

Chapter 174

Chapter 174 begins with Saint settling at the kitchen table, spooning a warm serving of Brunswick stew prepared by Charlotte. The savory scent rises with the steam, bringing a moment of comfort. Saint takes a bite and offers a playful critique, making Charlotte smirk with a mix of pride and nerves. The comment is light, but underneath it lies a silent understanding—Charlotte had invested herself emotionally in making that meal. The interaction feels ordinary yet meaningful, a small act rooted in care and effort. After the plates are cleared, Charlotte excuses herself and descends into the basement, where her real project awaits. Downstairs, the walls are lined with pinned notes, maps, and strings of colored thread. Each detail connects back to a bigger picture—one she’s been tirelessly building. Saint follows a few minutes later, drawn by curiosity and concern, finding herself surrounded by a visual archive of young girls who’ve vanished.

The basement feels colder than the kitchen, both in temperature and tone. A large corkboard dominates the wall, scattered with photographs, names, and colored pushpins: blue indicates abductions, green marks runaways, orange signals those still missing, and red signifies confirmed deaths. Charlotte leans in, her eyes scanning the names she knows by heart. When Saint picks up a pen and carefully writes “Crystal Wright” in red, the weight of that action settles heavily in the room. Silence follows, heavy with unspoken grief. Charlotte’s expression hardens, her small features set in quiet focus as she explains the background behind each name. For every color-coded pin, there’s a human story—parents who never stopped searching, communities left haunted. Saint recognizes several names, among them Angela Rossi and Summer Reynolds. She flashes back to newspaper headlines and case files she once reviewed, never imagining her own child would become invested in the same tragedies. This unexpected collaboration turns into an act of collective mourning.

Later, back upstairs, the mood lightens slightly over dessert and a second glass of wine. The sweetness of the pie contrasts sharply with the somber discussion that had filled the basement just an hour earlier. Yet the memory of the board lingers. Saint leans back in her chair, thinking through everything Charlotte had laid out. In her mind, connections begin to form—threads between the stories, patterns she hadn't recognized until now. Her pulse quickens as realization sets in: something important had been staring at her all along, hidden in plain sight. It isn't just a collage of grief—it's a roadmap, one that might offer a clue or a new angle. Rising from the table, Saint thanks Charlotte with a quiet nod and grabs her coat. Her face shows the fatigue of someone carrying too many thoughts at once. As she walks out into the cool night, her mind races, unsure of what the next step should be but certain that one must be taken.

Outside, the wind stings lightly against her cheeks, and she fumbles for her keys in the dark. The distant hum of a passing car on the road reminds her of how ordinary the world continues to be, even while lives are falling apart behind closed doors. Inside her vehicle, she pauses before starting the engine, still seeing Charlotte's bulletin board in her mind. It was never just a school project or a teenage obsession—it was a testament to resilience, a plea to not forget. Saint, who's seen too much and fought too hard to let things slip into silence, now feels the urgency of Charlotte's mission becoming her own. The chapter doesn't end with resolution—it ends with momentum. What began as an ordinary dinner transformed into a deeper reckoning. And as Saint drives away into the night, the weight of what she's just experienced pushes her further toward something that feels like the truth.