

Death comes to Killdeer on the wings of the storm...

# Orion Shadows of Sunlight City #2 by Tony Ross

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# SHADOWS OF SUNLIGHT CITY I BOOK TWO



# TONY ROSS

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Second Edition

# <u>ONE</u>

# January 2041

David Johansen stepped out onto the front porch of the little log cabin he called home and leaned back against its rough-hewn outer wall. He winced involuntarily at the chill in the January air, sipped from a steaming mug of coffee and smiled at the contrast. Hot and cold: polar opposites, like good and evil, life and death. He'd never known cold like this in his thirtyone years, not growing up in the near-tropics of Sunlight City. But there was something pure and cleansing about the soft blanket of snow during a Wisconsin winter and the way the rising sun sparkled off it like thousands of diamonds. He'd needed a change like this.

David huddled more deeply into his red-and-black-checkered flannel jacket and wrapped his large hands around his mug, breathing in the aroma. His pale blue eyes looked out beneath short blond hair and swept over the surrounding landscape, which consisted of a minimal yard and an abundance of pine and spruce trees. Tall oaks and maples towered over their smaller neighbors; Uncle Cal and Aunt Julie Jordan, his mother's parents, had planted them for shade when they built the cabin many years earlier.

The cabin itself was very carefully constructed, making maximum use of minimal square footage and space-saving appliances. It brought back pleasant memories from David's childhood when, during many summers, he and his mother came for a week's visit. The adults slept in the loft bedroom; David and his cousins camped out in sleeping bags on the living room floor, telling whispered ghost stories and listening to cricket chirps. The cabin had always been cozy and inviting. At just under five hundred square feet of living space, it also avoided Wisconsin property taxes. Although tiny, the cabin was comfortable enough for one or two people to stay awhile, and the quiet and seclusion was something else that David needed. Uncle Cal and Aunt Julie had blessed him by allowing him to stay there for as long as he needed.

His eyes travelled further, looking down the gravel driveway until it bent between two stands of evergreens and vanished out of sight. At the end of the driveway, if he took a right and travelled three miles south, he'd find

the little town of Killdeer. Just west of Chequamegon National Forest, Killdeer wasn't much of a town, at least as far as population went. Just shy of three hundred people called it home. The majority of them commuted to work in Superior or crossed the Minnesota border into Duluth. Others drove in the opposite direction to Ashland. Many who worked locally were farmers, loggers or miners.

Killdeer itself was a well-kept collection of small homes built along the south shore of kidney-shaped Killdeer Lake, a man-made body of water that David thought was more of a glorified pond. The town had two hotels which filled up quickly during skiing or hunting seasons. Iron Hills Ski Lodge and Resort was a large, grand building with sixty standard rooms and four executive suites; on occasion the wealthy and famous came to town for a weekend of skiing and privacy. The Blue Spruce Inn was quaint and rustic, but very comfortable. David had stayed there himself for a few days upon his arrival in town in August of last year, and his friend Mona, who had accompanied him from Sunlight City, stayed there now.

A small bank and doctor's office serviced Killdeer's financial and medical needs. Two gas stations faced each other in constant competition on opposite sides of Main Street. Just down the road, Trudy's Bar and Grill served the best Friday night fish fry in the area.

As hard as it seemed to transition from a city of five million to a quiet country lifestyle, Killdeer was becoming home to David. Knowing what to expect from his childhood helped. Uncle Cal and Aunt Julie had made the adjustment easier, introducing him to the locals, renewing old acquaintances and helping him get a job with an area construction company. Business had slowed for the winter and he was out of work for the time being, but he'd saved carefully and now had time to study Wisconsin law and work back toward the career in law enforcement he'd left in Sunlight City.

Everything was going well, David thought as he took another sip of coffee and listened to the wind.

So what in the world was bothering him this morning?

Was it just his nerves again, knowing that Mona was coming?

Was it the intrusion of heavy gray clouds from the north, promising a winter storm and dampening his spirit?

Or was it something more?

His ears pricked suddenly at the downshifting of an engine and the crunch of tires on gravel. It never ceased to amaze him how *quiet* it was here, especially in the winter. He'd never given a second thought to the continuous noise of Sunlight City; he'd grown up with it and learned to tune it out. Now he could hear the faintest sounds from what seemed like miles away. He'd had to sleep with a radio playing- loudly- for the first few nights in Killdeer. Over several weeks, he'd gradually lowered the volume. Lately he'd abandoned the radio and switched to a fan. Soon, he hoped, he wouldn't need anything at all.

A pair of headlights came into view. The crunch of gravel grew louder. David straightened, took another drink and stepped down off the porch. A small red truck pulled to a stop in front of him.

Mona Macheski slid out from behind the steering wheel with a pleasant smile. She adjusted her wool stocking cap over her ears and tucked her hands into the pockets of her white ski jacket.

"Good morning, Mr. Johansen," Mona said, her smile widening to radiance.

David smiled back. One look at that smile, those large green eyes and long dark hair and he couldn't help it. He felt close to this woman, closer than he felt to most people. He'd saved her life back in Sunlight City, she'd saved his, and the bond forged there was nothing that would easily be broken.

But what exactly *did* he feel? What was Mona's proper place in his life? Was she a good friend or something more? That was something David was still trying to figure out.

He answered her greeting before his smile could falter and betray his conflicting thoughts. "Good morning, Miss Macheski. And how are you today?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Mona stepped up and hugged him. David carefully returned it and released her.

Mona took a step back and looked him in the eye. "How are you? Sleeping better?"

David thought about it. The unusual circumstances of his birth had left

him with a unique medical condition that affected his adrenalin and metabolism. Sleep was a rare occurrence for him, and the condition was slowly killing him. Mona was using her background in bioengineering to try to develop a cure.

"Little bit better," David finally answered. "Two nights ago was pretty bad. Last night was better."

Mona frowned. "Why didn't you call me? I could've given you something to help."

"It was about one in the morning when I realized I wasn't going to sleep. I'm not going to call you then. I got up and prayed, then worked out for two hours. It helped."

Mona's expression softened. "Okay. Listen, Sarah and I have been going back and forth on-line the past few days, and I think we're getting closer."

Dr. Sarah Kreider was a biology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who Mona had recruited to help her. While the doctor knew of Mona's credentials as a bioengineer, she didn't know of Mona's extensive background in cloning, or that David's condition came from a cloned father. She certainly had no idea that Mona herself was a clone that carried the memories and knowledge of the original, who had died ten years earlier at the age of seventy-six. These were things that no one other than David and Mona would ever know.

"Closer," David repeated. "How so?"

"Do you want the technical explanation or the simple one?"

"Simplify, please. I haven't finished my coffee yet."

"The serum I brought today is a slightly different version of the last one we tried. Based on your bloodwork from last time, we actually limited your adrenalin production by eight to ten percent and slowed your metabolism by about the same. Sarah and I looked at what we did differently this time and I think we've got this figured out!" Mona was getting giddy, actually bouncing up and down slightly as she spoke. "We're close, Dave, we're really close! I think we can finally get this thing under control!"

David smiled. This was definitely good news. "So... maybe I'm not planning my funeral in five years?"

"Right. If we're right on this, you'll be able to live a normal, healthy life."

David closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath, fighting hard to keep his emotions under control. *A normal, healthy life.* He could hardly remember what that felt like.

"Come on, big guy," Mona teased, "let it out..."

David laughed, nearly crying, then hugged Mona. "You're doing great, girl. Thank you. For everything."

"I owe it to you. You saved my life. Seems only fair I return the favor, doesn't it?"

"You've never owed me anything." David set his mug down on the porch railing and shrugged off his coat. "Shall we take care of that shot, then? I'll take you out for breakfast afterward to celebrate."

"Out here?"

"No, I was thinking Moose's Diner on the edge of town."

Mona put her hands on her hips. "I *mean* the shot! Have you looked at the thermometer? It's like twenty degrees out here!"

"Eighteen. High of thirty today." David pushed up the sleeve of his gray sweatshirt. "Go for it. The quicker you do, the quicker I'm buying steak and eggs."

Mona glared at him. The sudden shift in her mood was unsettling. David paused, looked down for several seconds as if considering surrender, and finally shook his head no.

Mona sighed and gave in. She pulled a small plastic case from her coat pocket. Opening it, she removed a disinfectant pad and wiped down the skin on the inside of David's right elbow. Next she selected a capped syringe half-filled with a clear liquid.

"I don't even know why I'm doing this," she grumbled as she uncapped the syringe. She pressed slightly on the plunger, ensuring no air remained inside.

"Because you like steak and eggs?" David offered.

"No." Mona thrust the needle into a prominent vein and injected the serum. "Why am I out here freezing to death when we could be doing this indoors, where it's about fifty degrees warmer?"

"You know I'd gladly invite you in if I had a group here... if I had *room* for a group... but-"

"But you're concerned about appearances," Mona interrupted as she withdrew the needle. "You don't even have to say it. I've heard it before."

"You're not concerned?" David asked, pulling down his sleeve and donning his coat again.

"Why should I be? We aren't doing anything wrong."

"No, but this is a small town and people don't know that."

"What are we going to do in three minutes?" Mona repacked her syringe, put the case back in her pocket and threw her hands in the air. "I tell you, Dave, sometimes you're the most stubborn..."

"Look," David interrupted, his voice rising, "I'm doing everything I can to protect *your* reputation as well as my own. Scripture says to avoid any appearance of evil-"

"Don't you preach at me!" Mona snapped. "Actually, wait. *Do* preach at me. You tell me, chapter and verse, where it says that two friends of the opposite sex can't be alone together. Come on. Let's go. I'm waiting."

"Okay," David said, reining in his temper. "Sit tight. I'll get my Bible."

"*Oh* no. You're going to tell me right now where the Bible says that our being together is evil. If you recall, we roomed together in Sunlight City."

"At the Imperial Dragon Hotel, *in separate rooms* of a two-room suite, when we were running for our lives. And if *you* recall, you appreciated the gesture."

"I did." Mona lowered her voice a bit. "But Dave, when are we ever going to be able to talk *alone?* And not just on the phone? You're the *only one* in this frigid little arctic outpost we call home who can possibly relate to me. Do you understand how lonely that is for me?"

"Wisconsin isn't even close to arctic. It's great after the thaw. And yes, I can understand your loneliness."

"I don't think you can. You've got family here. I've got no one."

"Uncle Cal and Aunt Julie accept you just fine. And I can't talk to anyone but you about Victor, the Black Cats and the whole cloning business, so yes, Mona, it's hard on me too."

"I'm just tired of it," Mona sighed. "I'm tired of barriers between us. I'm

tired of restrictions. I want to be free to know you better, but I don't have a clue right now where our relationship is going."

"That's two of us, then," David agreed.

"We are getting closer, aren't we? You have to admit we're comfortable together."

"Sure."

"Last week, over at Thad and Amy's for lasagna. You touched my hand at the table. Afterward in the living room I snuggled in by you a little and you didn't push me away."

"I know, Mona. Really, I know what you're saying, but..."

"But what?"

"That was safe. We were with others."

"We could've gone out dancing with them after dinner," Mona said. "That was public, and I would've really enjoyed it."

"I don't dance."

"You can bench press five hundred pounds, throw spinning kicks and fight off assassins with microphone stands, but you can't spin me around the dance floor?"

"Sorry." David smiled halfheartedly and shrugged.

Mona sighed. "I haven't been out dancing since..."

"Don't. You know I don't like it when you do this."

"All I'm saying, Dave, is we're comfortable together, so let's try it out. All it'd take is you moving in with me for a month, or me with you..."

David slowly shook his head no.

Mona glared at him, her anger suddenly flaring back to life. "You really *don't* care, do you?"

"You know good and well that I do." David reached up and gently touched her cheek. His heart raced. He wanted to give in to Mona's wishes. He enjoyed their closeness. It didn't take much for him to get lost in her smile, the warmth of her laugh, the sparkle in her eyes when she looked at him. But what she was asking of him now just wasn't right.

Reluctantly he dropped his hand. "I don't ever want you out of my life." "I just don't see why we can't..."

"We've got to be careful, Mona! I keep telling you, I'm worried about-"

"How it looks," Mona finished sharply. "Appearances. Right. Got it, preacher man. Well then, tell you what, how about you stop treating me like a prostitute?"

David's jaw dropped open in shock. "What?"

"After all," Mona said evenly as she patted the syringe case in her coat pocket, "we only get together nowadays when you *want* something, don't we?"

David's shock quickly gave way to red-faced anger.

"I think you'd better go," he said quietly.

"Yeah," Mona said angrily. "I think I'd better."

She got into her truck, slammed the door and drove away.

TWO

Anya Ponikarova looked silently out the window, oblivious to the others seated with her in first class as the plane descended past a Chicago sunrise toward O'Hare International Airport. Several months earlier she'd looked out at the lights of another metropolis, on the night when the course of her life had been irrevocably altered by five simple words appearing as a message on her cell phone:

# Tonight I will kill you.

Of course she'd panicked. There was no other way to explain it. She didn't rattle easily, but that message had done it. Caller ID had confirmed Roberto as the sender. He'd walked into the bathroom to prepare for a wild night of intimacy and passion and promptly sent her a death threat.

It had probably only been part of his game. He'd been looking to heighten her fear and adrenalin for whatever sick fantasy he had in mind. That or he'd really meant it.

Either way, Roberto de Calatrava was dead. She'd survived, taking full advantage of her unsurpassed beauty to distract him and then... what? He'd tripped, hadn't he? He'd stumbled over the railing all on his own and fallen to his death. She hadn't intended to trip him and cause his fall... had she?

She couldn't answer that question. There was no sense in tormenting herself with guilt over a freak accident. She had kept herself alive, and that was all that mattered.

She'd left France quickly, before any questions could be asked, and counted on diplomatic immunity for protection the rest of the way. Having a United Nations ambassador for a father had its perks. Of course, if one of Roberto's friends decided to have her assassinated, diplomatic immunity wouldn't be worth a hill of beans.

Anya had been flying home on her family's private jet, trying desperately to unwind, when a text message appeared on her cell phone from...

*Roberto?* Impossible. Roberto was dead. She'd misread the number. But there was his name on the phone screen. Maybe this was an earlier text, something that hadn't been received until now. She wasn't in the mood to

read it, but if she did, she could put this whole dreadful episode behind her and move on.

You still live, the message read. Run away, little girl. I enjoy a good hunt.

If this was an old text from Roberto just coming in now, the wording and the timing were very disturbing. Almost as if Roberto hadn't died. But he had. She'd seen him fall, heard his scream. Did someone else have his phone... someone who knew?

Another message from Roberto. Anya's heart sank into the pit of her stomach. This couldn't be happening.

You need to understand the gravity of your situation, she read. Contact your family. Do it now.

Her family? What about her family? What had happened? Had Roberto, or someone else, done something unthinkable?

Anya immediately called home, trying both the open and the private lines, and was rewarded with dead silence. Her heart pounding, she'd run through every phone number she could.

Papa's personal cell phone. Nothing.

His number at the embassy. Nothing.

Mother. Still nothing. The constant silence was maddening. She wasn't even reaching their voice mail. High in the air and thousands of miles from home, Anya had never felt more helpless. Who was this caller, and what had he done?

Frantically, her fingers flew over her phone. Her brothers. Her sisters. *Come on, come on!* 

No response at all.

She snapped the phone shut with a muffled sob and pushed back the temptation to throw it across the cabin. If only she hadn't taken this trip to France, if only she'd stayed with her family...

You'd be dead with the rest of them, she told herself. No! You don't know they're dead! Control yourself!

She reached to the table in front of her and flipped up the computer screen hidden in its surface. The concealed keyboard rose up silently moments later. She switched the computer on and impatiently clicked her

nails on the polished oak table, finally entering her password and logging on.

A soft beep had informed her that she had new e-mail. From her family? Was it possible?

No. She hadn't recognized the address. Normally Anya would have deleted the message without a second thought, but she was desperate for information. She opened it.

No text at all. Simply a link to an attached video. Numbly, fearing the worst, she clicked on the link.

The image was blackness at first, then blurred into greens and blues. Studying the image, Anya finally realized that she was looking at a satellite image, zooming in from outer space and focusing with increasing clarity on...

No.

Please, no.

She had recognized the landmarks: the long driveway, the twin fountains in front of the property, the orchards in back. This was her house.

But the house was gone. What had replaced it was a confusion of colors that Anya's mind had refused to accept: black ash, gray smoke, sporadic flickers of red flame.

The house had been burned? Deliberately? Had it been *bombed*? Dear, sweet Papa and Mama, her brothers and sisters, Ivan and Greta the housekeepers...

Anya closed her eyes in shock, her head spinning. She'd thought she might black out. This had to be a dream. No, a nightmare. An insane nightmare from which she'd awaken at any moment.

Another beep. Anya had opened her eyes and looked at the computer, where the video had stopped playing. She read:

Do you believe me now?

Anya had closed her eyes and clenched her hands into fists, hard enough that her fingernails drew blood from her palms. This was no dream. This was sick, perverse and all too real.

Another beep. Another e-mail. The same sender.

"Stop it!" Anya had screamed into the air. "Stop it!"

She opened the message.

I would like to make this interesting. Find me before I find you. Do not waste your time with law enforcement. They cannot find me, and I will kill again if you involve them.

I understand the difficulty of the task I have given you. You have six months to find me. If you cannot or if you refuse, I will kill again. I will kill you.

Find me. The clock is ticking.

That had been five and a half months ago. Anya had effectively vanished from society, well aware that she was a high-profile figure wanted for questioning and possibly arrest in Roberto's death. She travelled often and never stayed in one place for long. She'd acquired a deeper tan and her blonde hair had lightened further, but otherwise she'd done nothing to alter her appearance. Call it vanity, but she couldn't bring herself to cut or dye her hair or hire a plastic surgeon. If she was recognized, she moved and that was that.

Anya had made some careful purchases and discreet inquiries through people she trusted. With the amount of money at her fingertips, it was nothing to gain access to phone and Internet records. The madman could text and e-mail her; therefore, he could be traced. It was possible for him to route his communications through different computers to give the appearance of calling from a different location. He'd already proven himself capable of doing so with Roberto's phone. The task of finding him had, at first, seemed extremely daunting.

But the madman had stayed in contact, only once or twice a month, sending short, taunting messages. Anya assumed this was just to keep her interested. And while he did cover his tracks, he didn't seem to do a very thorough job of it.

He was deliberately leaving her clues, Anya thought, allowing her few trusted allies with computer expertise to triangulate his position. He was telling her where to find him and daring her to come.

It had taken time to build up the nerve, but Anya had finally taken the dare. She'd been keeping track of his approximate location, and he hadn't been moving.

The killer was waiting for her in a Wisconsin town barely visible on the map, a place called Killdeer.

# <u>THREE</u>

Mona stewed for the entire ten minute drive back to the Blue Spruce Inn. Her temperature rose as she thought how she was taking twice the time she would have on the road because she was still learning to drive in snow. It spiked further as she thought about taking half an hour out of her morning for an injection that would've taken two minutes if she and David lived together. The mere thought of David's name got her madder still, and by the time she parked the small Chevy truck at the Blue Spruce and stomped through the parking lot, she half expected the snow to melt at her approach.

Mona entered the inn and blew past the front desk, heading upstairs to her room. Once there, she pulled her key and unlocked the door. She slipped inside and slammed it behind her, then kicked off her boots and left them there. She shrugged off her coat and threw it at the rack in the corner. For a split second it hung there unsteadily, then fell to the floor. Mona huffed in frustration and stormed away.

She started toward the refrigerator, then remembered that she'd left her kit for David's shots in her coat pocket. Hopefully she hadn't broken the syringe or anything. She should go check...

"No," she told herself quietly. "Leave it. See if he ever *gets* another shot from me, the rotten..."

Trailing off, she continued on to the refrigerator and opened it. Wisconsin's culinary choices were different than what she'd grown accustomed to in Sunlight City, but she was finding enough here that she enjoyed. What would it be this morning? Bagels with cream cheese? An omelet with diced ham, onions, peppers and tomatoes, smothered in cheese? A Belgian waffle with whipped cream and strawberries?

Then again, she'd been gaining a little weight lately, which was showing up, just a little, in her belly and hips. She'd have to discipline herself and cut back a bit.

Why? she asked herself. For David? Forget it! He's not interested! And even if he is, I'm not going to be one of those skinny little stick-figure models just to get his attention!

She turned from the refrigerator and went to the bathroom, carefully

studying the contours of her face, pulling up her shirt and checking out her belly, observing the curves of her hips and the lines of her legs.

Nothing wrong with that, girl. You look good.

She left the bathroom and went back to the kitchen, ignoring the refrigerator and starting up the coffeemaker. She wouldn't eat until she knew she wasn't doing it to calm her nerves. She sat down at the kitchen table, rested her chin on her hands and savored the smell of brewing coffee for several minutes. Her stomach growled in response, and she decided on a toasted bagel with peanut butter for breakfast. Just a little something.

She got up, dropped the bagel in the toaster and wandered toward her bedroom. This room, like the rest of her suite, was very comfortable, with soft carpeting and rustic pine furniture, which seemed odd at a place called the Blue Spruce. The walls themselves were paneled to look like log; woodsy prints or decorations adorned each wall. Her eyes crossed to the king-sized bed with its pine headboard and log frame and moved over the dark green bedspread toward the pillow and a small gray object there.

The object was a stuffed bulldog with a heavy brow, thick sagging jowls, and a black plastic collar with studs. Back in Sunlight City, she'd once referred to David as her protector. Shortly after moving here, he'd bought her this bulldog to remind her that he still watched out for her. It was a little premature, maybe, to keep it on her bed, but it was good to have a memento of him close by. What a good man. What a sweet, sweet man.

A man who deeply aggravated her at the moment. Mona sighed, tired of dealing with these conflicting feelings, and left the bedroom as she heard the bagel come up.

Okay, so maybe she was hard on him, she thought as she spread a thin layer of chunky peanut butter over her bagel. Maybe she shouldn't have made that crack about treating her like a prostitute. After all, he was always very kind, caring and sensitive to her, and not in a way that made him seem weak. On the other hand, it seemed a wonderful complement to the tremendous strength of body, mind and character he demonstrated. The way he honored her when they were together made her feel stronger and complete.

But why couldn't he come her way sometimes? Why did he have to be

so doggedly persistent about what the Bible said was right and wrong? Mona had to admit that following its principles and guidelines had made a fine man out of David, but that didn't mean she had to live the same way. Why couldn't he loosen up a little? She might even be willing to come his way a little more if he'd make a move in her direction. Relationships were built on compromise, right?

Then again, what would it hurt to try to understand David? He'd given her a Bible so she could study on her own. It was sitting on the counter four feet away, for that matter. Her reading had led to some very interesting, even enlightening, conversations with David. It had been a few days since she'd read, though. Maybe even a week. She'd just been too busy.

The same went for praying. She'd started in Sunlight City. It had been easy to pray then under the constant threat of death. Now that she was settled into a routine and comfortable, prayer didn't happen as often.

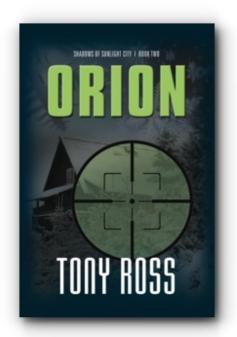
Mona sat and chewed on her bagel thoughtfully, then sipped her coffee. Her anger toward David had cooled somewhat. She understood his point, but wished he didn't have to make it.

Maybe she was just too close to everything right now. Maybe what she needed was separation, removing herself from Killdeer for a while. She'd look for an apartment in Superior so she and Sarah could continue to work on David's cure. She wouldn't give that up. But she'd still be far enough from David that she could focus on her work and not the other places her heart wanted to go.

The more Mona thought about that idea, the more she liked it. She'd finish up breakfast, then fire up the computer on her desk in the living room. She'd do some on-line searching for that apartment or at least a hotel, preferably close to the university there.

Then she would leave Killdeer.

Possibly forever.



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