

Chapter 32: An Investigation of Secrets

On July 27, 2021, in *Chapter 32*, Holly Gibney drives down Ridge Road, her mind filled with the tangled pieces of her ongoing investigation. She pulls into a two-hour parking zone, taking a deep breath before dialing the Harris household, intent on questioning Professor Harris about Cary Dressler. The name has surfaced in connection with a series of auto thefts, and after spotting Dressler in a team photo at Strike Em Out Lanes, Holly is determined to explore any potential connections.

Professor Harris answers the call with a tone of mild indifference, not immediately recognizing the importance of Holly's inquiry. She carefully explains her interest in Dressler, strategically revealing just enough to pique his curiosity while keeping her true intentions hidden. Although initially dismissive, Harris eventually agrees to meet with her, suggesting a brief conversation at his home, though his tone betrays little enthusiasm for the discussion.

As Holly finalizes her plan to visit, Harris relays the conversation to his wife, Emily, who remains confined to bed due to severe sciatica. The couple shares a moment of contemplation, questioning whether it is merely coincidence that Holly has now inquired about two people within their immediate circle. Emily, always more cautious, senses the potential for danger, while Harris, despite his growing forgetfulness, reassures her that he can handle the conversation without raising suspicion.

Emily, though suffering from physical pain, remains acutely aware of the risks posed by Holly's sudden interest in their affairs. Her husband's mental state has been showing signs of decline, a fact that she has tried to ignore but can no longer deny. As Harris prepares for the meeting, she urges him to be careful with his words, knowing full well that his habit of rambling might reveal more than they can afford to share.

When Holly arrives at the Harris residence, she is greeted by a casually dressed Professor Harris, who carries himself with a relaxed demeanor despite the undercurrents of tension. He leads her into a cluttered study, where stacks of books and papers create an atmosphere of controlled chaos, his mind seemingly preoccupied with anything but the conversation at hand. As they talk, Harris downplays concerns about COVID-19 and insists on continuing his work while they speak, citing Emily's migraine as a reason for keeping their conversation brief.

Unbeknownst to Holly, Emily watches the exchange from the bedroom through a hidden camera, her eyes fixed on the screen with a mix of anxiety and frustration. She knows her husband well enough to recognize when his focus is slipping, and every pause in his speech makes her grip the blanket a little tighter. While she cannot hear every word, she observes his expressions carefully, dreading the possibility that he might let something slip in his absentmindedness.

Holly skillfully steers the conversation toward Dressler, crafting a believable story about his alleged involvement in a car theft ring. Harris listens without much interest, offering only sparse recollections about Dressler's past, describing him as someone who once showed potential but was ultimately lost to bad habits. He does, however, mention something curious—Dressler was known to associate with a group called the "Hot Witches," a name that sends a ripple of intrigue through Holly's mind.

Elsewhere, Barbara sits in deep concentration, flipping through pages of her brother Jerome's manuscript, absorbing his latest literary efforts. Her focus shifts as she comes across information relevant to Holly's investigation, realizing that a specific location she had previously overlooked might hold more significance than she initially thought. She marks the area on a map, planning to revisit the details later, but her thoughts are interrupted by a call about a hospitalized friend, reminding her of the way life's urgent realities often collide with personal ambitions.

As the meeting between Holly and Harris comes to a close, she finds herself walking away with more questions than answers. Harris's recollections offer little in terms of direct leads, but the mention of the "Hot Witches" lingers in her mind, suggesting an avenue worth exploring. Though she senses that Harris is holding something back, it is Emily's unseen vigilance that truly unsettles her, leaving her with the feeling that she is treading dangerously close to something much bigger than a simple case of auto theft.

Driving away, Holly processes the day's events, weighing the frustration of yet another uncertain lead against the possibility that she is slowly unraveling a larger truth. The people she encounters in her search all seem to be connected in ways that feel too deliberate to be coincidence, each interaction adding another layer of complexity to her case. Though the answers remain elusive, one thing is clear—she is inching closer to something significant, and those involved are beginning to take notice.