

# **Darker Than Any Shadow**

## **Chapter One**

“Be still,” he said, his mouth at my ear.

His hands moved around my neck and lay lightly against my shoulder blades, powerful and deceptively elegant. They had killed, those hands. I remembered this at unfortunate moments, like when his fingers brushed the nape of my neck —suddenly, from behind —when I’d barely had time to register his presence let alone prepare for his touch.

I stood very still. The effort unstrung me. I closed my eyes, but even then my thoughts galloped irresistibly into dangerous territory, taking my body with them.

Trey exhaled in exasperation. “You’re still fidgeting.”

I opened my eyes. There we were in the mirror, I in my scarlet cocktail dress, he in his immaculate Armani suit, black with a white shirt. My grandmother’s pearls nestled in the hollow of my throat, tracing the path his hands had followed as he’d slipped them around my neck. The string of tiny orbs glowed against my freckled skin, cool as moonlight, but warming with each heartbeat.

I thought red made me look like I had a fever, but since Trey was the one with the AmEx Titanium and the thing for Italian couture in various vermillions and crimsons, I wiggled into it occasionally. He had an eye for cut, and I had to admit that this particular dress—a halter top with a plunging back and draped skirt—balanced my broad shoulders and sleeked up my hips quite nicely.

I tried to meet his eyes in the mirror, but he was focused on the clasp tangled in my hairline.

I yanked away. “Ouch!”

“Tai. Be still.”

He was so close I could smell his evergreen aftershave, plus the mint of toothpaste, the talcum scent of soap. He had his French cuffs fastened, Bulgari Diagono watch in place, black hair brushed back. My Manolos weren’t even out of the box yet, and the back of my dress was still unzipped.

Frustration tinged his voice. “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know. Somehow it caught on the . . . what are these things keeping my hair up?”

“Hairpins.”

“The stylist called them something French.”

“Épingles à cheveux?”

“Yeah that.”

Trey finished unknotting the stubborn tangle and zipped me up. Then he hooked the dress at the top and eyed me in the mirror, adjusting the left strap a millimeter to the left. His fingers brushed the skin there, and the resulting tingle rippled across my

shoulder blades.

He checked his watch, which was a formality. Even if he had to haul me out the door unzipped, pearls dropping behind me like bread crumbs, hair tumbling from my *épingles à cheveux*, we would be on time.

I scurried to collect my fancy purse and fancy shoes. He held the door for me, a dichromatic vision perfectly complemented by the blank white walls and black hardwood floor of his almost-penthouse. His clear blue eyes were impatient now, the little wrinkle between them digging in deep. I smoothed it out with my thumb.

“Chill out, boyfriend. We’ve got plenty of time.”

He cocked his head. “Boyfriend. Interesting.”

I laughed, stepped into the Manolos, and kissed him, not even having to stand on tiptoe to do it. It was one of those kisses, the kind that sneaks up like a rogue wave. I closed my eyes, inching my hands along his rib cage, skimming his torso . . .

Until I hit warm leather and cold metal.

I tilted my head back and looked him right in the eye. Armani suits were usually good for concealed carry —something about the cut and break of the jackets —but Trey’s H&K was not exactly an easy hide, especially not from a handsy girlfriend.

“Did you forget to tell me something?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“So you’re packing your nine-millimeter because . . .”

“Because Rico asked me to.”

Rico. My best friend.

I put my hands on my hips. “And you didn’t tell me because . . .”

“Because Rico asked me not to.”

“We’re going to a debut party for a bunch of poets! Why does that require firepower?”

Trey checked his watch again. “Can I explain in the car?”

“Oh yes.” I pushed past him toward the elevator, trying not to teeter in the ridiculous heels. “You can absolutely do that.”

He left me waiting out front while he retrieved the Ferrari. I took advantage of the delay and stepped out of the tortuous shoes, stretching my toes. Even in the shade, the pavement baked the soles of my feet, and the air smelled of scorched pollen and cement.

It was hot, blazing hot. The meteorologists displayed thermometers exploding red at the top, temps in the triple digits. Keepers at the Atlanta Zoo fed the otters ice cubes. The unfortunate cops stuck on speeder patrol stuffed ice packs down their polyester pants. Desperate people threw themselves into the tepid waters of the Chattahoochee River or Lake Lanier, which meant drownings were on the rise. Lightning strikes too, including three fatal ones, as rainless thunderheads flared and erupted on a daily basis. It was as if Mother Nature had a bad case of PMS, and she was taking it out on the city.

I understood how she felt. I was a little put out myself. Tonight was Rico’s debut as a member of Atlanta’s Spoken Word Poetry team. The event was one of many in preparation for the Performance Poetry Internationals, two days of wordsmiths and spitfires from around the world competing onstage for cash and glory.

It was a big deal, and this was Atlanta’s first time as host city. Hence the impossible shoes, form-fitting dress, and precarious up-do. And yet my best friend Rico

was keeping a secret, one that required my elegant badass boyfriend to strap on his semi-automatic.

The concierge smiled weakly in my direction. I smiled in return. “Hey, Mr. Jameson.”

“Ms. Randolph.”

Jameson was a slip of a man, fair-skinned and beige, his soft features forever knotted into perpetual anxiety. He winced as Trey’s F430 coupe roared into earshot, its guttural growl like a chainsaw mated with a sonic boom. Trey slung it around the corner and slammed it to a precise stop two feet from where I stood. Jameson took a deep breath and opened the door for me.

I put my shoes back on and eased inside. “Thank you.”

He shut the door and hot-footed it back to the safety of the portico. Trey checked his mirrors, then hit the street in a burst of acceleration —zero to speed limit in three seconds flat —and then he nailed it there, not one tick of the speedometer over.

I shook my head. “I can’t believe Rico put you in vigilante mode and didn’t tell me!”

“He said he wanted to explain the situation himself. And I’m not in vigilante mode.”

“So that gun is just an accessory, like an ascot?”

Trey used his patient voice. “Rico asked me if I’d be willing to keep an eye out tonight. His words. I asked him what that meant. He said he was concerned about a former team member, an armed and dangerous one.”

“Rico said ‘armed and dangerous’?”

“Yes.”

“Exactly those words?”

“Exactly.”

That was a bit unnerving. Rico was as precise as Trey was with the vocabulary. If he said armed and dangerous, I understood why Trey was holstered up.

“Does this poet have a name?”

“Maurice Cunningham. But he performs as Vigil.”

“Vigil. The guy with the big V’s all over his website?”

“I don’t know. But I do know he was recently released from jail after a weapons-related parole violation.”

Vigil. If I remembered correctly, he yelled a lot on stage, fast and loud in a machine-gun patter of alliteration and curse words. He won poetry slams, though. Again and again, the crowd awarded him the money pot. Until he’d gone to jail anyway.

“Rico said they found a replacement, one of the alternates, some new guy. Is that the problem, Vigil wanting back in?” Then I did the math. “Wait a minute, Vigil was only in jail four days. What’s he doing out already?”

“The charges were dropped.”

“Why?”

“On a technicality.”

“So this is why Rico put you on lookout? A frustrated poet with a grudge and a tendency to carry inappropriate firearms?”

“Not a firearm. A switchblade. At a middle school arts function.”

Ah. I was beginning to understand. But I still didn’t get why Rico hadn’t told me,

had decided instead to sic Trey on the problem. Granted, Trey was a former SWAT officer with martial arts training. But I was Rico's best friend.

Once we cleared the high rises, we hit the frustrating tangle of stop-and-go traffic, worsened by too many testy drivers making too many tight lane changes. I blamed the city-wide vehicular crankiness on the weather, the low gray-yellow sky and stagnant heavy air. I felt prickly too, unsettled and agitated .

I leaned my head back and stared at the black expanse of Ferrari upholstery. I hated being left out of the loop, hated not knowing what was going on. But I did know one thing — Rico Worthington had some explaining to do, and as soon as I got my hands on him, that's exactly what was going to happen.