

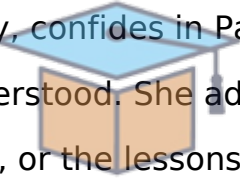
Chapter 160

Chapter 160 begins with Patch and Charlotte navigating the icy roads toward Lake Pine, their breath visible in the frosty morning air. Patch drives cautiously, glancing occasionally at his daughter bundled up in the passenger seat, her cheeks pink from the cold. The silence between them isn't uncomfortable—just the quiet of two people thinking deeply. As they arrive, the sight of Misty skating across the frozen lake catches their attention. Her movements are fluid, elegant, like a memory frozen in time, and for a brief moment, Patch allows himself to enjoy her laughter echoing across the ice. Even though her health is fragile, she radiates energy that momentarily masks the truth of her condition.

Charlotte slips on her skates with help from Patch, while Misty performs another graceful spin. Her confidence on the ice unsettles Patch, who fears she's pushing herself too far. Despite his concern, he smiles when she glides by, playfully shouting a challenge to keep up. There's a fleeting joy that connects all three—Patch, Misty, and Charlotte—though none voice it aloud. Misty eventually glides over and shares with Patch her wish to be honest with Charlotte about her illness. She believes that once Charlotte knows the full story, she will understand how much Joseph Macauley truly means to them both. Patch, protective and fearful, shuts the idea down. He insists Misty is in no condition to explain anything that complex. Yet she persists, her eyes filled with a bittersweet determination to be remembered honestly.

Later that afternoon, the mood shifts as they head to a therapeutic facility in Alice Springs, where Misty has been receiving care. The drive takes them through rolling Missouri hills, the vibrant greens of summer now giving way to the browns of approaching autumn. The facility itself is serene—designed to resemble a retreat rather than a hospital. Misty finds peace there among the other patients, engaging in light conversation and brief moments of laughter that allow her to feel like herself

again. Patch, meanwhile, steps into a quiet rhythm—handling school drop-offs, organizing Charlotte’s routine, and managing household chores with mechanical precision. He speaks often with Priya Meyer, who offers gentle advice and occasional help, giving him space to focus on Charlotte’s emotional needs.

One evening, after leaving the clinic, the trio stops at St. Raphael’s, a church that’s become something of a sanctuary for them. They light candles in silence, the flickering flames casting golden shadows across their faces. Misty, clutching her coat tightly around her frail body,  confides in Patch about her fears—not just of dying, but of being forgotten or misunderstood. She admits she is terrified Charlotte won’t remember her laughter, her stories, or the lessons she tried to teach. Patch doesn’t speak at first, but instead takes her into his arms. He holds her close, hoping his silence conveys what words can’t. It’s a deeply human moment—one of empathy, grief, and unspoken understanding.

Their visit to the lake and the clinic, bookended by moments of joy and vulnerability, reveals how they are all walking a tightrope between strength and sorrow. Charlotte, though young, senses the shift. She grows quieter, more introspective. When she later tells Patch that she’s starting to understand why Misty is tired more often, he doesn’t deny it—just nods, grateful she’s beginning to put the pieces together in her own way. He wishes he could spare her the pain, but knows some truths have to arrive gently, like snow falling on the surface of a frozen lake.

As the chapter closes, Patch sits alone in the dim light of the kitchen, watching the sky darken through the window. Misty is resting, Charlotte is asleep, and he is left with the weight of what comes next. He thinks about promises—some kept, others broken—and how fragile life becomes when measured by hospital visits and pain thresholds. But beneath it all, there remains a quiet hope, buried deep, that love might outlast even the darkest seasons.