

The Saint Chapter 21 - Tips

Carmen sat in her car outside the Davenport Clinic with more nerves in her belly than she'd felt on her first day at work. Which was stupid, really, considering the fact that she and Liam had spent the last day and a half alternating between being n*ked in his bed, being n*ked in his shower, being n*ked in his kitchen (God, that island had so. Many. Uses), and being n*ked in his living room.

She should feel better than ever, and not just because of the s3x, although, yeah, the man's tongue qualified as a national fvcking treasure. But they hadn't spent all of that time engaged in the world's hottest s3x-a-thon. They'd actually had incredible conversations, ranging from casual topics like the best shows to binge watch on Netflix, to crazy "would you rather" questions, some of which had made her laugh so hard, her sides had ached.

They'd had a few deeper conversations, too, although nothing close to that first one about his absolute as*sh0le of a father. She'd told him a few more stories about her mami though, and he'd reminisced a little about his brother in a bittersweet but not quite confessional way.

Carmen got the sense he wasn't used to talking about his really personal sh!t, and God, did she get that. Plus, she wasn't about to cash in her borrowed time by pushing. Every moment that they'd spent together, from the conversations to the meals they'd shared to the mind-scrambling s3x, had felt so unbelievably good that Carmen hadn't wanted the weekend to end. But they'd agreed on just once, and she couldn't possibly have more than a fling with a man like Liam.

No matter how badly she was starting to want exactly that.

"Time to face the music, chica," she said, smoothing a hand from her French braids to her peach-colored scrubs, making sure everything was tidy before getting out of her car. Yes, the last day and a half had been amazing, but she could no longer ignore the facts. Royce Gannon was blackmailing her into committing who knew how many counts of medical fraud. She'd agreed to give him access to the Davenport Clinic's database for nefarious purposes. The fact that she was doing so as part of an undercover operation didn't make her feel like she'd failed Connor and Harlow any less. Plus, Sergeant Sinclair had told them everything short of exactly what Gannon was holding over her head, which meant they knew she was the weak link allowing Gannon access he might not otherwise get. Carmen made the clinic vulnerable to major losses. If she were Connor and Harlow, she'd be prepping her pink slip for that alone. Once they found out about the night clinic?

Her career was going to be over. Rightfully so.

Carmen set her shoulders and hoisted her chin as she walked toward the building. She'd always known this could happen. She needed to s.uuck it up and focus on helping

the Intelligence Unit get the evidence they needed to put Gannon away, preferably for the rest of his life.

Just like the time she'd spent with Liam, her time here at the Davenport Clinic had been incredible, but it wasn't meant to last. Not for someone like her.

I know what I know. You're a good person.

Carmen sucked in a breath of summer-hot air, letting it press against her lungs. When Liam had cradled her face in his hands and adamantly said those words, for a slice of a second, she'd believed him. But it hadn't lasted—a decade's worth of knowing otherwise was tough to shake, after all. Not that she ever would, but in that moment, it had felt so, so good to pretend he was right.

That she was a good person. Someone a guy like Liam would want to be with for more than a couple of nights.

Bypassing the automatic double doors that patients used, Carmen shook off the last of her crazy thoughts and made her way around the side of the building to key-card her way through the employee entrance. The move landed her in the back hallway, right off the conference room, the staff lounge, and Connor and Harlow's office. Replacing her badge in the clear ID shield she wore in a lanyard around her neck, she slipped into the staff lounge to clock in...

And found Connor and Harlow standing in front of the time clock, waiting.

"Oh!" Carmen's heart rocketed upward, crash landing in her throat. "I, um. Hi."

"Hi, Carmen," Connor said, his normally cheerful demeanor swapped out for a way more serious counterpart, and sh!t. Sh!t. Were they not even going to wait until the case against Gannon had wrapped up before letting her know they were going to fire her? "Harlow and I were hoping to have a quick word with you before your shift starts."

Annnnd that would be a big, fat yes to getting fired. "Sure," she said, because what choice did she have? Carmen followed them both into their office—ugh, not even the conference room this time—where Harlow shut the door behind them.

"Please. Have a seat," she said. Carmen's prickly side wanted something to argue, even something stupid, like "I'd rather stand," but she sat in one of the chairs across from their desk anyway. Connor and Harlow had been so nice, taking a chance on her that she hadn't deserved. Fighting them just because her defenses were screaming seemed wrong.

"Before you fire me, I just want to say I'm really sorry," she blurted, and Dios mio, she wasn't going to get any style points for this. "I know that all of this stuff with Gannon puts

the clinic at a huge risk, and that's entirely my fault. But please know that I never wanted anything like that to happen. I really love it here. Or, loved, I guess."

It took a full beat of silence for Carmen to realize they were both staring at her in shock. "You think we're firing you?" Connor asked.

"Well, yeah," she said slowly. "Aren't you?"

Harlow shook her head, her blond hair brushing her shoulders. "Good God, no." She got up to move around to Carmen's side of the desk, sitting in the chair beside her. "We just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"You..." Carmen tried to process the words. Tried again. And failed both times.

"The people who work here aren't just our employees," Connor said. "This clinic is our family, Carmen. We look out for each other."

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "Well, yeah, but this is different. I'm different. You know, because of everything before nursing school."

"You think you don't deserve our support because you have a hard past?" Harlow shook her head to dismiss the idea before Carmen could even nod. "We knew about that when we hired you. Anyway, you also had a glowing recommendation from Isabella and impeccable scores on all of your exams and clinicals. We're lucky to have you."

Carmen couldn't help her laugh. "I'm being blackmailed into giving up access to your database. If Gannon had gotten away with this, it would have ruined this place."

"Then we owe you a massive debt of gratitude for not letting that happen," Connor said, his full-sleeve tattoos flexing beneath his navy blue scrubs as he crossed his arms. As laid back as he was, Connor also wasn't the type of guy to argue with.

Not that it was going to stop Carmen from trying, though, because this was crazy. They were thanking her? "You really don't. The reason Gannon is blackmailing me is..." She took a breath. "Big."

Harlow and Connor exchanged a glance loaded with the kind of nonverbal shorthand that only occurred between two people who knew each other as well as they knew their own reflections. "Sergeant Sinclair didn't disclose what that reason is," Harlow finally said. "You don't have to, either, but..."

"We're here for you if you do," Connor finished. "When we say we're a family over here, we really do mean it."

Carmen's heart lurched against her breastbone. She should tell them, she knew. It was the right thing to do. But still, her defenses wouldn't let the words escape without a fight. "It's big enough that you'll probably fire me."

"You can let us be the judge of that. But only if you want," Harlow said.

"I'm volunteering at an underground clinic in North Point."

Carmen was as shocked to hear the words as Connor and Harlow, and her bosses stared at her for a full ten seconds before anyone spoke.

"An underground clinic," Connor said slowly. "As in, off the books."

"Yes." With a deep breath, Carmen told them about the night clinic. She didn't leave anything out—honestly, there was no point now—and finally, she sat back in her chair with a sigh. "So, that's why Gannon is blackmailing me. He's threatening to expose the night clinic and everyone who volunteers there if I don't give him access to the database here. All of the doctors and nurses, including me, would lose their licenses. The people who count on the place would no longer get any care. The ripple effect would be huge, and very public."

"Son of a..." Connor's jaw went tight and his shoulders—which filled a damn doorframe to begin with—bunched around his neck.

Carmen's gut dropped. "I know that puts you both in a bad position, and I'm really sorry. I just—"

"Wanted to help people who need it but don't necessarily have the means to get it?" Harlow supplied, and Carmen nodded.

"Well, yeah."

A smile tugged at the edges of Harlow's mouth. "That's the entire reason Connor and I run this clinic. Does knowing that you've been volunteering at an off-the-books clinic make things dicey for us? I'm not going to sugarcoat it, yes. It does. Ethically, we're bound to report things like that."

"I understand," Carmen said, and God, this hurt more than she'd expected.

"I don't think you do," Connor said. "See, the thing is, just because a situation is dicey doesn't mean we're necessarily going to shy away from it. In fact"—he leaned in a little, giving up a conspiratorial half-grin—"Harlow and I kind of like a challenge, especially if it means helping people."

Carmen blinked, and okay, yeah. She was officially lost. "So, wait. What are you saying?"

"We're saying that we might be able to help you and the people who rely on that clinic. Legally," Harlow said, her blue eyes so kind, Carmen almost lost her breath. "It's not going to be easy—an off-book clinic is illegal, no matter how you slice it. I'm afraid at the very minimum, we'll have to ask you not to go back."

Before Carmen could say anything, Connor continued. "But we are a perfectly legal clinic, and we're always looking to expand our services. It would take a lot of work. And by a lot, I really mean an absolute sh!tload. But what if we set out to incorporate some of the things most needed at this off-book clinic into our services here?"

"You can do that?" Carmen asked, stunned. "It would cost a fortune."

"It would require an investment." Harlow's expression sharpened in thought, and she slid her red-framed glasses from their resting spot on the top of her head over her eyes as if she meant business. "But that's what grants are for."

"And fundraisers," Connor added. "And volunteers. But if this clinic has been able to float on volunteers and whatever cash the docs have been able to cobble together, I bet we could figure something out to get it fully funded. In fact, I know a few doctors and nurses at Remington Mem who would probably be happy to pitch in."

A thought picked at Carmen's brain, too stubborn to ignore. "Well, yeah, but we already do things like vaccine drives and wellness fairs here at Davenport. They're great, but..."

She trailed off. This was crazy. No, this was beyond crazy, like absolutely nuts on toast.

Even crazier? Connor and Harlow were looking at her, waiting for her to finish.

"The location is important. Most of these people in North Point need medical assistance they can count on close to home. Not to mention during off hours because of their work schedules. Even then, one static location can be challenging for things like flu vaccines or health screenings or clean needle exchange, because we still have to get people to come to us. Wellness outreach won't work—like, really work—unless we're right up in their faces."

Connor stilled in his seat. "Like, say, in a mobile unit?"

"You want to send ambulances to do this stuff?" Carmen asked, but Connor shook his head.

"Not quite. Ambos are for emergencies, so they're equipped differently. But what about a mobile unit that was made specifically to go into different parts of the city to offer things specifically related to wellness?"

Harlow's spine straightened, her eyes wide with excitement. "Yes! It would eliminate overhead, which is a bonus. There would always be a doctor on board in case of a

serious health issue, which—of course—we'd refer to the nearest hospital. But with a mobile health unit, we could do everything from prenatal care to wound checks to...God, the possibilities are nearly endless. Plus, I bet it would lower the number of non-emergent calls paramedics get on top of promoting general wellness. It's a win-win."

Carmen blinked, trying to keep up. "Okay, but isn't this all just kind of a pipe dream? It's not like you can just, what? Ask for a mobile unit and poof! Get one?"

"Yes, it's a pipe dream," Connor said. "At least, right now. But some of the best stuff starts this way. And it's not going to be a pipe dream forever."

"Or even for very long." Harlow set her shoulders, and whoa. Carmen had always known the woman was serious, but right now, she was downright fierce. "But getting from concept to reality is going to take a ton of work. We'll need to do research, crunch a billion numbers. Apply for grants."

Connor nodded. "At least the really hard part is done."

Carmen looked at him, confused. "And that is...?"

"We have the perfect person to coordinate the project."

The room was silent for one, two, three seconds. Then, "Wait, what?" Carmen asked as the implication sank in. "You don't mean me?"

"Of course we mean you," Harlow said. "After all, it's your idea."

Shock froze every part of Carmen other than her pulse, which was galloping out of control. But come on! "That doesn't mean I should coordinate the project. I have no idea how to do any of that stuff you guys were talking about. And, let's be real. People who have that kind of grant money aren't going to want to give it to a person like me."

"Do you mean someone tenacious?" Harlow asked, and Connor chimed in.

"Or someone with a really good idea and the medical knowledge to see it put into action?"

"And a connection and dedication to the community that encourages trust from patients who might normally shy away from a hospital or brick and mortar clinic?" Harlow finished.

Still. No way. "Are you forgetting the part where I have a criminal record?"

Connor shrugged. "Kinda, yeah, although we're not so much forgetting it as saying we don't care. We vetted you when we hired you, Carmen, and you've done nothing but

prove your worth as both a nurse and a person since the day you started. If you want to make this mobile wellness project go, we'd love to have you coordinate it."

Carmen opened her mouth, well aware that no words were coming out but too poleaxed to fix the problem. She'd walked into this room fully expecting to be sh!t-canned from the job she loved, and Connor and Harlow had not only not booted her out the door, but they were offering to let her coordinate a massive project that had the potential to help all the people who went to the night clinic and the doctors who worked there, only safely and legally?

This couldn't be happening.

"I don't..." Carmen cleared her throat, but yeah, that waver in her voice wasn't going anywhere. "I don't even know what to say. You trust me to do something like this?"

"Of course," Harlow said. "You clearly have good knowledge of what's needed, and you know a lot of professionals who share that vision. Don't get me wrong—it's going to be one hell of a process. But, if you're willing to take it on, I'm happy to mentor you through the steps."

To Carmen's absolute mortification, tears sprang to her eyes, so quickly that she had no hope of keeping them at bay.

Connor, however, just grinned. "I take it that's a yes?"

"Yes. Yes, it's a yes." She laughed, and oh, it felt so good. "But I want it on the record that you're probably going to regret asking me. I have no idea how to do any of this."

"Neither did Connor or I when we took over this place," Harlow said, gesturing to the office around them, her diamond-studded wedding ring winking in the overhead light. "In fact, in the beginning, we were a straight-up mess. But we got the hang of it, and so will you. We'll walk you through every step."

Connor nodded, laughing too. "Believe me, if Harlow can teach me the ins and outs of the business side, she can teach anyone."

"And Connor is brilliant on the ops side," Harlow said. "He can show you the ropes there better than anyone."

"Business. Operations. I don't even know where to start," Carmen said, her brain suddenly going a hundred and six miles an hour.

"Why don't you take a few days to start getting some ideas on paper," Harlow said. Carmen's panic must have made it from her brain to her face, because her boss quickly added, "Nothing formal yet, so don't worry. We do still have this Gannon business to contend with before we can attach your name to anything."

Ugh, talk about a giant buzz k!!l. But no way was Carmen going to risk raising the guy's red flags by doing anything other than her regular job. At least not for now.

"Okay. Some ideas. Sure, I can do that."

"Great," Connor said. "In the meantime, we'll stick to you keeping your regular schedule and working the case with the Intelligence Unit, just like Sergeant Sinclair asked. But"—here, he sobered again—"please know that if you need anything, we're here for you, okay? We understand that you're putting a lot on the line to make this case against Gannon, and we're here for you."

"We want you to be safe above all else," Harlow said with a nod.

Carmen was going to need a minute or nine billion to get over all the shock in her system. First Liam telling her she was a good person, now this? It was almost too much.

"I'm not...I'm not really used to anyone having my back," she admitted, and Connor's trademark smile poked at the corners of his mouth, beneath his beard.

"Well, you might want to get used to it," he said. "Because between us and Intelligence, I'm pretty sure you're covered."

"Thanks," Carmen said, and for the first time ever, she felt like maybe, just for a minute, she was worth looking out for.