

Chapter 188

Chapter 188 of *All the Colors of the Dark* begins with Patch waiting in a holding area while a secretary makes repeated calls to coordinate updates about the judiciary in the Twenty-fifth Judicial Circuit. After nearly twenty minutes, Warden Riley enters, casually instructing officers to remove Patch's cuffs before guiding him into his office. Riley's presence is physically unremarkable—round in stature, face flushed with age and habit—but it's the painting behind him that truly seizes Patch's attention. The large canvas portrays a bustling Main Street scene, evoking a rush of memories from a time when Patch's hands still held brushes instead of calluses from prison labor. He recalls this as one of his early works, a piece that once represented ambition, now distorted by the passage of time and regret.

Warden Riley points out that the painting was selected by his wife, Aileen, one of her many attempts to give the office a warmer feel. The discussion soon turns to Patch's recent petition for a modest library program on C Level—an area housing prisoners with little to no hope of return. Riley explains that while the Bureau of Prisons has encouraged rehabilitative efforts, death row remains a delicate subject. Patch takes the moment to describe how books serve not just as distraction but as lifelines in a place where time moves slowly and hope fades even faster. He references inmates like Marty Tooms, who face decades in isolation without meaningful stimulation, using literature as their only window to life beyond the bars.

As they converse, Patch reflects on more personal matters—especially the pain of not seeing his daughter, who hasn't visited in years. He tells Riley about the beatings he suffered in his first months, particularly a brutal encounter with a gang member that left him with broken ribs and two missing teeth. Despite the scars and solitude, he expresses that his resilience has grown, fueled not by revenge, but by a quiet mission to bring moments of dignity to those around him. His voice softens as he shares a line

he once read—"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted"—reaffirming that literature fosters empathy even within steel walls.

Riley, appearing contemplative, leans back in his chair, the pinstripes on his vest catching the overhead light. Though the conversation is serious, a touch of humor seeps in as Riley jokes about how little time he has to read these days, especially now that Aileen insists on decorating every corner of their home with motivational quotes. Patch laughs lightly but returns to the matter at hand, pressing gently about the need for humanity in places like C Level. Riley sighs, neither promising nor refusing, but rather acknowledging the complexity with a nod, hinting that the bureaucracy may not be quick, but the effort is not wasted.

As their meeting ends, Patch is escorted back through the corridor, carrying both anticipation and apprehension about what awaits on C Level. That night, despite his mental fatigue, sleep escapes him. His thoughts swirl—not only about the logistical challenges of running a book delivery system in a high-security block but about the people behind the cell doors. He wonders whether a paperback on art theory or a worn novel might make a difference, even for someone sentenced to die. The thought lingers heavily, whispering the question he's afraid to answer: Can redemption be offered when society has already written someone off?

The chapter closes with Patch lying in his bunk, staring at the ceiling above as the soft hum of the prison fades into the background. His hands, once used for painting delicate strokes on canvas, now twitch with restless energy. Tomorrow he will descend to death row, not just to deliver books, but to confront what might be the darkest chamber of his past. The final line leaves readers on edge: He wasn't sure if he was ready, but the story had already begun turning its next page.