

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens with Patricia waking to a new reality—her left ear partially gone, her face swollen, and a bandage wrapping her head tightly like a memory she couldn't avoid. The keyword, *Chapter 5*, captures the beginning of physical and emotional adjustment. In the mirror, she examines what's missing, overwhelmed by the loss not just of skin but of something symbolic: part of her identity. Yet she doesn't allow herself to linger in grief. Instead, she moves with purpose, driven by the voice that reminds her she must appear strong for her children. Over breakfast, she unwraps the bandage and shows them the wound, turning a moment of vulnerability into one of resilience. Their reactions are surprisingly tender, and for a moment, there's a closeness she hasn't felt in a while. Korey stands beside her, Blue offers morbid humor, and Patricia, in her pain, feels a sliver of connection threading through the room.

Later, she reassures Blue that Miss Mary's violent act wasn't intentional—just the result of a failing mind. Her words try to build trust, promising safety even as she questions it herself. Upstairs, Carter prepares for a political lunch with a hospital administrator, eyeing a promotion he'd once claimed not to want. Patricia watches his ambition flicker to life, just as she removes her bandage and hears him affirm her healing with a kiss that feels genuine. These moments of care are fleeting, but they matter. The day unfolds with routine—releasing the dog, tending to Miss Mary, greeting Mrs. Greene—all tethered to Patricia's desire to keep moving forward despite the wound, the noise, and the unanswered questions. Her daily life, once unremarkable, now crackles with subtle dread. Even letting the dog outside now feels like a decision with consequence.

In the kitchen, Patricia recalls Miss Mary's past—how she once read dreams and weather from coffee grounds, taught in a one-room schoolhouse, and brewed teas that

neighbors swore worked better than pills. Her mind, now dulled by age and illness, once brimmed with knowledge and grit. That memory, fragile and glorious, lingers as Patricia nurses her pain and prepares to face a community that can't stop talking. By 9:02 a.m., the phone begins ringing. First it's Grace, delivering the day's update on Ann Savage's condition. Then come the calls from neighbors—women passing information, warnings, and half-facts quicker than any media outlet. One reports a surge in home alarm installations. Another gossips about the nephew's refusal to sell the house. Patricia tries to stay gracious, but the constant chatter frays her nerves.

News finally arrives: Ann Savage has passed. Grace shares the details in a hushed voice—dehydration, infected wounds, suspected drug use. Patricia feels the weight of it. Not just the death, but everything it represents. There won't be a funeral. There's no obituary. Her life ended quietly, without closure. Patricia is disturbed by the idea of someone being erased so completely. She considers bringing food to the nephew, but Grace discourages it. The idea of gifting a meal to the family of a woman who bit off part of her ear sounds absurd—but not to Patricia. She sees something deeper in the gesture. Maybe an attempt at grace, or maybe a way to quiet her own guilt.

When Maryellen calls and confirms that Ann's remains were cremated without ceremony, Patricia feels hollowed out. The lack of mourning disturbs her. It becomes clear that the nephew wanted everything handled quickly and without sentiment. But this ending gnaws at Patricia's conscience—not because she seeks forgiveness, but because she sees in Ann Savage a future reflection of herself. Aging, fading, being passed from person to person like a burden. It's a common fear among caregivers, especially women who quietly shoulder the weight of others' needs until they become invisible. According to AARP studies, caregiving women often experience "anticipatory grief"—a sense of pre-loss for their own autonomy and future.

Patricia's unease isn't just about what happened to Ann—it's about what might happen to her. The chapter closes on this introspection, making *Chapter 5* not just about physical recovery, but about a woman confronting the echoes of her own future. Would her children care for her? Would she end up forgotten like the woman across the

street? In a society that often sidelines the elderly, Patricia's concerns are far from irrational—they're universal, deeply human, and heartbreakingly real.

