

Chapter 142

Chapter 142 begins with Misty and Patch arriving at a quiet hillside just outside Monta Clare, the town glowing softly in the distance beneath the shadow of the mountains. They had stopped earlier at Green's to buy a bottle of wine, and now they sat on a blanket in the cooling grass, sharing sips while watching the last rays of light stretch across the sky. Misty's voice, usually confident, wavered as she asked Patch if what they once had could still be considered love. There was a pause before he answered, one that carried the weight of everything they had endured. In his silence, she searched his face, hoping for something solid to hold on to. The breeze carried the scent of wildflowers and distant pine. Misty huddled closer, and he instinctively wrapped his arm around her, not just for warmth but as a wordless reassurance that something still remained between them.

As dusk deepened, Misty asked about the years they had been apart, prompting Patch to share a story he rarely spoke aloud. He described how, after everything fell apart, he ended up behind bars, serving twelve long years for a robbery gone wrong. He spoke about the moment shots rang out, the cold floor of the bank, and the metallic taste of fear in his mouth. The memory was sharp, but not as sharp as the despair that followed. Prison, he said, was not just steel bars and locked doors—it was time stretched thin, a place where every hour felt like a punishment. Misty listened closely as he described nights in solitary, days in the prison laundry inhaling steam and bleach, and a mind numbed by routine. There were moments of relief—books mostly—that transported him elsewhere. He reread Grace's favorite novels, clinging to their characters like lifelines.

Patch revealed how deeply Grace's absence had cut into him, even more than the confinement itself. The first two years were the hardest, he explained. Not because of the prison itself, but because every moment was haunted by the memory of Grace and the life they could have lived. He found solace in reading classics—*Wuthering Heights*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, even poetry—which gave him brief escapes from the gray walls that surrounded him. He imagined Grace laughing, imagined Misty smiling, and imagined Saint growing up without him. These mental images didn't just torture him—they motivated him to hold on. He confessed that there were days when he felt close to giving up, but something always kept him going. Sometimes, it was the smell of turpentine on an old bookbinding, reminding him of his studio. Sometimes, it was the way a line of prose mirrored his grief.

Misty's question—"Did you ever paint again?"—hung in the air. He looked away and replied that he hadn't picked up a brush in years. The desire had dried up, along with any belief that he could create something meaningful after so much had been lost. Misty reached for his hand and gently suggested they visit Thurley State Park, a place woven deeply into their shared history. The mention of it pulled at something inside Patch, something long buried. He remembered the way the trees arched over the trails, the soft dirt paths they once walked with Grace, and the rustling leaves that whispered memories when the wind passed through. Even though he knew no amount of walking would bring closure, the idea of returning there with Misty stirred something unfamiliar: hope.

Their shared silence turned into a kind of understanding. They both carried guilt, sorrow, and questions about what their lives could have been. Yet, here they were—on a hillside under a fading sky, speaking truths they had long hidden. Misty leaned her head on his shoulder, and for a moment, neither needed to say more. The mountain watched over them like an old friend, patient and still. The town below flickered to life with scattered porch lights and distant traffic, but their world was temporarily paused, preserved in the quiet of dusk. Though Patch remained uncertain about the future, this moment with Misty reminded him that healing didn't always come with answers—it sometimes came simply from being seen.