

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 begins with Saint standing in the cool, dusty silence of the garage, her fingers tightening around the smooth barrel of a polished Colt Python revolver. The weapon, heavy and cold, feels more like a burden than a tool, but she doesn't flinch. It's loaded—two bullets nestled in the chamber, with more tucked away in a hidden box under old rags. She knows she isn't supposed to be anywhere near it. If her grandmother finds out, there'll be more than just a scolding. But fear has taken a back seat. What drives her now is purpose—burning, unshakable purpose.

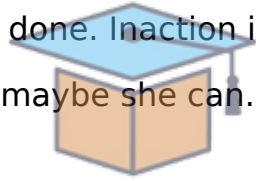
Wearing her worn-out denim overalls and a plain white tank top, Saint resembles a child, but her eyes carry the weight of someone far older. On the back of her hand is a faded skull and crossbones tattoo, something she drew in permanent marker weeks ago—symbolic, perhaps of her willingness to risk everything. She has an address now, scrawled on the edge of a torn poster. It belongs to a man named Eli Aaron. Every step she's taken since learning his name has pulled her deeper into a decision that can't be reversed.

She steps out into the cool breath of early morning, where the mist still clings low to the streets and lamplight reflects dimly off the pavement. With a canvas satchel bouncing lightly against her hip, she makes her way through Monta Clare's sleeping neighborhoods. Houses glow faintly from kitchen windows as coffee brews and radios hum, but none of that touches her. The police station looms in silence on the other side of town, empty and dark like a stage before the play begins. A few blocks down, the church doors creak open, and candles flicker to life. The smell of incense floats through the air.

As Saint approaches the church, Jimmy Walters stands in the doorway, Bible in hand, watching her with a puzzled expression. "Where are you headed this early?" he asks,

his voice cautious. Saint doesn't pause. "To see a photographer," she says, tightening her grip on the satchel's strap. Jimmy blinks. "Why?" Her answer slices through the air: "To shoot him dead. And bring my friend home." The words hang heavy, shocking in their clarity.

Saint doesn't look back. Her feet carry her forward as her mind flashes through scenes she can't erase—Grace's smile, the missing posters, the silence of those who should have acted but didn't. She no longer cares about right or wrong. She only knows something must be done. Inaction is its own kind of violence. If the adults won't protect them, then maybe she can. Maybe courage, even from a teenage girl, can rewrite the ending.



Her resolve is not born from recklessness but from the desperation that grows in forgotten corners—where children disappear and no one comes searching. Recent statistics show that missing persons cases involving young girls in rural America are often overlooked or misclassified due to outdated procedures or jurisdictional confusion. This reality fuels Saint's urgency. She doesn't carry the revolver out of ignorance. She carries it out of necessity, out of survival.

With every step toward Eli Aaron's address, the world seems to hold its breath. Saint's thoughts swirl—questions she has no time to answer: What happens after? Will anyone understand? But doubt is shoved aside by something fiercer—loyalty, justice, love. These aren't abstract values for her. They are lifelines, tethered to the memory of someone she refuses to let vanish without a fight.

As the chapter draws to a close, Saint disappears down a side street, swallowed by shadows and determination. What lies ahead may destroy her, but that matters less than the truth: someone has to act. And she's decided it's going to be her.