

Chapter 158

Chapter 158 begins with Saint traveling deep into the rugged terrain of Quartz Mountain State Park, led by a silent sheriff's deputy. Their route cuts through Cedar Creek Trail, bordered by heat-scorched shrubs and jagged slopes, while the nearby Black Jack Pass Trail looms ominously. The thick silence between them is heavy with tension, and Saint senses that whatever lies ahead will not be easy to confront. As they approach the site, the deputy remains tight-lipped, offering no assurance or context, which only amplifies her unease. Even though he's clearly a man seasoned by years of difficult duty, his emotional detachment feels chilling. The starkness of the path, broken only by the crunch of their boots on dry earth, creates a surreal contrast to the memories Saint recalls from her recent drives through Hobart and Lone Wolf. Everything about this moment, from the stiff wind to the smell of parched grass, signals that something important—perhaps even final—is about to be unearthed.

Far in the distance, the sheer granite cliffs of Baldy Point glisten under the Oklahoma sun, casting long shadows across the red dirt and scrub. Saint briefly takes in the ordinary sounds of hikers nearby, their laughter and calls bouncing off the rocks, before her attention returns to the deputy's words. He mentions the heat climbing steadily, noting that soon it will be unbearable. This small talk does little to calm her nerves, especially as the site comes into view—a shallow grave disturbed by wildlife and wind, marked only by an out-of-place pile of earth and dried wildflowers nearby. The sense of urgency and neglect is evident; no care was taken to properly bury the person whose bones now surface under the sky. Saint feels the emotional weight of the moment as she kneels, aware that the discovery confirms the fears she had long carried but never voiced aloud. Despite the desolation, the grave feels sacred, filled with memory and grief.

She studies the remains carefully, noting a distinct item among the weathered bones—an object undisturbed by the elements. It is a metal crucifix, its blue enamel still vivid, strung with beads spaced evenly along the chain. Saint recognizes it immediately; it's not just jewelry, but a pardon crucifix, symbolizing both faith and a cry for redemption. According to Catholic tradition, these crucifixes were often used in acts of penance or worn by the deeply spiritual, which makes its presence here more than symbolic. The deputy informs her that a rescue dog from the Wichita Mountain Climbers Coalition had uncovered the remains while helping trail workers, adding that the terrain was too rocky for a deep burial. This detail confirms what she already suspected: whoever buried this girl didn't have the time, strength, or will to do it

properly. It wasn't just an act of disposal—it was likely a burial made in desperation, haste, or panic.

As she takes a long breath, Saint reflects on how many times she had imagined this moment in the quiet hours of the night—when intuition screamed louder than any evidence ever could. The crucifix clenched in her palm now echoes the lingering voices of other lost girls she has investigated, each one tugging at her conscience. When the deputy finally asks if this is the same girl connected to previous disappearances, Saint simply nods, her voice steady but subdued. “Yes,” she confirms, “I knew before I got here.” Her confirmation doesn't stem from the physical evidence alone—it's rooted in months of research, gut instinct, and the burden of memory that she's carried. This girl, now bones under an open sky, is more than a name on a list. She's a chapter in a much larger story—one of silence, secrets, and systemic failures that allowed her disappearance to happen unnoticed.

The chapter closes on a note of quiet devastation. Saint remains beside the grave long after the deputy steps away, the hot wind stirring the dust into little spirals at her feet. Her hand remains over the crucifix, not in prayer, but in solidarity—a silent vow that this girl, unlike so many others, will not be forgotten. There's no spoken promise, but it's clear Saint has already made one to herself: to keep searching, keep uncovering, and keep telling the stories of the girls whose voices were taken from them. As she rises and turns back toward the trail, she doesn't look over her shoulder. What's behind her is tragedy; what lies ahead is the relentless pursuit of truth.