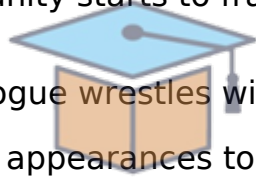


Chapter 4

Chapter 4 begins with Patricia leaving Grace's home after a spirited book club discussion, her thoughts still echoing with talk of rock legends and true crime cases. The keyword, *Chapter 4*, sets the stage for the startling contrast between cozy suburbia and the chaos that soon unfolds. As Patricia drives home under the heavy Southern night, her mind drifts between the thrill of conversation and the weight of domestic duty. Though tired, she looks forward to the quiet ritual of settling in—perhaps checking on Miss Mary, maybe dealing with leftover dishes or tomorrow's lunches. The craving for something extraordinary lingers—a need to feel alive beyond routine—but she never expected that longing to be met in the form of horror. Approaching her backyard, she notices trash scattered and an animal-like figure hunched over something dark. Confusion becomes dread as she realizes it's not garbage, but a neighbor—Mrs. Savage—eating a dead raccoon with primal intent. Disbelief doesn't shield Patricia from what happens next. As she steps closer, Mrs. Savage turns on her with shocking strength, biting and clawing, driven by a hunger that's clearly not rational. The woman who once exchanged small talk over azaleas now becomes an attacker, sinking her teeth into Patricia's ear and tearing away a part of her both physically and symbolically. The pain is excruciating, but it's the betrayal of safety that stings even more. Carter arrives just in time, wresting Mrs. Savage away from his wife, but not before the damage is done. Blood, screams, and confusion turn their neatly trimmed backyard into a site of trauma. Emergency responders arrive, and Patricia is treated, but nothing feels normal anymore. She had wished for something more exciting than carpool and casseroles. What she got was a violent unraveling of everything she trusted about her world.

Back inside, wrapped in gauze and medicated, Patricia tries to understand what just happened. The neighborhood, once a bubble of social niceties and small scandals, now

feels vulnerable and unsafe. Her thoughts flicker to Mrs. Savage—not as a monster, but as someone who must have been suffering long before anyone noticed. No one saw the warning signs. It raises a question that many women in caregiving or community roles face: how often do we overlook quiet deterioration in favor of comfort and convenience? It's easier to believe that everyone is okay than to confront discomfiting truths. In that moment, Patricia's world begins to shift, not just physically from injury, but emotionally—her view of neighbors, normalcy, and her own place in the community starts to fracture.



Her internal monologue wrestles with guilt and confusion. Had she been too passive, too concerned with appearances to see the rot beneath the surface? The reality of what happened now lives beneath her skin—literally marked by a missing earlobe. While the physical wound might heal, something deeper has opened: an awareness that danger doesn't always come from dark alleys—it can come from across the street, wearing a familiar face. Patricia's yearning for adventure was never about violence, but about meaning, about feeling seen and vital. Now, excitement has arrived in the most grotesque way, and she is left to pick up the pieces while maintaining the appearance of calm for her children, husband, and community.

This shift in Patricia's perspective is a reflection of what psychologists describe as a "shattered assumptive world"—the point where trauma forces someone to re-evaluate long-held beliefs about safety, trust, and identity. For suburban women often caught between invisible labor and social obligation, such moments can serve as emotional ruptures, revealing cracks beneath polished surfaces. Patricia, once just a mother and wife seeking stimulation, now becomes a central figure in a mystery unfolding in real time. And though she won't admit it aloud, part of her is wide awake for the first time in years—not because she wants to be, but because she has to be.