

EVENING SHADOWS

AN AGENTS OF HIS NOVEL

3 Chapter Excerpt

SHEILA KELL

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To Debbie Attenborough

You stood by me before I published my first novel, giving me the nudges I needed and telling the world about me.

It's been a spirited journey, and I'm glad you've been part of it.

His life would, in all effect, end today. Everything he'd ever been would be no more. He'd quickly learned that the twists and turns life threw could impact life irrevocably, and in only a moment. And all those little moments led him to this point. The point of no return.

In Baltimore's dreary weather, and its on-again and off-again drizzle, Ken Patrick leaned on a cane, his hip aching from the healing bullet wound and the dampness in the air. The deep ache merely emphasized the need to do what he must.

He paused outside the steel door that led to the amazing life and people he'd known the last few years and didn't truly want to lose either. He and his conscience had struggled over this decision since his most recent injury, and his conscience—as always—won the argument. No matter the pit of anxiety in his gut, his decision was made, and he'd put off following through long enough.

As team leader of the best men and women he knew—bar the men he'd served with as an Army Ranger—of Hamilton Investigation & Security, he'd failed once too often. Resigning from the team and HIS would restore the strength of the agency. Truthfully, Ken had been surprised they'd held on to him for so long, especially after the last FUBAR op. Okay, it hadn't truly been fucked up beyond all recognition, but it'd shown him he'd lost his edge. In his line of work, that could be deadly. Glancing down at the black cane he leaned upon, he sighed heavily at the reminder of why he'd shown up at HQ.

It'd been nearly a month since he'd taken a bullet in the hip—the same hip he'd been wounded protecting Madison Maxwell, now Madison Hamilton. At the time, he'd been focusing too much on Samantha Milton's safety—one of his sharpshooters—instead of concentrating on the protection detail as a whole. While things rarely went as planned, his distraction had put people in danger, including himself, and subsequently, he'd had to turn over the lead to his second-in-command, Rob Grimes, aka "Grits."

Thinking back to the day of his injury, he wanted to kick his own ass for being so stupid. His loss of focus had been the problem that could've ended more than one life, and even though everyone survived and the op had been successful, the entire incident was unacceptable.

Unable to keep the pain and weakness from his mind, Ken continued to deal with the repercussions of his stupidity. Taking the bullet wasn't what frustrated him most, since it was always a possibility when on an op. Instead, the recovery rankled him. He required the use of a damn cane for support and had lingering pain while attempting to regain the flexibility and strength he would need to outrun or outfight any trouble in the field.

Trying to think on the positive side, Sam had remained at his bedside while he'd recovered after surgery. Even though she'd assured him most of the team also waited, his heart absorbed the impact of her fussing over him. Since she'd come aboard HIS, they'd rekindled the closeness they'd shared what seemed like a lifetime ago. The heat that sizzled between them neared explosive. But, no matter what was building between them, they kept it strictly professional at work. With his injury, she seemed to be straddling the personal/professional line perfectly.

“Maybe while you’re high on the drugs, I can finally beat you at darts,” she’d teased after adding another pillow behind his head on the hospital bed.

Like that would happen. The woman may be able to hit a small target at record ranges, but she couldn’t hit the bull’s-eye of a dartboard if she stood right in front of it. His mouth curved into the grin he reserved for her. “I prefer it when we’re partners.” He meant more than at darts but wouldn’t push her, even though he felt they were on that precipice of falling into bed and burning up the sheets.

“I do too.” Her soft voice almost escaped him. When he stared at her, he didn’t know if the narcotics played tricks on his mind and showed him what he longed to see in her vivid blue eyes. Love.

He had to strengthen his body before he set them on the path from friends to lovers. First though, he had to straighten out what lay ahead of him.

Even though he’d been assured that with physical therapy he’d regain full strength without a limp, not being fully capable of doing his job chafed him.

Sick of having his own pity party, Ken slowly input his six-digit passcode into the keypad beside the door to HIS headquarters. Once the heavy door released, Ken entered and ensured it closed with its automatic lock before he moved away from the entrance. His palms grew sweaty as nerves assailed him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had that unsettling feeling. Even fighting his way through country after country, he’d never experienced the like of today. As his heart raced and with the combined awareness of his unease, he decided he could do without a case of nerves.

Ken limped down the carpeted hallway into the depths of the structure Jesse Hamilton had constructed for a more secure building to conduct business in then the back rooms of his home. Frowning, Ken contemplated how his resignation would be received. Undoubtedly, they’d take it as a blessing so they didn’t have to fire him. What was the point of having someone on staff who couldn’t do their job? Cut and run... it was the best possible option for all of them.

With a heavy heart, he stepped into the spacious war room where their ops were planned, briefed, and debriefed. Ken stopped and took in the sight for the last time, branding the memory on his brain. Inhaling, he wondered what they did to keep the windowless room from smelling of the sweaty, dirty agents post-op before they’d have an opportunity to shower.

He sought out Jesse, the oldest Hamilton brother and head of HIS. With a glance around the room, he noticed the Hamilton brothers and their sister, Emily, crowded around her desk, looking at her computer monitor. On the other side of the large room, half the team huddled around each other laughing. He expected they were playing at who could one-up the other. Although he never added one of his horrific stories, he enjoyed listening to others with their acts of valor.

Hearing a round of “Congratulations,” he swung his head back to the family. The men were each hugging their little sister and kissing her on the top of the head. Observing what appeared to be a personal moment between siblings twisted his heart. He missed the twin sister he’d lost when they were ten years old. His throat tightened at the memories. As if he didn’t have enough grief to deal with today, he didn’t need the losses that had impacted his family at the forefront of his mind.

When Jesse spotted him, he broke apart from the family and strode toward him. Knowing Jesse would slap him on the shoulder, Ken planted his strong leg so he wouldn’t stagger under the man’s strength. Not that Jesse was generally stronger than him, but right now, most people were.

As expected, he received that powerful slap on the shoulder. “How are you? How’s the physical therapy?”

Ken wanted to scream about how painful the damn PT was. Between the stretching and twisting he’d endured with this injury, he’d convinced himself that it was torture in repayment for his failure. The only benefit he’d seen to date had been the reduction in pain, but the doctor said that occurred naturally with his recovery, so he wasn’t ready to credit physical therapy as anything other than a dreaded requirement.

Attempting to exude an air of nonchalance, Ken shrugged and acted as if all was well. “It’s fine. I’m fine.” Oh, how he hated that word, especially when a woman used it, but it slipped from his lips before he could recall it.

Jesse raised a dark eyebrow. “Okay,” he dragged the word out. “Then how long before we can make you active again? We miss you out there.”

Garnering his resolve, Ken looked around, then back at Jesse. “That’s what I came here to speak with you about. May we talk in private?”

“Sure.” Without further question, Jesse led the way to his office in the back corner.

Ken’s mind raced to outrun the indecisive thought trying to rear its ugly head. After this, what would he do about Sam? Just the thought of her in danger made his gut clench. He’d promised to protect her, and he’d orchestrated her being a member of HIS so he could watch over her, but his resignation would make it difficult to have her back. Then again, on ops he focused so much on her that he jeopardized himself and his team. He’d puzzle out how he’d keep that promise later, but it wasn’t like he’d done a bang-up job so far at keeping his word.

They entered one of a few offices that had been set aside for admin work, initial op planning, and private meetings that needed to occur. Ken settled into a burgundy leather chair and glanced at Jesse’s large mahogany desk. Somehow, he kept it immaculate, and Ken wondered if Jesse just slid everything in a drawer at the end of the day so it looked like he’d been productive. Then again, Jesse didn’t do anything half-assed, so Ken figured his boss took care of business as needed on the admin side.

With an assessing gaze, Jesse leaned back in his chair and crossed his fingers behind his head. “How’s it really going?”

Ken thought for a moment how to answer. He didn’t typically share his private life, but he’d always given Jesse what he asked. “It’s taking too damn long to heal, but the doc says it’s coming along fine.”

Jesse appeared to contemplate his answer, making Ken even more nervous. He wanted to wipe his sweaty palms on his black cargo pants but didn’t want to show Jesse that he was anything other than the strong agent he’d hired.

“Okay, trust the doctor. Don’t rush it or it might not heal correctly.” Before Ken could say what he needed to say, Jesse continued. “The rest of the team will be back in a few days. Rob’s doing fine, but I’m looking forward to you taking back over. If you approve of his ability to lead a team, we’re planning to split the team since it’s so large, and that’ll give each group a team leader and smaller team to bond together since many ops only take a select number of operatives.” He paused. “You’d still lead as a whole.”

Jesse took a breath and seemed to wait for Ken's thoughts on his suggestion, but they were jumbled. His boss's plans included him, but Ken's participation would be a liability to HIS. It didn't matter which way he looked at it, his injury was debilitating. No amount of his boss's desire to welcome him back or create the whole family vibe they had going in HIS would change that fact.

Since Ken remained quiet, Jesse plowed forward. "You'll see less and less of me, my brothers, and our wives in the field." He smiled. "Kids grow up too damn fast, you know? We'll still be involved, but we want to stay close to home and take over our investigations side. Which reminds me." Jesse snapped his fingers, turned, and opened a desk drawer, then pulled out a small stack of yellow file folders. "I'd like to go over a few candidates with you and get your thoughts." Jesse must've thought Ken had a question about the folder color, because he shrugged and explained, "Em decided we needed to color code things for easier filing for her. Yellow for candidates, then red and blue for the two teams we'll have. I have no idea what color she's reserved for the family." Jesse grinned and shook his head. "Anyhow, I want you to be a part of the interview process. I don't want to drop someone on you that might not mesh well with how you lead. We'll also involve Rob if you think he's ready to select the right candidates for his team. No matter what, you're still the ultimate team leader."

Ken's gut clenched. Why did this man have to be such a great leader and friend? When Jesse had contacted him before his enlistment in the army ended and offered him this position, he hadn't hesitated to accept because someone needed to be at Jesse's back. In the army, Ken had saved his team leader's life twice. Jesse always argued three, but Ken didn't count the third as he hadn't meant to step in front of the bullet meant for Jesse. Thank God for Kevlar. But, the main reason Ken had leaped at the opportunity was because Jesse had offered a perk that allowed him to comfortably leave Georgia, knowing HIS could help him keep track of Sam.

Until now, he'd never thought his decision to join the agency questionable.

With his stomach churning up a thunderstorm, Ken cleared his throat and looked his boss in the eye. "Sir, I've got something to say." "Sir" slipped from his lips as it always did. In part because Jesse had been an officer and because his mother instilled manners in him that stuck.

Jesse's shoulders visibly tensed, and he placed the folders on his desk. His eyes narrowed, searching, as if he could extract the truth without words. "Go on," he encouraged.

This time Ken did wipe his hands on his thighs, although it did nothing for the clamminess. Pushing past the lump lodged in his throat, Ken bit the bullet. "I've come to resign." His heart hurt over those words. When he'd said goodbye to the army, he'd been sad, but nothing like the sudden emptiness he felt. HIS had been his new family. The place he felt needed, wanted, and, yes, loved. Emotions roiled up inside him. Loss... sadness... grief. Good God, if he cried, he'd whoop his own ass. This was nothing but smart business.

The silence in the office resonated through to his tortured soul.

"No." Sitting up straight, Jesse let the simple word stand as if law.

"No?"

"I don't accept your resignation."

Flabbergasted at the firm response, Ken tried to figure out what to say. "Sir, I don't think you understand. I'm leaving."

“Where are you going?”

Son of a— Jesse was deliberately making this difficult for him, and he didn’t appreciate it one bit. “You know what I mean.”

Leaning forward, his forearms on the desk, hands clasped, Jesse looked intent and authoritative and every inch the intimidating officer Ken had known. “Tell me why. I think after all we’ve been through, you owe me that.”

A sudden flash of the losses they’d sustained over time settled deep in his bones, adding to the ache from his hip. Too many men. He still had a lot to reconcile in his life. A whisper of Sam’s name played havoc with his ability to remain focused, and a hint of weariness flitted through him, making him doubt his choice.

His prepared speech vanished, so Ken just shared what his heart held. “We’ve been through a great deal, and in each instance, I’m glad you were there. But, sir—” Now came the hard part. With a dry mouth, he continued. “I’m stepping aside so you can find someone more competent than me. I’ve failed you too many times. This bullet and the time I’ve been laid up on my ass has helped me realize I’ve lost my edge, and I don’t feel you can depend on me any longer.” Damn, but that had been hard to say. At least he’d told the truth and believed Jesse would understand and let him be on his way. Alone and jobless. But the men and women with the agency would be led safely on their ops.

“Huh” was Jesse’s only response.

Seeing no need to further explain, Ken grasped the armrests and prepared to stand so he could clean out his locker and return his issued gear.

Jesse surprised him with, “When have you failed me and HIS?”

He should’ve resigned with AJ—the baby brother—instead of Jesse. It might’ve been easier.

Ken dropped his hands back to his lap. “Well, there’s this.” He gestured to his hip.

“While I’d rather you hadn’t been shot, you prevented our client from being killed. I don’t see the failure.”

Frustration slipped into his bloodstream at Jesse’s pushing back. “It was my fault she was in that situation.”

“No, it wasn’t. She ignored your directions. That would’ve happened to any of us.” Jesse drew his brows into a V-shape. “What else? It can’t be only this instance. I know you better than that. You’re not a quitter.”

The words slammed into his chest and he wanted to puff up and argue, but he had been a quitter this time. The team deserved better. He’d make Jesse understand. “Let’s start with Madison. I made a stupid move and she almost got shot.”

Jesse steepled his fingers and tapped his two forefingers together. “You did right by attempting to clear the place. Besides, my new sister-in-law appreciates you taking a bullet for her. Excuse me, a bullet graze.” Jesse waved his hand in a gesture that said his statement had been no big deal and he needed to continue bringing it on.

“Well, there’s Caitlyn. I didn’t leave the house protected.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one, but only because I think you should’ve hit my brother over the head to knock some sense into him. Because he was crazy in love with Caitlyn, Matt had taken the lead

from you, and he shouldn't have. We promised in the field that you'd lead. I'm sorry to say that with those women who have since become our wives, we haven't lived up to that bargain. We all got a bit emotional."

Ken raised his eyebrows and almost tossed his head back in an unexpected full belly laugh. The men had gone over the top with their women. He'd never seen the like before. Thank goodness they were all married. "A bit?"

With that, Jesse smirked and squirmed. "This isn't about my brothers or me. This is about you. What else do you have, because I'm not seeing why you should resign unless you have a better job?" He cocked his head and quirked that damn brow again.

Something told him he already knew Ken's answer. "No, sir."

"You don't like us anymore?"

If he didn't know better, he'd think Jesse was enjoying this. "I like the team, but that's not what this is about."

"Hmm."

Damn him. Maybe if he thumped Jesse over the head with his computer monitor, he'd fire him and this would be done. Ken cleared his throat and wished he'd grabbed a bottle of water for his dry mouth and parched throat. "Look, you know what happened in Kate's case."

"I don't blame you for that, Ken, and neither does my wife. You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened."

With deep sorrow, Ken closed his eyes a moment before speaking and looked at Jesse's blue shirt since he couldn't look him in the eye. "Les."

Jesse stiffened. "You weren't even there. You went to take care of your mother after your father passed away."

"But I should've been there."

Heaving a heavy sigh, Jesse stared at Ken as if assessing him with a new eye. "This is stupid. You know things can and will go wrong, no matter how much planning and preparation goes into it. Our clients' actions sometimes create unexpected problems. You're doing an exceptional job with us. We've had hundreds of ops go well, and I attribute that to you. Don't let the few that didn't stay with you. You know to learn from them and move on. In fact, you're the one who told me that when I kept trying to dwell on the team failures our ops suffered in the middle east. Listen to your own advice."

He had said that and was surprised Jesse still remembered it—and had listened to it. In no way did he want to leave HIS. It just seemed the right thing to do. It left him conflicted about Sam, but he'd led her on that assignment that could've gotten her killed. That wasn't the right way to protect her.

Of course, with Jesse not accepting his resignation, he could do one of two things—walk out without a backward glance, or stay. With everything in him, he wanted to stay, but the fear of failure rested there heavier than it ever had. And one of those times, Sam could pay the price and he couldn't live with that.

He wasn't due back from his medical leave for a while so he could work on controlling that emotion. His concern for Sam had gnawed at him for years, and when he'd finally been able to do something about it, he'd screwed up. She'd come to trust him and he couldn't lose that. They couldn't lose it. It'd become the foundation of their personal and professional relationships.

Inside, a switch flipped, as if new life had been breathed back into him. It shouldn't be so easy to change his mind, but, dammit, he didn't want to leave these courageous men and women. He wanted to stand by them. To fight the battles that matter.

"Okay, I'll stay." With those words, his heart lightened and something inside told him he'd made the right choice. He shouldn't have allowed his despair to overwhelm him into making the wrong decision.

"Good," Jesse agreed. "Now tell me what's going on between you and Sam."

Shit. *She's had my heart since the day we met* didn't seem the appropriate answer, even though it held the truth. *If I have anything to say about it, we're about to become more than friends* probably wasn't the right thing to say either. No matter if he stayed or left, he'd have requested this one thing. Staying as the team leader gave him a stronger voice for it. He only hoped she'd forgive him.

Ken cleared his throat so he'd have the firmness in his voice to match the resolution he held in his statement. With a desire to see her safe, he didn't even blink when he stated, "About that...."

Moving away from the toxic environment in Columbus, Georgia, had been good for Samantha. Although not free of her internal demons, she enjoyed her new life. In general, being happy and positive had become easier, except when someone tried to be overprotective or treat her as if she couldn't hold her own. Thankfully—and unfortunately—only one person did that at HIS. Ken Patrick. The tall, brown-eyed hunk who rode a Harley and wore his longer blond hair in a low ponytail, appealed to her, more than he should.

With a heavy heart and her cell on speakerphone, Samantha Milton sliced a tomato to make a BLT sandwich. The tantalizing aroma of bacon floated through the house, making her mouth water and her stomach rumble. While she fixed her lunch, her best friend Beverly Shodun, in her heavy southern accent—Georgian to be specific—continued her rant. This time it referred to her perceived injustice of the men who'd deployed with her husband being alive while he was dead and buried. At some point during the tirade, Sam realized she could repeat the outburst word for word since she'd heard it so often.

Since Bev's husband's funeral, her bitterness only deepened. To this day, her friend still blamed Jesse and Ken for both of their husbands' deaths on that ill-fated op. Worse, she wanted the army to charge and hang them. Yes, she wanted hanging as their punishment.

Over the last ten years, Sam had overcome that initial shock of seeing the army chaplain and her husband's battalion commander walk up her drive and knock on the front door to share the news of Lance's death while on a "training op." *Training op, my ass.* Lance hadn't broken OPSEC and told her about the op—location and threat. He'd promised to come home to her. She hadn't expected it to be in a US flag-draped coffin.

After each seeing the two men bearing life-changing information, she and Bev grieved together. Initially, they laid the blame on anyone and everyone they could. After her mind cleared, Sam came to terms with her husband's death as no one's fault but the foreign renegades who'd killed him. Ken had risked his career by explaining to her what had actually happened. He'd called them "tangos," but she used "renegades." Ken tried to be a rock and help her through her grief—whenever she'd allow it.

Memories rushed forward, and Sam closed her eyes for a moment to absorb the force of all that had been powerful in her married life. Lance Milton had been a good husband who'd always been there for her with the right words, the perfect touch, and more love than she thought anyone could share.

Sam sniffed and closed her eyes again, but this time to ward off the tears trying to break free. Prior to his final op, Lance had told her that if he died, he didn't want her to continue to grieve, that she had to live... and to love again. Neither of them had any idea how difficult—if not impossible—that task would be. In jest, he'd suggested she marry his best friend, Ken Patrick.

"I still can't believe you work for them," Bev spat.

Heck, Sam had been so lost in thought she'd missed all Bev was saying. Until now. She knew by "them" her friend meant Jesse Hamilton and Ken Patrick, the leadership on the fatal op that cost her

and Bev everything. Well, not everything for Bev. She had a son with her husband. Unfortunately, Adam Shodun never had the opportunity to see his only son. Bev had been pregnant when he'd left for the final time, and she'd delivered not long after she'd become a widow.

Before Sam could form an appropriate response, Bev continued. "I still can't believe the army didn't discipline them." Her venomous response shouldn't have startled Sam, but she hadn't been ready for it.

When she realized her friend paused, as if waiting for Sam to speak, she sighed. Dropping her head, Sam squeezed the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger and said, "Bev, I've told you this before; it's a primo job. It's elite and difficult to get hired into, even with all my years on the police force. I love it and am glad I'm here."

Seeing Ken again after so long, feeling the heated connection between them, had sent her spiraling. While the memorable kisses they'd shared long ago had touched her heart and imprinted themselves on her soul, and if truth be told, still haunted her, she'd been slow to open her lonely heart to a possible future for them.

"But they just left you home while they went out to save the world."

Sam shook her head at the uninformed statement. "No, they didn't. I mean," she corrected, "I didn't go, but a few members, including Jesse and Ken, didn't either." She halted and almost clamped her hand over her mouth. Knowing how much her friend hated the two men, she'd just given her the opening for another tirade.

Ignoring her response, Bev plowed forward. "You were doing fine on SWAT. I don't see why you had to leave and move so far away. I miss having you here. Brunch on Sunday isn't the same. All the other wives talk about are their new husbands and kids. You were the only other single woman."

Her appetite gone, Sam left her sandwich on the counter and strode into the living room, then dropped onto the red leather couch that came with the apartment. Sam would've chosen differently, maybe a nice vintage piece like she'd had when she lived near Bev. Instead of moving everything, she'd sold anything and everything and chosen a furnished apartment. Thank goodness Bev wasn't here; she would have gone nuts over the poor taste the owner had and pushed to have him refurnish it. When Sam purchased her own place, it would be away from it all, and she'd decorate it to her taste. She just wasn't sure where that place would be. Sometimes she saw herself and Ken furnishing a place together. Then a slight uncertainty about remarrying crept into the dream. Not an uncertainty about Ken but about her feeling she'd be cheating on Lance. It made no sense since her husband was dead, but when did love make sense? Or in her case with Ken, likes a lot.

But Bev only cared about having her best friend close, and Sam couldn't fault her for that. What bothered Sam was that her friend knew how painful talking about the issue she'd faced on the force was for her, yet Bev regularly brought up the subject. "You know the men on SWAT were harassing me. I'm strong, but I didn't want to take it anymore." She'd worked hard for her spot with the team, but the men didn't want a woman working with them.

Needing to change the subject before Bev went on a rant about that, Sam tried again, hoping for a different answer. "Bev, why don't you move up here? Since you don't have to work, you're free to live where you want."

“I’m not leaving Adam’s home.”

Sam sighed in disappointment. Her friend just wouldn’t let Adam’s death go enough to move her life forward. No one expected her to forget Adam and the life they’d shared. Bev needed to rebuild her life and no one could get her to do that.

She worried about the effect Bev’s behavior had on Cody—Bev’s son. Being an honorary aunt, when Sam hadn’t been working, she’d taken Cody away for some special time. Unfortunately, by the time he’d reached the age of six, he’d figured out his mom wasn’t normal. Normal in the sense that any little thing that reminded her of her husband’s death sent her in a rage at the U.S. Army, the Ranger team, and anyone else she felt responsible for his death, including the chaplain who came to break the horrible news. But mostly at Jesse and Ken.

As a friend, Sam had tried many things to help Bev quit living in the past and that moment of initial sorrow, but she’d failed. Miserably. Reminding Bev she could have two things—like Sam—where she didn’t forget but instead moved on in the world.

Sam had almost declined the job with HIS since she’d wanted Cody to have someone, for lack of a better term, sane in his life. Bev wasn’t insane like someone who needed to be committed or who would do harm to herself or her child. She just didn’t give Cody the love Sam would’ve.

“What happened to you?” Bev asked. “You used to feel the same way that I did.”

“I did in the beginning, Bev, but I opened my eyes, and I’ve realized I have a life to live. And, after all I’ve been through with my career, I’ve learned that when all hell breaks loose, sometimes the best-laid plans are useless.” As she looked back, it’d taken too long for her to come to this conclusion, but come to it she had. A rightness of that realization—and the bitterness she’d released against Lance’s team leaders—rested in her soul.

Bev huffed in indignation. “You did nothing wrong on that op.”

Realizing her friend had switched back to her SWAT days, Sam took a deep breath to remain calm. “A hostage died,” she seethed, knowing what op Bev meant, but at least she was off her revenge kick. The image of the woman in the jewelry store would never leave her. The woman on her knees, with her long, dark hair wrapped in the gunman’s hand. Her head had been pulled back a moment before Sam’s eyes had connected with hers. Though she doubted the hostage saw her since the woman’s eyes were wide and full of fear. Per procedure, once Sam had found the optimal location, she’d radioed in the situation from her perch on the rooftop across the street. It would have been an easy shot for her to take out the lone gunman, with his weapon pointed at the hostage’s head. She’d tried to impress upon the negotiator the urgency, but he’d shut her up. Some negotiators thought themselves God. Unfortunately, this negotiator failed and the next moment had instilled itself in her mind as the gunman fired his weapon and the hostage fell with a bullet in her head. The approval to fire came too late to save the woman. Sam’s light touch on her trigger brought down the murderer, but there’d been nothing she could do to bring back the woman’s life.

“Didn’t you say you weren’t given the order to fire or free clearance to do so if you felt it necessary?”

At times, Bev surprised the hell out of her and talked reasonably about the situation.

Frustrated, Sam jumped up and all but stomped to the kitchen to pick up the sandwich she no longer wanted and dump it into the garbage. “The fact that I was cleared didn’t change that the woman died and I could’ve prevented it.”

“Adam always told me that no matter how good the team was, sometimes people die because they couldn’t be everything to everyone.”

If only Bev would listen to her own words.

“I know. Lance used to say something similar. Jesse also explained that to me, although his preference is that everyone remains alive.”

Her gut twisted at how damn confused she was. As an agent—of any law enforcement or military team—saying “shit happens,” which was what it basically boiled down to, was easy. For the survivors, not so much. With Sam being on both sides, it made every day a struggle, not knowing which emotion would rule the day.

“Dammit, Sam, quit that job and move back here. You know the department will take you back.”

And they were on that road again. She didn’t believe her friend would ever stop trying to get her to move back to Georgia. “Bev,” she said patiently, “I’m here now.” *Near Ken once again.* “Like I’ve said, I love it and like working with this team. The types of ops they run make a difference. Thankfully, there’s little to no red tape. Plus, there are women on the team, and the men seem to trust them and treat them as equals.” With the way the male-heavy team had treated her so far, she wasn’t plagued with the fear or insecurity that had haunted her once the men of SWAT began their campaign of sexual harassment. “Can’t you understand how this is the perfect fit for me?”

“You won’t think it’s perfect after you hear what I have to say.”

Sam quietly groaned. She refused to ask or open this topic up again. If it weren’t for her love for Cody, she’d have reevaluated her friendship with Bev. She’d expect a friend to support her in her decisions, not try to bring everything down so Sam moved back to Georgia and was as miserable as her friend.

“I’ve been investigating. Actually, having someone inside do the investigating into what I can’t get my hands on as a civilian.”

Confused, she asked, “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about what really happened the day our husbands died.”

Frustrated, Sam silently counted to ten before she responded. “We know what happened. You have to let it go, Bev.”

“No, Sam. We know what they wanted us to believe, but there’s more to it, and I have proof that’ll make you rethink who you work for.”

Finally cane-free, but still limping, Ken once again was about to approach Jesse with the same request. He had to think of something that would sway his boss's mind about letting Sam go. Although he'd been shut down on his first request, he wouldn't give up. It would be best for her as they took on more dangerous ops each day.

He didn't know why he'd thought she'd be safer with HIS than SWAT. The thought of her nearby had seemed perfect at the time.

The problem was he couldn't tell Jesse it was for his own peace of mind and to calm the frantic beating of his heart for her safety. She'd solidified her spot on the team as a much-needed asset with her quick eye and dead-on shooting. She actually put the other two snipers on the team to shame. And Jesse happened to be one of those. Her being able to hold her own made it more difficult to achieve his goal.

He'd gritted his teeth long enough, worried about her each time the team went out to a precarious situation. He'd promised her late husband to protect her however he could, but that had already been a commitment in his heart. Before he'd left Fort Benning to join HIS, he'd tried diligently to get her to quit the police force. Stubborn didn't begin to describe the woman. When she'd made SWAT, he'd about lost his shit. A man on a mission, he'd shown up on her doorstep and insisted she give up the team. His disapproval had seemed to make her more determined to stay in the job.

At the open doorway to Jesse's office, Reagan's laughter floated into the hallway. "Please, Daddy." That pleading voice always did him and the other agents in for whatever she wanted.

"You can, but you can't force anyone, pumpkin."

"But, it's for a good cause."

Jesse chuckled. "It is, but still—"

Cutting her father off, Reagan turned to him. "Don't you think so, Uncle Ken?" Ever since she'd been little, she'd begun calling every agent "Uncle," and they all loved her as if they were. Boy, did she have them wrapped around her cute, little finger. Him included.

Noting Jesse's reluctance, he hedged, "What're you asking?"

She heaved a heavy sigh like he should know what she'd been discussing. "The jar?"

Confused, he simply asked, "Jar?"

Nearly bouncing with excitement, she said, "Swear jar."

Oh, hell. Most of HIS may as well hand over their paychecks. They came from military or law enforcement backgrounds that tended to lead to foul language from time to time. "Why a swear jar?"

The nine-year-old smile made him feel like he should've, once again, known the answer. "College money."

Ken looked at Jesse who only shrugged. "I see." He really didn't because with a millionaire mother and wealthy father, college would be a drop in the bucket. Yet, he knew they didn't spoil her—the agents were good for that—but still...

After a kiss on her father's cheek, Reagan skipped out the door with a girlishly decorated jar in her hand. Ken stared at it and swallowed. They'd always tried to curb their language around the children and did a pretty good job. On an op though...

Jesse shook his head and turned his attention to Ken. In a blue polo shirt with the HIS logo over his left breast, Jesse waved him into the office. "Come in. We need to chat."

Hell. He didn't like the sound of that. Still, he entered and sat in the familiar chair facing the desk with a stern-looking Jesse behind it. "Yes, we do." Although he couldn't imagine they had the same topic in mind.

As he sat, he figured if he couldn't get Jesse to dismiss Sam, he'd have to convince her to resign. Somehow. His gut clenched, and he felt like a heel for what this might do to not only her but their relationship. Selfishly, he wanted her near him and happy. As a civilian, her life wouldn't constantly be in jeopardy, and he wouldn't be a bundle of nerves. He and Jesse had thought getting her out of SWAT had been the wise thing to do since they'd found out about the sexual harassment, even though she hadn't filed a complaint. Some men liked to brag way too often. And while he'd wanted her out of SWAT, maybe they should've hired her to do the computer work with two of the Hamilton siblings, Devon and Emily. Then they'd have fulfilled Lance's request to keep her safe. Finally.

He'd love to marry her, not only because he loved her, but if he did, he might persuade her to avoid a profession where she risked her life, whether it be police, SWAT, or HIS. Something inside his heart flipped at the two of them being together as husband and wife. Then it sank in knowing she'd never agree to such a thing if he pushed her to give up what she loved.

In truth, he'd hoped she'd be safe by his side and not as an agent, yet he knew he'd have to go slow with her. A lifetime ago he'd had two chances with her. The first time they'd met, their kiss had been hot and searing. Not ready to commit to a relationship, he'd pushed her away and into Lance's arms. When he'd felt ready to build something between them, he'd touched his lips to hers again, only more gently. It'd been a year after her husband's death, and she'd put a screeching halt to the intimacy. He'd been right to fear it too soon after Lance's death, but now was the time for them.

While she'd followed his direction as a senior agent and her team leader, he'd focused more on being her shield than allowing her to spread her wings, so to speak. Hell, after each op he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her until they couldn't stand. It'd happen soon, but he wouldn't wait until an op occurred.

If things didn't go his way with Jesse, she'd be seeing him later today as they had a serious topic to discuss. Deep down, he knew he had no chance of winning, but he wouldn't go down without a fight. The only upside—and he meant only—was she'd been added to his team in the split. That allowed him to continue to watch out for her as best he could.

Funny how with Jesse refusing his resignation, his strength and confidence in commanding the overall team had returned. They'd find another sharpshooter to replace her. Heck, they had piles of unsolicited resumes from people with impressive experience. A woman he'd worked with on a government-sanctioned mission would be an excellent choice. Finding her was another matter as who she worked for hadn't been solved.

With all the danger that came their way, he wanted to admit that he liked Sam working with him, knowing that her skill enhanced every mission. But that contradicted his desire to protect her, and his focus on her when she was there. Without her realizing it, the woman scrambled his brain. He had to break through this clutter to return to normal. Although something tickled his mind that since he trusted her, he shouldn't worry and should let her do her thing, and he do his. Then a response that she might get hurt slapped it away.

He knew his views were archaic, but dammit, he wanted her safe—always.

"We've got an abduction."

Straightening himself in the seat, Ken's mind focused and his heart pounded, adrenaline readying to spill into his veins. The switch flipped and his mind tuned into the problem. "Child or adult?"

"Both. Listen, I don't have all the particulars yet." His jaw clenched. "Or the go-ahead."

Ken knew Jesse would get them airborne as quickly as possible, even if that meant getting the go-ahead in the air or on the ground. Whether family or police or government had agreed they'd want HIS to handle the situation, they generally took too long to pull the trigger.

"The team is coming in now. I need you and Rob to agree on that split and not let anyone on Bravo team disappear. When I'm ready to brief them, I'll come to the two of you."

Waiting sucked. Once Ken knew someone needed their help, he wanted to be there pronto. "You're going to send out Bravo team?"

"Have to."

A stab in his chest would've been easier to take than his boss remarking on his injury and the impact. Taking a deep breath, he remembered Jesse didn't have a problem with his injury and the decision made sense.

"Because I think they'll need the extra man power, I'm also going to send a couple of my brothers." He held up a hand to stop Ken's rebuttal. "I know I said we'd leave these missions to the agents, but they want to help, and, if at all possible, I'd like to keep a full team intact in case something else comes up on the fly." He sighed. "Look, this looks like it could get messy. The asshole"—Jesse regarded the paperwork on his desk before looking back at Ken—"one Ronald Wheeler, owns an arsenal and has beaten his estranged wife more than once. She filed for divorce and sole custody, and Ronald doesn't appear to be taking it well."

An angry fire blazed in Ken's gut, ready to erupt. There should be a special place in hell for men like this. Ken stood. "I'll take care of Rob. If you need my team, they're yours."

Jesse's lip quirked up at the end. "Have them on standby. If this becomes a multi-state chase, Rob may need the backup."

Exiting Jesse's office with the yellow folders from before, Ken hoped Jesse received the particulars and go-ahead quickly. As they all knew, every moment counted in an abduction case.

In the war room, Ken found Rob still in his all-black attire striding out of the locker room. When they approached each other, Ken grasped Rob's hand at chest level and smiled at his friend. "Welcome back." He nodded as agents walked by them, ready to debrief.

"Glad to be back."

"How'd it go?"

Rob grinned. "Piece of cake."

Ken almost snorted out loud. "Only a few bullets flying?" While true, it had been said in a lighthearted jesting manner.

"I'm thinking we need to train the team in evasive driving. I imagine Brad could help, but it wouldn't hurt to get them onto a professional course."

Brad Hamilton had once been U.S. Secret Service. Although he hadn't been an official driver, he'd somehow managed a few driving classes that had helped HIS when trouble had arisen. Now that Brad would be staying back more often, Rob's idea had merit.

"I'm sure Old Man won't fight it." He rubbed his chin in thought. "Maybe two per team." Old Man was Jesse's designation as being similar to a commander. Ken just couldn't call him that outside of an op or in discussion with the team. They'd been too close. The same held for Sam.

Rob showed surprise for only a millisecond before he returned his features to his blank expression. “Teams?”

Nodding, Ken led him to one of the empty offices. “Teams as in two. One for me and one for you.”

Ken sat behind the desk, and Rob took a chair in front of it. “That’s not a bad idea.”

A sly grin spread across his face before he told Rob, “It’d include a raise for you, of course.”

Rob shrugged as if it didn’t matter, but Ken knew the man saved nearly every penny he made. “I wish I could take credit for the idea, but it was Old Man’s. The family is stepping back. They’re available for special ops or when our numbers aren’t enough. But they’ll take over the investigative side freeing us up for the field.”

Rob nodded. “I figured they’d step back at some point.” Almost as an afterthought, he then asked, “How’s the hip?”

At the question, Ken automatically rubbed a hand over the wounded area. The skin was still tender to the touch but he’d never admit such. “I’ll be fine. Back to ops in a couple weeks.”

“It’ll suck not working side by side with you.”

“I’m sure we’ll have some ops that require both teams.” In fact, Ken knew one was in the offer stage. Once Jesse accepted it, most of the team would be gone for as long as it took. Due to the need to expedite everything since it included a child abduction, Ken expected to hear about it shortly.

“I imagine that’d be the case.” Rob half stood. “I’ve gotta debrief.”

Per Jesse’s orders, Ken was to delay Rob while he pulled the specifics for that op and ensured Rob accepted the new team leader role. “We thought, since everyone was here, we could present the team concept to them.”

“Christ, Boss, the team is exhausted.” He really didn’t care for “Boss,” but he’d been dubbed that and that’s what the team called him. Except Sam, in private. And the Hamiltons. Maybe because they’d grown up together, the brothers had never stuck with any callsigns they’d been given either in their careers.

“I know, but this is important and shouldn’t take long.”

Spotting paperwork Ken had dropped on the desk, Rob scooted forward. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

“Including us, there’re twelve agents. We’ll each have a sharpshooter and a field medic.”

Rob looked up from his perusal of the list Ken had handed him. “But we only have one medic—Rodney.”

Reaching across the desk, he tapped his finger on a name listed on the paper. “We’ve hired Ash McNabb. Casper was a D-boy and a paramedic before he became a Green Beret then Delta.”

Rob whistled, as he should for someone with such elite experience. Respect and all.

“As for team designations, I’ll lead Alpha team and you’ll lead Bravo team.”

A grin split Rob’s face. “Still making me second, aren’t you?”

“Filling these big shoes is hard,” Ken jested.

“Big shoes, my ass.”

Ken chuckled. “You’re just jealous.”

Rob snorted. “You just keep thinking that.”

“All right, let’s get back to this so we can get you out there and announce it to the group.” Motioning his head toward a single sheet of paper, he explained, “That’s the suggested breakout. But this will be your team too, so it’s not set in stone until we both agree.”

“So your sniper is Sugar, while I have Nemo.”

Ken nodded in agreement. “We’ll beef up that position to two on each team as soon as we can find sharpshooters that fit.”

Looking up from the list, Rob smiled slyly. “How about we switch?”

Without warning, Ken bristled at the remark. Although it felt like jealousy, he refused to admit it. “What’s wrong with Nemo?” Neftali, aka Nef, aka Nemo, had also been a SEAL, so he and Rob should get along great.

“Nothing. Sugar’s just better to look at.”

Anger raged through him, and he could’ve sprung over the table and strangled the man if his hip and professional restraint hadn’t held him back. Sam was millions times better to look at, but he didn’t want anyone else believing that. He’d try Jesse’s approach to when he’d attempted to resign. “No.”

His second-in-command laughed. At him. What the hell? He hadn’t done anything that warranted the humorous response. He decided moving on would be the best option. “For a medic, I’ll keep Rodney and you can use Casper. He shouldn’t need any training.”

Sober again, Rob nodded. “That works.”

Glad to be back on track, Ken proceeded with how he’d split the once larger team. “I’ll keep Franks, Cowboy, and Stone. That’ll leave you Romeo, Celeb, and Speedy.” He looked up from the list. “Any issues?”

“You have more former spec ops than I do.”

“Remember, you’re gaining a Delta for your team.” To move him off that topic, he added, “Also, we each have someone formerly from the FBI—Stone for me and Romeo for you—which can help in investigations when the Hamilton clan isn’t available. The rest are a mix of backgrounds.”

Rob leaned back and nodded. “That works for me.”

Jesse walked by the office and nodded at Ken as he continued toward the war room.

With a grimace, Ken spoke, “Your team is up now. Old Man is waiting to brief the team. You can debrief the op you just completed while you’re in the air. There’s no time to waste on this one.”

Rob surged to his feet, all appearances of exhaustion evaporated. “Then why the hell have you kept me here?”

Not wanting the vulnerable position of being seated while Rob stood over him, he unfolded himself from the chair and held out a hand, staying Rob. “Calm down. Old Man had to get the information. We haven’t wasted any time, except right now. Get out there and I’ll get the team.” With that, they both strode out, Ken falling behind because of his limp.

When the team had all congregated in the war room, Old Man quickly introduced the team breakout. As expected, no questions were asked. The men and women trusted the judgment of their leadership and that helped tremendously in HIS op success. “Bravo team, you’re up for this one. Let’s go. Alpha team, you’re on standby.”

With the room half empty, Ken called his team together near the end of the conference table. As they huddled around, he asked, “Anyone have questions or concerns about our splitting up the teams?”

“I’m glad you did it. It’s better than arbitrarily being put on standby or never knowing if you’ll be chosen for an op,” Danny Franks, former DEA, offered.

“I agree,” Mike—Cowboy—a former Air Force Pararescueman or PJ, added.

“What about the brothers and Kate and Rylee?” Franks asked.

“They’ll be more administrative. That’s not to say they won’t augment an op like this one, but the teams are it for the most part.” He didn’t add, because they’d all seen the change, Kate and Rylee—former FBI agents and Hamilton brother wives—had already slowly been pulling back on ops.

“Who decides who goes?” Sugar asked with that light Southern accent that sounded like music to his soul. The team had quickly dubbed her with a callsign of Sugar because her accent was “sweet as sugar.”

Ken smiled. “That’s one of those administrative things. Old Man will ultimately decide, but the plan is for rotation.”

“Hell, I’m gonna miss Rylee out there. She’s damn good.” Joe Stone, former FBI and called by his last name, must’ve realized how that sounded when Sugar gave him the evil eye. “Now wait a minute,” he begged off. “I’m not saying just because she’s a woman. I’m saying it because she was FBI and we stick together.”

While they all knew he was joking, a small argument broke out where Franks stood his ground for the DEA. When he disparaged the SEALs, Ken stepped in to keep a full-out war from happening.

“All right. We all know the Army Rangers are the best and anyone who argues can sit out the next op.”

Completely ignoring him, they all talked at once. He fought not to smile. This group was predictable.

“So what do we do when Bravo team is on an op?” Rodney, a former Navy SEAL and medic who they referred to as Doc, asked quietly.

“We’ll be on downtime, out on an op of our own, or we’ll be on standby to support them however we can. We’ll also train. Lots of training.” Ken’s experience had been when the topic of training was spoken, several groans sounded. Not from this group. They wanted to stay on top of their game.

“All right, I need to debrief with those who just came back and do the quick turnaround. I’ve read the police reports, but I need to hear from you why bullets were flying.” Some police departments who either weren’t equipped to handle some situations or needed the help the government wouldn’t provide loved their assistance, especially with a successful resolution. But they always hated it when bullets flew. Even if HIS didn’t fire first.

“Hell, Boss, you know they don’t fly unless we have to,” Stone said belligerently, taking up for his old teammates.

Ken sighed heavily. “Yes, but when they do, they don’t usually hit an off-duty police officer.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” Franks said. “I understood our attorney already said it was a clear case of self-defense. We couldn’t help it that the cop tried to kill Romeo.”

It didn’t surprise him Grits had called their attorney while returning. None of them wanted jail time for doing their job. “I’m not saying the team did anything wrong. Everyone needs to be informed of what happened before, during, and after so we can learn from it. We know that different states react to us differently, so banking the knowledge of each state can only help us. Knowing how the police react to every incident can help us improve our responses. Revisiting what occurred before the incident can only make us stronger in lessons learned.”

Franks, Stone, and Doc nodded. Sugar and Cowboy just watched him, not in disagreement, but more as if they wanted him to continue or add more.

“After we debrief, you’re released for the day. We’ll meet back here tomorrow for training. Remember you’re on standby to back up the team. If we need you, Devon’ll send out the alert.” Every

agent, by requirement, carried a cell phone, and if the emergency text pushed through, it required only one thing—get your ass to HQ on the double.

“When are you back on ops?” Doc asked.

“Not soon enough.” And no way in hell would he allow Sam to go on one without him.

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