

# Chapter 46

Chapter 46 begins with Leighton waking up early, feeling a dull stomachache that weighs on her. Her family surrounds her—her mom and sisters—but her attention is drawn outside where the absence of her father's truck indicates that he likely stayed at his workplace, a trailer used by Barnes Construction. This realization brings with it a mix of emotions, as her father's absence typically suggests that the operations at the construction site are sluggish, especially during the colder winter months. Though the warmth of home and the familiarity of her family provide some comfort, a heavy sadness settles over Leighton, one that she can't fully understand or articulate. The morning's usual rhythm, though comforting, doesn't entirely erase the ache she feels deep inside.

Her mom, looking exhausted, prepares coffee with a kind of quiet routine that feels distant now. The two of them engage in a game—a game they once played together with joy—mixing idioms and metaphors, an activity that once united them but now feels hollow. Leighton can sense the distance between them, and as they speak, the real issue becomes clear: the looming need for a restraining order against her father, who has become a source of genuine fear and danger. This underlying truth sparks an argument, as Leighton passionately insists that action must be taken for the family's safety. Yet, her mom hesitates, unwilling to move too quickly due to the long-standing marriage that she doesn't want to disrupt. Despite acknowledging the tensions at home, her mom continues to cling to the hope that things might improve, which only frustrates Leighton further.

Feeling the weight of responsibility for her younger sisters, Leighton reaches a breaking point. She knows she can't remain at home in this emotionally charged atmosphere, so she decides to leave, seeking solace with a friend instead. Her decision to distance herself is met with resistance, as her mom continues to cling to the fragile

hope of family unity, even as it slips further away. The tension between them escalates, leaving Leighton feeling trapped and misunderstood. With no other choice, she packs her things, fully aware that she needs to take a step back to preserve her emotional well-being. It is not an easy decision, but one that Leighton knows is necessary for her peace of mind and for the safety of her sisters.

Later, Leighton meets up with her friend Liam, who offers her a place to stay over the weekend. His offer provides a temporary sense of relief, as he understands the turmoil she is going through. As they drive to school, Leighton finds herself opening up to him about the increasingly volatile situation at home. Liam listens with empathy, offering support, but Leighton can't help but feel a sense of frustration. While Liam's understanding is comforting, she knows that he cannot fully comprehend the gravity of the instability she faces on a daily basis. The disconnect between them, though unintentional, highlights the deep-rooted issues that have plagued Leighton's life for so long.

At school, Leighton retreats to the newsroom, hoping to find some distraction and solace in the familiar surroundings. She begins researching protection orders, her mind heavy with doubt and fear as she reads about the various legal steps involved. The more she reads, the more the weight of the situation presses down on her. She grapples with the fear that her father's reputation—his well-known position in the community—might overshadow her own truth. She wonders how she could possibly navigate a system that often protects the guilty and silences those who need to be heard. This realization brings with it a deep sense of vulnerability, as Leighton faces the uncomfortable truth that many women in similar situations have to battle both personal trauma and societal judgment. It is a harsh, overwhelming thought that stirs in her, but it is one that she must confront as she searches for a way to protect herself and her sisters.

The chapter delves deeply into the emotional complexity of family life, particularly when trauma and instability become daily realities. The tensions between Leighton and her mother, the need for protection against a dangerous family member, and the

sense of helplessness that comes with trying to protect younger siblings, all paint a vivid picture of the turmoil Leighton faces. Her desire for safety and peace is overshadowed by the obstacles she faces in achieving it, but her journey of self-discovery and determination is only just beginning. This chapter captures not only the overwhelming burden of living in a chaotic and unsafe environment but also the strength required to confront it head-on, all while trying to maintain a sense of normalcy and care for those she loves most.

