

The Saint Chapter 8 - Tips

Carmen took a deep breath, and fvck it, here went nothing. "I met Dante a little over two weeks ago at a clinic in North Point. I work extra hours there, and he came in for care."

"He was a patient?" Liam asked.

"Yes, so I can't tell you anything about his medical condition or what he was treated for." The night clinic might be off the books, but she was still a nurse. Confidentiality was sacred. "But I can tell you why I think he told Axel to call me. If you promise that no one who isn't involved in what happened to Axel will get into trouble."

Sinclair examined her for a full five seconds, each of which lasted approximately an hour, before he said, "It's going to depend on what we're dealing with. We can't just look the other way on violent crimes or drug activity."

"I swear to you it's neither of those things," Carmen promised.

The detectives all exchanged glances that were both lightning fast and loaded with meaning she couldn't decipher, the room growing so quiet that Carmen's heartbeat sounded like tiny earthquakes, pulsing against her eardrums.

Finally, Sinclair spoke. "I'm listening."

Carmen responded before she lost her nerve. "The clinic where I treated Dante is off the books. It's run by MDs and licensed medical professionals," she added quickly, because holy sh!t, there was a lot of whoa-style staring going on. "But we're funded entirely by donations from the doctors and staff, and everyone who works there is a volunteer."

"Okay," Sinclair said in a clear bid to get her to give up some more details.

So, she did. "We don't charge anyone for services. They only know about us by word of mouth in the neighborhood. There are a lot of people who need medical care but don't have the means to get it," she said. "They don't have insurance, or enough money to cover the deductibles or cost of meds even if they do. We help them out as best we can."

"So, you just treat anyone who comes in the door, no questions asked?" Detective Garza asked, his dark brows lifted, and Carmen shook her head.

"No. If someone's experiencing a life-threatening condition, like a heart attack or a stroke, we call nine-one-one. We're not equipped to handle anything that critical."

Not a guy to go for pleasantries, Detective Maxwell asked, "A place like that is probably awfully appealing for anyone trying to slip past law enforcement. What about people with gunshot wounds or drug seekers?"

Irritation flickered in Carmen's veins. Of course, everyone's first instinct was to think that just because they were breaking one law, they'd be willing to shatter them all. "First of all, gunshot wounds usually fall under life-threatening situations, so, no, we don't treat those. Secondly, the doctors who are running this place know it's not legal, okay? But they are doing it to help people, not enable them. They're not interested in covering up crimes or giving out drugs like candy. We make that really clear to everyone. We don't have any narcotics on-site at all, and if injuries look suspicious, even a little bit, we call the police."

"Anonymously," Liam said. It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway.

"Yes, anonymously. There are a lot of people who need the clinic. We want it to be a safe place, and that means no drugs or gangs or violence. But we also don't want to get shut down, which means sometimes, we have to take precautions."

"So, Dante was a patient," Hale prompted, but gently enough that Carmen nodded.

"Yeah. He came in two and a half weeks ago. We talked a little bit—he's a nice guy—and then he was treated. I called him the next day to check on him, and we talked some more. I told him to call me if he needed anything. I haven't heard from him since then, but..."

"He knows no one at this clinic would treat anyone with a stab wound and not ask questions," Maxwell said, filling in the blank, and Liam picked up where Maxwell left off.

"But he did have your number, and he knows you're a nurse."

Carmen nodded. "That's my best guess. He probably thought I'd be able to help Axel."

"You said you haven't spoken to Dante since you called to check on him," Sinclair said slowly. "But you could text him, right?"

"I guess," she said slowly. "I'm not sure he would respond."

Liam arched an auburn brow at her. "If you asked him about Axel, he would."

Carmen blinked. "You want me to just text him, out of the blue, and what? Expect him to spill his guts?" No way would that work.

"Essentially, yeah," Liam said, and Dios mío, he was serious. "Look, he trusted you enough to give Axel your number. That's got to count for something."

Dante had been friendly when he'd come in to have his wrist X-rayed and set, and sure, they'd talked for a few minutes when she'd called to check on his pain the next day. But come on. "He was probably in a panic because his buddy had been stabbed, and he grasped at the first thing he could think of."

"Not to throw a wrench in your argument," Hale interjected with a small smile, "but the first thing he could think of was probably calling an ambulance. Only, he didn't. He gave Axel your number instead. I agree with Hollister. It looks like Dante trusts you, Carmen."

Well, sh!t. That did make sense. "Okay, so he might trust me more than he trusts the authorities. That's not saying much."

"It's all we've got," Liam said.

Carmen let out a slow exhale and looked at Axel's photograph on the wall-mounted monitor. "What do you want me to say to him?"

"We need to find him, then get him to talk, neither of which will be easy," Sinclair said. "But let's start at the beginning. Send him a text and tell him we're asking questions."

"That's it?" It didn't seem like something that would make the guy start blabbing.

"The more open-ended you leave it, the more his imagination will run," Garza said. "He's more likely to have a conversation with you if he needs to find out what you know. And what we know."

"Wow, do you guys manipulate everyone, or is Dante just special?"

The words flew out before she could trap them between her teeth. Not that she should be surprised, really, with sarcasm being her first language and all.

Still, Liam stayed perfectly even-keeled as he said, "Sometimes, we have to do that, yeah. But if it means we get closer to finding the person or people who killed Axel? Then I'm not sorry. We'll work together to come up with some good language for the text. All you have to do is send it, then let us know when Dante responds."

"Okay," she said. "And what happens after that?"

"Then we get him to agree to a meet," Liam said.

Realization bloomed like a starburst. "You're going to pick him up?"

"He's not in any trouble." Garza said, and the other detectives nodded their agreement. "So, we're not going to arrest him, if that's what you're asking."

Hale added, "But we do have to talk to him to find out what's going on. For all we know right now, he could be in danger, too."

Shit. Carmen hadn't really thought of that. "What if he doesn't want to talk?" Whatever Axel had been involved in had obviously been illegal, otherwise he'd have called nine-one-one instead of her.

"Then we can't make him," Liam said, sending a shiver of surprise through her. "But we think he called nine-one-one after Axel couldn't reach you, which means he cared what happened to the guy, cops or no cops. Hopefully, that will work in our favor."

Carmen nodded. Dante hadn't struck her as a choir boy, but he'd also lacked the douchebag factor she typically saw in so many younger men. "And what about the clinic?"

Everyone's eyes lasered in on Sinclair, whose eyes lasered in on Carmen's alone. "Our primary focus is to find Dante and figure out what happened to Axel. Since Axel was never seen at the clinic, I'm not inclined to press that issue right now."

Relief—and not a little bit of the stuff—tempted Carmen to sag against her stiff desk chair, but somehow, she kept her cool. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," Sinclair said. "Our next step is for you to convince Dante to meet, and something tells me that's going to be easier said than done."

Carmen thought of how just days ago, Axel had been alive and well and probably not thinking for a second that his life was about to come to a brutal end. Now Dante might be in the same sort of danger, and she didn't think twice before answering.

"I guess there's only one way to find out."

Liam watched Carmen hit send on the text the team had carefully constructed before all returning to the task of digging back into both Axel and Dante's social media accounts, meeting her eyes as she looked up from her phone.

"So, that's it?" she asked, and he nodded.

"Until he answers you. You have the script." They'd come up with various responses to questions Dante might ask if and when he replied, things that would hopefully get him worried enough to agree to meet her. "When he texts you back, call me. We'll go from there."

Carmen gave her phone one last glance before slipping it into the back pocket of her jeans. "Okay."

No less than a dozen things burned in Liam's mouth, all vying for airtime. He knew the value of trust and how hard it was to give it, especially when doing so made you vulnerable as hell. The fact that Carmen had trusted him enough to tell the team about this off-the-books clinic was a h.uge fvcking deal.

And the fact that she was working with them to help find Dante meant that, despite the way his heart had stupidly lurched against his sternum when she'd confessed the truth, she was more off-limits than ever.

So, even though his, “Great. I’ll walk you out,” sounded weaker than ever against his own ears, he said it anyway. Loosening emotions around Carmen was a bad idea. He’d learned that the hard way.

She nodded, her dark hair swishing over her shoulders. They made it down the hallway and the stairs, through the main lobby where he signed her out, and all the way to the sunbaked street beyond before Liam broke rank with his better judgment.

“I know it was a big deal for you to trust the team. Me, I guess,” he said, and yeah, eloquent, he was not. “So, thank you.”

Carmen squinted against the sunlight streaming over them. “I guess you made the decision a little easier by not being an ogre.”

His laugh was involuntary and quick and so, so good. “I have my moments.”

“Did you mean it?” she asked, and his confusion must have shown, because she added, “in the diner, when you said you really wanted to know about me. Or were you just trying to work me, like we’re doing to Dante?”

“That is a very cynical question,” Liam said, but—of course—she didn’t backpedal.

“Yeah. And, look, if you were just trying to get me to warm up and talk to you, I get it. You have a job to do.” Here, her expression softened, making his pulse rush in a different, more dangerous way than when she got all snippy with him. “But I’m sure you’ve noticed I don’t tend to trust people too easily.”

“Yeah, me either.” Okay, so that had barged from his mouth without permission from his brain. But there was no hauling it back now, so he shrugged and faced Carmen’s surprise head on.

“Oh,” she whispered. Her lashes swept up as she looked at him, wide-eyed, and for a second, they weren’t on the sidewalk outside the precinct. They were in her old apartment, years ago, her bruised and shaken and asking for comfort and him wanting nothing more than to give it to her, and damn it. Da*mn it. He had to distance himself from this woman before his emotions crept in and wrecked them both.

Liam cleared his throat, taking a half-step back that record-scratched the moment. “I meant it,” he said, going with the truth he could tell.

Carmen nodded, her vulnerable expression gone. “Well, thanks for breakfast. I’ll call you if Dante texts.”

She was halfway down the street before he could move his eyes from her and make himself go back inside the building.

