

The Saint Chapter 7 - Tips

“Allow the eyes to softly close and the mind to calm. Begin to center your awareness on your breath, noticing without judgment how it feels...”

Miranda tuned out the words floating down from the top of the line sound system in her at-home yoga studio. The room wasn't large—even the penthouse had space limitations at a certain point. But from the soft lighting and bamboo floors to the wall-mounted Smart Gym screen, the studio was a perfect escape. Not that she practiced yoga for a calm fucking mind. No, she was far too practical for that. The grueling, ninety-minute class she'd chosen this morning took strength. Discipline. Both things she'd needed to get where she was, and things she needed to remember daily if she wanted to stay there.

The only thing yoga lacked was ruthlessness. Of course, that Miranda didn't have to practice.

She'd always had enough to spare.

A knock on the door halted her flow, mid-breath. Irritation twisted in her veins, and she considered powering through the distraction. But her personal staff was under explicit instructions not to interrupt her, no matter the circumstances, and she simply couldn't let the indiscretion stand. Unfolding her legs from their knot, she rose from her mat and paused the audio recording, crossing the room with the calm precision of a sniper taking aim at a mark.

The fact that her husband stood on the other side of the door didn't ease her anger. “Royce,” she said, with all the warmth of a centuries-old glacier. “I'm practicing yoga.”

He strode into the dimly lit studio, bumping Miranda's anger to a high simmer. “I know. But I didn't think you'd want to wait to hear that Axel Franklin is dead.”

It was the only thing he could have possibly said to lessen her displeasure. “You're certain?”

“Very.”

“You were certain the first time,” Miranda pointed out, making a muscle in Royce's jaw twitch just slightly.

“No one survives the amount of Fentanyl that was injected into his IV. And he is currently in the morgue, so yes.” He flipped his cell phone around to show her a screen shot of the electronic chart, which had been updated less than an hour ago. “This time, I am certain.”

Dead was good. Careful, however, was even better. "I assume you took all the necessary precautions?"

"Miranda," Royce tsked, his veneers flashing as he gave her his most winning smile. "Of course I did."

She waited patiently until he got the message. He was going to have to do better than that.

"Alright, my little perfectionist," he said, and she let the condescension slide for the greater purpose, although the urge to punish him for it was strong. "As you suggested, Cutter was a perfect choice for the job."

Cutter—likely a nickname based on his violent set of skills, though Miranda didn't care enough to ask—had felt like the obvious choice. Sending Royce to personally correct his failure had been tempting, but far too risky. Remington Memorial was the best hospital in the area, and they had the security cameras and eagle-eyed guards to prove it. Even though her plan had included Axel's cause of death being attributed to his injury and not the Fentanyl Cutter had pumped into the man's already fragile system, she couldn't take the risk that anyone would notice Royce dressed as an orderly.

Cutter was a career criminal, with a rap sheet as long as a Paris runway. He knew how to avoid cameras and blend in; plus, he'd been Axel's direct contact in their doctor shopping scheme. If Axel had gone to the cops, as he'd threatened, Cutter had the most to lose. He'd probably been all too easy for Royce to manipulate. That, or Cutter had no soul, but either one worked equally fine for Miranda as long as the job got done properly.

"And you're sure he was undetected?"

"He was in and out in less than twenty seconds, just before shift change. No one saw a thing." Royce smiled, reaching out to pull her close. "Don't worry, sweetheart. It's taken care of. Just like you planned, and just like I promised."

The knowledge did placate her, but only for a moment. "I'll rest easier once the death certificate has been signed off on. At any rate, we'll need to discuss next steps."

"For replacing Axel? I'm sure we could do that easily," Royce said.

"We could replace a hundred Axels," Miranda corrected. "But I'm thinking bigger picture."

"You want to expand the doctor shopping scheme?"

Christ, he lacked vision. "I want to expand everything, darling."

Royce paused. To anyone else, he'd have seemed entirely casual, his body language loose and his expression neutral. But Miranda wasn't anyone else. She'd studied Royce for years, learning every last facial tic, pain point—hell, she even knew all of his sexual proclivities, including the ones he practiced only with women other than her.

This was how she knew he was calculating.

“To that end, we may have an opportunity we can't pass up,” Royce said. “Daniel McGee was released from prison this week.”

Now Miranda paused. Daniel McGee had swindled countless people in equally countless schemes and scams, most notably insurance fraud. She'd read all the articles on his trial—used them as notes, really. He'd been rather brilliant. Right up until he'd been caught by the FBI, anyway.

“I see,” she prompted, leaving her interest open-ended so Royce would tip his hand.

Candy, meet baby. “There have been whispers that he's looking to pick up where he left off,” Royce said. “He's still got a lot of contacts, and certainly no lack of smarts.”

“He did get caught,” Miranda pointed out, delicately enough to keep Royce talking.

“True. But I'm willing to bet he won't repeat his mistakes. Anyway, if he partnered with us, that wouldn't be an issue. We know how to take precautions.”

Miranda stopped her surprise just shy of her face. “Partnered?”

Royce put on a placating smile. “Given his credentials, he's not exactly going to deal with a middleman the way Axel did. He's a heavy hitter, Miranda. And if we don't recruit him, he'll find his way back into the game on his own, which will give us some stiff competition. Better to have him on our side, where at least we can benefit. Substantially.”

Shit. These things were all, unfortunately, true. Still... “Partnering makes us vulnerable. Not to mention giving us less power.”

“I hardly think bringing McGee on is a risk,” Royce said. “And, like you said, you're ready to expand. A partnership would be the perfect opportunity for growth. Just think of the money we could make. I think it's a good idea.”

Realizing her yoga workout wouldn't happen at this point, Miranda moved through the door, heading for the master suite. “I'm not sure I agree.”

Royce's perfectly smooth jaw tightened. “Oh, did you have something better in mind, then?”

The hint of challenge in his voice was enough to make Miranda's pulse quicken. He needed a set-down to remember his place, and she knew just how to deliver. "I'm considering a few options," she said coolly. She held his eye contact for only a second before turning to walk to the expansive bathroom, letting her hips swivel enough to distract him as he followed her.

"Oh?" Royce asked. But his eyes were trained on her tits, his stare hungry and dark, and she smiled.

"Mmm." Hooking her fingers over her designer sports bra, she lifted the garment over her head, letting him look his fill. She worked hard to keep her body perfect; it was one of her most powerful tools. What she couldn't perfect with diet and exercise, she enhanced discreetly with surgical procedures. Her breasts had come out particularly well, due in no small part to the number of times she'd sucked off the head of plastic surgery while his office door had been firmly locked.

Miranda was doubly glad for the investment now. She slid her leggings over her thighs, holding Royce's eye contact. And as he bent her over the bathroom sink and fucked her ruthlessly from behind, Miranda's smile became genuine.

She'd won this round.

Carmen's fork clattered to her plate, her brain absolutely refusing to connect what Liam had said with any sort of reality. "Axel is dead?"

"I'm afraid so. Apparently, he went into cardiac arrest. They tried to resuscitate him, but..." The easy expression Liam had been wearing for the last thirty minutes was gone, replaced by one far more serious as he pulled some bills out of his wallet to cover the check and slipped them beneath his empty coffee mug. "I'm sorry, I have to go. Jonah's waiting for me at the hospital."

Carmen followed him out of the booth on pure instinct. "I'm going with you."

Liam's steps hitched on the black-and-white checkerboard floor tiles, but he didn't stop moving. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" she asked, not waiting for him to answer. "You want me to help with this case, right?"

He waited until they were past the threshold of the diner, then stepped out of foot traffic and dropped his voice to a low murmur. "I want you to help me find Dante by giving me information. It's not the same as you coming with me while I investigate."

"Help is help," Carmen insisted. "And anyway, you're going to the hospital to confirm a death. Not into a war zone. It's not like it'll be dangerous."

“Someone stabbed Axel to death,” Liam pointed out. “It’s a murder.”

He had a point. Still... “I don’t think whoever did it is going to be hanging out, waiting for you.” She rolled her eyes. “But if I’m going to stick my neck out for this, I want to know what’s going on.”

That got him. “You’re going to tell me what you know about Dante?”

Say no. Say no, girl. Go on. N-O. No. “Yes,” said her traitorous mouth. “If you promise me no one will get in trouble other than the people who killed Axel.”

“I promise you that I will do my best,” Liam said. “Now, are you coming or not? Because this case isn’t going to investigate itself.”

Carmen nodded, even though she knew she’d kick herself square in the ass for this later. But a man was dead. She needed to help Liam figure out who had killed him. And why.

“Yeah. I’m coming.”

They made quick work of the walk back to the precinct, where Carmen waited in the main lobby for Liam to go upstairs to grab his keys and update the rest of the Intelligence Unit. It gave her just enough time to rewind the conversation they’d had over breakfast. She hadn’t meant to be prickly with him right out of the gate—but for God’s sake, she hadn’t meant to talk to him at all. She’d come down to the Thirty-Third to meet with Isabella, and being vulnerable in front of Liam? So not on her agenda. But he’d surprised her by easing up, then again by being interested in her job. Letting him in had felt surprisingly good, although she’d hardly bared her soul (nope. Not thinking about the one time she’d done that. Not going to do it). And now, Axel had died from his injuries, injuries Dante had clearly wanted her to help take care of. She couldn’t do anything for Axel now, but she could help find who had killed him.

All she had to do was trust Liam not to take the night clinic—and her career—down in the process.

“Ready?” he asked, and was it too much to ask that her body not respond with such an insistent oh yessss every time she fucking saw him?

“Mmm hmm,” Carmen responded, walking beside him as he headed through the front doors of the precinct and toward the parking lot.

“Sinclair okayed your coming with me, as long as you don’t interfere. And you’ll have to come back here to talk to the team afterward, obviously.”

She nodded. Her tenure as Isabella’s CI meant she was no stranger to crime scenes or to giving up intel. She knew the drill. “Okay.”

They arrived at an unmarked Dodge Charger, one of several that Carmen had seen various members of the Intelligence Unit use while they worked. Liam disengaged the locks, waiting for her to get in and put on her seatbelt before putting the car in Drive.

"There's a temperature control for your side," he said, making her blink in surprise. "You know, in case you're too hot. Or cold," he added quickly. "But it's supposed to get into the nineties today, so..."

"Thanks," Carmen said. "I'm good."

Liam nodded. Resuming their conversation from earlier felt wrong considering where they were headed and why, and she didn't want to talk about Dante until they got back to the precinct—better to get it all out in one go, for everyone—so they lapsed into silence. The hospital wasn't far, and even with rush hour traffic, they made it there fairly quickly. She and Liam headed through the parking lot, her heart beating harder with each step toward the ICU.

"This part should be pretty straightforward," Liam said as they got into the elevator. "I just need to ask Jonah a few questions."

"Okay." They didn't really see mortal cases in the clinic. Any patient with life-threatening injuries was rushed to the ED, so this part of things was foreign territory for her. But she'd meant what she'd said to Liam. If she was going to get involved in this case, she wanted all the facts, even if they were grim.

And judging by the look on Jonah Sheridan's face, they were very grim.

"Hey," Liam said, lifting his chin in greeting at the surgeon, who was standing at the nurses' station outside the ICU. "This is Carmen Desoto. She's giving us an assist on this case."

Dr. Sheridan gave up a weary smile. "You work at the clinic with Connor and Harlow, right?"

"Yeah," she said, surprise unfolding in her chest. She'd seen Dr. Sheridan there on occasion, usually with the other Dr. Sheridan, Natalie, who was his wife and a pediatric surgeon. They volunteered at some of the vaccine drives the clinic held. But Carmen had never expected either one of them to notice her, and certainly not to the point of remembering who she was.

"Well, it's nice to see you, although I wish it were under better circumstances," Dr. Sheridan said, nodding them toward a more private part of the hallway, outside the earshot of the nurses and doctors updating charts nearby.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Liam asked, and Dr. Sheridan nodded.

"Axel was still in critical condition when I left yesterday. At about six-thirty this morning, he went into respiratory distress."

Liam shook his head. "Is that unusual?"

"For someone with an injury like his, and the blood loss that went with it?" Dr. Sheridan shook his head, and Carmen mentally agreed. It might be a little surprising, since Axel had made it through the night, but it definitely wasn't unusual.

"He was already at risk for organ failure from the blood loss, and he was never fully stable," Dr. Sheridan said. "His body simply couldn't handle the trauma. I'm sorry."

Liam let out a slow breath. "I am, too."

"The morgue will hold him for seventy-two hours," Dr. Sheridan said, making Carmen's heart tug in her chest.

"Doesn't he have any family?" she asked.

"None that we've been able to track down," Liam said quietly.

She looked at Dr. Sheridan, then Liam. "So, what happens to him after that?"

They both paused, staring at her, and shit, that had to have been a stupid question. "Sorry. I work in the clinic, so I don't really know—"

"I don't, either," Dr. Sheridan said, his ocean-blue eyes serious but kind. "This is a murder, so I have to defer to you, Detective."

"We'll arrange for the ME's office to come get him," Liam said. "I'm sure Sinclair's going to want a once-over on the body, but I doubt they'll do a full autopsy, since the cause of death is pretty obvious. After that...it really depends on whether or not we can locate any family."

"What if you can't?" Carmen asked.

Liam said, "The ME will hold him for thirty days, then he'll most likely be cremated."

"Oh." She bit her lip. It made sense, but God, it was still a little sad that no one would mourn the guy.

"If anyone comes forward on our end, of course, we'll let you know," Dr. Sheridan said. They exchanged a round of solemn but pleasant goodbyes before Carmen and Liam retraced their steps back to the Charger.

"Do you have any idea what Axel was jammed up in?" she asked. "Gangs? Drugs? I'll still help you," she added. "I just want to know what I'm getting myself into."

Liam pulled out of the parking lot, squinting against the morning sunlight. "He does have a few low-level priors for drug possession, but it actually doesn't look like he was into either of those things deep enough to get him killed. Unless you know differently."

Carmen shook her head. "Nope." She'd treated Dante herself. No track marks, no other signs of drug use, and no gang ink. She wasn't really surprised that Axel hadn't been sporting any of the above.

But it did make her wonder what he had been caught up in. "And you're sure this wasn't something personal, like he slept with someone who had a jealous partner? Or was just a victim of a random crime?"

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but if I was sure of anything, I wouldn't need to know what you know."

Liam said it with just enough smile in his voice to make her huff out a soft laugh. "Fair. But you've got to have some idea."

"If you're asking if Axel's murder could have been a crime of passion or a robbery gone wrong, then the answer is technically, yes. That's possible."

"But you don't think so," Carmen said.

"I don't," he agreed. "He had very few defensive wounds, which makes me think he knew whoever attacked him and wasn't expecting it. Also, he had his wallet on him when we found him. Plus, with the way he was too afraid to go to a hospital, something about this one feels off."

She had to agree with him there. The rest of the trip back to the Thirty-Third passed quickly, and Carmen went through the familiar motions of signing in and being escorted upstairs. She'd never been here without Isabella—hell, most of the time, she was only here with Isabella.

Although they'd always been professional with her, the thought of working with the rest of the detectives in the unit without Isabella there made her pulse skitter. But then Liam led her through the door to the Intelligence office as if it were the most natural, no-big-deal thing in the universe, and the tightness in her chest eased a little.

"Hey," Liam said, addressing the group of detectives all situated around the large room at their respective desks and workstations.

Detective Hale was first to jump in with a response. "Hey," she said, her smile staying right in place as she turned to Carmen. "Hi, Carmen. I just got off the phone with

Isabella. She's on her way to the pediatrician's office with Elijah but she said she'll call you as soon as she can to catch up." Hale shifted her gaze to meet Liam's and she said, "In the meantime, she wanted me to make sure you'd checked your texts."

"Yep," he said, but didn't elaborate, looking instead at their tech and surveillance expert, who Carmen had only ever heard referred to as Capelli. If he had a first name—or if it was his first name, weird as that would be—she didn't know it. "Did you get everything for the case board update?"

Capelli, who had always struck Carmen as the kind of guy who was serious enough to iron his socks, looked at Liam with mild offense.

"Of course. Sinclair is on the phone with the ME's office right now."

"Copy that," Liam said. Detective Garza grabbed an extra chair from the desk beside his and offered it to Carmen. She'd just settled into it when Sergeant Sinclair entered the office from the back hallway that connected the main office to the interrogations rooms, a small kitchen/break room, and his private office. Carmen had met the man before, obviously—she'd been Isabella's CI for years, and he was in charge of every detective in the unit.

He had a reputation for being ruthless when it came to catching criminals and he had a no-bullsh!t air that Carmen respected, being cut from the no-bullsh!t cloth herself. Even though she knew they were on the same side, Sinclair was still intimidating as hell—probably not an unnatural byproduct of having faced off with serial k!llers, brutal rap!sts, and who knew how many sociopaths in his twenty-five-year tenure as a cop, but still.

"Good. Everyone's here," he said, his expression as serious as a heart attack with a tax audit chaser as he stood beside the six-monitor array mounted along the wall by Capelli's workstation. The top three screens flared to life, with driver's license photos of both Axel and Dante front and center and accounts of phone conversations color-coded and listed by date and time. "We can get started."

Liam nodded, taking that as his cue. "Right. Jonah didn't really have—"

Sinclair interrupted with a single shake of his head. "Actually, Hollister, I was thinking that now that this is officially a murder, we should cut to the chase. Carmen." He leveled her with a steel-gray gaze, and oh, hell. Her time was up.

"How is it that you know Dante West, and why did he give a dying man your phone number?"