

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 opens with Patricia waking up feeling physically drained, her body aching as if she had fallen down the stairs. Her joints crack and pop as she moves to get out of bed, and every movement seems to make her body groan in discomfort. When she reaches for the coffee filters, her shoulders feel stiff and sore, as if they are packed with broken glass, a sensation that lingers with every slight motion. As Patricia undresses for her shower, she notices the bruises on both hips, reminders of the rough ride in the back seat of the police car the previous day. Despite the physical toll, she forces herself to get through the morning, attempting to carry on with routine tasks.

Carter, her husband, had to go to the hospital even though it was Saturday, leaving Patricia alone to handle things at home. She gives Blue, their son, the freedom to roam outside, but with a stern warning to be back before dark. She knows it's not safe to let him out of her sight after dark, especially with everything that has been happening. Patricia cannot yet fully comprehend what James Harris is, or what he might be capable of, but she does know one thing—he never goes out into the sun. While she wants to reach out to her friend Grace and explain everything she has seen, she holds back, knowing Grace's skepticism might prevent her from understanding what has truly been happening. Patricia's mind races, but she forces herself to take deep breaths and calm down.

Unable to bring herself to vacuum or clean the curtains as she had planned, Patricia settles on doing laundry instead. She irons clothes for hours, even ironing socks in a desperate attempt to focus her energy elsewhere. However, her mind keeps drifting back to the horrifying image of James Harris, standing over the bloodied body of a young girl in his van. The memory clings to her, each attempt to think of something else futile. She cleans the bathrooms, watches the sun move across the sky, and tries to remind herself that her daughter Korey is still away at soccer camp, giving her a

brief reprieve from the chaos. But then the phone rings, pulling her back into the unsettling reality of the situation.

On the other end of the line is Mrs. Greene, whose voice trembles with fear as she tells Patricia that Destiny Taylor, a young girl who had been in contact with James Harris, has been taken by social services. The doctor had discovered a suspicious mark on Destiny's leg, a mark that mirrors the one Patricia had seen on the children James had interacted with. Patricia is frantic, knowing that if she doesn't act quickly, the situation could spiral even further out of control. She tells Mrs. Greene that she will call the police officers from the previous night and have them speak with Destiny's doctor to straighten things out. But even as Patricia tries to remain calm, she can feel the weight of the situation bearing down on her—she made a promise to protect the children, and she cannot let this go.

She dials Carter's office, hoping to get some answers, but he is preoccupied with his own work, barely listening to her as she explains the urgency of the situation. His focus on his professional career, especially with the department head position just out of reach, becomes clear as he dismisses Patricia's concerns. He refuses to get involved, his tone cold and dismissive as he tries to justify his inaction. Patricia's frustration builds, but she does her best to contain it, focusing on the one thing she can control—her own actions. She tries to convince Carter to make the necessary calls, but he remains steadfast in his reluctance. Patricia realizes she is on her own in this battle, and she can't wait any longer.

As they sit down for dinner, Blue brings up a disturbing topic, mentioning Himmler and the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. Carter, trying to keep the conversation light, dismisses Blue's comments, but Patricia cannot focus on anything except the pressing issue of Destiny Taylor's disappearance and the danger James Harris poses. When Patricia brings up the doctor who treated Destiny, Carter quickly diverts the conversation, refusing to discuss the matter any further. Patricia, feeling the weight of the situation, presses him again, demanding to know if he has contacted Destiny's doctor. Carter responds with deflection, downplaying the severity of the issue and

focusing on his own career. Patricia is left alone in her frustration, realizing that her husband does not fully understand the danger they are facing.

Just as Patricia's frustration reaches its peak, the doorbell rings, sending a chill down her spine. She feels an overwhelming sense of dread as she approaches the door, fearing that she knows exactly who it is. Standing on the other side is James Harris, smiling as if nothing were wrong. He is standing on her doorstep, and she is forced to confront him, knowing that this moment will be pivotal. She forces herself to maintain composure and welcomes him into her home, hiding her fear behind a forced smile. James Harris, ever the manipulator, speaks to her with an unsettling calmness, remarking on how often he seems to interrupt her family meals. He is testing her, trying to gauge her reaction, and Patricia knows that she must keep her guard up.

As the conversation continues, Harris subtly tries to provoke Patricia, hinting that he knows she is suspicious of him. His words are carefully chosen to make her feel uncomfortable, to make her question herself. But Patricia is resolute—she will not let him get to her. She plays the role of the gracious hostess, offering him dessert, even though every part of her wants to shut the door in his face. She continues to pretend to be the perfect neighbor, even as every fiber of her being screams to expose him for what he truly is. This is a dangerous game they are playing, and Patricia knows that the stakes have never been higher.

Later, when the evening winds down, Patricia finds herself trapped in a conversation with Carter and James Harris, both of whom are trying to downplay the severity of the situation. James Harris is careful with his words, pretending to be innocent and friendly, but Patricia knows better. She recalls the details of the evening, the unsettling way Harris spoke, the hint of something dark lurking beneath his charming exterior. She can't shake the feeling that she's in a race against time, and every moment she spends with him brings her closer to uncovering the truth—or to being consumed by it.