

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 opens with Saint sitting on the metal edge of an ambulance ramp, her body wrapped tightly in a thermal blanket as a wall of heat and smoke swirls around her. The fire behind her rages uncontrollably, painting the night sky with pulsing orange light. Sirens blur in the background, and voices echo commands, but the sounds seem distant, as if dulled by the emotional chaos within her. Her chest rises with shaky breaths as she watches the blaze devour what's left of the barn. Through cracked glasses, she tries to make sense of the blurred silhouettes of people working frantically to contain the flames. Her limbs feel heavy, but her thoughts move quickly, cycling between disbelief and grief.

A paramedic checks her vitals, but Saint barely registers the touch. Her gaze keeps drifting toward the fire, drawn to its violence and the sense that something—someone—may still be trapped inside. When she sees Chief Nix walking toward her, she suddenly stands. Her fists tremble, and words burst out in choked gasps. "He's in there," she cries, her voice raw. Nix tries to calm her, saying they've done a full sweep and no one remains inside. But Saint doesn't believe him. Her instinct tells her otherwise, and her emotions surge beyond what words can hold.

The team quickly organizes to follow a trail of blood leading into the woods, and Saint joins them, though her steps are unsteady. The trees look different in the firelight—less familiar, more threatening. She can smell the smoke embedded into the soil and leaves. It clings to her skin and hair, intensifying the nausea that has been building since the moment the flames touched her home. Turning away from the team, she hides behind a police vehicle and vomits, the act leaving her shaking. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and leans on the car, her thoughts circling in panic.

As dusk settles fully into night, a fine mist begins to fall, mingling with the ash still drifting from the fire. The rain doesn't cool the heat but thickens the mud, making movement harder. News reaches the group that two bodies have been found, though the identities remain unconfirmed. Saint's legs nearly give way at the announcement. Her hands grip her knees, holding her upright. Every muscle in her body protests, but her mind refuses to rest. She pleads again with Nix, her voice softer now, more broken than angry. Still, he insists they've found no signs of Patch. Her heart refuses to accept it.

Fueled by desperation, Saint suddenly takes off running, dodging between fire crews and slipping into the woods alone. Behind her, officers call out, their boots splashing in puddles of ash and rain. She hears them, but she doesn't stop. Her lungs burn, but her legs keep moving. Every step is a refusal—a refusal to accept loss, to give up. Branches scrape at her face and arms, but she presses forward. The air smells of damp earth and smoke. She no longer feels the cold.

Then, at the edge of a clearing, she sees him. Patch lies slumped in the grass, his body barely moving, his face pale against the mud. Saint drops beside him, cradling his head, whispering his name through sobs. Her fingers touch his pulse—weak, but there. Relief pours out of her in tears as she pulls him closer. “You’re alive,” she says, over and over, as if repeating it could make it more true.

Officers arrive seconds later, voices rising as they try to assess the scene. One of them radios for backup while another reaches to help lift Patch. But Saint won’t let go just yet. She remains there, curled around him, tears mixing with soot on her cheeks, silently thanking whatever force kept him breathing. In that moment, the noise fades again. All she can hear is his breath—ragged, but real. Despite the devastation, the fire, and the grief, that sound gives her hope.

This chapter captures the crescendo of panic, the weight of loss, and the sheer will to resist finality. Saint’s journey through smoke, fear, and fury becomes a symbol of her unwillingness to surrender to tragedy. Through aching lungs and bleeding hands, she finds what she was searching for—a fragile heartbeat in the chaos.