

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 begins with Patricia overwhelmed by the guilt of her impulsive kiss with James Harris. The keyword, Chapter 7, marks her internal unraveling as she scrubs away the physical memory with harsh mouthwash and denial. Throughout the day, dread coils tightly in her chest—she expects every phone call or doorstep knock to be someone finding out. But no one says a word. The normalcy of errands, school drop-offs, and summer camp signups dulls the edges of her anxiety. Between parenting duties and her husband Carter's frequent absences, the week rushes by in a blur of chores and heat. By the time the family gathers for dinner, Patricia is only half-present, distracted by the mental clutter she's trying to keep buried.

The dinner scene quickly descends into chaos, amplified by broken air conditioning and frayed tempers. Korey complains about the heat, Carter is inattentive, and Blue shares odd facts about Hitler—all layered over Miss Mary's rambling interruptions. A roach falls into Miss Mary's glass, prompting screams and disgust from the children. Patricia's heart sinks as she imagines the memory being preserved as proof of her failing household. She rushes to dispose of the roach and the tainted water, just in time for the doorbell to ring. When she opens the door, she's startled to see James Harris—transformed and smiling—returning her casserole dish. In that moment, her panic fades. He's clean, confident, and magnetic, and she's disarmed again by his easy charm.

Their interaction at the front door is awkward and electric. Patricia fumbles through apologies while James gently teases her about her habit of saying sorry too much. He seems sincere, and when she invites him in to meet her family, it feels both impulsive and intentional. The moment he enters their home, the atmosphere shifts. Her children stare, unsure why a stranger is at their table, while Carter politely offers ice cream. James plays along, fielding questions about his investments and hinting at interest in

local real estate. Patricia wonders if he might actually have money—maybe even a lot of it—and for a moment she feels like she’s hosting someone who matters.

As dessert continues, James and Patricia talk books. His references to Ayn Rand and Beat writers clash with Korey’s snarky remarks, sparking an exchange that leaves Korey visibly rattled. For the first time, someone challenges her defiance without anger—just insight and calm critique. Patricia watches, unsure if she should intervene or admire the effect. But the warmth dissolves when Miss Mary suddenly fixates on James, mistaking him for someone named Hoyt Pickens. Her accusation is laced with old Southern venom and disjointed memory. She calls him a thief, a threat, and a liar, culminating in a feeble attempt to spit on him that lands as a slop of melted ice cream and shame.

The scene collapses. Carter tries to manage his mother, Korey recoils in horror, and Blue hides his disgust. Patricia hustles Miss Mary from the room, boiling with humiliation and heartbreak. She wants this moment—this chance at intelligent conversation, validation, maybe even connection—but her mother-in-law shatters it. By the time she returns, James Harris is gone. Carter offers no comfort, only mild commentary about Miss Mary’s behavior. The opportunity, the spark, the glimpse of something new—all vanished under the weight of family obligation and unchecked confusion. Patricia sits in silence, aching for something she can’t quite name but now deeply misses.

In psychological terms, Patricia’s reaction is not uncommon for women navigating midlife emotional droughts. Studies show that in emotionally imbalanced marriages, external validation—particularly from charismatic outsiders—can feel intoxicating. Her draw toward James Harris isn’t just curiosity; it’s a response to invisibility. Meanwhile, Miss Mary’s outburst acts as a foil—an embodiment of past trauma, the kind that refuses to stay buried. Her delusions may not be fully accurate, but they tap into a truth Patricia can’t yet see. Something about James doesn’t add up. And though she doesn’t realize it yet, this dinner was more than awkward—it was a warning.