

The Saint Chapter 5

"Would you like to tell me what the fvck just happened in there?"

One thing Liam had always liked about Isabella was that she never pulled any punches. Right now? He wasn't exactly psyched to be under the microscope.

"I'm pretty sure that was an interview," he said, reaching for his composure with both hands as he and Isabella fell into step beside each other on the sidewalk in front of the clinic.

"And I'm pretty sure it was a sh!t show," she clapped back. "You went at Carmen pretty hard, don't you think?"

Irritation sparked in his chest, but he tamped it down. Funny how much easier it was to do when Carmen's dark eyes and ironclad attitude weren't on full display right in front of him. "We've got a stabbing victim in a coma and no idea who tried to kill him. Plus, you can't deny that Carmen's acting cagey as hell about this."

"Okay, but cagey is Carmen's default," Isabella said. "In case you haven't noticed, she doesn't exactly trust easily."

"Oh, I've noticed," Liam muttered.

Isabella stopped mid-stride, tugging him out of the path of foot traffic quickly enough that all he could do was let her. "That's it. Start talking."

Shit. "About what?"

Her laugh wasn't exactly happy, but it surprised Liam all the same. "We've been partners for a long time, so I'm going to overlook the fact that you just asked me that. What the hell is going on between you and Carmen?"

Liam's pulse flared, but damn it, he had to control this. They had a job to do, order to restore. The sooner they solved this case, the sooner he could move on with his nice, calm, Carmen-free life.

He could not, under any circumstances, tell Isabella why Carmen slid so easily under his skin.

Or how, sometimes, late at night, when he let himself think about it, he wanted her there so badly he could taste it.

"Nothing is going on between me and Carmen," Liam said. "I want to find Dante so we can figure out who stabbed Axel, and she's our only lead. She obviously knows

something about Dante. I pushed because I thought it would get her to talk, but clearly, I was wrong.”

Isabella didn’t look convinced. “Are you sure that’s it? Because you’re mellow with, like, everyone on the planet except for her, and you two have been fire and gasoline for years.”

Ever since they’d worked a case where Carmen had been assaulted and left unconscious in a burning building, to be exact. He’d never told Isabella what had happened later that night, when he’d gone to check on Carmen, and clearly, Carmen never had, either. But it was over, done—no, check that. It had never even started, and wasn’t that just all the more reason to forget it once and for all?

“I’m sure,” Liam said. “Like you said the other day, Carmen’s not exactly warm and fuzzy. Half the time, you two are fire and gasoline, too.”

“That’s true,” Isabella murmured, and he wasn’t going to wait to take advantage of her hesitation.

“Look, she’s your CI. I’m sorry I pushed. We’re at a dead end with this case, and I guess that got the better of me.”

He shrugged for emphasis, and that did the trick. Isabella nodded. “We really don’t have much to go on. And even though I agree that it seems like Carmen’s hiding something, I can’t see her obstructing justice. If she says she doesn’t know who hurt Axel or where Dante is now, my gut is to believe her.”

As frustrating as it was that Carmen had gone all Fort Knox on them, Liam had to agree. She’d testified against a killer once, and helped them on dozens of cases after that, albeit most of the time grudgingly.

“Let’s see if Capelli can turn up anything else on Dante,” he said. “Maybe we can pull something useful off his social media. In the meantime, we might as well check in on Axel in person, since we’re here.”

He pointed to the sprawling hospital campus a block away from the clinic. They paused only long enough to call their location in to dispatch and send an update on Dante’s LKA to the unit. Remington Memorial’s main lobby was a two-story, glass enclosed affair that bustled with all the activity Liam would expect for the city’s largest and most prestigious hospital, and he and Isabella threaded their way through the crowd, heading toward the elevators. They’d been here enough times to know the lay of the land, which made their trip to the ICU floor both quick and uneventful.

“Hi.” Liam flashed both his smile and his badge at the nurse behind the desk. “Detectives Hollister and Walker, checking on Axel Franklin.”

“Let me page Dr. Sheridan,” the nurse said, and two minutes later, Jonah walked through the automatic double doors leading in from the ICU.

“Hey. Good timing. I just finished rounds,” he said, his normally easygoing smile seeming pretty worn at the edges. “It’s been a hell of a shift.”

Liam nodded in empathy. “I bet. How’s Axel Franklin doing?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have much of an update for you, other than what I left on Isabella’s voicemail after the surgery,” Jonah said. “He’s stable for now, but his condition is still very much critical, and he’s still in a coma.”

Liam’s heart sank. “Is that normal?”

“For an injury as catastrophic as his? I don’t think it’s unusual,” Jonah said. “The stab wound is bad enough, but all that blood loss made stabilizing him very difficult.” Lowering his voice, he added, “We almost lost him twice during the surgery. Between the hypovolemic shock and the blood loss, it’s a bit of a miracle he’s not in organ failure.”

“So, there was definitely a time lapse between when he was stabbed and when he was treated,” Liam said.

Jonah’s nod was immediate. “It explains the amount of blood he lost, for sure, as well as how hard it was to keep him stable. There’s no way to know exactly how long, but we call it the golden hour for a reason. We had to do a rapid transfusion before we could even get him into the OR.”

“Do you think he’ll recover?” Isabella asked, and Jonah let out a long breath.

“He’s not out of the woods, but—at least right now—I think we can see the tree line. He’s been through a lot, though.”

“We understand,” Isabella said, changing tack. “Were you able to find any family?”

Jonah shook his head. “No. We tried, but...to be honest, you guys probably have a better shot at that than we do.”

“Capelli is still going through his phone,” Liam said. It was a process that looked a hell of a lot faster on TV than it was in real life—something Capelli never hesitated to remind them even though they all knew it as well as their own reflections. “Of course, we’ll let you know if we find anyone.”

“I’ll keep you updated, too. You’ll be the first to know when he wakes up.”

After a few quick goodbyes, Liam and Isabella made their way back to the lobby. While the fact that Axel was still in a coma wasn't great by any stretch, at least he was in good hands. Plus, they'd need time to go through Dante's phone and social media accounts. There had to be something there that would—

Liam's phone sounded off from the back pocket of his jeans, and he palmed it to check the caller ID. Sacramento District Attorney's Office flashed over the screen, making Liam's heart crash against his rib cage. No. No, no, no. There was only one reason the Sacramento ADA would be calling him, and that reason had been dead to Liam for years.

Eighteen of them, to be exact.

Blanking his expression took every ounce of his energy. "Give me a sec?" he managed to say to Isabella, who pointed to the nearby coffee cart.

"Sure. I need some tea, anyway. Just grab me when you're done."

Nodding, Liam slipped into a quiet corner of the lobby, raising his phone to his ear with a shaking hand. "Liam Hollister."

"Detective Hollister? It's Joy Porter." She gave him a second to process, no doubt knowing he'd need it. "I need to talk to you about your father."

"Is he dead?"

Okay, so the question was probably graceless. But Liam had no love loss for Daniel McGee. He'd buried the man the minute Daniel had left Liam, his younger brother, Jamie, and their unsuspecting mother with a heaping pile of crooked debt and no forwarding address. It didn't matter that Daniel had still been very much alive for the past eighteen years. At least he'd spent the last ten of them in prison. Not that it had helped Liam's mother in the end.

"He's not dead," Joy said. What came next was worse. "He's been released."

For a minute, there was nothing other than white noise and the slam of Liam's heart. Then, "Sorry?"

"Believe me, it came as a shock to me, too. I only found out after the fact. He wasn't even supposed to have a parole hearing for another year." Joy paused for a slow exhale. "I dug into it, of course. But so far, all I'm getting are vague answers."

"In other words, someone pulled some strings." Christ, this was just like Daniel. He was a con man, through and fvcking through.

"It's possible," she said, no-nonsense as ever. "But if that happened, I will find out and shut that down. I'm going to keep digging to see if I can get a more definitive reason. He bilked hundreds of people out of health insurance payouts they rightfully deserved. I'm not taking that lightly."

Liam closed his eyes and counted to five. Joy was a good DA. If his father had worked the system—again—she'd find out, and anyway, it didn't really matter whether his father was in prison or on the moon.

He'd be dead to Liam either way.

"Thanks for letting me know," he said. Joy knew better than to ask Liam to call her if Daniel got in touch—while Liam had been apprised of Daniel's arrest eleven years ago and the subsequent proceedings against him, he'd had no contact with his father, and Daniel hadn't tried to reach out. Liam didn't know if Daniel knew he was a cop, or that Jamie had been in and out of rehab half a dozen times in the past decade, or that their mother had died nearly fifteen years ago now.

But the one thing he did know, above all others, was that he needed to forget about Daniel McGee, just as he'd been doing since the man had been convicted ten years ago. He had no intention of ever speaking to his father again. That ghost was in the past, and that was exactly where it belonged.

Carmen rolled over, looked at the time stamp on her cell phone, and cursed. It was the first day off she'd had in weeks, and she couldn't even make herself sleep past six. Bad enough that her brain had been the polar opposite of her body, firing off thought after thought that had kept her wide awake until midnight.

Axel Franklin had been stabbed. Dante was the only person who could help the police figure out who might have hurt him.

And she was the only person who could help them find Dante.

Giving up hope that she might drift back to sleep, Carmen stared up at the ceiling. There were always risks to helping the police—this was a lesson she'd learned the hard way. She'd been threatened, smacked around, even left semi-conscious in a burning building, all in the name of gathering information for the Intelligence Unit. The risk of telling them how she knew Dante was perilously steep, and it wasn't just her livelihood on the line. Doctors. Other nurses. The patients they helped, when no one else would.

All of those people would pay the price if she told anyone about the night clinic, some of them with their lives. That wasn't just some dramatic overstatement, either. If her mami had had somewhere to go all those years ago, her diabetes might not have gone undetected for so long. She could've gotten treatment. Stopped the chain reaction of health issues that had ultimately led to her dying just shy of her fiftieth birthday, leaving sixteen-year-old Carmen with a stack of medical bills and no family to speak of.

Just like that, Carmen had lost the only constant she'd ever had. Her anchor. The one person who'd ever believed in her.

It had changed everything, and not in the good way.

Carmen rolled over in bed, steering the thought from her mind. Yes, there were risks involved in telling Isabella how she knew Dante and why Axel had called her after he'd been stabbed, and no, those risks weren't small. But there was a downside to keeping what she knew to herself, too. Someone had hurt Axel. Badly. And he'd been too scared to call an ambulance, even though he had to have known how dire the injury was, which meant that whoever had stabbed him was dangerous. Had probably hurt other people, too. Maybe done much worse.

A voice that sounded an awful lot like her mother's whispered in the back of her mind. You became a nurse to help people, mija. No, she hadn't been able to help her mother, and there hadn't been any resources for her mother to help herself. None that they could afford, anyway—her mother had worked two jobs just to make ends meet, only one of which had offered health insurance. But that had covered only the barest of bones, with sky-high deductibles and out of pocket costs. If only they'd had someone to help them, the way the night clinic helped people. The way Carmen had promised her mother, ten years gone now, that she would help people. No matter what it took.

No matter the risk.

With her heart beating faster beneath the thin cotton of her sleep shirt, Carmen squeezed her eyes shut. She trusted Isabella as much as she was ever going to trust a cop. She never would've agreed to be her informant if she hadn't. That trust hadn't come easy. Nothing with Carmen had come easy after her mother died.

But Isabella had been honest, tough when she'd needed to be, and kind when Carmen had needed it, but not necessarily deserved it. She'd made sure Carmen had been safe when she'd testified against Bobby D, aka Robert Dellacourt, aka Carmen's former drug dealer and resident dirtbag who liked to hook vulnerable women on any number of illegal substances, then use their addiction to his advantage.

He'd make them lie. Steal. Worse, all in the name of giving them their next high. Bobby had had a mean streak as wide as the freeway, too, so it probably shouldn't have come as a surprise when he'd beaten a woman to death. He'd been high on meth at the time, not that it had mattered. Carmen had overheard him bragging about it, found his bloody clothes balled up in the bottom of his closet when he was in the shower. Sitting there, on the dingy carpet in his apartment with the blood-spattered T-shirt in her hands, she realized she'd be next if she didn't do something.

The thought had arrived with startling clarity for someone coming down off a tremendous high. Something—survival instinct, maybe, because it really hadn't been her brain—had kicked her feet into motion. Her brain had joined the party only after

she'd arrived at the Thirty-Third precinct, realizing belatedly that she was just a drug addict who no one would believe.

For fvk's sake, she'd been wearing the same clothes for days. She'd reeked of tequila, Bobby D's sweat, and shame. The cops would probably lock her up, too. She was no stranger to breaking the law. For Chrissake, she'd been high as a satellite less than twelve hours ago, and Bobby would certainly point that out if she said a word. She was just another junkie, strung out and untrustworthy. Who would care what she said, anyway?

Carmen had turned to slink away, but a voice had stopped her short, right there on the street. "You look like you could use a friend."

The woman was young, only a few years older than Carmen herself, she guessed, although worlds different. Clean caramel-colored hair. Alert brown eyes that Carmen could feel, assessing her carefully. Healthy. Strong. Cared for. The woman's badge sat, shiny and obvious on her hip, like a beacon, and Carmen shook her head.

"No."

"How about breakfast, then?" she'd asked, and Carmen had laughed, not kindly.

"Why would you ask me to breakfast?"

The woman shrugged. Smiled even though Carmen's tone had been miles from nice. "Maybe I could use a friend," she'd said, starting to walk down the street. Over her shoulder, she'd asked, "You coming?"

Carmen paused, her heart in her throat and Bobby's voice in her head, echoing. That bitch won't be backtalking me anymore. I shut her up for good.

She wavered. "You paying?"

Another shrug. "Sure."

And that had been that. Isabella had gently, expertly gotten Carmen to talk. The rest had happened quickly. Her statement taken. A search warrant issued. The woman's body found and Bobby arrested. The evidence had been strong, even without Carmen's testimony, but her statement had made the case a lock. Isabella had stayed by Carmen's side as the case progressed, helping her get into rehab and find a job, albeit a shitty one at a pizza place on the North Point Pier. Carmen had thought, for a long time, that the kindness Isabella showed her, even when she was being a hard-ass cop (she'd insisted on rehab), was just a byproduct of Isabella wanting information. Transactional, and nothing more. Carmen knew she would be more reliable on the stand if she got sober, knew Isabella knew it, too.

Not long after, Isabella asked Carmen if she'd be interested in becoming a confidential informant, someone to be relied on for street intel or to go undercover on smaller jobs here and there. The money was far better than what Carmen scraped out of the pizza place, and even her shitty apartment had a rent payment due every month. Plus, if she could help get some nasty people off the street and maybe save a person here and there from danger, all the better. No one had been around to help the woman Bobby had murdered, but at least he wouldn't hurt any other women.

That trial, and her working relationship with Isabella, had come before Liam had arrived in the Intelligence Unit. He'd become Isabella's partner not long after Bobby had been sentenced, though. From the minute Carmen had laid eyes on him, she'd felt an involuntary pull of attraction. Which she really didn't think was her fault—he was gorgeous, all corded muscles and strong, stubbled jawline and eyes that swung from green to gray, depending on the light and his mood. But it was his kindness that really sunk her.

The way he looked at her and seemed to see a person, not an informant or a junkie or any of the other, worse things she'd been called. At least, that's how he used to look at her. Ever since that fateful, stupid night when he'd come to check on her after that fire, and she'd wrecked everything. Now he kept her at a chilly distance, pushing every time he saw her. She pushed back twice as hard, but way deep down, beneath her armor, it stung to know he probably thought she was just another pain-in-the-a.ss CI.

Are you going to tell us exactly how you know Dante, or not?

In one swift motion, Carmen kicked the tangled sheets off her legs and stumbled out of bed, her mind made up. Isabella had promised no questions asked, and while Carmen knew that only went so far, she also knew that she didn't need to tell Isabella exactly where the clinic was, or who else was involved, in order to help track Dante down. And the truth was, he could be in danger, just like Axel.

Carmen might be a pain in the a.ss, but at least she knew how to do the right thing.

Now, all she had to do was pray that coming clean wouldn't end her career.