

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 begins in a house full of panic, as fear clings to every creaking sound and ring of the doorbell. Maryellen's whisper—"They'll go away"—isn't just wishful thinking; it's a plea that echoes the tension crawling through the room. Plastic-wrapped packages, heavy with implication, begin to stir, one even thudding to the floor and dragging itself toward the door. They realize, too late, that the lights were left on—an error that could expose them all. Each character—Maryellen, Mrs. Greene, and Kitty—wears blood not as a symbol but as a burden they can't wash off fast enough. The ringing grows louder, the dread more physical, and the sense of exposure sharper as they fumble to decide who appears the least suspicious.

Grace's arrival brings relief but also judgement. Her sharp gaze moves from the women to the white carpet stained red and up the walls marked with smeared prints. The grim truth cannot be hidden, not even behind quick explanations. Grace demands honesty, refusing to shield herself from the reality upstairs. After seeing the scene for herself, her tone shifts. She becomes the planner, cold and precise, ready to clean up the disaster with chilling efficiency. A plan is formed using the crematorium's schedule, columbarium niches, and knowledge acquired from years of handling what others left behind. Grace's calm is unsettling but necessary.

Time becomes an enemy as the game nears its end, the streets preparing to flood with noise and curious neighbors. While Kitty and Maryellen prepare the vehicle, Grace commands a grim ballet of logistics—finding boxes, directing showers, and organizing changes of clothes. The grotesque irony of their mission, sandwiched between a college football game and a neighborhood in celebration, heightens the surreal horror. The body is split and packed, and despite attempts to make James Harris vanish, blood betrays them. The house is a war zone of stains, smears, and fragments of violence—far from the untouched disappearance they intended. The fantasy of a clean

erasure is undone by the visceral reality of human mess.

When Maryellen and Kitty leave with the remains, Grace and Mrs. Greene stay behind. Not out of loyalty, but out of necessity. They've spent their lives cleaning—after children, husbands, and now after death. Their tools are simple: vinegar, ammonia, peroxide, baking soda, and grit. Their rhythm is mechanical, methodical, rooted in years of labor invisible to those they served. Between them, they don't just scrub a house; they erase a story, layer by layer, bloodstain by bloodstain. It is not glamorous. It is survival masked as housekeeping, a dance older than justice itself.

By midnight, Maryellen calls from a gas station. The job is done. C-24 and C-25 now hold James Harris's secrets, sealed and recorded. Grace and Mrs. Greene are nearly finished too, the sheets pressed, the floors shampooed, the lies set neatly into place. The house looks empty of memory, as though no one had lived there, let alone died there. Patricia, sleeping deeply, is shielded from the storm of actions that swirled around her. Her silence becomes a fragile peace—one she didn't ask for but desperately needed. Mrs. Greene declines a ride, knowing appearances matter as much as actions.

The chapter winds down with quiet confrontations and long-buried guilt. Grace is forced to hear what she avoided for years—she had been wrong. She had been a coward. She listens, and for once, does not defend herself. Instead, she simply says, "I'm sorry." It's a small word, but in that moment, it holds the weight of every death, every betrayal, every moment missed to make things right. It is not forgiveness, but it is a start. Mrs. Greene, satisfied for now, prepares to bring her children home. That gesture feels more powerful than any confession.

Grace returns to Patricia, who wakes up gasping, her body still haunted by the trauma. Grace soothes her without words, climbing into bed and holding her. It's a gesture rooted in shared pain, a promise that whatever comes next, they will not face it alone. As the night deepens, the chaos recedes into quiet resolve. What remains is not guilt but solidarity, a bond sealed not by blood but by its erasure.