

Randy's body hadn't begun to smell yet, and judging by the still-tacky smears of blood around the carving on his chest, I'd say he'd only been dead an hour. Maybe less.

"*You idiot,*" I seethed, glaring at his prone form as I drew my blade, giving a short, sharp whistle to alert the others that we may not be alone.

Rook and Grey's quiet footfalls sounded behind me as they jogged down the alley, slowing to a walk as they approached.

Rook cursed, rocking back on his heels when he saw the body half-laying, half-sitting against the side of a rusted green dumpster. He scrubbed a wide palm over his jaw. "The tip was legit."

*No shit.*

A chick from the after-hours stocking crew at the Valley-Mart was the one who tipped off the Saints about the body. Damn near the whole town knew better than to call the cops first, and the ones who didn't...they'd learn.

If there's blood in the streets, you don't want the useless rent-a-cops from Thorn Valley PD on the case. They don't care about you. They won't protect you. The Saints will.

I knelt to drag my red-stained fingertips over Randy's eyelids and bowed my head. Grey crouched next to me, reaching two digits to the hollow beneath Randy's chin, feeling for a pulse. As if someone this pale, this *still* could possibly be living.

His hand dropped not two seconds later, his head with it.

"I'll call it in," Grey said, dutifully drawing out his phone and rising from his crouch.

"Stay close," I growled when he moved to walk away.

"He was supposed to be made a full member at the next meeting," Rook mused aloud, biting on his lip ring. A habit he knew annoyed the absolute fuck out of me.

I stood, pushing off from my knees. "Not anymore." I held out a hand for the bag slung over Rook's shoulder. "Give me the tarp. Let's get this shit over with. I need a fucking shower."

Rook tossed me the bag, and I pulled out the folded blue square, wincing when the sound of it crinkling echoed back to us from the tall brick walls of the alley. The whole place smelled like trash, but there was an undercurrent of something out of place, too. Cologne. Or just some really terrible aftershave. Like a pinecone got ass fucked by a lime. My nose wrinkled at the reek of it.

"Keep an eye out."

Rook nodded, drawing his blade and hissing at Grey to get off the damned phone and help me.

“The carving,” Grey stated as he ended the call, helping me lay out the tarp to roll the poor bastard’s body onto it. “It was the Aces?”

The letter ‘A’ brutally carved into the pale flesh of Randy’s chest would make anyone think so, but I wasn’t convinced.

“We haven’t had beef with the Iron Aces in months,” I hissed. “There’s no reason for this. Doesn’t make sense.”

“But the carving—”

“I know what it looks like, Winters.”

At that, both of my brothers fell silent, and we wrapped Randy’s body tightly in the tarp, binding him like a fucking sausage with half a roll of duct tape.

He was only twenty-four. Didn’t have a family. No kids. Not even a girlfriend. Without any of those things, Randy would be given a whiskey-fueled farewell by the Thorn Valley Saints and then sent to a watery grave. It was the best many of us could hope for.

“Diesel’s orders are to bring him to the Crow’s Nest for now. Said he’d deal with it later,” Grey told me as we finished, and I stuffed the rest of the duct tape back into the bag and tossed it to Rook.

When I didn’t reply, still trying to work through the puzzle that was Randy’s mangled corpse, Rook stepped to my side. “Want me to bring the Rover ’round?”

I nodded, jerking my chin for Grey to follow. “Go with him.”

At least it was a cool night for early October in Northern Cali. Hopefully, his corpse wouldn’t stink up the Rover too much before Diesel sent the cleaners to deal with it. Nothing worse than the smell of dead guy in the morning.

They turned to leave, but the roar of an engine coming to a stuttering, screeching stop at the mouth of the alley had me throwing an arm out to shield them, gun drawn, finger resting next to the trigger.

The sleek black sedan hadn’t even come to a full stop before a body jumped out of the backseat.

I took aim.

Air rushed from my lungs in a heavy exhale. I relaxed as I took in long legs, a mane of dark brown hair, and an ass so fine it made my cock twitch beneath my jeans.

“Move the body,” I hissed. Grey and Rook each took an end, pulling Randy with us into the shadows behind the trash bin and out of sight.

A driver exited the sedan as the girl pounded white-knuckled fists on its trunk. The bitch could hit. I’d be surprised if she hadn’t left at least one dent in the thing.

“Miss,” the driver pleaded. “Miss, the school is another mile *uphill*. Miss, please—”

“Open the fucking trunk,” she snapped back at him, her voice carrying. It was laced with warning, and the pinhead driver must’ve sensed it because he lifted his hands in a placating gesture I knew well and retreated to the open driver’s side door to pop the trunk.

“Ava Jade,” came a woman’s willowy voice from the darkened backseat as a window rolled lazily down. “You get back in the car this instant.”

The girl, Ava Jade, I presumed, ignored the older woman’s plea, hauling a massive suitcase and satchel from the trunk. When the damn thing fell over, it nearly took her with it, but she righted the suitcase, and herself, and took off in a huff, lugging all of her things up the road.

“*Ava Jade!*”

The girl paused, an audible growl tearing from her lips as she spun. A dark simpering fury in the set of her jaw. “I’d rather be at some bullshit elitist academy than spend a single night at your fucking *museum*.”

She didn’t spare another second for the old woman. She turned on her heel and left, upper lip curled with distaste.

Both Grey and Rook craned their necks to get a better look, and I suppressed a groan.

“Is that Old-lady Humphrey?” Rook asked.

The bitch was rich; her dead husband came from old money. She lived in the big mansion over at Waverly Place all alone with, rumor had it, at least nine cats and a parrot that squawked all hours of the day and night.

“Looks like it,” Grey replied, and I strained to hear the distant hum of more civilized conversation as the old bat instructed the driver to *leave the girl and take her home for Christ’s sake*.

The car drove off after a minute, and we were left listening to the distant echo of the suitcase wheels bumping noisily over the pavement as the girl made her way down Main Street and up toward Briar Hall.

Both the guys darted forward after the red glow of the sedan's tail lights vanished, peering around the edge of the alley wall to get a better look at the chick.

"Should we..." Rook trailed off, a mischievous grin tipping up one corner of his lips, Randy forgotten for the moment.

"*No.*"

"The fucker who killed Randy could still be around," Grey added. "We should at least warn her if not give her a ri—"

"I said *no*," I repeated, leveling the full weight of my glare on them both. Rook was quick to shrug it off, but Grey, he still didn't get it. He would though, even if I had to pound it into him.

I tucked my gun into the back of my waistband. "She isn't our fucking problem."

We weren't about to go out of our way for some spoiled rich brat who was going to be in the nurse's office all day tomorrow sobbing about all the blisters from her brand new heels. Not a fucking chance.

Grey stared after her a moment longer, and I didn't like the way his eyes followed her movements. Hell, even Rook still seemed bent out of shape that I wasn't going to let him loose on her. Turning his lip ring round and round with his teeth, his dark eyes gleamed with malice even though he was clearly trying to play it off like he didn't give a shit.

"There are finer asses than that in Thorn Valley," I said to Grey, attempting another tactic. "In fact, I'm pretty sure you left one in your bed an hour ago."

Grey tipped his head to one side, snorting a laugh.

We both knew I wasn't wrong about that last part, but fuck if I didn't know the first bit was total horseshit. I'd never seen a piece of ass that was worth wasting more than a night on. But *that ass*—that ass was trouble if I'd ever seen it.

It was in both of my brothers' curious stares as they took one last look at her before turning back to me for orders. I was going to have to do something about this *Ava Jade*. Fast.

"Get the Rover," I told them. "Looks like tomorrow we have a new student to welcome to Briar Hall."