

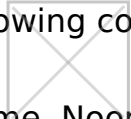
Chapter 5

Chapter 5: In this chapter, Parvana sets out to the marketplace without her father by her side, feeling a sense of unease with every step she takes. The absence of her father weighs heavily on her, and the oppressive restrictions placed by the Taliban only make the situation more daunting. Women are forbidden from entering shops or engaging freely in public life, leaving Parvana with the task of navigating the marketplace while disguised as a boy. She makes the decision to buy bread from the baker, using her chador to conceal her identity as she waits for her order. The hunger she feels is nearly unbearable, and she finds herself longing to consume an entire loaf, her body craving the nourishment it desperately needs. This fleeting moment of peace in the marketplace is overshadowed by the looming sense of danger that follows her every move.

As Parvana waits for her bread, she is suddenly confronted by a Talib soldier, who aggressively challenges her presence and attire. His harsh questioning sends a wave of fear through Parvana, as he demands to know who her male guardians are and threatens her with punishment. Parvana, desperate to protect herself, shouts back at him before fleeing, her heart racing as she tries to escape his wrath. The soldier raises his stick in a menacing gesture, but Parvana runs as fast as she can, knocking over vegetables and creating a chaotic scene as she sprints through the marketplace. Despite her fear, the warmth of the bread in her hands is a small comfort, grounding her in the midst of the terrifying encounter. Her only focus is reaching home safely, her pulse pounding as she weaves through the crowd, determined to outrun the danger that shadows her every move.

In her haste, Parvana accidentally bumps into Mrs. Weera, a familiar face who immediately recognizes her. Mrs. Weera is concerned by Parvana's hurried and anxious demeanor, and she gently encourages her to calm down. As the two walk

together, Mrs. Weera suggests visiting Parvana's home, as it has been a long time since she had a chance to speak with her mother. Parvana reluctantly agrees, feeling a mix of relief and anxiety at the thought of bringing someone into their home. She leads the way, her mind clouded with worry about her mother's health and the state of their household, unsure of how the visit will unfold. The tension in the air is palpable, yet Mrs. Weera's steady presence offers a sense of reassurance as Parvana tries to push aside her own growing concerns about their future.



Upon arriving home, Nooria notices the bread immediately, a brief moment of normalcy in an otherwise tense situation. Mrs. Weera introduces herself to Nooria, and the younger sister quickly relaxes, grateful for the presence of an adult who can help shoulder some of the family's burdens. Mrs. Weera wastes no time in stepping in, taking charge as she learns of the family's struggles, including their mother's illness and the lack of resources they are constantly battling. She listens intently as Nooria and Parvana describe their difficulties, offering words of comfort and support as the family struggles to stay afloat. Despite the grim reality of their situation, Mrs. Weera's energetic disposition and practical attitude provide a glimmer of hope, showing them that they don't have to face their challenges alone. Her resolve to help Parvana's family is unwavering, and her ability to take control of the situation adds a sense of stability in an otherwise unstable environment.

As the day wears on, Parvana continues to take on her responsibilities, even though exhaustion is beginning to take its toll on her. She goes outside to fetch water, her body aching with every step, but she pushes through, knowing that it is necessary to care for her family. However, when she tries to drink some of the untreated water she has collected, Nooria scolds her for not boiling it first, reminding her of the dangers of drinking such water in their harsh reality. The tension in the house is palpable as Parvana and Nooria try to keep the younger children quiet while the family deals with the emotional and physical strain of their situation. As the chapter closes, there is a sense of tentative hope as Mrs. Weera stays the night with them, suggesting that they might need to come up with new strategies to cope with their ongoing struggles. While the future remains uncertain, the support of Mrs. Weera provides a small but important

sense of stability for Parvana and her family, who continue to endure in a world fraught with hardship and danger. Despite the overwhelming challenges, there is a glimmer of possibility that they might find a way to navigate their way through the turmoil that surrounds them.

