

The Saint Chapter 27 - Tips

Carmen's heart nearly made a jailbreak from her rib cage as she watched Liam walk out of the Intelligence office. Her head was still spinning from the overload of information—Daniel McGee working with the FBI, Miranda Astor being behind the whole fraud operation with Gannon trying to double cross her in a power play, the sudden change in the game plan that raised the risk for the operation—it was enough to give her wh!plash.

But what threw her most was the one thing only she seemed to recognize. The resemblance was subtle, Carmen had to admit. But Daniel's eyes, although a different shade, had that same piercing quality as Liam's, the edges of his mouth set in that same easygoing half-smile Liam almost always wore, and as soon as Capelli had said that Daniel had been convicted of fraud and when, the truth had smacked Carmen right in the face.

Daniel McGee was Liam's father. The same father who had ripped their family apart eighteen years ago, leaving Liam to pick up the pieces.

God, no wonder he'd been so upset in the truck.

Upset enough to push you away, her defenses reminded her, making her straighten. Yes, the news that Daniel was involved in this case was an emotional A-bomb, and no, she didn't blame him for his reaction. She couldn't even imagine what he must be feeling right now.

But none of that changed the fact that, as much as it tore at her, he'd shut down and shut her out in less time than it had taken for her to blink.

"Hey." Isabella's voice startled her back to the Intelligence office, where the meeting had broken up just seconds after Liam had made his hasty exit. "Do you want to tell me what's got Hollister's boxers in a triple knot?"

Carmen knew better than to pretend Liam hadn't been visibly upset, so she forced her shoulders into a shrug. "He's probably just trying to err on the side of caution. There is an added risk with this guy, McGee, in play now."

"Yeah, but it's not one that he'd normally get so ch3sty about," Isabella said. "In fact, he doesn't get ch3sty about anything."

Shit. Carmen couldn't tell Isabella what was going on—that would be a colossal violation of Liam's trust. But Liam was going to have to disclose his relationship with Daniel, at the very least, to Sergeant Sinclair, before they could figure out how—or if—they could proceed. Both her safety and his were on the line, not to mention the entire case.

But until she could figure out how to handle that little nugget, she had to play it safe.

"We've been working this thing for weeks, and it's all really intense," Carmen tried, and, hey, at least that wasn't a lie. "The meet with Gannon, all this new intel. The McGee thing came out of nowhere. I know he's normally pretty chill, but everyone's got a tipping point. If I had to guess, I'd say he's just processing. He'll be fine tomorrow."

To Carmen's relief, Isabella gave up a slow nod. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Tonight has been a lot. Plus, the adrenaline of being in the field can be pretty huge." Isabella paused. "Nice job, by the way. You were a total boss out there."

Carmen took the swing in subject and ran. "Thanks, but after this, I'm leaving the undercover work to you guys."

"Fair enough," Isabella said with a smile. "Come on, you must be exhausted. I'll walk you out."

They made their way downstairs together, where Isabella signed Carmen out and wished her goodnight before heading to the staff parking lot. Carmen's car was only a block away, and she scanned her surroundings (old habits, and all that) carefully before beginning to walk.

She caught sight of the figure leaning against her car at a few dozen paces out. Her heart slammed against her sternum, her footsteps faltering just slightly. But then the figure straightened, and her heart began moving at a different rhythm altogether as it recognized the man without question.

"Liam," she whispered. Even in the shadowy streetlight, she could see the emotion on his face, and her feet were in motion before her brain even registered the message to make them go.

He reached out for her wordlessly, his breath coasting out on a hard exhale as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Okay," Carmen said, her throat knotting to prevent the rest of what she wanted to say from coming out. Liam didn't seem to care, though. He held on tightly, his body trembling against hers, and she held on right back.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice rough with no fewer than a dozen emotions. "I'm so sorry. I'm such an as*sh0le."

She huffed in protest. "No. You're human, and you're hurting."

"I just...I can't..."

Liam broke off on a shaky breath, and okay. They needed to get out of here. "Hey," she whispered, pulling back only far enough to let their gazes connect. "Let me take you home, okay?"

He pressed his forehead to hers for a beat, then another, before nodding. Neither one of them spoke as they let go of each other so she could guide him to the passenger side of her car, then make sure he was safely buckled in. Carmen knew the route to his apartment by heart—how had there ever been a time when she didn't know it?—and she drove as quickly as she could without breaking too many laws. Liam remained silent for the whole trip, then silent still as they made their way from her car to his apartment. He muscle-memoried his way through getting the key in the lock, and once the door was closed and locked behind them, he turned toward her.

"I'm so sorry," he said, but she cut him off with a shake of her head.

"We've covered this. You don't need to apologize."

"But I do," Liam insisted. "You wanted to help, and I shut you out. I was a complete d!ck. You deserve so much more than that. You deserve everything."

Carmen moved toward him, cupping his face in her hands. "Do you want to know what Isabella said to me when I told her about us?"

"Probably not," he said, but she didn't even think of holding back. Not for this.

"She told me to be careful with you. She said you keep yourself b.uttoned up, and that when b.uttoned up is your default, it can be hard to let someone else in. But I meant what I said. I care about you, Liam."

Emotion snuck into her voice, but rather than soften her words, it only made them stronger. "I'm here for you, even when things are ugly or hard. I see who you are—who you really are—and you're safe with me. I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm in love with you."

Every part of Carmen froze except for her pulse, which skyrocketed. "You—"

"Love you, yeah," Liam said, the tiniest laugh crossing his l!ps. "Which is pretty crazy, since I never thought I'd let myself get close to anyone, let alone close enough to fall in love with them. I thought it was dangerous. But even if it is, I don't care. I would walk through hell for you, Carmen. I would do anything to keep you happy and safe. You're mine, and I'm yours, and I am totally, insanely, irrevocably in love with you."

Her heart squeezed, but, oh, she'd never been so sure of anything in her life. "I love you, too, Liam. I'm here." She pressed up to brush her mouth over his in the barest hint of a k!ss, like a promise. "No matter what happens with this case, or Daniel, or any of the rest of it. I'm here."

Liam closed his eyes, leaning into her touch. "I know I have a lot to figure out before I can work on this case. I do." He exhaled. "But right now, I want to forget everything but you."

His eyes opened, so full of need that Carmen's breath crashed to a halt in her lungs.

"Please. Just for tonight, let me forget everything but this."

Her response was pure instinct, but she knew without a doubt that it was right. This was right. "Just me and you," she promised.

Lowering her hand, she threaded her fingers through his and led him down the hall to his bedroom. Need burned through her, filling her veins and making her nearly dizzy. Carmen turned, wrapping her arms around Liam's shoulders.

He dipped his head to slant his mouth over hers, parting her lips with a sensual slide of his tongue, and her body sparked to life like a live wire, awareness pulsing with every heartbeat. Carmen wanted to live the rest of her life in this moment, spending hours with Liam's mouth on hers, learning every nuance of how they felt together. He deepened the contact, his tongue sliding over hers more urgently.

A sigh drifted up from her chest, and Liam breathed it in, capturing it with his mouth and kissing her even harder. But for all its intensity, this kiss was just like their first one, that night in the laundromat. It wasn't sloppy or greedy. It didn't demand a thing. Instead, this kiss was a promise, and it consumed her from the inside out.

She wanted this forever. Just this. Her and Liam.

Carmen tightened her arms around his shoulders, pulling his chest flush against hers. His breath hitched, his muscles growing taut at the contact, and somehow, impossibly, it made her want him more. Reaching down, she lifted Liam's shirt over his head.

She ran her hands over his body as if it were the first time, exploring the curves of his biceps, the plane of his chest. His muscles jumped under every sweep of her fingers, his skin warm and smooth. Carmen pulled off her own shirt, wanting nothing more than to feel him without barriers, and she wrapped her arms around him to ground herself here with him in the right now he so desperately needed.

"Carmen." Liam's eyes flashed, needful and dark. But the moment felt so much bigger than words, so much bigger than everything, so she didn't answer. She simply undressed him, one garment at a time, and held steady as he did the same to her. Their hands roamed, their mouths following, until they were both breathless and desperate. And as Liam guided her to the bed and they finally gave in to the need they'd created, Carmen repeated only two words, over and over.

"I'm here," she whispered.

Hours had passed, although in the dark of the bedroom, Carmen couldn't tell how many. She'd dozed off in Liam's arms—or maybe he'd been in hers—but now, the bed was empty, so she shouldered her way into one of the nightshirts she'd left here and padded down the hallway. She followed the soft light spilling in from the kitchen, unable to help her smile as she caught sight of Liam sitting at the island, wearing jeans and nothing else. A package of Oreos sat in front of him, a mug of milk beside it, and she wrapped her arms around him from behind, pressing a kiss between his shoulder blades.

"Hey," she whispered against his skin. "I missed you."

"Sorry," he murmured. "I couldn't sleep."

Carmen nodded, kissing him once more before sliding to the bar stool beside him. "I can't say I blame you. Do you want to talk about it?"

Liam blew out a breath, staring into the mug between his hands without speaking. But Carmen knew how hard it was to be vulnerable, even—or, God, maybe especially—in front of someone you loved, so she simply sat next to him and waited until he was ready.

He didn't pull any punches to start. "You know Daniel McGee is my father, right?"

Carmen nodded, her heart in her throat. "I do. Assumptions aren't really my thing, but I'm guessing no one else knows?"

"No." Liam studied his hands. "At least, I'm almost sure. It's in my file, so Sinclair knows my father is a convicted felon, but we barely even talked about it when I joined the unit, and that was more than half a decade ago. I highly doubt he made the connection, otherwise he'd have said something."

"I figured as much," Carmen said. Sergeant Sinclair wasn't the type to ignore something so huge. Clearly, Daniel didn't know that Liam was working the case, either. Roman had just found out himself, and he had no reason to name drop anyone from Intelligence to his CI. Not yet, anyway.

Liam shook his head. "Hearing his name tonight, knowing he's involved in this case—a case that has your life on the line—Christ, Carmen. I can't..." He broke off, the emotion in his voice turning his words to gravel. "I don't care what Roman or anyone else says. I don't think I can trust him. Not with this. Not with you."

"It's perfectly understandable that you don't want to trust him," Carmen said, because, hey, she was right there in that boat with him. "He did horrible, unforgivable things, and minimizing those—and how you feel about him—would be wrong, no matter how long ago he did them. I guess the real question is, what do you want to do about it?"

Confusion flickered over his face. "What do you mean?"

Carmen let a smile touch her lips. "I mean, what do you want to do about it? We don't have to proceed with the op."

"We," Liam said, and at least here, she knew exactly what to say.

"Yes, we. This is me and you, together, remember? If you don't think you can move forward, then we don't."

Surprise mixed with something a lot more tender, both flickering across his face. "You'd do whatever I chose?"

"Did you miss the part where I love you?" Carmen asked.

"No," Liam said, the tenderness doing a full takeover of his face. "I did not."

"Good. Of course I'd do what you chose, Liam. I'm working this case with Intelligence, yes, but I'm in this with you. If you don't want to go undercover with Daniel, we won't."

His expression told her he'd considered it. And yet... "The case hinges on catching Gannon and Astor in the act. The meet is set. All the pieces are in place. Changing that now would seriously jeopardize bringing them both down. Not to mention, if you back out of giving Gannon access, he'll come after you and the night clinic."

There was no sense arguing the likelihood that Liam was right, so Carmen did what she did best. She met the truth head-on. "He probably will," Carmen agreed. "But, although Roman seems like one chilly dude, he also doesn't strike me as a dumbass, and I know for a fact that the Intelligence Unit is the best in the city. We've got three days before the meet. If you aren't up for the op, the team can come up with a Plan B."

"It won't be nearly as good as Plan A, though," Liam said, and again, Carmen used honesty as the best policy.

"You're right. It won't. But that doesn't mean you can't choose it."

Here she paused. This next bit was going to sting, and probably not a little, but it needed to be said. "You'll have to tell Sinclair the truth either way. Roman, too. Before Daniel does."

Liam let go of a joyless laugh. "I don't even know if Daniel will recognize me. I haven't seen him in eighteen years."

"Still," Carmen said. "It doesn't matter. Sinclair needs to know."

"I—" Liam broke off, thrusting a hand through his hair. "I know. It's time for me to stop stuffing this down and pretending like I can ignore all the feelings that go with it. My past

has been buried for a long time, and Daniel with it. I thought I could leave it there. Dust to dust. But now..."

Reaching out, she slid her hand over his forearm, her fingers as steady as her gaze and words. "Whatever you decide, the unit will have your back. And so will I. If you don't want to do the meet, we won't. But if you decide that you can, we will all be there, making sure it goes off without a hitch. I've got you, Liam. I swear."

Liam sat quietly for a minute, then another. "Fvcking Maxwell."

Of all the things he could've said, that just might headline the list of ones Carmen expected the least. "Sorry?"

A very small smile poked at the corners of his mouth. "When we were getting ready for the op, Maxwell told me that for as badly as I wanted to protect you in the field, I had to be prepared to let you protect me if the situation called for it. I thought he was just a little bit crazy, but he was right."

Carmen's heartbeat pressed faster in her ears, but she was way beyond holding back. "You'd walk through hell for me, and I'd walk through fire for you. I love you, Liam. Whatever you decide, whatever you need, I'll be right beside you."

And as she led him back to bed and held him in her arms until he drifted off to sleep, she knew she'd do anything, no matter the cost, to keep her promise.