

The Saint Chapter 15 - Tips

Liam had never been a fan of rocking the boat. He liked things calm. Controlled. Cooler than a frosty beer on a hot summer afternoon. So, the fact that his mouth had opened and the words, “I want to go undercover with her” had flown right out, just as easy as you motherfvcking please?

Yeah. This didn’t bode well for his composure, even if it was a smart plan to nail Gannon.

“I’m listening,” Sinclair said, which was great, because it saved Liam from having to deal with both the WTF on Isabella’s face and Carmen’s wide-eyed stare.

Facts. Yes. Facts first. Feelings later. Or, hey, better yet, never. “This won’t be much different than how we were going to do things with Dante,” he started. His brain finally kicked into gear, a plan beginning to formulate with clarity, and yeah. Yeah, this would work.

“In fact, this is even better. Carmen is a seasoned CI, so she won’t need a whole lot of coaching. But it’s a big job, so we don’t want her to go in alone. I was going to pose as a dealer who could move a lot of product to a new market for Cutter and try and get an intro up the chain, anyway. Carmen’s already up the chain, right at Gannon’s level. Sending me in with her to take him down is a smart play.”

Isabella tilted her head. “The idea has merit,” she said slowly, looking at Carmen. “Not that I don’t think you’d do an amazing job on your own. But this guy may well have killed Axel, and who knows what else he’s done that we don’t even know about yet. Giving you direct protection in the field is a smart idea.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Sinclair said.

“What’re you thinking for cover?” Maxwell asked Liam, and fvck, might as well trot out the truth like the racehorse it was.

“I’m not sure yet,” Liam admitted. For fvck’s sake, he was lucky he’d gotten this far. “But you’re the expert. What do you think?”

Maxwell had been their number one UC detective until recently. He still worked cases when circumstances called for it—using your best asset to catch a criminal was just smart police work. But ever since he’d found out he had a daughter, then gotten engaged to Frankie, he’d been a lot less likely to argue when someone else volunteered for the job.

“You’ll have to pose as someone who can bring more to the table than Carmen alone,” Maxwell said. “More business is something Gannon is clearly after if he’s running multiple scams. We already know he’s got a healthy ego, so he’s not going to bite

unless there's something in it for him. The bigger, the better," Maxwell added, and Hale picked up the thread with a nod.

"Yeah, but we can't go with the drug dealer thing anymore. If we let on that we know he's doing anything other than insurance fraud—"

"He'll know we know a lot more than we should," Liam finished.

"So, what could you offer Gannon on the fraud that he doesn't already have?" Garza asked, his dark eyes narrowed in thought.

"What about protection?" Carmen asked. All eyes swung in her direction, and even though her gaze went round for a split second, she didn't shrink back. "I mean, Gannon already has people running his scams, and you don't want something low-level like what Dante's doing, anyway. Like you said, you have to make it worthwhile for him, otherwise he'll say no." She turned to Isabella. "You're always telling me to keep it simple and tell as much truth as I can when I do stuff for you. So, what if Liam just poses as himself?"

"You want to walk into your meet with Gannon with an Intelligence detective on your h!p?" Isabella asked, her shock obvious. "He'll k!!l you both on the sp0t."

Liam's thoughts raced, and oh. Oh, this was good. "Not if we convince him I'm dirty."

"Exactly," Carmen said. "If I could bring in someone from the RPD who would be willing to make sure our tracks were covered, then it would probably go a long way toward getting on Gannon's good side, right?"

"If he doesn't get pissed you ran your mouth about the fraud to a cop," Isabella said. "And that's a big if."

Liam paused. She was right. It was risky as hell. Still... "Pissed is one thing. But he needs Carmen to get this job done. I'll have to fast talk him, but he'll get over it."

Thankfully, Garza agreed. "If Hollister can convince Gannon he's good for the protection from prying eyes, it could kick the door wide open for other opportunities, like the prescription scam. We could use that to try and get intel on Axel's murder."

Isabella nodded, clearly warming to the idea, too. "That tracks. Bad Hollister's willing to keep the insurance scam off the radar because he's clearly got questionable morals and decent means to make that happen. But if he offers Gannon protection, he'll want something in return for making sure things go off without a hitch."

"And since Bad Hollister is...well, bad, it would be perfectly logical for him to question what else Gannon's up to. He'd know the scam is too clean to be a one-off," Capelli added. "Being cut in on other scams would make it worth his while."

Liam arched a brow, unable to help himself. “Are we seriously calling me Bad Hollister?”

“Oh, yeah,” Hale said, grinning. “It has a nice ring to it.”

“Bad Hollister needs good motivation, though,” Maxwell said. “He can’t just be some random dirty cop who turns up out of the blue offering protection. Why would he care? Like you said, he’s not getting anything for his trouble unless Gannon agrees to cut him in on something.”

“Unless he’s offering to protect Carmen, not Gannon,” Capelli offered. “If their cover story puts them in some sort of close relationship, wanting to keep her safe from Gannon would be a very logical reason for Hollister to jump in. And a very logical reason for her to go to him in the first place.”

Hale’s eyes brightened. “Ooooh! Carmen gets blackmailed by Gannon, gets all upset, naturally. So, she goes to Bad Hollister and confides in him. Bad Hollister gets all broody and mad—you’ll probably have to work on that part, Mr. Calm, Cool, and Collected—and shows up to tell Gannon he’ll protect the scam because of Carmen, but then wants to know what’s in it for him. Leverage for leverage. I like it!”

Liam’s pulse snapped out a warning as the reality of the situation kicked in. “We are going to have to play this carefully, though. I’m good, but Gannon’s not going to like it if I just show up as some angry older brother trying to throw my weight around. This is a guy who might have stabbed Axel just for getting greedy, and he’s blackmailing Carmen. He’s not exactly harmless.”

“First of all, that’s why you’re going in with her, goofball. In case he freaks out.” Hale rolled her eyes, then turned her gaze to Carmen. “Plus, Carmen’s tough. She can talk her way out of a lot, too. She might not even need much help to get Gannon to see that bringing you on board is a good thing for everyone involved.”

Carmen blinked. “Thanks.”

“What’s the second of all?” Liam asked, trying really fvcking hard not to react to the softness in Carmen’s tone or the fact that they were probably about to dive headfirst into danger.

Garza took the lead on this one. “No chance Gannon is going to buy you being her older brother. He’s too good not to have done a background check on her family connections before blackmailing her. Something like an older brother who’s also a cop? Yeah, that’s a red flag he’d definitely notice.”

Sh!t. “Okay,” Liam said. “So, what then?”

“God, for a detective, you can be sooooo thick sometimes,” Hale said with a laugh. “You’ll have to be her boyfriend. Obviously.”

Liam's heart decided to run a goddamn marathon in his chest. Cool, cool. You have to play it cool, you great big uncool idiot. "That's not really up to me."

Everyone looked at Carmen, except for Isabella, who was zeroed in on him like a sniper. It took Carmen a handful of beats before she realized all eyes were on her, and she crossed her arms over the front of her light blue scrubs, her gaze wary. "What?"

"What Detective Hollister is saying is that we won't give you a cover you're not comfortable with," Sinclair said. "You're both going to have to be very convincing in order for Gannon to believe you. So, if you're not okay pretending he's a protective but morally unsound cop trying to look out for his girlfriend—you—while also trying to make some money for his trouble, then we'll find another angle."

"Oh. Oh." Her lips parted in surprise, and the last wisps of Liam's composure left the building. "Well, Gannon already thinks I'm a criminal. My having a crooked cop boyfriend kind of makes sense. And this is the best way to get what you need to put Gannon away and figure out if he's the one who killed Axel, right?"

"Technically?" Maxwell asked. "Yes. The protective boyfriend/bad cop cover is the one that gives us the best shot."

Carmen didn't hesitate. "Okay, then. That's what you should do."

"We," Isabella corrected. "Make no mistake, mija. If you agree to pose as Hollister's girlfriend—and you do get to choose—then we aren't the only ones in charge. I'm not saying you'll get the same leeway we do," she added quickly. "You're still a CI, and Hollister's an Intelligence detective, so he'll take point. He's done this a lot more times than you. But we'll plan the whole thing as a team and coach you through the meets, and you get a voice, especially when it comes to your comfort zone. Gannon's not an amateur, and you two really are going to have to sell being a couple. That means you have to tell us what you're okay with. And what you're not."

Carmen's arms loosened from around her rib cage, her dark brows gathered in obvious thought for a beat, then another, before finally, she said, "Gannon is ripping these insurance companies off. He's putting the clinic—and who knows, maybe even the hospital—at risk. Patients could be next, and even though you can't prove it yet, he probably killed Axel. I'll do whatever I have to in order to stop him. If pretending to be Liam's girlfriend is the best way, then I'm in."

As if her determination wasn't enough to end Liam all by itself, she looked at him and said, "As long as you're okay with doing it this way, too?"

"Absolutely." The word vaulted out of his mouth, shoved by some primal instinct he knew he should rein in, but couldn't. This was the best way to take Gannon down. Just as long as he could lock his control back into place and keep it there, he'd be fine.

Sinclair sent one last look between him and Carmen, then nodded. "Alright. Then let's get moving. Capelli, we're going to need a cover for Hollister as a dirty cop. Some fake disciplinary reports, a few questionable associations. You know the drill."

"You got it, boss. One Bad Hollister, coming right up," Capelli said, starting to type far faster than any human should be able to.

Sinclair continued, "Maxwell, let's get started on a full strategy. I want to cover anything Gannon could possibly throw at us. And Garza, let's keep digging into both Gannon and Miranda to see what we can find. If she's got her hands in this, I want to know now." He turned toward Carmen, and damn it, Liam knew the look on the man's face all too well. Whatever he was about to say, she was going to hate. "Carmen, it's time for us to let Connor and Harlow know what's going on."

Panic ripped across her face, then ripped into Liam's chest. "You can't. Please. I'm going to lose my job. My license."

"We don't have to tell them what leverage Gannon has over you," Sinclair said. "But in order to get irrefutable evidence against Gannon and anyone else involved, we may have to head into some gray area. They need to know that you'll probably be hacking into their database."

"You want me to really give Gannon access to those files?" she asked, the question doing nothing to ease her alarm.

"It would be temporary," Liam promised. "But we have to let him into the database, then track him through the whole fraud if we want to nail him."

"Anything he does will be reversed as soon as we have enough to arrest him," Isabella promised. "But we do have to catch him red-handed for charges to stick."

Carmen gave up a resigned nod. "I guess that makes sense. But I really don't want Connor and Harlow to know about the night clinic. Not just because it will put my job and license at risk, although I'm not going to lie, that's part of it. But as directors of the Davenport Clinic, they're almost certainly obligated to report something like that, and the people there are really just trying to help those who can't afford healthcare otherwise. If they get shut down, those people have nowhere to go, and the doctors and nurses who volunteer there will get in huge trouble, just for trying to help."

Liam shook his head, pulling his calm together even though it took far more effort than it should have. But he had to reassure her, even if it was temporary. "Let's focus on Gannon first. We'll tell Connor and Harlow only what we have to for now. If we have to disclose anything about the night clinic down the line, we'll come up with the best way to keep everyone involved as safe as we can. It's Connor and Harlow. They're not going to jump to conclusions without at least hearing us out, especially when there's a bigger fish to fry, here. Okay?"

Carmen nodded slowly. "Okay. Yeah. I guess we can do that."

"Alright, everyone," Sinclair said, nodding a silent good job in Liam's direction. "We don't know when Gannon's going to reach out to Carmen, so we don't have time to waste. Garza, I want to know everyone Gannon and Miranda Astor do business with, everyone they call, every charity they donate to, all of it. I even want to know what they both had for lunch today and whether they used the proper fork to eat it. While we're digging, Isabella, pull up whatever hospital records you can get your hands on. If there's anything that looks even the slightest bit crooked, I want it on that board. Hollister, work with Maxwell and Hale to get both covers together, then we'll circle back to bring Connor and Harlow into the loop. Understood?"

"Copy that," Liam said, along with everyone else in the room except for Carmen, who simply nodded.

"Carmen, we'll have you stick around to make sure the cover story we come up with works for you," Maxwell said, his voice more gentle than usual as everyone began to get to work, and Liam made a mental note to buy the guy's first round once they wrapped this case up.

"I'm going to need your cell phone, too," Capelli said, adding a small smile to his normally serious expression.

"Okaaaaay?" she said, although it was so clearly laced with WTF that Capelli had mercy on her.

"It's precautionary, but Gannon was obviously tracking you. He may have simply had someone follow you for a few days; it's the easiest way to do surveillance undetected."

Carmen's mouth pressed into a grim line. "But you think he might have tapped my cell phone somehow, too."

She'd clearly already thought of it herself, having texted Liam from a burner phone. Not that she looked thrilled about the prospect in the least.

"You were smart not to use it or the Davenport Clinic phone to call Detective Hollister," Capelli said. "I can give it a quick check to be sure it's clean. Chances are good that it is. Gannon would have had to go to a lot of trouble to tap it, and it would leave a potential trail he probably doesn't want. But"—here, Capelli hesitated again, and damn it, this was a lot, even for someone as resilient as Carmen—"now that you're going undercover, we'll probably need to check your car and your apartment, as well, just to be really sure the surveillance was temporary."

Her eyes widened for just a fraction of a second before she gave up a slow nod. "Do what you've got to do, I guess." She pulled her cell phone out of her bag and handed it over to Capelli, along with her keys.

"Oh, ah." Capelli shook his head, adjusting his glasses before saying, "That's okay. I can check your car and your apartment without taking your keys."

"Great. That's reassuring," she mumbled, and oh, hell. How had he not seen this before?

Carmen wasn't prickly by way of a bad attitude, and she wasn't rough or tough by design. Her sarcasm was a finely honed defense mechanism.

Kind of like his calm.

"You know what, you're right," Liam told her, taking them both by surprise if her expression was anything to go by. "Your privacy has been invaded. You're being threatened. And now we're throwing a lot at you on top of all that, and it's all pretty intense. Would it make you feel better if Capelli walked you through exactly what he'll be doing? Because we can absolutely make that happen. Just say the word."

Carmen's look of confusion turned to surprise. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Liam promised. He couldn't take her out of this sh!t sandwich with Gannon, and he couldn't nail the guy for blackmail, fraud, and possibly murder without her help. But he could damn well offer this one small thing to make her feel better, and nothing was going to get in the way of that.

Carmen looked at him, her expression impossibly hard to read. Then her chin lifted, and okay, yeah, that look, Liam would know in the dark.

"It's not that I don't trust you. I know you guys won't do anything you don't have to, and I get that you—we—have to be sure Gannon won't figure out what we're up to. But, um"—she turned her gaze to Capelli—"yeah. Just out of curiosity, how are you going to get into my car and my apartment without keys?"

God, the question might as well have been a two-week vacation in the Bahamas for as happy as Capelli was to have it. "I'm glad you asked," he said, his eyes lighting up. "Your car is a bit of an easy one, in that I don't need to get into it so much as under it. The vast majority of tracking devices used by criminals who aren't surveillance experts—"

"Gannon," Liam piped in, and Capelli didn't even skip a beat as he nodded.

"—are placed on the exterior of a vehicle. I'll sweep your car electronically after I do a thorough visual search of the undercarriage and tires just to be absolutely sure, but the odds that he'd use something that sophisticated just to track your movements are exceedingly low."

"I bet you know them, don't you?" Carmen asked, and ha! Capelli blushed.

"Well, I don't mean to brag, and there are some variables that are a bit subjective, but I feel safe saying we're looking at about twenty-thousand to one, with a one to two percent margin of error."

Carmen cracked a very tiny but very real smile. "I can live with that. How about my apartment?"

"Trickier," Capelli said. "On the off chance that Gannon does have a camera set up in your apartment, if I just go in looking for it, he'll see me. That's no good, so I'll have to get creative."

"Creative," she repeated, and Capelli nodded.

"I've found that it's rare for most building superintendents to turn away a representative from the gas company who's investigating a potential leak, and I may just have access to a pair of gas company coveralls for occasions such as these."

"Won't my super need to stay with you while you look?" Carmen asked.

Capelli smiled, clearly impressed. "By law, yes. If you can't be present in an emergency situation, he needs to stay with me while I search. But I may have done this a time or two before." He cleared his throat. "Hypothetically."

She lifted a brow. "Right."

"I can make it look like I'm searching for a gas leak while I do a thorough sweep for surveillance devices and he won't know a thing. Even better, on the off chance that Gannon is also watching, it won't look suspicious to him, either."

"Sorry, won't he think it's just a little suspicious when you kill the feed?" Carmen held her forefinger and thumb less than an inch apart, but this one, Liam could field.

"We can't risk tipping Gannon off. If he is tapped into your place, we'll leave the feeds live and move you somewhere secure. We can do it under the guise of our covers, make it seem like you're staying with me. But, really, you'll just spend a little time in either a hotel or a safehouse, depending on what's available."

"Oh. Okay," she said, offering Capelli a nod of thanks a second later. "Thanks for walking me through that. It helps to know how all of this works."

"I'm happy to explain anything you like. Anytime," he said. "And don't worry. I promise not to disturb anything in your apartment."

She shrugged. To anyone else in the room, the move almost certainly looked like one more extension of the hard shell she always kept locked around her. But her shoulders were just stiff enough for Liam to know far better.

Of course, the vulnerability was gone in a flash. "I promise there's not much there to disturb, other than four loads of laundry that need to be folded and some very questionable milk in the fridge. But if the spirit moves you..."

One corner of Capelli's mouth lifted. "My girlfriend is the same way with laundry. Trust me, I've seen it all before. This morning, in fact."

"She sounds like a woman after my own heart," Carmen said.

Oh, God. Getting Carmen and b.ra.ssy, sassy firefighter Shae McCullough in the same room might be dangerous.

A fact that Capelli likely realized, because he tapped out, lickety split. "I'll get started on your phone right now so you can have it back quickly."

"Thanks." Carmen watched him take her cell phone to his workstation, where he plugged it in to presumably start running nine different kinds of detection programs, before turning back to Liam. "So, I guess we should do this."

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

"Of course I'm okay," she said, rolling her eyes in that typical Carmen way that said not only had she been okay since birth, but she was going to be okay long after she was dead, too.

She was so convincing that Liam almost believed her.