

The Saint Chapter 3

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Liam was going to need more than coffee to get through this morning. He'd already thrown back half a pot to no avail, and now that the sun was beginning to push past the blinds in the Intelligence Unit's open office space, he was going to have to find another way to put his sleepless night behind him. But really, it wasn't his fault he'd tossed and turned.

Every time he'd gotten within a nautical mile of drifting off, his maddening nonversation with Carmen had roared through his mind like a runaway truck, waking him right back up. The way her hands had found her h!ps so easily whenever he'd asked her even the simplest questions. The defiant glint in her dark brown eyes that always managed to say, "go on, I dare you". He didn't even want to get started on the pale pink lace he'd caught sight of on her couch, glimpsing it for only a split second before she'd hidden it with her bag.

Thathad done things to him that went far beyond a wake-up call, and okay, yeah, he needed to stamp out all thoughts of Carmen's undergarments—no matter how delicately se*xxy they were—and focus on the real issue here.

She was hiding something, and whatever it was, Liam would bet it wasn't small.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he looked at the case notes he'd recorded on his computer at stupid o'clock this morning. None of them had changed since the last time he'd stared them down, but at this point, he was getting desperate.

"Oh, hey, you're here early," Isabella said, pulling her hair into a ponytail as she hustled into the office.

"Back atcha," Liam replied, punctuating the words with a smile he had to push into place. "I'm just trying to make sense of this before we throw it in front of Sinclair and the rest of the unit."

Isabella nodded, sitting at her desk, which faced his in the large, open office space. "Yeah. Jonah texted me in the wee hours."

"Really?" Liam asked, a spark of hope setting up camp in his c.hest. For all her caginess, Carmen hadn't been wrong about Axel being in great hands. Jonah Sheridan was the best trauma surgeon in the city. He was also a friend, one who wouldn't bullsh!t them about Axel's chances.

"Yep. Axel made it through surgery, although there were a few complications. He lost a lot of bl00d, and they had trouble stabilizing him. Jonah said he'd likely been stabbed at least twenty minutes before that nine-one-one call came in, so it's all pretty touch and go. Axel probably won't regain consciousness for a while."

Just like that, the spark in his chest fizzled. “Well, sh!t.”

“My feelings exactly,” Isabella said. “What about you? How did the meet with Carmen go?”

“It was”—frustrating. Infuriating. An odd and slightly inappropriate turn-on—“not very productive,” Liam said, and okay, yeah, he needed to nix that turn-on thing, fast. That rush of heat he’d felt during their back and forth was nothing more than argument endorphins, doing their thing. God knew Carmen was a pro at pushing his buttons.

“Seriously?” Isabella’s brows had traveled halfway up her forehead, and Liam might as well add to the pile of crap news they were building.

“Yep.” He gave her a rundown of his exchange with Carmen, from her unhappiness to see him (expected) to her taciturn responses (semi-expected—she was a CI, sure, but she’d never been the chatty type) to the way she’d pushed back hard enough for him to know she was hiding something (very unexpected).

“So, you think she’s somehow involved in Axel’s stabbing?” Isabella asked, her brows lifting in both shock and doubt.

Liam was quick to shake his head. “Do I think she stabbed the guy? Hell, no.” The idea was ludicrous, not to mention the fact that it made zero sense that Axel would call his attacker after he’d been stabbed. “Do I think she knows something she’s not telling us? Hell, yes.”

“I know Carmen isn’t exactly warm and fuzzy,” Isabella said, and Liam had no choice but to snort his agreement. “But, come on. She’s my CI, and she’s always been solid. Do you really think she’d lie about this?”

It was a fair point. Carmen might have some pretty sharp corners, but Liam doubted she’d withhold direct information about a crime. Especially one involving a grave injury.

Unless she had one hell of a reason.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But Axel called her three times in pretty rapid succession, and her number was in his hand. There’s no way he misdialed. She might not know him, but he was desperate to talk to her.”

Isabella blew out a breath, sitting back in her chair. “You’re probably right about that. Let’s start with a full dump of his cell and socials and find out what he’s been up to, or if anyone might want to hurt him. Then we can take a ride to Remington Mem and see if he’s regained consciousness.”

“Sounds good.”

By the time the phone records had landed in Liam's inbox, the rest of the team, including their boss, Sergeant Sam Sinclair, had arrived in the office. Isabella filled them in on the details, skimpy as they were, and the unit's tech and surveillance expert, James Capelli, started a case board on the digital array mounted on the wall over his desk.

"Alright," Capelli said, nodding at Axel's photograph, which just so happened to be a mug shot from earlier in the year. "Our victim is Axel Franklin, twenty-two. Four prior arrests, all drug-related misdemeanors—possession, distribution in small amounts. He pled out on all four charges."

"So, not exactly a choir boy," Garza said, but Hale countered quickly.

"That doesn't mean he deserved to get stabbed."

"Somebody out there disagrees with that," Liam said. "We just need to figure out who. And why."

Sinclair nodded, his stare firm on the case board. "Did Dade get anything off the canva.ss?"

"Negative," Liam said. Her report had been in the database as soon as he'd logged in this morning. "Half the neighbors didn't answer their doors, and the other half said they saw and heard exactly nothing. There's some bl00d on the sidewalk in front of his place. On the doorknob, too, so..."

"That tracks with him being stabbed somewhere else, then coming home," Isabella finished.

"Can we walk the path of the bl00d back to an origin point?" Hale asked, and Capelli nodded.

"That's sometimes more difficult than it sounds, with public streets and sidewalks, but the forensics crew is working on it. Given the severity of the injury, chances are high he was either stabbed very close to home or dropped off nearby."

Maxwell tried, "Any street cams we can pull from to see which direction he came from? Maybe catch a break there to at least see when he got home or if anyone was with him?"

"The closest one is at the corner of Rutherford and Winc.hester," Capelli said, clacking away quickly to pull up the view. "But that's two blocks away from Franklin's place. I doubt we'd get much."

Damn it. This case was already chock full of dead ends, and they'd just started.

Not that it was going to stop Sinclair. Or any of them, really. "Pull it anyway, just in case. Let's take a look at his cell records and scour his socials, too," Sinclair said. "There's got to be something there besides these calls to Carmen. And what about the nine-one-one call?"

"Not made by Axel," Liam said, and hell if that didn't add yet another thread of WTF to the whole thing.

"Capelli, reach out to dispatch and see if we can track that call," Sinclair said. "Someone clearly knew Axel needed help. I want to know who."

Capelli nodded. "Copy that. I'll see if we can get a recording, too. Even we hit a dead end with dispatch, there's a chance I could get something off the call itself."

If anyone could tease details from an anonymous call, it was definitely Capelli. The guy's brain was a freaking wonderland. "Great," Liam said. "Let's do this."

He and Isabella divided up the cell phone records while Garza, Hale, and Maxwell took Axel's social media accounts. Liam let the rhythm of work smooth over his frazzled focus, organizing the information in front of him, looking for commonalities, anything at all that would line up...

"I've got something," he said, his pulse lunging as the connection solidified in his mind. "This number, here"—he sent it to Capelli, who put it up on the case board—"belongs to a Dante West. There are a bunch of calls between the two, going back at least a year. Axel called him five minutes before he called Carmen the first time. The call lasted four minutes."

"Okay," Hale said slowly. "So, Axel had likely just been stabbed at that point. Dante is a friend, someone he trusts. You think he called him for help?"

"It's plausible." A theory clicked together in Liam's head, piece by piece. "Axel's up to something illegal, can't go to the hospital because they'll call the cops, but he knows he needs help. Calls Dante."

"Dante knows Carmen somehow, thinks she can help," Garza added. "Gives Axel her number."

"But she's at work and doesn't answer." Another light bulb went off in Liam's head, sparking bright, and he turned back to his keyboard. "Capelli, what time did that nine-one-one call come in?"

He answered without looking. Perks of an eidetic memory. "Eight fifty-two PM."

Liam scrolled through the phone records. "Dante called Axel back at eight fifty, and the call only lasted for a minute." His heart dropped. "There's no record of a nine-one-one call from Dante's phone, though."

"That doesn't mean he didn't make it," Sinclair put in. "It just means he didn't do it from his own cell phone. Smart move if he's covering for Axel."

Capelli nodded, doing some scrolling of his own. "The nine-one-one call traces back to a burner cell. I'll work on finding out where and when it was sold, but for now, the timing certainly suggests Dante made the call. His LKA is on Granville Street in North Point."

Sinclair didn't even hesitate. "Hollister, you and Isabella go pick him up. Maxwell and Hale, keep tabs on Axel's condition. See if you can get an update from Remington Mem. Garza, you and Capelli work that burner phone and anything else you can find on Dante and Axel. I want to know what we're looking at here."

A chorus of "copy that" went up around the room. Isabella pushed back from her desk, but something lingered in Liam's brain, refusing to let his a*ss leave the chair.

"What?" Isabella asked. "I know that look. What's bugging you?"

Later, Liam would have to remind himself to work on his fvcking game face. For now, he let his gut guide his hands over the keyboard, his calm taking a hit as he found a phone number he recognized all too well.

"Two weeks ago, Dante called Carmen. The conversation lasted over three minutes. The next day, she called him back and they spoke for another five. Which means two things."

Isabella lifted her brows in silent question, and damn it, Liam didn't know which of the truths to hate more.

"Carmen knows way more than she's telling us, and there's a good chance she's either involved in this mess or in danger."