

# Chapter 165

Chapter 165 opens with Charlotte arriving at the Mad House, a place that feels both foreign and oddly familiar. She steps out of the car gripping a small suitcase, its white surface marked with delicate blue butterflies—a subtle reflection of her fragility and quiet strength. Norma gives Patch a knowing look, one that doesn't require words. It's a silent exchange that conveys a transfer of guardianship, a shared understanding that Patch must now become something more than a figure from Charlotte's distant past. As she walks through the front door, Charlotte's eyes wander but her feet barely move. She pauses in the hallway, examining the glossy wooden parquet floor with a mix of indifference and quiet judgment. Patch had spent days installing those intricate pieces himself, sanding and varnishing each one, but her expression doesn't reveal approval or displeasure—only distance.

Despite the warm lighting and artistic decor lining the walls, Charlotte keeps her pink coat buttoned all the way up. Her suitcase remains clutched to her chest, a sort of shield against the unfamiliar. Though she studies the leather chesterfield sofa, the layered rugs, and the thick velvet drapes, she refuses to interact with any of it. Patch gestures gently and offers to show her the room prepared just for her, but Charlotte doesn't even glance in his direction. "Nothing here is mine," she mutters, voice low, as if the house were more a museum than a place to call home. He leads her upstairs nonetheless, moving slowly so she can absorb everything at her own pace, even if she won't yet acknowledge the effort.

The bedroom had been crafted with love and precision. The wooden bedframe, carved with roses and leafy vines, had been selected to convey warmth and stability. A soft pink canopy hangs overhead, its gauzy fabric meant to provide Charlotte with a sense of privacy, maybe even protection. Patch had spent hours modifying the room's wooden shutters, crafting louvered slats to give her control over the sunlight pouring

in from the south-facing windows. He worried about how the seasons would affect her comfort—too hot in summer, too cold in winter—so he insulated the walls, adjusted the vents, and repainted the space multiple times until the pink felt exactly right. He didn't just want the room to look good; he wanted it to feel safe.

A reading scone is mounted by the bed, meant for late-night stories or quiet evening reading—if Charlotte ever chooses to open a book. Triple closets line the opposite wall, already half-filled with clothing, most of it selected based on Misty's old suggestions about her daughter's preferences. Atop the dresser sits a small zoo of plush animals: foxes, rabbits, and bears. Charlotte had once been fond of animals, and Patch hoped that detail might still resonate. But Charlotte doesn't linger. After scanning the room without much reaction, she turns and descends the stairs, the silence between them as heavy as ever.

Outside in the yard, the swing catches her attention. It hangs from the same sturdy oak that shaded her mother's childhood. The wooden seat, made from larch, swings slightly in the breeze. Charlotte runs her fingers over it before turning to Patch. "Was this hers?" she asks, and he nods. She sits, slowly, the sunlight dappling her face through thinning branches. Her expression is unreadable, but the tension in her shoulders eases slightly. For a few moments, she simply rocks back and forth, eyes fixed on the distance.

Patch stays nearby but doesn't interrupt. He doesn't want to break whatever fragile connection is beginning to form. Charlotte still hasn't unpacked or taken off her coat. Hours pass before she removes it, and even more time goes by before she takes off her shoes. It's not laziness—it's a subtle form of resistance, a way of asserting control in an environment that feels imposed upon her. Patch understands this and doesn't push. He realizes that trust, for someone like Charlotte, will be earned in increments, not grand gestures.

The chapter lingers in this quiet in-between space. There are no dramatic confessions or emotional outbursts, only small shifts in body language and silence filled with meaning. Patch feels helpless but also hopeful—like watching spring buds form on

branches, knowing they'll bloom when they're ready. Though Charlotte hasn't said much, her presence in the house, on the swing, and finally without her coat, all suggest something beginning to thaw. For now, that has to be enough.