

Chapter 25: A Poet's Journey

On May 19, 2021, *Chapter 25* unfolds as Barbara rushes through the quiet, sterile hallways of Kiner Memorial's oncology department, her mind racing with anxiety. The familiar hum of medical machines and the faint scent of antiseptic fill the air, creating an atmosphere of both order and unease. Despite the hospital's attempt at warmth with soft lighting and cushioned seats, the tension of those waiting—some anxiously checking their phones, others staring into space—presses down on her. Marie's unexpected call had been brief but urgent, and Barbara had braced herself for something serious, though she clung to the hope that this was just another routine check-up.

Spotting Marie in the waiting area, Barbara quickens her pace, her stomach twisting at the expression on her friend's face. Without preamble, Marie explains that Olivia, their mutual friend and mentor, has been living with cancer for years—something Barbara had never known. While the disease is slow-moving, it is still cancer, and the revelation feels like a blow, leaving Barbara momentarily speechless. Olivia, never one to wallow in pity, has chosen to keep her condition largely private, dismissing it with her usual dry humor, calling it “ass-cancer” as if it were no more than an irritating inconvenience.

Dr. Brown, Olivia's trusted oncologist, has been closely monitoring the progression of her illness, ensuring that while malignant, it remains at a pace that allows her to live as normally as possible. Olivia, true to form, refuses to let her health dictate her life, making her doctor's visits just another errand rather than a defining factor of her existence. Barbara, still grappling with the weight of this new reality, finds herself shifting focus, momentarily setting aside her academic concerns to take in the gravity of Olivia's condition.

Before Barbara can process everything, Olivia reaches into her bag and hands her an envelope, her expression unreadable. Confused, Barbara hesitates before carefully tearing it open, eyes scanning the contents until they land on the words that change everything—she has been shortlisted for the prestigious Penley Poetry Prize. A wave of disbelief washes over her as she rereads the letter, her breath catching at the realization that her work, her voice, has been recognized on such a significant scale.

For a fleeting moment, the heavy atmosphere of the hospital lifts, replaced by an unexpected but much-needed moment of joy. Olivia, watching Barbara's stunned expression, allows a small, satisfied smile to form, proud of her mentee's accomplishment. The contrast between celebration and the weight of reality lingers in the air, making Barbara feel as though life is playing a cruel yet poetic trick—giving her something wonderful in the midst of something tragic.

The ride home along Ridge Road is filled with unspoken emotions, Olivia's voice cutting through the silence as she sings along to songs from her past. Barbara listens, struck by how frail Olivia appears yet how vibrant she remains in spirit, her presence refusing to be overshadowed by illness. The car moves steadily down the winding road, but Barbara's thoughts are anything but still, tumbling between the excitement of her achievement and the realization that time is slipping away for someone she deeply admires.

Back at home, Olivia maintains her characteristic blend of wisdom and humor, refusing to let the weight of her condition steal the moment. Standing in the foyer, she tells Barbara to release the emotions she has been bottling up, urging her to scream. At first, Barbara hesitates, unsure if she can find the voice for such an act, but as Olivia throws her arms up in an exaggerated demonstration, Barbara laughs, the tension between them finally breaking.

The moment, absurd yet profound, encapsulates the essence of their relationship—one built on trust, understanding, and an unspoken agreement to embrace life despite its unpredictability. Olivia's strength isn't just in her ability to endure but in her refusal to let hardship steal joy, a lesson Barbara absorbs as she

clutches the letter confirming her poetry's worth. This moment, though seemingly simple, shifts something within her, solidifying not just her aspirations as a poet but her understanding of what it means to truly live.

As the day winds down, Barbara reflects on the paradox of the afternoon—how triumph and sorrow can exist in the same breath, how victories can be tinged with grief. Olivia, despite her illness, remains a guiding light, proving that even when faced with the inevitable, life must be celebrated. As she watches the golden evening sun cast long shadows through the window, Barbara knows that this day will stay with her, shaping both the poet and the person she is meant to become.