

The Saint Chapter 17 - Tips

Carmen was so not okay. Yeah, she'd been in more than a few bad situations, and yeah again, some had been of the holy-sh!t, this-might-get-me-dead variety. But just because she'd gotten up close and personal with that particular brand of adrenaline before and had crafted the armor to deal with it didn't mean it didn't freak her out.

She'd been followed. Photographed. Blackmailed. Threatened. And now she was going to have to put everything she'd worked so hard for on the line by handing over access to the Davenport Clinic's database to a man who was almost certainly a k!ller, and pretend Liam was her boyfriend on top of it?

Yep. Definitely not okay.

Not that she wouldn't rather be skinned alive than admit it.

"Hey."

Too late, Carmen realized Liam had looked up from his laptop and was staring at her. Da*mn, she was going to have to get her sh!t together far better than this if she wanted a chance in hell of helping take Gannon down.

"Hey," she said, without elaboration.

"You okay?" Liam asked, and that, that right there was the problem with showing someone your vulnerable side. All it took was once, and they never fvcking forgot what it looked like.

"Yep." Guilt plucked at her for the single-syllable treatment, but if Liam was bothered by her terse responses, he didn't let it show.

"Look, it's been a hell of a day. Why don't I walk you downstairs so we can both go home?"

The Intelligence office had emptied out a little while ago after the team had meticulously pieced the case against Gannon together, bit by bit. They'd worked for hours, first on research and cover IDs, then a detailed strategy for how to handle anything Gannon might throw their way.

Carmen had mostly listened, although on occasion, the detectives had asked her questions about the Davenport Clinic's database and the access she had to the information on it. Isabella and Maxwell had made sure to ask for her input on formulating the Boyfriend Plan, and by the time Sergeant Sinclair had brought Connor and Harlow up to speed—a secure virtual meeting that Carmen had been very glad to have not been invited to—most of the day had slipped off the clock.

Funny, for as badly as she should want to go home and crawl into bed for about a year, the thought of her empty apartment made her stomach hurt. "You don't have to tap out for my sake," Carmen said.

Liam rubbed a palm over the back of his neck and blew out a sheepish breath. "Actually, I was kind of hoping to tap out for my sake. I'm pretty fried."

"Really?" she asked, before she could button herself back up. But her surprise was out. Might as well follow through. "It's just that you seem so chill with all of this." He'd worked pretty much non-stop all day.

"I'm used to the process." Liam shrugged. "But you never really get used to the stress. You just learn decent ways to handle it. Look at it this way—I bet you'd be perfectly chill if our desk sergeant choked on a donut hole right now. In fact, I bet you'd Heimlich him one-handed without even thinking twice. Meanwhile, I'd be standing here, shell-shocked and freaking out, fumbling for my phone to call an ambulance."

"You can't Heimlich someone one-handed," she said, although damn it, she laughed.

He laughed, too. "Okay, bad example. All I'm saying is that it's pretty normal to be thrown by something this big."

"Good to know."

"Look at the bright side," Liam said, shutting his laptop down and reaching into his desk for his keys. "We have a solid plan. We've got a lot of background on Gannon to sift through. Your phone, your car, and your apartment all turned out perfectly clean, which means not only is he no longer watching, but he knows nothing more than what he needs to blackmail you."

The fact that Gannon didn't know about her relationship with Isabella and the Intelligence Unit should be reassuring, Carmen knew. Still, she scoffed, although it came out more soft than sarcastic. "Thanks for the reminder that I'm being blackmailed. Also, you're not seriously bright-siding me, are you?"

He stood and gestured to the door, waiting until she'd started moving toward it before falling into step beside her. "Sure. The fact that Gannon is acting exactly as we expected him to is a really good thing. Knowing those patterns will help us a lot once we go undercover. Plus, now you can actually go home and not worry about him keeping tabs on you."

"Yeah." Again with the pang to her chest, and God, she must be getting soft.

Liam's footsteps mingled in with the quieter rhythm of her Danskos for about a dozen paces before he said, "You know, being thrown by a situation like this really is entirely normal."

Carmen wanted nothing more than to double down. The words formed like clockwork in her head, her mouth moving to launch them with a healthy dose of attitude, just to hammer them home.

But what came out was, “Fabulous. At least I know I’m doing one thing right.”

To his credit, Liam didn’t dish up a bunch of pity—a good thing, since she was already pretty fucking mortified that she’d just admitted to being rattled. Instead, he just shrugged in that no-big-deal way of his and said, “You’re doing a lot of things right.”

Pretenses gone, Carmen said, “I just keep playing everything over in my head, you know? All the people Gannon has probably stolen from. Hurt. Worse.” She thought of Axel and shuddered. “And now, all the people at the night clinic are at risk, plus all the people at the Davenport Clinic, too. I know I should be glad that Gannon isn’t watching my apartment, but…”

“If you go home, you’ll just climb the walls?” Liam supplied.

“Yeah.”

They made their way down to the precinct’s main level, then all the way to the front doors before he said, “It sounds like you need a distraction. Why don’t you do something that has nothing to do with this case at all?”

Carmen laughed, more out of surprise than anything else. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. What do you do when you’re not at work?”

“I’m always at work,” she pointed out. Between the Davenport Clinic and the night clinic, she easily clocked sixty-five hours a week, sometimes seventy, and sleep didn’t exactly count as a hobby. Not that she’d be able to get any right now, anyway.

“Come on,” he pressed, nudging her shoulder with his as they walked through the gold evening sunlight beginning to cast shadows on the pavement. “There must be something.”

Her curiosity made her turn the tables on him. “What do you do to relax?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I cook.”

Shock made her stumble to a halt. “You cook?”

“Yeah.” Liam looked at her, his expression so relaxed that she followed suit. “I mean, it started out as a necessary evil. Everyone’s got to eat, right? But the more I did it, the more I realized that cooking is kind of calming. The chopping, mixing, getting the flavors

exactly the way you want them—it just gets my head right. So, now, whenever I need to unwind, I hit my kitchen. Is it really that surprising?”

“Um, yeah,” she said, not even bothering to sugarcoat her honesty. “Most single guys I know rely on takeout. Or microwave burritos, or whatever.”

“First off, microwave burritos should not be a thing. Secondly, I was fourteen when I taught myself how to cook, so takeout wasn’t really an option. Not long term, anyway.”

Oh, look. More whoa. “Fourteen? That’s awfully young.”

He paused. “It was just me, my mom, and my younger brother, and my mom worked a lot. Like I said, necessity.”

Liam’s expression stayed perfectly neutral as he spoke. But his jaw tightened by the smallest fraction, something Carmen probably wouldn’t have even noticed if he were anyone else, and it warned her not to push.

“Not a bad way to blow off steam, I suppose,” she said.

He took the swerve in subject and ran with it. “So, are you going to tell me yours, or am I going to have to get all cagey and interrogate you?”

Laughter spilled past her lips, feeling far better than it should. “You have to swear not to laugh.”

Liam stopped in front of her car, which she’d parked in the private lot behind the Thirty-Third. God, had that really only been six hours ago? “I swear I won’t laugh,” he said, lifting one palm to punctuate the oath.

“I can’t believe I’m going to tell you this,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“Wow, it’s not something totally off the wall, is it? Do you climb trees barefoot? Or, wait. You make snowmen out of cotton balls and glue. No. Wait, wait.” He pressed his forefinger to his stubbly chin in thought, making her laugh even harder. “I’ve got it! Beer pong!”

“Oh, my God, no! I watch telenovelas, okay?”

Liam’s eyes brightened. “You watch soap operas to relax?”

“You said you wouldn’t laugh,” she warned, but damn it, she laughed again.

His smile got pretty big, but he kept it in check. “I’m not laughing. I just have to admit, that’s a totally new one for me.”

Carmen knew that if she opened her mouth to spill the whole thing, their conversation would get personal. She should blow it off. She definitely should not elaborate and make herself vulnerable.

But she'd been vulnerable in front of Liam before, and he hadn't taken advantage of that—not even when she'd asked him to. She might not be wired for easy trust, but she couldn't deny the truth.

She did trust him.

"When I was growing up, my mami was obsessed with telenovelas," Carmen said, the bittersweet memory making her smile. "They're not exactly soap operas, but you've got the right idea. Fast paced. Loads of over the top drama. My mother couldn't get enough of them. She knew all the storylines, and she talked about the characters as if she knew them personally."

As promised, Liam wasn't laughing. He didn't interrupt, simply giving her whatever room she wanted to keep talking.

So she did.

"It was just the two of us when I was growing up, but I felt like I had the biggest family ever. She kept the juicier bits from me when I was younger, of course. But by the time I hit middle school, I was as into the stories as she was. We watched them together right up until the day she died. Now, any time I need to let go of a crappy day or relax or whatever, I binge watch telenovelas."

Liam tilted his head at her as if he were deep in thought, but only for a second. "Okay. That's it. I need to investigate."

"Investigate what?" she managed.

But for all her confusion, he was perfectly matter-of-fact. "This telenovela-as-relaxation thing."

Carmen's eyes flew wide. "You want to watch telenovelas?"

"Why not? We've spent all day busting our brains on this case. We could both use a distraction now that that's done, right? I can cook us some dinner, you can walk me through Telenovelas 101, and by the time the evening's over, we'll both feel better. Come on, what do you say?"

"I'm wearing scrubs," she protested weakly. She was about as sexy as a flu vaccine right now.

Liam rolled his eyes, albeit not rudely. "I'm sorry, I wasn't aware there was a dress code for dinner and telenovelas."

He took a step toward her. Carmen's heart did a backflip as she realized one more step would have them touching, then another as she realized how badly she wanted him to close that space. To kiss her. More. Everything.

"Look, we just spent all day together, and we're about to jump into an undercover case that will put us in close proximity for a while. I don't want to mess with that. If you'd rather go home on your own to unwind, I totally understand."

"What if I don't?" she asked, and oh, his smile was warm and perfect and so, so good as it slipped under her skin.

"Then you're going to have to settle for what's in my refrigerator. But I promise, you won't leave hungry. What do you say?"

"I say I hope your fridge is stocked and your tolerance for drama is high. It sounds like you're going to need both."