

Chapter 161

Chapter 161 begins on a cool, early morning with Patch answering a phone call at the Meyer household. On the line is Charlotte's teacher, informing him that she hasn't shown up for class. Without hesitating, Patch tells them she's unwell, masking the truth with a practiced calm. He sets out to find her, walking the familiar streets of Monta Clare with quiet determination. As he moves through the neighborhood, Patch sends Sammy to check the roads further uphill, hoping she might be sitting in one of her usual quiet places. His mind wanders to Misty and the weight of responsibility he's taken on. The silence of the town offers no clues, but he keeps walking, his thoughts marked by a mix of frustration and concern.

Eventually, Patch finds Charlotte sitting alone at the edge of the lake, her small hands stripping petals and leaves from a sunflower, letting them fall into the water in a slow, deliberate rhythm. The lake, still and reflective, mirrors her mood—withdrawn, contemplative, unreachable. Patch greets her gently, careful not to startle her, and tries to break the ice by admitting he used to skip school at her age. Charlotte, unamused, tells him she hasn't "cut" class but chose to walk away, framing her decision as one of control, not rebellion. "It's not prison," she says, making it clear that she resents being told what to do, even by someone trying to help. Her tone is cool, but her words carry emotional weight.

As they sit together, Patch attempts to talk about Misty. He wants to know if Charlotte ever resents her mother, sensing there's something unspoken beneath her defiance. Charlotte doesn't lash out but instead speaks with precision. She defends her mother's beauty, adding that Patch was chosen by Misty—a fact she doesn't understand but respects. The conversation takes a more personal turn when Charlotte questions Patch's place in their lives. Patch, confronted with the blunt truth, shares that growing up poor made him hard to love. Charlotte doesn't soften; instead, she echoes his words, almost accusingly, reinforcing the gap between them.

Patch then asks a question that reveals his longing for something deeper: "Do you believe in God?" Charlotte replies without hesitation: "No." It's not said to provoke, but the answer stings. It widens the distance between them, showing not just a generational divide, but a spiritual one. For Patch, who carries grief like a second skin, the idea of belief—of something eternal—is what keeps him grounded. But for Charlotte, it's just another thing she can't bring herself to accept. The emotional landscape of their conversation is rough and unyielding, and Patch finds himself at a loss.

Finally, the chapter crescendos with a painful declaration from Charlotte. She looks at Patch and tells him with unwavering clarity that she will never consider him her father. The words are sharp, unfiltered, and cruel, but Patch doesn't argue. He simply listens. He doesn't cry. He doesn't plead. He just nods, absorbing the impact. His silence is not agreement, but recognition of her truth. He knows he can't force love or trust. As she walks off toward home, Patch lingers behind, keeping enough distance to respect her space, but close enough to protect her if needed.

The moment is deeply symbolic—Patch walking behind, always there, always watching, yet never quite welcome in her world. Their bond, strained and uncertain, continues to evolve through moments of silence more than words. Patch knows he can't replace her mother, and perhaps he never will be a father in her eyes. But his quiet presence speaks to something unspoken: a willingness to stay, to try, and to wait—no matter how long it takes. This chapter ends not with resolution, but with a fragile, lingering tension between love offered and love withheld, between being there and being enough.