

Chapter 171

Chapter 171 follows a somber, reflective evening in Patch's life as he settles into a small motel with Charlotte. The night air feels thick with memory and unspoken emotion. Before turning in, Patch carefully lays a blanket across the bottom of the door, checking the locks and making sure the windows are secure. It's a quiet but deliberate act of protection—one that speaks to his instinct to shield his daughter from both visible dangers and emotional ghosts. Charlotte is already asleep nearby, unaware of the unease that tightens in her father's chest. When the phone suddenly rings, Patch answers swiftly, ensuring the sound doesn't wake her. The voice on the line belongs to a neighbor from back home, offering a new lead—a possible address for the Carters. But hope dims as Patch learns the address is unlisted, turning the potential lead into another dead end. He hangs up slowly, the weight of the moment heavy in the silence.

As he gazes outside, his mind drifts into a catalog of landscapes once visited. The stars remind him of moments he's tried to preserve—vivid autumns across New Hampshire's Kancamagus Highway, the impossible blue of Crater Lake, and the tranquil stillness found above Skagit Valley's foggy fields. These memories, though beautiful, are no longer comforting. Each image carries the sharp ache of someone who once stood beside him but is now lost to time. Grace's absence lives in every remembered view, and her presence continues to echo in the quiet spaces between these thoughts. The road has brought him through wonder and devastation, and now it brings him to Charlotte. The past and the present exist side by side, neither able to replace the other.

Patch's thoughts shift to Charlotte, asleep in the next bed. He watches her soft breathing and finds comfort in her small presence—an anchor in an otherwise drifting world. Despite everything he's endured, despite the grief and the missteps, she's here.

And that matters more than he can put into words. Still, the uncertainty of the journey ahead gnaws at him. They have no real direction, only fading clues and instinct. His heart is split—half beating for what he still wants to recover, half fighting to hold onto what he now has. The pain of losing Grace has not dulled; it's just been layered beneath this fragile hope for connection with his daughter.

As dawn creeps into the motel room, coloring the walls in pale orange, Patch takes the scrap of paper with the address and tears it in two. He doesn't hesitate. The sound of the paper ripping is soft but symbolic—it's his decision to let go of chasing ghosts and to be present for the person who needs him now. Without saying it aloud, he promises Charlotte that he won't leave. That even if he doesn't have all the answers, he'll stay. He watches her shift under the blanket and wonders if she understands how deeply she has changed him. She doesn't yet realize that her presence has become his lifeline.

But even as he makes this internal vow, a sharp sadness cuts through. He will never stop mourning Grace. That loss has etched itself into his identity. It doesn't matter how far he travels or how many people he tries to save—there's a part of him that will always wonder what might have been if he'd made different choices. In the end, he accepts that the past will remain unfinished. But maybe the future, if built with enough care, can be something close to whole. The chapter closes not with resolution, but with recognition—Patch can't change what was lost, but he can protect what remains.