

Chapter 139

Chapter 139 opens with Saint standing near a muddy trail, her eyes fixed on a white van as forensic experts in protective suits begin their examination of the property. Patch, disregarding Saint's earlier plea for distance, lingers among the skeletal trees that line the trail's edge. The house that once belonged to Tooms stands in the clearing—a relic of the past, its wooden frame having survived more than a century of storms, including the infamous 1896 tornado that tore through St. Louis. The land surrounding it is wild and beautiful in a way that feels haunted, with tall bluestem grasses brushing against the trunks of birch trees already shifting toward autumn hues. Saint is struck not only by the historical presence of the house but also by the eerie silence that seems to settle over the scene, as if the land itself remembers what happened here.

Rather than enter the house, Saint allows the forensic team to work undisturbed. She remains outside, recalling her discussions with Himes about the role of advanced DNA sequencing in criminal cases—conversations that have left her with a mixture of curiosity and dread. Recent legal shifts have altered the fates of several death row inmates, forcing her to question the certainty of guilt and the fragility of justice. That doubt lingers as the team moves deeper into the property, eventually descending into a cold storage area beneath the structure, where the air grows heavier and the task even more grim. Saint tries to remain composed while watching professionals sift through what may be the remains of someone's child, someone's sister, someone who never came home.

Hours pass in tense silence until the forensic team completes its work. The van pulls away slowly, its tires carving deep tracks in the gravel like scars in the earth. Patch walks over, looking exhausted, his face etched with worry lines that weren't there just weeks ago. Saint asks when they can expect lab results, though her tone suggests she

doesn't believe answers will come easily. They sit together on a moss-covered rock, knees brushing, steam rising from her thermos as she pours black coffee into a metal cup. A light drizzle begins to fall, but they remain still, wrapped in the intimacy of shared silence and uncertain hope.

As the mist thickens, Saint quietly picks up a magnolia leaf and tucks it into her jacket pocket, unsure why she's drawn to it but feeling the need to hold on to something tangible. The forest around them whispers with the rustle of wind and wet leaves, amplifying the sense that time is both still and slipping. Patch, staring into the trees, wonders aloud if this case could finally bring closure—not just to the investigation, but to a part of his own life that has been suspended in grief and longing. He speaks of the countless faces he's painted, each girl imagined or remembered, and how every brushstroke was an act of mourning. Saint listens, offering no solution, only presence, which sometimes speaks louder than words.

They sit a while longer as the sky darkens, the air now tinged with the scent of wet soil and decaying leaves. Saint's thoughts drift to the many families who wait by phones, checking inboxes, searching faces on news reports, hoping for confirmation, fearing the worst. What they've uncovered today may bring relief to someone—or reopen wounds too old to heal cleanly. For Saint and Patch, the emotional weight is familiar, but never easier. Their work continues, not only in forensic files and interviews, but in the quiet spaces between moments, where memory and loss take shape. As they rise to leave, neither speaks of the girl who might still be out there, because in their hearts, they both know hope is a fragile but necessary burden to carry.