

The Saint Chapter 23 - Tips

Carmen was happier than she'd been in over a decade, which was more than a little ironic, considering she was sitting in the parking lot of a police station. But the four days—and nights—she'd spent with Liam had been nothing shy of perfect. They'd worked their respective shifts, then met up at either his place or hers for dinner, talking for hours.

She'd shared all of her plans for the mobile clinic, which were coming together slowly, but surely, and admitted her worry about getting the grant money to make it work, or, worse yet, getting the money and making some huge error that would tank the whole thing.

Liam reassured her without syrupy “you can do it” platitudes, his belief in her so quietly unyielding that Carmen had started to believe, too. The unbelievably good sex that had capped each night together had only added to the bliss of the week, to the point that she couldn't deny it.

Liam Hollister had gone from getting under her skin to sliding his way into her heart.

And as ridiculous and scary and impossible as that seemed, she wanted him there.

Indefinitely.

Carmen blinked her way out of the thought and back to the here and now of her sweltering car. She and Liam had made the joint decision not to tell either Isabella or Sergeant Sinclair about their involvement until Gannon made a move, but, of course, Carmen had gotten a succinct text from him this morning, saying he wanted to meet tonight so they could “discuss their plans.” Within minutes of her calling Liam, the entire Intelligence team had sprung into motion, and here she was, less than an hour later, ready to help them kick this case into gear. The fact that she'd have to spill the details about her relationship with Liam on top of it? Yeah, that wasn't doing much to calm her nerves. Even if she was certain about both going undercover and her feelings for Liam.

Forcing her hands to steadiness she didn't quite feel, she scooped up her cell phone and sent a quick text to let him know she was here. He responded just as quickly, and Carmen got out of her car to walk toward the precinct. With a deep breath, she headed toward the large double doors marking the entrance to the Thirty-Third, stepping over the threshold and into the air conditioned lobby.

Liam stood at the front desk, wearing a snug black T-shirt and dark jeans, his badge at his hip, and a smile that told her nerves to take fucking hike, and later, she was going to have to really examine all the crazy-as*s feels she was catching for him. But right now? Gah, she was happy as hell to have his calm, cool presence to glom off of.

“Hey,” he said, his voice low and warm. “You ready to catch a bad guy?”

Carmen nodded. She could do this. They would do this. “Absolutely.”

They went through the motions of getting her signed in, then headed toward the stairs leading to the Intelligence office.

“So, you just got the one text?” Liam asked, all business, and she nodded.

“Yeah.” She’d read it to him, word for word, before sending a screen shot to Capelli on the Intelligence Unit’s secure network. “I texted him back with an ‘okay,’ just like you said to, but he didn’t respond.”

Liam shook his head, waiting for her to crest the top of the stairs first before falling into step beside her in the hallway. “We didn’t expect him to. But it’s good that he gave you the meeting place ahead of time, rather than telling you to meet on the fly.”

At the brows she’d raised in question, he added, “It gives us the chance to set up surveillance ahead of time rather than scrambling to get set up and trying to figure out the best vantage points fifteen minutes before the meet. Also”—he opened the door to the Intelligence office to usher her over the threshold—“it means Gannon trusts that you haven’t gone to the cops. Otherwise, he wouldn’t take the risk.”

“Surprise, as*sh0le,” Carmen murmured, her prickly side making an appearance as her nerves fluttered.

Liam—shocker—remained steady. “He will be when we take him down. Come on.” He gestured to his desk, which—not a shocker—was as neat an operating room. “I grabbed you a chair.”

She caught sight of the chair sitting right in between his and Isabella’s workspaces and had no choice but to press a smile of her own between her lips. “Thanks.”

“Hey, mija,” Isabella said, looking up from her desk with a smile as they made their way over. “How are you holding up?”

Carmen looked around the office, taking in the detailed case board that Capelli had pulled up on the array over his desk and the team of detectives all clacking away on their desktop computers or with phones pressed to their ears, and the sight freed up some breathing room in her chest. With Liam at her side and the rest of the unit at her back, she’d be okay.

“Not so bad. I mean, I’ll be better when Gannon isn’t trying to blackmail the crap out of me and the night clinic or ripping off who knows how many people, but…”

She trailed off on a tiny lift of one shoulder, and Isabella laughed. “I think we all will. Good thing is, now that he’s texted you, it’s looking like we can nail him for both.”

As if he'd heard Isabella's words and taken them as a personal challenge, Sergeant Sinclair arrived at the back of the office. "Carmen, thanks for coming in on such short notice. Why don't you walk us through the text Gannon sent this morning before we get started on a plan for this meet? Then I'll loop in the ADA's office."

Right to business, then. "Okay, sure," she said, sitting down in the chair Liam had brought in for her. "There's not much to tell, though. Gannon texted me this morning and said he wants to meet to 'discuss our plans.' That's the text, right there."

She pointed to the lower left-hand monitor of Capelli's array, where the words splashed across the screen.

Need to meet to discuss our plans.

Parking lot. 852 Adler Ave.

9:00 tonight.

Come alone.

"I don't recognize the address," Carmen said. "I responded 'okay,' like we discussed, but that was it. He never answered."

"He probably wants as little communication as possible," Isabella said, and Capelli nodded.

"The text came from a burner cell, so he's covering his as*s. It's turned off right now, but I'll monitor it to see if that changes. I'm trying to trace the phone back to a point of sale and tie it to Gannon definitively, but even if I get there—and that's a sizeable if, considering how careful he's been so far—it's thin."

Detective Maxwell frowned but didn't disagree. "He could always say someone stole the phone. Even if we got lucky enough to find it on him—another sizeable if—the text isn't incriminating on its own."

"Exactly," Capelli said. "We wouldn't even get a search warrant based on that, let alone an arrest warrant."

"So, we have to proceed as planned and catch him in the act," Liam said.

Sergeant Sinclair looked at Detective Garza. "Any red flags pop up on Miranda Astor?"

"No, but that doesn't mean we can rule out her involvement," Garza said. "She has no record. Her reputation's even cleaner than Gannon's, if you can believe that. Ivy League medical school, hotshot residency. She became Remington Memorial's youngest and first female CEO five years ago. She donates money and pro bono surgeries, and she's

a bit of a society darling. Last year, a photo of her having lunch at the Plaza with a certain Academy Award-winning actor went low-key viral.”

“Oh!” Detective Hale exclaimed. “I remember that.” At everyone’s raised brows, she said, “What? She was wearing a killer pair of designer shoes, and that actor is always in the tabloids, not to mention très yum. Of course I remember it.”

Garza tilted his head as if to say, “fair enough,” then gestured at a screen on the array loaded with financial information that Carmen had zero hope of understanding. “Delia’s been combing through both Gannon and Miranda’s financials, as well as the hospital’s. But the search only legally extends to the accounts that Gannon and Miranda share, since he’s our primary suspect. Anything we could use against her alone—if it exists—is likely buried out of Delia’s reach. At least for now.”

Before Carmen could voice her confusion, Liam leaned in and murmured, “Delia is Garza’s fiancée. She’s a forensic accountant.”

“Oh.” That explained the smile the guy had just tucked away at the mention of the woman.

“All of the numbers Delia has run so far look like they’re on the up and up,” Garza said, and Detective Hale shook her head, her blond braids swinging over her shoulders.

“Which they would even if Astor is dirty. Even crappy criminals know enough to cover their tracks on the public-facing stuff, and according to her bio, she’s no dummy.”

Sergeant Sinclair inclined his head in agreement, then looked at Garza. “Have Delia keep digging. I don’t want any question marks here. We can adjust the warrant if something else pops.” To Capelli, he said, “Talk to me about the location Gannon chose for this meet.”

“852 Adler Avenue.” Capelli pulled up a few aerial shots that looked like they were from street cameras and displayed them on two of the array screens. “AKA a warehouse for a company called Cardinal Medical Supply. It’s on the outskirts of downtown. They receive deliveries and make shipments, but there are no offices there. Just storage and inventory.”

“Is the company legit?” Detective Maxwell asked.

Liam shrugged. “It looks like it on paper, but…”

“We have to keep digging, got it.” Detective Maxwell looked at the images on the screens, his dark brows pulled together in thought. “Smart meeting place, though. No eyes, and chances are high he’s familiar with the layout and the neighborhood.”

Capelli nodded, pushing his black-framed glasses higher over his nose. "The place is closed after five. No night deliveries, nothing. There are security cameras on the building, but they're owned and operated privately, by the company."

"So, easily tampered with if you have an in—which I bet a dozen donuts Gannon does—and not accessible at all to us," Detective Hale said brightly, and Carmen wondered if the woman ever saw the glass as anything other than half-full.

Her mind snagged on a detail, and wait... "If there's no access to the cameras at this place, where did those pictures come from?" she asked.

Capelli's brows lifted as if he were impressed. "There's a street cam half a block away. It only gets a view of the south side of the building, where the loading dock is. The first image is of the full angle and the second is zoomed in."

"Oh. Let me guess," she said, and Isabella filled in the blanks for her.

"The parking lot where Gannon told you to meet him is on the north side of the building, out of the street cam's reach? Yeah. It totally is. At least, that's what Google Earth tells us."

"We'll do a full drive-by to scout it out in person as soon as we're done here, though," Liam said. "We're not leaving anything to chance."

Carmen's mind spun as she tried desperately to keep up. "Okay, so Gannon wants to meet at this warehouse. That means we're not getting into the Davenport Clinic's database tonight, right? Can he even do that remotely?" She'd never tried to log into the system from anywhere other than the clinic. The whole thing was locked down pretty tight.

"Not with your credentials," Capelli said. "There are only a few accounts that allow for remote access, and those belong to Connor and Harlow, along with a few other people who keep the books and do IT. So, to answer your question, no. The chances of him wanting to access the Davenport database tonight are pretty slim."

"He's likely got a plan to get it, though," Sergeant Sinclair said. "One we're going to throw a wrench in when you show up with Hollister."

Carmen's gut bottomed out somewhere in the vicinity of her kneecaps. They already suspected Gannon of murder. If she showed up with Liam and Gannon got mad enough, he could just decide she wasn't worth the trouble. "He did say to come alone."

"He did," Liam agreed reassuringly. "But I'll talk him down, just like we planned." A steely flash moved through his stare. "Believe me, Gannon's not going to hurt you."

The steel had made its way into his tone, too, making Isabella's brows lift. Thankfully, she stuck to the subject, though. "We'll all be there to make sure of that. You'll be safe, Carmen."

Sergeant Sinclair nodded, sending the promise home. "Maxwell, you and Hale go scout out the warehouse. When you get back, we'll work out vantage points. Until then, Garza, you keep digging on both Gannon and Miranda and see what kicks up. Hollister, you, Carmen, and Isabella run through cover IDs and strategy one more time just to be sure everything's solid. Capelli, you'll be on comms for the meet tonight. Are we good?"

Each detective murmured an affirmative, all of them turning toward their respective tasks, and Carmen swallowed hard. But she wasn't going to get a better chance to tell Isabella about her and Liam, and what's more, her feelings were getting too big to hide.

So, she looked at him and said, "Hey, could I talk to Isabella privately for a minute?"

The fact that he didn't even skip a beat when Isabella's brows nearly lifted off the top of her head was a testament to his never-ending cool. "Absolutely. I need to go talk to Sinclair about something, anyway."

"Thanks." To Isabella, who was just one step shy of WTF if her expression was any indication, she said, "Let's go grab some tea?"

Ignoring the mostly full cup of the stuff on her desk, Isabella nodded. "Okaaaaaaay."

They were barely down the hallway and headed for the stairs, when Isabella pounced. "What's going on, Carmen? Are you okay? I know a case like this is nerve-wracking as sh!t, but—"

"I'm fine," Carmen said, wanting to ease her mind. "I'm actually, very, very fine."

"You're fine." She sounded totally unconvinced. "Wait, does this have to do with all of the weird stuff going on between you and Hollister that he won't tell me about?"

Carmen's feet clattered to an ungraceful halt at the bottom of the stairs. "Uh," she grunted, and God, and she'd thought her stand-still had been ungraceful. But she hadn't expected Isabella to have asked. Or for Liam to have dodged her.

"What weird stuff?"

"Cute, mija." Isabella rolled her eyes.

Fine, Carmen had probably deserved that. For Chrissake, Isabella was a detective. "Sorry. Yeah, I guess it probably does."

Patience was not one of Isabella's virtues. "Well? Are you going to clue me in here? Because you guys went from biting each other's heads off to you calling him instead of me when Gannon wormed out of the woodwork to threaten you, and now he gets all growly when your safety comes up and you're acting all..."

Isabella trailed off, her brows furrowing in thought, and Carmen braced for impact.

"Oh, my God," Isabella murmured, her brown eyes as wide and round as nickels. "Oh, my God. Are you...you're not...are you two—"

"Yes," Carmen said, because A, she couldn't hold it in for another freaking second, and B, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to hear how Isabella would finish her sentence. "We're a thing."

Isabella took a second to gape—not that Carmen blamed her, really—then snapped her mouth shut and looped her arm through Carmen's long enough to tug her into an empty office and shut the door.

"Define 'thing,'" Isabella said.

Shit. Guess they were ripping the Band-Aid right off, then. "We're sleeping together," Carmen started. "But, there are...feelings, too. On both sides."

"Feelings," Isabella echoed, and oh, screw this. They'd been friends for too long, and Carmen wasn't going to hold back on something that felt this good.

"Yes. We didn't mean for anything to happen, and God knows, the timing is for sh!t with this case. Things between us started before Gannon threatened me. But we're both happy, and our relationship won't affect this undercover op. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I just didn't know I'd—"

Isabella's arms were around her in a flash. "Ugh, stop apologizing, you dummy!"

Shock crashed a path up Carmen's spine. "You're not mad?"

"What, that neither of you decided to let me in on the fact that you're...what are we calling it? A thing?"

"Yeah."

Isabella pulled back just in time for Carmen to catch her wry smile. "Maybe a little. I mean, you're my CI and he's my partner. A little heads up would've been nice. But you're also consenting adults who get to make your own decisions, and you're clearly very into each other. I've never seen him get tetchy about another person like that, and I've damn sure never seen you blush."

"I'm not blushing," Carmen lied. But come on, pride was a thing.

One Isabella wasn't going to let her have. "Girl, you are absolutely blushing. Anyway, being mad would make me a hypocrite."

"How's that?" Carmen asked.

"Kellen and I were a 'thing' in the middle of a nasty case once, too." She slung air quotes around the word, but Carmen was too busy picking her jaw up off the floor to really notice.

"Wait." She did a mental rewind back to the only case she could think of that Kellan had been attached to. "That case against the guy who was trafficking women out of North Point? That's when you two first got together?"

"Yeah. Sinclair was less than thrilled, but..." Isabella's smile faded out after a beat. "Does he know about you and Hollister?"

Carmen nodded. "Liam's telling him right now. We agreed that as soon as Gannon made contact, we'd tell you both."

"Good. He's not going to be happy, but technically, you're not breaking any rules. Which, knowing my illustrious partner, I'm sure you two have already talked about."

"Yeah." The thought of Liam using the word "fraternize" directly before kissing the hell out of her made her face flush.

A reaction that Isabella noticed. Because of course she did. "Oh, my God, you two really like each other, don't you?"

Carmen tried to smother her smile, but fuck it. She just didn't want to. "Yes. It's weird and crazy and a little bit scary, but..."

"Also really, really good, and something you both deserve?" Isabella supplied.

The word—deserve—and everything that went with it, sent a pang through Carmen's chest. But, God, she was tired of fighting herself. She might not be fairytale material, but Isabella was right. Liam was right. She did deserve to be happy, even if only in this moment.

The realization startled her so much that she didn't catch the seriousness in Isabella's expression until it was too late. "Just do me a favor," Isabella said, "and be careful with him, okay?"

"You don't seriously think Liam would hurt me," Carmen said, but Isabella shook her head and laughed.

“No. God, no. I didn’t mean be careful of him. Please. He’s not that kind of guy.” She snorted before growing serious. “What I meant was, be careful with him. I don’t have to tell you Liam is a good man. But he keeps himself pretty b.uttoned up, and I know from experience that when b.uttoned up is your default, it can be hard to let someone else in. Even when you want to.”

One of these days, when this case was nothing but a distant memory, Carmen was going to pin Isabella down to get that story out of her. But for now, she said, “I know. It’s hard for me to let him in, too. To let him...see everything.”

Isabella smiled. “You know, I used to think that relationships were based on s3x and love and respect, and don’t get me wrong. Those things are important. Foundational, even. But there’s something even bigger than all of them.”

“What could be bigger than that?” Carmen asked, blinking.

“Safety,” Isabella said. “When you can be yourself in your truest form—good, bad, ugly, scared, b.rave, whatever—in front of another person, and that person tells you you’re safe with them no matter what those pieces look like? Especially when you’re most vulnerable? That is when you know you’ve got something unbreakable.”

Isabella reached out to squeeze Carmen’s forearm. “I guess what I’m trying to say is, don’t be afraid to let Liam see those parts of you. If he’s the man I believe he is, he’ll keep them safe.”

Carmen’s throat knotted, but against all of the odds, she knew the feeling Isabella was talking about. She trusted Liam to see those parts of her without judgment, and she wanted to see all of him, to hold him sacred in return. The whole thing should scare her to her very core, but it didn’t.

It made her feel invincible.