

The Saint Chapter 10 - Tips

Liam had experienced more emotions in the last hour and a half than he'd allowed himself to feel for the past year. Surprise at Carmen's text, followed quickly by the urgent need to see her face to face. Want—so much fucking want—as she'd told him how she'd felt that night, then even more want when she'd confessed that she still felt that way now.

Her honesty had flipped some unknown switch inside of him that had made holding back impossible, and before he'd known it, the want he'd felt when they'd been talking had become nothing in the face of the pure, uncut need that had consumed him when they'd kissed.

Forget complicated. This was downright insanity.

And, as dangerous as it was, Liam had loved every dark, dirty second of it.

"Hello? Earth to Liam? Are you okay?" Carmen asked, delivering him back to the parking lot outside the laundromat with a wave in front of his face.

"Yes," he answered by default. He was always okay. He couldn't afford to not be okay. "Yeah, sorry. I just got lost in thought for a minute. Let's go over things one more time before Dante shows up."

For a second, he thought she might protest. She'd never been one to hide her emotions, and irritation with him had headlined her list enough times for him to recognize it on her pretty face. But she must have sensed that this was a big deal, because she said, "His phone was turned off because he was late paying the bill, which is why he didn't respond to my texts until now. He said he wanted to talk in person and asked if he could meet me. Said it was important. I told him yes, and he should be here in"—Carmen checked the time stamp on her phone—"ten minutes."

Liam nodded, his head back in the game. "Okay. I alerted the team and sent screen shots of the text exchange to Capelli for the record. I'll hang back until Dante gets here. I don't want to risk him running when he realizes you're not alone. There's a patrol unit around the corner on the off chance that he bolts anyway, but I don't think it'll come to that."

"So, I just have to talk to him for a minute and that's it?" Carmen asked.

"That's it," he confirmed. "I'll take care of the rest."

Liam knew from the team text stream that Isabella and Sinclair were already on their way to the precinct, waiting to meet him there once he got Dante to agree to talk. As soon as that happened, Carmen would officially be free of this case, and the unit would be a hell of a lot closer to finding out who had killed Axel—and why.

Carmen sent a stare around the shadowy parking lot. One other person had showed up at the laundromat, but as soon as her laundry had gone into the machines, she'd put earbuds in and gotten lost in her phone. Liam preferred having this conversation away from the fluorescent spotlight of the laundromat, anyway, and even though the guy might be a flight risk once he realized what was going on, Liam didn't think for a second that the exchange with Dante would be dangerous.

If he did, Carmen sure as hell wouldn't be anywhere near the guy.

With one final nod, Liam slipped back into the darkened entryway of an adjacent dance studio. His vantage point gave him a good view of Carmen, leaning against her car and looking bored as hell under the lone streetlight in the lot. He used his time wisely, scanning his surroundings for Dante's most probable escape routes if he decided to run and any roadblocks that would slow pursuit. Less than a minute after Liam had memorized the layout of the parking lot, he caught sight of a figure headed in Carmen's direction from the opposite side of the street. The person was tall and lanky, with a dark hoodie pulled low enough that Liam couldn't be entirely certain they were male, let alone Dante. But then the person approached Carmen, stopping a few paces away from where she leaned against her car and tugged the hood away from his face, and yep. It was him.

Liam moved over the pavement on silent feet, his eyes on Carmen and Dante the whole way. She was talking to him in low tones, keeping his attention focused on her as Liam got close enough to make out her words.

"...please, just tell me what's going on."

"I can't. You have to tell the cops you don't know me," Dante said, and Liam planted himself directly in the guy's exit path.

"It's a little late for that, Dante. Don't run," he added as Dante spun around, his eyes searching wildly and his body poised for flight. Liam held his hands up in an effort to put Dante at ease. "Detective Liam Hollister. I just want to talk."

Dante swung back toward Carmen, his eyes wide. "Are you fvcking kidding me? You called the cops?"

"No, they called me, remember? Anyway, you didn't give me much choice," she pointed out, standing her ground. "You didn't really think they wouldn't figure out how you know me, did you? Speaking of which, how's your wrist?"

Dante's gaze dropped to the cast poking out from the sleeve of his hoodie, and ah, that explained his trip to the clinic. "Fine. But I'm not talking."

"Dante, you're not in any trouble," Liam started, but Dante cut him off with a humorless laugh.

“You really don’t know sh!t.”

“You’re right. I don’t,” Liam agreed, and at least that got his attention. “But I’d really like to know who k!lled Axel, and I think you can help with that.”

Dante paused before digging in. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Frustration snapped in Liam’s veins, but he had to play this cool if he wanted any chance of getting Dante to budge. “I’ve got phone records that say you do,” he said quietly. “The calls between you and Axel. The ones he made to Carmen’s cell phone after you gave him her number. The last one, when he called to tell you she wasn’t picking up.”

Liam took a half step toward Dante, his calm locked in place. “You called nine-one-one that night, didn’t you? You knew Axel needed help and you wanted to save him.”

Sadness flickered over his face, but still, he said, “I told you, I don’t know what you’re talking about, man.”

Liam tried again. “Axel is dead, Dante. I need to find out who k!lled him, and I can’t do that unless you talk to me.”

“I don’t have anything to say.”

“If Axel was mixed up in something dangerous, we can protect you—”

“No,” Dante bit out, taking a step back on the pavement. “You can’t. We’re done here.”

He turned to walk away. Desperate, Liam opened his mouth to push the issue, to say something—fvck, anything—that would get the guy to talk. But the next thing he heard wasn’t his voice.

It was Carmen’s.

“It won’t work, you know,” she said, stopping Dante in his tracks.

“What?”

“It won’t work,” she repeated. “If you’re jammed up in this, too, running away from it won’t help.”

Dante crossed his arms over the front of his hoodie and rolled his eyes. “Right. Like you have a clue.”

Carmen speared him with a stare that glittered in the low light of the parking lot, and oh, hell. “You think I’m standing here for sh!ts and giggles? I know exactly what it’s like to

be where you are. My former drug dealer used to kick me around. Withhold my next high until I got so desperate for it that I'd do anything, including have s3x with him or his friends."

Liam's heart slammed, sending white-hot rage through him even though he was well aware of Carmen's past. Dante didn't respond, but he also didn't leave, so Liam remained quiet as Carmen kept talking.

"I didn't have anywhere to go. No family. No friends who weren't in as deep as I was. No job and no skills. I didn't even have a car. So, I was stuck with him, which was how he wanted it. And, just like you, I thought that if I could just convince myself that things weren't so bad, I'd be okay. But then, one night, he got so high that he beat a woman to death."

"Shit," Dante breathed, and Carmen nodded.

"I realized then that if I didn't do something, he'd only hurt more people, and one of them would probably be me. I went to the cops. I didn't believe them, either, when they said they'd protect me. I thought they were full of sh!t," she said, looking at Liam with an apologetic shrug. "No offense. Just keeping it honest."

He shook his head in a non-verbal "none taken", but didn't want to interrupt. She looked at Dante again and said, "But they weren't. Detective Hollister's partner kept me safe, and I testified against my dealer. He'll be in jail for the rest of his life. So, even though I know you want to feel like you'll be okay if you don't say anything, the truth is, you won't. Like it or not—and believe me, I know you don't—telling the cops what you know is the only safe option you have."

"You don't understand." Dante shook his head, fear glinting in his eyes. "These people are crazy. If I talk to anyone, and I mean, like, one word, they'll either frame me for Axel's murder or k!!! me. Maybe both."

Liam found his voice. "No one's going to know you talked to us. You have my word. We'll keep you safe."

"He's good for it," Carmen said, sending a pang through Liam's chest. "I promise."

Dante blew out a breath. For a beat, then another, he said nothing, the silence growing louder and louder until finally... "I'll only talk to you under two conditions."

"Name them," Liam said.

"The first is that I get immunity. I didn't have anything to do with what happened to Axel," he insisted, and Liam believed him. "But this stuff we were jammed up in? Let's just say, it's not exactly on the level."

Liam nodded. "Finding out who killed Axel is my first priority. Ultimately, it's up to my boss and the DA's office, but they want what I want. I'm sure we can work around your extra-curriculars. What's the second thing?"

Dante pointed at Carmen, his expression turning to pure resolve. "She stays with me the whole time."

Whoa. "That's not—"

"I didn't ask," Dante said, turning to speak to Carmen. "You want me to trust these guys, but I don't. I trust you. Either you stay with me, or this doesn't happen. Take it or leave it."

Miranda sat back against the antique chair behind her desk and surveyed her plan. Although the décor in her home office was more luxurious than the one she'd earned at the hospital, the chair was an exact match for The Throne she sat in there. Presence was power, and Miranda wanted to remind everyone with whom she did business that she held all of it.

Speaking of business...

Ever since her conversation with Royce about expansion, she'd been busy. Her husband was a smart enough man, but his vision was no match for hers. From the very first moment she'd realized how easy it was to falsify medical records to reap the benefits (so to speak) from both the insurance companies and the hospital itself, she'd known how big this venture would become, just as she'd known she'd be in complete control of every decision and every move.

Royce had grown easy to manipulate over time—he liked money and sex, and she kept him flush with both. But Miranda craved power, and that meant that the empire she'd created was never going to be big enough.

She wanted more than the funds she siphoned from the hospital every month. More than the money she covertly stole from insurance companies, and more than all of Royce's middlemen and pawns like Axel Franklin brought in with their drug scams.

Specifically, she wanted the Marlene Davenport Clinic.

"Miranda," Royce said from the doorway. "It's late, sweetheart. Don't you want to come to bed?"

His loosened tie and the cut-crystal tumbler of Scotch in his hand—from the glassy look of his eyes, not his first—told her he was in the exact frame of mind that would make him open to her pitch, so she smiled and pushed back from her desk.

"Soon. There's something I'd like to talk to you about first, though."

“Oh?” Royce moved into the room, the sound of his footsteps muted by the Aubusson rug.

Miranda rose and walked over to the love seat, crossing her legs enough to showcase her four-inch heels but not so much as to be obvious about it. “Well, I promised you some ideas on how to expand, and I think I’ve come up with a plan you’ll like.”

Royce’s eyes lit up. “I knew you’d come around to the idea of partnering with McGee.”

Keeping her disdain from showing took effort. “I did look into that,” she said, because Royce’s ego was a beast that needed careful tending. She’d done plenty of digging on Daniel McGee—after all, the man had been the best in the business before she’d come along. There was a possibility he’d prove useful.

Royce puffed up with so much pride, he looked in danger of spontaneous combustion. “See? I told you it’s a good idea. My sources say he’s looking for a new venture. I think we can offer him exactly what he’s looking for.”

“We don’t know what he’s looking for,” Miranda countered. “And, as you said, he’s not going to agree to a small offer. Bringing him on board may be too risky.”

“Or it could make us more lucrative than ever. And with money comes power, Miranda. This could be exactly what we’re looking for.”

Miranda paused. She’d always considered herself an excellent businesswoman, above all else. Ever since she’d seduced her anatomy professor in exchange for an A as an undergrad, she’d been making calculated business decisions to attain success. She hadn’t enjoyed the s3x—rather disappointing that an anatomy professor hadn’t been able to come within a mile of finding her clitoris.

But Miranda had done what had been necessary in order to gain the power she craved. His career. His marriage. She could have destroyed that professor. So, yes, a few sessions of him gracelessly shoving his d!ck inside of her while she faked her org*asms had been worth the power she’d gained from it.

The question was, could working with Daniel McGee be worth it, too?

Royce gave her a condescending smile, and Christ, he really did have an ego the size of a baseball stadium if he thought she fell for his pseudo-charm. “But where are my manners? You said you’ve come up with a plan. Tell me what you have in mind.”

“I want the Davenport clinic,” she said, cutting directly to the chase.

Royce’s brows lifted, although his Botox kept his forehead from letting them get far. “Lofty aspirations,” he said. “The clinic has been quite successful over the past few

years. There's a large patient pool we could exploit if we had a trusted contact with access."

"Exactly," Miranda said. Although the clinic was part of the larger hospital campus that also included rehabilitation facilities and short- and long-term specialized care units, it operated as an entirely separate entity than the hospital itself. As such, even as Remington Memorial's CEO, Miranda had no access to their systems. The financials. The claims. The patient records. None of it. "I've been looking at several options in that regard."

"Connor Bradshaw might be useful," Royce said. "After all, his father used to be in the game."

Miranda shook her head. "I thought of that, too." Duke Bradshaw had been the most powerful CEO on the East Coast before he'd been indicted for fraud nearly a decade and a half ago. The charges had never stuck, but Miranda had read enough to know the man had gotten away with murder—maybe literally.

"Unfortunately, that apple fell far from the tree. Both Connor and his wife, Harlow Davenport-Bradshaw, are clean. They don't appear to have had any contact with Duke at all, and her father is Maxwell Davenport."

"President of Davenport Industries?" Royce asked.

"The very same."

According to several articles in *Forbes* and *The Harvard Business Review*, Maxwell Davenport had a reputation for being a complete hard-as*s. But, as hard as Miranda had tried, she hadn't been able to uncover so much as a whiff of questionable business practices, by Davenport or any of his board members. He was sharp, highly driven, and—unfortunately for her—as straight as an axe when it came to ethics. In fact, he was nearly as righteous as Remington Memorial's Chief of Staff, Dr. Keith Langston, who had been Miranda's nemesis for years. The sanctimonious bastard.

Miranda refocused, intent on forming a plan to get a foothold in the clinic. "Connor and Harlow have sterling reputations. He's a decorated Air Force veteran, and they both have a long-standing history of charity work within the community. Aside from Connor's tie to Duke Bradshaw, which isn't a secret, there are no skeletons in their closets. No drug problems, no gambling addictions, no massive debt." She'd spent the better part of the day looking for leverage and found none. "Trying to recruit either of them is too dangerous. There simply isn't enough proper motivation to make them check their integrity at the door."

"Agreed." Royce sipped his Scotch. "Still, surely not everyone who works there can boast such moral integrity, can they? Perhaps we could find someone with more to lose."

Finally, something Miranda could smile about. "There are a few potentials. A physician's assistant who's carrying three loans to keep his mother in an Alzheimer's care facility—"

"Not bad," Royce said. "He might be willing to do a lot for the money to ensure her care."

Of course, Miranda never led with her strongest option. "There's also a nurse with quite the police record. Multiple counts of narcotics possession, one arrest for distribution. Her dealer ended up killing a woman. Nasty mess."

"She could be useful in a few ways," Royce said. "After all, we do need to replace Axel. If she still has contacts who can move a good amount of fentanyl, and could get us access to the clinic database, too, that might be a very worthwhile connection to make. Two birds, and all."

Miranda nodded. "I agree. I'll have to do some more research, but I think it's worth pursuing. She may have other weaknesses that make her willing to be of assistance."

The truth was, Miranda was limited with exactly how far she could alter the insurance documentation and hospital records at Remington Memorial without raising suspicion, especially from Langston, who always followed the rules to the letter. Being able to dip her toes in the clinic's pool would expand her reach exponentially, not to mention pad her offshore bank accounts, both of which were a win.

An idea bloomed in her head, taking immediate root. It wasn't without risk, which, under normal circumstances, would be enough to make her hesitate. But every so often, an opportunity that couldn't be ignored presented itself, and the risk was worth the reward.

Leaning in, she took the glass of Scotch from Royce's hand, treating herself to a sip of the smoky liquid before saying, "Darling, what if we could have the best of both worlds?"

Greed flashed in Royce's eyes. "I'm listening."

"Daniel McGee is a dark horse, but he does have a very specific area of expertise, and, as you said, the clinic's patient database presents several opportunities for growth. If we had a clean way to access it and someone like McGee with the knowledge to oversee the schemes we orchestrate..."

"We could run multiple scams at once out of the clinic and increase our earnings by millions without having to lift a finger. And we'd have the perfect fall guy on the off chance that McGee gets caught," Royce said.

"Exactly. We'd have to be careful about how we cut him in," she added quickly, because, while she didn't mind paying him for his services, she wasn't about to lose an ounce of control to the man, no matter how much expertise he brought to the table. "But I'm sure he'll appreciate our discretion. After all, the last thing he wants is to go back to

jail." If McGee was caught, his return trip to prison would be on a one-way ticket. It was excellent leverage.

Royce smiled. "I knew you'd see it my way."

Miranda battled the urge to smack him. But letting him think this whole scheme was his idea would be a small price compared to the payout when it worked. Christ, let him think he'd masterminded the whole damned thing. She'd be the one with the power in the end. "Of course, darling."

"I'll reach out to McGee and set up a meeting."

"Wonderful."

A pulse of excitement ran up Miranda's spine. This would take extremely careful planning, of course. She'd need to be able to pin everything on McGee if things fell apart. But if all the pieces aligned and all the players did her bidding, she wouldn't just gain power.

She'd be fvcking untouchable.