

The Saint Chapter 29 - Tips

Carmen was ninety-nine percent sure her head was going to explode. For the past three days, the Intelligence Unit had put together a step by step strategy for the meet at the Davenport Clinic, including no fewer than three separate contingencies for if the sh!t hit the fan.

The plan itself was pretty straightforward. Carmen and Liam would meet Gannon and Daniel at the clinic at the set time. Then, Liam would bypass the security alarm and reroute the cameras (well, Capelli would really do that part from the surveillance van a block away, but Carmen had to admit, the whole thing had looked super convincing when they'd practiced it).

Once they were safely inside, Carmen would access the database with her credentials, Daniel would download the database, then he and Gannon would meet with Miranda, at which time the Intelligence Unit would take all three into custody.

On paper, and even in practice, it seemed so easy. In reality? It was enough to make her wonder how on earth Liam did this job without going bat-sh!t crazy.

Leaning all the way back in her chair in the now-empty Intelligence office, Carmen closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. They'd broken early today so everyone could get some rest ahead of tonight's meet, and Liam was going over some last-minute surveillance stuff with Maxwell in the equipment room. After his initial meeting with Daniel, Sinclair, and Roman, Liam hadn't spoken to Daniel at all—at least not that she had seen—and even though she'd let Liam know she'd listen if he felt like unloading anything, he'd remained pretty quiet about being face to face with the man. Daniel wasn't anything like she'd expected, although she knew con men could dr.ape on a thousand different personas in the span of an hour. But he'd simply sat in all the strategy meetings, listening carefully and asking questions when needed, but not interfering otherwise. Carmen was still chock full of dislike for the guy, even though he'd been polite and, on occasion, helpful. The fact that he claimed to have turned over a new leaf meant nothing in the face of the hurt he'd heaped on Liam for eighteen years, and—spoiler alert—she was always, always going to be Team Liam. At least after this case was closed, Liam would be able to put his animosity for Daniel to rest and finally move on.

"Oh," came a masculine voice from the doorway, and speak of the devil. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize anyone would still be here."

Carmen's spine unfolded against the back of her chair, her whole body on alert as she eyed Daniel with caution. "Well, you realized wrong. Obviously."

Daniel nodded, taking her prickly tone in stride. "I forgot my glasses," he said, gesturing to the small desk where he'd been sitting earlier. Sure enough, his wire-rimmed glasses

sat neatly on the corner. He moved to retrieve them, but stopped as soon as he had them in hand.

"After tonight, I guess I won't have any cause to see you again," he said, and her defenses took control of her mouth.

"I hope not."

"I suppose I deserve that," he said, looking down at the glasses in his hand. But rather than getting defensive or hightailing it out of the room, he surprised her with, "I can tell that Liam cares a great deal for you."

A laugh, not a happy one, vaulted out of her mouth. "You don't know anything about Liam."

"Actually, I do. I've been following his career for years. I know he went to college and got a degree in criminal justice. He graduated ninth in his class at the Remington Police Academy, and he's got a rather impressive record here in the Intelligence Unit."

Carmen wasn't that easily fooled. "Congratulations. You can Google."

"Fair enough," Daniel said. "You want something more personal. How about this? I know he raised his brother, and that he still does everything he can to help Jamie, even as Jamie struggles with addiction. I know that he hates me, and that he's doing his best to keep that in check so we can proceed with this case. I know that, unlike me, he's a good man, because I've watched him work for the past three days. And I know he cares an awful lot about you, because I can see it on his face every time he looks at you."

Holy. Sh!t. Carmen searched for a tart comeback, but couldn't find one.

"You're surprised that I've been paying that much attention to him," Daniel said.

At least that, she could respond to. "Well, yeah. You've set a pretty solid precedent for s.ucking at life, so..."

Daniel laughed. "I can't argue that. For a long time, I was a despicable human being, and I have more regrets than anything else. I can't take back who I was, although I'd give nearly anything to do so."

The words slid beneath Carmen's skin, hitting uncomfortably close to home. How many times had she wished for a way to erase what she'd done in those years she'd lived on the street? Still, she'd never hurt anyone, certainly not the way Daniel had hurt Liam and hundreds of other people. "No, you can't," she said.

Somehow, Daniel didn't seem daunted by this. "I'm doing my best to atone for all the horrible things in my past, but there are some things I'll never be able to fix. I can't undo

the hurt I've caused Liam or Jamie or their mother, and I'll take that to my grave. But if I can do even this one thing for the sake of good now, if I can spend just this time seeing the man my son became despite his father"—a small, sad smile crossed his mouth—"then I'll consider myself luckier than I deserve."

Carmen's breath slipped out unsteadily, her thoughts moving a thousand miles an hour. She wanted to tell Daniel to fvck off, that the things he'd done were too big, too horrible to be forgiven. But Daniel wasn't asking for forgiveness.

He wasn't asking for anything at all.

He broke the moment by tucking his glasses into his jacket pocket, heading for the door. "Well, I don't want to keep you. We've got a big night ahead and we're going to need all of our wits to stay ahead of Miranda and Gannon. But, Carmen?" He turned, the sad smile moving back over his lips. "Thank you for listening."

But before she could reply, he was gone.

"Mic check, one, two," Isabella said from inside Carmen's ear—for the record, still one of the weirdest sensations she'd ever experienced. "Carmen, can you hear me?"

"Affirmative," Carmen said into the shadows. She and Liam were parked around the corner from the clinic, and she waited out his matching mic test, forcing herself to take slow, steady inhales as she listened to the surveillance chatter going back and forth between the detectives.

"McGee is in position on the east side of the clinic, standing by," Hale said in a hushed whisper.

In a move that had surprised no one, Sinclair had insisted that, while Daniel would be wired with the same sort of button cam they'd used in their first meet with Gannon, he would not be given an earpiece. Although Daniel hadn't protested, Roman had, but in the end, the precaution stood. Daniel knew the plan. He'd either follow it or he wouldn't. But he didn't need to know every move the team was making on the periphery.

"All clear from across the street. No sign of Gannon yet." Garza murmured, and Maxwell chimed in.

"Rear exits are clear. Hollister, you're good to proceed."

Because Gannon had almost certainly done his homework and looked into the Intelligence Unit after Hollister's arrival the other night, they'd had to get creative about who they put undercover, and where. As such, most of the team was looking on from parked vehicles or darkened storefronts, where Gannon would never catch sight of them. Hell, Carmen probably wouldn't be able to see them, and she knew without a doubt that they were there, watching her back.

They were prepared. They'd practiced a thousand times.

All they had to do was download that database, have Daniel pass it off to Gannon and Miranda together, and they'd be set.

This would be over.

"You ready?" Liam asked from the driver's seat, and she reached out to squeeze his hand.

"Me and you," she promised, and he nodded, squeezing right back.

"Me and you. Let's go do this."

They got out of the F-150 and walked toward the clinic, both of them keeping their heads on a swivel. But everything was quiet and dark, just as they'd planned. Carmen's pulse evened out with each step, and by the time they'd reached the small, private parking lot beside the clinic, she'd corralled nearly all of her nerves.

"We're in place," Liam whispered, angling his body so Capelli could get a decent look at their position from his hidden body cam.

"Copy that," Capelli said. "Daniel is two minutes behind you, approaching on foot from the east. As soon as we get eyes on Gannon, we'll go dark on two-way."

Carmen turned toward the east corner of the parking lot just in time to catch sight of a figure headed their way. "There's Daniel," she whispered.

"I have eyes on McGee," Liam murmured.

"I've got a very familiar gray Maserati approaching the parking lot," Maxwell said. "This guy is seriously even dumber than he looks."

Carmen's belly swooped toward her knees, but she wrestled herself back into steady territory. Everything was going perfectly to plan.

Daniel drew closer, his footsteps echoing softly on the pavement. The Maserati's headlights were obscenely bright, the white-blue light so intense that Carmen had to squint, then finally look away. Liam swore under his breath, his body at such high alert beside her that he was practically spring-loaded, splitting his awareness between Daniel and the Maserati. The team had gone dark on comms, but Carmen knew that they were seeing everything she and Liam were seeing.

She turned toward Daniel, leaving Liam to focus his attention on Gannon. Daniel made only the briefest of eye contact with her before staring at the Maserati. Gannon killed the engine but not the headlights, letting them blast through the shadows for another

few seconds before finally extinguishing them. The resulting darkness was blinding, and Carmen struggled to adjust.

But as soon as she did, she realized that the person who had just gotten out of the car wasn't Gannon at all.

It was Miranda Astor.