

The Saint Chapter 25 - Tips

Something was very wrong.

Carmen's heart raced as she did a lightning-fast mental backtrack. The meet with Gannon had gone well—or, at least, as well as a meet with a murderer/blackmailer/drug-running insurance scammer could go. Although it had been more than a little off-putting to see Liam act like such a righteous d1ck, he'd played his cover exactly as planned, which had given her the courage to do the same. Bad Hollister and Bad Carmen had been able to get Gannon talking even better than she'd thought they would.

Even though she'd nearly redlined on adrenaline when he'd checked them both for wires and Gannon had kind of thrown her for a bit of a loop with the whole adding-an-expert thing, he'd given them a time and date for the meet, with three whole days to prepare. Everything had seemed like it had been going according to plan.

Right up until Gannon had said the name Daniel McGee, and Liam looked like someone had walked over his grave.

He'd stowed the expression two seconds after its appearance, so expertly that Gannon—who had been knee-deep in his own fvcking ego—hadn't even noticed it. But Carmen had, just as she'd picked up on the way Liam had ended the meet not two minutes later, when Gannon had promised to be in touch soon. Now, as they got into Liam's truck, he was still stony and stiff, and okay, screw this.

This wasn't part of his cover. Something was seriously, deeply wrong.

"What's the matter?" she asked, turning toward him.

"Nothing," he auto-replied. "That went well."

Just as Carmen was about to throw the bullsh!t flag (nothing? Did he really think she was that stupid?) Isabella's voice sounded off in her ear, making her jump.

"It really did. You guys were great," she murmured.

Carmen opened her mouth to protest—something was wrong—but Detective Hale's voice came first. "Gannon's in his car, heading out of the parking lot. You're clear, Hollister."

"Good job, you two," said Sergeant Sinclair. "See you back at the house."

"Switching comms off," Capelli said.

And then it was quiet.

Liam removed his earpiece and put it into the small plastic box he'd stowed in the truck's center console, but nope. No. Uh-uh. She wasn't going to pretend like everything was fine.

"Okay," Carmen said, taking out her own teeny transmitter and placing it beside Liam's in the box, then snapping it shut. "Now do you want to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Nothing's going on," he said, starting the truck and putting the box back into the console between them.

"Ah, yeah, no," Carmen said, her heart pounding although she had no idea why. "You can lie to your unit-mates over the wire if you want. That's your business. But I'm sitting here, looking at you, and I know something's wrong. Please"—she put her hand on his forearm—"help me understand what's happening. Why are you upset?"

Liam stared through the windshield, his jaw cranked so tight, she'd swear he was about to crack a fvcking molar. "I'm not upset. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"Thanks," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Because what I really needed after that meet was for you to tell me I look like sh!t."

Carmen's eyes flew wide, his words slicing cleanly through her. "Jesus, Liam. You know I didn't mean it like that."

Her brain warned that she should drop the subject. He clearly didn't want to talk. But something Gannon said had rattled him, and whatever it was had dug in deep.

"Who's Daniel McGee?" Carmen asked, and Liam thrust the truck into gear and began to drive.

"Nobody. Daniel McGee is nobody."

The words arrived with such venom that Carmen instantly knew they were a lie. "Look, can we just stop for a minute and talk about this?"

He didn't even slow, let alone stop driving. "We're at the scene of an undercover op and the unit has been called back to the precinct for a debrief. They've all left already, so no. We really can't."

Carmen tried again. "Okay, we don't have to literally stop. I just meant can we take a breath and talk about whatever's bothering you?"

"And I told you, nothing is bothering me."

The pain he was so clearly trying to hide in the shadows flashed over his face, illuminated for a brief second by a passing streetlight, and her heart pushed the vulnerable words directly out of her mouth.

“Come on, Liam. I really care about you. Something’s obviously got you upset. Talk to me.” She turned toward him, unable to hold back the emotion in her voice. “Let me in. Please.”

For the briefest second, he looked at her, his expression softening. But then his shoulders snapped back together, his spine rigid against the driver’s seat and his stare pure steel as he leveled it back at the windshield, closing her off completely.

“For the last time, there’s nothing to talk about.”

Carmen’s breath whooshed out of her—oh, that hurt—but her pride quickly took the reins. “Fine. Have it your way.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she stared out the window for the rest of the trip to the Thirty-Third. Liam kept up with his stony silence as he got out of the truck, slamming the door and cutting a path to the front entrance. Carmen’s irritation surged with each step, and by the time they made it past the front desk and up the stairs to the Intelligence office, she’d ditched her hurt feelings for something far more familiar, not to mention, far safer.

At least her prickly armor didn’t shut her out when the going got tough.

With her chin elevated into no, fuck you territory, she followed Liam over the threshold. But the door had barely bumped shut before she realized he’d stopped short in front of her, and she stumbled to a clumsy halt just shy of crashing into him.

“Detective Hollister,” Sergeant Sinclair said, and wait, why did all of the detectives—Isabella, Maxwell, Garza, even the ever-bubbly Hale—look so freaking serious? “It seems we have a major complication with this case.”

Only then did Carmen see the handsome Black man standing at the front of the room beside Sergeant Sinclair, and whoa. She thought the Intelligence detectives had looked serious. This guy was practically an ice sculpture.

“Agent Roman,” Liam said, clearly shocked. “What are you doing here?”

Roman looked at him, his dark brown stare showing no emotion whatsoever. “I’m here to find out what the hell you think you’re doing in the middle of my case.”

“The FBI is investigating Daniel McGee?” Liam asked.

But Roman shook his head. “No. We’re investigating Miranda Astor. Specifically, I am.”

Carmen's shock had barely made its way from her chest to her brain before Roman added,

"Daniel McGee is my CI. He's on our side."

Miranda was going to kill her husband.

"Let me see if I've got this right," she said, folding her fingers tightly together and placing them over her desk in an effort to keep them steady. "You brought an Intelligence detective in on this job without vetting him or asking me? Are you insane? Or just stupid?"

Royce glared at her over the rim of his glass. "Insults are a bit childish, don't you think, Miranda? Anyway, I didn't see you volunteering to go meet with Carmen."

"That's not how our business works," she snapped. She'd given him one job—not even a difficult one, for Chrissake—and he'd gone and fucked up this entire operation. "You were supposed to go and give Carmen a date and time for our visit to the clinic. That was it." They hadn't wanted to risk sending the information via text. It was supposed to have been a two-minute meet, and now it was a disaster she'd have to fix.

"Carmen changed the plan when she showed up with her boyfriend," Royce said, as if none of this mess was his fault. "I simply took advantage of the situation."

Took advantage of... "You put us at risk," Miranda said icily. "RPD's Intelligence Unit is the best in the city."

"So, having Detective Hollister on our side is a boon," Royce argued. "I checked both of them for wires, and I looked into him fully as soon as I left. He's hardly a shining star over there at the RPD. He's had three disciplinary hearings in the last five years."

"He's still a cop," Miranda argued back. Truly, how reckless could Royce be?

"He's a cop who could make us a lot of money," Royce said, his heels clearly dug in like a pouty child, and it was time for Miranda to put her foot down, once and for all.

"No."

Royce lowered his tumbler and stared at her. "No?"

"No," Miranda repeated, the power of the word surging through her veins. "I had this whole thing set up perfectly with just two players—Carmen and Daniel. I'm not adding a cop to the mix just because you're getting power hungry. It's too dangerous."

"You had this whole thing set up?" Royce snorted, entirely unbecoming. "Please. You haven't done a damned thing."

It took a lot to make Miranda truly angry. This? Did the trick. “You can’t be serious,” she said. “Accessing the clinic database was my idea.”

“And involving Daniel McGee was mine. I did all the legwork,” Royce said. “I reached out to him to express interest. I recruited him. And now I’m bringing someone in who can offer us protection on this job plus expand our reach on others, which is what you said you wanted. Expansion.”

“This isn’t the way to do it. It’s sloppy and dangerous and I won’t stand for it.” Miranda stood, her La Perla bathrobe swishing around her wrist as she jabbed a finger at him. “I’m constantly cleaning up your messes, Royce, and quite frankly, it’s getting old.”

He opened his mouth to argue—good Christ, his ego was starting to become more trouble than it was worth—but she needed to end this idiocy, right here, right now.

“You think you’re so smart. Please.” Miranda skewered him with a look. “You never think anything through. In fact, I’m starting to wonder if you think at all. You couldn’t even kill Axel properly. If I’d trusted you to do that job without any hand-holding, he’d probably have regained consciousness and you’d be rotting in a prison cell right now.”

“At least I have the balls to do the wet work,” Royce shot back. “God forbid you step down from that ivory tower of yours and actually take action. You think you’re so fucking smart, but all you do is talk, talk, talk.”

“I think,” Miranda said quietly, so she would not rage—or, worse yet, slit his throat with the Tiffany letter opener sitting on her desk, “that you need to be very, very careful, Royce.”

He laughed. “Or what? Come on, Miranda. Bringing Hollister on is a smart play. Dirty cops can be useful in a lot of different ways, and in the end, we’d have enough leverage to blackmail him, too, if the need arises.”

“And you don’t think it’s awfully convenient that he just happened to show up with Carmen?” Something about this whole thing smelled off.

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘fortuitous,’” Royce said, and for love of God, could he be any more condescending?

“Not if they’re undercover,” she said, matching his tone. Fine, so they hadn’t been wearing wires, and Carmen had enough of a dark past that her shacking up with a dirty cop wasn’t that big of a stretch. Still...

“You just don’t like this because it wasn’t your idea,” Royce said. “God forbid, just once, someone else is the smartest person in the room.”

Miranda was tempted—not a little—to kill him right on the spot. Clearly, his ego was beginning to outweigh his usefulness, and she'd always planned to cut him out of her business arrangements at some point, anyway. But, as much as she'd love to show him how fond of wet work she could be when the occasion called for it, she needed to deal with the situation in front of her first. There would be plenty of time for her to engineer her own widowhood later, after they'd gained access to the database.

"I don't like this because it's a bad idea. But it's a bad idea that, unfortunately, you've married us to."

As much as she wanted to tell Royce to renege on the deal entirely, thanks to his prideful mouth, the detective knew too much. If they backed out now, Hollister might get mad enough to have his unit start a legitimate investigation into Royce, and by extension, her as well. And that, she could not have. They were going to have to proceed with Royce's plan.

At least, until she'd had enough time to alter it to suit her purpose.

"I'll be looking into Detective Hollister personally," Miranda said, his resulting smile making it clear he thought he'd won. Fvcking amateur. "If one single thing smells off about him, and I do mean one thing, both he and Carmen will be your mess to clean up, Royce. And this time, I expect that you'll finish the job properly. Am I clear?"

"I knew you'd see it my way, darling."

As he threw back the last of his Scotch, Miranda knew two things. One was that no matter what, this job would go according to her plan, and her plan only.

The other was that she needed to start looking for a suitable black dress to wear to her husband's funeral.