

The Saint Chapter 2

Carmen Desoto had woken up exhausted, and sh!t had only gone downhill from there. Now, ten hours after her shift at the Marlene Davenport Memorial Clinic had started and two minutes after it had ended, she needed a good meal, a hot bath, and a solid night of blissfully undisturbed shuteye. But since her pantry held more cobwebs than condiments, a bathtub was a luxury she'd never been able to afford—let alone deserve—and her shift at the night clinic started in a few hours, she'd have to settle for the granola bar she'd swiped from the staff lounge, a lukewarm shower, and a catnap.

Which was fine by her, really. So she was running on little more than mediocre coffee and sheer fvcking determination, and yeah, she smelled like anti-microbial hand wash and probably a couple other things she didn't want to think too hard on. Big deal. She had endured way worse, and wasn't that exactly why she'd scratched her way out of the sh!ttest part of North Point to become a nurse in the first place?

At least she had a pantry, a shower, and a bed. The people she'd help treat tonight, off the books and under the radar, got by on far less. If Carmen had to suffer some hunger pangs and sleepless nights in order to help them, she damn well would.

Even if doing so could get her in a truckload of fvcking trouble.

"Hey, Carmen. Are you on your way out?" Her boss's voice startled her back to reality, but she landed on her feet in less than a blink. From the bulky muscles beneath his scrubs and matching full-sleeve tattoos to the reddish-gold beard framing his friendly smile, Connor Bradshaw was pretty much the screaming opposite of what Carmen had expected a seasoned trauma nurse to look like. But Connor—who insisted that everyone who worked for him at the clinic call him by his first name even though he ran the place with his wife—had more nursing chops than most. Decorated service as an Air Force flight medic. Seasoned experience as a trauma nurse. Co-director of Remington's largest and busiest health clinic.

Guy who would fire her in a red-hot instant if he knew where she was headed tonight, and yeah, it was time to get gone before he could ask too many questions.

"Yep." Carmen tried on a smile even though it was an ungainly fit, adjusting her bag over one scrubs-clad shoulder. "Have a good night."

"Hang on," he said, shooting a glance at the darkened windows lining the front of the clinic. "I'll walk you out."

Her heart clapped out a warning, but she kept it far from her face. "Oh, that's okay. I got a good parking sp0t. I'm not even a block away." She didn't add that she'd come up in the thorniest part of the city, or that she'd learned how to b.razen her way down a night-darkened street before she'd even turned sixteen.

Not that any of that would've changed Connor's mind. "That makes me walking you a piece of cake. And since I had a huge piece of cake after lunch today, I could use the extra steps. Gotta practice what I preach if I'm going to run a wellness clinic."

"You have, like, five percent body fat," Carmen said, unable to curb her laugh. Although she'd never seen them firsthand—because, hi, Connor was not only her boss, but also happily married to her other boss—she'd still bet that he had the sort of abs you could do your damn laundry on.

"See? It's working already." Wagging his brows, Connor led the way to the clinic's front door, tossing a "be right back" over his shoulder to the triage nurse closing down the front desk for the evening. He wasn't going to let Carmen off the hook, and, to be fair, the buddy system wasn't a brainless idea. Still, if Connor went all chit-chat and asked her what she was doing tonight, she'd have to lie through her teeth.

Rather than chance it, she kept her mouth firmly shut. Yeah, the silence was pretty awkward, and yeah again, part of her hated throwing off prickly vibes when Connor had never been anything but nice to her in the whole six months she'd worked at the clinic. But having her guard up wasn't just a precaution. It was necessary.

And wasn't that just a fvcking life lesson, right there?

Luckily for her, Connor was terminally laid back. He rolled with the lack of conversation the whole way, stopping a handful of steps from her beat-to-hell Hyundai before wishing her a goodnight.

"Night," she said back, scooting into the driver's seat and praying the car would do its thing without fuss. By a tiny miracle, it did, and one seatbelt and two seconds later, Carmen was in business. She took a minute to check her cell phone before getting on the road, and huh, that was weird. Three missed calls.

She looked at the screen more closely. The number was local, although she didn't recognize it, and there were no voicemails, only hang ups. It was probably one of those annoying telemarketers wanting to extend the car warranty she didn't even have. But since another thing she didn't have was time to waste, she tossed her phone back into her bag and put her car in Drive. If she played things just right, she'd be able to squeak in a nap and a shower before she had to head into North Point for the night.

The thought pushed her to hurry, navigating the familiar path from the clinic to her shoebox of an apartment. Despite its lack of both size and style, it wasn't by far the worst place she'd ever lived, and anyway, ninety percent of the time that she was there, she was asleep. The building might be older than dirt itself, with meager appliances that were likely original artifacts and carpet that had passed retro at least twice, but she had a roof over her head that (probably) wouldn't leak and a snug, comfy bed all to herself.

"Oh, bed," Carmen murmured, the thought unleashing an involuntary smile over her face as she climbed out of the rickety elevator. But the sight of the man leaning against her doorframe killed her joy and vaulted her heart halfway up her windpipe.

Dark auburn hair swept up off his face. Eyes the most unusual shade of hazel, so unique they practically defied description. Lean, strong muscles—b.rachioradialis, biceps b.rachii, sweet mother of deltoids—flexing beneath his gray T-shirt as he pushed himself fully upright, then flexing again as those arms crossed over his c.hest and he frowned, and yep. Nothing had changed since the last time she'd seen Detective Liam Hollister.

He was still hot enough to bake her cookies, and he was still wildly unhappy to see her.

"What are you doing here?" Carmen heard the words post-launch, felt the barbs hidden in the syllables. She hadn't intended them, really, but there they were anyway, tiny little roadblocks meant to keep him at arm's length.

After all, once someone knew your weaknesses, you had to be extra vigilant around them. And Liam Hollister wasn't just aware of Carmen's soft sp0ts, the vulnerable places that could be pushed like a bruise, causing pain.

Ever since that night, years ago, when she'd let her guard down with him despite her ironclad efforts not to, he was one of her weaknesses.

And she only had two.

"Nice to see you, too." Liam's frown stayed in place, at odds with the words. God, that mouth was just fvcking ridiculous, firm, full l!ps framed by just enough stubble to be se.xy over scruffy, and Carmen nailed him with a stare despite the way her face had heated at the thought. Por el amor de Dios, it was just a mouth. Vermillion zone, philtrum. Damn near everyone had one, and she needed to get over his—fast—if she was going to make it past him.

"You haven't answered my question." She noticed his badge on full display at his h!p, and a tendril of worry sn.aked through her. "And where's Isabella?"

"She's fine," Liam said quickly. But that was the extent of his kindness. "I'm here because I have questions for you."

God, he was so pushy. At least pushing back was something she knew how to do. "They're gonna have to wait," she said.

"Why, you have a hot date or something?"

Carmen's brows shot upward. "Excuse me?"

Liam's eyes went wide, as if he'd just heard the implication layered in what he'd asked. "It's an expression. I didn't mean...just...never mind. Anyway, the questions are important."

"So are my plans for the night," she said, and at least this was true.

"Great. The faster we talk, the sooner I'll be out of your hair."

She sighed and took aim at one last ditch. "You're going to stand out here on my doorstep until I talk to you, aren't you?"

One corner of his mouth edged further into the dark red stubble at its border. "Yep."

And there went her nap. "Fine," Carmen said, although her tone made it sound like a very different four-letter F-word. "Let's get this over with, then."

She slipped past him to put the key in the lock, disengaging the deadbolt with a heavy thunk. The idea of letting Liam into her apartment didn't exactly take her to her happy place. Still, letting him see her stuck-in-a-time-warp living space was better than letting nosy Mrs. Derringer across the hall eavesdrop on whatever he was going to ask her. The last thing Carmen needed was for word to spread that she was getting chummy with cops. She might work with Isabella from time to time in order to help get some really nasty people off the street, but she needed to keep that on the down-low now more than ever. Earning trust where she was headed later tonight was hard enough.

Liam spun a gaze around her foyer/living room/kitchen, which took all of five seconds. "Nice place," he said, and her cheeks prickled at the polite lie. Of course, she'd just had to leave her dirty breakfast dishes in the sink. And—oh, hell—was that the b.ra she'd flung off the minute she'd walked in the door two days ago, stuffed between the sofa cushions?

"Something tells me you're not here to discuss my interior decorating sk!lls," Carmen said, dropping her bag over the satin and lace to hide it from sight. His place probably boasted things like granite countertops and hand-scr.aped hardwood floors, for Chrissake.

Thankfully, he got right to the point. "No. Can you tell me how you know Axel Franklin?"

"Um, you might want to backtrack and ask me if I know Axel Franklin," she said, shaking her head. "Because the answer is no."

Taking his phone from the back pocket of his jeans, Liam pulled up a mug shot, turning the phone in her direction for a good look. "This guy. Axel Franklin?"

White guy, sandy blond hair, a little on the lanky side, dark eyes, and yep. Still no. "I've never seen him before," Carmen said.

"Really," Liam replied, and funny, it didn't sound like a question. Not that she expected him to take her word as gospel, but still.

"Yes, really."

"Then why did he try to call you three times tonight?"

She blinked. This was the guy who had tried to call her? She'd never seen him before in her life. "I don't know," she said, her frustration rising. "Why don't you ask him that?"

"Because he's currently unconscious at Remington Mem, being treated for a stab wound to the chest. Isabella just called to tell me Dr. Sheridan thinks he's lost about thirty percent of his blood volume."

Oh. Shit.

"Exactly," Liam said, and great, she'd let that slip past her lips. "So, do you want to try again?"

Carmen's hands found her hips, her resolve turning to stone as she chose the truth she could tell. "There's nothing to try," she said. "I told you, I don't know him."

"Okay, let's backtrack," Liam said calmly. "Are there any voicemail messages on your phone?"

"No."

"Even if Axel didn't say anything, we might be able to get something from the background noise," he tried again, and Carmen shook her head.

"No messages." Axel, or whoever had called her, had hung up before the beep. "Just three incoming calls from a number I didn't recognize. It was probably a wrong number."

Liam wasn't having it. "But he called you three times in twenty minutes. Your phone number was on a slip of paper that was in his hand when we found him."

"Well, I didn't give it to him."

More carefully selected words. She really didn't know this Axel guy—that much was true. But there was only one reason a stranger, especially one who was badly hurt, would've called her, and that, she did know. A patient from the night clinic must have given it to him. Not that she could tell Liam that. Despite the fact that they had strict rules against treating crime-related injuries, coming out with that little truth bomb would only jeopardize the underground clinic and countless people who needed help, not to mention taking a flamethrower to the career she loved.

Carmen couldn't take the risk, and anyway, what she knew wouldn't help Liam. She'd never met Axel and had no idea who had hurt him. Telling Liam about the night clinic would only cause trouble.

He tilted his head, eyeing her scrubs with care before returning his eyes to her face, and she forced herself to meet his stare even though—whoa—all that gray-green intensity made her belly do a little flip. Fvcking nerves.

"Have you been at the Davenport Clinic all day?" he asked.

"What does that..." She trailed off, losing her words as realization slammed into her. "Are you asking me if I have an alibi? You think I hurt this guy?"

A split-second of confusion moved over Liam's face before turning to shock. "What? No."

"Then why else would you ask me that?"

As soon as the question was out, Carmen wanted it back. Hearing him say, out loud, that she didn't exactly inspire trust—or anything good, really—wasn't on her "oh, yes, let's do that" agenda.

To her surprise, though, he didn't. "I'm trying to figure out if you spoke to him earlier today, or if maybe you saw him at the clinic as a patient. Look"—Liam dialed his expression to the laid-back setting she'd seen him use dozens of times, although not usually with her—"if you know him, and he's in some kind of trouble, we can help."

"I'd say he's in a sh!tload of trouble if he's lost that much bl00d," Carmen bit out. Okay, so that might've come out more tartly than she'd intended, but she needed to keep Liam from asking questions she couldn't answer. "Hypovolemic shock is no joke. But if he's at Remington Mem, he's in the very best hands. As for how he got hurt, I really can't help you. I already told you, I didn't talk to him and I don't know him."

"You're sure you've never seen him before?" Liam tried again. "Maybe out with a friend, at a bar or a party? Even in passing?"

Whether it was her exhaustion or something far more complicated, Carmen couldn't be sure, but her composure dipped. "I can see why you wouldn't take my word at face value, Detective. I'm not exactly a saint. But, contrary to popular belief, I'm also not an idiot."

Liam took a half step back, his brows slinging up. "I don't think you're an idiot."

"But you don't believe me."

He paused, and God, that was a no if she ever heard one. "Axel Franklin had your number in his hand. He called you three times, very likely after he'd been stabbed. I'm just trying to figure out who hurt this guy, and I think you know more than you're telling me."

For one scorching-hot second, she was tempted to trust him. But then her mind tumbled back to the last time she'd done that. Of what she'd said, what she'd done, and she slammed the door on the urge.

Trusting Liam wasn't just risky. It was flat-out dangerous.

"I hope that you do find whoever stabbed him," she said, walking over to her front door to tug it open. "But I don't know who he is or why he called me, and I definitely didn't talk to him. I'm sorry. I can't help you."

"I'm not going to stop until I get to the bottom of this," Liam said, turning back only once he'd cleared the threshold. "So, I guess I'll see you soon."

"I doubt it," Carmen said.

But it was the first lie she'd told him tonight.