

The Saint Chapter 24 - Tips

Liam took a deep breath and held it for a count of four before releasing a slow, steady exhale. He'd done hundreds of ops under hundreds of different circumstances, but nerves always came with the territory. They were a good sign, he thought as he plucked the pinhead-sized panic button that Capelli had assigned to him out of its inventory box and attached it to the side of his watch.

If he didn't feel even the slightest bit edgy about going up against a guy like Gannon, he was either too jaded or too cocky to take him down. And they would be taking him down.

Liam wasn't going to let him rip off the clinic or get away with murder, and he damn sure wasn't going to sit idly by while Gannon threatened so much as a hair on Carmen's head.

Carmen was his, and he was hers right back. Nothing was going to happen to her.

Not on his watch. Not ever.

"Hey," came a gruff, familiar voice from the doorway, and Liam turned toward it, brows arched to cover his surprise.

"You do know it's unnatural for a guy your size to be stealthy, right?"

The corners of Maxwell's mouth tilted in a close-enough version of a smile. "Are you size shaming me?"

Liam laughed. Maxwell was six three and built like a Sherman tank. "Strictly jealous, my friend."

Maxwell nodded, his already scant smile fading out as he gestured to the surveillance equipment Capelli had set aside for the op. "Need help?"

"Sure." While Liam had gone undercover enough to be a seasoned pro, Maxwell was a master. He picked up a button camera, expertly threading it through the hole in Liam's shirt where the second button used to be.

"So, you and Carmen, huh?" Maxwell asked, making Liam's pulse jump in surprise.

"Sinclair told you?"

"Yeah, but he didn't have to. We are all detectives, you know."

Liam huffed out a laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

"No," Maxwell said. "Not really. You two have stuck to business for this case. But remember, we've all been there."

Of course, the big guy was right. Isabella and Kellan, Garza and Delia, Maxwell and Frankie, Hale and Dempsey—they'd all been working on cases when their relationships had started. "Yeah, Sinclair made a comment along those lines when I told him."

At Maxwell's raised brows, Liam added, "I think his exact words were, 'With this unit's track record, I should have seen this coming.'"

Maxwell made a noise, not quite a laugh, but close. "That sounds about right. Anyway, it's cool. You and Carmen have been solid all the way through this case. We'll nail Gannon just like we would otherwise. We aren't going to let him get away with murder—literally—and we aren't going to let him threaten her. She's one of ours."

"Thanks, man."

Maxwell slid an earpiece into place to test the button cam's audio, giving up a one-two, then nodding in approval. Liam assumed the conversation had been put to bed—Maxwell wasn't exactly a chatty dude, and Liam certainly didn't do the sharing-is-caring thing. Not with anyone other than Carmen, anyway.

But then Maxwell startled him with, "Word of advice?"

"Uh, sure," Liam managed.

"I know your instinct is going to be to protect Carmen when you're undercover, and that's not a bad thing." Maxwell stepped back to examine his handiwork, but kept talking. "But she's smart and fierce, and she's prepared. She can take care of herself."

"I know," Liam said, because he did.

"Your brain knows," Maxwell countered. "But take it from me. When your instinct and your brain get into a pissing match, it can be hard to let smart win."

Liam's protective side started to prowl like a lion in a cage. "Okay, but Carmen's not trained like we are, and Gannon's dangerous. I'm not going to take any chances with her safety," Liam said, and Maxwell shook his head.

"I'm not saying she won't need backup. The whole reason we're sending you in with her is so she's not flying solo. But what I am saying is that you're in this together, and neither of you can afford to be distracted. Which means not only do you have to trust her to take care of herself, but you have to be prepared for her to take care of you if the situation calls for it."

Liam opened his mouth to argue, but God, he fvcking couldn't. They were going into the field against a dangerous criminal. If he didn't trust Carmen the way he trusted the rest of his unit, he'd be jeopardizing the whole op, not to mention both of their lives.

He looked at Maxwell, huffing out a half-laugh. "How'd you get so goddamn smart, anyway?"

"Let's just say I know a thing or two about going undercover with a badas*s woman who I also happen to love," Maxwell said, letting a smile escape.

Liam's heart slapped against his sternum, his mouth automatically forming the default he'd relied on for...Christ, ever. "That's not...I mean, I care about her, but I don't think we're...you know, there."

Maxwell paused, but only for a beat. "Ah. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No worries," Liam said, the smile he'd always found so easy to manufacture tight on his face. But he couldn't possibly love Carmen. He couldn't love anybody. Love was the highest form of danger—for fvck's sake, it had kllled his mother. Yes, he'd wanted Carmen for years. Wished a thousand different ways that he could have her. And, yes again, what they had now was much more than casual s3x. But it wasn't love. It wasn't ever going to be love.

That was the one risk he couldn't take.

Liam was saved from the thought—and from responding to Maxwell further—by Capelli's appearance in the doorway. "Hey. It's time to go. Are you two ready to roll out?"

"Yeah," Liam said, giving Maxwell one last nod before turning toward the door. He could untangle all these thoughts later. Right now, he needed to stuff them down like always. They had a job to do.

Liam sat in the driver's seat of his F-150 and scanned the parking lot in front of him even though he'd committed the scene to memory hours ago. Rectangular space with four large light posts bisecting the center lengthwise. The warehouse—a fairly new building, low and squat—sat south of the lot, with an empty commercial building to the north and a whole lot of nothing much to the east and west. The place looked deserted. No cars, no one on foot, no movement of any kind other than the faint breeze swaying the trees on the western fence line. Still, there was no such thing as too careful, so Liam did one last visual sweep before pulling the truck to a stop. Carmen sat beside him in the passenger seat, her eyes moving in a covert side to side that matched the one he'd just finished, and as she lifted her chin in a nod, he moved to report.

"We're in position," he said quietly, knowing that Capelli could still hear him loud and freaking clear even though he and Garza were in the surveillance van a block away,

and that the rest of the unit had eyes on him and Carmen from their various vantage points around the parking lot and warehouse, to boot. "No sign of Gannon yet."

"Copy that," Capelli said in his ear. "As soon as we get eyes on him, we'll switch two-way voice comms over to surveillance team only. Confirming code word for intervention as 'cupcake.'"

Liam shook his head. "Who let Hale pick?"

"Could be worse," Maxwell murmured into his mic. "Last time, she picked 'sprinkles.'"

"Oh, come on," Hale said brightly over comms. "If you're gonna have a code word, you might as well make it delicious."

"She has a point," Carmen said.

"Uh-huh. Fine. Confirming code word 'cupcake,'" Liam said. If the sh!t hit the fan and they needed all hands, he could think of worse things to yell.

Looking at Carmen, he steadied his resolve. "You good?" he asked, and she responded without moving her eyes from the windshield.

"Yep."

Liam chuckled. "You'd say that if you were hanging over the side of a cliff by your fingernails, wouldn't you?"

That got her attention, just as he'd meant for it to. "Fine," she said, cracking a smile. "I'm a little nervous. But I'm okay."

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm a little nervous, too," he admitted.

Her eyes widened in the shadows. "Really?"

"Hell, yes. My adrenal glands don't give a sh!t how many times I've done this before. But the team will be able to hear us and see everything we see that whole time, even when we can't see or hear them. Plus, we have a strong plan and we're ready. This is going to be a walk in the park."

"He's right, mija," Isabella said over the line. "You've got this, and we've got you."

Carmen nodded, her shoulders loosening. "Okay. Yeah."

"Alright, cats and kittens." Hale's voice filtered over the line, much more quietly than a minute ago. "I've got a gray Maserati coming northbound on Adler, headed for the parking lot."

"Well, that's about as subtle as a sledgehammer," muttered Maxwell, and Liam snorted his agreement. Only Gannon would drive a hundred and thirty thousand dollar car to a covert meet.

"I see him," Liam said under his breath. "He just rolled into the lot. Headed our way."

"Going dark on Carmen and Hollister's voice comms," Capelli said, leaving only Liam's heartbeat pressing against his ears. He kept his eyes trained on the pair of headlights coming toward them, and sure enough, they belonged to one fancy-as*s sports car.

"Ready?" he murmured to Carmen, and she reached out for a quick squeeze of his hand.

"Yeah. Let's take this as*sh0le down."

Liam watched with caution as the Maserati pulled to a stop a few spaces away from them. Single rider. No tail. Nice and easy. Although it took restraint, Liam waited until the driver got out of his car, confirming that it was Gannon and that he was alone before giving Carmen a nod, both of them getting out to meet him together.

Gannon's shoulders stiffened beneath his impeccable suit, his chin wh!pping toward Carmen. "What the hell is this?"

Per their plan, Carmen stopped after only a few paces, buying herself a decent exit path back to the truck as she stared Gannon down.

"My insurance policy," she said, crossing her arms over her c.hest and sliding into the version of herself they'd hand-crafted for this op. "Call me crazy, but I felt like meeting my blackmailer in the middle of nowhere, at night, with no protection and no witnesses, was just the tiniest bit stupid, and my boyfriend agreed."

"These are not the terms we discussed," Gannon bit out, his eyes shifting with just the faintest hint of nervousness.

Carmen pounced on it like a pro. "We didn't discuss anything. You threatened to end my career if I didn't give you access to the Davenport Clinic database. I'm not exactly here for funsies."

He eyed Liam with not a small amount of suspicion. "I'm not sure what you're talking about," he said, and okay, it was time to cut through the crap here.

"Oh, so you're only a tough guy when you're threatening someone who isn't your own size?" Liam asked, dialing his tone to its meanest setting, throwing in just enough c.hest-thumping machismo to make the whole bad-cop persona stick. "Because you fvcked with my woman, as*sh0le. And when you fvck with my woman, you fvck with me."

Which means you can play dumb all you want, but we still have a problem, because nobody fucks with me.”

“I told you to keep your mouth shut,” Gannon snapped at Carmen, who rolled her eyes.

“I’m a criminal, Gannon. Did you really think I’d play by the rules? Anyway, no chance am I not covering my as*s on this. Showing up solo for sh!t like this is how dead bodies get made. If I have to play along, I’m doing it my way.”

She stepped in toward Liam, and he slung an arm around her shoulders. He’d meant it as posturing, a show of possession that a guy like Bad Hollister would get off on. But Carmen’s warm, steady presence, the way she stood so firmly at his side and let him stand equally at hers, made his next words ring with truth.

“It’s me and Carmen together, or nothing.”

“Think of it as a bargain,” she said, and Gannon’s responding laugh held no joy.

“A bargain? Please. For all I know, he could be a cop.”

Liam let go of Carmen to clap, his smile all teeth. It was time to throw this as*sh0le for a loop. “Give the rich guy a gold star. As a matter of fact, I am a cop.” Before Gannon could react—or worse yet, run—Liam was right up in the guy’s personal space, backing him up until he bumped against his car door. Gannon’s eyes went wide, and Liam stopped just shy of making contact, exactly as planned.

“Relax, High Roller.” Liam smiled. “If I was gonna take you down, you’d know by now. All I want to do is have a little chat.”

“This meeting is over,” Gannon bit out.

Liam channeled every last let’s-stay-calm-here vibe that he could muster. “I’m not going to arrest you. I don’t have proof of anything.”

“You’re right.” Gannon straightened. “You don’t.”

“You’re obviously a smart man,” Liam said. Gannon shifted at the accolade, just a slight puff of his chest, and oh, they had him. “And, while I may be a cop, I’m definitely no saint. I don’t let my profession stand in the way of good business opportunities.”

“And I’m supposed to, what? Simply take your word for it? I don’t think so,” Gannon said, digging in. “This conversation is over.”

Liam had known he’d have to work for this one, so he dug in right back. “This conversation is just getting started, Royce. Can I call you Royce? Good,” he said without waiting for an answer. He stood his ground, keeping himself planted right in

front of Gannon while still remaining hyper-aware of Carmen's position behind him and to his left.

"See, here's what I think. Carmen has something you want. Bad. And you worked too hard to find leverage on her to just cut her loose because I showed up. The pictures were a nice touch, by the way."

Gannon glared, but said nothing, so Liam kept digging. "You walk away now, and all that hard work goes down the sh!tter. No contact, no leverage, and no access to that database at the Davenport Clinic. All of it, gone." He made a starburst motion with both hands, mouthing the word "poof" as he shook his head.

Anger flashed through Gannon's eyes, lined with the slightest edge of fear. "You're a cop. I'm not saying anything to you."

"I'm a detective, actually. Liam Hollister. Two Ls, since I'm sure you'll be looking it up. And I already told you, if I was going to do this by the book, you'd be halfway downtown by now."

Gannon looked at him, then Carmen, assessing. "You could be wearing a wire."

Liam held out his arms. "You want to check? Be my guest."

That got him. "You're serious," Gannon said, and Liam smiled.

"I'm always serious when it comes to business."

He sent up a tiny prayer that Capelli's state-of-the-art equipment was good enough to pass the field test Gannon was about to give it, then exhaled in relief as Gannon relied on patting him down rather than looking at his clothing too closely.

"She's next," Gannon said, nodding at Carmen, and oh, look, Liam didn't even have to use his acting skills for this part.

"You don't get to touch her," he growled.

"Then we don't proceed," Gannon shot back, and Carmen rolled her eyes.

"You have enough leverage to blackmail me, Gannon. Do you honestly think I want the cops to know about that? You know what, don't answer that. Will this do?"

Stepping back, she lifted her form-fitting T-shirt high enough to expose the lower edge of her b.ra and the top of her low-slung jeans, all of which showcased nothing but bare skin. She turned a full circle while Liam both gnashed his teeth and reminded himself to be grateful that her b.utton cam was embedded in the necklace sitting at the hollow of her throat.

"I suppose," Gannon said, his eyes lingering on Carmen's body long enough to make Liam want to scream. Luckily for him, Gannon refocused as soon as Carmen had righted her shirt a few seconds later. "So, tell me, Detective. What sort of business did you have in mind?"

Liam rolled his eyes, leaning into the Bad Hollister role with all his might. "You've got more money than brains, don't ya? Come on, Royce. I'm interested in the sort of business where you cut me in on this deal you've got going."

Gannon, the little fvcker, actually laughed. "Why on earth would I do that?"

"Because I'm very good at making problems disappear," Liam said, taking a step back with a smile. "Security footage at local clinics, for example. See, I can offer you protection. Make sure whatever you're planning will go off without intervention."

"And how do you know I don't already have a cop on my payroll?"

"Because like you, I do my research," Liam said. "Which is how I know you're far too slick to be committing insurance fraud for the first time with this little database scam you've got Carmen caught up in."

"You have no proof of that," Gannon replied silkily, and Liam stepped back again, planting himself right beside Carmen as he shrugged.

"Other than your six-thousand dollar suit and your fvcking Maserati? I guess not. But since you seem to like money as much as I do, I can make all of this very worth your while."

Gannon's pause was microscopic, but there, and yes, they had him. "I'm listening."

Liam didn't wait for the guy to change his mind. "Like I said, I assume a guy like you has multiple business ventures going. A guy like me can be very helpful in that area."

"More protection?" Gannon asked, but Liam shook his head.

"Not quite. See, in my line of work, I meet a lot of people with certain, shall we say, chemical dependencies."

Gannon's gaze darted to Carmen, then lit with understanding. "Drug addicts."

Liam suppressed the urge to throat punch Gannon for the disdain in his stare, but Carmen simply arched a brow, as cool as ever.

"Where do you think we met, dumbas*s? A knitting circle? Liam knows where to get all the best sh!t." She slipped an arm around him and smiled. "He's got people all over the city begging for it."

"I've got the demand part down," Liam said, taking the baton she'd so effortlessly passed him. "But the supply part is tricky. I'm a cop, you know? Heroin's easy. That sh!t is everywhere. But prescription drugs are harder to get. Oxy, Fentanyl, Percocet...I can't always come up with enough to go around. I've got people paying me double, sometimes triple, just to hook them up."

Gannon's stare turned calculating. "That sounds like what I'd call a champagne problem. But it is still a problem if you're leaving money on the table. Fortunately for you, I may be able to a.s.sist. But I'd need to know how much quant!ty we're talking about."

"As much as you can get me," Liam said, and Gannon laughed.

"I've got people scamming every hospital and doctor's office in the city. Trust me, you couldn't possibly move everything I can get my hands on."

Oh, goodie. Gannon's ego was coming out to play. Fortunately, Carmen was ready.

"You're working hospitals and doctor's offices, too?" she asked, her eyes wide. "How can you possibly manage all that weight and not get caught?"

"Because, as your boyfriend said, I'm smart. I've got a lot of people working for me. They just don't know it."

"Ah." Liam pretended to have a light bulb moment. "You have runners working for a middleman. That is smart. If one of them gets caught..."

"They can't tell the cops anything useful. We do everything by burner phones. Rotate meeting places and drop sp0ts. Nothing ever touches me. If anyone were to get caught, their claims that they're working for a middleman look like fast talk. There's no proof of anything."

Gannon was flat-out bragging now, so Liam pushed a little harder. "So, these runners. Any of them ever get squirrely? Steal the merchandise or squeeze you for more cash?"

"Why do you care?" Gannon asked, his stare narrowing.

But Liam pivoted into his persona, just as they'd practiced. "Because I have a cop-sized as*s to cover, that's why." He sneered. "I'm not having any of your guys get out of line. One of them figures out I punch the clock at the RPD and gets the bright idea to blackmail me—"

"I can assure you, I keep my people in line personally."

"You do your own dirty work?" Carmen asked, pinning the question with enough doubt to get Gannon exactly where she wanted him.

"Yes, sweetheart. I do whatever needs to be done. My people don't step out of line. Not if they don't want to be stabbed to death in a dark alley."

Liam's pulse took off in a hard burst. Christ, he was talking about Axel. The way Carmen had stilled beside him told him she knew it, too. Still, it wasn't proof. They needed the murder weapon. They needed to take Gannon down for everything—not just the murder, but the fraud and the drug running and whatever else he was up to.

So Liam said, "A man who takes care of business. I like that. Speaking of business, do we have an agreement?"

Gannon examined him one more time before saying, "If your reach is as good as you say it is, then we should be able to work out a deal that will make us both a lot of money, Detective Hollister. But first, I'll be taking you up on that protection you offered. Carmen and I have a job to do."

She huffed out a sigh. "Fine. You're still gonna cut me in on this one, too, right? I mean, a girl's gotta eat."

Gannon shifted his focus from Liam to Carmen. "You're quite the opportunistic pair, aren't you?"

"Not everyone was born with a trust fund," she said, and Gannon gave up a condescending smile.

"You don't have to worry. You'll be pleased with your cut."

Carmen nodded. "Okay, so how do you want to do this, then? Just sneak into the clinic and download everything?"

Gannon's look of disdain returned, and along with it, Liam's desire to bury the guy. "This isn't some smash and grab. It's going to require finesse. My expert will be accompanying us to the clinic at one AM three nights from now. Once we use your credentials to gain access, he'll download what he needs."

"You're working with someone besides me?" Carmen asked, the shock on her face matching the fresh batch of the stuff popping around in Liam's chest.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but I could say the same about you," Gannon pointed out. "But if I can make accommodations for your boyfriend here, then you can deal with my expert accompanying us so he can take what he needs from the database."

Unease plucked at Liam's spine. Gannon had never mentioned an expert. Something about this was off.

"Hold on just a second," he said, shaking his head. "Who is this guy?"

Gannon scoffed. "I'm sure you can appreciate the desire for discretion on jobs such as these."

"And I'm sure you can appreciate the fact that, as we've discussed, I. Am. A. Cop," Liam snapped. "I'm not doing a job—even a one-off—with anyone I haven't vetted. And in order to do that, I'm going to need a name."

"You're pushing your luck," Gannon said, and Carmen stepped between them with a frown.

"Haven't we had enough bullshit for one night?" she asked, her gaze trained on Gannon. "Look, I get that you don't want to advertise your guy's name, but come on. Unless this guy wears a fvcking clown suit when we go to break into the clinic's database, we're going to see his face, anyway. So, could you just cut the crap, give up a name, and let us get on with this job?"

"Fine," Gannon said. "I suppose you're right. We'll all be working together soon enough. But you won't need to vet my expert. His reputation speaks for itself."

Again, something odd stirred in Liam's brain, just out of reach. "In case you haven't noticed, we don't exactly travel in the same circles, Royce."

"Well, unless your circles have had you living under a rock for the last decade, you'll know my expert. He's the very best in the game."

"The game," Liam said slowly, and Gannon laughed.

"Insurance fraud. My expert can work a medical database a dozen different ways without a trace. He's the master."

Gannon smiled, and no. No, no, no, no...

"Surely you've heard of Daniel McGee?"