

The Saint Chapter 6

Liam left his apartment as the sun was coming up. In his defense, he got a lot of paperwork done when the Intelligence office was empty, and sometimes, he even snuck in a workout in the basement weight room before his shift started.

In fact, a nice long run on the treadmill might be just the thing to get his head straight after hours of coming up empty on Axel's case yesterday, then more hours of him mentally scouring each dead-end last night. He'd ended up frustrated enough to haul his a.s.s out of bed at oh-dark-thirty to come down to the precinct, nodding a "good morning" at the night shift staff as he made his way past the badge scanner and metal detector at the front desk.

The main Intelligence office was deserted—not a shocker, considering the hour—and after a quick stop in the small kitchen/break room off the back hallway for some coffee, Liam parked himself behind his desk.

He reviewed the case details again even though, at this point, he had them down cold. Other than the pair of phone calls from a few weeks ago, there was nothing connecting Carmen and Dante. Nothing crossing on social media. No shared circles, either personally or professionally. No calls before the two between them, but no way of knowing how or why they'd connected to make them.

And yet, she was protecting him.

Liam's phone buzzed with an incoming text message, depositing him back to his desk. Only a select few people would text him this early, and sure enough, Isabella's name flashed across the screen.

Isabella: Hey. Baby has a fever. Cried all night. Thinking ear infection. Waiting for ped's office to open.

Liam didn't hesitate to respond with: No worries. Team and I have this case. Go get some sleep.

Three prayer-hand emojis danced across his screen. TY! K and I are effing zombies. Call if something big breaks?

Liam shook his head and laughed even though no one could hear him. See you tomorrow.

Three little dots appeared on the screen, then disappeared a second later, as if Isabella had been writing something, then deleted it. The dots did their little dance again, a pause following before the next message arrived.

Try not to let Carmen piss you off too much if she comes around. I know it's not always easy, but she really is on our side.

Liam's heart suddenly decided his throat would be a good place to hang out. Still, Isabella was right. Yeah, Carmen wrecked his calm, and no, he was never, ever going to tell anyone—especially Isabella—exactly why. But even when she was being evasive (read: now), Liam knew without question that Carmen was a good person. She'd put a lot on the line to help them bring down some really nasty criminals. A gang leader who had threatened two paramedics at Station Seventeen. A serial arsonist who had tried to blow up an entire city block. Liam really needed to focus on the case and stamp out his emotions.

Starting with the uncut want that lit him up for a single bright second every time he saw her.

Copy that, Liam texted back, tucking his phone and his idiot thoughts away as he turned back toward his laptop. Every case had a way in. Granted, some were harder to find than others, but he'd been here before, with a tough case and slim-to-no leads.

He just needed to figure out how to find his calm and climb the hill in front of him.

Digging back into the case file, he re-read everything with care. He was scanning Axel's cell phone records (again), searching for anything that might have slipped his notice, when the desktop phone at his elbow rang.

"Okay, weird," Liam muttered. The call was coming from the sergeant's desk downstairs, which only increased the weird factor, and he shouldered the receiver. "Intelligence Unit, Detective Hollister."

"Detective," came Sergeant Riordan's brusque voice, and great. The cranky desk sergeant was the only cop who had been at the Thirty-Third longer than Sinclair, and his uniform wasn't the only thing bearing b.ra.ss. "Got someone here asking for Intelligence."

"Okay." He drew the word out, waiting for Riordan to continue. When it became apparent that wasn't going to happen, Liam asked, "Do you know who it is?"

"Nope."

"Is it about a case?"

Riordan released a heavy sigh. "We didn't play twenty questions. Are you coming down here, or not?"

Oh, what the hell. He needed more coffee, anyway. "Sure. I'll be right there."

Liam hung up the phone and headed for the stairwell that would lead him down a floor to the precinct's main entrance. It was probably just a courier and Riordan was busting his balls, making him come all the way downstairs to pick up some envelope that could easily hit the mail room or be brought upstairs by whichever rookie had been assigned desk duty. But Liam wouldn't have made it past his first few months as a patrol cop if he didn't take Riordan's grumbling in stride, so down the stairs he went, determined to (metaphorically) kill the guy with kindness, his smile firmly in place...

Until he saw Carmen standing in the hallway in front of Riordan's desk, and shock took control of his face.

"What are you doing here?" Liam blurted, at the same time she said, "Oh, it's you."

Heat—some good and some not so good—sparked through him, tempting his usual frustration to rise. He forced himself to grab for a breath, and in that moment, he realized she looked not pissed, as he'd originally thought, but just as shocked as he was, and something he couldn't explain made him say, "Let me try this again. Good morning."

He gave her enough of a smile that she didn't tell him to fuck off into the sea, and at least that was a start. "Good morning," Carmen said, with more than a little caution.

Liam probably deserved it. "Is everything okay?"

"I came for Isabella," she said by way of non-answer, and worry kicked off, deep in his gut.

"She's out today. Anything I can help you with?"

Carmen's dark eyes went wide. "Oh. Um...is she okay?"

Concern flashed over her face for only a second, but he caught it all the same. "Yeah. Elijah has an ear infection."

She nodded knowingly. "Babies that age get them a lot."

They lapsed into silence, and finally, Liam said, "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that you're not here for a social call."

"Maybe I am," she countered, and he laughed.

"Carmen, it's barely seven in the morning. No one is social at this hour."

She sighed, the barest hint of a smile ghosting over her lips. "Fine. But it's no big deal. I can come back another time."

Liam opened his mouth to push. There was no way she'd come all the way down here at stupid o'clock for something that wasn't something, and he was still certain she was holding back. But then Isabella's text rang through his head, prompting him to say something entirely different than planned.

"Why don't we go to breakfast?"

Carmen's chin hiked, and he would have found her surprise endearing if he hadn't been so busy wondering what had just come out of his mouth.

"You want to go to breakfast. With me," she added, as if he'd suggested they strip naked and tango down the hallway.

Well, there was a thought that didn't help him recover his wits. Liam cleared his throat. Think, dummy! "Sure. I mean, that's what you and Isabella do, right? To catch up?"

"Yeah." She lifted the end of the word in question, and fuck it. The only way out was through.

"Look, I know I pushed you pretty hard yesterday on this case." He waited out her you got that right face, which she gave him in pretty, pretty spades, before continuing, "and I know you came here to talk to Isabella, not me. But I'm actually a pretty decent listener, and—even better—I'm buying. So, what do you say?"

She examined him for the longest minute of his life. "What if I don't feel like talking?"

"Then I guess we'll just eat instead."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," Liam promised. A short stack of pancakes and some home fries were really the least he could do to make up for having pushed her so hard, and anyway, Carmen had wavered at Isabella's niceness yesterday. She clearly wanted to talk about something important. He wasn't too proud to extend an olive branch when the occasion called for it, and pushing sure as hell hadn't worked. This was his best shot at getting her to open up.

Not that Carmen was going to let him off easy. "Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?" she asked.

"Because despite what you might think, I'm not an ogre."

Her laugh was throaty and unexpected, and Christ, he wanted to make her do it a thousand more times just so he could selfishly watch. "An ogre?"

“Yeah. I mean, I know things between us have been”—loaded. Magnetic. Needfully hot—“tense,” Liam managed. “But I’m not a bad guy, and I’m definitely not your enemy. You want to talk, we’ll talk. You want to eat in silence, we can do that, too. Your call.”

Carmen waited a few beats before surprising him with, “Okay, fine. I have to eat, anyway.”

“Great,” he said. “A Fork in the Road good?”

“Sure.”

He let her lead the way past the precinct’s front doors, then fell into step beside her on the sidewalk. Only a handful of blocks separated the Thirty-Third from the locally renowned diner, making the trip thankfully short, and a few minutes later, they slid into one of the last empty booths lining the far wall. He waited until their server had brought them a pot of coffee and taken their orders (French toast with a side of fruit for her, a full-on breakfast special for him) before leaning back against the leather banquette and tagging Carmen with a smile.

“So, you’re off today.”

Her hands froze over her coffee cup. “Are you checking up on me?”

“What? No,” he said, pointing to her jeans and red tank top. “You’re not in scrubs, so…”

“Oh.” She shook her head, then filled her cup to the brim. “Right. Yeah.”

Liam let the silence unfold for a few beats before trying again. “How are things going at the clinic?”

“Pretty good,” Carmen said, but didn’t elaborate.

He gathered his patience and tried again. “You’ve been there for, what? Six months now, right?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you trying to make small talk with me so I’ll open up about this case? Because, no offense, but I don’t really fall for that.”

Frustration sparked, just enough to make him say, “And, no offense, but I’m not exactly an amateur. Do I want you to talk about Dante? Yes. But I’m not dumb enough to think that small talk is going to make that happen. You’re only going to talk if you want to. At this point, there’s not a hell of a lot I can do about it.”

Carmen’s brows gathered. “So, why are you asking me about the clinic, then?”

Damn, she really did have some walls to scale. "Did it ever occur to you that, oh, I don't know, I'm asking because I'm interested in the answer?"

"No."

The honesty in the single syllable hit him with the force of a brick. "Why wouldn't I be interested in the answer?"

Carmen blinked. "Because I'm just an informant."

"And I'm not an ogre, remember?" Christ, did she really think he thought poorly of her because she helped them on cases? "Anyway, there's no 'just' when it comes to CIs, Carmen. You've put your a.ss on the line to help us break some really big cases. We don't take that lightly. I don't take that lightly."

"Oh," she said, her cheeks flushing just the slightest bit beneath the bright overhead lighting. "Well, I get paid for that."

"As you should," Liam pointed out. Even if they only offered up intel and never went undercover, CIs were still putting themselves at risk. "But you also deserve common courtesy. Which is not to say that you owe me any details about your life. If you don't want to talk about your job, that's fine. But I'm not asking to manipulate you. I really am asking because I want to know."

She looked into her coffee cup for a full ten seconds before speaking. "I like working at the clinic, yeah."

A weird shot of relief unwound in Liam's rib cage. He wasn't about to let go of this truce, even though it might be entirely temporary. "So, working at the clinic is different than if you worked in a doctor's office or in the hospital itself, right?"

Carmen only hesitated for a second, then she nodded. "You need different skills to work in each of those places, and there are lots of nursing specialties. Critical care nurses have different training than oncology nurses or pediatric nurses. That kind of thing."

"What's your area of expertise?" he asked, and her expression flickered with some emotion he couldn't quite quantify, there and then gone before he could examine it.

"I'm certified in emergency nursing, but that's kind of deceptive."

Liam gave up a soft laugh. "How's that? You either are or you aren't, right?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, I'm definitely certified," she said, a tiny smile edging over her mouth. "But emergency nurses kind of have to know enough to cover every specialty. We see kids, people with broken bones, people having heart attacks. So, I have to be able to handle peds, ortho, cardiology. Some of everything."

Damn, that was impressive. “That must get kind of overwhelming, huh?”

“Says the man who gets shot at for a living,” Carmen quipped.

“Fair point,” he said, lifting his hands and laughing again. They paused their conversation as their server arrived with their breakfasts, the table filling with the scent of cinnamon sweetness and hearty bacon.

“I’m just saying, I’m not the only one with a stressful job,” Liam continued, and Carmen took a few bites of French toast before shrugging.

“Yeah, but it’s worth it. I get to help people. That’s actually why I picked the clinic instead of the emergency department.”

His curiosity sparked even harder. “Aren’t you helping people either way?”

“Technically,” she said. “But in the ED, it’s all about helping people in one moment. Which we do at the clinic, obviously, but we also do a lot of preventive stuff. Outreach. Wellness. It helps people get healthy and stay healthy rather than just waiting until it’s too late.”

A note of sadness hung on to her words, vulnerability that he’d only seen once before simmering beneath the surface of her expression, and oh, how he wanted to push. But he’d meant it when he’d told her she didn’t owe him any personal details—God knew he’d never willingly spill his own, even to his own unit-mates—so he stayed quiet, giving her room to do the same if she wanted to.

To his surprise, she didn’t take it. “My mother died when I was sixteen. Complications of diabetes. So, yeah. If I can keep that from happening to someone else…”

“Carmen, I’m really sorry,” Liam said.

Carmen gave up a small smile of thanks. “I’m surprised you didn’t know. Isabella’s known forever.”

“What you tell Isabella is between the two of you, unless the team needs to know it for a case,” he said. “She would never tell me anything personal about you. Even if I asked.”

“It’s not like it’s some big secret. Don’t get me wrong, it absolutely sucks that she died as young as she did. I miss her every day.” Carmen took a bite of French toast, clearly at ease talking about her mother, and Liam’s chest tightened over his own secrets. “But she was a great woman, and I became a nurse to help people just like her.”

“She sounds pretty great.”

They ate for a few minutes in silence. Carmen seemed deep in thought, her dark brows tucked together and her mouth pressed into a half-frown as she picked through the fruit on her plate. Liam left her to it—just because she and her mother had been close didn't mean thoughts of the woman weren't hard to wade through. Family was complicated, a truth he knew firsthand, even if he'd never verbalize it. Finally, Carmen looked up from the strawberry on the end of her fork and said, "I need you to promise me something."

Of the thousands of things she could have cut the silence with, that was the last one he'd expected. "Okay?"

"If I tell you about Dante, you have to promise me no one gets in trouble."

Liam took a beat to process her words. "I can't really do that without context."

She didn't budge. "Isabella said no questions asked. I can't talk to you unless no one gets in trouble. I mean it."

"I mean it, too," he said. But instead of giving in to the emotion that flared in his chest every time Carmen was within a mile's radius, he took a deep breath. "Look, I'm not trying to be difficult, but I can't just give up a Get Out of Jail Free card without knowing what I'm dealing with here."

She paused. "I'm not trying to be difficult either. I want to talk to you."

"But?" Liam prompted, and she huffed out a sigh.

"But if I tell you how I know Dante, some good people could get into really big trouble."

Liam opened his mouth to tell her he'd do his best not to let that happen—Dante was too far in the wind for them to have a good shot at finding him without her help, and anyway, he wasn't looking to jam anyone up for smaller crimes. But the buzz of an incoming text stopped him short, the words on the screen sending his heart toward his boots. Damn it. Damn it!

"What?" Carmen asked, her dark brown stare wide. "What's the matter?"

"That was Jonah Sheridan," Liam said, his voice turning her stare wider still. "Axel died about an hour ago. As of right now, this is no longer an assault case. It's a homicide."