

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 begins with Saint stepping into the wintry quiet of Thurley State Park, her mind troubled by the silhouette of the tall, worn house she's just passed. That house belongs to Dr. Tooms, a man whose presence in her life has always been wrapped in mixed emotions—part caretaker, part mystery. As she walks through the brittle trees, the lingering scent of honeysuckle offers a strange contrast to the creeping unease inside her. Her thoughts drift to Patch, her missing friend, and the unanswered questions circling his disappearance. The stillness of the trail is broken by a sudden animal cry in the distance, sending a jolt of fear through her, but she forces herself forward, determined not to turn back.

She approaches the doctor's property cautiously, surveying the aging porch and faded paint. Despite the bitter cold, sweat clings to her palms as she knocks gently on the door, then harder, with growing urgency. Saint peers into the dark windows, hoping for movement, some sign of life, but all she sees is her reflection staring back, distorted by the wavy glass. Her mind races—if Patch is inside, he could be hurt or worse. Her instincts scream that time may be running out. Though her fear tells her to leave, her loyalty to Patch won't let her walk away without answers.

Circling to the back, Saint shines her flashlight through another window, catching a glimpse of the doctor's cluttered kitchen. The space is silent, filled with pots, medical supplies, and a heavy layer of dust. Something about the absence of a dog—a pet he always had—feels eerily off. Her heart begins to hammer as she jiggles the door handle, but it doesn't budge. She calls out Patch's name, her voice quivering, unsure whether he can hear or whether he's even there. Desperation floods her chest as she presses her ear to the door, listening for any sound beyond the wind.

Suddenly, a scream rips through the darkness. It's sharp and human, and it sends her stumbling backward, nearly dropping the flashlight. Tears prick her eyes, but she doesn't retreat. Instead, she runs back around the house, yelling for Patch, consumed by the thought that he's in danger. Her steps crunch against frozen leaves until a sudden hand grips her shoulder. A cry erupts from her throat before she even registers what's happening. Turning, she's met with the pale, grim face of Dr. Tooms—his hands stained with something dark, his breath shallow in the cold air.

Saint gasps, barely managing to take a step back before sprinting away, her pulse deafening. She doesn't look behind her, not even when his voice calls out, muffled and strange. Whether he's trying to explain or mislead her again, she can't tell. All she knows is that something inside that house isn't right. She runs toward the park's edge, her feet numb and heart pounding, while her thoughts spiral with what she just saw. The red on Dr. Tooms' hands—was it blood? Could Patch still be inside?

As Saint escapes into the shadowed woods, her mind floods with fear, but also a growing sense of purpose. This isn't just about Patch anymore—it's about unraveling a truth others are too afraid to face. Her breath clouds the cold air as she finally stops beneath a pine tree, clenching her fists to fight the shaking. She knows now there is more to Dr. Tooms than anyone has guessed. His calm exterior has cracked, revealing something far more sinister beneath.

The chapter closes in a swirl of snowflakes and secrets, with Saint crouched beneath the trees, steeling herself for what comes next. This chapter builds momentum, blending horror with emotional tension, and hints at the psychological impact of witnessing something incomprehensible. Through Saint's eyes, we feel the rising stakes and the weight of the unknown, setting the stage for a confrontation that feels both inevitable and terrifying.