

The Saint Chapter 20 - Tips

Liam hovered in the hazy spot between sleep and wakefulness, wondering for a brief second if his night had been a dream. But, no. He and Carmen had left the precinct to come here, to his place. They'd shared dinner, watched TV. Had mind-melting sex—he smiled into his pillow, because really, how could he do anything else at the memory of that. Then, rather than getting awkward, the way the first-time moment after almost always did, they'd simply curled up together in his bed and dozed off.

The sex had been shockingly intense, which for him, was even more shocking, because—even naked—he usually kept a lid on any feelings that might crop up. Something about Carmen had loosened those emotions right out of him, though, and Christ, the result hadn't just been explosive. It had been purely intimate, something that could only belong to them.

And even though Liam knew he shouldn't, he wanted it again.

It was still dark enough now to qualify as the middle of the night rather than the morning, so he rolled over, reaching sleepily into the space beside him to pull Carmen close and get some more sleep.

His bed was empty.

Carmen was gone.

Heart hammering, he sat up, now fully alert. A quick scan of his room revealed a few items of clothing strewn over the floorboards, although it was too dark for him to tell if they were his or Carmen's. His bedroom door was shut, but a sliver of golden light peeked through the bottom crack, and he slid out of bed, pausing just long enough to cover his nakedness with a pair of gray sweatpants before padding quietly down the hall.

He'd promised her a distraction, then delivered a bucket full of intense emotions.

Fvck. Of course she'd left.

Wait. No. Quiet movement drifted in from the kitchen, sending a hard shot of relief through Liam's chest. An entirely different feeling took over that part of him, though, at the sight of Carmen sitting at his kitchen island with her hair piled into a messy knot, wearing one of his RPD T-shirts and twisting an Oreo in half over a mug of warm milk.

Liam moved into her line of vision slowly, so as not to scare the shit out of her. "Hey," he said quietly. "I see you found my secret stash."

Damn it, her eyes went wide anyway. "Oh! Crap!" Half of the cookie hit the milk with a splash, and she cursed a little more darkly as she fished it out. "I didn't mean to go

snooping through your kitchen. I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to wake you. Which I obviously did anyway, because here you are, totally not sleeping. God, I'm really sorry."

He slid onto the bar stool next to hers, blanking his expression even though his instincts were hollering at him to do whatever was fvcking necessary to ease her mind. "It's a figure of speech, Carmen. You were hardly rooting around in my underwear drawer. Although, to be fair, it does look like you stole my shirt."

She laughed, and bingo. "Yeah, I guess I did. I thought fumbling around for mine would wake you, and this was on top of the laundry basket in the alcove by your room—you're the only person I know who folds their stuff right out of the dryer, by the way—but I did steer clear of your underwear drawer."

"Okay, folding your laundry right out of the dryer is just good anti-wrinkle strategy. And as far as my underwear drawer goes, I'm pretty sure that ship has sailed"—he plucked an Oreo from the package and grinned—"since you have, in fact, been in my underwear itself."

"Oh, my God," Carmen said, laughing again. "Fine. I have. But just because we had s3x doesn't mean I get to snoop in your stuff."

"We had great s3x," Liam corrected, and she pressed her lips into a smile, focusing just a little too hard on her midnight snack.

"We had great s3x," she agreed. "But I am sorry for raiding your kitchen and waking you up."

The worry that had needled between his ribs when he'd woken to find her gone poked at him again, and oh, fvck it. He'd already let every last one of his emotions rip while they were in bed. No sense in curbing his honesty now. "It's fine. I didn't hear you at all. I woke up on my own. In fact, I kind of thought..."

Carmen connected the dots, her mug lowering to the counter with a thunk. "You thought I left?"

He forced a shrug. "Well, things did get a little intense."

Translation: I felt so fvcking right with you that I lost my goddamned mind and all my inhibitions along with it. Christ, he knew far better than to let his emotions fly like that, even in bed. It was reckless. It was dangerous. It was—

Not nearly as big a deal as he'd made it in his head, if Carmen's expression was anything to go by.

"Yeah, but it was the good kind of intense."

"The good kind," Liam repeated, and she reached for another Oreo, twisting it apart.

"Sure. Like, when you go skydiving. Or on one of those really twisty roller coasters at an amusement park. Or have multiple orgasms from absolutely toe-curling sex."

Liam barked out a laugh, his tension suddenly taking a hike. "Ah. That good, huh?"

"Yeah," she said, taking a bite. "That good."

Nodding toward her half-full mug of milk, he asked, "So, is that why you can't sleep, then? Too much good intensity?"

Carmen shook her head. "Not really." At his obvious surprise, she added, "Well, maybe a little bit. But actually..."

Silence stretched between them until finally, he asked, "Actually?"

She bit her lip, her face flushing in the soft overhead lights. "Never mind. It's stupid."

"It can't be that stupid if it's keeping you awake in the middle of the night," Liam pointed out, his curiosity perking.

She rolled her eyes, although whether at him or at herself, he couldn't be sure. "Fine. I guess I was letting Gannon back into my headspace a little. I mean, as much as I'd love to, I can't give reality the finger forever. But your kitchen is so homey. It's, like, right out of a magazine. I thought...I don't know. That if I came in here and had some warm milk, I'd feel better. Or at least feel tired enough to go back to sleep."

This woman was never, ever going to stop surprising him with her candor. "Did it work?"

"A little," she said with a demi-shrug. "But it's kind of hard not to feel like I'm an imposter in a place as nice as this."

There were so many things to unpack there, Liam didn't know where to begin. "You feel like an imposter in nice places?"

"Well, sure." God, she said it so easily that it made his chest ache. "I mean, you've seen my apartment. It's a shoebox, and that's a step way up from my last place in North Point. I've never dreamed of living anywhere like this."

He wasn't dense enough not to get that he lived fairly well, but his place wasn't a six-thousand square foot mansion, either. Yeah, Carmen's apartment was on the small side, and maybe her appliances were bordering on geriatric, but it was in a pretty desirable part of Remington, near both the hospital and the university. The units might be cookie-cutter, but they were hardly low rent.

“Never ever?” he asked, and Carmen shrugged, propping her elbows on the island and her chin in her hands.

“I don’t know. Maybe before my mom got sick, I thought we might have a nicer place one day. Something with a yard so I could get a puppy. But I lost that dream pretty fast after she died.”

Liam’s gut panged. “I’m sorry.” He swallowed the urge to give her firsthand empathy—Christ, sometimes he missed his own mother so much, it hurt. “That must have been really hard.”

“Yeah,” Carmen whispered. Her softness didn’t last, though. “Then I ended up falling in with a nasty SOB who smacked me around and pimped me out to his friends, and doing heroin and sleeping on park benches, and that was that. I couldn’t afford to eat, let alone dream of a better place to live.”

Logic told him not to make a big deal out of what she’d just said. It would only make her double down. But vulnerability flashed beneath Carmen’s dark brown stare, and oh, no. Not a chance. Logic could go fvck itself.

He couldn’t let her believe she’d deserved those things. Not even for a second.

“You’re a little hard on yourself sometimes,” he said. He followed with, “Not an accusation,” because she’d bristled beside him. “Just an observation.”

Carmen sat with that for a second before shrugging again. “Gannon targeted me for a reason, Liam. I don’t exactly have a sterling reputation. He took one look at me and saw the truth.”

“Which is…?”

“I’m an addict. I have a rap sheet. I’ve done so many things I’m not proud of, I can’t even count them all. God, Gannon probably did a backflip when he saw me at the night clinic, breaking yet another law. I’m the perfect mark.”

Something inside of Liam snapped, and his words flew out, unchecked. “You’re a recovering addict who successfully completed a grueling rehab program before taking the stand to testify against a murderer. You’ve assisted my unit on dozens of cases, some of them with your life on the line.” Both things Gannon couldn’t know, because Carmen’s involvement was confidential, kept only to sealed court records and the RPD database, and good luck hacking those. “You’re also an incredibly gifted nurse, which you can be very proud of. Your patients and your bosses are lucky to have you.”

Still, Carmen shook her head. “You’re a good person, so of course you see the glass half full.”

“You’re a good person, too.”

“I already told you, you don’t have to sweet talk me,” she said. But rather than arriving with all the fiery conviction Liam would expect, the words were barely a whisper, and hell if that didn’t make them knife right into him even harder than if she’d screamed.

Reaching out, he very gently cupped her face, making sure he had her full attention before saying, “And I already told you, it’s just the truth. Yes, you’ve got a lot of really bad sh!t in your past, and yes, you made mistakes. But that doesn’t make you a bad person, and it damn sure doesn’t mean you’re unworthy of good things now.”

“But—”

Liam placed his thumb over the center of her mouth, knowing she’d probably k!ll him for it later. But for this, he was willing to take the heat. “Gonna have to stop you there, angel. There’s no but. I know what I know. You’re a good person. Probably better than I am, if I’m being honest.”

Carmen snorted as soon as he’d shifted his hands from her face. “Right. You, the Boy Scout, who has been nothing but nice to me while I drag you by the hair into my criminal problems.”

“Technically, I’m dragging you into my case. A case you’re providing help with, despite the fact that it’s dangerous,” Liam said. “Also, I’m not exactly a Boy Scout.”

She raised a dark brown brow, and looked like her sassy side wasn’t going to give in so easily. “You made me dinner, watched hours of TV that I got to choose, gave me two ridiculous org*asms, and called me pretty. I, on the other hand, stole your shirt and your cookies, then vomited my issues all over your beautiful kitchen like a geyser. You’re probably wishing you could kick me out the door right now.”

He opened his mouth, ready to argue like a million-dollar trial attorney. But pushing Carmen had never gotten him anywhere, so he stuck with the easy-does-it method that had served him so well for...well, pretty much ever.

“And miss power eating Oreos with a beautiful, half-n*ked woman?” He grabbed another cookie, taking a big bite. “Not a chance. Anyway, you’re not the only one with issues. Or a hard past.”

“Oh, really?”

Too late, Liam realized what he’d said. Even worse, he realized that she was looking at him not with doubt or defiance, but with rampant, do-tell curiosity, and fvck. Fuuuuvck. How could he have been so careless? He should shut up—for Chrissake, shutting up about his family had been his default literally one hundred percent of the time until two seconds ago. But Carmen had been so open about her own mother, not to mention her

rocky history, and his own past was over and done. It wasn't as if it could come back to haunt him.

Plus, for as tightly as he'd guarded the truth before now, he trusted Carmen to guard it, too.

"When I was fourteen, my father left my mom, my younger brother, and me." The words were rusty in his mouth, and God, had he ever really said them out loud?

Awkward or not, they got the point across, because Carmen's eyes went wide. "Liam, I'm so sorry."

"Me, too," he said. "There was no warning, no sign that anything was wrong. After almost sixteen years, he just went to work one day and never came home."

After a second, she asked the obvious. "You're sure he left intentionally? There wasn't some sort of accident?"

Liam barely held back his ironic laugh. "Not unless you count him draining the bank account he shared with my mother, selling the car that was in her name for some fast cash, and leaving her with hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt."

"Sh!t," Carmen breathed, and now, Liam did huff out a laugh.

"Yep. We came to find out he'd been leading a double life for about six years. He'd quit his job, rented some office space downtown so he had someplace to go every day, but instead of working at a legitimate job, he was running all sorts of scams. Identity theft, credit card fraud, phishing schemes. The Fraud Department had a list as long as the interstate of scams they suspected he was running or had gotten away with."

"I take it back," Carmen said, her milk and cookies totally forgotten in front of her on the island. "Sh!t doesn't even cover that."

"Nope," Liam agreed. "Turns out, they were finally close to catching him for a pretty big credit card scheme, so he took what he could and bolted. My mother had no idea. None of us did. The whole thing just wrecked her."

He paused here to take a breath. For as much pain his father's betrayal and abandonment had caused him, his mother had felt it tenfold, and the reminder made it hard to breathe.

Carmen slid one hand over Liam's, giving him the room and the means to take a steady inhale. "I can't even imagine."

Liam knew he could leave it at that and she probably wouldn't push. But, much to his surprise, the words kept rolling out. "Of course, the police had to rule out any chance of

her aiding and abetting, so that was fun.” At least they’d been able to do that fairly quickly. Daniel had kept his dirty money far away from all of them, although Liam suffered no illusions about it being a kindness. Using his family to hide stolen money would only tie that money right to Daniel, and he was a selfish bastard, to the core. “After that, the case stalled out—my father hid his tracks incredibly well. My mother struggled with depression. She tried her best to cope, to be there for me and Jamie, but…”

“Depression doesn’t really let you choose. Emotional stress, especially at that level, can take a horrible toll on people,” Carmen said. “No matter how hard they try.”

He nodded. “That, and the police could only do so much. My old man was in the wind. They had no luck tracking him down, and the debt he’d racked up wasn’t going to pay itself. My mother had to take a second job. I was fourteen, but Jamie was only eight, so I took on nearly all the responsibility for looking after him.”

“That’s why you learned to cook so young,” Carmen said, understanding dawning in her eyes.

“Yeah. It was a whole lot of peanut butter and jelly for a while there at first, but Jamie was a good sport.” A memory punched Liam in the gut, vaulting past his lips before it had even fully formed. “We used to make the sandwiches together. I’d do the half with the peanut butter and he’d do the half with the jelly, then we’d press them together. Only Jamie always made my sandwich and I always made his. He liked twice as much peanut butter as jelly. I always wondered how he managed to eat it.”

“That sounds sweet,” Carmen offered, and damn, how had he forgotten that?

“Jamie didn’t really understand what was going on at the time. I did my best, but…” Liam aimed at a shrug. In the end, Jamie had been as much of a casualty from their father’s actions as their mother. “My mother’s depression spiraled. She hid it well, always saying she was exhausted from so much work. To be fair, I’m sure she was exhausted. But her depression led to a breakdown not long after my father left. She was never the same after that.”

“Oh, Liam. I’m so sorry.” Carmen squeezed his hand. But she didn’t say anything else, simply giving him room to say or not say whatever he wanted to.

Fvck if he didn’t let go as he kept right on talking, his hand in her hand and his heart in his windpipe. “Before he left, she’d always been so affectionate, always hugging us and saying, ‘I love you.’ And she had this fantastic laugh. You know, the kind that makes other people laugh when they hear it, just because it sounds so damned happy. That was my mom.” God, that laugh might have been the thing Liam had missed the most after his father had left them all in tatters.

Anger burned away at the tiny shot of happiness the memory had given him, tightening his lungs. “But after, whenever my mom wasn’t at work, she was sleeping. It got to the point that days would go by, sometimes even a week, without us seeing her. I was trying so hard to keep it together for Jamie, but in hindsight, I can’t believe I didn’t see that her depression was killing her, day by day.”

Carmen was off her bar stool in an instant, the movement so sudden that Liam had barely tracked it before she was right up in his space, her hands on his face and her eyes seeing every damn thing he’d ever tried to hide.

Yet, he didn’t shy away as she said, “Liam, look at me. You were fourteen years old, and you were hurting, too. I have no doubt that you did the very best you could.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t enough, as it turns out,” he said, the words bitter in his mouth. “She had a massive heart attack and died four years after he left. A couple months after my eighteenth birthday, actually. The doctor said she died instantly, but the truth is, I think she’d been dying all along.”

Carmen’s eyes closed as she exhaled, dropping her forehead to his. The comfort of the gesture, of her nearness—fvck, of every single thing about her right now—wrapped around him along with her arms, all of it combining to give him the strength to finish telling the story.

“We have no other family, so I took custody of Jamie and changed both of our last names to our mother’s maiden name, Hollister, as a way to honor her.” Also, to disavow their father, which Daniel had fvcking deserved. “Jamie took our mom’s death really hard. He got distant. Angry. He wouldn’t talk to me, no matter how hard I tried. By the time he was fourteen and I was twenty, he was cutting classes and getting into fights all the time, failing out of school. When he was sixteen, he dropped out altogether. A month later, he was arrested for drug possession.”

“People can do some stupid things when they’re hurting. Believe me, I know,” Carmen whispered, and ah, hell. Of all the sh!tty ties two people could have.

“It led to a massive fight,” Liam admitted. He wasn’t proud of the way he’d handled things with Jamie at first, yelling and trying to strongarm him into getting his sh!t together rather than seeing that what Jamie needed was a better way to cope with his grief. “I was at the police academy by then, so it was a pretty big deal. Here I was, training to be a cop so I could keep people safe, and my brother—who I was raising—was in a holding cell, high as Mount Everest, with a pocket full of heroin.”

Carmen nodded. “Addiction doesn’t really let people choose, either, even though their actions are real. It’s sh!tty for everyone.”

That was the raw fvcking truth. By the time Liam had realized his brother needed help and not tough love, it was too late. “I didn’t get it, and Jamie didn’t make it easy to figure out.”

“Addicts never do,” Carmen said, without a trace of judgment. “To be fair, he probably didn’t know, himself.”

“Doesn’t,” Liam corrected. “Jamie left about four months later. He kept in touch enough for me to keep tabs on him, but not enough for me to know what he was really doing or where he was living. I thought he might grow out of it, or have a wake up call, or...God, I don’t know. Something that would make him come to his senses and let me help him.”

“But he didn’t,” Carmen finished. “When was the last time you talked to him?”

“Six months ago. He was arrested for vagrancy,” Liam said. “We go through the motions every so often. Sometimes I just bail him out. Other times, he asks for help, and I get him into rehab. He makes it work for a while. Sometimes longer than others. But he always slides back.”

The first few cycles had made Liam furious. But the times after that had just made him weary, which—as it turned out—was a hell of a lot worse.

“He’s not really in charge of that. Not entirely,” Carmen said softly. “I mean, I know he’s an adult, and, of course, there are consequences for what he does. He’s responsible for that. But addiction is a nasty bltch.”

“It must have been really hard for you to fight that,” Liam said, and she released a wistful smile.

“I did a crapload of therapy in rehab—sessions your partner dragged me to kicking and cussing, by the way. But I was lucky.”

A pang unfolded in Liam’s chest. “That you had someone there for you?”

To his surprise, she shook her head. “No. Well, yes, but Jamie has someone there for him, too. But what I meant was, I got lucky that I was ready to fight it the first time, then I was offered the right tools to do that. The program I was in, the counselors, my sponsor. Isabella. My mom, even though she was gone. All of it came together to get me on the path that worked for me. But addiction has roots that grow strong and deep as hell. I could have just as easily relapsed. God knows I wanted to more than once.”

Liam took a second to process all the holy sh!t wh!pping around in his head. “Yeah, but I only see Jamie, like, once or twice a year, and that’s mostly to get him out of scrapes. I’m all he has. Maybe if I gave him better support—”

Carmen placed a finger on his mouth, just as he'd done to her earlier, her voice as adamant as his had been when he'd told her she was a good person, and fvck, what could he have possibly done to deserve this woman? "I'm gonna have to stop you there. Jamie's not relapsing because he doesn't have support, Liam. He's relapsing because, for whatever reason, he's not ready to recover.

Yes, addiction is twisty, and no, he's not in control of all of what his brain and body are feeling right now. But, at the end of the day, the decision to begin recovery has to be his, otherwise he'll never stay drug-free."

"I know." Liam backtracked, "I mean, my head knows. I just can't help but feel responsible for him. And for my mom."

"Oh, that's not on you," she said, a razor wire edge to her voice that was impossible to miss. "Did the police ever catch your father?"

Ah, the silver lining of it all. "The FBI did, actually. But only after he single-handedly ripped off thousands of people in a massive insurance scam."

Her dark brows lifted. "Please tell me he's in jail."

"He did ten years. He was released a couple weeks ago," Liam said. Funny, he thought the words would sting on their way out—Christ knew they'd been slicing him to ribbons ever since he'd gotten that first phone call from Joy. But saying them out loud to Carmen gave him an odd sense of unburdening.

"Isn't ten years kind of short, considering what he was convicted of?" she asked.

Liam nodded. "About fifteen years too short."

Surprise moved over Carmen's beautiful face in the soft kitchen light. "He got out that early?"

"Apparently, he's a changed man." Liam rolled his eyes. "Retribution. Good behavior. Whatever. I don't really know."

"You don't know," she repeated.

"I don't. I haven't spoken to him since he left eighteen years ago, and I don't plan on it now that he's out, either. He's the reason my mother is dead. As far as I'm concerned, he is, too."

On this, Liam was never going to budge. His father might not have put a gun to his mother's head and pulled the trigger, but he'd killed her all the same, and he might as well have done the same to Jamie. If Liam never heard the name Daniel McGee again, he'd die happy.

“We’re quite the pair, huh?” Carmen asked, her question gently lightening the heaviness of the conversation.

“Oh, I don’t know.” He slid his hands to her hips, pulling her closer. “I think we’re okay.”

“Thank you for telling me about your mom and Jamie,” she said, her hands warm on his shoulders. His cock stirred in response to her touch, and God, even though he knew he shouldn’t, he wanted her again.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re easy to talk to?” he asked, loving the way she looked when she laughed in response.

“Nope. Normally, people are telling me I’m a prickly b!tch.”

The thought of anyone calling her a b!tch, even in the abstract, made Liam’s jaw tighten. “Those people are as*sh0les.”

More laughter. “Oh, come on. They’re not all wrong. At least, not about the prickly part.”

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree.” Looking at the clock on his oven, he said, “It’s really late. Do you have a shift tomorrow?”

Part of their strategy for the case was to make Gannon think everything was business as usual, which meant that Carmen would do all of her shifts at the Davenport Clinic as scheduled. Tomorrow—or, technically today, given the hour—was Saturday, but the clinic was open seven days a week.

Carmen shook her head. “Not until Sunday afternoon. You?”

Working in Intelligence was hardly a nine to five, but luckily, he could say, “Not unless Gannon calls you.”

“Ah. So, we’re both at loose ends for a while.”

As badly as Liam wanted her—fvck, it was even worse than badly—reality still sent up a warning in his head. “We’re still working a case together. This could get complicated.”

She brushed her mouth over his, and how could he be so turned on by a simple touch of her lips? “This doesn’t feel complicated. It feels good. Plus...” She pressed her belly against his cock, which was already hard and begging for him to shut up and take her back to bed. “Until Gannon calls, we’re not undercover yet.”

Liam paused. “Well, we did agree to distract each other for tonight, and the sun isn’t up yet, so...”

“So, let’s not waste any more time talking,” she said, lacing her fingers through his.

Liam let her lead the way, although whether they were on a path to heaven or hell, he really couldn't be sure.