

# Chapter 102

In Chapter 102, Patch meets Walter Strike, a man whose past is marked by both personal loss and a family history steeped in struggle and defiance. Walter, walking with a cane due to a limp, recounts tales of his ancestors—brave men who fought in the Revolutionary War and others who supported a secessionist government advocating for fierce independence. As they walk through the scenic Virginia mountains, Walter reflects on a time when he believed his family could survive independently, relying only on themselves and their own resources. This glimpse into his personal history highlights not just his resilience, but also the deep roots of hardship and pride that have shaped his worldview over time.

The conversation shifts as Walter shares the heart-wrenching story of his daughter, Eloise, who disappeared at the age of fifteen. His voice betrays the lingering frustration he feels toward law enforcement, who dismissed Eloise's disappearance by treating her as an adult. The painful memory of how they failed to take the case seriously still haunts Walter, and Patch listens intently, absorbing every word. Their conversation is interrupted as they pass a woman speaking in the vibrant Gullah language, which contrasts sharply with the sorrowful tale Walter tells. The language spoken by the woman serves as a reminder of the cultural diversity around them, while Walter's painful recollection of Eloise's disappearance stands as a symbol of the personal loss he has never been able to overcome. Through this conversation, Patch begins to understand that Walter's grief runs deep, intertwined with feelings of abandonment and neglect.

As their day continues, Walter and Patch visit Middleton Place, a historic plantation along the Ashley River, where the beauty of the surroundings starkly contrasts with the sorrow Walter carries. Standing near a gazebo, Walter reflects on the day his daughter went missing, leading him on a futile search that took him into murky black

water swamps. This poignant memory highlights the difficulty of the search and the inability to ever gain closure, a feeling Walter has carried with him since that day. As they watch a happy couple taking photos nearby, it becomes clear that Walter will never experience those same moments of joy with Eloise—her wedding, her achievements, or the simple pleasure of seeing her happy. The contrast between the couple's happiness and Walter's pain is a stark reminder of the inescapable reality that grief never truly fades, and that the absence of a loved one leaves a permanent void.

The conversation then turns to Walter's son, Coop, who also struggles with the loss of Eloise in his own way. After his sister's disappearance, Coop retreated from life, choosing to become a librarian in a quiet town rather than pursuing a path of ambition or personal growth. Walter's reflection on Coop's choice underscores the profound effect that loss can have on familial bonds, how it can alter the trajectories of lives in ways both seen and unseen. Walter's sorrow is not only personal but generational, affecting not just his own sense of self but also the way his family has chosen to cope with the tragedy. As the day fades, Patch feels a growing unease, realizing that their time together is nearing its end. Walter's prompts about goodbyes stir thoughts in Patch's mind about the many faces of the missing he has encountered over the years, the countless lives forever altered by unexplained disappearances.

The chapter concludes with Walter's final reflection on the importance of acknowledging individual stories, no matter how fleeting or inconsequential they may seem in the broader context of the world. Walter's words about the significance of their personal stories resonate with Patch, who is reminded of the deep emotional weight carried by those who continue to search for answers in the wake of loss. While the world around them may not provide the answers they seek, the bond they share in their pain and memories offers a connection that is both profound and comforting. As Walter and Patch part ways, the impact of their conversation lingers in Patch's mind, reinforcing the importance of human connection amidst grief. The shared humanity of their experiences, as different as they may be, leaves Patch with a lasting impression of Walter's struggle, and a renewed sense of understanding about the complexities of loss and remembrance.