

The Saint Chapter 13 - Tips

Liam's week had been for sh!t. They'd caught a case that had been low-action, high-paperwork, which—while good for the unharmed robbery victim—had made Liam's eyes want to bleed. On top of that, Cutter had never texted Dante with a new job, and when Dante had finally texted him at the team's instruction, he discovered the burner cell Cutter had been using was out of service.

Dante had made no less than a dozen panicked calls to Liam in the last day and a half, absolutely convinced that whoever had k!lled Axel was going to pop out of the nearest available hidey-hole to turn him into Swiss cheese. The fear wasn't entirely without weight—whoever the k!ller was, he certainly wasn't high on scruples.

But there was already a body count attached to this little endeavor, and chances were low that Axel's k!ller would let Dante twist in the wind. If he wanted Dante dead, he'd have made him that way already. No, it was far more likely that he'd simply cut bait and disappeared.

As far as the k!ller knew, Dante was in the dark about what had happened to Axel, and anyway, Dante had no proof of any wrongdoing. Even worse, Dante had gone through hundreds of mug shots to try and get a positive ID and full name on Cutter, to no avail.

Which meant their one and only lead had stalled out, and they had nowhere to go but to Cold Caseville.

Liam's cell phone vibrated a path across his desk, cutting through the sounds of early afternoon work chatter in the Intelligence office. But instead of Dante, as Liam had expected, Joy Porter's name flashed across the screen, making Liam's heart squeeze.

"Shit," he muttered.

Isabella looked up from her desk, brows raised. "Everything okay?"

As much as he trusted his unit—and when bullets were flying, he really fvcking did—he'd never gone for a reveal on his personal life with any of them, so he said, "Yep. I'll just be a minute." Scooping the phone to his ear, he answered, "Hollister."

"Hi, Liam. It's Joy. Is this a good time?"

"Give me a second to find a quiet place," he said, because something along the lines of "there's never a good time to talk about the man who abandoned me and my family" was pretty much a given. Liam headed through the office and into the meeting room where he and Carmen had met with Dante, pulling the door quietly closed behind him. "What's up?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Joy said. "The paperwork surrounding your father's release is sealed tighter than a bank vault. I dug around as best I could—and believe me, I put my back into it—but I couldn't find a thing on who authorized his release or exactly why. The case notes just say he's been released early for good behavior."

"So, that's it?" Liam's frustration built. "He had fifteen years left on his sentence, and believe me, he's no angel."

Joy paused. "Apparently, he's been a model prisoner, especially for the last few years. He paid restitution to the people whose money he stole. He even petitioned for, and got, funds to expand the prison library. He spearheaded the whole project from start to finish. Taught literacy classes for the other prisoners and everything."

"Forgive me if I'm not impressed," Liam said. "I know Daniel McGee, and he's a con man, through and through. Whatever good behavior he's got to his credit stinks of ulterior motives. He's not a changed man. He's just a Grade-A liar."

"I'm sorry I don't have any answers, Liam. I know this whole thing feels suspect—"

"Because it is," Liam bit out. "Daniel McGee has never done a good deed that wasn't for his own gain. Whatever he did to get out of prison this early, it isn't on the up and up." Someone had to have pulled some strings to make it happen. Or been bribed by someone with a lot to offer.

"Well, I've been told it's a done deal and to stop asking questions. So, I don't disagree that something doesn't smell quite right here, but I also can't keep pushing without pissing off my boss," Joy said, her tone softening by a degree before she said, "I don't suppose Daniel tried to reach out to you or your brother?"

Liam took a deep breath, but his exhale was all snort. "No. At least, not me. I don't know about Jamie. We don't talk a lot."

It was a vague approximation of the truth. Liam hadn't spoken to Jamie in six months. Even then, he hadn't so much spoken to Jamie as he had to the officer from the Fourteenth who had brought Jamie in for loitering, which was really just code for living on the same park bench for a week straight.

Jamie'd had a couple of hypodermic needles on him, but no drugs, and the officer had seen Liam's name in the database as Jamie's emergency contact and called him out of courtesy. Liam had found Jamie a spot in a shelter and made him an appointment with a social worker to get into rehab, which Jamie had—not surprisingly—blown off, then disappeared until the next time.

Daniel wouldn't be able to find Jamie even if he wanted to, which was fine and dandy, because Liam was certain that Satan could host the winter Olympics in his backyard before that would happen.

"I understand," Joy said with kindness. "I wish I could give you more than this, but my boss was clear that the matter is closed. If anything changes, or if you need anything, you'll let me know?"

"Of course." Liam counted to three, scraping his composure together. "Thank you, Joy. I know you did your best."

Disconnecting the call, Liam ran a hand through his hair, letting his palm rest on the back of his neck. He needed to put his feelings about Daniel on lockdown. Nothing good was going to come of them. Anyway, whatever Daniel was up to now, even if it was almost certainly nefarious, wasn't Liam's concern.

He'd already wasted enough time feeling things for a man who'd never felt anything back.

Liam went to shove his phone back in his pocket and his feelings for Daniel back into the hole where they belonged. Before he could get it there though, it vibrated with an incoming text from a blocked number.

It's me. Your favorite ogre. Need to talk. Work related.

His heart bucked in his chest and he hit the call button immediately.

"Hey," Carmen said, her voice one degree above a whisper. "Before you do that thing you do, I'm safe."

Nope. Not buying it for a second. "If you're safe, then why are you calling me from a burner phone and not your cell?" he asked.

Her pause told him his concern was valid. "It's just a precaution. And a very long story."

"What a coincidence. I love long stories."

"This one might change your mind."

Okay, yeah. He'd heard enough. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the clinic," she said, wary. "Halfway through a shift. But I need to talk."

Well, at least she was right about being safe. Connor and Harlow ran that clinic with both their patients' and their employees' well-being front and center. "Okay. Sit tight. I'm on my way."

They exchanged goodbyes and Liam ended the call, his boots already in motion. He headed back to the main office, pausing only to stop by Isabella's desk.

"We need to take a ride," he said quietly.

Her brows gathered in concern despite his no-big-deal tone. "What's up?"

So, so many directions to take that, really. "I'll explain in the car."

Like any great partner, Isabella didn't argue. She simply made sure her badge and weapon were secure, then followed him out of the office and down the hallway. Her patience had its limits, though, and as soon as they were in the Charger, she ditched all pleasantries.

"Okay, Hollister. What the hell is going on?"

He had to smile at her tenacity. No wonder Carmen had trusted her all those years ago. "Carmen just called me."

The beat of silence told him she was making the leap from huh? to whoa. "My Carmen?"

She's my Carmen, screamed some voice from deep in his brain, and Christ, he needed to gather his sh!t. "God, I hope there's only one," he managed to crack. "She's on a burner phone and said she needs to talk. That's all I know, but..."

"It sounds hinky," Isabella finished. "Speaking of which, why exactly did she call you and not me?"

Liam's pulse tapped faster, but he covered it with a shrug. "You'll have to ask her. All I know is that something's up and she didn't want to talk over the phone."

Silence stretched through the car, but it didn't last long. "How long have we been partners?"

"Uh," he grunted in surprise. "Ever since I got to Intelligence."

"So, a long-a.ss time, right?"

"Yeah?" Where was she going with this?

"Don't you think it's about time you actually, oh, I don't know, trust me, then?"

Oh, fvck. She was going there. "I do trust you," Liam managed.

But Isabella was far too quick for that. "Great. Then let's talk about what's really going on between you and Carmen."

“That’s”—personal. Ridiculously complicated. Killing me with want—“not my story to tell.”

It wasn’t that Liam had wanted to shut Isabella out. Yeah, he kept his personal stuff close to the vest, but he wasn’t bullsh!tting when he said he trusted her. There must have been a dozen times over the past few years that he’d nearly spilled the reason for the tension between him and Carmen.

But Carmen had been vulnerable enough that night she’d asked him to stay with her. Blabbing about it, even to Isabella, felt like a violation of trust. Telling her about the k!ss he and Carmen had shared the other night at the laundromat? Even more so. It was personal. Private.

Theirs alone.

Isabella pulled back to stare at him, making him wildly grateful he was driving and didn’t have to return the favor. “You two were at each other’s throats for years, and now, all of a sudden, she’s calling you for help instead of me. Come on, Liam. You’re my partner and she’s my CI. Talk to me here.”

Oh, ouch. She’d pulled the first-name card. Still, Liam didn’t budge. “Look, my not talking about this has nothing to do with me not trusting you, okay? I just want to respect Carmen’s privacy. That’s all.”

“So, there’s something private going on between you two?” Isabella asked, and sh!t, he’d walked riiiiight into that one. Time to get creative.

“Are there things you know about Carmen that you don’t share with me?”

He caught Isabella’s nod out of the corner of his eye. “Of course.”

“And the reason for that is...?”

She sighed, but still answered. “Okay, fine. Because it’s personal.”

“Exactly. If you want to know why she called me, you should ask her.”

“I’m glad you respect Carmen, although I’m not surprised since you’re, like, one of the last remaining decent men on the planet,” Isabella said. “But what does surprise me—and don’t take this the wrong way—is that she trusts you enough to be her first call for help.”

Liam huffed out a sarcastic laugh. “Gee, how could I possibly take that the wrong way?”

"It's Carmen," Isabella said, unfazed. "You may have noticed that she has just a tiny bit of trouble trusting people. With good reason," she added, "but still. The fact that she called you is a huge deal."

"I get it," he said, and hell if it wasn't the understatement of the millennium. "I'm not taking that lightly."

"Good." After a minute, Isabella asked, "So, you have no idea what this is about?"

"No," Liam said truthfully. "The last time I talked to Carmen was four nights ago when we were all at the precinct with Dante."

Isabella shook her head. "Axel's killer wouldn't have any way of connecting her with Dante or Axel's missed calls. Dante hasn't been in contact with her since the other night, right?"

They'd given him very clear instructions not to be, so... "I hope not. But I doubt he'd risk putting her in danger. He knew there might be eyes on him."

"Yeah, that doesn't make a ton of sense," Isabella agreed. "This must be unrelated. But if she used a burner cell to call you from the clinic, then whatever it is, it's not good."

They spent the rest of the trip to the clinic in silence that allowed Liam to find as much of his calm as he was going to. He parked in front of the place, the blazing sunshine and soaring temperatures enough to make him break a sweat in the short walk to the clinic's front door.

The waiting room was half-full, with patients and family members clustered in chairs all throughout the space. Liam bypassed the bank of self-check-in computers mounted to the counter, opting instead to move further down to where the intake nurse sat behind a counter-to-ceiling plexiglass shield.

"Hi," he said, giving her a smile so well-practiced, he could pull it off even if he was in a coma. "Macie, right? Detectives Hollister and Walker. We're here to see Carmen Desoto, please."

"Oh, of course," the woman said, after blinking twice in surprise. Picking up the phone on her desk, she dialed an extension, murmuring quietly for a few seconds, then hanging up. "I'll come around to walk you back."

"Thanks," Liam said. He and Isabella made it through the double doors, past the triage stations, and all the way into the conference room that was quickly becoming a familiar place before his patience began to fray. Carmen sat in the chair farthest from the door, her face drawn and her dark eyes worried as hell, and right, that did exactly jack sh!t to help chill him out.

"Thanks, Macie," Carmen said. As soon as the woman had the door closed, she looked at Liam. "Sorry for dragging you out of work."

With a sh!tload of effort, he smiled. "You forget, I live for this."

The words somehow managed to calm her, at least enough to lower her scrubs-clad shoulders by a fraction, and he didn't hesitate to dive in. "So, what's going on?"

Carmen glanced at Isabella, who had given Liam the lead since Carmen had called him, not her, and blew out a breath. "Royce Gannon just came to see me. He's on a bunch of hospital committees, and he's married to Remington Memorial's CEO."

"Royce Gannon?" Liam's WTF-o-meter hit a high note. He'd never even heard of the guy. "What did he want?"

"A lot, as it turns out."

Carmen spilled a story that made Liam more shocked with every syllable. She started with Gannon's knowledge of her involvement in the underground clinic, complete with surveillance photos that he'd brazenly let her keep "as a reminder", then moved on to blackmail. By the time she got past his involvement in a large-scale insurance fraud and landed on the watch she'd seen on Gannon's wrist just before he'd arrogantly breezed out the door, Liam was ready to march across the street to the hospital and throttle the smug bastard wherever he stood.

"Holy sh!t," Isabella breathed, looking at Liam.

He nodded. "Yeah, that about covers it."

"So, you believe me?" Carmen asked, eyes wide and just the slightest bit wary. "I know it sounds crazy. Like, right out of a movie, even, but I swear—"

"God, Carmen, of course we believe you," Liam said, and Isabella nodded in agreement.

"I didn't know what else to do," Carmen said. "I know the burner phone is a little over the top, but Gannon had those pictures of me. I didn't want to risk calling or texting from my cell phone, and there's a bodega up the street, so..."

Isabella shook her head. "Not over the top at all. In fact, it was smart." She looked at Liam. "We're going to have to take this to the team. Looks like this case might not be dead after all."

"What do you mean, dead?" Carmen asked, dividing her stare between Isabella and Liam. "Didn't you have a meet with Cutter? I thought you were going to go undercover."

"I was," Liam said. "But Cutter never called Dante, and the burner he was using has been turned off. We're still trying to find another way in, though—"

"You don't need one," Carmen said, and oh, no. No, no, what was that look on her face?

Too late, he realized it was determination. "Dante's not your CI on this case," Carmen said. "I am."