

Chapter 6

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

CHAPTER 6

Friends and relatives had dropped by the house all Friday and brought Patricia six bunches of flowers, two copies of Southern Living and one copy of Redbook, three casseroles (corn, taco, spinach), a pound of coffee, a bottle of wine, and two pies (Boston cream, peach). She decided that regifting a casserole was appropriate, given the situation, so she took out the taco one to thaw. Carter had gone to the hospital early even though it was the weekend. Patricia found Mrs. Greene and Miss Mary sitting on the back patio. The morning felt soft and warm, and Mrs. Greene leafed through Family Circle magazine while Miss Mary stared at the bird feeder, which was, as usual, crawling with squirrels.

"Are you enjoying the sunshine, Miss Mary?" Patricia asked.

Miss Mary turned her watery eyes toward Patricia and scowled.

"Hoyt Pickens came by last night," she said.

"Ear's looking better," Mrs. Greene said.

"Thank you," Patricia said.

Ragtag, lying at Miss Mary's feet, perked up as a fat black marsh rat streaked out of the bushes and dashed across the grass, making

Patricia jump and sending three squirrels fleeing in terror. It dashed around the edge of the fence separating their property from the Langs next door and was gone as fast as it had appeared. Ragtag put his head down again.

"You ought to put out poison," Mrs. Greene said.

Patricia made a mental note to call the bug man and see if they had rat poison.

"I'm just going down the street to drop off a casserole," Patricia said.

"We're about to have some lunch," Mrs. Greene said. "What are you thinking about for lunch, Miss Mary?"

"Hoyt," Miss Mary said. "What was his name, that Hoyt?"

Patricia wrote a quick note (So sorry for your loss, The Campbells) and taped it to the tin foil over the taco casserole, then walked down the warming streets to Ann Savage's cottage, the freezing cold casserole held in front of her.

It was turning into a hot day so she had a little bit of a shine on her by the time she stepped off the road onto Mrs. Savage's dirt yard. The nephew must be home because his white van sat on the grass, underneath the shade. It looked out of place in the Old Village because, as Maryellen had pointed out, it seemed like the kind of thing a child snatcher would drive.

Patricia walked up the wooden steps to the front porch and rattled her knuckles against the screen door. After a minute she knocked again and heard nothing but the hollow echo of her knock inside the house and cicadas screaming from the drainage pond that separated Mrs. Savage's yard from the Johnsons next door.

Patricia knocked again and waited, looking across the street at where developers had torn down the Shortridges' house, which used to have the most beautiful slate roof. In its place, someone from out

of town was building an ostentatious miniature mansion. More and more of these eyesores were popping up all over the Old Village, big heavy things that sprawled from property line to property line and didn't leave any room for a yard.

Patricia wanted to leave the casserole, but she hadn't come all this way not to speak to the nephew. She decided to try the front door. She'd just leave it on the kitchen counter with a note, she told herself. She opened the screen door and turned the doorknob. It stuck for a moment, then swung open.

"Yoo-hoo?" Patricia called into the dim interior.

No one answered. Patricia stepped inside. All the blinds were drawn. The air felt hot and dusty.

"Hello?" Patricia said. "It's Patricia Campbell from Pierates Cruze?"

No answer. She'd never been inside Ann Savage's house before.

Heavy old furniture crowded the front room. Liquor store boxes and paper bags of junk mail covered the floor. Circulars, catalogs, and old rolled-up copies of the Moultrie News spilled from the seats of every chair. Four dusty old Samsonite suitcases were lined up against the wall. Built-in shelves around the front door were crowded with waterlogged romance novels. It smelled like the Goodwill store.

A doorway on her left led into a dark kitchen, and a doorway on her right led to the back of the house. A ceiling fan spun lethargically overhead. Patricia looked down the hallway. There was a half-open door at the far end leading to what she assumed was the bedroom. From it, she heard the groaning of a window-unit air conditioner. Surely the nephew wouldn't have gone out and left his air conditioner on.

Holding her breath, Patricia walked carefully down the hall and pushed the bedroom door all the way open.

“Knock knock?” she said.

The man lying on the bed was dead.

He lay on top of the quilt, still in his work boots. He wore blue jeans and a white button-up shirt. His hands were at his sides. He was huge, well over six feet, and his feet hung off the end. But despite his size, he looked starved. The flesh clung tight to his bones. The sallow skin of his face looked drawn and finely wrinkled, his blond hair looked brittle and thin.

“Excuse me?” Patricia asked, her voice a shaky rasp.

She forced herself to step all the way into the room, put the casserole dish on the end of the bed, and took his wrist. His skin felt cool. He had no pulse.

Patricia examined his face closely. He had thin lips, a wide mouth, and high cheekbones. His looks lay somewhere between handsome and pretty. She shook his shoulder, just in case.

“Sir?” she croaked. “Sir?”

His body barely moved beneath her hand. She held the back of her forefinger under his nostrils: nothing. Her nursing instincts took over.

She used one hand to pull his chin down, and the other to pull his upper lip back. She felt inside his mouth with one finger. His tongue felt dry. Nothing obstructed his airway. Patricia leaned over his face and realized, with a tickling in the veins on the inside of her elbows, this was the closest she’d been to a man who wasn’t her husband in nineteen years. Then her dry lips pressed against his chapped ones and formed a seal. She pinched his nose shut and blew three strong breaths into his windpipe. Then she performed three strong chest compressions.

Nothing. She leaned down for a second attempt, made the seal with their lips, and blew into his mouth, once, twice, then her trachea

vibrated backward as air blasted down her throat. She reared back coughing, the man bolted upright, his forehead smacking into the side of Patricia's skull with a hollow knock, and Patricia staggered backward into the wall, knocking all the breath out of her lungs. Her legs went out from under her, and she slid to the floor, landing hard on her butt, as the man leapt to his feet, wild-eyed, sending the casserole dish clattering to the floor.

"What the fuck!" he shouted.

He looked wildly around the room and found Patricia on the floor at his feet. Chest heaving, mouth hanging open, he squinted at her in the dimness.

"How'd you get in?" he shouted. "Who are you?"

Patricia managed to get her breathing under control enough to squeak, "Patricia Campbell from Pierates Cruze."

"What?" he barked.

"I thought you were dead," she said.

"What?" he barked again.

"I performed CPR," she said. "You weren't breathing."

"What?" he barked one more time.

"I'm your neighbor?" Patricia cowered. "From Pierates Cruze?"

He looked out the hall door. He looked back at his bed. He looked down at her.

"Fuck," he said again, and his shoulders slumped.

"I brought you a casserole," Patricia said, pointing at the upside-down casserole dish.

The man's chest heaved slower.

"You came here to bring me a casserole?" he asked.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Patricia said. "I'm...your great-aunt was found in my yard? And things got a little bit physical? Maybe you've seen my dog? He's a cocker spaniel mix, he, well...maybe it's

better you haven't? And...? Well, I so hope that nothing happened at our house to make your aunt worse."

"You brought me a casserole because my aunt died," he said, as if explaining it to himself.

"You didn't come to the door," she said. "But I saw your car outside so I stuck my head in."

"And down the hall," he said. "And into my bedroom."

She felt like a fool.

"No one here thinks twice about that," she explained. "It's the Old Village. You weren't breathing."

He opened his eyes wide and closed them tightly a few times, swaying slightly.

"I am very, very tired," he said.

Patricia realized he wasn't going to help her to her feet, so she pushed herself up off the floor.

"Let me clean this up," she said, reaching for the casserole dish. "I feel so stupid."

"No," he said. "You have to leave." He wavered, his head jerking in little shakes and nods.

"It'll only take a minute," she said.