

# Chapter 152

Chapter 152 begins with Patch and Misty sitting side by side on the old wooden swings, their legs gently pushing them forward as the sun dips low behind a patch of gray clouds. The gentle creak of the chains is the only sound that cuts through the quiet, until Misty breaks the silence. She speaks candidly about her past, admitting she made the decision to drop out of school without telling many people, especially Patch. Her voice carries the weight of regret, but there's also a hint of defiance—like someone who's long accepted her consequences. Patch listens quietly and then asks why she never confided in Sammy, someone he assumed she trusted. Misty hesitates before explaining that certain things—especially about Charlotte—had to be handled on her own.

The conversation shifts to Charlotte, and Misty discloses something that hits Patch harder than he expected: her mother had forbidden him from being part of Charlotte's life. This revelation cuts deep, not just because it explains his absence, but because it affirms his worst fear—that he was never really given a chance. Misty's tone softens as she talks about their daughter. She describes Charlotte as fierce and smart, someone who's drawn to animals and nature. The Culpepper Zoo, she says, is one of Charlotte's favorite places—somewhere she can lose herself among the creatures and forget, even briefly, about the grown-up problems that surround her. But Misty doesn't gloss over the challenges. Charlotte, she confesses, has developed a habit of stealing small things—trinkets, tokens, and even food. It's not malicious, Misty insists, but it's something that signals a deeper struggle.

Patch's reaction is a mix of silent guilt and quiet reflection. He admits he doesn't know how to handle that kind of behavior—not from a child he barely knows and not when he already feels so far removed from being a father. Misty, ever direct, tells him that Charlotte doesn't need a perfect man; she needs someone who stays. She needs

stability. Not just promises, but a presence. Patch, humbled by her words, stares down at the dirt beneath his feet, knowing deep down that Misty is right. But that knowledge doesn't make him feel any less inadequate. When he finally lifts his gaze, it's to the horizon where clouds are gathering fast. The storm, both literal and emotional, feels imminent.

Misty, sensing his discomfort, tries to guide the conversation back to something lighter. She tells Patch that Charlotte has his stubborn streak, even if she's never really known him. She talks about how Charlotte once tried to lead a classroom protest over lunch prices, and Patch smiles despite himself, realizing that she may have inherited more than just his eyes. Then, as if trying to bridge the emotional gap between them, Misty shares how Charlotte often asks questions about her father—nothing specific, just curious thoughts about who he might be and why he isn't around.

Patch, overwhelmed by emotion, says softly that he's not someone worth remembering. Misty disagrees, reminding him that Charlotte deserves the truth—however messy or uncomfortable it might be. She then calls for Charlotte to come outside. The little girl appears at the back door, squinting into the fading light, and slowly walks toward them. Her presence is both calming and jarring to Patch. She's a living link between past and future, and for the first time, he realizes how much he's already missed. The chapter closes with the first fat drops of rain hitting the ground. Misty and Patch don't move from the swings. They sit quietly, watching Charlotte chase fireflies, their shared silence filled with the realization that some storms can't be avoided—they can only be weathered together.