

Rachel Vincent, *Shadow Bound*

One

Kori

If you live in the dark long enough, you start to forget what light looks like. What it feels like. You may remember it in an academic sense. Illumination. A possible source of heat. But after a while those abstract memories are all you have left, and they're worth less than the memory of water to a man dying of thirst.

I didn't know how long I'd been in the dark. Long enough for most of the pain to fade into dull aches, though the latest batch of bruises would still have been visible, if anything had been visible. Long enough that I couldn't remember what shade of gray the walls were. Long enough that when the light came on without warning, it blinded me, even through my closed eyelids.

I'd lost all sense of time. I didn't know when I'd last showered, or eaten, or needed the toilet in the corner of my cell. I didn't know when I'd last heard a human voice, but I remembered the last voice I'd heard, and I knew what the sudden light meant.

Light meant a visitor.

And visitors meant pain.

The door creaked open, and my pulse leaped painfully—fear, like a bolt of lightning straight to my heart. I clung to that one erratic heartbeat, riding the flow of adrenaline because I hadn't felt anything but the ache of my own wounds in days.

If not for the pain, I couldn't have sworn I was still alive.

"Kori Daniels, rise and shine." Milligan was on duty, which meant it was daytime—outside, anyway. In the basement, it was always night. There were no exterior windows, and no light until someone flipped a switch.

The dark and I used to be friends. No, lovers. When I was alone, I walked around naked just to feel it on my skin, cool and calm, and more intimate than any hand that had ever touched me. The dark was alive, and it was seductive. We used to slide in and out of one another, the shadows and I, always touching, caressing. Sometimes I couldn't tell where the dark ended and I began, and at some point I'd decided that division didn't really exist. I was the dark, and the dark was me.

But the darkness in the basement was different. It was false. Broken. Weakened by infrared lights I couldn't see, but I could feel blazing down on me. Caging me. Draining me. The shadows were dead, and touching them was like touching the stiff limbs of a lover's corpse.

"Kori," Milligan said again, and I struggled to focus on him. On my own name.

The guard shift change had become the ticking of my mental clock—the only method I had of measuring time. But my clock skipped beats. Hell, sometimes it skipped entire days. If there was a pattern to the granting of meals, and showers, and company, I hadn't figured it out. They came when they came. But mostly, they didn't.

I didn't sit up when Milligan came in. I didn't even open my eyes, because I didn't have to. I hadn't sworn an oath to him, and I hadn't been ordered to obey him, so participation was at my discretion. And I wasn't feeling very discretionary.

I rolled onto my stomach on my mattress, eyes still squeezed shut, trying not to imagine how I must look after all this time. Skinny, bruised, tangled and dirty. Clad only in the same underwear I'd been wearing for days, at least, because humiliation was a large part of my sentence and I hadn't been granted the privilege of real clothing. My period hadn't come, which meant I wasn't imagining not being fed regularly, and water came rarely enough that I'd decided I wasn't being kept alive, so much as I was being slowly killed.

I'd been a bad, bad girl.

"Kori, did you hear me?" Milligan asked.

I'd had no problem with him on the outside. He'd respected me. At least, he'd respected the fact that the boss valued me. Milligan had never gotten grabby, and he'd only leered when he thought I wasn't looking. That was practically chivalry, on the west side of the city.

Now, I hated him. Milligan hadn't put me in the basement, in that rotten fucking cell of a room. But he'd kept me there, and that was enough. If I got the chance—if I ever got out and regained my strength—I'd put a bullet in him. I'd have to, just to show Jake Tower that I was down, but not out. Beaten, but not broken.

Milligan would be expecting it, just like I would, in his position.

The door creaked open wider and I buried my face in the crook of my arm, nose pressed into the dirty mattress, braced for whatever would come. Prepared to turn myself off and make the world go away. That was the only way to survive in the basement. Convince yourself that whatever they do to you doesn't matter. And really, it doesn't. How can it, if you can't stop it and no one else wants to? So I dug down deep, to a place where there was no pain, and no thought. Not my happy place. Thinking of a happy place—*any* happy place—only reminded me that I wasn't really there. That I never would be again.

I went to my empty place.

"Tower's on his way," Milligan said. "I think you're getting out."

My heart leaped into my throat, but I didn't move. Surely I'd only heard what I wanted to hear. If I wasn't careful, I sometimes imagined things, and there's nothing more dangerous in the dark than unwarranted hope.

"Kori?" he said, and that time my eyes opened. "You're getting out today."

I sat up slowly, blinking furiously in the light, wincing over the residual pain from the gunshot wound in my shoulder. I'd heard him, but it took forever for the words to sink in, and even once they had, I didn't let myself believe it. It could be a trick. Jonah Tower—Jake's brother—had told me I was getting out before, but he only said it so he could watch me suffer when I realized it wasn't true.

"If you're lying, I'll fucking kill you," I croaked, my mouth and throat so dry my tongue felt like it had corners.

"I'm not—" Milligan glanced down a hallway I couldn't see as a set of firm, even footsteps echoed toward us. "Here he comes."

I swallowed a sob. I'd expected to die alone in this false dark. In these dead shadows.

Milligan stepped back, and Jake Tower replaced him in the doorway, a steel-spined symbol of power and authority in his white button-up shirt and suit jacket, sans tie. I hated myself for how relieved I was to see him, when he was the one who'd locked me up. I hated his clean clothes, and combed hair, and tanned skin. I hated the apple wood smoke clinging to his clothes from the grill, making my stomach rumble and cramp. I hated the slight flush in his cheeks that told me he'd had two glasses of red wine with his steak—never more, never less, because Tower was in control. Of everything. Always.

Jake Tower was the heart of the Tower syndicate. We—the initiates—were the lifeblood of the organization, but Tower was the pump that kept us flowing through the veins and arteries of this living machine. He pushed the buttons and pulled the strings, and we belonged to him, all of us, bound into service, sealed in flesh, by blood and by name. We lived and died according to his will. And we obeyed because obedience was a physical mandate. Even when our minds resisted, our bodies complied, helpless in the face of a direct order.

But I'd found a loophole. I'd disobeyed the spirit of an order, if not the order itself, and as punishment, Tower had thrown open the gates of hell and shoved me inside. He'd locked me up and given Jonah free rein, and for all I knew, Jake had forgotten I even existed until...

Until what?

Until he needed me. Why else would he be here? Why else had he let me live, if my current state could even be called living?

Tower's nose wrinkled—I didn't smell good—then he closed the door at his back and sat on the edge of the bare foam mattress covering the raised concrete slab that was my bed. He grabbed my chin and tilted my face toward the light, studying me. I knew what he saw, though there was no mirror in my cell. Bruises. Dark circles and sharp cheek bones. Split lips. And the damage didn't end with my face. I looked like hell and I felt worse.

Tower looked...satisfied. "Does it hurt?"

“You fucking know it hurts.” Everywhere. That was the whole point. With my existence reduced to fear, and pain, and dead shadows, surely I would never even consider another betrayal. “The lights?” I didn’t want to ask, but I had to know. “Your idea?” Jonah wasn’t smart enough to think of something like that.

Tower’s lips curled up in a small smile, like he’d just remembered some distant childhood pleasure. “An irony I hope you fully appreciate. Absolute, inescapable darkness for the shadow-walker. Imprisoned by the source of your own abilities. How did that feel?”

I am a Traveler. A shadow-walker. I can step into a shadow in one room, then out of a shadow anywhere else I want to go, within my range. I can see better in the dark than most people. Sometimes I can look into one shadow and see through another one, somewhere else, like looking through a periscope, or one of those paper towel roll telescopes we used to play with as kids.

But the basement darkness was anemic, thanks to a grid of infrared lights, too high up for me to reach. So while my cell looked absolutely, claustrophobically dark to the naked eye, that darkness was too shallow for me to travel through. The shadows were dead. I was trapped in the element that had always been my ally. My escape.

How did that make me feel?

Like I’d been betrayed by my own body. Like I was lost to the rest of the world. Like I no longer existed at all, which would have been easy to believe, if not for the pain anchoring me to the reality of my own miserable existence. But I wasn’t going to tell Tower that.

“It sucked, on ice. Happy?”

He said nothing. Whatever he wanted to tell me would come on his terms, and making me wait for it was just another way of making me suffer.

“Why?” I demanded, pissed off that my voice was as weak as the rest of me. “Why didn’t you just kill me?” He’d killed others for far less than what I’d done.

“You needed to pay for your crimes, and others needed to know you were paying.” He said it like he might explain that grass is green, as if it should have been obvious, and the emptiness in his voice was the scariest thing I’d ever heard.

“You told them?”

“You were an object lesson, Korinne. I showed them.” He glanced at the slab of one-way glass in the top half of the exterior wall, and my blood froze in my veins. I started to shake, and I couldn’t stop.

“You let them watch?” He’d invited an audience to see me beaten, and broken, and humiliated, and... I closed my eyes against this new layer of humiliation.

“Only those who needed to see.”

“Kenley?” No. *Please* no. I didn’t want her touched by this. I didn’t want her to know. If Tower was void of human emotion, Kenley was made of it, and she couldn’t defend herself. That was my job.

Tower shook his head. “Your sister only knows that you’re alive. She’s anxious to see you.”

I exhaled slowly and blinked back tears that would never fall, using them as fuel for the rage burning deep in my gut. Fury that would have no outlet for four more years. Anger that would fester and burn as I planned for the day when I’d be the one throwing punches and spilling blood. Jake Tower would *pay*. Jonah would pay. Milligan and the other guards would pay. Everyone who’d watched would fucking pay.

I would listen to them beg while they bled out on the floor.

But I’d have to survive to get revenge, and to survive, I’d have to play Jake’s game. It was always his game, always his rules, and the only cards he dealt me were penitence and obedience. So I would play the shit out of penitence and obedience—anything to get out of the basement—and keep the cards I’d dealt myself up my sleeve. Until it was my turn to deal.

“I have an assignment for you, Korinne,” Jake said. “A chance to redeem yourself.”

I said nothing, because nothing was required, but my pulse raced so fast I had to lean against the wall to steady myself. Milligan was right. I was getting out of the basement.

“Ian Holt.”

“Who?” I licked my lips, but my tongue was too dry to wet them, and now that I knew I was getting out, I found it hard to concentrate on the details, rather than the promise of regular meals, and showers, and relative freedom.

“He’s a Blinder of extraordinary skill.”

“You want him killed?” I’d never heard of him, which meant he wasn’t ours. And if he could be used against us, he was a target.

“I want him whole. Preferably unharmed.”

“Another acquisition?” In the weeks before I was locked up, I’d done quite a few of them, collecting whoever Tower wanted for his pet project.

“Only as a last resort. I want him on staff. Willingly.” Because forced bindings were never as strong as those entered into freely. “Holt hasn’t signed with anyone yet. In fact, he managed to stay completely off the radar until two days ago, when the JumboTron at an NHL hockey game caught him darkening the entire arena during a riot on the ice.”

“How do you know it wasn’t just a power outage?”

“Because he blinded the arena from the outside in, starting at the perimeter and moving toward the ice from all sides equally. The general public thinks he’s just some idiot who saw the first lights go out before the camera did and pretended to be doing a magic trick. But I know what I saw, and I’m not the only one. Now that he’s been exposed, everyone wants him. I’ve officially extended an invitation, and he’s agreed to come to town as my guest and hear our pitch. You will be his liaison. You will show him the advantages of joining the Tower syndicate and make sure that he signs with us, or with no one.”

“I’m not a fucking recruiter, Jake.” I’d been part of Tower’s personal security team. I’d killed for him. I’d kidnapped for him. I’d done other things I desperately wished I could forget, but recruiting was a specialized skill—one I didn’t have. “I’m a soldier, and you need a salesman.”

“You are whatever I say you are, and when Ian Holt gets here, you will be his recruiter. You will be his girlfriend, his best friend, his therapist, his mother, or his dog trainer, if need be. You will do whatever it takes to put a chain link on his arm.” For emphasis, Tower glanced at the two black interlocking chain links tattooed on my own arm—the flesh-and-blood binding tying me to him until my term was up. “Whatever it takes, Korinne. Do you understand?”

I understood. “You want me to fuck him.” And if I refused—if I refused *anything* Jake told me to do—resistance pain from violating my oath to him would shut my organs down one at a time until I died screaming.

“I want you to give him whatever he wants. And if he wants *you*, then yes, you will bed him, and you better be the best he’s ever had, because if he refuses my mark, you will have to bring him in by force, so I can drain him. And if that happens, I will kill you, and your sister will pay for your failure, as you’ve paid for your latest mistake. She will serve out the years remaining on her contract in this room, under the same conditions.”

My blood ran cold, and suddenly I couldn’t breathe. “No one touches Kenley. You swore it when I signed on.” My little sister would be untouchable, in exchange for my service.

“And *you* swore that you would guard my life and my interests with your own.” Tower unbuttoned his shirt slowly, and I knew what he was going to do even before he pulled back the left half of the material to show me the fresh pink scar. “Your key card let the enemy into my house. Into my home, where my wife and children sleep. Your gun faltered where it should have fired, and I was shot in my own home, by my greatest enemy.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“You failed,” Tower insisted. “You broke your word, and I have no reason to keep mine. If Ian Holt does not sign with me voluntarily by the end of his visit, I will have you executed, and your sister will pay the pound of flesh you still owe.”

Nausea rolled over me, and if I’d had anything to vomit, it would have landed in his lap.

“You have two weeks to get back in shape and make yourself presentable. This is your last chance, Korinne. Save yourself. Protect your sister. Get me Ian Holt.”

After Tower left, the lights stayed on, and I had several minutes to see the emaciated ruin my body had become. And to think. And to hate Jake Tower like I'd never hated anyone in my life. Then the door opened again, and my sister stepped into the room, a younger, softer reflection of the woman I'd been until Tower locked me up.

Kenley gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth, then she spoke from behind it. "What did you bastards do to her?"

Milligan stood behind her, staring at the floor. "I never touched her. I just work here."

"Where the hell are her clothes?"

Milligan shrugged. "This is how he sent her. You've got fifteen minutes to get her cleaned up." He backed out of the room and shut the door.

Kenley crossed the small space and set a canvas bag on the floor, then dropped onto her knees in front of me, brushing hair back from my forehead.

"How long?" I asked, staring at the mattress while she dug in her bag.

She pulled out a bottle of water and handed it to me. "Almost six weeks," she said, and I could hear the sob in her voice, though she tried to hold it back.

"I'm fine." I cracked the top on the bottle, scared by how much effort that took, then unscrewed the lid. I'd gulped half of it before I remembered I should go slow.

"You're not fine. I thought you were dead. Jake kept saying you were alive, but he wouldn't let me see you. I was sure he was lying, just to keep me working." Tears formed in her eyes and when she blinked, they rolled down her cheeks.

"No. Don't cry, Kenni," I whispered, because they were listening. They were always listening, and they were probably watching, through the one-way glass. I licked the moisture from my lips. "Don't ever let those steel-hearted sons of bitches see you cry. If they know you can be broken, they'll fuckin' break you just for sport."

Like they'd tried to break me.

She nodded, jaw clenched against sobs she was visibly choking back.

I opened my mouth to tell her it would be okay. I would *make* it okay. But then my stomach revolted, and I lurched for the toilet. I retched hard enough to wrench my injured shoulder, and the water came up. It was too much, too fast. I should have known better. I'd been sipping half-handfuls of clean water from the back of the toilet tank since the bottles had stopped coming, but that was different from gulping half a bottle, ice cold.

Kenley pulled my hair from my face and I sat up, wiping my mouth with the back of one bare arm. My stomach was still pitching, but there was nothing left to lose.

"No one knew where you were." She handed me the bottle again, and I rinsed my mouth, then spit into the toilet, thinking about how wrong she was. Some people knew where I was. Some of them had seen me, through the one-way glass. "Tower was shot, and you were shot, then he woke up and you disappeared. What happened, Kori? No one knows what really happened."

What happened? I'd been buried in the basement, at the mercy of the monsters. But that wasn't what she was asking.

"Liv said she needed my help, so I went. But it was a trap. They were waiting for me. They took my key and used it to break in." I was the breach in security that got one of our men killed, two more shot, and Tower's prize blood donor—my murdered friend Noelle's only daughter—taken. "Ruben Cavazos shot us both." I ran my fingers over the dirty bandage on my shoulder.

I should have run, regardless of the risk. I *would* have run, if not for Kenley. I couldn't leave her alone with Tower. Alone in the syndicate. My sister and I were a package deal, from start to finish.

"You're lucky he didn't have you killed," she said, but I shook my head.

"He can't. He still needs me." I had no clue why I had to be the one to recruit Ian Holt, but if Jake didn't need me, I would be dead.

"Let's get you cleaned up." She stood and headed for the canvas bag, but her shoulders were shaking and it took me a minute to realize why.

"Kenley, this isn't your fault." I used the edge of the toilet to push myself to my feet.

“Of course it’s my fault.” She dug in the bag and pulled out a bottle of shampoo, then crossed the room toward the narrow, curtainless shower stall in one corner. “I sealed the binding between you and Liv, so you have to do what she asks. Because of me.”

Kenley was a Binder. A scary-good Binder. She was so good Jake hid her from the world, to protect her and every contract she’d ever sealed for him. He kept her under twenty-four-hour guard, and he threatened me to control her, just like he threatened her to control me.

“It wasn’t like that this time,” I insisted, as she turned on the shower—it only worked when they wanted it to. “Liv didn’t officially ask and I wasn’t compelled. I went to help her on my own.” Because it was the right thing to do. I was sure of that, even after everything that had come since.

“It’s my fault you’re here in the first place, Kori.” Kenley aimed the shower spray at the opposite wall, then turned to look at me, arms crossed over her chest, and I sighed. I’d never been able to effectively argue with that one. But again, I had to try.

“I make my own decisions. We came into the syndicate together, and we’ll leave together.” Or not at all. “Four years,” I whispered leaning with my forehead against her shoulder, while stray droplets of water sprayed us both. “We can do four more years, right?”

She nodded, but she looked far from sure. I’d been shot, starved, abused, and locked in the dark for almost six weeks, but she was the one I worried about. Kenley was fragile, so I had to be strong enough for both of us. And Jake knew it. He knew what cards we held—what mattered to us—so he always won the game.

“Let me see your shoulder.” Kenley blinked away more tears, and I leaned against the wall for balance while she peeled medical tape and gauze from my gunshot wound. I’d done my best to keep it clean, and I’d taken all the antibiotics Jonah had brought in the first couple of weeks, back when I was being fed and showered regularly, because *he* was the bulk of my punishment. But then Jake had figured out that his brother wasn’t enough to break me, and that’s when the darkness and isolation had dropped into place around me.

“It could be worse.” Kenley wadded up the bandage and dropped it on the floor. “The stitches have dissolved and it’s only a little red.” Which kind of figured, because the rest of me was black and blue. “Get cleaned up. He’s sending an escort for us in a few minutes,” she said, while I stepped out of my underwear and dropped my grimy bra on the floor. Kenley kicked them into the opposite corner, then stuck one hand under the water and grimaced. “They could at least make it warm.”

But they wouldn’t. The basement cells weren’t built for comfort. They were built for isolation and torture. They were built for hour after hour of darkness and silence, because when you can’t see anything and you can’t hear anything, you have no choice but to think about what you did, and how you would never, ever do it again.

But here’s the thing. I would do it all over again, if I had the chance. I would take the gunshot wound, and the silence, and the darkness, and the worst Jonah could throw at me, if it meant sending Noelle’s kid back home where she belonged.

I stepped into the shower and gasped as freezing water poured over my face and body. I let it soak my hair, then I opened my mouth and drank just a little, one hand propped on the tile wall for balance, because I hadn’t eaten in days, and the room was starting to spin.

While I washed my hair slowly, shocked wide awake by the cold water, my sister pounded on the one-way glass. “She’s gonna need something clean to wear. Actual clothes, this time! And a towel!”

I lathered the cracked bar of soap while water and shampoo suds ran down my body to swirl through the drain at my feet. It felt good to be clean on the outside, even if I might never be truly clean on the inside, ever again.

Five minutes later, clean and still damp, my hair dripping on clothes that weren’t mine and didn’t quite fit, I stepped out of the cell I’d spent almost six weeks in with one arm around my sister, as she half-held me up. Milligan didn’t look at me, and neither did either of the grunts Tower had sent to escort us to Kenley’s apartment. But as the door swung shut behind me, literally closing on a chapter of my life I never wanted to reread, a man stepped out of the shadows in the hallway and crossed beefy arms over a barrel chest.

“Won’t be the same around here without you, Kori,” Jonah Tower said, cruel laughter echoing behind every syllable, and at the sound of his voice, my heart thumped painfully, pumping remembered pain and fear along with the blood in my veins. He stepped closer and whispered into my ear, too softly for Kenley to hear. “But I think you’ll be back. And if you can’t give Jake what he wants, I get to end you. Then the younger Miss Daniels and I are gonna get to know each other real well.”

Kenley shied away from the hand he laid on her shoulder, and I stepped between them, close enough that I could smell the beer on his breath. “I’ll be back all right, but you’re not gonna see me coming. And if you’ve laid a finger on my sister, I’m going to tear them off one at a time and shove them down your throat until you choke on your own sins.”

Two

Ian

“Have I told you you’re an idiot?” Aaron asked, staring through the windshield at the tall iron gate and the even taller house behind it. If such a monstrosity could even be called a house. It was more like a modern fortress.

“About twenty times since my plane landed.” I flipped down the driver’s side sunshade and checked my tie in the mirror.

“Has it sunk in yet?”

I glanced at him in the thick shadows of the car’s interior, lit only by the green numbers scrolling across the radio’s display in the dashboard. “Your puny verbal barbs are no match for my thick skull.”

“You *do* have a freakishly thick skull,” Aaron said, flipping through the stations on my rental car’s radio. “But that won’t stop a bullet. They may look civilized in tuxedos and sequins, but they’re really monsters in men’s clothing, every single one of them. They’re going to eat you alive in there, Ian.”

“Then may they choke on my corpse.”

Aaron punched the button to turn off the radio, uncharacteristically serious in concession to the job at hand. “Eight years since you left, and nothing’s changed. You’re still ready to charge in half-cocked and make the world bend to your will, consequences be damned.”

“That’s not true.” The kid I’d been back then was idealistic but soft. Smart but naive. That kid had been burned by the real world—roasted alive—and I’d risen from his ashes, ready to breathe fire of my own. “Now I’m *fully* cocked, and well aware of the consequences. As are you.”

He nodded at the somber reminder. “You sure you don’t want me to go in with you? I could grab a monkey suit and be back in a second.” Aaron was a Traveler, which meant he could step into the shadow of a tree outside my car and into his own bedroom in the space of a single breath, and be back just as fast. “You’re gonna need someone you trust at your back.”

Unfortunately for Aaron—or fortunately, depending on your perspective—traveling was one of the most common Skills in the world. Aaron’s range was a little above average, but his accuracy was questionable at best, and unless his motivation was personal, no one would ever call him punctual. Which meant he had no value whatsoever to the Skilled syndicates.

That fact had kept him safe from their interest for years. So safe, in fact, I’d often wondered if he was faking his own incompetence for that very reason. He wouldn’t be the first to try it. Hell, *I’d* tried it. But that wasn’t why I couldn’t use his help.

“Thanks, but no. If you show your face in Tower’s house, within an hour they’ll know you’re an Independent.”

They’d also know that Aaron was as good with a computer as he was bad with women, that he was late on the rent and quick with a punch line, and that he was addicted to those little melt-away mints people serve at weddings. Because his life was an open book, available to anyone who care to read it. As were most people’s lives. Which was why I was the only one who could do this job.

Because I had no life. No past. Officially, I didn't even exist, and if they ever figured that out, being seen with me could get Aaron killed.

"I need you to stay off their radar so you can be my emergency bailout, if this ends badly."

"Fair enough." Aaron sounded half relieved, half disappointed. He wanted to play badass assassin, but he didn't really want the risk that came with it. "Give me a call if you need a quick escape."

"I will," I said, as he pushed open the passenger side door. But we both knew I wouldn't. There was nothing he could do to help me, if I couldn't get out of Tower's house on my own. The infrared lighting grid guaranteed that trespassers couldn't gain entrance through the shadows. His heavily guarded exits made sure no one got in the traditional way, either. Once inside, I would be on my own.

"If you survive this kamikaze mission, we should get dinner. And beer."

"Absolutely." But that was another lie. I had every intention of surviving, but wouldn't get the chance to hang out afterward, and I'd probably never be able to come back into the country at all, much less this particular city. If I accomplished what I'd set out to do, the price on my head would be high enough that preachers and Boy Scouts would fight one another for the chance to profit from my death.

"Good luck, man." Aaron stuck his hand out and I shook it, then he stepped out of my rental car and closed the door. I watched as he walked into the patch of woods at the side of the road. One step. Two. Three. Then he was gone, not just hidden by the shadows, but transported by them. Through them.

I took a deep breath and checked my tie in the mirror again—I hadn't worn a tux in years, and my distaste for formal wear had not faded. Then I shifted the car into Drive and pulled onto the street at the end of a procession of cars all headed the same place I was.

The queue of vehicles moved quickly, greased by proper planning and a well-trained workforce. When I rolled to a stop in front of the house, feet from the curved, formal steps, a man was waiting to take my keys while another spoke into his handheld radio, his steady but unobtrusive gaze taking in every detail of my clothes and bearing. They knew my face.

Before I'd even rounded the front of the car, a brunette in a long, formfitting peach-colored dress came down the steps toward me. She smiled like a pageant contestant and moved like a waitress, quick and eager to please.

"Mr. Holt." She threaded her arm through mine and guided me smoothly up the steps, without ever faltering in either smile or stride. "We would have sent a car for you," she said, leading me through a door held open by a man in service dress. She was smooth, and polished, and poised—an experienced people handler and a beautiful woman.

But she was *not* what I'd requested.

"Unnecessary. I wanted to see the city a bit on my own." I stopped in the foyer, and she had no choice but to stop with me, because I still held her arm. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Nina. Mr. Tower's personal assistant."

"And you're my escort for the evening?"

Her smile faltered a bit over my implication, and the dissatisfaction echoing intentionally within the question. But then she rallied from the insult and her smile beamed brighter than ever, if a little brittle now. "No, I'm afraid Mr. Tower has chosen someone else to keep you company during your stay. I'm just here to make the introductions this evening."

Nina led me through the wide foyer, generically ostentatious with its soaring ceiling and gold-veined marble tile. Even in his absence, Jake Tower exhibited his own affluence and power like a peacock displaying plumage. Wealth was evident in the expensive furnishings and decor, while his power was even more obvious in the stream of well-dressed guests, several of whom I recognized from political pieces on the nightly news.

At the base of each curved staircase, dressed in black and carrying handheld radios, stood a member of Tower's security team, monitoring the party in general and me in particular. I was unbound—I'd taken no oath of loyalty or service to Jake Tower—thus untrusted. They would watch

me, prepared to intercept or incapacitate, until the day I bore Tower's chain link on my arm, marking me as his to command.

And that wasn't going to happen.

Once those milling in the entry had their chance to see me, Nina guided me into the main event. Into the snake pit, where every hiss would feel like praise and every bite like a deep, hot kiss. The venom would flow like honey, too thick to swallow, but too sweet to entirely resist.

I knew how extravagant and generous the syndicates could seem, when they wanted something. I also knew it was all a lie. The party was an illusion, from every plunging neckline to each glass of chilled champagne. It was a show. A seduction. I was being courted by the Tower syndicate because I had something they wanted. And I would play along because *they* had something *I* wanted.

Heads turned to look when we entered the party. Hands shook mine and voices called out greetings, but the faces all blurred together. The names were a jumble of syllables I didn't bother to untangle. These weren't the important names. Not the important faces. Remembering would be a waste of effort.

So I smiled and nodded in the right places, agreeing when it was convenient, changing the subject when it wasn't. I sipped from the glass placed in my hand and ate the hors d'oeuvres Nina insisted I try. But I tasted nothing and hardly heard the words that came out of my own mouth. I was too busy scanning the crowd for the faces I'd studied. The names I'd memorized. The important ones, not necessarily in power circles, but vital to my purpose.

And finally, nearly half an hour after I arrived, a soft buzz spread through the crowd and I looked up to find Jake Tower coming down the main staircase with his wife on his arm and two black-clothed bodyguards at his back. The host had arrived, late enough to demonstrate that he lived life on his own schedule, but not so tardy as to be truly rude to his guests.

"Let me introduce you to Mr. Tower," Nina said, taking my arm again. She led me through the crowd toward the stairs as Tower and his small entourage descended into our midst.

At the base of the stairs, a glass of champagne was pressed into Tower's hand, but he handed it to his wife before accepting another for himself. A heartbeat later, his gaze landed on Nina, then slid to me, and I swallowed a lump of eager rage before it could shine through my eyes and give me away. Tower wasn't my target, but that didn't mean I'd cry at his funeral. When the time came, I'd be raising my glass to whoever finally put the vicious, arrogant bastard in the ground, as would everyone else he'd ever tried to put his mark on.

"Mr. Holt, may I introduce Jake Tower and his lovely wife, Lynne. Mr. Tower, this is Ian Holt, your guest of honor."

Tower offered me his empty right hand and I shook it, making eye contact for the first time. Trying not to show that I knew more than I should.

I shouldn't know that Tower's first name was actually Jacob and one of his middle names was David. His wife was really Gwendolyn, and before she married, she'd been a Pierce, a great beauty by all accounts, but not burdened with enough brains or initiative to ever get in her husband's way.

"Mr. Holt, so glad you could join us. I hope you're enjoying yourself so far?" Tower's brows rose, and I nodded in reply.

"Of course. You have a lovely home, and an even lovelier wife." I took Lynne Tower's hand briefly, and she smiled, then silently sipped from her glass.

Over their shoulders, the bodyguards watched me, and their surnames filtered through my memory, triggered by faces matching the photographs and notes Aaron had fed me for days. The taller, darker man was Clifton, and the shorter, paler, broader one was Garrett. Their Skills, like their first names, were unknown, but based on their size alone, either could break a man in half.

The group around me shifted to accept a new couple into our power circle, and I realized with one glance at the newcomers that they weren't a couple at all.

"Mr. Holt, this is my brother, Jonah, and our sister, Julia."

"My pleasure," I said, shaking their hands in turn, and Julia's left eyebrow quirked over one deep brown eye, like something in my reply amused her.

Jonah only scowled. He was dressed like one of the guests, but even if I hadn't known from my research, I would have known from his bearing alone that Jonah would have been more comfortable wearing all black like the rest of Tower's muscle. He didn't like dressing up, and he didn't like playing nice. And he didn't like me—that much was obvious in his first glance my way.

Almost as obvious was the fact that his dislike of me would be very much mutual.

“Mr. Holt, if I may say so, that was quite an impressive show you put on at the arena a couple of months ago.” Julia—Lia—raised her glass just a little, offering her own personal toast to my Skill.

“Oh, thank you, but it wasn't intended as a show at all.” *Lie*. “I was just trying to help out where I could.” That part was true, but intentionally misleading. I was trying to help myself into Tower's power circle.

“Still, you made quite an impression,” Tower insisted. “Lynne and I were impressed, anyway.”

“Unfortunately you weren't the only ones. The news clip got quite a bit of airtime, and it's been viewed on the internet ad nauseam. If I'd known there were cameras aimed at me, I might have done things a little differently.”

Another lie, and a big one, that time. I knew there were cameras. The arena was chosen for that very reason. For my Skilled coming out party. For the exposure that would bring me to Jake Tower's notice, during his favorite sport.

“And you're uncomfortable in the spotlight?” Julia asked.

“Or maybe scared of it?” Jonah added. “Darkness is more your thing, right?”

“I'm most comfortable in the absence of both light and attention, but scared of neither.” I faked a nervous laugh. “However, I will admit to being unnerved a bit at first by interest from organizations like this one.”

“You've had offers from other syndicates?” Tower's frown was small, but telling.

“Let's just say I'm keeping my options open for now. Though no one else has gone to quite this much trouble to impress before.” I gestured one-armed at the entire party.

“Obviously we don't stand around drinking and talking every day, but I thought a party would be the best way to introduce you to the syndicate as a whole.”

“And what an introduction it is,” I said, as one waiter took my empty glass while another replaced it.

“This is only the beginning.” Julia smiled, dark straight hair framing a pretty face I couldn't quite read. “By the end of the week, you'll understand that no one else can offer you the benefits, security, and career advancement potential that the Tower syndicate can.”

“And here is the woman for the job.” Tower smiled coolly at someone over my shoulder and I turned as he waved two more women into our widening circle. The first was a small, delicate-looking woman in light blue, her platinum curls tumbling over pale, bare shoulders. She was smaller and fairer than my personal tastes ran, but I'd requested an escort of her exact description, and when her brown-eyed gaze met mine, some small bit of tension inside me eased.

“Mr. Holt, this is Kenley Daniels.”

I took her hand to shake it and couldn't help smiling in relief. There she was, my target, hand delivered to me by one of the most dangerous and powerful men in the country, though he had no idea that he'd played the very card I wanted most. All I needed now was to get her away from Tower and his security team, and...

“And this,” he continued, before my hand had more than grazed Kenley's, “is her sister, Korinne. Kori will be keeping you company this week.”

I blinked, confused, and glanced from Kenley Daniels to her sister, whose coloring matched Kenley's exactly—same platinum hair, pale skin, and deep brown eyes. Korinne was only an inch or so taller. She was a virtual match to the description I'd given Tower when he asked what I'd desire most in a liaison—the description of her sister.

“A pleasure,” I said on autopilot, as I released Kenley's hand in favor of Kori's, still reeling from the bait-and-switch. Only it couldn't be a bait-and-switch, because Tower didn't know I'd had anyone specific in mind as my liaison.

And I hadn't known his mistake was possible, because *Kori Daniels* wasn't possible. She was dead. Every single one of Aaron's sources had said the same thing. She'd been a fixture at Tower's side for years—a strategically visible threat—then she'd disappeared several weeks ago. Gone, with no trace and no explanation.

In the syndicate, that can only mean one thing.

Yet there she stood, clearly alive and breathing, and waiting for me to shake the hand she held out. So I did.

She let go of my hand almost the instant we touched.

"Kori will be your tour guide," Tower continued. "She will also be your assistant, your chauffeur, and your personal security while you are here. Anything you want, Kori will provide."

But Kori looked like she'd rather perform CPR on a leper than ever touch me again, even if only to hand me a cup of coffee.

My thoughts raced while I struggled to recover from surprise and frustration, without showing either. "You have security experience?" I said as if I didn't already know the answer, grasping at the only reasonable excuse I might have to reject her services. There had to be a reason she was no longer guarding the boss, and if he didn't trust her, why should I?

"Six years on my personal security detail," Tower said, and I was starting to wonder if my new liaison even had a tongue. "I assure you, Kori is everything you requested, and more."

Something silent and angry passed between Tower and the taller, older Daniels sister as her jaw clenched visibly and his gaze went hard. Kenley Daniels stared at her feet in the awkward silence, and Jonah Tower smirked when Kori flinched first, and looked away from her boss.

"Well, then, Mr. Holt, I believe we're scheduled to discuss business later, but tonight is for drinking, and dancing, and mingling. I have some other guests to greet, so I'm going to leave you in Korinne's capable hands for the moment. Please make yourself at home in my home."

With that, Tower guided his wife toward a couple I vaguely recognized from the cover of some financial magazine, and the rest of his entourage followed. Leaving me alone with Korinne Daniels, who held an untouched flute of champagne but showed no sign of sipping from it. Or of acknowledging my presence.

How could she be alive? Where the hell had she been for the past few weeks? I'd made sure that none of the other women photographed with Tower recently had pale blond hair, specifically to avoid this kind of mistake. Korinne was the only other person on Tower's staff who could have fit the description, but she was dead. Everyone had said so.

Weeks of research and study, down the drain.

"So..." I said, watching Kori watch the rest of the room, trying not to let frustration leak into my voice. "You're one of Tower's bodyguards?"

"Was," she said, and her posture tensed almost imperceptibly as she stared at something over my shoulder. I twisted to see Jonah Tower guiding her sister through the crowd with one hand at her lower back, and when I turned back to Kori, I found her eyes narrowed, one fist clenched at her side.

Were Jonah and Kenley involved? If so, Kori clearly didn't approve. Neither did I. Jonah Tower didn't like me, which could make it very hard for me to get close to Kenley if they were together. Unless her sister trusted me...

I studied Kori as she watched them wind their way through the crowd, trying to assess her more clearly now that I was over my initial surprise at being saddled with the wrong Daniels sister.

Korinne was slightly taller than her sister, but much thinner. Too thin, really. Her hipbones showed through the material of her dress and the points of her collarbone looked like they might pierce her skin at the slightest pressure. Her makeup was expertly applied, but couldn't quite cover the dark circles under her eyes or skin that looked sickly pale, in contrast to her sister's naturally fair complexion.

Still, she was pretty, in a hard-edged, angry kind of way.

Kori glanced up and caught me staring, and I held her gaze. "What do you do now?" I asked, trying to pick up the thread of a conversation that already seemed destined to unravel.

“Now I babysit you,” she snapped, and I blinked in the face of such candor. Then almost laughed out loud. I’d expected Tower’s people to be overaccommodating and ingratiatingly polite. Perhaps even sycophantic. Unvarnished honesty was a surprise.

“I meant, what do you do for Tower? What’s your role in his organization?” When my question produced only a blank, half-puzzled look, like she wasn’t sure she even knew the answer, I tried again from another angle. “Would it be impolite of me to ask about your Skill, considering you already know mine?”

“Hell yes.” She flinched and rubbed her temple with one hand. Then she rolled her eyes at nothing. “I’m a Traveler.”

A shadow-walker, just like Aaron.

“I assume you’re good with a gun, since you used to be a bodyguard. Any other special skills?” But I could tell with one look at her closed-off expression that I’d picked the wrong approach.

Kori Daniels didn’t want to talk about herself. She didn’t want to talk to me. And she certainly didn’t want to relax. She looked a little like she wanted to rip my head off and spit down my throat. “A *special skill*?”

I nodded, and too late I realized she’d found innuendo where I hadn’t intended it.

I shook my head and tried to rephrase the question, but then she stepped closer, until she was in my personal space, not quite touching me, but so close air couldn’t have flowed between us. She went up on her toes, like she might nibble on my ear, or share some dirty little secret. Then she whispered, so softly no one else could have heard.

“I do have a special skill,” she murmured, her breath warm on my neck, her voice soft and low pitched, with that hot, gravelly quality some women get when they’re really turned on, and my pulse raced a little in spite of my very clear objective. “I’m pretty good with knives. I’m so good, in fact, that I could sever your testicles with one hand and slice open your throat with the other, and you’d go into shock so fast you’d die without ever knowing you’d spilled a fucking drop of blood.”

Korinne settled back onto her heels and smiled up at me like she’d just promised to fulfill my dirtiest, most secret desire, and I felt the blood drain from my face.

This was *not* the woman I’d ordered.