

# Chapter 238

Chapter 238 began with Patch feeling emotionally worn and physically drained as he sat motionless on the long-haul bus, his hunger gnawing at him like a slow-burning ember. Each passing minute felt stretched thin, elongated by exhaustion and a mind too full to rest. When the driver pulled over at Rowan Bridge, the scent of warm diesel and night air filled the bus, and a woman boarding briefly caught his attention—her gaze steady and familiar, as though she'd known him from a life already lived.

The thought of getting off surged in his chest, yet he remained seated, anchored by something deeper than fatigue—something close to resolve. As she disappeared down the aisle, the impulse passed, and he sat in silence while the others shuffled off for coffee and cigarettes. Warm air drifted through the open window, brushing his face gently as he stared into the darkness beyond, letting his thoughts drift far from the reality of the hour.

By the time the sky started to pale, Patch was stepping off the bus once again. The early light of morning painted the roadside in pale amber tones, and the world began its quiet stir—birds calling, engines humming faintly, the distant bark of a dog lost in the trees. His small canvas bag, which held the few items he still considered essential, tugged at his shoulder as he exhaled and scanned the horizon ahead.

Montgomery's silhouette loomed in the distance, crowned by the proud dome of the state capitol, a landmark as unmovable as history itself. He remembered reading about the city's past, marked by both civil strife and courage, wondering how it might shape the people who called it home. But today, the city was just a waypoint—a place to pass through quietly, without leaving a trace.

After catching one last local ride, Patch leaned into the curved frame of the seat, his head resting against the cold glass, counting the breaths between each bump in the

road. The hum of the engine was steady, offering a kind of rhythm that calmed the thoughts swirling in his chest. He tried to close his eyes, but images of faces, letters, and memory fragments flickered behind his lids like dim lanterns refusing to go out.

When he finally stepped down again, the land felt different beneath his boots—softer, somehow more alive. He pulled out the creased map from his bag, its corners worn and the ink faded in places where he'd folded and unfolded it too many times. A deep breath filled his lungs, laced with dew and the scent of pine, as he began walking the last few miles on foot, determined to reach a place he'd only ever seen in stories and dreams.

At last, he reached the edge of a wooden sign, half-wrapped in vines but still readable. He reached out and brushed his fingers across the worn lettering: "Grace Falls." The texture was rough, almost splintered, and it grounded him in the moment, reminding him that every step he had taken had led exactly here.

What he saw ahead stirred something in him. The road curved gently downhill, flanked by trees heavy with blossoms, their petals trembling in the morning breeze. For a long time, he stood still, staring not just at the sign but at the possibility that this town, like its name, could hold the answer—or at least the truth—he'd been chasing for years.

Each step forward felt deliberate, like he was stepping into a story already written yet unfinished. He thought of the people waiting—or hiding—within its boundaries. What kind of welcome he might find was unknown, but he had come too far to turn back.

Patch knew Grace Falls would not be just another town. It held the gravity of a final chapter or the first page of something else entirely. Whether it would offer redemption, resolution, or something in between, he could no longer guess—but he had arrived, and that was enough, for now.