

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 opens with Patricia's voice shaking as she recounts the disturbing encounter with James Harris over the phone. She explains to Mrs. Greene that he had been drunk, showing off and boasting at a party, but it wasn't just his typical bravado. James had somehow pushed Patricia further away from her husband, Leland, until she found herself trapped in a conversation that would haunt her. He shared a chilling story about a woman from his past who had supposedly stolen from him. The way he spoke, in a low voice only meant for her ears, left Patricia uneasy. His words hinted at something darker, something unspoken, but it was when he pulled out a driver's license—Francine's driver's license—that everything clicked into place. Why would he have it? How could he explain it away? Patricia felt the surge of fear as she pieced the disturbing scenario together. A part of her wanted to ignore it, but the sight of that license, tucked away in his wallet, shattered any doubt. Patricia knew she needed to act fast, and her decision was made: this had gone too far.

She quickly devised a plan, telling Mrs. Greene how they could trick James into revealing his secrets without him realizing it. They needed to catch him off guard. The best opportunity would be at the Scruggs' oyster roast in six days, a public event where people would be drinking and distracted. Patricia was confident that, in the chaotic atmosphere, it would be easy to slip the information into James's wallet and get the police involved. The clock was ticking, and time was running out. Every move Patricia made now had to be deliberate. There was no room for error. The risks of this plan were high, but she knew it was their best shot at exposing the truth. Yet, even as she prepared to carry it out, she couldn't shake the gnawing feeling that something worse was already happening.

Halloween evening arrived, and with it, the usual bustle of the Old Village trick-or-treating tradition. Patricia, left behind as Carter worked, attempted to keep the night

lighthearted by handing out candy to the stream of costumed children. She greeted them with the usual enthusiasm, but her thoughts were elsewhere. The dads came in groups, laughing and sharing drinks behind their children as they made their way through the neighborhood. It was all so normal, yet Patricia could feel the weight of impending danger. Her mind kept wandering back to Slick's call, and when she received the second phone call from her, Patricia's unease only deepened. Slick's voice was barely audible, repeating over and over, "I didn't make a sound." The words were muffled, and the desperation in Slick's voice sent a chill down Patricia's spine. It was clear something was horribly wrong. Slick was no longer the person she once knew; she was unraveling, and Patricia could sense the danger closing in around them.

Patricia wasted no time. She grabbed her purse, leaving her daughter Korey behind without a second thought. The Old Village streets, usually full of festive joy, became a blur as Patricia drove through them with urgency, weaving around families and navigating the maze of parked cars. As she passed James Harris's house, she couldn't help but notice the two jack-o'-lanterns flickering on his front porch, casting eerie shadows in the dimming light. Her mind raced. She couldn't be sure, but she had a sinking feeling that Slick's call had something to do with James. The longer she stayed away, the more twisted her suspicions became. Reaching Creekside, Patricia was alarmed to see both cars parked in the Paleys' driveway, signaling that whatever had happened was bigger than just Slick. The eerie silence around the house and the unsettling decorations of pamphlets with religious messages about the "grace of God" made her pause at the door. The door was unlocked, and she cautiously stepped inside, searching for any sign of what might have transpired.

What she found was not what she expected. The house was eerily quiet, the kind of silence that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. But when Patricia entered the dining room, she was taken aback to find Leland, his children, and their family sitting around the table, laughing. They were oblivious to the tension in the air, their focus completely on the Monopoly board in front of them. Slick, however, was nowhere to be found. As Patricia tried to keep her composure, she quickly excused

herself to check upstairs. When she entered the master bathroom, what she saw in the bathtub made her heart race. Slick was lying there, disheveled, her mascara running, and her hair tangled. There was a deep, haunting sadness in her eyes that Patricia couldn't ignore.

Slick's fractured words about not making a sound filled the air, and Patricia's instinct screamed that the situation was far worse than she'd imagined. It was clear that Slick had been hurt—badly. The deep physical and emotional pain Slick was experiencing struck Patricia to the core. Patricia knew she had to act fast, but Slick's plea that "they can't know" weighed heavily on her. As she helped Slick into the tub, she couldn't help but think about the dangers they were facing. The damage was already done, but they were only at the beginning of an even darker chapter. Patricia resolved then and there that she would stop at nothing to uncover the truth and protect her friend, no matter the cost.