

A KISS
OF
SHADOWS

Laurell K. Hamilton

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

Chapter 1

TWENTY-THREE STORIES UP AND ALL I COULD SEE OUT THE windows was grey smog. They could call it the City of Angels if they wanted to, but if there were angels out there, they had to be flying blind.

Los Angeles is a place where people, those with wings and without, come to hide. Hide from others, hide from themselves. I'd come to hide and I'd succeeded, but staring out at the thick, dirty air, I wanted to go home. Home where the air was blue most of the time and you didn't have to water the ground to get grass to grow. Home was Cahokia, Illinois, but I couldn't go back because they'd kill me if I did, my relatives and their allies. Everyone wants to grow up to be a faerie princess. Trust me. It's overrated.

There was a knock on the office door. It opened before I could say anything. My boss, Jeremy Grey, stood framed in the doorway. He was a short, grey man, four feet eleven inches, an inch shorter than me. He was grey from his dark Armani suit to his button-up shirt and silk tie. Only his shoes were black and shiny. Even his skin was a pale uniform grey. Not from illness or age. No, he was a trow in the prime of life, just a little over four hundred. There were some lines around his eyes, along the thin mouth, that made him appear mature, but he'd never be old. Without the aid of mortal blood and a pretty serious spell, Jeremy might live forever. Theoretically. Scientists say that in about five billion years the sun will expand and engulf the Earth. The fey won't survive that. They will die. Does five billion years count as forever? I don't think so. Though it's close enough to make the rest of us envious.

I leaned my back against the windows and the thick, hanging smog. The day was as grey as my boss, but his color was a cool, crisp grey, like clouds before a spring rain. What lay outside the window felt heavy and thick like something you would try to swallow, but you'd never get it down. It was a day to choke on, or maybe it was just my mood.

"You look gloomy, Merry," Jeremy said. "What's wrong?" He closed the door behind him, making sure it shut. Privacy, he was giving us privacy. Maybe it was for my benefit, but somehow I didn't think so. There was a tightness around his eyes, a set to his thin, well-tailored shoulders that said I wasn't the only one in a bad mood today. Maybe it was the weather or the lack of it. A good rain shower or even a good wind would have cleared out the smog and let the city breathe again.

"Homesick," I said. "What's wrong, Jeremy?"

He gave a small smile. "Can't fool you, can I, Merry?"

"No," I said.

"Nice outfit," he said.

I knew I looked hot when Jeremy complimented my clothes. He always looked impeccable even in jeans and T-shirt, which he only wore if he absolutely had to be undercover. I'd seen Jeremy do a three-minute mile in Gucci loafers once, chasing a suspect. Of course, it helped that his dexterity and speed were more than human. When I thought I might have to actually chase someone, a rare occasion, I got out the jogging shoes and left the high heels at home.

Jeremy put into his eyes that look a man gives you when he's appreciating the view. It wasn't personal, but among the fey it's an insult to ignore someone who's obviously trying to be attractive, a slap in the face telling them that they'd failed. Apparently, I hadn't failed. I'd woken up to the smog and dressed brighter than normal to try and cheer myself up. Royal blue suit jacket, double-breasted, silver buttons, a matching blue pleated skirt that was so short, it was only a fringe across my thighs underneath the jacket. The outfit was short enough that if I crossed my legs wrong, I'd flash the tops of my black thigh-highs. Two-inch patent leather high heels

helped show off the legs. When you're as short as I am, you've got to do something to make your legs look long. Most days the heels were three inches.

My hair was a deep rich red in the reflections of the mirrors. A color more red than auburn, a color that had black highlights instead of the usual brown that most redheads had. It was as if someone had taken dark red rubies and spun them out into hair. It was a very popular color this year. Blood auburn it was called in the high court of the fey royalty. Faerie Red, Sidhe Scarlet, if you went to a good salon. It was actually my natural color. Until it became popular this year and they finally got the shade right, I'd had to hide my true color. I'd gone for black, because it looked more natural than human red with my skin tone. A lot of people getting the dye job made the mistake of thinking that Sidhe Scarlet complements a natural redhead's coloring. It doesn't. It's the only true red color I know of that matches a pale, pure white skin tone. It's the red hair for someone who looks great in black, true reds, royal blues.

The only things I still had to hide were the vibrant green and gold of my eyes and the luminosity of my skin. I used dark brown contacts for the eyes. My skin—that I had to tone down using glamour, magic. Just a steady concentration like music in the back of my head, to never let down my guard and start to glow. Humans don't actually glow, no matter how luminous they may be. No glowing, which was why the contacts covered my eyes. I also wove a spell around myself like a long familiar coat, an illusion that I was just a human with lesser fey blood in my background who had some psychic and mystical abilities that made me a really excellent detective, but nothing too special.

Jeremy didn't know what I was. No one at the agency knew. I was one of the weakest members of the royal court, but being sidhe means something even on the weak end of the scale. It meant that I had successfully hidden my true self, my true abilities, from a handful of the best magicians and psychics in the city. Maybe in the country. No small feat, but the kind of glamour I was best at wouldn't keep a knife from

finding my back or a spell from crushing my heart. For that I needed skills that I didn't have, and that was one of the reasons I was in hiding. I couldn't fight the sidhe, not and live. The best I could do was hide. I trusted Jeremy and the others. They were my friends. What I didn't trust was what the sidhe might do to them if I were discovered, and my relatives found out my friends had known my secret. If they were truly ignorant, then the sidhe would leave them alone and only hurt me. Ignorance was bliss on this one. Though I thought that some of my very good friends would see it as a type of betrayal. But if the choices were them alive, with all their body parts intact, but angry at me, or dead by torture but not angry at me, I'd take angry. I could live with their anger. I wasn't sure I could live with their deaths.

I know, I know. Why not go to the Bureau of Human and Fey Affairs and get asylum? My relatives would probably kill me when they found me, but if I went public and aired our dirty laundry for the world media, they would most definitely kill me. And they'd kill me slower. So no police, no ambassadors, just the ultimate game of hide-and-seek.

I smiled at Jeremy and gave him what I knew he wanted: the look that said that I appreciated the slender potential of his body under his perfect suit. To humans it would have looked like flirting, but for the fey, any fey, it wasn't even close to flirting. "Thanks, Jeremy, but you didn't come in here to compliment my clothes."

He walked farther into the room, running manicured fingers along my desk edge. "I've got two women in my office. They want to be clients," he said.

"Want to be?" I said.

He turned, leaning against the desk, arms crossed over his chest. Mirroring my stance at the windows, either unconsciously, or purposefully, though I didn't know why. "We don't usually do divorce work," Jeremy said.

I gave him wide eyes, pushing away from the windows. "Day one lecture, Jeremy: The Grey Detective Agency never, ever, does divorce work."

“I know, I know,” he said. He pushed away from the desk and came to stand beside me, staring out into the fog. He didn’t look any happier than I felt.

I leaned back against the glass so I could see his face better. “Why are you breaking your cardinal rule, Jeremy?”

He shook his head without looking at me. “Come meet them, Merry. I trust your judgment. If you say we stay out of it, we’ll stay out of it. But I think you’ll feel the same way I do.”

I touched his shoulder. “And how are you feeling, boss, other than worried?” I ran my hand down his arm, and it made him look at me.

His eyes had gone dark charcoal grey with anger. “Come meet them, Merry. If you’re as angry afterward as I am, then we’ll nail this bastard.”

I gripped his arm. “Jeremy, relax. It’s just a divorce case.”

“What if I told you it was attempted murder?” His voice was calm. Matter of fact, it didn’t match the intensity in his eyes, the vibrating tension in his arm.

I moved back from him. “Attempted murder? What are you talking about?”

“The nastiest death spell that’s ever walked into my office.”

“The husband is trying to kill her?” I made it a question.

“Someone is, and the wife says it’s the husband. The mistress agrees with the wife.”

I blinked at him. “Are you saying that the wife and the mistress are in your office?”

He nodded, and even through all the outrage, he smiled.

I smiled back. “Well, that’s got to be a first.”

He took my hand. “It might be a first even if we did do divorce work,” he said. His thumb rubbed back and forth over my knuckles. He was nervous, or he wouldn’t be touching me this much. A way to reassure himself, like a touchstone. He raised my hand to his lips and planted a quick kiss on my knuckles. I think he’d noticed what he was doing, that his nerves were showing. He flashed me a white smile, the best caps money could buy, and turned toward the door.

“Answer one question first, Jeremy.”

He adjusted his suit, minute movements to tug it back into place as if it needed it. "Ask away."

"Why are you scared of this?"

The smile faded until his face was solemn. "I've got a bad feeling about this one, Merry. Prophecy isn't one of my gifts, but this one has a bad smell to it."

"Then pass it by. We aren't the cops. We do this for a very nice paycheck, not because we've sworn to serve and protect, Jeremy."

"If after you meet them, you can honestly walk away from it, then we will."

"Why is my vote suddenly a presidential veto? The name on the door is Grey, not Gentry."

"Because Teresa's so empathic she couldn't turn anyone away. Roane is too much the bleeding heart to turn tearful women away." He adjusted his dove grey tie, fingers smoothing over the diamond stickpin. "The others are good for grunt work, but they aren't decision makers. That leaves you."

I met his eyes, trying to read past the anger, the worry, to what was really going on inside his head. "You're not an empath, and you're not a bleeding heart, and you make dandy decisions, so why can't you make this one?"

"Because if we turn them away, they won't have anywhere else to go. If they leave this office without our help, they're both dead."

I stared at him, and finally understood. "You know we should walk away from this one, but you can't bring yourself to pass judgment on them. You can't bring yourself to condemn them to death."

He nodded. "Yes."

"What makes you think that I can do it, if you can't?"

"I'm hoping one of us is sane enough not to be this stupid."

"I won't get you all killed for the sake of strangers, Jeremy, so be prepared to walk away from this one." Even to me, my voice sounded hard, cold.

He smiled again. "That's my little cold-hearted bitch."

I shook my head and walked toward the door. "It's one of

the reasons you love me, Jeremy. You count on me not to flinch.”

I walked out into the hallway that led between offices, sure that I would turn these women away. Certain that I would be the wall that kept us all safe from Jeremy’s good intentions. Goddess knows, I’d been wrong before, but seldom as wrong as I was about to be.

Chapter 2

I THOUGHT FOR SOME REASON I'D BE ABLE TO TELL WHICH OF the two women was wife and which was mistress just by looking at them. But at first glance they were just two attractive women, casually dressed, like girlfriends out for a day of shopping and lunch. One woman was small, though a few inches taller than either Jeremy or myself. Blond hair cut just above the shoulders, with a careless curl to it that said it was natural and she hadn't done anything special to it this morning. She was pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way, with extraordinary blue eyes that took up most of her face. Her eyebrows arched thick and black, balancing out a lace of dark lashes that framed those eyes in a very dramatic fashion—though the dark brows made me speculate about how natural the blond hair might be. She wore no makeup and still managed to be very pretty in an ethereal, very natural way. With makeup and a little effort she'd have been a knockout. But it would have taken more than makeup and a better fit of clothes.

She sat huddled in the client chair, shoulders hunched as if waiting for a blow to fall. Her lovely eyes blinked at me like the eyes of a deer caught in headlights, as if she were powerless to stop what was happening, and what was happening was bad.

The other woman was tall, five feet eight inches or better, slender, with long pale brown hair that swung straight and shining to her waist. At first glance she seemed early twenty-something. Then I met her eyes and there was an intensity in their brown depths that made me add on ten years. You just

didn't get that look much before thirty. Her look was more confident than the blonde's, but there was a flinching around her eyes, a tightness in her shoulders, as if something deep inside was hurting. There was also a delicacy of bone as if what lay under the skin had been formed of daintier things than mere bone. There is only one thing that can give a tall, commanding person that look of daintiness: she was part sidhe. Oh, it was a few generations back, nothing as intimate as my ties to the court, but somewhere a several-times-great-grandmother had lain down with something not human and walked away with a child. Fey blood of any kind marks a family, but sidhe blood seems to stay in the genes forever, as if once in the mix, it never gets cleaned out.

I was betting the blonde was the wife, and the other one the mistress. The blonde seemed the more beaten down of the two, which is usually the case with an abusive man. They may abuse all the women in their lives, but they'll usually save the best or worst for immediate family. My grandfather had always done it that way.

I came into the room smiling, hand out to shake hands, like they were any other clients. Jeremy made the introductions. The small blonde was the wife, Frances Norton; the tall brown-haired one was the mistress, Naomi Phelps.

Naomi's handshake was firm, hand cool to the touch, those extraordinary bones moving under her skin. I held her hand just a little too long, luxuriating in the feel of her touch. It was the closest thing I'd had to another sidhe in three years. Even a touch of some other fey isn't the same. There is something in the royal bloodline that is like some drug. Once tasted, you miss it.

She looked puzzled at me, and it was a very human puzzlement. I let her hand go and tried to pretend to be human. Some days I was better at it than this. Some days I was worse. I could have tried to get the measure of her psychically, to see if she had more than bone structure going for her, but it was impolite to try and read another person's magical ability at first introduction. Among the sidhe it's considered an open challenge, an insult that you don't believe that the other

person can shield himself from your most casual magic. Naomi probably wouldn't have taken it as an insult, but her ignorance was no excuse for me to be rude.

Frances Norton held out her hand like she was afraid to be touched, the arm half bent so she could tuck it back into her body as soon as I was finished with it. I'd have given her the same polite treatment that I'd given the other woman, but with my fingers just above her skin I could feel the spell. That small line of energy that surrounds all of us, her aura, pushed against my skin like it was trying to keep me from touching her. Someone else's magic was so thick in her body that it had filled her aura up like dirty water in a clean glass. In a way, the woman wasn't herself anymore. It wasn't possession, but it was a close cousin. It was certainly a violation of several human laws, all of them felonies.

I forced my hand through that roil of energy, gripping her hand. The spell tried to surge through my skin up my arm. There was nothing to see with the eyes, but just as you can see things in your dreams, so I could sense a faint darkness trying to creep up my arm. I stopped it just below my elbow and had to concentrate on peeling it down my arm like stripping off a glove. It had breached my shields like they hadn't been there. Not many things can do that. None of them human.

She was staring at me with wide, wide eyes. "Wh . . . what are you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything to you, Mrs. Norton." My voice sounded a little detached, distant, because I was concentrating on peeling the spell off of me so that when I let go of her hand none of it would cling to me.

She tried to take her hand back, and I wouldn't let her. She started to tug on it, weak but frantic. The other woman said, "Let Frances go, now."

I was almost free, almost ready to let her go, when the other woman gripped my shoulder. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I lost concentration on my hand, because I could sense Naomi Phelps now. The spell poured back over my hand and was halfway to my shoulder before I could concentrate enough to stop it. But all I could do was stop it. I

couldn't push it back because too much of my attention was on the other woman.

You never touch someone while they're working magic, or doing psychic stuff, unless you want something to happen. This more than anything told me that neither woman was a practitioner or an active psychic. No one with even minimal training would have done it. I could feel the remnants of some ritual clinging to Naomi's body. Something complex. Something selfish. The thought that came unbidden to my mind was gluttony. Something had been feeding off of her energy, and it had left psychic scars behind.

She jerked back from me, cradling her hand against her chest. She'd sensed my energy, so she had talent. Not a big surprise. What was surprising was that she was untrained, maybe totally untrained. Nowadays they go into preschools and test people for psychic gifts, mystical talent, but it was a new program in the sixties. Naomi had managed not to be spotted, and now she was over thirty and still hadn't dealt with her abilities. Most untrained psychics are either crazy, criminals, or suicides by the time they're thirty. She had to be a very strong person to be as together as she looked. But this very strong woman looked at me with tears trembling in her eyes. "We didn't come here to be abused."

Jeremy had stepped closer to us, but was being careful not to touch any of us. He knew better. "No one is abusing you, Ms. Phelps. The spell on Mrs. Norton tried to . . . leach onto my colleague. Ms. Gentry was merely trying to push the spell off of her when you touched her. You should never touch anyone when they're working magic, Ms. Phelps. The results can be unpredictable."

The woman looked from one to the other of us, and her face said clearly she didn't believe us. "Come on, Frances. We're getting the fuck out of here."

"I can't," Frances said in a voice grown small and submissive. She was staring up at me, fear plain in her eyes, but it was fear of me.

She felt the energy wrapped around our hands, pressing us together, but she thought I was doing it. "I swear to you, Mrs.

Norton, I am not doing this. Whatever magic has been used against you, it thinks I'm tasty. I need to peel it off of me and let it flow back into you."

"I want to get rid of it," she said, voice high with a faint edge of hysteria trailing around the edges.

"If I don't pull it off of me, then whoever did this to you will be able to trace me. They'll be able to find me. They'll know that I work at a detective agency that specializes in supernatural problems, magical solutions." It was our slogan. "They'll know that you came here for help. I don't think you want that, Mrs. Norton."

A fine trembling started in her hands and spread up her arms, until she stood there shivering as if she were cold. Maybe she was, but it wasn't the kind of cold that an extra sweater would fix. No amount of outer warmth would cure the coldness inside. She'd have to be warmed from the damaged core of her soul out to her fingertips. Someone would have to pour power into her, magic into her, a little bit at a time, like thawing some ancient body found frozen in ice. If you thawed it too fast, you'd cause more damage than if you just left it alone. Such delicate use of power was beyond my abilities. All I could have done was give her a measure of calmness, taken some of her fear—but whoever laid the spell on her would sense that, too. They wouldn't be able to trace me by it, but they'd know she'd been to see a practitioner, someone who'd tried to help her on a psychic level. Call it a hunch, but whoever laid the spell wouldn't like that. They might do something rash, like speed up the process.

I could feel the sucking energy of the spell, trying to breach my defenses, to feed on me, too. It was like magical cancer, but as easy to catch as the flu. How many people had she infected? How many people were walking around with this spell draining little bits of their energy? Someone who was only a little bit psychic might know something had happened, but not what. They'd avoid Frances Norton because she'd hurt them, but they might not realize for weeks, months, that the tiredness, the vague feelings of hopelessness, the depression, were being caused by a spell.

I started to tell her what I was about to do, but staring into her wide eyes, I didn't bother. She'd just tense up, be more afraid. The best I could do was make it as invisible to her as possible. I would try to make sure she didn't feel it slide back inside her, but that was the best I could do.

The spell had grown thicker, blacker, more real, just from those few extra moments of sitting against my skin. I began to peel it down my arm. It clung like tar, and it took a lot more concentration to push it back, rolling it back on itself like thick cloth. Every inch of my skin that I freed up felt lighter, cleaner. I could not imagine living totally encased in this thing. It would be like going through your entire life faintly oxygen-deprived, shoved in a dark room, where the light never came.

I had freed my arm, my hand, and began to slowly pull my fingers away from her hand. She stayed utterly still against my skin like a rabbit hiding in the grass, hoping desperately that the fox will pass her by if only she can lie quiet enough. What I don't think Frances Norton realized yet was that she was halfway down the fox's throat, with her little legs kicking in the air.

When I pulled my fingers away, the spell clung to them, and then fell back into place around her with an almost audible sound. I wiped my hand on my jacket. I was clear of the spell, but I had a terrible urge to wash my hand with very hot water and lots of soap. Ordinary water and soap wouldn't help, but some salt or holy water might.

She collapsed into the chair, hiding her face in her hands, shoulders shaking. I thought at first she was crying without making any noise. But when Naomi hugged her, she raised a face devoid of tears. Frances was shaking, just shaking, as if she couldn't cry anymore, not because she didn't want to, but because all the tears had been drained out of her. She sat there while her husband's mistress hugged her, rocked her. She was shaking so badly her teeth began to chatter, but she never cried. It seemed worse somehow because she didn't cry.

"Excuse us for a moment, ladies. We'll be right outside," I

said. I looked at Jeremy and headed for the door, knowing he'd follow. In the hallway he closed the door behind us.

"I'm sorry, Merry. I shook her hand, and nothing happened. The spell didn't react to me."

I nodded. I believed him. "Maybe I just taste better."

He grinned at me. "Well, I don't know from experience, but I'd almost bet on it."

I smiled. "Physically, maybe, but mystically, you're as powerful in your own way as I am. Lord and Lady, you're a better magician than I'll ever be, yet it didn't react to you."

He shook his head. "No, it didn't. Maybe you're right, Merry. Maybe it's too dangerous for you."

I frowned at him. "Now he gets cautious."

He looked at me, fighting to make his face neutral. "Why do I get the feeling that you're not going to be the cold-hearted bitch I was hoping for?"

I leaned against the far wall and glared at him. "This thing is so malignant that we'll be able to get some police help."

"Bringing in the police won't save them. We don't have enough to prove it's the husband. If we can't prove it in court, he doesn't do jail time, and that means he'd be free to work more magic on them. We need him locked away in a warded cell where he can't harm them."

"They'd need magical protection until he was in custody. This isn't just a detective job. It's a baby-sitting job."

"Uther and Ringo are great babysitters," he said.

"I guess."

"Still not happy. Why?"

"We should walk away from this one," I said.

"But you can't do it," he said. He was smiling now.

"No, I can't do it." There were lots of detective agencies in the United States that said they specialized in supernatural cases. It was big business, the preternatural, but most agencies couldn't back up their advertising. We could. We were one of only a handful of agencies that could boast a staff made up entirely of magic practitioners and psychics. We were also the only one that could boast that all but two employees were fey. There aren't that many full-blooded fey

who can stand to live in a big, crowded city. L.A. was better than New York or Chicago, but it was still exhausting to be surrounded by so much metal, so much technology, so many humans. It didn't bother me. My human blood allowed me human tolerances for steel and glass prisons. Culturally and personally, I preferred the country, but I didn't have to have it. It was nice, but I didn't sicken and fade without it. Some fey would.

"I wish I could turn them away, Jeremy."

"You've got a bad feeling about this one, too, don't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah." But if I cast them out, I'd see her trembling, tearless face in my dreams. For all I knew, they might come back to haunt me after whoever was killing them finished the job. They could come back as righteous ghosts and bemoan me for having knowingly taken their last chance at survival away. People always think ghosts haunt the people who actually killed them, but that's just not true. Ghosts seem to have an interesting sense of justice, and it would be just my luck to have them following me around until I could find someone to lay them. If they could be laid. Sometimes spirits were tougher than that. Then you could end up with a family ghost like a banshee howling at every death. I doubted either woman had that kind of strength of character, but it would have served me right if they had. It was my own sense of guilt that made me walk back into that office, not fear of ghostly reprisals. Some people say that the fey have no souls, no sense of personal responsibility. For some that's true, but it wasn't true for Jeremy, and it wasn't true for me. More's the pity sometimes. More's the pity.