

The Saint Chapter 18 - Tips

Liam's brain knew the rest of him was veering into dangerous territory. He had a hard enough time resisting Carmen when she was fierce. But this version of her, the one she tried so hard to cover with spikes and sarcasm but was really just a caring, brave woman whose face lit up when she talked about her mother and who was willing to do whatever it took to help catch a killer?

Forget his brain. The rest of him would walk through fire to ease this woman's worries.

"Thanks for letting me swing by my place to change," Carmen said, her red flip-flops sounding off in a soft snick-snick-snick as they made their way into his building. The jeans and dark blue T-shirt she'd swapped for her scrubs might just be casual wear to her, but to Liam, they were like sexy little torture devices. The denim and cotton hugged her body perfectly, the tiny row of buttons leading down into the deep vee of her top more likely to kill him than a chase-related car wreck and a dozen stray bullets combined.

Liam cleared his throat and wrapped his fingers around his keys, just enough to let the bite remind him that the dead-last thing he should be thinking of right now was Carmen's tits.

"Sure. After all, if we're going to properly enjoy dinner and binge watch telenovelas, you should be comfortable."

He also got the feeling that shedding her scrubs would let her forget about her day with just a little more ease, so the suggestion had been worth it. Torture aside.

"I feel like I should warn you, some of these stories are very addicting," she said as they made their way to the elevator. "You start with one or two, and the next thing you know, bam! Nine hours are gone, just like that."

"Nine hours, huh?" He made a show of looking at his watch. "I guess I'd better call in sick now."

"Joke all you want. But we'll see who's a tough guy when you're begging me to watch one more episode so you can find out if Paolo really is the father of Valeria's baby, and whether or not Mariana and her mother will ever be able to put their differences aside."

"I consider myself duly warned."

Trying to set aside any thoughts of what he'd really like to beg her for, Liam talked himself through the steps of door, key, lock, guiding Carmen over the threshold of his condo before closing them both in tight.

“Home, sweet home,” he said, tossing his keys on the small table across from the front door.

“Wow.” She stood in the foyer, doing a near three-sixty as she took in the open-concept living space. He’d had the same reaction the first time he’d seen the place, with its large windows offering a sun-sparkled view of the adjacent community park and the warm walnut hardwood floors that spanned the living room and kitchen, as well as the small study and his bedroom down the hall. He’d upgraded the kitchen in stages over the five years that he’d lived here, the polished concrete countertops and stainless steel appliances balanced out by antique-finished black cabinets in a way that had always made him feel at ease in the space.

“This place is...wow. Wow,” Carmen said again. “Where’s all your mess?”

Liam’s pulse tripped, but he covered it up with a smile. Like cooking, tidiness was another adult responsibility he’d learned quickly at fourteen. But he’d already let one mention of his mom and Jamie slip when he’d told Carmen about learning to cook, and anyway, he wasn’t about to ruin an evening with her by talking about all the sh!tty things his old man had left him instead of a legacy.

“Ah, I’m hiding it,” he said lightly, and oh, the goddamn irony. “Just don’t look in the hall closet and you’ll be safe.”

Carmen laughed, just as he’d meant her to, and yes, crisis averted. “Sounds fair.”

“How do you feel about spaghetti carbonara?” he asked, going full circle on the change in subject. “I don’t have any pancetta, which is what you’re technically supposed to use, but I’ve got bacon, and—”

“Stop.” Carmen held up a hand. “You had me at bacon and carbs. It sounds great.”

“Bacon and carbs, coming right up.” Liam nodded toward the kitchen, and she followed him the dozen or so steps it took for them to reach the threshold. The rectangular space was bisected by an island with a built-in butcher block and two stools on the far side, and Carmen slid onto one, facing him. Liam washed his hands and filled a large stock pot with water, sliding it over a burner and clicking it to life before turning back to the island.

“So, I’ll admit to being a complete telenovela virgin,” he said, making her laugh.

“I am shocked to hear that,” she said, her brow arching in contradiction.

Liam went through a few steps—chop, heat, stir—before answering. “I didn’t say I’m a stranger to drama. I mean, I know we sat behind a desk all day today, but my job can be pretty dangerous from time to time.”

"That's probably a good thing. At least, as far as your tolerance goes," Carmen said, propping her elbows on the island and her chin in her hands. "Someone always gets severely injured in a telenovela. Or dies. Or both."

"Yikes."

"Oh, yeah. Being in a telenovela is dangerous stuff. No one's safe."

"Okay," Liam said, sliding the bacon he'd chopped into a frying pan, waiting out the sizzle for a minute before steadying the heat. "So someone always gets injured and/or dies. Got it. What else do I need to know?"

Carmen's dark brown eyes lit with a combination of excitement and mischief as she sketched together a few of the tropes and standard fare for telenovelas. Liam cooked and listened, only pausing her happy chatter to ask questions that would keep her talking, and by the time he was done sprinkling both of their oversized bowls full of pasta with cheese and fresh cracked black pepper, Carmen's face was lit with a blissful glow.

"Oh, my God, this smells amazing," she said, cradling the bowl he passed over in both hands. "I can't believe you seriously just wh!pped this up, no big deal. You didn't even use a recipe."

"I make it a lot," he said, picking up his own bowl and heading to the table tucked on the far side of the kitchen. "Like you said, it's hard to go wrong with bacon and carbs."

She sat down across from him with a smile. "And cheese."

"Now you see why I know the recipe by heart."

Liam fully intended to let her take a few bites, then dive back into the telenovela discussion that had eased all the tension from her shoulders. But as soon as Carmen's lips closed around her first forkful, he realized he was in trouble. Her eyes fluttered closed, a happy moan drifting up from her chest to her throat, and trouble couldn't touch this with a fifty-foot pole.

Carmen was fvcking gorgeous. And he wanted her so badly, he could taste it.

"You like it?" he asked, unable to keep the gruff edge from his voice.

Her eyes popped open, and the flush spreading over her face brought him one step closer to ruin. "Yes. Sorry. I probably got a little carried away. It's just"—she paused just long enough for Liam to get his bearings—"I don't remember the last time someone else

cooked for me. I'm not used to anyone wanting to do something nice for me because I've had a sh!tty day."

"I'm kind of the cause of that sh!tty day," he reminded her.

But she shook her head. "Oh, the blame for that is totally on my shoulders. Gannon's blackmailing me for a reason."

Liam proceeded carefully. "He's blackmailing you because he's trying to rip off countless people. He's the bad guy here, Carmen. Not you."

One half-lift of her shoulder told him she didn't believe a single word he'd said—she blamed herself for this?—but tonight was about distraction. So when she said, "Anyway. Thank you. For all of this," he simply dished up his most easygoing smile and replied, "You're welcome."

They ate for a few minutes in comfortable quiet. Once their bowls were more empty than full, they turned the conversation back to telenovelas, with Carmen giving him a few last things to know before he took their dishes to the sink for a good soak. They made their way to the living room, the sun having moved far enough toward the horizon that Liam clicked on the overhead lights, then settled on one side of the couch.

"Okay," he said, pulling up his Netflix queue. "School me, oh wise one. Where do I start, here?"

Carmen's eyes sparkled as she sat down next to him, close enough for him to smell the wild, sweet scent of her shampoo. "Well, I suppose it depends. We can go with any of the new ones if you want something more modern. The Queen of Flow and The House of Flowers are both super bingeable. Very high drama. Or we can stick with a classic. Rubí, Yo Soy Betty, La Fea, there are so many ways to go, really."

"You're the expert," he said. "Whatever's going to take us as far away from reality as possible works for me."

"Ohhhh, deal. One crazypants telenovela, coming right up." Reaching for the remote, Carmen scrolled through until she found what she was looking for, then selected the show. She passed the remote back to Liam to fiddle with the translation subt!tles—his rudimentary Spanish was only going to get him so far—and a minute later, they had the lights dimmed and the show rolling.

Carmen hadn't been kidding about the extreme drama or the addicting nature of the episodes. Letting himself get lost in the escapism really was relaxing in a weird sort of love triangle/rags to riches/family secrets/whose baby is it really sort of way. But watching Carmen get lost in them shifted his own relaxation into a dim, distant second place. The tension that had knotted her shoulders and lined her face earlier was gone, replaced by a giddy little half smile. She'd ditched her flip flops somewhere between

Carlotta discovering Angela's affair with Ricardo and Angela discovering Carlotta was pregnant with Ricardo's baby, curling her legs beneath her and snuggling into the couch cushions like she belonged there, oohing and laughing and sitting beside Liam just as easy as you please. The happier she looked, the more he wanted her to stay that way, and then finally, after the fourth episode faded to black, he realized the truth.

On top of wanting her happy, he also just plain wanted her. And he was losing his ability to fight it.

"See?" Carmen asked, lifting her chin at the now-dark TV screen. "I told you they're addicting."

"They are," Liam admitted. "And you weren't kidding about the drama. But I have a serious question. Do all of the fiery arguments end in fiery k!ssing? It seems a bit irrational."

She shook her head and laughed. "Okay, first of all, if you're looking for logic, this is not the place you're going to find it. Secondly, yes. Literally all of the fiery arguments between couples on this show end up in fiery k!ssing, and most of that leads to fiery s3x."

"But only sometimes does the fiery s3x lead to secret babies?" Liam ventured, and Carmen lifted her brows with a grin.

"Now you're catching on. Anyway, fiery arguing can be hot. It's not that illogical that it leads to k!ssing, is it?"

He thought back on all the verbal sparring he and Carmen had done over the course of the last couple of years, and all the wicked thoughts of her it had conjured up after the fact, and okay, fine. "You may have a point."

"You're blushing," she said, and even though the accusation was soft, he countered it.

"I am not."

She smiled. "And now you're arguing."

"No, I'm—" Liam caught himself, too late. "I'm respectfully disagreeing."

Carmen rolled her eyes. "Uh-huh. That's also called arguing. Just nicer."

God damn it, she was right. Arguing with her, even playfully, was fvcking hot. "You're doing it too, you know."

"Guilty as charged." She shifted toward him, close enough that her knees pressed against his th!gh, sending a jolt of need through him even though the contact was

buffered by both her jeans and his. “You know, the k!ss we had at the laundromat was pretty fiery.”

Liam would be both an idiot and a liar to deny it. Still... “That was before.”

“Before what? This case?”

“Yes,” he said, but Carmen just shook her head.

“Actually, it wasn’t. Anyway, you said there’s no rule against us—what was the word you used? Ahhh, right. Fraternizing. Right?”

Between the suggestion in her tone and the s3xy-sweet smile she’d paired it with, the word might as well have been the filthiest promise ever uttered. “Technically, no. But we’re working this case together now.”

“Not right now,” Carmen said. “In fact, right now, in this moment, we haven’t started working this case together at all. At least, not as far as Gannon is concerned. We haven’t gone undercover together yet.”

Liam opened his mouth to...well, sh!t, argue. But he couldn’t. “I guess that’s true.”

She looked at him, her smile still in place but her gaze serious enough for him to know she meant what she was saying. “Here’s another thing that’s true. I’ve wanted to k!ss you again pretty much ever since we stopped k!ssing the last time. I know that’s not entirely uncomplicated,” she added. “But it’s also not advanced calculus. You said we could both use a distraction, right?”

“I did,” Liam said, his voice gravel and his c0ck stirring to life just at the sound of hers.

Carmen edged closer, but not so much that he wouldn’t have to make a move to meet her, and dear sweet God, she was going to end him right here on his couch. “Do you want to k!ss me again?”

A laugh flew out of him, unbidden, but it broke any tension the moment might’ve carried. “You have no idea.”

“But I do,” she whispered.

Some primal emotion Liam couldn’t quite name made him close the space between them until his mouth hovered only an inch or two from hers. “I don’t just want to k!ss you. I want to k!ss you everywhere. I want to take my fvcking time with every last part of you, then make you come so hard that you don’t even know your own name. You say you’ve wanted to k!ss me again since the last time we k!ssed? Carmen, I’ve wanted you, this badly, for fvcking years. So, when I say you have no idea how much I want to k!ss you again, I really do mean it.”

Rather than pull back like he'd expected her to, she brought her mouth within a breath of his. "Then why are we still talking?"

"Carmen," he whispered, but she shifted even closer, moving one leg over his hip to settle gently on top of his thighs.

"Liam."

God, his name in her mouth was like heaven and sin, all at once. "Be sure."

She smiled. "If we're going to distract each other, we might as well do it right. I'm sure," she said.

And then she kissed him.