
DANGER COMES IN AMBER

Cape Danger Book Two

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Prologue

Six months earlier...

Amber Nelson lay on her belly, naked and bound to the cold metal stretcher. She could hear someone talking in the background. A woman's voice? Forcing herself to open her eyes, she closed them again instantly. The room was bright; too bright.

A laugh close to her face made her wince. But the voice was familiar.

"Please," she uttered in confusion. "Tell me it's not *you*."

"About time you woke up, *pretty little Amber with the strawberry curls*."

Amber squinted through almost closed lids. "Nobody calls me that anymore."

"No, they don't, do they?" The woman raked her fingernails along Amber's naked body, causing her to flinch. "I see someone has already put a few welts and bruises on you. I wish I'd been there to hear *that* one." She paused her hand and pinched a painful welt across Amber's lower bottom.

To hear that one? Not to see it? Confusion clouded Amber's already groggy mind.

"Why are you doing this?" Amber forced herself to stare, determined not to be afraid.

"Because you and your *friends*..." the word was said with a sneer, "... thought you were so much better than I was. Didn't you?"

"I don't think any of us thought that," Amber said softly.

The woman drew back and delivered a slap that made Amber's ears ring. "Don't tell me what I already know to be true." Her voice developed into a singsong rhythm. "It doesn't matter now. It's time for you to pay. And Grant will see to it you do."

Amber's brain was ringing, along with her ears. The slap had been delivered to the same jaw Kenneth had badly bruised a few days ago. She'd gone to the ER for x-rays the next day and learned he'd cracked a rib at the same time. This time, the beating had been because she hadn't returned from the grocery store before he got home from work. As the memory of that beating played through her mind all over again, she stared at her old classmate sadly.

"I don't care what you do to me," she whispered. "But I can't go home."

The woman's laugh hurt deep into her head. "Oh, trust me, sweetie. You *won't*." Then she'd turned to Grant. "Beat her until she bleeds. And if you don't, well, you won't work here much longer, will you? I'll be outside." She turned to Amber once again. "You see, Grant doesn't speak, so no one will be able to question him, will they? And I'll get to play this recording of your pain over and over for years to come. And when he's finished with you, he'll leave you just awake enough to feel the heat of the

cremator as it brings you to two-thousand degrees." Her voice returned to its singsong pattern as she waved a manicured hand. "Goodbye, little Amber. Goodbye." On her way out of the room, she'd turned to Grant. "I'll be listening." As she left Amber alone in the room with him, she closed the door.

Amber's eyes grew terrified. She was going to die—like this? "Please God, *no*," she whispered.

Grant was moving around the room now, quickly. He picked up a bundle of something from the sink and carried it, dripping across the room to her stretcher. Amber tried to follow him with her eyes. What was he carrying? A wet towel?

The hiss of his belt as it was pulled out through the loops met her ears and she gulped, fighting the overwhelming feeling of panic. Gathering as much strength as she could, she pulled frantically against the restraints. The man called Grant suddenly turned to her, putting a hand that was surprisingly gentle on her shoulder.

Amber squinted up at him. *Oh, dear God*, he must have been at least eight feet tall. Dark eyes the color of espresso looked down on her a few seconds before he pulled a squirt bottle from his pocket and sprayed a stream of something back and forth across her back, bottom and legs. Then, to get her attention, he motioned his hand above his mouth as if in a silent scream.

"You," she whispered, "you want me to scream?"

He nodded, suddenly, and raised the belt, bringing it down across the bundle at the end of the stretcher with a sound that she would have sworn was the sound of her own skin, had she felt it. She'd certainly felt it enough times before, except it had been Kenneth holding the belt. Then he looked to her and motioned again.

Amber let out a blood-curdling scream that shook the room.

He nodded his approval. He repeated the motion time and time again, until Amber's voice grew hoarse, and she could no longer scream. Then, he brought over a syringe and injected something into her arm, and she instantly began to fade.

The next time she opened her eyes, she was being carried up a series of stone steps. They reminded her of the old horror movies she'd seen as a child. At the top, however, he paused and opened a door leading into an almost white room.

She leaned her head into him, just before closing her eyes once again.

The sound of the cremator was the next sound she heard. She managed to get her eyes open, praying it wasn't meant for her. Once again, she was lying on a stretcher, but this time, she was covered with a sheet. Only her head was uncovered, and she was able to glance over toward the tall man just in time to see him bring over a metal stretcher with the remains of a deer on it. When her eyes opened wider, she realized he was putting the dead animal into the oven with gloved hands. A moment later, he dropped the gloves into a basket and once again put a finger to her lips before bringing the sheet up over her head.

Amber had always been afraid of having her face covered, and she made an attempt to scream. The sheet was jerked back down suddenly, and his hand descended on her mouth, although gently. He shook his head fiercely, warning her into silence.

The jolt of adrenaline into her bloodstream made her fully aware that he was moving her through the room. A moment later, she realized he was placing her into the back of a hearse, with velvet curtains covering the windows, and nodding to the driver.

But just before closing the door and watching it pull away, he raised the sheet just a bit and smiled at her.

Danger Comes in Amber

"Be safe, little one," he said.

Chapter 1

Six months later...

Amber stared at herself in the mirror, her eyes wide. Her divorce from Kenneth was final as of two weeks ago, and she was beginning to sleep at night again. It was something she'd never thought she'd be able to do again.

After brushing her teeth, she finished putting on make-up. The bruises on her face had finally faded from Kenneth's last beating, but it had taken months. She was still the scared little girl inside she'd been since the night she'd married him.

She rolled her shoulders, trying to relax as she thought about finally being free of her ex-husband, and her mind drifted back to what had happened over six months ago when a high school classmate had had her kidnapped in an attempt to kill her.

Amber would never understand the hatred she had for the group. The beautiful woman had been part of it in high school, the group everyone referred to as the *smashing seven*, which consisted mostly of cheerleaders. Amber hadn't seen her again until the ten-year high school reunion, when horrible things

began happening to each girl. Luckily, the FBI had been working undercover, watching, and had managed to get each woman to safety.

All, except for one, Chelsea.

Amber shook her head. The trial was over now, thank goodness, and so was her marriage to Kenneth. The time she'd spent in the safe house during the trial had opened her eyes to the fact that she deserved better than the abuse he'd heaped upon her for the five years of their marriage. Living in constant fear during those years had taken its toll, not just on her mind, but on her body, from the constant abuse she'd endured at his hands. Before she'd been kidnapped, rescued, and taken to the safe house, it had grown more frequent, until it was almost a daily occurrence.

She smiled. In a way, her kidnapping had been her salvation. And after spending six months in a safe house during the trial, it was finally over.

Something inside her had changed during those months. Her green eyes were still dulled with fear, but there was a spark of hope there now, too. Her strawberry blonde hair was still unmanageable, and today, she'd left it curly instead of trying to straighten it.

Nightmares had plagued her during those months as well, but they were different now. They didn't seem to be brought on by the abduction, however. They were nightmares about Kenneth.

Now, a look of fright overcame her face as she stared back at her reflection. Nightmares of Kenneth finding her, Kenneth dragging her home, Kenneth stripping her, tying her down. Kenneth beating her...

"No!" A cry escaped her, and she brought her hand to her lips. She closed her eyes for a moment, getting her bearings before opening them again. The hand covering her lips had no

wedding ring on it now. She'd given it back to him, along with everything else he'd ever given her, including the house, the furniture, even her beloved piano. The divorce proceedings had let her know everything had been in his name only, even her car. *How would she manage to make a living now*, she wondered? Teaching piano was all she'd ever done.

The court had awarded her a small settlement, and she'd managed to buy an older model car. It wasn't much, but it seemed dependable. There hadn't been much left over after that, but she'd managed to buy a year of insurance on it. And then she had a little left for some furniture from Mellie's antique shop, which she'd been given at cost. The rest, Mellie had been kind enough to donate, and Amber had promised to pay her back. But at least it was clean and decent, and Mellie showed her how to do the 'eclectic' look, with mismatched pieces that looked cute together.

She wasn't foolish enough to believe Kenneth would ever come across with the alimony he was supposed to send.

She picked up a hairbrush then set it down again and tried to finger-comb through her curly hair to put some order into it. She paused, looking thoughtful as she once again remembered the nightmares she'd had in the safe house. But toward the end of the stay, they had begun to end with a white sheet over her head and a large hand pulling it down to reveal a smile, kind dark eyes, and a deep but gentle voice saying, "*Be safe, little one.*"

At first, she was sure she'd imagined it. She hadn't known until she was safely tucked away there that he worked for the FBI. And his name was not Grant at all, but Michael Alex Braden.

Now, she smiled to herself as she finished working with her hair, remembering. He was, after all, difficult to forget. Seven-

foot three and all muscle, he'd been the hero she'd have picked if she had her choice; the hero she'd dreamed of as a little girl. Strong and kind, he would be the one who protected her, who cherished her.

Wandering into the living room, she stood before the bay window. Down below, on the ground, she stared at the gang in the neighborhood. But it was Alex's face she saw staring back at her. She'd seen him several times during the trial as she glanced across the courtroom. His eyes had been resting on her, but there was no expression of recognition on his face. She'd looked away, feeling embarrassed for even thinking of him.

Her phone rang in the bedroom, and she jerked back to reality. It was probably Mellie, she decided. They had all become close through this.

She picked up the phone and stared at it. An unfamiliar number. For a second, she panicked. She knew it wasn't Kenneth's; she'd have recognized that one. But he could have called from anywhere, couldn't he?

Amber closed her eyes. She couldn't allow herself to come unglued every time a strange number came through. Finally, she put it to her ear. Unable to keep her voice from trembling, she answered, "Hello?"

A friendly, deep voice spoke on the other end. "Amber Nelson, please?"

It wasn't Kenneth. *Thank God* it wasn't Kenneth.

"This is she," she answered, sounding like a mouse checking the hole in the wall for a cat's paw.

"Oh, good. Amber, my name is Alex Braden. I realize this appears quite unorthodox since the only time I've seen you is when I worked as an undercover agent, and again in court, but I'd really like to spend a few moments with you."

There was a long pause. *It was Grant—no, Alex.* Her breath caught.

"Amber?"

"I-I'm here. I just—" Her voice trailed away.

A deep, melodious chuckle answered. "I hope I haven't scared you. I've been thinking of you a lot, and I hoped to lay eyes on you again. I wondered if you'd have lunch with me. You can choose to meet me somewhere, but I won't pick you up today, and you shouldn't be telling me—or anyone else you don't know—where you live over the phone. But I *would* like to see you."

Her voice was still shaking. "Alex, I don't know what to say." Amber closed her eyes. Was she being too cautious? Yes, she decided. "I'd like very much to see you. Too."

He paused. "Good, I'm glad to hear it. Now, here are the rules."

She stiffened. "Rules?" she echoed, her voice hollow.

"Rules," he repeated. "For your safety. I want you to call a friend as soon as we hang up, and let them know you're meeting me, where, and what time. And let them know you'll call when you get there and call or text every half-hour to let them know you're all right. Write my number down and give it to them. You should be doing this regardless of who asks you out, unless you know them extremely well."

Amber closed her eyes briefly. She'd thought of him, dreamed of him so much. Could she say no? She took a deep breath. "Let me get something to write on," she said as she ran to scribble down the number he gave her. "Where would you like to meet?"

"You have a car and can get there? If you don't, I'll pay for a cab for you."

"Yes. An old one, but it runs. I had to give mine back in the divorce settlement." A hand flew to her mouth. Why in the world had she told him that?

There was a pause. "You gave your car back? Surely, the courts didn't require it." His voice sounded incredulous, but a moment later, he spoke again. "All right. How about *Tony's*, downtown? Do you like Italian?"

"I love Italian."

"Good. See you at eleven? I know I haven't given you much time. I'll get there a little early and reserve us a table."

Her voice was more cheerful now. "That sounds wonderful."

"Good. Don't forget to call one of your friends and let them know. I'll be upset if you don't."

Amber nodded and then realized he couldn't see her. "I will," she said softly. "And Alex?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"Be safe," he said.

Amber stared at the phone. *Be safe*. He *had* spoken when he'd put her into the hearse the day he sent her to the safe house.

Oh, gosh, what have I done? she thought. Looking at the number he'd called from, she started to dial him back and tell him she'd changed her mind, but she couldn't make herself do it. After all, if he hadn't been who he said he was, why would he have told her to contact someone to let them know where she was going and whom she was meeting? And he would have pressed for her address instead of telling her not to give it out to anyone.

She dialed Melanie's number instead.

"Hey, Amber," Mellie's cheerful voice answered.

"Mellie, I may have done something really stupid."

There was a pause. "What is it? Do you need me to come?"

Amber proceeded to tell her about the lunch date, and Mellie chuckled.

"Are you talking about the Alex who saved our lives?"

There was a pause. "Yes."

"I think it's wonderful."

Amber stood there, staring at the phone. "Really?"

"Yes!"

"Oh. Good. Well, I'm supposed to meet him at *Tony's* at eleven. And he said to call and let someone know, so you're that someone. And he said I needed to call or text you every half-hour to let you know I'm all right and to give you his number. And he wouldn't let me tell him my address over the phone."

"It sounds like he's being very cautious. Do you want me to take you and drop you off?"

Amber bit her lip, frowning.

"I'll pick you up at ten-thirty. Okay? I'm home all day today. That way, we can make sure it's him. And if he's not there waiting, you don't have to get out of the car. What's the number?"

Amber gave it to her.

She hung up and looked at the clock. Ten o'clock! She rushed to her bedroom and looked through her closet, frantically pulling out one outfit after another. She'd lost so much weight during the stress of her stay in the safe house and the divorce, most of her clothes no longer fit. She didn't much care. Kenneth had always said she'd been too heavy anyway.

Settling on a black dress that she still considered at least a little flattering, she tugged it on over her head and stood in front

of the mirror, moving this way and that, letting the hem sway around her calves.

It was a little too long, but that was okay. She tugged on a pair of black heels, hoping to make herself seem taller. Alex, after all, was extremely tall. She paused in front of the mirror. What if he wore jeans and a t-shirt?

She laughed at herself out loud. "What's wrong with you, Amber? You're acting like a schoolgirl on a first date."

Checking her make-up in the mirror, she moved into the living room and looked around at her tiny apartment. It was neat enough, an old upper floor set of rooms with a bay window in the living area, but she so wished she could have afforded a place in a nicer neighborhood. There was no place to park her car but on the street, and the kids in the neighborhood had stolen the hood ornament and the hubcaps off it. Not that they were worth much.

Mellie's car pulled up outside, and Amber grabbed her purse and coat and locked the door, running to meet her. As she walked around the car to get into the passenger side, she noticed Mrs. Embers, the little woman who lived in the apartment below her peeking out the window. As she waved, she hopped into Mellie's car.

"Thanks so much for doing this," she said as she closed the door and fastened the seat belt.

"Amber, are you sure you won't move in with me?" Mellie asked for the umpteenth time. "I worry about you here."

"I'm armed. And, no, Mellie. Thanks, but I really want to be on my own. And you donated all the furniture I have. I have to do this for my own sake—"

"I know, I *know*. But that doesn't make me stop worrying."

She pulled away into traffic and turned right onto the main road. "You said you're meeting at *Tony's*? Downtown?"

"Yes."

"I love that place. Do you need any funds?"

Amber rolled her eyes. "If I did, I wouldn't have agreed to come."

"You're not going to tell me anyway, are you?" Mellie sighed. They turned off William onto Kingshighway and then Independence before heading downtown, and neither of them spoke for a minute.

"I'm sorry, Mellie. I don't mean to sound ungrateful."

"I know," Mellie said softly. "But I also know you gave back everything you had to that jerk except the clothes on your back. I could have given you the name of a good lawyer, you know."

"I didn't want to cause any trouble." Amber's voice sounded defensive. "And I couldn't afford a good lawyer. My brother-in-law is a nice guy, but he—"

"Took you to the bank," Mellie finished, glancing up into the rear-view mirror. "Oh, Amber, I'm sorry. I didn't want to spend what few minutes we had arguing." She drove further downtown and guided the car into a parking place, scanning the lot for signs of Alex.

"There he is," she said, pointing.

Amber followed the direction. Her breath caught in her throat. "Oh, Mellie. I don't know if I can do this," she breathed, her heart pounding.

But it was too late. Alex had spotted them and was moving toward the car.

Mellie grinned. "Then *you* tell him you've changed your mind," she teased. "*I won't.*"

A large hand was resting on the handle of the car, and Alex

leaned down, opening it. He cocked his head to one side. "Hello, Melanie." When he saw the uncertainty in Amber's face, he lost his smile. "Amber? Have you changed your mind?" A small bit of disappointment had crept into his voice. "If so, I understand."

Amber took a deep breath and summoned courage. "No, of course not." She took the hand he offered and stepped out.

Alex glanced at Mellie. "Do she give you my number?"

"I have it," Mellie nodded.

"And she'll call or text every half-hour so you'll know she's all right."

Mellie grinned. "Amber, what time do I need to come back and get you?"

"Um," Amber stalled uncertainly. "Can I call you?"

"Sure. I'll be home. I need to talk to you later anyway." Mellie waved as Alex shut the door.

Amber watched as she pulled away, then she looked up at Alex, her eyes wide.

"No need to be afraid of me, I promise," he murmured gently. Letting go of her hand, he offered his arm. She took it.

"I-I'm not."

Alex glanced down at her, grinning. "Of course, not."

Was he making fun of her? Amber glanced up at him from beneath her lashes.

The hostess seated them at a small table in a back corner, away from the lunch crowd, and he held her chair for her before sitting down.

Alex watched her for a moment. "Tell me," he said softly. "How have you been?"

The concern in his voice was touching. How could she share with him what she'd been through? Saved by the appearance of the server, she looked away.

"Wine? Champagne?"

"I'll have unsweet tea, please," she answered.

"The same," Alex echoed. When the server disappeared, he leaned forward. "I'm waiting," he prompted.

Amber forced a smile. "I'm fine. And you?"

There was a silence. "See, the thing is," he said, "when I ask you a question, I want you to be completely honest with me. I ask because I want to know. Forget the *I'm fine*. An honest answer, please?"

Amber stared at him. He wasn't going to let her get away with it. Tears sprang to her eyes and she looked away. Her voice was a whisper. "It's been," she gulped and blinked, "difficult."

A large hand closed over hers, and she forced herself to look up into gentle eyes. "That, I will accept. I haven't been able to get you off my mind since I put you in the hearse and sent you to the safe house. It's nearly killed me, not knowing how you were."

She tilted her head. "But in the courtroom, you looked at me, but you didn't seem to remember me."

He smiled. "I remembered you. I couldn't appear to recognize you. And I couldn't have any contact with you, or testimony would have appeared compromised. That killed me, too."

The server brought their drinks and set them down, and they ordered. Alex glanced at her quizzically. "You don't drink?"

She shook her head. "Kenneth did," she said, as if that explained it.

He frowned. "He became abusive when he drank."

She took a sip of her tea and set it down. "Actually, he was abusive all the time, but *less* so when he drank. I just hated the fact that it changed him, and I felt as if it was necessary to have it in the house all the time."

"I see." He leaned back. "I haven't finished with my ques-

tions, Amber. But I can wait until we're in a more private setting. Tell me about what you do."

"I teach piano," she said, frowning. "But in the neighborhood where I live now, it's difficult to get parents to bring their children there."

His eyes widened now. "I see. Where do you live?"

She glanced around her. "On Winslow," she said quietly, keeping her voice down.

He stared at her. "Good Lord. We need to get you out of there."

Amber's expression retained its smile. "*We* don't need to do anything."

"Who suggested that neighborhood?"

She stared at him, scowling. "Well, the landlord called and offered it to me. But when I compared it with other places in the paper, it was the only place I could afford."

He cocked his head. "The landlord called and *offered* it to you? That's a first."

She nodded. "I thought it was odd, too. He said something about a realtor mentioning it to him. But I hadn't called one. I've never had that happen before, but of course, it's the first time I've ever looked for one."

He shook his head. "Little miss independence. Who did you use for the divorce settlement? I could probably find you a good lawyer."

Amber closed her eyes, setting her mouth stubbornly. "My brother-in-law. And it's too late."

He stared at her, frowning, and cocked his head. "You used your husband's brother for your lawyer?" His voice was incredulous.

She nodded. "It kept me from having to hire one. He was cheap. And it's my business, anyway."

"I wish I'd talked to you first. You needed one who's mean as a snake and loyal only to you."

"You sound like Mellie. I suppose you have one in mind." She didn't mean for her voice to rise as much as it did.

"Actually, I do." He leaned forward. "And keep your voice down, young lady." His voice held a glint of warning, and her eyes widened. A second later, he put his hand over hers. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to dictate to you, but I take great exception to the idea of anyone taking advantage of you. Your husband's brother is not the ideal lawyer for keeping your welfare in mind."

Amber looked up as the server came to deliver the food. When he was gone, she nodded. "You're right. He's a nice person, but he's also afraid of his brother. By the time I realized what I would have to live on, it was too late in the process. But Grant—"

"Alex," he corrected.

She nodded. "Alex. I'm so happy to be free of him, I can't even make myself complain."

Deep brown eyes studied her. Sympathy was written all over his face. "I'm so sorry, Amber. I'll say only one more thing. It's not too late. And even if you don't want to do it now, you could hire a different lawyer later and take him back to court."

Amber gave him her most dazzling smile. "Alex?"

He frowned warily, in response. "What?"

She leaned toward him and said softly, "Let it go."

He gave a sigh. "Typical female. You try to help and she looks up with those gorgeous green eyes, gives you a smile to distract you and tells you to go to hell."

Amber couldn't help it. Laughter bubbled up and escaped.

"And you're a typical male," she whispered. "You talk to him about something and he puts on his *Mr. Fix It* hat and tries to take over."

He grinned. "It's what we do." But a moment later, he glanced back down at her. "Did your husband do that?"

Amber dropped her gaze to the table. "No," she said with a slight shake of her head. "He never wanted to hear. *Or* help."

"Jerk," he said, "I already want to hire a hit-man for him."

Amber glanced at him, looking around. "Don't say that," she whispered. "If anything happened to him, they'd come looking for you."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know." Glancing at his watch, he grinned. "Call Melanie. It's time for your first check-in."

"You're serious about that."

His brow rose. "You thought I was kidding?" She nodded, and his head moved back and forth. "I never kid about safety. Especially yours. Call her. Now."