

Chapter 153

Chapter 153 begins with Patch and Sammy seated on a narrow balcony, their view cast over the horizon where dark clouds gather, signaling the arrival of a fierce storm forecasted to sweep across the state. They sit quietly at first, taking in the eerie stillness before the wind begins to stir, the distant thunder sounding more like a warning than mere weather. For Patch, that rumble mirrors the inner unrest he's been trying to push away—mainly the undeniable presence of his daughter, Charlotte, in his life. Though the girl is seven now, he still hesitates to fully accept what her existence means for him. Sammy, recognizing his friend's unease, gently opens a dusty bottle of Rhum Clément 1940, the ritual of pouring drinks providing them with a momentary escape and an entry point into a deeper conversation. The liquid amber glows under the dim sky, and with it, their truths start to pour out too.

Patch admits, with a tinge of shame, that he still finds it difficult to say Charlotte's name out loud. It's not that he doesn't care—it's that the weight of caring feels unbearable. He believes that claiming her as his daughter might damage her somehow, that he's too flawed to be a presence in her life. Sammy listens without judgment, then reminds Patch that their bond has always been honest, even when the truth hurt. He challenges Patch to consider what kind of future he's building if he keeps clinging to the past. Sammy points out that while Patch may never feel worthy, the girl doesn't need perfection—she needs consistency, someone who shows up. She needs to know where she belongs. Sammy stresses that being a father isn't about earning the title—it's about accepting it, flaws and all.

Patch shifts uncomfortably in his seat as the first drops of rain hit the railings, their soft taps underscoring the tension between acceptance and resistance. He confesses that what worries him isn't just himself, but the bloodline Charlotte carries. Misty's father, a man with a troubled past and darker tendencies, left behind a shadow Patch fears may have reached their daughter. Sammy responds with unfiltered candor, explaining that genetics don't seal fate—environment, love, and opportunity shape people more than any inherited trait. He speaks from experience, recalling his own absent father and how, even without a role model, he carved out a life grounded in choices and resilience. Patch takes in the words quietly, letting them settle into his doubts, slowly shifting his perspective.

The conversation turns once more toward Grace, a name Patch speaks with aching tenderness. He confesses that part of him still believes Grace needs him more than Charlotte does. It's a notion born from grief and guilt, rooted in the idea that one lost

soul might still be reached if only he could try hard enough. But Sammy challenges that thought, gently suggesting that perhaps Grace's memory has become an anchor, one that prevents Patch from stepping forward into the life unfolding before him. What Charlotte needs isn't the version of Patch that is chasing ghosts. She needs the man who's willing to sit through a storm just to keep her safe and dry.

A moment of clarity strikes Patch as the lightning flashes in the distance. He announces his decision to Sammy—not with drama, but with certainty. He tells him to sell the remaining paintings, no longer concerned with preserving them for some abstract future. The proceeds, he says, should go toward something concrete, something real—a life in Monta Clare. This marks the first time Patch has taken a definitive step toward permanence, toward building something stable not just for himself, but for Charlotte. His choice represents more than just a business transaction; it's a symbolic severing from the chaos of his past and a commitment to be rooted in a place that has already begun to matter to him. Sammy offers no congratulations, only a nod of understanding. That, Patch realizes, is enough.

The rain begins to fall harder now, cascading off the roof in sheets, but neither man moves to go inside. The storm, like Patch's fear, has finally arrived—but he's no longer retreating from it. As they sit side by side, sheltered just enough, Patch allows himself to imagine the future: a house filled with color and warmth, a backyard swing creaking in the breeze, and Charlotte's laughter carrying over the grass. It's not a fantasy anymore. It's a life that might be built, brick by brick, choice by choice. And for the first time in years, Patch feels something solid beneath his feet.