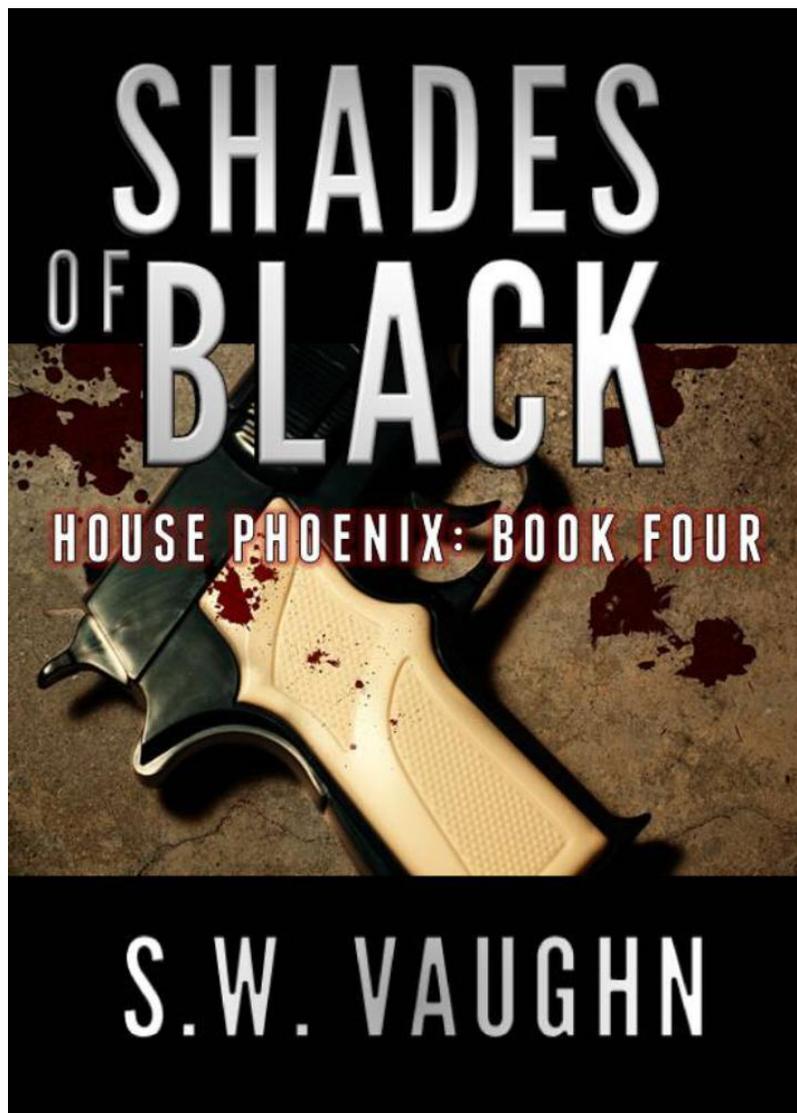


# Shades of Black

*S.W. Vaughn*

**House Phoenix: Book Four**



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Second Edition, 2013

<http://housephoenix.wordpress.com/>

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## Chapter 1

“You’re hunting.”

The accusation from Dell Ramone’s usually silent bodyguard tore her gaze from the packed dance floor below their balcony seat. Ania faced her without expression, eyes flashing in time with the frenzied pulse of strobes painting blue-white flickers over the animated bodies crammed in the basement of the Devil’s Den.

“Maybe.” Offering a careless shrug, Dell drained her glass and set it on the edge of the table. Within minutes a dark-skinned, shirtless specimen of a man with a faux loincloth that barely covered him moved in to clear the empty. The waiter held it aloft briefly, asking an unspoken question. Dell shook her head. He vanished.

She could have had him, if she’d chosen. But after allowing a hard and lithe young man with a talented tongue to handle her equipment earlier this evening, it was time to choose a woman. She wanted soft and warm now. Later, there would be time for the rough stuff.

Hopefully Ania wouldn’t be too upset.

Ania lapsed back into speechless mode and Dell returned to the hunt, her enthusiasm dampened slightly. Beneath the crystalline lightning beams, hundreds danced and writhed in explicit anticipation. Some came together in the midst of the melee, flesh entering flesh without heed of spectators. The shattering staccato of a techno bassline pumped from overhead speakers and wound through the action, a live copper wire of sound and vibration.

A few of her fighters were down there somewhere. Eddie and Rasheed in particular had been looking forward to the annual sin-fest at the Den. She hadn’t seen either of them with a woman in a while. For their sakes, she hoped the ones they latched onto were actually women. Many of the Den’s frequenters were as perfectly crafted illusions of the

feminine form as she herself.

Heaving a sigh, she toyed with a tiny glass vial lying on the table and shot a sideways glance at Ania. Her bodyguard's stone features hadn't changed. They weren't likely to, either. At least not here. Ania preferred to stay away from crowds unless they were at Dell's arena, where she could monitor everything that went on. Here, she was out of her element.

"Sugar, you worry too much," Dell said, hoping to prod a smile from the rock. "Loosen up. Why don't you go down there and pick yourself a man?"

Ania looked at her, clearly saying that hell hadn't frozen over yet.

"How 'bout a drink? Have one with me."

Nothing.

Exasperated, Dell slid to the end of the booth. "Fine," she said with a hint of dejection. "I'm gonna go down there, though." She stood and smoothed the skin-tight leather tube she wore, pleased she'd been able to get herself tucked back in to undetectable after her last romp. "You comin'?"

"Do I have a choice?" Ania's silk-and-gravel voice carried a touch of sarcasm, but her eyes reflected concern.

"No." She smiled and drifted to the twisted metal staircase leading to the dance floor. Ania remained scant steps behind her. A touch of guilt shivered through her just before they stepped into the crush. Ania was acutely uncomfortable. But they went through this every year. Nothing would happen.

Dell found a gap in the shifting mass and stepped through. Ania followed.

And something happened.

The door leading in from the upstairs lounge burst open with a hollow bang, barely audible above the thunder of the music. A lone man vaulted through and stopped to close it behind him, then fired a gun into the deejay's booth.

Sparks and smoke gushed from the jagged hole in the glass-encased booth. An earsplitting shriek came from the speakers as they shut down with a crack she felt in her

gut. A single scream rang out—then hell moved in.

The crush became a vise as people attempted to stampede away from the lone figure, now brandishing the gun in wild swinging arcs over the assembled crowd. Too far from the access stairs to see him, Dell pulled Ania close to her and half-shouted, “Who is that asshole?”

Ania shook her head. The man was screaming something, but the throng screamed louder. He fired again, this time aiming down further to take out a plaster chunk of wall. Debris rained down on the fringes of the mob to Dell’s left.

“...the hell up!” The shooter’s voice cut through the din. “Shut up, you dribbling morons! Where is she?” He drew a breath and shouted, louder this time, “Dell! I know you’re here, traitorous bitch! One of you fuckers best flush out Dell Ramone.” He leveled the weapon, aiming into the heart of the crowd. “Three and I shoot. One...”

Ania pushed her in the opposite direction from the shooter, keeping her from seeing him. Sick rage filled Dell at whatever this bastard was after, whoever he was, and she struggled to break free of the mob and face him. But Ania wasn’t having it.

“Two,” the gun-wielder roared over the clamor. A few souls had reached the lower exit leading to the alley and thrown it open. Bodies piled against the back wall, bottlenecked in terror.

She lunged toward the stairs, toward the loony with the gun. Again, Ania stopped her.

“Let me get to him,” Dell shouted. “He’s gonna hurt somebody.”

“Dell, that’s Loyal,” Ania said sharply. “Run!”

Loyal? Impossible. He wasn’t supposed to get out for another fifteen to twenty, and that was with good behavior.

“Three!”

The gun bucked in Loyal Sims’s hand. A spray of blood erupted from the center of the crowd, black droplets frozen in the surreal flashing air. Fresh shrieks tore through the basement and replaced the lost club beat with the discordant music of death. As the mob

pressed back, a massive figure battled against the tide and gained ground toward the stairs.

It was her favorite fighter.

“Eddie, no!” Her cry was swallowed in the bedlam. The surge carried her away as Eddie, head and shoulders above the crowd and impossible to miss, bobbed in the opposite direction. Someone—one of the Den’s employees, it looked like—had taken charge of the evacuation. People filed and fled through the exit like flowing water.

Loyal descended three steps and drew a bead on the advancing Eddie. “Dell!” he screamed. “This hero one of yours? Come out, or watch him die for you!”

Before she could react, Ania slammed bodily into her and propelled her toward the exit. “He’s already gone,” she rasped near her ear. “But you’re not. Move, Dell.”

They were feet from the door. Unable to tear her gaze away, she watched Loyal step down further. “Last chance,” the crazed shooter howled. “You only got ’til one, bitch! Or bastard, whatever the fuck you are!”

The door. Cool air whispered across her heated skin. Almost out. *Eddie...*

“One.”

A flat crack coincided with the back of Eddie’s skull bursting. Blood and bone splinters erupted in clouds to baptize the squirming, solid mass of humanity packed around him. His head flopped back, and for one absurd moment his body remained upright, jostled into grotesque life by the movement of the mob. Just as she reached the door, Eddie’s husk sank slowly from sight.

Dell froze. Loyal stared across the chasm—then brought the gun up again.

“I see you!” He screamed in maniacal singsong tones, his eyes locked on her. She could feel them from here. Within seconds a bullet lodged just above the doorjamb, sending a shower of plaster into the air. “Hold still, bitch!”

Another shot slammed by, grazing the lower edge of the frame. Closer than the last. Loyal had good aim.

Dell blinked and found herself outside, sprawled on cold cement with Ania lying

across her. Panicked partygoers flowed over them in their scramble to escape. Ania vaulted to her feet amid the mob and hauled her up, then pulled her along with the crowd.

“He’ll come out the front. We have to go somewhere. Not home,” Ania said as she guided them through the absconding sea, propelling her toward the street.

Shock encased her like hardening amber. Eddie. That bastard killed Eddie. Where were they? Manhattan. Uptown. And Loyal was on the loose.

Marcus Slade’s hotel was blocks from here. She could head there—no. Too obvious. Loyal knew Slade, or at least knew of him. Another hotel? Would the bastard check them all? Panic threatened to smother her, but suddenly the answer came.

Angel.

The organization’s newest House leader ran a gym here in Manhattan, down past Chinatown. He lived there too, and he’d told her at the Halloween fight she hosted a few days ago that the third floor he’d been building to house his own fighters was nearly done. Loyal couldn’t know about him yet.

Besides, Angel owed her a favor.

“Ania, give me your phone and find a place to duck in.”

Wordlessly, the bodyguard handed her a slim silver cell phone and steered them toward a side street. Dell glanced back at the thinning mob. No Loyal. Yet.

They flew down the first subway stairs they came to. Holding her breath, she dialed Angel’s number.

## Chapter 2

Angel had promised to stay out of it. But as he watched his best friend Shiro argue with Tomi Harada over the battered half-dead body of his unconscious partner, it was all he could do to keep from throttling them both.

They'd arrived on the private island that was home to Harada's House Pandora over an hour ago. And ever since then, Jenner lay dying by degrees on a wheeled bed in Harada's medical room, while the two Japanese men stood on either side and shouted across him.

Reluctantly concentrating on the fight in progress, Angel tried to translate the rapid Japanese being fired between Shiro and Harada. Shiro said something about honor, and a debt. Harada's response seemed to have nothing to do with what Shiro told him—it sounded like “take out the trash.” No, it was “filth”, not trash. *Get this filth out of my house.*

Shiro growled.

Angel sprinted and wrapped both arms around Shiro's chest from behind as the fighter lunged forward. Though he used all his strength, Shiro still lifted him from the floor and nearly broke free.

“Don't do it.” Angel didn't dare relax his hold on the struggling Shiro. “He won't fight you. He'll just shoot you in the back.” Meeting Harada's stone-black eyes with contempt, he added, “He's a coward.”

Harada's features flushed a dull red. “How dare you,” he said through clenched teeth in clipped English. “No *gaijin* speaks to me in this manner. And in my own house, no less. The others will hear of this.”

“Tell them whatever you want.” Angel kept his voice firm, though his hands itched to finish what Shiro started. “And I'll tell them how you let your ex-lieutenant die, *in your own house*, because you're afraid of him.”

“I do not fear this insignificant Hindi mongrel.” Harada managed an icy laugh. His eyes

flicked to the motionless figure lying on the bed between them. And left too quickly. “Very well. We shall see what can be done, but he does appear beyond repair this time. A shame.” The old man probably would’ve shaken Diego Mendez’s hand, if he’d known what had happened.

There was no way in hell he’d let Harada find out.

As if Harada’s assent had been a command, his two elderly doctors materialized in the entrance from the supply room. Endo and Hoshi, he thought they were called, though he had trouble remembering which was who. Shiro’s taut frame didn’t relax until one of them took command of the bed and pushed it to the opposite side of the room where most of the equipment stood. Angel released him and stepped back, not taking his eyes off Harada.

“You may stay, Shiro, if you wish,” Harada said smugly. “But the *gaijin* cannot. Do you not have a...gym to run, *Angel?*”

The black eyes bore into him as Harada glared unsmiling. Angel regarded the doctors working silently over Jenner’s body, then met Shiro’s frustrated features. “Yes, I suppose I do,” he said. “But I’m sticking around here for a while. I’ll leave for the night—but I’ll be back.”

Harada seemed about to refuse, but he restrained himself. “Be sure you do not overextend your welcome,” the elder man said stiffly. Without so much as a nod to Shiro, he pivoted on one heel and marched from the room.

When he’d gone, Angel and Shiro drifted closer to Jenner. The doctors had already hooked him up to an IV line. While one pried shreds of hastily wrapped, blood-soaked bandage from a foot that bore a vicious close-range gunshot wound, the other cut away his torn shirt to reveal a torso almost completely black with bruises, the effect of several broken ribs.

And those injuries were just the beginning.

Battling rising gorge, Angel looked on in horrified fascination. Though he had every reason to hate Jenner—and by all rights should have felt the same indifference as Harada toward the torment the man apparently endured over the past week—he couldn’t help

feeling sympathetic. Despite Jenner's cruel and calculating personality, the man was his partner now. Their uneasy shared past was just that. Past.

And no one, not even Jenner, deserved what Mendez had done to him.

For Shiro it was worse. Jenner was his *sempai*, teaching him the trade of a psychiatrist, and Shiro held himself responsible for allowing the Prometheus leader to kidnap the man from the parking garage of the hotel he lived in. Mendez had held him prisoner while Shiro and the rest of House Phoenix tried every tactic they could conceive to find him. In the end they "convinced" Mendez to return Jenner—but the damage had already been done. They might still be too late.

"There is little for you to do here," one of the doctors said, turning to them. "Perhaps you would like me to summon you when he is stabilized."

It wasn't a question. Shiro hesitated to reply.

"That's fine," Angel said for both of them, steering Shiro toward the double doors leading out of the medical room. "Let Shiro know, okay? I'm going to be taking off soon." His friend needed a break and about twenty hours or so of sleep. He'd see him to whatever room Harada allotted him, then go back to the mainland and get some rest himself.

As they stepped into the corridor and the doors closed behind them, Angel's phone went off. Cursing, he fumbled it from his pocket and held up a finger to Shiro as he hit Accept. "Yeah?"

"Angel. Gotta make this fast. Where you at, sugar?"

"Dell?" He pulled the cell away from his ear long enough to glance at the ID display. The number on it was unfamiliar. He *thought* it was Dell Ramone, but if it was, the transgendered leader of House Dionysus sounded breathless and nervous. Nothing like her usual ebullient, at-ease self.

"That's me. You home?"

"No." Angel frowned at Shiro, and shook his head when the fighter shot him a questioning look. "Why...what's going on?"

“Tell you later. I need a favor. Anybody at your place?”

“Er...just Umekai,” he said slowly. “You know, the—”

“Ah, your lady fighter. I remember.” Dell paused, drew a quick breath. “You trust her?”

“Ye-es.” This conversation was growing more bizarre by the second. “Dell, what—”

“Good. Call her up and tell her I’m droppin’ in. Ania and I both. You got a back door, right?”

“Yes.” He didn’t bother trying to say anything else.

“Have her let us in that way. Tell her she’s not to let anyone know we’re there. I mean *no one*. I’ll explain when you get there.”

Angel hesitated for just a second, and then said, “Consider it done. I’ll be there before morning.”

“Thanks, Angel-baby. See you then.”

The phone clicked, and dead air hissed through the line. Angel stared at it as though it might serve up an explanation. But none was forthcoming. He punched in Umekai’s cell and regarded an equally baffled Shiro.

“Dell’s coming for a visit.”

\* \* \* \*

From the security room on the ground floor of Angel’s Gym, Umekai watched the monitor she’d set to display the feed from the newly installed camera over the back door. Nothing yet. It had only been twenty minutes or so since Angel’s arcane call informing her of Dell Ramone’s imminent arrival, so she kept watching—though why in hell the woman, or technically the man, had decided to drop by at two in the morning was beyond her.

The screen image flickered and refocused for the third time in five minutes. Shaking her head, Umekai shook a cigarette free from the pack beside her and lit up. She’d have to get Angel to invest in a better system when things settled down. Like she’d been telling him to since she came here from House Pandora. There she’d worked in security under Tomi Harada’s chauvinistic thumb, but here she was in charge. And a fighter to boot. She liked it

that way.

Minutes passed, and still she saw nothing, heard nothing. She finished her cigarette and wondered if she should call Angel back. Maybe the Dionysus leader had changed her mind. She didn't know Dell that well anyway, and really wasn't looking forward to trying to make small talk until Angel returned. Whenever that would be. He'd said he would try to get here as soon as possible.

At last, movement on the screen. Through the grainy image, what looked like two women approached the back door at a brisk clip. One of them knocked. The sound drifting from the back door down the hall preceded the on-screen action by about half a second, like a bad dub. The one not knocking stood just beside her companion, facing the entrance to the alley with one arm slightly bent and—

Was that a gun in her hand?

Umekai stood and jogged to the back door. "Dell?" she called when she reached it.

"Yeah, sugar, it's me. Make it fast?"

Apprehension cast a shadow over her. Reaching into her short jacket, she wrapped one hand around her throwing knife and opened the door with the other. Dell started in almost before she'd gotten out of the way. The other woman—Ania, Angel had said her name was—backed in after Dell and didn't even look at Umekai as she put whatever it was she'd been holding away in some hidden pocket.

"Glad you're here," Dell said once Umekai got the door shut and re-locked. "There someplace I can freshen up?"

"Er, we have locker rooms over in the—hey, where the hell is *she* going?" Umekai glared after Ania, who was headed down the hall toward the security room. The compact, silent woman paused before the open door, then walked right in.

"*Hey!*" She started after her, but a hand gripped her arm, firm but not rough.

"Ania won't screw with anything. She just has to check things out," Dell said in an apologetic tone tinged with distress.

Umekai faced her, and the invariably flawless transvestite's state of disarray made her gasp. The dress she wore was askew, ruffled, and bore ground-in smudges of dirt. White dust and fragments that looked like plaster sprinkled her shoulders and hair, where scraggly tendrils shot from a tight upswept coif. A few faint streaks of mascara smudged the hollows beneath her eyes and snaked down from the corners. She looked like a badly painted, cocoa-skinned Pierrot clown. "Damn," Umekai finally whispered. "What happened?"

Dell pressed her lips together against a frown. "Better if I don't tell you just yet," she said. At that moment, Ania emerged from the security room and headed for them, then kept going and turned down the hall leading to the main gym.

Shaking her head, Umekai watched her go. "What is she checking out, exactly?"

"She's making sure we weren't followed."

"Oh." A chill shook her, erasing most of her resentment at the intrusion. Unsure what to say next, she waited until Ania rejoined them. The woman gave a curt nod to Dell, and Umekai said, "Why don't we go upstairs? You can use Angel's bathroom, maybe watch TV or something until he gets back." If the television even worked. They rarely turned it on. There was precious little idle time at House Phoenix.

Relief flooded Dell's taut features. "Sounds fine," she said. "Lead the way."

Throwing a curious glance at Ania, who still hadn't uttered a word, Umekai moved to the stairs leading to Angel's loft apartment and started up. Her two guests followed silently. The stairs ended at a platform leading to a good-sized living room. To the left was an open doorway with a mini-kitchen and the access stairway for the former roof, which was now almost the third floor. Alongside the wall with the entrance to the kitchen was the bathroom. The closed door to the right contained the bedroom she and Shiro shared while construction was completed on the upper rooms. Angel had taken to sleeping on the couch. The contractors were supposed to be finished in the next few days.

As the others joined her on the landing, she pointed to the left. "Bathroom's right there," she said. "Help yourself."

Dell nodded thanks, drifted across the room and let herself in. Ania immediately crossed to the windows opposite the landing and looked out.

Once again at a loss, Umekai settled on one of the couches and said, "So. You're Dell's bodyguard, right?"

The woman at the window faced her with narrowed eyes, and after a minute, turned back to observing.

"Fine," she muttered under her breath. "How about we just wait for Angel, then?"

No response.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Her irritation returning, she grabbed the remote from the end table beside her and thumbed the television on. She found an '80s sitcom rerun and hunkered down in her seat, trying to ignore the rigid phantom who stood guard feet from her.

It was going to be a long night.

## Chapter 3

*You're dead, bitch.*

More from anger than fear, Dell's hands shook as she stood before the sink in Angel's too-bright bathroom. Damn it, how in the hell did Loyal get out? Somebody must have pulled some serious strings to cut him loose. The fact that it still took five years to do it just proved how dangerous he was.

She turned on the cold water, bent, and splashed some on her overheated face. It didn't help. She closed her eyes and saw Eddie's brains blowing out the back of his head. If only she could have gotten to him, warned him somehow...

But Ania had been right. By then he was already gone. Once Loyal Sims marked someone for death, they were dead. Period.

The only way she could survive now was to kill him first. And for that, she needed time.

A knock on the door drew her attention. Maybe that Umekai chick needed the bathroom. She seemed all right, and Dell hated not being able to explain anything to her. But she'd learned the hard way to limit her trust only to those who'd earned it. She didn't know this woman yet. Angel, she trusted.

It wasn't Umekai on the other side of the door. Ania stood there looking like a wartime telegram messenger, and Dell knew she wasn't going to like whatever her bodyguard had to say. Peering past her, she said, "Where's the chick?"

"She went downstairs." Ania slid between her and the door, then stood by the shower and waited until they were closed in. "He'll find you," she said in muted tones. "You know what you have to do."

Nausea rolled through her stomach. "He doesn't know Angel," she insisted. "I can just lay low for a while, keep my head down."

“Dell.”

She met Ania’s gaze and sighed.

“Guess you’re right,” she said after a minute. “Me and low profile just don’t mix. All right, sugar, I’ll do it. But unless you want to stop by the house, we’re gonna have to go shoppin’.”

Ania frowned at the enthusiasm behind the word “shopping.” Jerking her head toward the door, she said, “Take some of his.”

“Angel’s?” Dell glanced around the bathroom. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “He probably wouldn’t mind, but...”

“You trust him?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a closet in the living room.”

Dell flashed a melancholy smile. “Nothin’ gets by my foxy lady, does it?” Ignoring the fresh wave of disgust filling her at the thought of what she was about to do, she said, “Okay, then. If there’s a closet, I guess that’s where I’m headed...back in.”

Determined, Dell went out to borrow a few things from Angel.

\* \* \* \*

Shiro managed to stay in his room for all of ten minutes after Angel left. He could not wait to be summoned, nor could he sleep. Cracking the door open, he glanced into the empty hallway and then stepped out.

Nothing stirred in the Harada mansion, though he knew at least one member of the security team monitored the house and the grounds from the third-floor control room. Because he’d worked for a time under Ken Serizawa, the former chief of security who had been killed just months ago by an assassin pursuing Tomi Harada, he knew the placement of every camera and sensor in the mansion. Serizawa had made sure of it.

Ken Serizawa had also been the only man Jenner had called friend. Perhaps that explained his excruciating attention to detail.

He neared one of the cameras and stopped, glancing up to catch the minute flash of darkened glass snug against the ceiling. For a moment he wondered whether Serizawa's daughter Kirei or her husband, Piper, watched the monitors tonight. They were both his childhood friends, the impish Kirei and the red-headed mute Piper. He had been glad to see them married. But now was not the time to exchange pleasantries or reminisce with old friends.

He edged carefully around the camera's field of vision. It was ridiculous, this sneaking about like a child on Christmas Eve, but he did not wish to chance someone stopping him. He could not rest while his *sempai's* life balanced on the precipice of hell.

Silent in bare feet on the burnished wood floor, he approached the stairs. To reach the medical room, he would descend to the basement—which meant passing through the main floor, where anyone awake at this hour would be. He hoped no one was. But as he started across the vast low-lit room where Pandora's fights took place, the shadows to his left moved and he made out a figure rising from a chair.

He kept walking. Perhaps whomever it was would not bother speaking to him.

"Who is there?" a female voice called in Japanese. "Hideko, is that you?"

The figure drew closer, moving slowly among the cluster of tables as though walking was difficult. Sighing, he halted and turned toward the woman.

A gasp drifted from the gloom. "Shiro! What are you doing here?" The words carried a chill that said the voice's owner was not happy to see him, yet an undercurrent of fear ran through them. She maneuvered around another table, and he made out the swollen bulge of her belly. Aiko Harada, Tomi's wife and his junior by some thirty years. The child she carried was not Tomi's, but few knew the truth about her illicit pregnancy—and he was one of them.

"Aiko." He offered a stiff nod, but no explanation. "You will excuse me. I am quite busy." He turned to go.

"I do not know how you managed to get in this house, but you are leaving it now," she said. "The door is behind you."

He stopped mid-step, and rage swirled through his blood. Shaking with its force, he pivoted and strode to her. "Do not dare command me, Aiko. You are a traitor, and you owe your life to my silence." He leaned forward until his mouth rested near her ear, to ensure the cameras did not catch his next statement. "After all, that is my nephew you carry. A fact I am sure your husband would find most interesting."

She paled, and then glared at him. "He will not believe you."

"Perhaps not. Would you care to wager that he will not believe Jenner?"

"*He is here?*" She whispered the words and backed away, glancing around as though Jenner would materialize from the shadows to claim her.

"Indeed. And I am going to him now. So, if you will excuse me, *Harada-san*." He offered a mocking half-bow and strode from her without looking back.

As he descended the basement stairs, he dismissed the confrontation. Aiko Harada was as much a coward as her husband, particularly where her life was concerned. She would cause no further trouble for him. And at the moment his concentration was needed elsewhere: behind the white double doors looming before him like a sentence.

Steeling himself, he stepped through them to serve it.

\* \* \* \*

Angel let himself in the back door of the gym and walked right into Umekai.

"What the hell is going on?" she demanded without missing a beat. "Dell is a wreck, and that sidekick of hers is packing heat. They just waltzed in like they owned the place, and—"

"Whoa." Angel held up a hand, peered around the rigid figure. "Where are they? And I don't know any more than what I already told you."

Umekai huffed and pointed. "Upstairs. And I'm not going anywhere near them until you explain to Ania exactly who's in charge of security around here."

"Okay, okay. Relax." Slumping in place, Angel sidled clear of the entryway and closed the door. "Christ, Umekai. Tonight hasn't been a picnic for me either, you know."

“Damn. I’m sorry.” Her expression softened, and she laid a hand on his arm. “How is he?”

“Which one?” He flashed a tired smile, but it fell quickly. “Doesn’t matter. They’re both wrecks, just in different ways. Jenner hasn’t woken up yet. And Shiro’s staying there.”

“I figured as much.” Umekai’s wistful tone conveyed her disappointment in being right. “How did Harada take it?”

“Well, once we convinced him to let the doctors have a look at Jenner, he seemed pretty damned pleased at the shape he was in.” He shuddered at the recollection of the predatory gleam in Harada’s eyes when he’d pronounced Jenner too far gone. “You got any idea what went on between those two—Harada and Jenner, I mean?”

“Not a clue.” A frown touched her lips. “Besides them, the only people who know are Shiro and...Ken.” She looked down, and added, “I guess that means only Shiro knows now.”

Angel gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. Umekai had been close to Ken Serizawa while she worked at Pandora, and his loss still stung. “Maybe I’ll ask him sometime,” he said. “Then he’ll laugh at me, or punch me, or both. And that’ll be the end of *that* conversation.”

Umekai smirked. “You two are hopeless,” she said. “I’m going to my room. Tell me when it’s safe to come up.”

“You got it.” He watched her walk down the hall and disappear into the security room, then mounted the stairs to deal with the latest flare-up. When in the hell had he been appointed the organization’s chief fire extinguisher? Especially when he never asked to join in the first place.

But that chapter of his life, the one titled *Gabriel Morgan: Sucker*, was off the books now. Time to move on.

As he neared the landing, he saw two people standing in front of the windows on the opposite side of the room. Their heads were bent close, almost touching as they conversed in low whispers. Both turned to face him when he reached the top. One of them was Ania. The other, a man he didn’t recognize.

Wearing *his* clothes.

Angel's mouth fell open as the stranger's facial features impressed on his exhausted mind. He stepped forward once, then stopped short.

"Dell?"

## Chapter 4

Dell deflated when Angel named her almost immediately. She shot a weighted glance at Ania. “Is it that obvious?”

For a moment Angel didn’t answer. He shook himself, then said, “No. Not until you talked.” Moving a bit closer, he looked her up and down. “If I hadn’t already known you were here, I never would have guessed. And I think you’d better tell me what’s going on, right now.”

Dell felt Ania tense beside her. Holding up a hand in front of the incensed bodyguard, she cleared her throat and dropped into a lower register. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s sit and talk.”

“Holy shit.”

“Well, what’s wrong now?” Dell asked.

“Er. Nothing.” Angel’s green eyes shone with disbelief. “It’s just that you sounded like—well, I mean, I guess you are...”

“A man?”

“Yeah.” Angel released a breath, stepped aside and sank onto the couch. “Sorry, Dell. It just seems wrong.”

“Tell me about it,” Dell muttered. Gesturing to the seat beside him, she added, “May I?”

When Angel nodded, she crossed the room and lit on the opposite end of the couch. His expression remained dubious, and she realized she’d arranged herself as though she were still wearing a dress—perched sideways on the edge of the cushion with her legs crossed at the ankles and hands in her lap. It must look ridiculous. Cursing inwardly, she shifted until she rested against the back of the couch and looked over at Angel.

He blinked, then faced Ania and said, "You can sit down too, if you want. There's plenty of room."

"She won't," Dell told him. "She's brooding."

Ania directed a simmering glance at her, then turned back to the window. Dell sighed. She'd long ago given up trying to convince the woman to talk to people. It wasn't going to happen in this lifetime.

Angel wanted answers. *Do you trust him, Dell?* She'd never been able to figure out what it was about this painfully young man that drew her to him and made her feel she'd known him forever. But how much should she really tell him?

How much *could* she?

"Okay," Dell said at last. "Tonight we ran into...an old acquaintance of mine. An associate, I guess you could call him. A while back I had him put away. He's out now, and he wants me dead."

Angel blanched, but offered no comment.

"Normally a thing like that wouldn't concern me," she said. "Lord knows plenty of people'd like to see me dead. But this guy, he's psychotic."

He frowned. "Psychotic?"

"Yeah. We were at a rave, and the bastard came in and started plugging away." Her throat tightened, and she had to push the next part out. "He killed at least two people in there. One of them was Eddie."

"Jesus!" Angel sat up straighter. "Ah, Dell, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"No time. Loy—this guy works fast. When he wants somebody dead, they die." A shudder traversed her spine. Saying it out loud hammered the fact home. Before Angel could offer any more condolences that would only make her feel worse, she said, "I need time to figure out how to stop him. And I can't go home. I'm also stuck like this for a while." She looked down at her borrowed clothing in disgust.

“You’ll stay here,” Angel said. “A bunch of the rooms upstairs are finished, and the rest will be in a few days.”

“I was hoping you’d say that, sugar.” Summoning a shadow of a smile, Dell added, “But I want you to think hard before we make it for sure, because I am not exaggerating in the least. You know I’m not afraid of anyone. This man is different. And I don’t want him comin’ down on you because you’re helping me.”

Angel fell silent long enough for her to think he’d changed his mind. At last he said, “We’ll just have to make sure he doesn’t find out. You’re staying.”

“Thank you.” A measure of relief blanketed her, and she was at once aware of the exhaustion remaining when the adrenaline drained. “I just need to ask one thing, then.”

“Go ahead.”

“Who knows I’m here?”

“Besides me and Umekai, just Shiro.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yeah.” Angel’s brow knitted. “Why?”

“Don’t tell anyone else. Not a soul.” She didn’t like this. Three people was at least two too many. But it couldn’t be helped now.

Angel’s features flooded with concern. “Is he really that dangerous?”

“Yes.” She’d seen Loyal in action when someone pissed him off—a self-made wrathful god frenzied for blood, and he’d take it any way he could get it.

“All right.” Nodding as though he were convincing himself, Angel stood and glanced around the room. “I don’t have anything ready upstairs, so for tonight we’ll have to make do with what’s here. Shiro isn’t coming back tonight, so his bed is free. I think you and Ania can sleep in there—” He pointed to the closed door opposite the entrance to the kitchenette. “—and I’ll give Umekai the couch. Tomorrow I’ll get some furniture up there.”

Though she was curious, Dell didn’t ask why Shiro wouldn’t be there. She stood and flashed a grateful smile as Ania moved to join her unprompted. “If you don’t mind, Angel-

baby, I think I'll turn in now. Oh—and tomorrow, the furniture's on me. Least I can do, and don't you dare try and refuse.”

“Yes, ma'am. If you insist.” Angel smiled back, and her doubt fell away. He would keep her secrets.

Her life depended on it.

\* \* \* \*

A thick layer of silence carpeted the room as Shiro slumped in a chair beside his *sempai's* inert form. Hoshi and Endo had grudgingly agreed to allow him to remain. When he'd asked them what Jenner's prognosis was, Endo said nothing and Hoshi offered an uncharacteristic grunt. Then they'd left.

Apparently there was nothing further they could do, either.

Shiro still could not believe Diego Mendez had done so much damage to Jenner—and worse, he would likely get away with it. The litany of injuries the American doctor had recited before he and Angel came here haunted him: four broken ribs...fractured jaw...strained shoulder...torn tendons...distinctive laceration of the back. It was the last that plagued him most and made his hands long to snap Mendez's neck. The skin on his *sempai's* back was comprised entirely of scars from beatings inflicted during his long service to the Harada clan. And Mendez, driving deep enough to draw blood where none had flowed for decades, had carved his name into Jenner's flesh.

Before the kidnapping, only Shiro had known of the scarring and the circumstances behind it—other than the bearer and the one who'd caused its existence. Now he could only imagine how many of Mendez's thugs had witnessed his *sempai's* shame, the one thing the man made a point to hide.

Jenner had no use for pity. Even now, he would be appalled to learn that Shiro's soul ached for him. Caring was an emotion Jenner neither possessed nor understood.

On the edge of cognizance but unable to succumb to sleep, he sank lower in the chair, releasing a sharp sigh. The figure beside him emitted the same sound. Half-standing and ready to summon the doctors, Shiro froze.

Jenner's eyes were open.

Words failed him. He did not dare breathe for fear he would drive away whatever miracle allowed the man to regain consciousness. The lucid gray eyes, normally so startling in contrast to Jenner's dusky skin, were rendered bloodshot slits, yet they focused on him without hesitation.

"*Kousuko...*"

Jenner's lips barely moved as he uttered the familiar name he reserved for rare good moods: *best student*. His own eyes burning, Shiro held up a hand and motioned downward. "Do not try to speak, *sempai*," he said. "You must regain your strength."

"I am...not dead." It was a statement Jenner did not seem pleased to make.

"No, *sempai*. You are not."

"Where..."

Already, the question he'd dreaded. Jenner would detest finding himself weak and helpless in the house of his former *shujin*, his lord. Briefly he considered lying, but Jenner would know. He always did.

"On the island," he said. "In Harada-san's medical facility."

There was a long pause before Jenner said simply, "No."

"No?" Shiro echoed.

Before he could determine what the man meant, Jenner gripped the edges of the bed and started to rise.

"*Sempai!*" Horrified, he started to reach out to guide him back down, but stopped just short of actual contact. He dared not lay a hand on him. "Please," he said. "You are in no shape to move. The American doctors could not help. We had to bring you here."

Jenner froze in place, then settled slowly back with a physical sigh and looked at him. "We?"

"Angel and I." He tensed and explained, "Harada sent him away, but he said he would return soon."

“Angel.”

Jenner’s eyes closed, and Shiro wished he could read his *sempai*’s thoughts. He blamed himself for allowing Mendez to take Jenner. He and Angel practically dared the man, and it had been his own idea. But they’d had no clue the leader of House Prometheus was capable of such brutality.

Jenner breathed evenly, once again in the vise of sleep. Soon a sense of cautious relief allowed Shiro the same respite.

\* \* \* \*

Angel awoke to a ringing crash and a pseudo-manly, “Whoops.” Impulse made him attempt to bolt upright. Instead, he thudded to the floor. He’d forgotten he was sleeping in the chair.

Groaning, he let himself go limp and looked bleary-eyed across the room. The commotion hadn’t woken Umekai—or if it had, she was pretending damned hard at being asleep. From overhead the muffled sounds of men moving around the third floor drifted down. That meant it was after eight, at least. But the crash hadn’t come from up there, so that left only one option.

As if in confirmation, Dell called from the neighboring kitchenette, “That you, Angel? Sorry about that.”

“Yeah. ’S all right.” His tongue felt too thick to move, and he doubted whatever he’d just said was intelligible. But it seemed to satisfy Dell, because he heard her bustling around in there, probably straightening whatever fell over.

He stayed where he was another minute, then pushed himself up and stumbled to the bathroom. The door was closed. Heaving a sigh, he knocked and got no response, so he reached for the knob. Before his hand touched it, the door opened a crack and a hand extended with one finger raised, presumably attached to Ania. *Just a minute.*

“Sure, no problem,” he muttered. He stepped back as the door closed and tried not to cross his legs and squeeze.

One long minute later Ania emerged—or at least, he thought it was her. Dell’s

bodyguard had smoothed her short-spiked hair, changed her clothes, and somehow acquired a pair of wire-rimmed reading glasses. Gone was the tough, stoic she-dragon of last night. Now she could have been a businesswoman, generic and faceless in any crowd.

Angel gaped at her. She answered with a small smirk and brushed past him, headed for the kitchen.

Shaking his head, he went in and relieved himself. This situation just kept getting stranger. His head swam trying to puzzle it out. Probably better not to think about it for now. Dell would tell him what he needed to know.

He hoped.

Since the kitchen seemed the place to be, Angel went out to join his guests. He hadn't bothered putting a shirt on, a fact Dell made him acutely aware of when she stared at him with open approval. Now that she was a man, it was even more unnerving.

"You are easy on the eyes, sugar," Dell said. "Always loved that tattoo of yours."

"Thanks," he replied with a trace of discomfort. The life-sized black wings inked into his back hadn't been his idea, nor had he ever wanted them. He was getting used to them, though. And besides, they went with his ring name. Angel was the only House leader who still fought regularly. At least, with a willing opponent.

But now wasn't the time for painful memories. Shaking his head, he took a seat at the small round table and watched Dell stare at the coffee machine as if she'd never seen one.

"Hmph," she said after a minute. "Ania, would you run and get us some breakfast? Half a dozen bagels, and you know what I drink. Angel, you want a coffee? Maybe one for your lady, too?"

"She's not my lady," he said before he'd realized what Dell asked. He summoned a grin, and said, "Don't let Shiro hear you say that. He'll kick my ass."

Dell laughed, but the sound lacked her usual infectious melody. "All right, then. I'll remember that. So, what about the coffee?"

Wondering what his coffee machine had done to offend Dell, he said, "I'll take one,

thank you. I'm sure Umekai will too." He glanced at Ania, but she remained expressionless and silent.

When Dell met Ania's eyes, the woman offered a curt nod and vanished from the room. "Good news, Angel-baby," Dell said when she'd gone. "Your crew says they'll be finishing up today. The foreman put me in touch with a good interior design company close by, so if you let me know what you want up there, I'll get it here."

"How—you talked to the construction guys?" A flutter whispered through his stomach, of anger or awe, he wasn't sure.

"Sure." Shrugging, Dell crossed the small space and took a seat opposite him. "Thought I'd help you out, since you're putting us up." Her expression grew distant. "And I don't know how long we'll have to stay."

"Okay," Angel said, as much to convince himself as to reassure her. "Thank you."

She didn't respond. Probably thinking about Eddie, or the guy hunting her. Likely both. He was hesitant to say anything further, but if this was going to work there were a few things he'd have to make clear.

"Uh, Dell?"

The eyes that met his were haunted. "Yeah?"

"Er. Can I just...mention a few things?"

"Shoot."

Angel paused. "Well, you probably already know this. But I don't—I mean, we... Damn." Loosing a pent breath, he said, "I'll have to ask that you don't have drugs here."

Dell's eyes tightened, so briefly he wasn't sure if he'd seen it. "Not a problem," she said, and her voice was normal—at least, as normal as it could sound to him considering her drastic change in timbre. "But I do enjoy a few drinks now and again, if that's all right."

"Drink all you want," Angel said, grateful for the opportunity to agree. "Matter of fact, you can do just about anything, except...that. I'm sorry, Dell."

"Don't be." She smiled at him. "I've been thinking on a few things too, and I need to

run 'em by you.”

“Go for it.”

She drew in a deep breath, clearly gathering strength for what she had to say. “My name is Randall Tyler. If you call me Dell from now on, I’m going to ignore you.” Grimacing, Dell pushed on. “At the moment, we all have to accept that Dell Ramone *does not exist*. Including me.” The statement emerged as a groan. “You use that name, and all this is for nothing.”

Angel nodded slowly. “All right. I’ll do my best not to slip—I have a feeling all of our lives will count on it.”

The other man smiled and leaned back in the chair. “A body like that and brains to boot. Damn, living here with you’s gonna be tough, sugar.”

Angel gave a short laugh. “Well, Randall,” he managed with only a touch of awkwardness. “I guess we can pile all the wool on we can find, but you’ll always be a wolf.” Randall’s well-sculpted body inside his clothes was not bulky or defined, but taut and sleek, like a cat, or a dancer... An interesting idea formed.

Before he could say anything to her—*him*, he silently amended—Ania materialized again, somehow balancing two bags from the nearby deli and a cardboard cup holder with four large coffees. Frowning in Angel’s direction, she strode into the kitchenette and settled her cargo between the two men. He gave a brief nod of thanks to the blonde woman as he pulled a bagel from one of the bags, then grabbed a Styrofoam cup—one of the ones without the big black X, which he assumed was Dell’s. *Randall’s*.

Finally, Randall seemed to notice the change in his demeanor. Worry flitted over his features. “Angel-baby, what’s the matter?”

Angel smiled. “Randall. How would you like to try a new...position for me?”

## Chapter 5

“My God. What happened?”

The woman’s voice cut through Shiro’s erratic slumber. He shifted a bit, then froze when the pins-and-needles of denied circulation seared his right side. Deciding it was best to remain where he was for a moment, he raised blurred eyes and attempted to locate the source of the voice.

A pale, black-clad woman stood just inside the doorway.

“Kirei,” he croaked. Behind her was a tall, rigid figure with an unmistakable shock of red hair: Piper. Gritting his teeth, Shiro righted himself in the chair and glanced at Jenner’s unconscious form before facing them.

Kirei moved cautiously toward him, trailing a Piper shadow. She stopped at the foot of Jenner’s bed and looked from the shattered man within it to him. “Harada-san told me you were here,” she whispered. “But he did not say why. Shiro...who did this to him?”

Old feelings struggled to surface, but he forced them aside. “I cannot tell you,” he said with real regret.

Piper loosed a low growl, and Kirei half-turned and laid a hand on his arm. “It is all right,” she said—much to Shiro’s surprise. He had expected a verbal tirade concerning his stubbornness in believing her still a child. “There are some things better left unsaid.”

Nodding, Shiro rubbed his still-tingling arm. “Thank you for understanding,” he said.

A small smile turned her lips upward. “It is good to see you, Shiro, though I wish the circumstances were different.” She glanced at Piper as though requesting permission for something, and the man offered a slight nod. “Things are not pleasant here either.” Her voice lowered, and her eyes darted to the closed doors before she continued. “*They* are coming.”

“They?” Shiro blinked at her.

“The board,” she nearly hissed. “From Japan. They are not pleased with Harada-san and wish to investigate his operation.” She paused and seemed to consider explaining further. At last she added, “I do not know what triggered their concern, but Harada-san has much to hide. And he cannot hide it all.”

Disgust roiled in his stomach and clenched his throat. No wonder Harada had ultimately agreed to allow Jenner to stay. *The board*. They were no businessmen. The true masters of the Harada *zaibatsu* did wear suits, but only to camouflage the full-body tattoos proclaiming their status as the most ruthless and rigid criminals in all of Japan. They would not be pleased to discover that Tomi Harada had dismissed his father’s hand-picked advisor. And that was only the beginning of the list of grievous violations the man had to somehow explain away—or be executed for.

“When?” he blurted, suddenly far more alert.

“Four days.” Kirei shot another glance at the door, and then her eyes settled on Jenner and softened. “Will he...”

“I do not know for sure,” Shiro said as his throat constricted again. “He woke for a short time last night, but even Hoshi and Endo have been unable to offer a definite prognosis.” Dropping his hands to his lap, he said, “We shall have to wait and see.”

Piper caught Shiro’s eye, and then jerked his head toward the door. Kirei smiled. “An excellent idea,” she said. “Shiro, will you not join us for breakfast?”

He cast a hesitant look at his *sempai*. “Well...”

“Please come,” Kirei said. “I know you are concerned, but you must allow yourself some respite. Besides,” she said sadly, “I do not think he is going anywhere.”

“All right,” he said at last as he became aware of his protesting stomach. “I will join you. Thank you, Kirei, Piper.”

Piper offered a brief bow of acknowledgement as Shiro stood and followed them from the room. He looked back only once. *Be well, sempai*, he thought. *We will need you now, more than ever.*

\* \* \* \*

The man formerly known as Dell gingerly took the shirt Angel held toward him, as though it would infect him with cheer and sunshine. “Er, Angel,” he said. “Could we think about a change in uniform? Yellow’s not my color.”

Angel smiled and shook his head. “Hey, if you don’t want me to call you Dell, you better work on not acting like her.”

Randall heaved a sigh. “All right,” he muttered. “One neon black man, coming up.” Leaving Angel to deal with the two ladies, both of whom were awake and emphatically ignoring each other, he shut himself in the bathroom and changed.

A glimpse in the mirror revealed a stranger whose eyes cast misery forth from the silvered glass. *Randall*, he told himself firmly. *This is you now. Deal.* But his silent pep talk did nothing to boost his guttering spirit.

This afternoon he’d have to call the house and let the staff know Dell wouldn’t be back for a while. And tell them about Eddie. Jesus. Laurianna would be crushed. The buxom madam harbored a sweet spot for the massive fighter. He might even have to call Wolff, try and find out what had been done with the body. House Orion’s leader was an NYPD captain who made it his business to know what went down with who, and why. Wolff could be trouble, especially if he demanded answers Randall couldn’t give—even if he’d still been Dell.

And then he had to figure out what the hell to do about Loyal.

Looking himself in the eyes one more time in a futile attempt to forget who he was, he re-entered the living room. “Ready. Let’s go meet the public.”

Angel stood and shot a warning glance at Umekai, who scowled and got to her feet as well. “I asked Umekai to show Ania around the security room. Figured the two of them could work together. That way Umekai isn’t completely responsible for the security, and Ania has something to do.”

“Good idea.” His bodyguard wore an expression nearly identical to Umekai’s. “It’s all right,” he said to her. “Go on. I’ll be fine.”

Without a word, Umekai tromped down the stairs. Ania flashed her employer a

withering look, then followed in the same manner. Angel managed to withhold his laughter until they were out of earshot. “They’ll get along great,” he said. “C’mon, I’ll introduce you to Jordan.”

“Jordan?” Randall echoed. “Who’s he?”

“*She* is my secretary. You’ll love her. Just...don’t ask her any questions, okay? You need to know something, ask me.”

“Why?”

Smirking, Angel replied, “Because by the time she gets around to the actual answer, it’ll be time to close the place down.”

Randall nodded and followed the younger man downstairs. The sounds of activity increased as they approached ground level. Rock music floated over the rhythmic clinking of metal meeting metal, the buzzing hum of wheels on stationary bikes, the clack and whirr of treadmills. Heat rolled over them, replete with the oddly clean scent of mingled sweat and vinyl. They entered a main room awash with white light, a stark contrast to the gloom he’d entered last night. There were at least fifty people here, and judging from the clouds of steam billowing from the saunas, more he couldn’t see. And it wasn’t even ten in the morning.

“Well, now. Ain’t you Mr. Somebody,” he said with a trace of amusement. “You stay this busy all the time?”

Angel shrugged. “I guess,” he said. “Don’t know why this place is so popular all of a sudden, but for the last month or so it’s been packed.”

As he watched the customers watch Angel cross the room, Randall thought, *It’s you, sugar*. Angel was a magnet. People couldn’t help wanting to be near him.

They stopped before a tall oak desk. A diminutive blond girl perched on a stool behind it, her attention rooted to the computer beside her. Angel knocked on the surface of the desk. The girl’s head whipped around to direct big blue eyes at them, and within seconds radiance infused her features. *Damn, girl*, Randall thought. *You got it bad for him*.

“Hey, Jordan.” Angel didn’t seem to notice the girl’s infatuation—or if he did, was

studiously overlooking it. “We have a new staff member.” He swept a hand out and said, “This is Randall Tyler. He’s going to do some personal fitness coaching. Randall, this is Jordan. She’s going to sit here and play Solitaire.”

Jordan giggled. “Hi, Randall,” she said, but her eyes strayed to Angel. “You’ll like it here. Hey, Angel, did you ever get to those applications I gave you? People’ve been calling every five minutes.”

“Oh, yeah.” Angel sighed. “I’ll get to them today. Jordan, I’m going to be leaving early this afternoon and I won’t be back until late, so I’ll need you to make sure things are under control. All right?”

The girl nodded, and Randall shot a curious look at Angel. He hadn’t said anything about leaving. *Tell you in a minute*, Angel mouthed, then said, “I’m gonna go show him around. You straight up here?”

“No worries, boss,” she said, flashing a pretty smile. “See you later.”

When they were out of range, Angel explained, “She’s a great girl, but she *really* likes to talk. C’mon, we can go in my office and get you set up, then I’ll give you the grand tour.”

“Sure.”

They entered the back hall and made a right, taking them past the closed door of the security room. Randall stared at it for a moment, half expecting Ania and Umekai to burst out and roll around trying to rip each other to shreds. But it seemed quiet enough. He hoped they would at least tolerate each other.

Angel stopped at the last door and opened it, then motioned him inside. The “office” was little more than a desk and chair crammed into a corner to make room for a barrage of exercise equipment. Apparently, Angel preferred a private workout. The younger man closed them in, produced a metal folding chair from somewhere, and snapped it open with a practiced flourish. “Sorry there aren’t better seats,” he said. “But we won’t be long.”

Randall sat, and as Angel squeezed past the desk to get to his own chair, the phone he’d relocated this morning let out a shrill chirp. He yanked it from his waistband intending to turn it off—he wasn’t ready to face anyone with the news just yet. But a glance at the

display wrenched his stomach into knots: WOLFF. There weren't too many reasons the bad-tempered cop would be calling, and he didn't like any of them.

*Damn it.* Meeting Angel's concerned eyes, he said, "Scuse me a minute, sugar. I gotta take this. It's Wolff." He was already slipping back into his familiar feminine drawl. As Angel nodded in understanding, he hit Accept and said, "You got me."

"Dell, where the hell are you?"

No greeting, no acknowledgement of who was calling. This was bad. "Nice to hear from you too, Captain." He spoke as pleasantly as possible, though panic threatened to shrill from his throat. "What's up?"

"You don't know?"

*Oh God.* "I was planning to call you today, Wolff. I know about Eddie. You need me to make arrangements?"

"Eddie?"

His anxiety rose to new levels. If he wasn't talking about Eddie...

"Dell. I don't know anything about Eddie. But I think you'd better tell me...ah, *shit.*" There was a long pause, and then Wolff said with less venom, "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" He could barely get the words out. It had to be Loyal. The bastard must have done something big to get Wolff's attention like this.

"Christ, I never was good at this crap." Wolff's voice seemed to come from far away, distant and tinny, as though he were shouting across a subway car. "Look. Last night, your house..." Another pause. Then Wolff drew a sharp breath and muttered a curse. "Your house is gone, Dell. Burned flat."

The foundation of the world crumbled away. Gripping the side of the chair with his free hand to keep from tumbling into the void, he closed his eyes against the stricken look on Angel's face and managed to say, "Did everybody get out?"

Silence greeted his question. At last, from galaxies away this time, Wolff said slowly,

“No one got out. They were all dead before the fire started.”

It was too monstrous to consider. As though someone else had taken the controls, he heard himself say, “How many?”

“At least twelve. Probably more, though. The FD’s still laying down a water barrier.”

Jesus. He only kept six full-time staff there. How many of his fighters had been there? His girls? *At least twelve...*

Had Loyal murdered them all?

Unable to face Angel, he lowered his head and slumped toward the floor. “I can’t go there,” he said, straining to get the words out. “I don’t know...you’ll have to meet me somewhere.”

“Come to the precinct,” Wolff said, almost gently. “You know where I am.”

He would probably be safe there. A police station was the last place Loyal would dare show his distinctively twisted mug. “All right,” he finally said. “It’ll take me a while. Two hours?”

“I’ll be here. And Dell...I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Yeah,” Randall whispered. “Me too.”

Unable to summon enough strength to turn the phone off, he let it drop to the floor and prepared to attempt an explanation—one he knew he couldn’t give.

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