground. Maybe the family spoiled him too much. Whatever the case, Jake had a solid head on his shoulders and wouldn't allow AJ to lead them astray. "I thought we'd always be together."

Children usually believed that. The children had thought that of their mother before she'd passed from cancer.

"We'll be together, just not living in the same house," Jesse said.

One of the twins snorted, and Jesse's head whipped toward them with a deadly gleam in his eyes. Brad and Matt, who'd just turned thirteen and sported black eyes, were still ornery and fighting over everything.

Blake shook his head at both the insolence of the snort and the stupidity of how they'd acquired those injuries. They'd broken each other's noses over a girl. At their age. So what that she'd kissed the both of them and then told each the other was a better kisser. They had to lighten up and stop being so randy if they were to survive high school girls.

As their father, he found the whole of the situation amusing—although he'd never admit it—but he'd also been resigned to how things could be until the two developed a thick skin so childish pranks by a mere slip of a girl wouldn't affect them.

Heaven help them all when the two were grown. One could hope that as they matured, so did their tastes, and in a different direction so they weren't both looking at the same girl.

"AJ, I need to go to college."

"But why?" his youngest son whined.

Seeming to try another tact, Jesse asked, "AJ, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A policeman." He straightened his shoulder with pride radiating from them. "But I'm going to live here," he hurriedly added.

"What about college?"

After AJ's inability to accept Jesse leaving for college, Blake couldn't understand where his eldest son planned to lead this conversation

Another sigh from AJ. "If I must."

The boy had no clue. Blake would have someone drag his ass to class every day in college if that was what it took for him to gain an education. As Jesse had found out, going to college—or not—wasn't negotiable in the Hamilton household.

"I'm going. If I can afford it." Jake pulled his knees close to his chest and rested his arms across them. His jeans looked as if they could be short. It was hard to tell since in that position anyone's pants would pull up that way. The boy was growing fast. "I hear there are ways."

Oh, he'd go to college and it'd be paid for but not from Jake's criminal father. Blake wouldn't allow Jake to be someone who fell through the cracks once he turned eighteen and foster care ended.

"What do you want to be, Jake?" Jesse asked.

"A policeman."

This, Blake knew. After having his father pulled off him by an officer, it had been a single focus of the kid.

"But I want college too," Jake added.

"I know." Eagerness flowed through AJ's words. "We can all be policemen together. Have our own unit at BPD. Dad could make it happen. I know he can."

Blake almost busted out laughing at that. The kid had a bit too much faith in his father, but if that was what they wanted, he'd work his ass off to make it happen. Anything for his kids.

Jesse shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. Besides, I think I'm going in the army after I graduate."

What the fuck? Blake's heart nearly stopped. This was news to him. He didn't know what to think. Pride. Fear. No, pride. His son knew what he wanted and was competent. Definitely pride. He only wished he'd been told first.

"What?" exploded from a sixteen-year-old Devon in a black T-shirt and jeans with holes in them. The boy was smart as a whip and could do almost anything with a computer. Blake saw MIT in his future and a recruiting call from either the CIA or NSA. From what

Blake had heard from Jesse, instead of worrying about college and a future career, Devon was enjoying all the attention he received from the girls in high school.

Jesse picked up a wood chip and tossed it into the fire, watching it get devoured by the flames. “Yeah. I’ll do ROTC and join. Hopefully one day they’ll ask me to be a U.S. Army Ranger.”

His pride in his son grew twofold.

“I want to be a SEAL.”

Blake couldn’t believe those words came from Matt. The young man, when not connected with Brad, was the opposite of what he expected of a SEAL. They were big, badass men who ate nails for breakfast. Matt was calm and peaceful. A hostage negotiator seemed more his speed.

“Like they’d take you,” Brad taunted and leaned into Matt, shoving him with his elbow.

“What about you, Brad?” Jesse asked.

The teenager always tried to act big and bad around them, but Blake knew the real Brad, and he was gentle and kind.

Keeping the twins separated seemed key. When the time came, he’d push for different colleges. That should do it since those years helped make a man. If they didn’t beat the shit out of the other one before then.

“I’m going to be a bodyguard.” He bowed up his scrawny chest wearing a shit-eating grin. “I’m going to protect hot movie stars and supermodels.”

Everyone laughed. The kid did like to be comic relief.

“Why can’t you all just be policemen with me and Jake?” AJ whined.

Blake wanted to go out there and soothe AJ and explain how they were all different, but he held his ground and left it to Jesse since he wasn’t supposed to be there.

“Well, because we all want different things,” Jesse explained.

“But there has to be a place we can all work together,” AJ insisted.

Brad stood. “We could all work for Dad,” he turned and shot over his shoulder. Blake thought he’d been noticed. Instead, Brad took off in a different direction. “I gotta take a piss.”

“I don’t want to work for Dad. I want to wear a badge and protect people.” AJ’s voice took on that annoyed tone it did when he wasn’t getting his way. Usually they tried some way to please him.

In this, they couldn’t help him because there was no way they could all work together. Even protecting people.

Just about to step away, thinking the conversation had ended, AJ jumped from his place. “I know. We can have our own company. Then we can work together.”

Knowing this would go nowhere, he turned to make his way to Emily and take her inside. As he neared them, he heard his seven-year-old daughter tell Trent, “I’m going to join them too.”

“Aw, Em, they won’t want a girl,” said Trent in all his eleven-year-old wisdom.

She stuck out her chin in defiance and launched her hand on her hip, the tips of her fingers sliding under her pink top. “They will,” she insisted. “I’ll be Jake’s wife, so they’ll have to take me.”

Jake’s wife? What the fuck? He’d best watch those two.

Trent shook his head and rolled his eyes but said nothing to such a ludicrous statement.

That made him wonder what else he’d missed not being around much.

“And they’ll take you too.”

“I can’t. I’m not a Hamilton.”

If only he knew....

Grinning, Trent added, “And I’m not marrying Jake.”

She scrunched up her mouth to show her displeasure. “Jake’s not family either.”

“True, but he’s like family. Me? My mom works for your dad.” He frowned. “I’m like the hired help.”

That shot an arrow through his heart. He almost stepped out and broke the news, but at the last minute, he held back, keeping to his promise.

“I don’t care and neither will they,” Emily insisted.

“Come on, let’s go home before someone misses you.” He reached out his hand, and she clasped her small one in his. So trusting.

Blake took an alternate trek back to the house to avoid Emily and Trent. His mind spun the whole way. Wouldn't it be great if they all stayed together and did own a company of their own? He couldn't be happier or prouder if that ever happened.

One

Seventeen years later

U.S. SENATOR BLAKE Hamilton always thought he'd be ready for anything that came his way. He'd once been a member of a black ops team, albeit short-lived. As a senator, he'd flown into dangerous territories where he had to wear a flak vest and helmet to greet troops. He'd faced down angry constituents who didn't agree with his stance. After his first few years in office, dealing with senior executive leadership was a cakewalk. Meeting with foreign leaders hadn't even thrown him off his game. He'd been raised as a senator's son, and he knew what it took to be a good senator, and he emulated it to the best of his ability.

Raising six boys and one girl—albeit with a host of nannies and other workers—had only added gray to his dark hair. Being a single father after their mother died had freaked him out initially, but the advice he'd received from his father guided him. *Handle everything with love and compassion.*

So, he had. And he'd handled everything else with the strength of his character and his resolve to be a good man.

Then came Elizabeth Page.

It'd been another fundraiser he'd agreed to attend with Drew, a fellow congressman, not paying much attention to the cause, just grateful he hadn't had to don his monkey suit. The tux got entirely too much wear as far as he was concerned. Instead, he'd worn his favorite Brioni dark gray suit, prepared to meet the woman who had Drew in knots.

As the evening had progressed, he'd learned the cause was Diamond Blackfan Anemia Awareness. It sickened him to hear of the destruction of this horrible disease. And while not widespread, it wasn't picky when it sought its victims.

After committing to a hefty donation, he turned his head to find this angel gliding toward him and Drew. Her long white gown shone as she passed the lights, glittering like pixie dust. With her blonde hair pulled up in some up-do thing women did, her long, slender neck called to his lips. His gut rotated into knots of desire. He had to meet this beautiful woman. Had to get to know her.

Reaching out her hands as she approached, she clasped both of Drew's outstretched hands and squeezed them.

"Senator Shelby, it's so great that you could come."

"I wouldn't miss a chance to see you, my lovely."

Shell-shocked, Blake stood there, trying to take in this lovely creature and... he couldn't even think it without wanting to toss his cookies. This couldn't be who Drew had been raving about for weeks now. It couldn't. She had to be his.

"And"—she turned to Blake with a beautiful smile, but still spoke to Drew—"who is this?"

That was a slap in the face. He'd been in politics for more than twenty years. He'd chaired more committees than he'd like to have done. His name and face were always plastered in the news. He was the fucking Senate minority leader.

Clearing his throat to speak for himself, he thrust out a hand to clasp hers. "I'm Blake Hamilton." Let her figure out if he was an important donor or not. If the name didn't knock sense into her, he had an uphill battle. At least from what he could tell from their initial interaction, she hadn't shown Drew any different emotions than she showed him.

"It's nice to meet you." She shook his hand with a soft one he could imagine running all over his body. "I'm Elizabeth Page." After dropping her hand, she waved it as if to encompass the area. "Thank you for attending tonight. I'll be glad to answer questions."

Although he'd learned plenty beforehand, he'd ask question after question to keep her close, to hear her voice, to catch a drift of her scent when he could. "What's the short overview of the disease?"

Her smile dimmed some with her response. "Diamond Blackfan Anemia is a disorder of the bone marrow. In Diamond Blackfan Anemia, the bone marrow malfunctions and fails to make enough red blood cells, which carry oxygen to the body's tissues."

"Is there a cure?"

Her smile disappeared all together. "Sadly, no. Which is why foundations such as mine are so important. Building awareness and helping fund research are crucial in our attempts to beat this disease."

They spoke more in depth about her foundation. With each fervent word she spoke, her passion about the project exploded to the surface as her face glowed and a light burned

bright in her eyes. Her response stirred him and made him wonder if she'd be this passionate in bed.

Before that night, he hadn't been enjoying a robust sex life. Months ago, his latest mistress had wanted marriage, and he'd refused, so she'd walked. He imagined—knowing her—she expected him to come running back with his tail tucked between his legs when he realized how much he missed her. He only missed sex. She'd even taken the fun out of it until it was just plain old screwing.

He'd come to the realization that was all there was at his age. Hell, it wouldn't be much longer, and he'd have to have pills to get it up. At least that was what he'd been told. Right now his dick worked fine. It just needed a good, warm place to park itself.

After the event, he'd gotten out of Drew that there wasn't a relationship between him and Elizabeth. Never before had he thought to put a woman over friendship, but with her, he would do it. He informed Drew that he planned to make a play for her. Laughing, his friend told him that she'd yet to choose anyone vying for her attention so Blake could waste his time beside him and others.

After years of working together, Drew should know that Blake didn't waste time, and he didn't lose.



It had taken a few months, but with a full-court press to gain Elizabeth's attention, he'd won. It hadn't been easy. She didn't play coy, but she hadn't wanted a relationship—with anyone. She'd been quite happy with her solitary life. But he hadn't given up and finally Elizabeth was his.

They'd been seeing each other ever since. They hadn't been a public couple, preferring to keep their relationship secret, but they'd been seen together at several events over the past year. A few people had figured out something was happening, but preferred to speculate with their friends instead of asking.

And if they had asked, he'd have told them the truth—he'd fallen head over heels in love with her and planned to make her his wife. As far as he knew, she had no idea he was that serious about their relationship. Sure they'd said they loved each other, but the heads-over-heels crap hadn't been discussed. He considered that the final level before taking the plunge—something he swore he'd never do again after his marriage to Camilla.

He wouldn't allow his mind to divert to his late wife. Marriage would work with Elizabeth. He just knew it. As for his kids, Elizabeth would be their stepmother, even though they were too old to have one, so he wanted their approval. Since he made all his calls and Facetime with his kids all about them, they hadn't met Elizabeth and Blake hadn't spoken of her. Even if his children didn't approve—which he couldn't see how since she was absolutely perfect—he'd still propose, but he'd prefer their blessing.

So, he set up a family affair at their Oxford home to introduce Elizabeth to his children and grandchildren. Her future children and grandchildren by marriage. He'd have a day with her with no hectic social or work calendar to intrude, then the entire family was arriving. Then, proposing.

A knock sounded on the door to his study in his DC townhouse effectively bringing his mind back to focus on his current task—get the hell out of here as quickly as possible and pick up Elizabeth.

“Come,” he said more gruffly than he'd meant. It wasn't his assistant's fault he wanted to be gone.

Approaching the desk, Randy Rollins, the young kid he'd taken a chance on a few years ago wore an uncommon frown.

Drawing his brows in, his gut clenching, Blake asked, “What's going on?”

Randy reached a shaky hand and slid a single sheet of paper on Blake's desk. “They sent another one. I already called to have it traced, but it could be like the last couple and end up a dead end.”

He reached across the desk, trepidation in his movement. With his fingers on the paper, Blake pulled it to him and read the same note they'd sent before. The same thing that confused the hell out of him.

Vote our way or you die.

How the hell did whoever sent this expect him to know which way to vote? On what? Not that he'd allow a threat to dictate that. But if they knew any of the Ws—who, what, why—they could stop the idiots sending these notes.

Death threats weren't uncommon, but the inability to track these brief messages told of someone a bit more intelligent than the average person who sends a threat. Yet, they've not said how to vote, so maybe they aren't all that brilliant after all.

With a heavy sigh that emptied his lungs, Blake leaned back in his office chair. “Maybe this time they screwed up.”

“Do you think it’s time to get some protection?”

Thinking for a moment, he shook his head. “No. It says if I don’t vote, then I die. They obviously want me to vote on something, so it stands to reason they won’t harm me.” *Yet.* “I don’t have anything to vote on until after I return from vacation. When I return, we’ll reevaluate it then.”

“Good luck on the proposal, sir.” Randy nodded. “She’ll say yes.”

His gut clenched. He wouldn’t accept any other answer from her but yes. Even if that meant kidnapping her and holding her hostage until it happened. Even though he joked, his gut clenched at the thought of something so terrible happening to her. No way would he hurt a hair on her precious head. God help the man who ever did.

Two

“I’M TELLING YOU, Beth, he’s going to propose,” Crystal said fervently.

Elizabeth Page gripped the phone and pushed it tighter to her ear. *If only he would.* “He’d best,” she stated in response even though one wasn’t required. It generally wasn’t with her friend who made bold statements without thinking them through before they left her mouth. “If not, I’ll do it.” She nodded even though Crystal couldn’t see her. “We’ve been together more than long enough. Marriage is the next logical step.” *And I want to marry Blake Hamilton with all my heart.*

A gasp sounded on the other line. “You wouldn’t.”

Standing straighter, Elizabeth jutted her chin out and huffed a little breath in commitment. Yes, she would. In a heartbeat. In fact, she probably should’ve done it to move things along with the two of them. Lord knew he was taking his sweet time. “I’m tired of never being able to spend our full nights together or touching in public because he’s worried about my reputation and how it would impact my foundation.” Before Blake, her foundation had been everything to her. It was her only link to her daughter. Now, he took a slice of that everything pie. And she wouldn’t give up either him or the foundation, or knowingly do damage to either.

Exhaling on a long sigh, her shoulders relaxed from their tense stance. He’d been right in his beliefs—as old-fashioned as they sounded. People might misconstrue their relationship and call her playing the whore for donations since he’d made a very substantial one and invited his friends to events and helped solicit contributions.

But oh, she wanted it all. The happy ending she knew only he could provide. She’d loved her dearly departed husband, but not with the ferocity of her love for Blake. Or the passion. That sweet passion where they almost ignited being near each other.

Blake Hamilton represented everything good in men and in politics. Always voting with his conscience and not just with his party, earned him a great deal of grief from time to time, but he was able to sleep at night by voting for what was right. And when he was passionate about something, he’d stop at nothing to get his message out and sway those he needed to win his vote. He worked for the people, not a party.

He also still opened doors for her, carried her bags, all the stuff gentlemen of old used to do. The things you didn't see anymore, mostly due to the lack of common courtesy seen demonstrated more often today. Sure, she could do her own things, and would, but if he offered, it didn't offend her—it endeared him to her.

Heck, add a few flashy weapons on him, and he'd be Captain America in her mind.

That image did generate a chuckle from her that Crystal ignored as she kept rambling. Thank goodness because she'd hate to explain that image to her friend.

“But that's a good thing he's done that. Now he's taking you away for a long weekend, and you're meeting his children. He's going to propose,” Crystal reiterated with just as much passion as the first time.

Laughing, Elizabeth turned the call on speaker phone, she set it down on the bed beside her suitcase so she could pack while talking. Picking up a cream blouse, she folded it while she got her laughter under control. “You sound like a broken record.” After placing the blouse in her suitcase, she picked up a pair of navy slacks and proceeded to fold them. She knew she was overpacking, but she had no idea what to expect, except heat and humidity. A shudder spiraled up her spine at what occurred when she met the two elements. She pictured everything sticking to her, soaking wet, and her hair plastered to her head. Sure Blake said it wasn't that bad in August, but he was used to it and probably didn't realize how bad it truly was for someone who didn't live or frequent Mississippi.

“What kind of ring do you think he's purchased? Princess? Diamond cut? Ooh, maybe an emerald surrounded by diamonds.”

Elizabeth shook her head. She'd had enough of the conversation. Instead of getting her hopes up, she should practice how she'd propose to him. She could do it. Okay, she might be a smidge nervous... maybe a bit cowardly on the idea, but she had to have a game plan.

One thing was for certain, she had to win over his children. She and Blake had agreed, when they'd discussed keeping their relationship secret, not to tell his children. Which could've been his simple code for “I don't want my kids bugging me about us whenever we talk.” She just went with it since it was his family.

Blake's children were about all that he spoke about. His love for them was monumental. If only she could grasp a slice of it, then life would be perfect.

Her spine snapped straight. What if his kids didn't like her and that meant he wouldn't propose? With a sinking heart, she turned over the idea in her mind. Something roared inside her that told her Blake was his own man and his children were grown. Nothing would stop him if that was what he wanted. But did he want it?

The doorbell interrupted her response to Crystal. "Hold on a second. Someone's here."

"Who?" Crystal asked in a serious tone.

That was a good question. She checked her watch to make sure it wasn't Blake's driver picking her up. No, she had plenty of time. Plenty of time provided this wasn't a visitor who expected to be entertained.

Out of habit, she picked up her phone then walked to the front door. Peeking outside, she saw a deliveryman, but he didn't have the flowers Blake typically sent her. Then again, it wouldn't make sense for him to send flowers today since she wouldn't return until they were dead or close to it.

Easing the door open, with the cell phone in her hand at her side, she smiled when she saw the heavysset man held a gift basket in his hands.

"Delivery for Elizabeth Page," he said in a bored voice.

Wow. He definitely didn't care about tips with that attitude. She always believed in giving them something, though. Since Blake had taken to sending her flowers regularly, she'd stashed away some ones and fives in a little container on a small table near the front door so she didn't have to search out her purse each time.

"I'm Elizabeth," she finally said with her interest piqued at the contents of the basket.

The man extended the basket, and she grabbed it by the handle. Not too heavy, but it appeared full of stuff. She saw a travel pillow and smiled. Curiosity flowed through her at what else the man she loved had put together for her.

"Hold on a moment." She stepped back and set the basket on the floor right inside her home and dropped the phone on the table and reached for her container. After grabbing a few bills, she turned back and extended them to the deliveryman. "Thank you."

He nodded and walked away. *Grouch*. Then she almost snickered out loud at that thought.

After closing the door, Crystal shouted from the phone she'd forgotten on the small table. "Who was it? It sounded like a delivery. Did you get more roses?"

With a little pep in her step, she picked up the phone and the basket and moved swiftly to her bedroom. “It’s a basket. I don’t know what’s all in it yet. Give me a minute.”

“Is it from Blake? Never mind, stupid question. Of course it’s from Blake. The man should just employ his own deliveryman.”

Laughing, she set the phone down on the bed, then flipped the lid of the suitcase closed to make room for the basket. Once on the bed, she untied the top and opened the cellophane wrap. She covered her mouth with a gasp and then a big smile split her face. He remembered.

“What is it?” her friend persisted in asking.

Giggling, she said, “It’s a travel basket. He remembered I get motion sickness sometimes.”

“So what—he sent you Dramamine?”

She nodded, then remembered Crystal couldn’t see her. “Among other things.” She began emptying the basket. “A travel pillow to sleep on the plane. Dramamine tied to a travel blanket. A small size of peach antibacterial lotion. Peach lip balm. A bag of cashews. A bag of dried peaches. And a dark chocolate bar.”

The thought that went into the basket overwhelmed her. She dropped on the small space open on the bed. He’d truly listened to her and what she liked. He’d asked once and remembered.

“Wow, Beth, that’s... amazing.” The awe in her friend’s voice matched the awe inside her.

“I know.”

“Does it have a note?”

Elizabeth started at that. She’d seen one but had been too excited about the items. “Hang on.” Reaching in the basket, she noticed her hand trembling as she retrieved the note.

My love,

My arms are always there for you, but I thought these items might bring you comfort during our travels.

B.

She read the letter to her friend.

“Yep, he’s going to propose,” Crystal said before Elizabeth had finished saying the letter B.

“How do you get it from this note? There’s nothing special in there to allude to that.” Elizabeth read it again and love rolled through her veins. She’d found the most wonderful man alive, and she wasn’t going to let him get out her grasp.

“Just trust me.”

Knowing the conversation would go nowhere else and the fact she had to pack, she decided to end her call with her friend. “I need to get packing. Goodbye, Crystal.”

“Okay, have a good trip and call me as soon as he proposes.”

She shook her head. “Bye.”

So he might propose, but he might not. At this point, she didn’t care. No way would she allow that man to get lose of her grasp. She wanted a full life with him. To be his wife. To be in his bed every night. Yep, there was nothing else to do. She’d have to propose to him.

