

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 begins with the arrival of comfort food wrapped in foil, but the warmth of neighborly concern carries a subtle edge. Caroline McLaren is the first to show up, arms full with a bubbling chicken Divan and condolences that sound rehearsed. Her hug lingers too long, and she warns the casserole shouldn't go through the dishwasher—as if that's the most pressing concern in a house now shadowed by murder. A few hours later, Emily and Campbell arrive in tandem, bringing paper bags from the high-end gourmet shop in the village. It's the kind of place that lets you pretend you cooked when all you did was sign a receipt. I smile, nodding in appreciation, but there's a stiffness in my jaw that won't go away.

As I store the containers in the freezer, I can feel their eyes on me—sipping their iced coffees, watching me like I might crack open and spill something useful. They want details. Everyone wants details. But I also see something else in their faces today—sincerity. Campbell's eyes are swollen, and Emily isn't wearing a hint of makeup, something I've never seen before. They look... tired. Grief-ridden. And for the first time, it hits me that they're mourning too. These weren't just neighborhood acquaintances. Bea and Blanche were their people. They hosted parties together. Raised children on the same streets. Whispered about each other, maybe, but also depended on one another to maintain the illusion that life here was perfect.

"We all are," I agree quietly, unsure what else to say. For a long second, we just sit in silence, the kind that usually only exists between people who have known each other far longer than I've known them. Then, Campbell finally asks the question hanging between us like fog: "They really think someone killed them?" I nod, and Emily's lips part slightly, like she's about to say something else but then decides not to. I think about how Detective Laurent keeps circling us all like a hawk, and I wonder who she thinks is the prey.

Campbell's voice is small when she says, "They want to talk to me on Thursday." Emily adds that her appointment is Friday. Both of them glance my way, eyes searching, but I keep my face unreadable. What am I supposed to say? That I'm terrified the detectives will start digging into my past? That I'm afraid my old life is leaking through the cracks of this new one like water under a locked door?

After they leave, the house is quiet again. Too quiet. That's when the phone rings. The number flashes up on the screen—a 205 area code. My heart stutters. It could be Detective Laurent. It could be the police saying they've found something—something that makes all the casserole-bearing kindness vanish like smoke. But when I answer, it's worse. It's John Rivers.

His voice is like nails on a chalkboard, smooth but sharp. "The church is raising money for a new sound system," he says, not bothering with pretense. I realize immediately—it's not a request. It's a demand, disguised in a smirk. He's leveraging my fear, hoping to squeeze a few hundred dollars out of my panic.

"You and your boyfriend are all over the paper," he adds, tone casual but soaked in threat. "Thought maybe you'd want to stay out of it."

The way he says "you and your boyfriend" makes my skin crawl. He doesn't say Eddie's name, but the implication is clear: he's reminding me how precarious all of this is. One word from him, and my entire new life could unravel.

I hang up the phone with trembling fingers, already moving toward my purse to find my checkbook. I tell myself this is the last time. That I'm buying silence, not feeding the monster. But deep down, I know better. Blackmail never ends on a handshake.

That evening, I pour a glass of wine and sit by the window. The storm that had threatened earlier finally breaks open, soft rain trickling down the panes. I watch the droplets race each other, my mind racing with them. If Emily and Campbell are being questioned, then I can't be far behind. My story has to hold. My nerves have to stay calm. Because if I falter—if I hesitate even once—everything I've built will come

crashing down.

When Eddie walks in, he doesn't say much, just kisses my temple and pours himself a drink. The silence between us isn't strained, exactly, but it's dense—full of things neither of us is willing to name. He thinks we're finally safe, that with Tripp arrested, the danger has passed. I wish I could believe him.

But safety, like casseroles, has an expiration date. And secrets always rot from the inside first.



Summaryer