

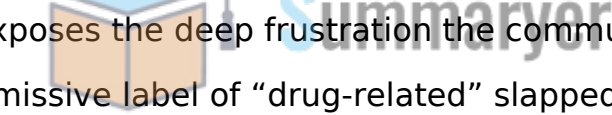
Chapter 14

Chapter 14 opens with a growing sense of urgency pressing down on Patricia and Kitty. Though Kitty suggests it's time to leave, Patricia remains rooted, her concern sparked by what she sees unfolding around her. The keyword, Chapter 14, signals a pivotal shift—moving the story from unease to confrontation. The sight of a boy near Patricia's car, dismissed as harmless, unnerves the women more than they admit. For Patricia, who has been living in fear and disconnection since her attack, the situation finally presents an opportunity to act. With children possibly at risk, she feels a glimmer of purpose return, a small foothold in a life that has felt uncertain for weeks.

Patricia's desire to help becomes more pronounced when she directly asks about Jesse and Aaron. Mrs. Greene, cautious but resolute, begins to unveil a disturbing pattern of events involving children from their community. Since May, two young boys have died, and another child, Francine, has disappeared under suspicious circumstances. While the official stories claim coincidence or personal choice, the people most affected are not convinced. The lack of media coverage is noted, a silence that fuels suspicion and widens the gap between what's reported and what's believed. It's this absence of acknowledgment that makes the local warnings and whispers feel even more urgent.

The story of Orville Reed, an eight-year-old boy allegedly killed by a truck, brings a chilling undertone to the conversation. Officially considered an accident, the account from his peers—claiming he intentionally walked into traffic—casts doubt on the narrative. What's most haunting is the detail that Orville had been talking to someone, possibly imaginary, possibly not, in the woods. Mrs. Greene links Orville's behavior to something more sinister, raising suspicions about a white man seen near the area. Even Francine's sudden departure loses credibility when it's revealed she left her beloved cat behind—something those who knew her say she would never do.

Orville's cousin, Sean, becomes another focal point in the unraveling mystery. His own disturbing changes in behavior—erratic moods, avoiding food, staring at the television blankly—paint a picture of a child overwhelmed by something he couldn't explain. Despite warnings and concern, his attempt to protect Orville led to a brutal death in the woods, far beyond what any accident or simple crime could justify. His body was found disfigured, too gruesome for an open casket, which sent shockwaves through those who knew him. Patricia listens, horrified, as Kitty finally stops fidgeting, gripped by the dark implications.



The conversation exposes the deep frustration the community feels toward the authorities. The dismissive label of “drug-related” slapped onto Sean's death is rejected by everyone who knew him. Patterns are forming: boys are disappearing, dying, and the stories surrounding them are being sanitized or ignored. Patricia begins connecting the strange happenings—unexplained figures, unsettling noises, and children's rhymes—to something far more serious. The image of a pale man seen outside windows—one even allegedly appearing at a second-story unit—strikes Patricia deeply. She recalls similar disturbances in her own home and begins to realize that these stories might not be just folklore or community hysteria.

Mrs. Greene finally shifts from sharing stories to offering something tangible: a license plate. She explains how she keeps track of unfamiliar vehicles in case they're needed by the police. A week ago, she jotted down part of a Texas plate from a white van leaving the area late at night. Though incomplete, the information provides a possible clue, the first hard detail that ties a real vehicle to the otherwise untraceable presence haunting their community. Despite reporting it, she received no follow-up from the police—a silence that echoes previous dismissals and heightens distrust in the system.

What stands out is not just the van, but how prepared Mrs. Greene has become. A notebook kept by the window, an ear tuned to suspicious sounds, and a willingness to act, all mark her as someone who refuses to be a passive witness. Her resolve offers Patricia a model to emulate. In that moment, Patricia's lingering helplessness is replaced with purpose. The stories no longer feel distant or unconnected—they've

become part of her reality.

This chapter reveals the danger of underestimating communities that are rarely given a voice in official narratives. The Old Village, with its faded security and charm, is changing. Chapter 14 reminds us that fear grows in the spaces left by silence, and that real danger often thrives when it is ignored by those in power. By bringing these stories to the surface, the women begin to reclaim some agency, even if they must do it alone. What began as neighborhood gossip sharpens into a grim mosaic of death, disappearance, and ignored warnings—laying the groundwork for what comes next.



Summaryer