

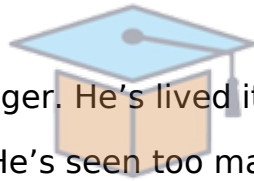
Chapter 16: The Visit

Chapter 16: The Visit begins in a sterile hospital room in Reading, where Chona remains unconscious, her fragile state watched over by those closest to her. Though she cannot speak, her presence anchors Addie and Moshe, who trade brief but meaningful observations each morning. Addie insists she sees movement, slight signs of awareness, though doctors warn otherwise. Moshe, weary from his nighttime work at the theater and drained by grief, never questions her hope. His eyes remain locked on Chona's face, as if willing her to open her eyes. The staff pass silently, some cold, others indifferent, their stares betraying discomfort with the company Chona keeps—Black friends sitting vigil beside a white Jewish woman.

Whispers and sharp glances echo through the corridor, especially when Addie and Nate step outside the room. Their presence offends some nurses, not for anything said, but simply because they exist in a space considered off-limits to them. The hospital, like the town it serves, draws lines that those of color are expected not to cross. But Addie crosses them anyway. She walks tall beside Moshe, wiping Chona's brow, challenging the unspoken rules that try to keep their compassion confined. These quiet acts of defiance aren't dramatic, but they are steady and clear. In a place of judgment, Addie's loyalty is louder than the staff's prejudice.

As Moshe leans beside Chona each morning, he listens to Addie speak in soft tones about movements she's noticed—fluttering fingers, a twitch of the eye. Whether imagined or not, her belief is unwavering. Doctors chalk it up to reflexes, dismissing her claims as false hope. But Addie clings to the signs, believing Chona hears them. With so much pain around them, hope is the only comfort they can afford. Nate visits too, often quiet, watching from the side, adding his strength to the room. Together, the three maintain a sacred rhythm—holding vigil, exchanging news, and shielding Chona from the hospital's cold disinterest.

The backstory adds weight to their pain. Chona, a woman admired for her fierce advocacy and community efforts, is now the subject of whispered scandal. It's rumored Dr. Roberts, a respected figure in Pottstown, was involved in an inappropriate incident at her store. Some believe it caused the episode that led to her coma, while others dismiss it or protect him. Addie, however, knows too much to stay quiet. Her voice, low but resolute, reveals frustration at a town that protects its own and ignores the rest. Racism and classism intertwine in Pottstown, where truth is often a casualty to appearances.



Nate echoes her anger. He's lived it for too long—watching how justice depends on the color of your skin. He's seen too many people like Chona, who tried to bridge divides, punished for standing too close to the fire. In Pottstown, silence keeps the powerful safe, and lies grow thick in the spaces where no one dares to look. Addie and Nate want better, not just for Chona but for everyone like her—those who speak out, who stand between communities, and who pay a quiet price. Even now, as Chona lies motionless, they believe her spirit resists the injustice that put her there.

Outside the hospital walls, the world continues with its usual indifference. But inside, the space around Chona feels like sacred ground. Addie keeps her voice soft, humming songs Chona once sang, placing cool towels on her forehead, offering stories instead of silence. She talks about Chicken Hill, their shared past, and how Chona never backed away from a fight that mattered. Nate brings updates from the outside world, bits of news, slivers of life. Each visit is an act of love, one not recognized by the institution but undeniably powerful. Their presence is more than duty—it's rebellion against everything that tried to keep them apart.

The chapter closes not with resolution but quiet resolve. Addie and Nate share a glance down the long hospital corridor, their faces weary but firm. They know the road ahead will be harder still. Racism, injustice, grief—these things don't leave when a patient opens her eyes or takes her last breath. But neither do loyalty and courage. In that small room, with fluorescent lights buzzing and machines beeping, the past and future collide in silence. Chona's life, and all she stood for, remains wrapped in the

arms of friends who refuse to let her go quietly.

