

Burden of Proof
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Chapter 3

April Ramos's stomach rumbled, and her fridge at home looked like she'd hung a Vacancy sign on it. Donuts were the last thing she needed after this morning's negotiation gone wrong—as though filling her body with sugar and grease might reduce the overwhelming guilt—but her car still swung into the busy parking lot of a popular donut shop a few blocks from her home in Houston.

How sad she also looked for something sweet to soothe the ache of loneliness. The idea of calling someone special, sharing her miserable past hours, and doing the same for him tugged on her heartstrings. Maybe her future held the possibility, but right now no one stood backstage, waving.

A slight chill blew in from the north, and she grabbed her FBI jacket from the backseat, slipping it over her blouse. Inside the shop, she took a place in line behind four other customers.

What drove a man to give up on himself and life? Benson had invited her onto the roof with him . . . so she could watch him commit suicide? For a while, she believed she'd gained his trust. Then an absent wallet destroyed his confidence and hers.

A young woman behind her scolded a crying baby. "I told you to hush. All this way, you've whined and screamed. I'm hungry, so deal with it. Should have left you alongside the road."

The insensitive words irritated April, especially on the heels of the earlier incident. Loving mothers treated their children with tenderness, not like they were liabilities. They protected them from a world that was often harsh. April turned to the young woman who held the crying baby in pink pajamas. Tears stained the child's cheeks, and mucus flowed over her lips.

"Are you a real FBI agent?" The mother looked to be in her early twenties, long ponytail, taller than average.

"Yes."

The young woman shoved the baby into April's arms. "Take her for a few minutes, please. I need to breathe."

April attempted to return the baby, but the mother stepped back. "She's making me crazy."

"I see you're upset. We can talk." April patted the baby's back, but the child only cried louder.

"I'm done with her." The young woman rushed toward the entrance and disappeared into a mass of parked vehicles.

"Hey—" What just happened? April held the baby close to comfort her and detected a dirty diaper. She was shivering too. Shrugging off her jacket, April stepped out of line to wrap the baby—who wailed louder than before.

The mother might have gone to her car for a diaper bag.

Seven minutes ticked by. April pushed through the entrance of the shop into the cold November air, cradling the crying baby girl. At least the jacket kept her warm. April scanned the parking lot and walked to the rear. The young woman had disappeared.

"Well, little one, looks like it's just you and me," she whispered and walked toward the front of the shop with the intention of calling Child Protective Services. "Wish I knew how to ease your tears."

A man jogged her way. "Stop! You have my daughter."

What had she been hit with now? April sized him up for a potential struggle. Trim build. Wore a brown leather jacket and a cap pulled down over his forehead. And a distinct frown.

"Why did you kidnap my daughter?" Despite the cool air, sweat beaded his brow. Before April could respond, the baby whirled to him with open arms. "Isabella, Daddy's here for you." He attempted to take the baby, but April stepped back.

"You can't take this child. A woman gave her to me, and I'm sure she'll return in just a minute." He was close enough to inflict harm.

His face reddened. "Just give me my daughter, and we'll be going." He grabbed April's arm.

She kicked him in the shin, and he winced but didn't release his hold. She held the baby tighter and kept her away from the man's grasp. "Stand down. I'm FBI." April couldn't protect Benson, but she could keep this child from potential harm. The baby's tears settled into a sob.

He looked at the jacket and released her arm as though he'd been burned. "This is yours?"

"Yes. I'm Agent April Ramos. This baby is under my care until I find her legal guardian."

"I'm Isabella's father." He reached into his pocket. "She was kidnapped last night, and I followed the car here. My driver's license—"

"Only proves your name."

"I'm asking you for the last time to give me my daughter."

"Or you'll do what?" She made eye contact.

He rubbed his hand over a stubbly chin. He trembled. "What if she were your daughter? How would you react?"

"I certainly wouldn't accost an FBI agent."

He hesitated. "I need help with a serious situation."

The moment the words were uttered, April's instincts kicked in. "Is this about the woman who left me with the baby?"

He glanced around the parking lot as though he planned to grab the baby and bolt. "Can we talk? The diaper bag is in my truck, and Isabella needs to be changed. I smell her."

Fat chance of that happening. "Why don't you get the bag, and I'll change her inside the donut shop while you tell me your problem."

He shook his head and opened the inside of his jacket just enough for her to see a Beretta. He closed his jacket, covering the weapon. Her Glock was tucked in her shoulder bag. "Don't reach for your gun," he whispered. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Sir, it's difficult for me to be sympathetic when you've pulled a gun on a federal officer. What about endangering your daughter?"

A muscle twitched below his eye, and he patted the gun inside his jacket. "Follow me to my truck, and I'll explain."

"No."

"You have no choice."

She always had a choice, but not when an innocent child was placed in danger. She'd fight for this baby when the only risks were her own. He gestured for her to take the lead

and pointed to a 2018 green Chevy pickup, extended cab. He slid her shoulder bag down her arm and placed it in his opposite hand. There went her Glock and phone. All she needed was an opportunity to seize control. They passed a woman with two small children. No point calling out to them when the man beside her had a gun.

They neared the truck, and by habit, she memorized the plates. He clicked a key fob. “Open the rear driver’s-side door,” he said. “A diaper bag’s inside with everything you need to change Isabella. And a clean sweatshirt and pants.” He looked into the baby’s face, and his facade saddened. “Sweetie, I know it’s cold, but that diaper has to come off.” The baby jabbered some unintelligible language.

April obeyed him, and he backed up six feet, eliminating the opportunity for hand-to-hand combat. She laid the baby with her head nearly touching the car seat midway across. Her diaper-changing skills were at ground zero, but she managed and used a wet wipe to wash the baby’s face. “She is beautiful.”

“Thank you.” His voice shook. Maybe he was second-guessing his actions.

She needed him to trust her. “I’m ready to hear your explanation.”

“Not yet. Put Isabella in the car seat.” He kept his distance.

No one was in sight to even question the crime taking place. Once the baby was secure, he pressed the barrel of the gun against her back.

She sighed. Was he reading her mind or had she left all logic at the office with Benson’s suicide? “Let’s talk about what’s bothering you and get this straightened out.”

“Open the driver’s door and scoot over to the other side. Don’t try a thing, or I’ll use the gun.”

She obeyed and crawled over the console. As soon as her feet hit the floorboard on the passenger side, he was seated and locked the doors. No way to kick him with the console . . .

“Don’t forget the seat belt,” he said.

“Sir, your actions will have serious consequences.”

His brown eyes bored hard into her face. “I’m a desperate man.”

This must be a domestic or custody dispute. The baby no longer cried, a blessing since April questioned what kind of insanity she’d met for the second time today. Images of the early morning death slammed into her brain. In truth, the memory would never leave her.

“Do you live alone?” her abductor said.

“Yes.”

“Address?”

She gave him one.

He typed into his phone. “That belongs to the FBI.” He pulled the Beretta from his jacket and aimed it at her. “This is a life-and-death matter. I hate pulling you into my circumstances. But I have no choice when my daughter is threatened.”

Definitely a troubled man. She’d gain the upper hand at her home. With that reassurance, she gave him the correct address.

“We’ll talk there.” He typed into his phone and placed the truck in reverse.

While Jason drove to Agent Ramos’s home through heavy traffic, he worried the cops were on his tail. Emotion for what he’d experienced over the last several hours threatened to break loose. He’d shed nearly as many tears as when Lily died. Now Russell . . . And he’d almost lost his baby girl. Jason stared at Isabella through the rearview mirror. “Daddy is so sorry for what you went through.” She’d been the victim of his worst nightmare: an abduction.

“Are you ready to talk?” the agent said.

“Not yet.” The tiny woman beside him probably had hand-to-hand combat skills beyond his imagination. He’d done his best to avoid a flying fist or foot. At least he had her purse, most likely containing a cell phone and a weapon. A huge risk. But her influence in law enforcement could right a terrible wrong. Several of them. “I’m thinking through how to present my story.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m Jason, and you’ve met my daughter, Isabella.”

April nodded. “I’m glad I was there. Would you like for me to call Isabella’s mother and let her know her daughter’s safe?”

“Isabella’s mother died a year ago, giving birth to our daughter.” He’d disappointed Lily too. She’d kissed Isabella at two hours old, just before saying good-bye to them forever. What had he just done? “Nabbing a federal agent was an impulsive decision. Not my normal way of handling a problem.”

“I won’t deny you’re in a lot of trouble. Let’s talk this out.”

He swallowed hard. “No amount of talk can fix the tragedy affecting my life.”

“Then I need to hear what you have to say.”

After two more turns, he pulled into a driveway in front of a cottage-style home. A risky plan formed, one of justice and a way to solve a murder.