

The Saint Chapter 1

Detective Liam Hollister was never more than two steps away from his Zen. The fact that he was a detective in Remington's most elite crime-fighting unit made this a tough fvcking go sometimes. After all, finding your chill when you were being threatened at gunpoint wasn't exactly a cakewalk. But cultivating calm when sh!t went pear-shaped was a survival sk!!l Liam had learned long before he'd become a cop. It wasn't just an occupational bonus.

It was a survival sk!!l.

For as much good-natured crap as his unit-mates gave him for his nothing-to-see-here att!tude, being calm to a fault was still better than the alternative. After all, Liam had endured enough emotional chaos in his life to be full-up on the stuff, thanks. All of those out-of-control feelings that ripped a path right through an otherwise normal life like a tornado leaving destruction in a small town?

Hard pass. Emotions wrecked everything they touched, and Liam wasn't interested in being wrecked.

Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt and the scars to prove it.

Sitting back in his chair at the Crooked Angel bar and grill, he surveyed the crowd, where his unit-mates—as well as all of their mates, plus a bunch of firefighters and doctors—filled a half dozen tables around the bar. Detective Matteo Garza had his arm slung over his fiancée Delia's shoulders, her engagement ring winking in the soft glow filtering down from the tiny white lights covering the rafters overhead. Detective Shawn Maxwell and his three-year-old daughter, Isla, were sharing a plate of fries with Garza and Delia, although "sharing" seemed to be a pretty loose interpretation of what was going on.

"Okay," Delia said, her sunshiny smile aimed mostly at Isla. "We've got forty-six fries on this plate, and there are four of us. That would put us at eleven point five fries per person, but we do have other variables to consider."

"Babe," Garza started, not unkindly, but Delia held up a hand.

"I'm a forensic accountant, Matteo. Analyzing numbers is what I do. Now, where were we? Ah!" Delia pulled two fries off the plate and handed them over to Isla with a wink. "Now we have a much more even number. Eleven fries per person. While we could take into account the fact that your dad is much bigger than you are"—she gestured to Maxwell, who, at six-three and two hundred forty pounds of solid muscle, was basically a retaining wall with legs—"and because of that, he requires more food, there is a much more important variable to factor in."

Maxwell's black brows lifted, and his fiancée, Francesca Rossi, leaned in to ask, "Which is?"

Delia grinned. "Isla's much cuter than all of you, so she gets dibs on the fries."

"Thanks, Miss Delia," Isla beamed as Delia pushed the plate in her direction, and okay, Delia wasn't wrong about the cute thing. Even Liam, whose experience with kids was limited to doing everything he could not to create one any time soon, could admit that.

"You're welcome, sweetheart. Dig in."

The group settled in to eat, with Isla sweetly sharing her fries. Further down the table, Liam's unit-mate and partner, Detective Isabella Walker, was feeding her seven-month-old son. Beside her, their other unit-mate, Detective Addison Hale sat next to her boyfriend, Ryan Dempsey, her head thrown back in laughter at something the firefighter had said. Dempsey simply grinned and shrugged one shoulder in response, so easily that you'd never know the body part in question had, in fact, been Swiss cheese a mere twelve weeks ago. Thankfully, the unit had been able to take down the stalker/serial klller who had shot Dempsey, and the surgical team at Remington Memorial had done a bang-up job taking care of him, despite his pretty nasty injury. Of course, there had been a sh!tload of physical therapy and restricted duty involved, too, but in the end, Dempsey had healed up good as new.

Fantastic, really, since Hale would've been a nightmare to live with if any permanent damage had been done to the guy.

Liam took a leisurely sip of his beer and a deep breath to go along with it, letting both of them cement his calm. Of all the cops in the unit, Hale was the last one he would've ever expected to fall head over boots in love with anyone. Sure, Isabella was fierce, and Garza made Oscar the Grouch look like a cute and cuddly puppy. And Maxwell—good God, the big, broody detective was the king of Menace Mountain when he wanted to be. But despite Hale's bubbly disposition and always-positive outlook, she had dodged even the most casual of relationships until now. The fact that she'd fallen so obviously in love with Dempsey made Liam painfully aware of two things.

One was that even the world's biggest commitment-phobes could end up catching feelings for someone if they weren't careful.

And two was that he was the last commitment-phobe standing.

Giving himself a mental shake, Liam smoothed over the thought. He wasn't against commitment—at least, not when it applied to other people. Seeing his closest friends happy made him happy. But Christ knew that dating, especially for someone in his line of work, was messy at best. If there was one thing Liam didn't do, it was mess. Nope. He liked things nice and easy. Calm. Predictable.

No muss, no fuss. Relationships, with all their inevitable drama, need not apply.

He'd already experienced enough drama in his life to last until the day they put him in the ground. He didn't want any more. Ever.

Liam's phone vibrated in his back pocket, tugging his attention fully back to the bar. Putting his mostly full beer on the table in front of him, he palmed the thing, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Isabella had made a similar move. The message was short and to the point, but it didn't bode well for the beer in front of him.

Reported assault at 612 Rutherford Street. Patrol on-scene. Requesting immediate Intelligence backup.

His pulse kicked into the involuntary up-and-at-'em it always did when a call came in, and he smoothed it over with a nice, deep breath.

"Damn it," Isabella muttered, lifting her gaze to meet his.

"It's all good," Liam said, which he might as well have tattooed across his forehead for how often he uttered it. "Patrol's already there, so the scene's probably secure. I can take it solo, if you want." Not that he'd rather hang out at a crime scene than at the Crooked Angel, but Isabella had a family to go home with.

She also had a work ethic built like a titanium vault, because she shook her head as she stowed her phone and stood up. "And let you have all the fun? Never."

Maxwell's dark brows gathered over his steely blue stare. "What's up?"

"Patrol responded to an assault call and Sarge wants us on scene," Hollister said.

"Just you two?" Garza asked, and Isabella nodded.

"Looks like it."

Garza's expression veered toward concern, but Liam shrugged it off, his heartbeat already back in no-big-deal range. "Probably means he's covering his bases if he only called in two of us. Plus, you guys took that robbery call two days ago while Isabella and I were in court. We owe you one."

"That's true," Hale said, having swung toward them to join the conversation. "You guys got a cushy day of testifying while we had to beat the streets." She wagged her brows and laughed. "It's still a little weird that he only called you guys, though."

"Hey, I don't pretend to understand the method to Sinclair's madness," Liam joked smoothly, although, yeah, he had to admit, it did feel a little weird.

"Me, either. But I'm not exactly blowing him off when he calls," Isabella said. Turning, she murmured what was probably a quick explanation to her husband, Kellan, then kissed baby Elijah twice before looking back at Liam. "Ready?"

"Always," he said. Leaving some cash with Hale to settle his tab, he led the way to his Ford F-150, glad that he'd stuck to his one-drink rule. Not that he didn't enjoy cutting loose every once in a while, but overindulging usually opened the door for a whole lot of emotional chaos to rear its ugly head. Ninety-nine percent of the time it wasn't worth it, and anyway, if he'd thrown back more than half a beer, he wouldn't have been able to respond when the team needed him to.

"Okay," Isabella said, pulling her seat belt into place and plugging the address into the GPS. "I'll let Sinclair know we're en route."

Liam did his share by radioing dispatch to do the same. They made their way to the scene fairly quickly, the city streets having long since quieted down after rush hour. The June air had cooled after sunset, but was far from chilly. Liam was plenty comfortable in his T-shirt, and he made sure his weapon and badge were secure on his belt as Isabella radioed dispatch to let them know they'd arrived.

"Huh," Liam murmured, concern trickling through his rib cage as he got out of the truck and took in the scene. "This is an awful lot of response for a garden variety assault call."

Isabella nodded, her eyes sweeping from left to right in a similar assessment. Two patrol cars and an ambo sat parked at off-kilter angles in front of a block of older row homes, lighting the street up like a rock concert. A small crowd had gathered on the crumbling pavement, with a patrol officer making sure the entryway to the second row home of four was cordoned off by bright yellow tape just as two paramedics rushed out the front door with a gurney.

"Whoa!" Isabella jumped into step with the paramedics, one of whom Liam recognized as firefighter/paramedic Lucy deCosta, from Station Seventeen. "Hey, Lucy," Isabella said. "You moonlighting?" Everyone else on A-shift was off tonight. Including Isabella's husband, Kellan.

"Pulling a double," Lucy said with a nod that sent her black corkscrew curls bouncing. "But this guy's hurt pretty badly. Nasty stab wound to the upper torso, and it's not exactly fresh. He's lost a lot of blood," she added as the man groaned in pain past the oxygen mask Lucy had put over his face. "We've got to hustle."

Isabella looked torn, but Liam didn't hesitate. "Go with him and see if he can tell you anything. I'll check things out here and call you."

"Copy that." Isabella picked up Lucy's brisk pace and followed her to the ambo. Turning toward the row home, Liam made his way up the dilapidated steps and over the threshold. Nearly every light in the place was on, but it still didn't do much to illuminate

what had happened. The front room served as both a foyer and living area, housing a grungy sofa and small coffee table littered with the crumpled wrappings from nearly a dozen gauze pads, along with half a roll of medical tape. Calling the place sparsely furnished was a gift—the sofa and coffee table were pretty much it as far as décor went. There weren't any signs of a struggle either here or in the tiny kitchen beyond, although the blood-soaked towel jammed over the equally stained sofa cushions didn't point to anything good. Whoever this victim was, he'd been bleeding for a while.

Which begged the question: why try to self-help a stab wound—and a grievous one, at that—rather than going to the hospital?

"Ah, Detective Hollister," came Officer Lucinda Dade's voice from the back of the kitchen. "Glad Sinclair was able to find you. Is Detective Walker here?"

Dade looked around for Isabella, but Liam shook his head. "She went to the hospital with the victim," he said, worry tingling at the back of his neck. "Why?"

"The victim's name is Axel Franklin," Dade said. "Ring any bells with you?"

Liam took a run through his mental files and came up empty. "Not offhand."

She nodded, jutting her chin at the front room. "Best we can tell, he was injured somewhere else. There's a good amount of blood here, as you can see, but no spatter, no weapon left behind. Also, no signs of a struggle, either here or upstairs. In fact, there's no blood upstairs at all. But there are traces on the sidewalk and on the front doorknob, and that trail that leads from the door to the couch, right here."

Dade pointed to the drips on the carpet that she'd already marked off with tape, and hell if this whole thing didn't send Liam's red flags waving in the wind. There were only a handful of reasons someone with a grave injury wouldn't go straight to a hospital, and none of them were good.

He started with the easiest. "Any outstanding warrants?"

"No, but he does have a sheet. All misdemeanors. Nothing violent."

The plot thickens. "So, whatever this guy is involved in is bad enough to make him come home after being assaulted rather than getting medical help," Liam murmured, and wait... "Who called nine-one-one?"

It took a lot to stump Dade, who had been on the job since before Liam had graduated middle school. Still, she blinked. "That's a good question."

"Which means there's no good answer," Liam said, and here, Dade shook her head.

"I may not know who called nine-one-one, but I know who didn't. In fact, it's why you're here."

"Okay." Liam drew the word out, steeping it in his confusion as he asked the sixty-four thousand dollar question. "And why is that, exactly?"

Dade held up an evidence bag, passing it over to Liam. Nestled inside was a slip of paper with a phone number scrawled on it, bl00died at the edges. "Axel Franklin had this in his hand when we got here. He didn't call nine-one-one, but he did try to call that number three times in the last twenty minutes. Each call lasted about fifteen seconds."

She held up another evidence bag, this one containing a cell phone, and Liam raised a brow. "No screen lock?"

Dade let one corner of her mouth drift up. "I'm a cop, not a magician. No. No screen lock."

Liam huffed out a soft laugh, grateful for the tension buster. "Fifteen seconds, huh? That's hardly long enough for a conversation."

It was long enough to get someone's voicemail, though, and maybe even to leave a quick message. Liam looked at the number more closely, something familiar tugging at the edges of his memory that he couldn't quite locate. "Do we know who the number belongs to?"

Dade's black brows lifted. "Thought you'd be able to tell me that, Detective. Seeing as how she's one of yours. Or, at least, one of Detective Walker's, anyway."

"One of..." Liam's mind spun, catching like a record scratch a few seconds later.

No. No, no. No fvcking way. It couldn't be.

With hands he willed not to shake, he pulled his own phone out of his back pocket, scrolling through his contacts. A...B...C...

Liam's stomach took the Hula-Hoop route down to his kneecaps.

Carmen Desoto.

One of Isabella's most trusted CIs. The only woman who had ever smashed Liam's composure. Even worse, she'd done it with one simple action, something she'd never repeated and he'd never forgotten, not even now, years later.

Something Liam had never stopped wanting, despite knowing he couldn't have it, and that made Carmen so much more than messy. Christ, she was her own personal hurricane, wrapped up in a se.xy, sharp-tongued package.

And, as of right now, she was Liam's only lead.