

The Saint Chapter 9 - Tips

Carmen felt like a Grade-A dumbas*s. Three days had passed since she'd gone to the Thirty-Third, and not only had she not heard so much as a syllable from Dante, but she also hadn't exchanged a word with Liam after walking away from him on the street.

The first thing, she knew she couldn't really help—Dante was either going to take the bait or not. The second thing? That had happened purely at the hands of her bruised and broken pride, and she knew better than to let her guard that far down.

Especially around Liam Hollister.

"Stop," Carmen muttered, pulling her scrubs top over her head and launching it into the laundry basket at her feet before shouldering her way into her last clean T-shirt. It wasn't really her fault that she'd done such an abrupt disappearing act. Liam's confession that he didn't trust people easily had shocked her, yes. But when he'd looked at her with that X-ray-vision stare of his and told her his interest in her had been genuine, not just a byproduct of needing to make her feel comfortable for the sake of the case, something had detonated, deep in her belly. It had been the same something that had driven her to idiocy with him all those years ago, and a woman like her didn't have any business feeling it about a man like him.

Attraction. Raw and primal and loaded with need that only he could fill.

So, she'd done the only thing she could in that moment. She'd fvcking power-walked away from him just as fast as her legs would let her.

Oh, look. Still a dumbas*s.

Bending down, Carmen scooped up her overflowing laundry basket with a curse in English and Spanish, just for good measure. Per Sergeant Sinclair's request, she'd texted Dante twice more since the original message, given her "nothing new" updates to Isabella for the past three days, and worked another trio of shifts each at both the Davenport clinic and the night clinic. They'd recruited another two nurses at the night clinic, which allowed Carmen some much-needed leeway in her schedule.

She'd finally had to cry uncle on laundry—the huge basket in her hands was one of two, and that didn't include the sheets she still had to pull off her bed. It would take hours for her to get it all done, but that was better than alternating between embarrassment and pure, hot desire for a man she'd never have.

Carmen tossed a container of laundry detergent and a well-loved romance novel into one basket and her bed sheets into the other, stacking them on top of each other and heaving them into her arms. It took effort to get through her front door and out to her car, but, like always, she managed.

The laundromat—twenty-four hours, thank God—wasn't terribly far from her place, and she thought about Liam the whole way there. So he'd shown her some kindness at breakfast the other day, and that had caused her unrequited crush on him to come sailing to the surface. He'd still been nice to her, and the truth was, even if this case didn't pan out, they were almost certainly going to work together on others. She really needed to get over what had happened between them (hadn't happened, she reminded herself sternly) once and for all.

And that meant they were going to have to talk about the great big elephant in the room.

Pulling into the laundromat's deserted parking lot, Carmen slid her phone from her laundry basket before her pride could screech out that it was the worst bad idea.

Hi. It's me. Carmen, she added, already feeling foolish.

Liam's response was immediate. Are you okay?

Yes. Okay, that wasn't one hundred percent accurate. Sort of. I—

She was halfway through thumb typing the rest of her sentence when her phone rang in her hand, startling the hell out of her. "Hello?"

"‘Are you okay?’ is a strictly yes/no question, like ‘are you dead?’ or ‘are you pregnant?’" Liam said. "So, maybe we should try this again. Are you okay?"

Carmen laughed, because it was that or cry at how quickly this had escalated into a thing. "I'm not hurt or anything, if that's what you mean."

"Okay, good. Did Dante text you?"

"No," she said, wishing like mad that she'd had at least a shred of impulse control when it came to this man.

"Oh," he said, his confusion audible. "Then what's going on?"

She shook her head. This had been a mistake. "I was going to tell you something, but you know what, it's stupid. We can just forget it. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"Carmen." The sound of her name in his mouth made the space between her legs instantly hot. "It can't be that stupid if you called to say it."

"You called me," she pointed out, but he didn't budge.

"You're splitting hairs. What's on your mind?"

"I..." Oh, to hell with it. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for what I did that night a couple years ago." There was no need to clarify which night. Liam had to know. "I know we've never talked about it, but I felt like I should, I don't know. Apologize."

"Where are you?" he asked, his voice so low and gruff that she answered without thinking twice.

"The laundromat on Caton Avenue."

"I'll be right there."

Carmen blinked. "Wait, you don't have to—"

Her protest was cut short by three quick beeps that told her he'd ended the call. For a brief second, she thought about turning around and hightailing it straight back to her apartment. But knowing Liam and his penchant for being a pain in her ass, he'd probably show up there, too, so she tossed her phone back into the laundry basket and tugged the whole mess out of her car. Catching sight of herself in the sideview mirror, she hustled into the empty laundromat (score one for late-night laundry).

She placed both baskets on the long, skinny table bisecting the room, scooping her unruly curls into a knot on top of her head. There wasn't anything to be done for the oversized T-shirt that hung off one shoulder and exposed the teal-blue strap of the least practical and only clean bra she owned, or the flip-flops that showcased her absolute lack of a pedicure.

But at least she'd traded the leggings with a hole in the crotch for a pair of cutoff jean shorts, and honestly, what she looked like wasn't going to make a difference, anyway.

Carmen divided her dirty clothes and sheets between four washing machines, because this conversation was going to be bad enough without Liam seeing her panties, thank you very much. That left only the container of detergent and the romance novel with the gorgeous, tattoo-covered model on the cover, and fuck it. The least she could do was sneak in a few pages of distraction before Liam got there.

The skinny table had a far better view of the door and her surroundings than the low chairs beside the bank of dryers on the far wall, so she hopped up onto it and started to read. She'd left off at the beginning of a ridiculously steamy scene, and whoa, this book wasn't holding back. Carmen's face flushed as she read, her mind drifting deeper into the words. Only, in her head, she was the heroine, whose back was against a wall and whose skirt was around her hips, her body wild and her pussy wet as the hero fucked her with his tongue, thrusting faster and harder until—

"Hey."

Carmen dropped the book to the floor with a yelp, slamming a hand over her heart as she leaped off the table. “For the love of God, make some damn noise next time!”

Liam’s brows lifted, and he bent to retrieve her book. “Sorry. You were pretty lost in”—he looked at the cover and smiled—“thought.”

“Are you making fun of my book?” she asked, and he shook his head.

“Not at all. In fact, I know the guy on the cover, if you’d like a signed copy.”

Holy. Shit. “You know this guy?” Carmen tapped the front of the book he’d handed back over in disbelief.

“Yep. He’s actually Connor’s buddy from the Air Force. Married to Tess Riley, who runs the ED at Remington Mem? They just had a baby girl,” Liam said, and that was it. She was officially in an alternate universe.

“Right. Well, you didn’t have to come down here,” she said, getting to the point. “I shouldn’t have bothered you in the first place.”

Liam’s shoulders tightened around his spine—medial deltoid, trapezius—and it was only then that Carmen noticed he was holding an overloaded basket of his own. “You aren’t bothering me. I had laundry to do, too.”

For a minute, he separated his laundry, placing dark jeans and T-shirts into one machine, fluffy, cream-colored towels, lighter T-shirts, and gray sweatpants (sweet mother of God, was he trying to kill her) in another as if this were the most natural thing in the universe. As soon as the lids were shut and the machines filling with the soft rush of water, he looked at her, adding, “And you don’t owe me an apology for anything. Least of all what happened that night.”

“Did you come all the way down here to tell me that?” she asked, her heart galloping.

Liam didn’t hesitate. “Yeah.”

“I threw myself at you,” Carmen reminded him. If they were going to finally talk about it, she might as well go all in. “I told you I’d wanted you since the minute I’d met you and I tried to seduce you. In fact, I’m pretty certain there was begging involved. Things have been weird between us ever since, which is my fault for stupidly flinging myself at a man who was just trying to be nice by checking up on me, so yes. I’m pretty sure I do owe you an apology.”

“You don’t,” Liam insisted, his voice low and quiet around the hum of the washing machines. “You’d been attacked. Hurt. Left in a burning building. You wanted comfort—which is entirely normal after a trauma—and I just happened to be there for you to ask. That’s all.”

She blinked. "You think I threw myself at you just because you were there?"

"You think I said no because I didn't want you?"

Carmen's breath jammed in her lungs as her brain caught up with his words. He looked just as shocked as she felt, as if he'd never meant to say them, or anything close to them, at all.

Oh. Oh, God. "Yes," she whispered, staring at him. "I thought you weren't attracted to me and were trying to let me down gently. Which was more than I deserved." Her cheeks bloomed with fresh heat, but she didn't look away even though she wanted to. "But, of course that's what I thought. Think."

The smile that found his mouth was chock full of irony, and Carmen felt it everywhere. "Well, you're wrong."

"Why?" she blurted, and Liam's brows gathered in confusion.

"Is it really so hard for you to believe that I was attracted to you, too?"

"Well, yeah," she said. "I mean, I'm just me. Shitty past"—understatement—"smart mouth"—accurate—"graduated high school four years late. I'm not exactly 'you' material."

His eyes flashed, and it took Carmen a beat to recognize the emotion there as intensity. "Maybe you should let me be the judge of that."

In all the times she'd reviewed the events of that night in her head (and oh, there had been lots of them), never once had she considered her attraction to him might be mutual. "But you said no. You practically ran out of my apartment."

Liam let out a breath and leaned against the laundry table. "Carmen, you'd been threatened and hurt. I stopped by to make sure you were okay. I'd have been the worst sort of as*sh0le if I'd taken advantage of you."

"It's not taking advantage if I wanted you to," she said, but nope. He wasn't budging.

"Trauma endorphins can cloud judgment worse than bottom-shelf tequila. You were vulnerable, and even though I wanted you, too, there was no way in hell I was going to risk you regretting anything we did later."

Her brain spun faster than the washing machines behind her. "So, you thought pissing me off was better?" For fvck's sake, they'd been prickly with each other for years.

"I wasn't trying to piss you off," he said. "Not at first. But you were pissed off, and pushing you away was safer than the alternative, so I guess I just...ran with it. Which means I really owe you an apology, not the other way around."

"I wasn't pissed off," Carmen said, and oh, to hell with it. She'd already put her stupid-crush feelings on display. She might as well throw her shredded pride on top like a cherry. "I mean, yes, I was ab.rasive.

And I gave you a hard time every time I saw you after that. But it's a defense mechanism, okay?" She'd k!ss her dignity goodbye right now if she thought for a second that she'd ever had any. "I was embarrassed that I'd been dumb enough to think you'd be interested in a woman like me in the first place. So, afterward, it was easier to put up walls."

For a minute, Liam simply stared at her, his gorgeous face as free of emotion as ever. Finally, he said, "You might have a difficult past and a smart mouth. But that doesn't make me think less of you."

"Oh, come on—"

"No," he said. "This is what I think of you. I think you're b.rave. And badas*s." He stepped closer, still leaving enough space between them for her to easily reclaim the distance he'd erased if she wanted to.

She didn't.

"Liam—"

"Not done," he said, lifting a hand. "I think you're b.rave and badas*s and so fvcking beautiful. And yes, even though I shouldn't have, I wanted you that night. A lot."

Carmen's pulse tapped against her throat, and this time, she took a step toward him, close enough to watch his pupils flare in the bright light of the laundromat. "Then why did you say no?"

"I told you. I was worried you were vulnerable."

His breath hitched just the slightest bit, and that was all she needed to boldly reduce the space between them to inches. "I'm not vulnerable now."

"No. But you're still my partner's CI," he whispered.

She had no choice but to pause. As badly as she wanted to know how he really felt, she also didn't want to get him in trouble. "Is that against the rules?"

"It would be if you were my CI, yes."

“But I’m not.”

“That doesn’t mean things wouldn’t get messy.”

Carmen arched a brow. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“No.” The word was gruff, loaded with need, and God, she felt it, too. “It’s not technically against the rules for you and I to...fraternize.”

Her laugh flew out against her brain’s permission. “Way to make it sound hot.”

The heat in his eyes made her laughter fade in an instant. “If I’d had what I wanted that night, it would have been so hot you’d still feel it.”

“Oh.” Carmen’s breath collapsed from her lips, more sound than actual word, and something she couldn’t name dared her to say, “Do you still want it?”

“That...could get complicated.”

“It could,” she agreed, because there was no sense trying to sugarcoat that. “But you didn’t answer the question.”

“Yes,” Liam said, his voice like gravel. “I still want you.”

“I still want you, too.”

His mouth was on hers before she could feel self-conscious about her confession, and oh, it had been worth the wait. His lips were warm, lingering on hers for a split second before starting to seek more. Her mouth parted, her tongue meeting his in a deliberate slide, and the friction triggered some deep-seated need inside of her.

Carmen pressed her palms over his shoulders—God, those shoulders she’d mapped with her fingers and mouth a thousand times in her imagination—clutching the soft cotton of his T-shirt as if it could save her.

Liam’s kisses grew hungry, his arms sliding low around her rib cage to hold her close as he tasted and took. But there was no primal urgency, no sloppy now, now, now in the connection of lips and tongues. Instead, it was as if the whole thing was simply a promise without words, and the thought spiraled through Carmen, taking her control with it.

A moan drifted up from her throat, the desire in her belly becoming a hot, fast demand. Kissing him harder, she knotted her arms around his shoulders, wanting more, wanting everything—

Liam broke away from her on a gasp. “Carmen.”

She blinked, trying to recalibrate, but failing spectacularly. Then, the look on his face registered, and a fragment of shame sliced through her.

“You think this was a mistake, don’t you?”

Liam’s brows pulled downward immediately. “What? No.” He brushed his fingers over his lips in a movement that seemed subconscious. “It’s just...for one thing, we’re in the middle of a laundromat.”

Carmen looked at the rows of washing machines and dryers, a half dozen of which were churning away, and okay, he had a point. Still. “Is there another thing?”

His pause was slight, but oh, it was enough. “This really could get complicated,” he said.

“So, you think we shouldn’t have kissed.”

The laugh he gave up rooted her to the linoleum in surprise. “Of all the things I’ve done in my life, that kiss is the one I regret the least. But there are a lot of things to consider, here—not the least of which is that we’re still trying to track Dante down.”

“So, where does that leave...this?” she asked, gesturing between them with her index finger. But before he could answer, her cell phone began pinging from the spot where she’d left it in her laundry basket, the messages arriving so insistently that she had no choice but to check it.

“Oh, my God,” Carmen said, her heart in her throat as she read, then re-read, the string of texts on her screen.

“Is everything okay?” Liam asked, and she flipped her phone around so he could see for himself.

“It’s Dante. He wants to talk. Right now.”