

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 begins with Patricia stepping down the shaky front steps of the house, holding a silver Boy Scout flashlight in her hand. She had just spoken to Mrs. Greene, who stood at the doorway, but as Patricia prepared to search around the back of the trailer, Mrs. Greene swiftly locked the door behind her, securing it with a chain. The night around her was alive with the hum of air conditioners, and the woods were filled with a cacophony of insects, making the air thick and heavy as she moved into the darkness. The ground beneath her feet was sandy, and as she walked around the corner of the trailer, Patricia felt a growing sense of unease. She clicked on the flashlight, scanning the area around her, but only found shadows and unidentifiable lumps in the dirt. She then turned her attention to the trees in the distance, the dim light from her flashlight illuminating the pine trunks.

Patricia, feeling increasingly unsettled but determined, decided to venture into the woods. As she stepped further, the woods seemed to swallow her, and the insects' chorus grew louder, filling the air with an almost suffocating hum. Every step she took was met with resistance from the underbrush, and she could hear the sounds of her own body crashing through the branches and bushes. At one point, something caught her foot—a rusty wire stretched across the ground—which made her heart race with a surge of fear. She paused for a moment, realizing that the homes she had left behind were now far out of sight. She had entered an unfamiliar world, alone in the woods, with only the beam of her flashlight to guide her. As she continued, she tried to focus on each tree trunk, trying not to think of the vast darkness that surrounded her.

Patricia's anxiety reached a peak when she heard a rustling sound off to her right. She immediately turned off her flashlight, letting the night surround her in a thick silence. The sounds of the insects abruptly ceased, amplifying the pulse in her ears. The silence felt unnatural, almost as though the woods were holding their breath. Just as

Patricia's fear intensified, she heard the unmistakable sound of something scurrying through the underbrush. In a panic, she turned the flashlight back on and moved forward, her focus now solely on finding Destiny Taylor. Her heart raced as she made her way through the forest, the flashlight casting erratic beams of light on the ground in front of her.

Then, as if guided by some unseen force, Patricia stepped onto a dirt road, not far from where the trees began to thin. The road appeared to have been recently used, with large tire tracks in the sand indicating recent activity. When she shone the flashlight in one direction, the beam revealed a van parked nearby—the unmistakable chrome grille of James Harris's white van. Her heart skipped a beat. She turned off the light and stepped back into the trees, unsure if Harris had seen her. The van sat ominously still, its headlights dark, and Patricia knew that this moment could determine everything. She needed to approach, needed to confirm whether Harris was inside, but every step felt heavier than the last.

With her stomach churning and her body tense, Patricia cautiously moved toward the van. The sand under her feet felt soft and heavy, but she pressed on, each step bringing her closer to the vehicle. Her mind raced with possible scenarios, but her instincts told her to proceed. She reached the van, her hand trembling as she touched the cool metal of the vehicle's hood. Kneeling, she tried to peer into the dark interior, but it was impossible to see anything. She considered turning back, but the thought of Destiny, the thought of the young girl she was certain was in danger, pushed her forward.

Patricia was almost certain that James Harris had been in the van, and he was most likely still nearby. She had to make her move before it was too late. She reached for the back door of the van, her hand trembling as she gripped the handle and pulled. As she raised the flashlight, she froze in shock. A man's back was bent over something on the floor of the van, and as he turned around, Patricia's blood ran cold. There was something terribly wrong with his face. Something long, black, and insect-like was protruding from his mouth—an appendage that resembled a cockroach's leg. The sight

left her paralyzed, and the blood on his chin and cheeks made her feel sick to her stomach. Beneath him, a young girl lay sprawled across the floor of the van, her body limp, a dark bruise marking the inside of her thigh.

In that moment, Patricia understood that the horror she had feared was real. James Harris was not just a threat; he was something far worse, and Destiny Taylor was in grave danger. Patricia's body went into survival mode, but even as she turned to run, she could feel the weight of what she had just witnessed. Harris's reaction was slow, but he seemed to sense her presence. The van rocked as he shifted inside, and Patricia knew she was close to being discovered. Fear surged through her as she sprinted back into the woods, desperate to get away. The trees seemed to stretch on forever, and with each passing second, the dimming light from her flashlight made it harder to navigate.

As she ran, the thumping of her heartbeat drowned out all other sounds, and her body screamed for her to stop, but she couldn't. She had to keep going. The light from her flashlight flickered, growing weaker, but Patricia pushed forward, the shadows of the trees surrounding her like an impenetrable wall. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she stumbled out of the woods and onto a chain-link fence, recognizing the road that led back to Six Mile. Just as she began to catch her breath, a car appeared, its headlights blinding her for a moment. A police officer's voice came from inside, asking if she was the one who had called 911. Patricia wasted no time and climbed into the back of the patrol car, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief wash over her as the door slammed shut behind her. The officers were here. They were going to take action.

The car sped down the road, and Patricia gave the officers the direction to the woods where she had seen Harris's van. The police were focused, determined, and in a few moments, their spotlight was scanning the woods. Patricia's heart raced as they moved deeper into the area, but the moment stretched on without finding Harris or Destiny. The officers turned the car back to Wanda's trailer, where the search for Destiny continued. Patricia's frustration grew as she saw the uncertainty in their faces—her story, her warning, seemed to be slipping away. But she remained resolute.

She couldn't let Destiny become another casualty of this twisted nightmare.

