

Chapter 157

Chapter 157 unfolds with the house alive in motion, its once-quiet walls now echoing with voices and music as Patch hosts a community gathering arranged by Norma. Guests arrive in waves, close to three hundred in total, filling every space from porch to parlor with laughter and light conversation. Daisy Creason from The Tribune attends with notepad in hand, keen on capturing the spirit of the event for the next morning's front page, much to Patch's quiet discomfort. Though grateful for the turnout, he remains wary of media attention, preferring the shadows of his canvases to public scrutiny. Sammy, embracing the role of town philosopher, gives a speech that meanders between civic complaints and poetic rambles, amusing some and confusing others.

Misty oversees the evening's culinary offerings with grace, serving up a menu that straddles creativity and nostalgia. Local guests seem puzzled yet intrigued by items like fennel salad or lavender-glazed chicken, a far cry from the comfort food they expected. The artwork on the walls draws quiet admiration, especially from women charmed by the artist's reputation and presence. Away from the noise, Patch and Misty slip into the garden. Fairy lights stretch across the branches, lending the space a soft glow, and they settle onto a weathered bench made from repurposed oak. The calm prompts reflection, and Misty tells Patch that the house reminds her of one of his paintings—layered, thoughtful, unfinished in a beautiful way.

As they sit under the stars, their talk turns more personal. Misty explains her desire to return wasn't just sentimental; she wanted Charlotte to have pieces of her history—to understand the land and family she came from. Patch, equally contemplative, admits that returning was never about nostalgia alone; he had been lost in grief, believing that proximity to the past might somehow lead him back to the people he'd lost. The conversation deepens when Misty confesses the severity of her illness. There is no

cure, no treatment left. Her words are soft but certain, and the garden air thickens with the weight of finality.

Patch tries to mask his reaction, but it's impossible to conceal the ache in his eyes. Misty's voice remains steady as she describes what it feels like to live with a body slowly giving way, how she has learned to cherish small things—like sunlight through lace curtains or Charlotte's laughter in another room. Patch listens closely, absorbing every syllable as if her words were brushstrokes he could preserve forever. He holds her hand tightly, not in desperation, but in quiet solidarity. This, he knows, is not a goodbye, but a moment of truth between two people who understand that time, no matter how generous, is always borrowed.

In a small act of comfort, Patch wraps an arm around Misty's shoulders and pulls her close. She leans into him, and for a while, neither speaks. There is a peace in that silence, though sadness lurks just beneath. The house, glowing behind them, feels less like a building and more like a memory already in the making. Their shared hope is that Charlotte, still so young, will one day walk these halls and feel their presence in the details—the creak of a stair, the scent of paint, the faint echo of jazz from a kitchen radio.

What Patch doesn't say aloud—but feels fully—is how deeply Misty has shaped the life he's tried to rebuild. She gave him something no gallery, no applause, no review could: a sense of belonging, a reason to stay. Though no canvas could ever capture the full complexity of this night, he knows that somewhere, hidden in shadows and starlight, there's a painting waiting to be born from it. As Misty sighs and rests her head against him, Patch closes his eyes and lets the moment stay just a little longer.