

Chapter 227

Chapter 227 begins as Saint approaches a weathered apartment block, its architecture a harsh reminder of her early investigative days. There's a sterile familiarity to the concrete walls, the chipped paint, and the lack of warmth that clings to places that house secrets. Temporarily reinstated by Himes, she carries the authority of her badge again, though she hardly requires it—her instincts, sharpened by years in the field, guide her more than any official order. As she steps through the corridor, fluorescent lights buzz above her, the hum acting like a metronome to the quickening of her thoughts. She doesn't expect resistance from this visit, but something about the silence behind the door feels dense with anticipation. When she knocks, there's a pause—long enough to imply reluctance—before the door opens.

Inside, Saint finds Cooper Strike living within a shell of a home, the apartment reduced to its barest essentials. His life, as reflected in the space, appears stripped of personality or comfort. A rack holds his few neatly folded clothes, and a worn sofa faces a window where dusty blinds are partially drawn, letting a faint stream of daylight sketch out his profile. He sits there, upright and unmoving, as if waiting for something that may never arrive. She notices his posture, the angles of his face, and the symmetry of his bone structure—traits that might suggest confidence in another man, but here, they suggest resignation. Saint remarks softly, "Looks like you've been through it," though her tone lacks pity. They begin to review his statement, with Saint comparing his words against the original version he had given earlier. There are no discrepancies, not even subtle ones, which only makes her feel more uneasy.

The air in the apartment remains still as they discuss the bureaucratic chaos surrounding the prison records. The office, she's learned, is buried in unprocessed paperwork, and any attempts to connect with Warden Riley have failed—his line constantly tied up. It's a mess she's all too familiar with, a reminder of how

administrative gaps can create dangerous openings in legal procedures. Cooper, on the other hand, offers no resistance during questioning. He recounts a monotonous life spent in libraries, first in various public systems, then finally landing a long-term role at Hannington. He makes no mention of parents, siblings, or any past love. “No wife. No children,” he says matter-of-factly, a hint of something unreadable in his tone. The lack of emotional attachments seems intentional, as though solitude is his only form of security.

As the interview nears its conclusion, Saint offers standard advice. “You might want to retain a lawyer,” she suggests, knowing full well that such interactions rarely remain isolated in cases this complicated. Cooper simply nods, offering nothing more. She begins to gather her things, mentally preparing her summary for Himes. But then, something near the bedside table catches her eye—a photograph in a gold-toned frame that seems strangely out of place in the otherwise lifeless room. Compelled by instinct, she crosses the space and gently picks it up. It’s faded with age, but the image remains vivid: a girl, young, dark-haired, with unmistakable green eyes and a gentle pout that stops Saint in her tracks.

The girl’s face stirs something familiar, like the ghost of a memory lingering just beyond full recognition. The photo feels like a puzzle piece that doesn’t yet have a picture to fit into. Without asking about it directly, Saint sets the frame back down, filing the image in her mental archive. As she turns toward the door, she gives him one last glance. “I’ll be seeing you, Mr. Cooper,” she says in passing, expecting no reply beyond a polite nod. But Cooper surprises her. “Actually,” he says, his voice quiet but certain, “Cooper is my first name.” Then, as she pauses in the doorway, he adds, “My surname is Strike. My name is Cooper Strike.”

The weight of his correction settles over the room like dust. Saint processes the name, letting it echo for a second before leaving. It isn’t just a minor detail—it’s a clue, maybe even a key. And though nothing more is said, the truth that lingers between them suggests that their paths are far from finished crossing.