

# Chapter 26

Chapter 26 begins in a quiet, snow-draped December, where Saint receives a vintage Nikon camera from her grandmother as a thoughtful Christmas gift. It's an old model, worn with history, but beautiful in its own right. With it comes only a single roll of film, along with a gentle warning: "Choose your subjects carefully." That advice lingers in Saint's mind like a quiet echo as she ventures into the wintry woods near her home, ready to capture the fleeting beauty of the cold season. Trees look sculpted under ice, and birds—house finches, cedar waxwings, and a red-tailed hawk—flutter into her viewfinder. As she frames each shot, Saint feels connected to something larger, as if she's documenting time before it slips away.

The new year looms, and Saint finds herself both embracing and resisting it. The posters of the boy with the eyepatch—once plastered across storefronts—have been taken down. Most people have moved on, but she hasn't. One of those posters ends up in her possession, stored on a high shelf like a secret she refuses to discard. Her fixation on what happened and who was lost leads her down a new path: science. Saint begins reading about trauma, forensic methods, and how even trees can preserve fingerprints. These discoveries feel like breadcrumbs in a mystery she's desperate to solve. When she shares her findings with Chief Nix, hoping for a spark of interest or maybe even validation, his downcast expression nearly breaks her spirit. He's seen too much. She senses that in him.

Life in town continues its slow churn, and Saint's thoughts turn to Ivy, who's sinking deeper into hardship. Her job search has failed, and her home feels like it's caving in from neglect. Saint, though now distant from her friend, still leaves fresh bread or muffins on Ivy's porch. The offerings remain untouched, gathering frost. When word spreads about Ivy facing eviction, Saint makes a difficult decision. She empties her savings jar—coins from babysitting, birthday bills, everything she's hoarded—and passes it anonymously to someone who can help. It's a quiet act of love, even if Ivy never knows who gave it.

At her weekly piano lessons, Saint finds something close to peace. Mrs. Shaw, her teacher, allows her to play freely now, recognizing that Saint's interpretation carries emotion that sheet music alone can't teach. On one particular day, as she plays Debussy's "Arabesque in C Major," she notices Chief Nix outside through the frost-laced window. He's shoveling snow around the okame cherry tree, the same one he's cared for since the boy's disappearance. They share a short exchange. His words are few but heavy—he wishes he could bring someone back for her. She knows he means

it.

Later, unable to sit still, Saint takes her camera and wanders toward the reservoir. She catches sight of a belted kingfisher perched near the water, its feathers flaring in contrast to the gray sky. She snaps the photo, heart swelling with the kind of beauty that only comes in silence. But her feet carry her farther still, unconsciously pulling her to a place marked by tragedy. She stops at the site—where everything changed. The air is cold, but she doesn't cry this time. Instead, she lets the weight settle in her chest and chooses to stay present. There's power in remembrance, even if it hurts.

The chapter closes on a soft but significant note. Saint, though burdened by sorrow and unanswered questions, finds threads of meaning in her actions—through her photos, her music, and her care for others. She's no longer the girl who hides behind grief; she's beginning to shape her own story from the pieces of loss. Snow continues to fall, quietly covering the world in a blanket of stillness, but within that stillness, Saint discovers clarity and a spark of resilience that wasn't there before.