

*Where the fuck are you, Kaleb?*

The early morning sun glared angrily through the open top of the Bronco, heating my already boiling blood as I barreled down the Sunday streets of Santa Clarita.

I craned my neck to check oncoming traffic before blowing another red light and hanging a sharp right onto Grove St.

*I swear to fuck, if your ass is at Minty's...*

My tires spat gravel onto the road as I pulled into our old dealer's driveway, lifting myself out of the Bronco by her roll bars. The squat white house near the edge of Canyon Country stared out into the day with dark eyes. Quiet.

Not for long.

I took the steps three at a time, landing my fist on the front door once, twice, three times. Rattling the window panes.

"Christ!" Minty shouted somewhere inside and the sound of pills scattering over the floor met my ears.

I knocked again, twice, louder.

The dirty once-white blinds covering the window to the right of the door crinkled, beveling back and forth. "*Shit*," Minty cursed, and I listened as no less than three locking mechanisms unlatched before the door swept open.

I shoved past Minty's gaunt frame, into his kitchen, where something that smelled like acid simmered in a shallow blackened fry pan on the stove. Pills popped and crunched under my boots.

"Hardin, man, what the fuck—"

I spun, leveling the full weight of my stare on him, a tremor of heat coiling up my spine, heating my cheekbones where they flared out.

*Don't fuck with me, Minty.*

He reared back a step, hands raised. "No harm done."

"*Kaleb*," I growled, eyes tracking the airspace behind him, scanning the two caved-in sofas in the living room and the darkened doorway of the bedroom beyond it.

"*Kaleb?*" Minty repeated as I stormed past him through the living room and into the bedroom, flicking the light on.

“Minty, it’s too early...” a scratchy feminine voice mewled from beneath the covers, her pale foot retracting beneath their warmth with a shuddering sigh.

I slammed my palm against the wall, the release from the sting licking down the length of my body like salve applied to a wound. I tipped my head to the left, cracking my neck, shaking out my tight muscles as I made my way to the bathroom, Minty blathering something unintelligible in my wake.

Empty. I threw back the shower curtain to be sure, but he wasn’t here.

“*Hardin*,” Minty said, and I guessed it wasn’t for the first time by the exasperation in his tone.

I turned to him.

“Kaleb’s not here, man. I haven’t seen him in months.”

I felt my face twisting.

*If he was fucking lying to me...*

“I swear,” he added, normally hooded eyes wide and red with his promise. “If he shows his ass here, you’re my first call.”

My gaze narrowed on a black slip of fabric by Minty’s feet.

He saw it the same time I did, and paled.

“*Hardin*...” Minty said warily, already backing away.

I bent to retrieve the sweater, turning it over in my palm. The fabric fell to one side, revealing the shining silver Saint emblem on the right breast. Kaleb had been wearing it when he left around midnight.

I crumpled it in my fist, deciding to give Minty exactly three seconds to explain before—  
Nope.

I launched at him, the sweater abandoned in favor of the front of his t-shirt as I coiled my other arm back and swung, vision tinted red. Minty’s head knocked back, mouth slack, eyes wide and blinking as blood spurted from his shattered nose.

“When?”

He spluttered for a response, trying to pry my hand from his shirt as he came to.

“Minty?” the girl from the bedroom said groggily then screamed before I heard the door shut behind her. Smart bitch.

“When?” I repeated, hitting him again.

He gurgled, blood coating his tongue, mixing with the saliva to dribble down his stubbly chin. “Around three, man!” he managed after a good hard shake before lifting a trembling hand to his busted nose.

I released him and he doubled over, falling into the side of the sofa.

I stepped toward him, and he fell back on his ass. He knew what I wanted. He’d better start talking.

“He didn’t buy nothin’, okay?”

My chest vibrated with a growl.

“*He didn’t*. It’s why I said he wasn’t here. He came. Drunk as fuck. Hung out a while, talked some shit about getting high like old times. I-I told him you’d have my head if I sold to him. Bastard pulled his gun on me, but then he just laughed and said my shit wasn’t worth it. Took off on his bike.”

I swiped the sweater from the floor, deciding whether I believed this fucker after he just lied to me once.

“I *will* call you if he shows up again. You have my word, man.”

Because that shit’s worth so much?

I shook my head, staring at Minty as I walked past him right out the still-open front door, slamming it behind me so hard that the window to the right of the door shattered. The gratifying sound ringing in my ears all the way back to the Bronco.

As soon as I had the engine started, I lifted my phone, jamming Kaleb’s name on the recent calls list and putting it to my ear, pulling back out onto the street.

I needed to head back to the house, check and see if he was back.

The call rang eight times before hitting voicemail.

The robotic voice finished her spiel, and I let the voicemail record nothing but the sound of the wind as I sped back through Santa Clarita toward home.

Damien would lose it if he knew Kaleb was out alone, piss drunk in the night. There was a new player in town and our father had been grim as he’d explained how we were to keep a low profile, stick together, and never leave the house unarmed.

The Saints *owned* the city of LA with my father at the helm. My brother and I took care of Santa Clarita as part of that territory as soon as we turned eighteen. We’d ruled both without incident, side by side, for going on five years.

And I'd never seen him as on edge as he was right now.

Whispers in the matrix of smaller gangs my father allowed to operate in his territory said the new player was an Irishman. His gang known only as the Sons of O'Sullivan. The twist of the knife? Apparently this foreign implant had strong ties to the new senator.

If those ties were stronger than the ones we had, it could mean a whole goddamn shitstorm was headed our way and there was absolutely no fucking warning when it would make landfall.

The fact that the Sons of O'Sullivan hadn't come to my father was a threat in and of itself. You didn't move in on the king's territory without first bending the knee, offering to pay tribute. Play by the rules.

My phone buzzed in the cup holder and I snatched it up, the wind eating up the sound of the voice on the other end of the call. I hit the brakes, forcing all traffic behind me to come to a grinding halt.

Tires screeched and a couple horns blared. Idiots who didn't recognize my vehicle.

"Hardin?"

Sam's voice came through more clearly, but it was still hard to hear over the damn horns blaring behind me. I lifted from my seat, drawing my gun from the back of my waistband to lift it overhead. I fired once and fell back into my seat, laying the Taurus 1911 across my lap. The horns silenced.

"Speak."

"Hey man, so, *uh*, Kaleb's here at the bar. I told him I was shutting down at five but he wasn't ready to leave."

I was already turning around, heading east toward campus and the Copper Crown. I didn't consider the bar hidden above the bookshop on the Row mostly because like Sam said, he closed it down around three usually. Maybe four in the morning if it was a Saturday. But for a King of Kilborn he'd keep it open as long as needed.

*Damn.*

Of course that was where he took his drunk ass to.

I sighed.

At least the bastard was all right, at least until I got my hands on him.

"Don't worry. Already nicked his keys so he isn't going anywhere, at least not on his bike. Want me to try to—"

I hung up, pushing the Bronco faster as I weaved through the lazy traffic, carving an almost straight line to the Copper Crown.

The nondescript black metal door was already unlocked for me when I pulled up, leaving the Bronco to idle on the street. The narrow stairwell was cleaner than I'd ever seen it and I knew Sam had to find ways to busy himself while my brother drowned himself in whatever was Sam's best scotch.

My phone went off again in my pocket and I jerked it out, finding two messages waiting for me there. One from my father with an order to meet him at the shop later today.

The other in a group chat from Rook, one of our cousins from the Thorn Valley chapter of the Saints.

**Rook: Have you seen her yet? Ghost says she's staying at some motel nearby. Mind checking it out? Make sure it isn't a shithole?**

My hand tightened around the device.

Why the fuck we'd agree to keep an eye out for their girlfriend's best friend here in SoCal was beyond my ability to comprehend right now. We had enough shit to deal with.

I started a reply message, stopping halfway through to take a steadying breath, erase what I'd written and start fresh.

**Hardin: Have some shit to deal with today. Might have time later.**

His reply was immediate.

**Rook: Thanks, bro. I can tell Ghost's worried about her.**

I sighed at that. Both the fierce and virtually unkillable Ava Jade—aka, Rook's *Ghost*—and her best friend had been through some fucking shit over the past year. They had matching scars over their hearts to prove it. Against the odds they'd somehow both survived the gang war and the sadistic fuck who'd wanted to make Ava Jade his own personal perfect doll.

Unlike her best friend though, Becca didn't know all the ways to kill a man. She was a mostly innocent bystander that got mixed up in the fight. No doubt she had some mental scars to match the one over her heart after that shit.

Her scholarship to CalArts here in Santa Clarita meant Ava Jade couldn't keep an eye on her friend as closely as she'd like, but it wasn't the woman herself who asked us to check in on Becca. It was her three boyfriends. Our cousins.

To them, if Becca was important to Ava Jade, she was important to them, too. Never mind that the threat against Becca and her bestie had already been handled...

But I understood, to an extent. Becca was a known ally of the Saints now. Someone important to the woman who was now known as the Saint's Dagger. Which meant that she could never truly be safe ever again.

I scrolled back up the pages of messages, pausing just before Becca's photo could light up my screen, shutting it off instead. I remembered what she looked like. Her image burned into my retinas the instant it glowed over my screen for the first time.

Something about those eyes...

I clenched my jaw, casting the image from my mind. Rolling my shoulders back, I settled the rattle of nerves going up my spine as I pushed through the door at the top of the stairs.

A gust of scotch and cherry cigar scented air slapped me in the face as I entered. The music that'd been muted in the stairwell was louder now that I was inside, but not so loud that I couldn't hear Sam rearranging the stock behind the bar running along the left side of the attic-like space.

Sam lifted his chin in greeting, his blond hair loose around his shoulders instead of pulled back in its usual leather tie. He inclined his head to the back of the space, and I peered through the haze of smoke to find my brother. The only soul who appears to be left in the Copper Crown besides its owner.

Kaleb's tatted arms rested lazily over the back of a dark sofa facing the other way, his sun-stained brown hair messy. His head lolled back, hands fisting the leather.

I stalked toward him, hearing a sucking sound, followed by a gag and a low female moan. Kaleb's eyes were shut as the little brunette knelt between his thighs, her head bobbing up and down on the head of his cock as she worked the base with a manicured hand.

My brother's lips parted on a silent exhalation of pleasure, and I kicked the couch.

He jerked, but didn't open his eyes, moving a hand instead to the back of the girl's head, guiding her to take his thick cock more deeply into her throat. She gagged on him again, but she didn't fight him, even as he fisted a hand into her hair and held her there, thrusting up into her throat until her cheeks turned red.

I kicked the couch again.

“What the fuck, man...” Kaleb slurred, letting the girl get a gulp of air. She gasped as her lips popped off his dick, and he cocked his head at her, reaching forward to run a thumb over her glistening lower lip. “Did I tell you to stop, Poppy?”

“It’s Pippa,” she corrected.

“That’s what I said.”

“*Kaleb*,” I hissed, heat fizzling across my back as I stepped around the sofa and gave the girl a hard stare. Her reddened, watery eyes met mine with a bolt of fear.

She disentangled herself from Kaleb’s grip and held a slip of red fabric over her naked tits, keeping her head bowed as she rose to her feet, collected her purse from the low table, and muttered a *Sorry, Hardin*, as she fled.

“Bro, what the fuck?” Kaleb said, fumbling an empty pack of cherry cigars from the small pocket on the front of his tank. “Shit, I’m out.”

I kicked his leg.

His face twisted into a sneer as the empty pack drifted to the floor to mingle with the empty scotch glass and beer bottles there. “What are you doing here?”

I lifted a brow at him. Was he fucking serious?

He lifted a brow right back. “What? The silent treatment? As fucking usual.”

It was my turn to sneer. He knew damn well why I wasn’t talking. My heated gaze darted to Sam behind the bar and back again.

“Shit, man,” Kaleb groused. “Sam doesn’t care if you have a—”

I dragged him from the sofa before he could finish, hauling his drunk ass onto his feet before he could say something he wasn’t able to take back.

Kaleb cursed as I towed him along with me, my fist in the back of his tank the only thing keeping him on his feet.

“Okay, okay, Christ, I’m *going*,” Kaleb grumbled as Sam nodded his thanks and farewell.

I kicked the door to the stairwell open ahead of Kaleb, and stepping out, he immediately gripped the handrails on both sides and swayed on his feet as he looked to the bottom.

“Shit.”

The door shut behind me, and I growled low. “I got you, just move your fucking ass.”

“He speaks!”

“*Kaleb*,” I warned, my stomach twisting, the shriveled thing in my chest aching for my brother.

As much as I fucking wanted to, it was hard to be pissed at him.

To everyone else, this was just how Kaleb sometimes got, but I knew the truth.

I knew why he needed to drown himself in expensive scotch, push himself to the edge of oblivion. But after the last time, nearly nine months ago now, I thought it was finally over.

Now I doubted it ever would be.

Some trauma stuck with you and Kaleb’s had fused itself to his bones like a demented shadow. Rearing its ugly head whenever it got hungry, feasting on whatever stability he’d managed to regain since its last meal.

I helped him down the stairs, practically having to lift him to get to the bottom, otherwise we’d have been there for a fucking hour.

He slipped on the bottom step, coughing, hunching over to one side to vomit onto the cement landing. I shut my eyes on a hard sigh, waiting for him to be finished retching before I lifted his left arm over my shoulders, hauling him onto my back in a fireman’s carry.

The sun scalded my overtired eyes as I used my brother’s ass to push through the door back out onto the street. The students milling around looking for hangover food and coffee scattered from my path as I carried Kaleb to the still-idling Bronco and all but tossed him over the side into the back seat.

If he puked back there, the fucker was going to clean that shit himself. I twisted my neck to get out the kink there and pushed my black hair away from my eyes, spitting the lingering cigar smoke flavor onto the pavement.

And there she was.

Becca Hart.

She stood perfectly still on the sidewalk a few shops up, frozen as our eyes locked together. Hers wide and wild, fearful and hungry as her thighs pressed tight beneath the curve hugging black dress she wore. Her full lips parted. Powerless to look away until I released her.

My cock twitched in my jeans, and I wired my mouth shut, hating how my body reacted to her. I’d had my fair share of women, but they were a means to an end. And *none* got me hard without a considerable amount of work.



Her chest rose and fell rapidly and I knew if I rested my callused palm over the mounds of her tits, I'd feel her heart racing.

My upper lip curled and her fear intensified.

Good.

If she were smart, she'd stay the fuck away from me. The Saint's Dagger wouldn't like what I wanted with her best friend.

The need to claim her, mark her, *break her*, seared through me like white fire.

I ground my teeth, breaking eye contact, sending her stumbling back into a bench. I lifted myself over the passenger door, slinging my body into the driver's seat, rocking the Bronco with my weight before I shifted her into drive and peeled away from the Row.

Forcing myself to leave before I decided to throw her into the backseat with Kaleb and take her with me.