

Chapter 184

Chapter 184 begins with an unexpected visit from Sammy, who arrives carrying a striking brass and leather-bound case. With a flourish, he unveils its contents to Charlotte—a rare 1912 Boss & Co. shotgun, crafted in London and steeped in legend. The heirloom, according to Sammy, once played a part in a deadly dispute over gambling debts. Charlotte’s reaction is a mix of awe and amusement, her fingers tracing the elegant craftsmanship with fascination. She quips that it might serve as a deterrent to unsuitable suitors or, perhaps ironically, attract more of them due to its flair. Patch, never one to let a moment slip without humor, jokes about putting those suitors in cuffs, which draws laughter from the group. Despite the firearm’s ominous backstory, the scene is lighthearted—marked by warmth and camaraderie, a rare shared moment of ease.

Soon after, the mood shifts as Saint prepares for their trip back to Kansas. The eighty-mile stretch ahead doesn’t deter Charlotte’s chatter, which spills forth with teenage excitement over a party and a boy named Dallas. Patch, already skeptical of the name alone, reserves judgment but makes it clear he doesn’t like the sound of him. Charlotte, in her usual bold spirit, remarks that Dallas’s current romantic interests won’t pan out, hinting that she might be a better match. Her remarks are tinged with humor, especially as she links her confidence to the newly gifted shotgun—joking that it might tip fate in her favor. The conversation blends youthful optimism with a protective undercurrent from the adults, reflecting their growing concerns over Charlotte's independence and choices.

As they drive through the rolling countryside, the landscape gives way to an emotional detour. They stop by Misty’s grave, where Patch quietly steps aside, leaving Charlotte to grieve or reflect in solitude. It's a quiet, powerful pause in the narrative—underscoring how the living continue to carry the weight of those who have

passed. Patch's gesture is one of respect and quiet love, giving his daughter space while privately shouldering his own loss. Moments like this remind readers of how grief can linger in the most ordinary days, woven into drives, conversations, and shared silences. This visit, though brief, reflects how family wounds, particularly ones rooted in absence, continue to shape Charlotte's and Patch's lives.

Later, they arrive at the Culpepper Zoo, a place bursting with life and movement—an intentional contrast to the stillness of the cemetery. Charlotte dives into the experience with contagious energy, marking spots on the map, leading the way, and enthusiastically chatting about the animals. Patch watches her, comforted by her spirit, grateful for the distraction and for the glimpses of joy he rarely allows himself. The zoo becomes more than a destination—it symbolizes a moment of renewal, a pocket of peace in their often turbulent lives. Her lighthearted questions, pointing out facts about reptiles and primates, offer fleeting moments of normalcy. These details about Charlotte—her curiosity, her courage—paint her as a girl still caught between adolescence and adulthood, craving both autonomy and connection.

However, Patch's internal state begins to unravel as they enter the reptile house. The dim lighting, close humidity, and serpentine forms awaken something dark within him. His breathing quickens, palms dampen, and a tingling sense of dread crawls across his chest. It isn't fear of the reptiles—it's the grip of memory, anxiety taking hold in visceral form. He battles to stay present for Charlotte's sake, but his mind betrays him with flashes of Grace and unresolved ghosts. In prisons of trauma, the body remembers long before the mind allows clarity. As his heartbeat pounds in his ears, Patch tries to ground himself, clenching his fists in rhythm with Charlotte's carefree commentary on the snakes behind the glass. The emotional contrast between father and daughter could not be more stark.

Meanwhile, Saint, away from the day's journey, receives a call that pierces her carefully balanced emotional state. It's Charlotte's voice on the other end, calling her on her birthday—a gesture as intimate as it is sudden. The call, though welcome, casts a shadow of unease. It's a reminder that their emotional bonds, while strong, are

tethered to a world filled with fragility and the unknown. The chapter closes not with celebration, but with questions and quiet apprehension, as Saint feels the fragile tension that comes with loving someone too much in a world that rarely guarantees safety. The final line leaves a lasting chill, not from what is said, but from what is yet to come.