

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins with Patricia surrounded by kindness—flowers, food, and familiar faces stopping by to offer comfort in the aftermath of her injury. The keyword, Chapter 6, captures this intersection of community support and quiet guilt. Although her neighbors mean well, Patricia feels a nagging obligation to pass the kindness forward. She decides to re-gift one of the casseroles, choosing the taco dish to deliver to Ann Savage's nephew as a gesture of sympathy. Outside, the day warms quickly, and the air already carries the weight of summer. Her husband Carter has left early for the hospital, leaving her to navigate the morning with Miss Mary and Mrs. Greene, both settled on the back patio. A black marsh rat bolts across the yard, startling everyone and drawing Patricia's attention to the creeping discomforts in her home—rats, heat, and unpredictable behavior.

As Patricia prepares to walk the casserole over to Mrs. Savage's cottage, the street feels both familiar and alien. Development has started to reshape the neighborhood, replacing modest homes with towering mansions that crowd the property lines. The change unsettles her, but she refocuses on the errand. Upon reaching the house, she knocks several times without answer. The nephew's white van is parked nearby, suggesting he's home, but silence fills the air. Patricia peers around and finally opens the door, telling herself she'll simply drop the casserole on the kitchen counter. The interior is dim, cluttered, and stale. Her eyes adjust slowly to the mess—old furniture, magazines, dusty books, and the smell of disuse. She follows the sound of a running air conditioner to a back room and hesitantly steps inside.

What she sees stops her cold. The nephew lies motionless on the bed, fully dressed, pale and still. Patricia's nursing instincts engage, and she approaches, checking for breath, pulse, and obstruction. Finding none, she performs CPR, her body reacting automatically even as her mind recoils in disbelief. Just as she leans in for another

breath, the man jolts awake violently, slamming into her and sending her to the floor. Confusion turns to panic as he shouts, demanding to know who she is and how she got in. Breathless, Patricia tries to explain herself—she thought he was dead. She only wanted to offer condolences and a casserole. The tension finally breaks when he realizes she acted out of concern, not invasion.

Still dazed, the man—James Harris—processes her words slowly. He questions her entry, her intentions, and her assumptions. Patricia scrambles to explain the Southern custom of neighbors walking in, the urgency she felt seeing no signs of life, and the casserole she now points to as a peace offering. James, exhausted and confused, doesn't know whether to laugh or be angry. Patricia, embarrassed, attempts to clean up the mess but is told to leave. There's no rage in his voice, just fatigue. She stands awkwardly, still offering help, but he declines. Patricia exits the room—shaken, humiliated, and unsure if she's crossed a boundary or saved a life.

This chapter delicately blends Southern hospitality with the potential dangers of assumption. In tight-knit communities like the Old Village, it's not uncommon for neighbors to check in unannounced. However, modern boundaries—especially between men and women who don't know each other—can blur that familiarity. According to Pew Research, nearly 60% of Americans say they don't know most of their neighbors well, suggesting that Patricia's gesture, while rooted in tradition, reflects a fading norm. Her instincts, sharpened by past nursing experience, guide her actions—but her longing for connection, purpose, and perhaps redemption adds emotional weight. In helping, she oversteps. Yet, she also glimpses someone else who seems lost, a mirror to her own unraveling.