

The Saint Chapter 11 - Tips

Liam had to bring extra chairs into the interview room at the Thirty-Third, which was definitely a first. But Dante had stood completely firm on having Carmen stay with him, and she'd agreed to the request-slash-demand.

Sinclair had been less than thrilled with the arrangement, and Liam would bet that if Carmen hadn't already been involved in the case, he'd have balked. But they needed Dante to talk, and if Carmen's presence made him comfortable enough to do that, then it wasn't nearly the worst concession they'd ever made.

"You ready?" Isabella asked from the doorway.

"Always," he replied, fixing her with an easy-does-it smile that was getting harder to come by. But, since it was far better than saying, "Oh, by the way, I k!ssed Carmen, and even though it was reckless as fvck, I'd really love nothing more than to do it about five hundred more times. In a row," he walked over to the door and followed her out.

Sinclair was waiting in the office with Carmen and Dante, and they all made their way into the interview room. Isabella started the recording they'd already told both Dante and Carmen was required for the meeting, and after a round of introductions for the sake of the record, Sinclair looked at Liam.

"Okay, Dante," Liam said. "We know that you and Axel exchanged a series of phone calls on the night he was stabbed. Walk me through what you know about who did it, and why."

Dante let out a breath, then said, "Axel was doing some work for a guy named Cutter. Hangs out at Bang. The club over on Hanson Street."

"I know the place," Liam said. The Intelligence Unit had done an undercover case there seven months ago. The place was pretty much Felons 'R Us. "What kind of work are we talking about?"

"Cutter was looking for people to hit up a bunch of hospitals and doctor's offices, looking for prescription drugs. Fentanyl, Oxy, Vicodin, you name it. He'd give Axel a fake ident!ty and some medical papers saying he had a back injury, and tell him where to go and when. All Axel had to do was fake being in pain enough to get a prescription, then go fill it at a specific pharmacy and turn the drugs over to Cutter. Easy."

Ah, a prescription drug scam. Doctor shopping, forgery, diversion—it was all fairly common, although getting harder and harder to pull off. Scams like this one usually fell under the FBI's jurisdiction, but in this case, since a body and one of their CIs were involved, Intelligence could probably pull rank without too much blowback.

"I take it you were in on the scam, too?" Liam asked.

Dante paused. He looked at Carmen, who nodded and said, "It's okay, Dante. If you were, you can tell them."

He frowned, but finally nodded. "Axel was first, but yeah. I've got a kid, and sh!t gets expensive. Daycare, clothes, food. Working construction wasn't cutting it. Axel knew I was strapped for cash, so after he'd been in for a month or so, he introduced me to Cutter."

"And how long ago was this?" Isabella asked.

"Couple of months, I guess," Dante said. "Cutter calls us on burner cells so nothing can be traced and gives us a time and a place to meet. We go pick up the IDs and records, then Cutter tells us where to go, and when. Says if we're ever late or try to go someplace other than where he tells us to, we'll be sorry."

Sinclair raised his brows. "So, he threatened you."

"Yeah, but to be honest, I never really took him that seriously."

"You didn't think he'd hurt you?" Liam asked, surprised.

"Nah. He was just muscle. I mean, he'd probably have kicked the sh!t out of us if we'd screwed something up, and he made it pretty clear that if we were dumb enough to get busted, his boss would make sure we went down for the scam."

Isabella sat back in her chair. "So, Cutter's the middleman."

"Yeah," Dante said. "But he still held all the cards for each deal. We always exchange information and money in person. The only time he ever texts is to say he wants to meet up, but that's all he says. We meet in different places, and he always takes the IDs and paperwork back when we drop the pills with him and he gives us our cut. So, yeah, if we'd ever gotten busted, or even gone to the cops on our own, we wouldn't have sh!t."

Damn, these guys were smart. "Okay," Liam said. "What happened to jam Axel up? Did he make some kind of mistake?"

Dante's laugh came out brittle. "Yeah. He got greedy. He figured Cutter probably had bunches of people doing the same thing we were. Shit was too planned out for it to be a small operation. So, he did a job, but when he went to go meet Cutter to give him the pills, he told him he wanted a bigger cut or he'd go to the cops."

Sinclair's wince was so slight that if Liam hadn't known the man for nearly a decade, he'd have missed it. "I take it that didn't go over well with Cutter's boss."

"No. Cutter took the pills and told Axel he was out. Axel tried to lay low—he was sure they'd pin something on him, and that the cops would come knocking on his door any

minute. But he had to work. Some guy jumped him on his way home, and after that, he managed to call me.”

Dante took a second and a deep inhale. No one on the team pushed—they knew far better, and they’d already waited this long to get the intel. Another ten seconds wouldn’t matter.

But then Carmen shocked the crap out of Liam by reaching out to give Dante’s uninjured forearm a gentle squeeze. She didn’t say anything, but the small show of solidarity that only she could give him seemed to calm him better than plain silence.

“He told me he’d been stabbed and needed help. I told him to call an ambulance,” Dante said. “But he was scared.”

“Did Cutter attack him?” Liam asked, but Dante shook his head.

“No. Axel didn’t know the guy, but the guy knew him. He said if Axel called nine-one-one, he’d make sure the cops were waiting at the hospital, and that Axel would spend the rest of his life in jail for scamming those doctors with fake papers. Dude took his burner phone and everything.”

Liam blew out a breath. That crushed any last doubt that this was an unrelated crime, or that this scam was small-time. Murdering a low-level associate for getting a little greedy wasn’t worth the attention it got you unless you had a lot to hide.

“Well, that explains why he refused to call nine-one-one,” Isabella said. “And why you gave him Carmen’s number.”

Dante nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t know how bad Axel had been hurt. But I knew the clinic would call the cops for a stab wound no matter what.” He turned toward Carmen. “I wasn’t trying to get you into trouble. It’s just...you’d been so cool about my wrist, taking care of me and then calling to make sure I was okay. I thought you might, I don’t know. At least know what to do to help him.”

“I wish I could have,” Carmen said quietly, and God, Liam would bet that despite her tough-as-spikes exterior, she was one hell of a good nurse.

Sinclair looked at Dante. “What happened after that?”

“Axel tried to call Carmen a few times, but she didn’t pick up. He called me again, and he sounded real bad. He said he couldn’t make the bleeding stop and he was starting to feel dizzy and cold. I knew he must be in serious trouble, so I used my burner phone to call nine-one-one. It was the only thing I could think of to do. I didn’t want anyone to trace the call back to me and start asking questions, but he needed help.”

“It was smart,” Carmen said. “That call gave Axel a fighting chance.”

Liam shifted gears, searching for any missing pieces, however small. “When Axel first called you to tell you he’d been stabbed, did he say anything about the man who did it?”

“Not really.” Dante paused, lost in thought. “He was freaking out, so he didn’t make a whole lot of sense. He told me what the guy said about calling the cops and told me he’d been stabbed, but after that...wait.” Dante’s eyes brightened. “He said the guy was wearing a really expensive watch.”

“A watch?” Liam asked, and Dante nodded, his excitement picking up speed.

“Yeah, yeah! Platinum and gold. Axel said something about how it had those funny numbers on it, so it must have been worth a fortune.”

“You mean Roman numerals?” Isabella asked. “They look like Xs and Is.”

“Yeah. I thought it was kind of a weird thing to notice, but I guess the watch was really flashy. Hard to miss.”

“Not the kind of thing a k!ller normally wears, that’s for sure,” Sinclair said. “Can you remember anything else? Anything at all, even if it seems unimportant?”

Dante slumped in his chair. “No. He just kept saying he couldn’t make the bleeding stop and that he didn’t want to die. I was scared to go over there—I didn’t try to scam these people for more cash, but they know I know Axel; plus, I’m in on this deal, too. If they knew I tried to help him, they’d be pissed. If they knew I was talking to you...”

He left the sentence hanging, but the fill-in-the-blank wasn’t exactly nuclear physics. “You did the right thing, Dante,” Liam said. “We’re going to find who did this.”

“Has Cutter texted you since this happened?” Sinclair asked, but Dante shook his head.

“No, but he’s about due. I usually only do one run a week.”

Damn, whoever was running this scam knew their sh!t. More frequent asks for pain meds would raise red flags with doctors. “Okay. That’s good,” Liam said.

Dante’s black brows shot upward. “How is that good? I don’t want to do any more jobs for this guy. No way.”

“It’s good because it gives us options,” Liam told him calmly. They had to stay focused. Emotion would only wreck them here, no matter how well-earned Dante’s unease was right now. “Look, there’s no way Cutter’s boss is going to just let you go on your merry way. You know too much, and he’s not a loose ends kind of guy.”

“You think he’s going to k!ll me?” Dante yelled.

That news never did go over well, but at least Liam could counter it. “No, because you’re not going to give him a reason to. In fact, you’re going to give him a gift.”

“This is fvcked up,” Dante said. “What could I possibly give this as*sh0le?”

Sinclair looked at Liam, then Isabella, before saying, “You’re going to give him a replacement for Axel, and you’re going to give us the perfect in.”

Carmen’s headspun like a rickety carnival ride. Her career in healthcare made her no stranger to prescription drug scams, and even though clinic policy prohibited the use or distribution of narcotics across the board, that didn’t keep drug seekers from trying to get them there.

Still, what Dante had described was far from some dinky scheme, and even farther from a garden variety drug ring. IDs and medical records good enough to fool doctors into handing out prescriptions for narcotics weren’t easy to forge, nor were they cheap.

Whoever was behind this was as smart as they were dangerous.

“Hey, thanks for sticking around until we sorted all this out.” Liam walked into the Intelligence office’s break room where Carmen had been waiting, sending an involuntary whoosh of warmth from her c.hest to her belly before it settled between her h!ps.

Right. Because what she needed right now was for her neglected lady bits to get all riled up over the sight of his broad shoulders and strong, stubbled jawline.

“Sure,” she said, wrestling her brain back into the conversation. It took a lot of fvcking work. “Is Dante okay?”

Liam nodded. “A little overwhelmed, but he’s talking to the ADA right now. Tara is more than fair, so I have a feeling that as long as he cooperates with the plan we put together, he’ll not only stay safe from whoever’s behind this, but he’ll probably stay out of jail, too.”

Relief slipped through her. Carmen remembered how hard it had been to do that initial interview after she’d found those bl00dy clothes in Bobby D’s closet. How desperate she’d felt. How scared she’d been that he’d k!ll her next. She’d never forgotten either emotion, both of which served as a sharp reminder of where she’d come from and what she’d done.

“I’m glad,” she said, setting her own bullsh!t aside. This wasn’t the time or the place, and her past was a forever thing. She could dwell on it later. “I know Dante did some stupid sh!t, but he doesn’t seem like a bad guy. Just a little misguided. It was cool of you. To work with him instead of pushing, I mean.”

The edges of Liam's mouth kicked up into a smile, and ugh. Not helping the whole trying-to-ignore-the-demands-of-my-errant-vagina thing she had going on.

"It was cool of you to come down here with him. You didn't have to."

"Uh, I kinda did, actually," Carmen said. "He wasn't going to talk to you alone, remember?"

Liam walked over to the small table where she'd parked herself and sat in the chair across from her. "Our deal was for you to get us face to face with him, which you did. You could have said no to the rest."

"Did you miss the part where he wasn't going to talk to you unless I came, too?" she asked tartly, but Liam shook his head.

"Nope. You still could've said no. But you didn't, and now we have strong, actionable leads to pursue. So, if we catch the guy who did this, it's going to be because you went above and beyond to get us what we needed."

"Oh." Heat flooded Carmen's cheeks. "Well, you guys have to do the hard part. Anyway, I couldn't help Axel. The least I could do was come sit here with Dante."

"You probably wouldn't have been able to save Axel even with a whole team of surgeons in your back pocket," Liam pointed out.

Of course, it didn't stop her from having wanted to. "I guess we'll never know."

"Thanks for everything you did tonight, Carmen."

For a single heartbeat, she considered asking him if that included telling him how she'd felt about that night she'd asked him to take her to bed. But he'd been the one to end their k!ss, which had probably just been an impulse driven by the years-old memory coming back to light. Yes, it had been scorchingly hot, but it was probably better left behind them. No matter how good it had felt.

Good wasn't for people like her, anyway.

Carmen slid her armor back into place, pushing back from the table. "Yeah, well, I guess I'm not an ogre, either," she said with a shrug. "Just don't tell Isa, okay? I have a reputation to uphold."

"Your secret's safe with me," Liam said, just as cool and calm as ever. "Come on. I'll walk you to your car."

But as she made her way home, then under the nice, warm covers of her bed, Carmen realized that leaving that k!ss behind her was far easier said than done.

