

Elysian Park



by J.L. McGoldrick

Dedication

To my wife, Kathy,

and to our four sons—John, Curtis, James, and Collin.

Without you, I cannot imagine a life so filled with love and joy.

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Chapter One

(A Day of Many Firsts)

Hello. My name is Chili, and I've been asked to bring you up to speed on what's happening here.

Okay—let me answer your first question. Yes, I am an angel.

I know what you're thinking. An angel named Chili? Well, I just thought it had a better ring to it than John, Number One Thousand Fifty. Anyway, enough about my name. Let's get moving.

That place down there is O'Grady's. It's one of the happiest social spots in Edenvue. Inside, sitting at the end of the crowded bar all by himself, is Lukas Alexander.

Look inside.

See?

I know what you're thinking again, but no—I'm not telepathic, and I can't see through walls. So how did I know this?... Easy.

Lukas has sat in that same place every Friday night for the past year.

Before we go much further, Lukas isn't my case. You see, angels work a little differently than you might expect. It's not like the movies where we just deliver messages or sing happy Disney songs all day, and we don't jump around doing one good deed after another.

We get our cases—or assignments, people—from upstairs, just like everyone else. And we aren't finished with a case until it closes, or to put it quite frankly... they croak.

I know what you're thinking again, and yes, you're right. Some cases are long, and some are short.

I once had a case that I received when she was six months old. She joined the convent at twelve and lived to be one hundred and three years old. I missed the entire sixteenth century because of her. She became a saint, and I never had to lift a finger.

Then again, I've also been assigned some holy terrors—but that's another story.

Lukas has just been assigned to Jodie, and that's why I'm here. Jodie was my A.I.T.—Angel in Training. Lukas is going to be her first case, so I thought I'd watch over her. Besides, the people upstairs like to be sure first meetings go smoothly.

Why wouldn't they, you ask?

Well, just think about it. How would you react if someone appeared out of nowhere and told you they were your guardian angel?

That's right—you'd freak out.

We also have to be careful of other people. Yes, other people. I know you've seen a few angels breaking the rules by talking to their cases out of uniform—in public.

How would you know?

See if this sounds familiar.

You're sitting at lunch, looking out a window, when across the street you see him. He looks normal at first. Then you see him start writing in the dirt at his feet. He's still trying to act as if nothing strange is happening. Next, he starts talking in one-word phrases, almost like someone is pestering him.

That's when he breaks down and starts a full-on conversation, complete with foul adjectives and flailing hands.

You thought he was crazy. Or maybe on drugs.

Some are.

But not all of them.

See... you're talking to a book.

I rest my case.

Anyway, I know I keep getting sidetracked. I can't help it.

Where were we?

Oh yes—Jodie.

Jodie is a good angel. She'll be just fine. Better safe than sorry, right? So now you're up to speed on angels.

We don't really have a lot of time to go deep into Lukas.

He was born December 25th, 1977, in a small one-horse town. He is an only child—so far, his parents keep saying. They all moved to Edenvue when Lukas was two.

His parents, Markus and Sabrina, are great parents. Typical middle-income, small-town people. They raised Lukas in a traditional way, but they never pushed him—they just guided.

He graduated first in his high school class. No one has ever really noticed him or seen his many gifts. He's really shy. I've seen turtles come out of their shells faster.

It's not that he hasn't tried—heaven knows he has. It's just that whenever he gets a chance at the limelight, he always makes the wrong choices. And rather than try again... here he is.

This is where I have to leave you.

I'm sure we'll meet again.

"Excuse me—is this seat taken?" a lovely blonde young lady asked.

"No," Lukas replied quietly.

"May I take it to the bar across the street? They're full."

Lukas looked up for the first time in a year to actually make eye contact with someone other than Ronny the bartender.

"Excuse me?" he said, looking like someone had just smacked him awake from a deep sleep.

“I’m only kidding. Hello, my name is Jodie.”

“I’m Lukas.”

“I know,” Jodie replied. “I asked the bartender a few minutes ago. But don’t be scared—I’m not a serial killer or anything like that.”

She finished with a warm smile that looked like—well, an angel.

“Can I buy you a drink?” Lukas asked.

“Yes, please!” Jodie said with all the enthusiasm of a high school girl being asked to dance by her first crush. “I’ll have a chocolate shake with two cherries, please.”

Lukas cracked a half-smile and said, a little nervously, “I don’t think they make those here.”

Jodie let out a quiet little “sorry” as her smile began to melt.

Just then Lukas chimed in. “I do know this really great diner that makes the best shakes in town. I’m sure it’s still open. Would you care to go there—with me?”

He was having trouble getting the words out, but it was a start.

“I’d love to,” Jodie said, her smile returning as a boost of pride lifted them both out the front door.

“I’ve never seen you around here before, have I?” Lukas asked in a voice reminiscent of a twelve-year-old boy asking out his first date. “Because if I had seen you, I’m almost sure I would have remembered. I think. I mean, I’d really feel bad if I didn’t—you know—remember.”

Jodie stopped Lukas in his tracks, taking his hand to calm him down.

“No, I’m not from around here. And believe me—you would have remembered.”

Just then, it began to rain, and they ran the rest of the block to their dry sanctuary.

Jodie knew the quiet time in the diner would be good. It would allow her to learn deeper details about Lukas.

When they entered, she instantly felt as though she’d stepped through a time warp into the 1950s. Everything was authentic—the red leather bench seats, the round red-and-chrome counter stools, the twenty-

five-cent mini jukeboxes on every table, the black-and-white checkerboard floor, even the waving tail-and-eyes cat clock on the wall.

What a cool place, she thought.

Lukas was already seated, reading the menu with it held up to his face like the road map of a lost tourist.

Jodie sat down and watched him contentedly. It wasn't as though Lukas didn't already know the menu by heart—he was hiding. Buying time. Trying to figure out what to say next to this new, beautiful woman.

The silence was broken when the waitress introduced herself.

“Hi, I'm Debra—Debra Wissink.”

She looked at Lukas just long enough for her eyes to focus. “Hello, Lukas,” she said quietly. Then she turned back to Jodie and continued without missing a breath. “I went to school with him. I didn't do college, though. I started to, but with work and my social calendar, I couldn't continue. You know what I'm saying?”

Very few people ever understood Debra. This included Lukas—and now Jodie.

Not wanting to hurt Debra's feelings, Jodie did what everyone else does. She agreed, then gently cut her off.

“I'll have a large chocolate shake with two cherries, a banana split, and a cheeseburger with fries, please.”

Lukas stared at her, mouth slightly open, a look of total amazement on his face. When he realized she caught him staring, he snapped out of it.

“I'll have a honker burger with cheese and a diet coke, Deb. Thanks.”

He handed over the menus with a quick smile that went unnoticed.

Then his attention returned to Jodie.

“My God—how can you eat like that?”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Most people I know who can eat like that weigh three hundred pounds and look like hogs,” Lukas said honestly. “But you can't weigh more than a hundred pounds.”

“I don't know how I do it,” Jodie said with a shrug. “I guess I just have a fast system.”

She was happy—their first meeting was going well.

Then Lukas's mouth betrayed him.

“I really hope you don't turn into a fat pig. That would be a real turn-off, and I don't think I want to marry a pig. I dated this girl once—she was a pig. I mean, she turned into a cow. I just really hope that doesn't happen to you.”

Jodie was nearly in shock.

Where had that come from?

Even if he thought it, why would he say it?

That's when she realized—he was speaking the way someone does when they think they're alone.

“Lukas,” she asked gently, “how many first dates have you been on?”

“Well, that's hard to say. Is this a first date? I mean—would you consider this a date? Because I do this kind of thing a lot.”

Jodie jumped in quickly. “Sure. This would count as a semi-date.”

“Okay,” Lukas said after thinking hard. “Then I'd have to say... twenty.”

“How many of those were with the same person?”

“None. They don't usually call me back. Or they give me the wrong number—on accident. Maybe they're too busy?”

At that very moment, Jodie understood exactly what Lukas needed.

She would start first thing in the morning.

After they said goodnight, she began to make a plan.

Lukas wasn't going to be an easy case—but things could be worse.

He was a gentleman, when his mouth didn't get in the way. Handsome in that small-town-boy way. Smart. Educated.

Which meant he could learn.

But how do you take someone who struggles to interact with others and show them they're the masters of their own destiny—without scaring the life out of them?

These were the questions Jodie thought about as she watched Lukas sleep through his bedroom window.

Yes—she was in the tree.

She stayed in the old tree house Lukas and his father built when he was just a boy. It was quiet there. Peaceful. And it allowed her to stay close for their first week together.

Chapter Two

(Let's Get Started... Maybe!)

At 11:30 the next morning, the doorbell rang at the Alexander house, and Lukas's mother, Sabrina, answered it.

Sabrina had a charm that was hard to describe. She was definitely old-fashioned at heart, but blended with the best parts of a modern woman. She was an excellent mother, and even the people in town who disliked nearly everyone always seemed to have a smile for her.

As she opened the door, a look of pleasant surprise crossed her face.

"Good morning," she said warmly. "May I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Jodie," she replied. "I'm here to see Lukas. He knows that I'm coming."

"Come in—come in," Sabrina said immediately. "He's still asleep. I'll go wake him. He shouldn't be sleeping so late anyway—it isn't like him."

Jodie could tell that Sabrina was proud Lukas had a visitor, let alone a girl visiting. As she continued talking about him, it felt as though she were quietly trying to convince Jodie that Lukas was worth dating—or even marrying.

“He keeps his room spotless,” Sabrina said. “He won’t even let me do his laundry. I wouldn’t mind—I’m his mother—but he always says, ‘Mom, I’m an adult, and I don’t want you spending your time following me around and cleaning up.’”

“He’s great,” Jodie said sincerely.

“How long have you two known each other?” Sabrina asked.

“We just met last night,” Jodie replied, “but I’ve known of Lukas for quite a while.”

Sabrina paused. “I thought I knew everyone in Edenvue.”

“I just moved here last week,” Jodie said.

Sabrina looked puzzled for a moment, then decided it was best to change the subject. “I’ll just go upstairs and get Lukas.”

Quickly, Jodie stood. “No—let him sleep.”

From the kitchen drifted the smell of something wonderful.

“Mrs. Alexander,” Jodie asked, “what is that amazing smell?”

Cooking was one thing—besides Lukas—that Sabrina loved to talk about. And she was very good at it.

“Do you like to cook?” Sabrina asked.

“I don’t know,” Jodie replied honestly. “I’ve never tried.”

It was music to Sabrina’s ears.

“Well then,” she said brightly, taking Jodie by the arm, “follow me.”

There were two large pots simmering on the stove and a light dish baking in the oven. Sabrina guided Jodie over to the first pot.

Jodie leaned in and inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. “That smells like carrots and onions,” she said.

“Yes,” Sabrina replied proudly. “Vegetable beef stew.”

Jodie had already moved to the second pot, trying to identify its contents by scent alone. The puzzled look on her face said she wasn’t having much luck.

“Potato dumplings,” Sabrina said with a smile. “They don’t smell like much, but they taste wonderful.”

Sabrina opened the oven door so Jodie could get a quick whiff of what was baking inside.

“Apples and cinnamon,” Jodie murmured dreamily.

“Apple pie,” Sabrina chuckled. “The best thing in this kitchen.”

“Well,” Jodie whispered, “it smells like heaven—and I should know.”

Sabrina laughed, then asked where Jodie had learned to cook.

“I learned from the best—my mother,” Sabrina said, then paused. “Haven’t you ever cooked before?”

“Well,” Jodie replied carefully, “nothing that ever smelled like this.”

She wasn’t telling the whole truth. Angels didn’t need to eat—but they loved to while on assignment.

“I’d love to learn someday,” Jodie added.

Sabrina’s smile widened even further.

“Wonderful! What should we cook first? You name it, and I’ll teach you. What’s your favorite thing to eat?”

“Root beer floats,” Jodie said, glowing.

Sabrina laughed. “That isn’t exactly cooking—but we can have some while we work on something a little more challenging. How about chicken pot pie?”

Jodie nodded eagerly. If Mrs. Alexander thought it was good, it had to be.

Chapter Three

(First Impressions Don't Mean Everything)

Upstairs, Lukas didn't wake until 1:30 in the afternoon.

He could smell good things cooking in the kitchen, and his head still felt a little cloudy. As he got dressed, he wondered if the night before had been nothing more than a dream. He convinced himself it must have been and decided not to tell his parents about the girl he had met.

Better not.

His stomach growled as he made his way downstairs. The wonderful smell wasn't a surprise—his mother was the best cook in town. What was surprising was the sound of two women laughing as if a small party were underway.

When Lukas swung open the kitchen door, it nearly knocked into his shoulder as he stopped short in shock.

He stood there staring.

His mother and Jodie were having a great time, laughing and making a complete mess of the kitchen.

Sabrina would call out the next ingredient, and Jodie would grab it and add it to the bowl. Sabrina hadn't noticed that Jodie knew exactly where everything was, as if she had lived in the house her whole life.

"You're a natural, Jodie," Sabrina said proudly. "Soon you'll be cooking like a pro."

Lukas cleared his throat softly. "Good morning, ladies."

"Good afternoon," his mother replied. "Nice of you to finally get up. Poor Jodie here has been keeping me company all morning while she waited for you. I'll say one thing—she has more patience than I do."

Sabrina fixed Lukas with a look to be sure her point landed.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," Lukas said, fumbling for words. "It's just... I'm not used to—"

He trailed off, unsure how to explain that he didn't often have girls waiting for him.

Jodie saw the tension in his face and stepped in smoothly. "Don't worry about it, Lukas. I've had a great time with your mom. She's been keeping me occupied." She smiled. "And I can't wait to learn more of her cooking secrets."

Feeling Lukas relax, Jodie asked if he was ready to go.

Sabrina wasn't about to let them off that easily.

"Oh no," she said. "Not so fast. You two aren't going anywhere until you eat something."

Knowing better than to argue, they sat down together and ate Jodie's first-ever chicken pot pies.

After they were stuffed to the gills, it was finally time to leave.

Jodie had come up with a plan during the night. She intended to spend the week helping Lukas learn the finer points of interacting with people—especially women—and gently break him of a few habits that worked against him.

She had been watching Lukas for some time and noticed he was most at ease in the local park.

Elysian Park lay just outside the main part of town, stretching several miles with a beautiful lake at its center. They found a quiet spot away from playgrounds and crowds where Jodie could explain her plan.

First, she told him she wanted to help him use the skills he already had—qualities many women found important in a man.

Lukas wasn't convinced.

"Could we start with something easier?" he asked.

Not wanting to push, Jodie decided confidence-building might be the better first step.

"Okay," she said. "Let's find someone who needs help. Lukas, you've always been willing to help people. That matters—a lot. Very few people have that quality."

When she looked over, Lukas was nodding, but his eyes were distant. He was clearly thinking about something stressful.

“What is it?” she asked.

“My mother has always said the same thing,” he replied. “But honestly, I don’t think the girls around here agree with either of you.”

Jodie kept her voice calm. “What makes you think that? Most women like a helpful man.”

As they walked toward the picnic area, they spotted a woman struggling with two armfuls of boxes.

“Now’s your chance,” Jodie said quickly. “Go help her. Keep it short—and be yourself.”

Lukas approached eagerly, smiling.

“Hi, I’m Lukas. Let me help you.”

Without thinking, he grabbed the bottom box. The woman’s eyes widened as everything stacked above it began to topple. Lukas tried to catch what was falling, but in doing so dropped what he already held.

Glass shattered.

Jodie heard it from several yards away and ran toward them.

The woman was furious, yelling as she bent to collect the broken boxes. Lukas apologized in a whisper, but she couldn’t hear him over her anger.

“What are you doing?” she shouted. “Who asked for your help? What am I supposed to do with thirty broken crystal globes? Are you an ox? Did my ex-husband send you?”

Lukas answered in one-word bursts. “No, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

Then he asked the wrong question.

“What were you going to do with thirty crystal globes?”

The woman pointed to a nearby table facing the small one-way road through the park. A sign read:

PURE CRYSTAL HOLIDAY GLOBES — \$5 EACH

She explained she had been selling ornaments to take her kids to Mouseland.

Lukas checked his wallet. Not a penny.

When he tried to help again, the woman shook her head, tears forming.

“Don’t help anymore. You’ve done enough.”

She dumped the boxes into a trash can and walked away.

“I’m no expert,” Lukas said quietly to Jodie, “but I don’t think that went very well.”

He tried to smile. It didn’t work.

Jodie took his hand. “True. But she’s still breathing. If you’d stayed any longer, who knows what might’ve happened.”

She tugged him gently down the path and asked him to show her the town.

They passed the high school. Lukas remembered all four lockers he’d used—and their combinations. Next would have been the elementary school, then the cemetery.

When a steam whistle blew from the nearby mill, Jodie noticed Lukas stiffen.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“That woman’s face,” he said slowly. “I’ve seen it before. I just can’t place where.”

Not wanting him to dwell on it, Jodie thought fast.

“I feel like bowling,” she said brightly.

Lukas began to protest, but she pulled him along toward the alley.

Tomorrow would be better.

Chapter Four

(The Best-Laid Plans...)

Lukas and Jodie walked the aisles of Stater Brothers Market, making several laps through the store while talking about the people they liked most and working hard to keep their conversation positive.

Jodie was confident Lukas would succeed at his next test—a chance meeting that would leave him feeling better about himself. She even allowed herself to think that he might make a new friend, or maybe meet a soulmate, though she knew that was getting a little ahead of things.

After all, so far they hadn't seen a woman under seventy.

She decided to have Lukas practice by helping the elderly ladies with their shopping. Most of them already knew Lukas, which made the initial contact much easier.

The first woman he helped was Mrs. Eva Hine, a tiny widow Lukas had often seen at the park playing with her great-grandchildren.

Lukas approached her with a strange new confidence and greeted her warmly. With a calm smile, he asked if he could keep her company while she shopped.

Mrs. Hine didn't move quickly, so they spent nearly an hour talking—about her family, especially her grandchildren, and about how Edenvue had changed over the years.

She told Lukas how much he had to look forward to: the joys of life, love, and growing older.

They laughed. They connected.

It was the first truly free conversation Lukas had ever had.

He walked her to her car, helped load her groceries, and promised to meet her again next Thursday at the park.

Jodie watched from a distance and saw the glow on Lukas's face as he returned to the store.

Inside, he spotted Shurla Turek. He had met her only a few times before—mostly when he'd tried, unsuccessfully, to get a job at her husband's construction company.

This time, Lukas approached more cautiously. Jodie noticed a slight tremor in his voice.

Mrs. Turek noticed too.

Taking Lukas by the arm, she smiled. “I haven’t had a big strong man help me in a long time. I’d never turn down the company.”

They moved slowly through the produce aisle, laughing and chatting. Lukas found himself at ease.

After a pause, Mrs. Turek stopped the cart and turned to him.

“I have a grandson your age,” she said. “I love him dearly, but I wish he had half the manners you do. Always helpful. Always polite. Please—call me Grandma. Everyone does.”

As they continued, she added casually, “You’ve been to our office a few times for an application. Did you ever leave one?”

Lukas started to answer, but she waved him off.

“Never you mind. I’ll speak to Johnnie today. I want you working with us. You remind me so much of him—quiet, thoughtful, tall, and strong.”

Lukas beamed—not just at the compliment, but because she hadn’t even asked if he had another job.

He would have quit any job to work for Johnnie Turek Construction.

He squeezed her hand gently. “Thank you, Grandma.”

After helping Mrs. Turek load her groceries and sending her on her way, Lukas felt like he was floating.

Jodie and Lukas sat outside Henry’s Market, soaking in the warm afternoon sun. They talked quietly, replaying every moment like critics discussing a favorite movie.

Opening up felt easier. Being himself felt safer.

Then Lukas saw Debbie Wissink.

She was climbing out of her car, still wearing her diner uniform. She looked exhausted—tired of standing, tired of walking, tired of the day.

Before Jodie could stop him, Lukas took off.

He hurried inside the market, not hearing Jodie's whispered warnings behind him.

Just inside the front office door sat a rolling chair.

Lukas grabbed it.

Debbie was in the cosmetics aisle when he pushed the chair toward her.

“Hi, Debbie,” he said brightly. “I thought you might like a lift! Or better yet, you can sit and push your cart while I push you wherever you want to go.”

Debbie gave him a half-smile and glanced past his shoulder.

“I don't know,” she said carefully, “I don't think Will—the store manager—would go for that idea.”

Lukas turned.

Will was already coming toward him, arms swinging, eyebrows drawn into a sharp, unmistakable V.

Debbie slipped away.

Lukas didn't think it was a good idea to wait either.

Debbie was already halfway down the aisle when Lukas realized two very important things.

First: the chair was still in his hands.

Second: Will was no longer walking.

He was charging.

“LUKAS.”

The word echoed through the market like a gavel strike. Shoppers froze. A child dropped a cereal box. Somewhere, a cash register stopped mid-beep.

Lukas turned slowly, still gripping the rolling chair as if it were a life raft.

“Yes, sir?” he said automatically.

Will stopped three feet away, chest rising and falling, eyes locked on the chair. “Why,” he asked very calmly, which somehow made it worse, “is one of my office chairs no longer in my office?”

“I was just—” Lukas began, then stopped. He could hear Jodie in his head screaming about mission, but his mouth kept going. “—helping Debbie.”

Debbie, who had very wisely chosen this moment to be fascinated by lip balm, did not turn around.

Will pinched the bridge of his nose. “Lukas. I appreciate... community spirit.” He gestured toward the chair. “But this is not a taxi service.”

Lukas nodded rapidly. “Yes, sir. Absolutely. I see that now. Completely see that.”

“Good.”

Lukas returned the chair, hands shaking slightly, then stood there, unsure whether to flee or apologize again.

Will sighed. “For what it’s worth,” he added, lowering his voice, “your heart’s in the right place. Just... think first.”

“Yes, sir.” Lukas exhaled.

Will turned and walked away.

Lukas stood frozen for a full ten seconds.

Then he felt a hand slip into his.

Jodie.

“Well,” she said brightly, “that could’ve ended with handcuffs.”

“I thought I was doing better,” Lukas muttered.

“You are doing better,” Jodie replied gently. “You just skipped a few steps.”

He looked at her. “Like... thinking?”

“Exactly like thinking.”

Lukas laughed despite himself. And for the first time, the laugh didn't sound nervous.

They walked out into the afternoon sun together.

From across the parking lot, unseen, Chili leaned against a light pole, wings folded, chewing on something that absolutely was not gum.

“First weeks are always messy,” he said to no one in particular. “But she’s doing good.”

Chapter Five

(Confidence Is Not the Same Thing as Silence)

That night, Lukas lay awake staring at the ceiling, replaying the day in fragments.

Mrs. Hine’s smile.

Shurla’s words.

The chair.

Will’s eyebrows.

Jodie’s laugh.

Something had shifted—just slightly—like a door cracking open somewhere inside him.

Outside, the old tree house creaked softly in the breeze.

Jodie sat cross-legged on the floor with a small notebook in her lap, writing and then stopping, listening to the quiet.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered, “we keep it simple.”

Jodie scribbled more ideas that glowed faintly gold before fading into ordinary ink. She paused, sensing Lukas’s thoughts ripple outward like a stone dropped in water.

Morning came with the smell of coffee and low clouds threatening rain.

Lukas met Jodie at Elysian Park just after sunrise. The lake was smooth as glass, fog drifting across the water.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lukas said, hands shoved into his jacket pockets.

Jodie raised an eyebrow. “Uh- oh.”

“I talk too much,” he admitted. “Or the wrong things. Or both.”

“That’s true,” Jodie said, then softened. “But you’re also learning when not to talk.”

They sat on a bench overlooking the lake.

“Today,” she said, “you don’t fix anything. You listen. You ask one good question. Then you stop.”

Silence followed.

A duck cut a clean line through the fog.

“This is uncomfortable,” Lukas muttered.

“That’s how you know it’s working,” Jodie said.

A jogger passed. Then a woman walking her dog smiled politely at Lukas.

Every instinct in him urged a comment.

He didn’t make one.

The woman smiled again—and kept walking.

“That was it?” Lukas asked.

“That was it,” Jodie said. “No disasters. No broken crystal globes.”

He laughed quietly and let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

Just then a group from the local women's auxiliary club came whizzing by, Mrs. Turek was right in the middle of the pack.

"Good morning Lukas dear" she said along with a quick wave before briskly passing Lukas & Jodie. "See you tomorrow morning". A smile in her face, she turned to say something to the young lady beside her.

That's when Lukas noticed it was the same lady from the park yesterday with the snow globes. He stood up instantly and started to move forward when Jodie grabbed his hand to stop him.

"Where are you going?" She caught Lukas's eye and he replied "I recognize the woman with Mrs. Turek. She's the one that I accidentally broke her stuff, I have to apologize to her again". The look on his face told Jodie the whole story.

His color changed and the excitement of the possible interaction meant one thing to her, she had to really prepare him if he was going to impress the stranger.

"Please sit Lukas. There will be time for that second meet cute!" He had no idea what she meant. "What is a meet cute?"

Jodie laughed with a big smile and it calmed Lukas "I'll tell you later".

They sat a while longer, watching the fog lift.

"So," Jodie said at last, "about tomorrow."

Lukas straightened. "Mr. Turek."

She nodded. "You won't sell yourself. You won't apologize for existing. You'll thank him for his time and tell him you're ready to work."

Lukas considered that. "I can do that."

"I know," Jodie said.

They stood together, the park warming around them, the day still full of promise.

From a distance, unseen, Chili watched and allowed himself a small smile.

"Quiet wins count too," he murmured.

Chapter Six

(The Interview)

The Turek Construction yard sat just beyond the edge of Edenvue, a sprawl of gravel, stacked lumber, idle equipment, and half-finished frames waiting their turn. It smelled like oil, sawdust, and damp earth.

Lukas stood at the gate with his hands folded behind his back, repeating Jodie's advice in his head.

Simple. Honest. Don't sell yourself.

Jodie stood beside him, looking perfectly ordinary. She smiled once, small and encouraging.

"You've got this," she said.

Then she took a single step back—and vanished.

Lukas didn't notice. He was too busy swallowing.

Johnnie Turek met Lukas outside the office. He was a solid man with a weathered face, the kind of person who looked like he'd been built rather than born. He didn't offer his hand right away.

"Hello Lukas. Walk with me," Johnnie said.

They moved across the yard, boots crunching on gravel. Johnnie didn't speak at first, and Lukas resisted the urge to fill the silence.

They passed a stack of lumber covered with a tarp.

"Pressure-treated pine," Johnnie said casually. "What would you use it for?"

Lukas answered without thinking. "Ground contact. Deck posts. Anywhere moisture's an issue."

Johnnie nodded once and kept walking.

They stopped near a flatbed truck loaded with steel beams.

“Those arrive late,” Johnnie said. “What happens to the schedule?”

Lukas felt his chest tighten. Jodie’s invisible hand brushed lightly against his shoulder.

The panic loosened.

“You adjust,” Lukas said. “Shift crews if you can. Move interior work forward. Or you eat the delay.”

Johnnie grunted—approval, maybe—and led him toward a partially framed structure.

“See that joint?” Johnnie asked.

“The load’s wrong,” Lukas said after a moment. “That’ll sag over time.”

Johnnie stopped walking and studied him.

“You ever work construction?”

“No, sir.”

“You ever read about it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Johnnie’s mouth twitched, almost a smile, and they turned back toward the office.

As they walked, Johnnie finally spoke more freely.

“I don’t expect you to know everything,” he said. “I expect you to listen. I expect you to show up when you say you will. And I expect you to ask questions before you make mistakes that get someone hurt.”

Lukas nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Johnnie stopped near a line of parked equipment.

“This isn’t a place for shortcuts,” he continued. “People think construction is just muscle. It isn’t. It’s judgment. It’s patience. It’s knowing when not to do something.”

Lukas considered that carefully.

“If there’s anything I should be studying,” he said, choosing his words, “I’d like to. Codes. Safety manuals. Anything that would help me do the job right.”

Johnnie looked at him for a long moment, surprised.

“Most people ask how fast they can move up,” he said. “You’re asking how not to screw up.”

Lukas shrugged slightly. “I don’t want to be the reason something goes wrong.”

Johnnie nodded once, decisively.

“I’ll give you a list,” he said. “Start with safety. Everything else comes after.”

Inside the office, Johnnie finally offered his hand.

“Trial position,” he said. “You show up on time. You listen. You work hard. We’ll see.”

Lukas shook his hand, steady.

“Thank you,” he said. “I won’t waste it.”

Johnnie nodded. “We’ll see.”

Outside, Lukas stopped, blinking like someone stepping into sunlight after a long tunnel.

Jodie reappeared beside him.

“You did it,” she said.

“I think I did,” Lukas said, smiling. “I didn’t even panic.”

Jodie said nothing, only watched him.

Shurla Turek caught Lukas near the office door, her purse tucked under her arm.

“Lukas,” she said warmly. “One more thing.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

She leaned in slightly, lowering her voice. “That young woman with the snow globes—Mica. She asked about you.”

Lukas blinked. “She did?”

Shurla smiled. “That’s all. Thought you should know.”

She patted his arm and walked away.

Lukas stood there, stunned.

Jodie watched him carefully.

From across the yard, unseen, Chili folded his arms and sighed.

“Comfort without control,” he muttered. “Careful, kid.”

Lukas took a breath, steadied himself, and headed home.

He had a job.

And somewhere in Edenvue, someone had asked about him.

Chapter Seven

(What Survives)

Mica Verholtz measured her mornings in small victories.

Finding both shoes before the bus came counted as a big one.

So did pouring milk without spilling it, negotiating cereal portions that somehow always felt unfair to at least one child, and tying Mary's hair back tight enough to survive the walk to school but loose enough that it didn't feel like punishment.

Joe watched everything. He always had.

He sat at the kitchen table, spoon paused midair, eyes moving between the clock, the front door, and his sister, who was currently attempting to wear her backpack upside down.

"That's not how gravity works," Joe said patiently.

"It is for me," Mary replied, tugging at the straps.

Mica hid a smile as she fixed it. "Shoes," she said, pointing.

Joe lifted his backpack without complaint.

Mary spun once in the hallway, pink jacket flaring. "Are we going today?"

"Not today," Mica said. "Soon."

Mary accepted that answer the way only four-year-olds could—completely, and for now.

Mica's job existed in the quiet margins of Edenvue.

She worked for the community restoration group—a small, underfunded nonprofit responsible for inspecting, cataloging, and maintaining public structures that everyone used and no one thought about until something went wrong.

Gazebos with peeling paint. Community rooms with cracked steps. Railings that wobbled just enough to make you uneasy.

Mica knelt beside an old park structure and pressed her thumb into a softened beam. It gave more than it should have.

"This needs fixing," she said to her clipboard, more to herself than anyone else. "Before someone gets hurt."

She wrote it down carefully.

Shurla Turek knew the value of noticing things before they broke.

That was why she sat on the board of the restoration group, and why she and Mica crossed paths more often than most people realized. Shurla helped secure funding, pushed paperwork, and occasionally showed up in person—usually with coffee.

“Decaf,” Shurla said, handing one over. “I remember.”

“Thank you,” Mica replied, genuinely grateful.

They sat together on a bench overlooking the park, talking through inspection reports, repair priorities, and the careful math of limited resources.

“How are Joe and Mary?” Shurla asked.

“Good days and loud days,” Mica said. “Mostly good.”

Shurla smiled. “That counts.”

After a pause, she added casually, “Johnnie’s got a new assistant starting this week.”

Mica looked up. “Oh?”

“Lukas,” Shurla said. “Quiet young man. Smart... like you.”

Mica nodded once. She didn’t comment, but she remembered the name.

The second time Mica saw Lukas was outside the community center.

Her hands were full. Joe was distracted by a poster. Mary had dropped a mitten and was insisting it had feelings.

The door opened smoothly before Mica reached it.

“Here you go,” Lukas said.

“Thank you,” Mica replied.

Joe looked up at him, studying him with open curiosity.

“Do you like Mickey Mouse?” Mary asked suddenly.

Lukas blinked, then smiled. “I think he’s got very good ears.”

Mary considered this carefully. “We like the rides.”

“That sounds important,” Lukas said solemnly.

Mica felt something soften at the edges.

When they were a few steps away, Joe asked quietly, “Is he nice?”

“I think so,” Mica said.

Across the street, Lukas stood watching the family disappear down the block.

“They really love Disney,” he said, almost to himself.

Jodie stood beside him, hands folded behind her back.

“They talk about it like it’s the most magical place that exists,” Lukas continued. “Not just an amusement park.”

He hesitated. “What if... I mean, what if I tried to fix that? Not fix—just help.”

Jodie said nothing.

“That woman,” Lukas continued, “she shouldn’t have to choose between groceries and a good day with her kids.”

Jodie looked at him carefully. “You don’t owe her anything.”

“I know,” Lukas said. “I just want to.”

Jodie nodded slowly. “Whatever you do,” she said, “it has to be because you chose to.”

“I get it,” Lukas replied.

Lukas didn't explain himself when he handed Shurla the envelope.

He held it carefully, as if it carried weight beyond paper.

"Could you give this to Miss Verholtz?" he asked. "Please."

Shurla didn't ask questions. She didn't open it.

"Of course," she said.

Later, Shurla passed the envelope to Mica.

Mica turned it once in her hands, then opened it where she stood.

Three tickets slid out.

Then \$150 dollars cash.

Then the note.

30 globes at \$5 wouldn't be enough to have a good day at Disney. Hopefully this helps. Sorry again.

No name.

Mica stared at it for a long moment.

She looked up at Shurla. "Did he really do this on his own?"

Shurla hesitated just long enough to matter. Then nodded. "Yes."

"No one told him to?"

"No one."

Mica folded the note carefully and placed it in her pocket.

She didn't cry, she wanted to, but she didn't.

She sat very still, thinking about Joe's patience and Mary's laugh.

Across the street, unseen, Jodie watched.

“I didn’t do this,” Jodie said quietly.

Chili glanced at her. “I know.”

“He chose it,” Jodie continued. “All I did was get out of the way.”

Chili nodded once. “Now you see why we have certain rules.”

Chapter Eight

(Sunday Morning)

Sunday mornings at the Alexander house moved at a different speed.

Coffee brewed longer than it needed to. The radio stayed low, murmuring old songs that no one actively listened to but everyone would have noticed if they were gone. Plates were set out before anyone sat down, forks aligned by habit rather than intention. It wasn’t about hunger so much as ritual.

Lukas hovered near the table, hands in his pockets, listening to his parents talk about nothing and everything. Sabrina discussed grocery prices. Markus commented on the weather, then contradicted himself and laughed. Lukas nodded along, his first day at J. J. Turek Construction resting quietly in the back of his mind—heavy, but not frightening.

“Eat,” Sabrina said, pointing with her fork. “You can’t build anything on an empty stomach.”

“I’m eating,” Lukas replied, reaching for toast to prove it.

Markus smirked. “That’s not eating. That’s procrastinating.”

Lukas smiled despite himself.

The knock came just as they were sitting.

Three light raps. Polite. Familiar.

Sabrina glanced at Lukas. “Friend of yours?”

“I think so, I forgot to mention Jodie might be coming for breakfast.” he said, and went to the door.

Jodie stood on the porch, jacket zipped, hair pulled back, looking like she belonged there in a way that surprised even her. She shifted her weight when she saw him, suddenly unsure.

“I’m not late, am I?” she asked.

“Perfect timing,” Sabrina called from the kitchen before Lukas could answer. “Come in.”

Breakfast stretched to make room for her.

Introductions turned into questions, questions into gentle teasing.

“So,” Markus said, folding his paper and setting it aside, “you’re the reason Lukas was reorganizing his closet at midnight?”

“That was optional,” Jodie said quickly, then smiled. “But yes.”

Sabrina laughed. “Anyone willing to help him prepare is welcome here, besides you seem to be rubbing off on him in a good way.”

Jodie relaxed into the chair, answering easily, listening more than she spoke. She noticed how Lukas mirrored his parents when he laughed, how he grew quieter when the attention lingered on him too long.

“And tomorrow?” Sabrina asked. “First day jitters?”

“A little,” Lukas admitted.

“That means you care,” Jodie said. “That’s a good sign. I am positive you’re going to be great.”

When the plates were cleared and the coffee cups emptied, they stood near the door.

“Let’s get supplies,” Jodie said. “Boots, gloves, lunch. No surprises.”

Lukas nodded. “Okay.”

Sabrina watched them go with a thoughtful smile saying “You two behave and have fun”.

The parking lot near the hardware store was busier than Lukas expected for a Sunday.

He noticed it before Jodie did.

A truck from Penbrook Supplies hesitated at the exit. Another car rolled forward too quickly behind it. A third idled, unsure.

Lukas felt the familiar tug to help.

He stepped forward, lifting a hand. “Go ahead,” he said, guiding one driver through.

The second driver misread the signal.

Plastic met metal with a dull, unforgiving crack.

Silence followed. Then voices.

Lukas froze.

The sound hit him harder than the impact. His chest tightened, his thoughts collapsing inward.

I shouldn’t have stepped in.

I made it worse.

Jodie didn’t see the vehicles.

She saw Lukas—standing too still, shoulders tight, eyes unfocused.

This shouldn’t have happened.

The thought wasn’t a plan. It wasn’t a calculation.

It was refusal.

Sound thinned, as if the air itself had been pulled away. Voices stretched and unraveled. The vehicles slid—not forward, but back—awkwardly, reluctantly, like reality correcting itself without enthusiasm.

The crack un-cracked.

Time released its grip.

Lukas blinked.

The vehicles were separated. Drivers sat calmly. No damage. No shouting. No accident.

But Lukas remembered.

His hands shook. He checked the bumpers, then the pavement, then Jodie.

“Did you—” he began, then stopped, breath shallow. “That just—”

Jodie met his eyes.

They moved to a low concrete divider at the edge of the lot. People passed without noticing them.

“I need to tell you something,” Jodie said.

“I know,” Lukas replied. His voice was steady, but only because he was forcing it to be. “I saw it. I felt it.”

She nodded. “I wasn’t supposed to do that.”

“You did that?... What was that?” Lukas asked. “Because it wasn’t nothing, that felt very uncomfortable or unnatural... I’m not sure-how?”

Jodie took a breath and didn’t rush. “I’m your guardian angel,” she said. “I have been assigned to you. Permanently.”

He waited, as if expecting her to laugh.

She didn’t.

She explained carefully—what she was, what she was meant to do, the rules she followed, and the one she had just broken.

“I cannot make you do anything you don’t want to, I am here to help you become your best self. Just consider me a friend with a few unique abilities.”

“You remember because we’re connected,” she said. “For life. And because what I did was for you.”

Lukas stared at the ground. “So everyone else just... didn’t?”

“To them it never happened. They didn’t need to,” Jodie said quietly.

“If you hadn’t—”

“There would’ve been a dent,” she said. “And a bad day.”

“And now?”

Jodie hesitated. “Now there’s something else.”

Lukas leaned back, staring at the sky. “This can’t happen again.”

Jodie nodded. “I know.”

They sat there longer than necessary, the world resuming around them.

Neither of them believed it.

The rest of the day passed in fragments.

Errands were completed. Bags were carried. Words were exchanged only when necessary, each of them careful not to step on the strange new shape that now existed between them. Lukas drove. Jodie watched the road. Silence filled the spaces where conversation usually lived.

By evening, Lukas was exhausted in a way sleep didn’t immediately promise to fix.

He sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, staring at nothing.

The house was quiet. His parents had gone to bed early, Sunday spent the way Sundays always were. Normal. Steady.

Lukas turned the day over in his mind.

Guardian angel.

The words felt unreal, even now.

If she'd been there his whole life—watching, guiding, intervening—what did that say about him?

Had he failed at something fundamental?

Was he broken in a way that required correction?

He pressed his palms together, breathing slowly.

Was there something wrong with me?

—

A faint glow caught his attention through the window.

The old tree house.

A pinprick of light shimmered where there shouldn't have been any.

Lukas stood before he had time to overthink it.

—

The ladder creaked under his weight as he climbed. The night air was cool, carrying the smell of leaves and damp wood.

The tree house was dark when he reached it.

Empty.

Yet Lukas felt something unmistakably familiar.

“You don't have to hide,” he said quietly.

Silence.

Then, softer, “Please.”

The air shifted.

Jodie appeared as if she had always been there.

“You’re good at finding me,” she said.

“You left a light on,” Lukas replied.

She smiled. “Old habit.”

He looked around. “Why here?”

Jodie glanced at the walls, the floor, the small window overlooking the yard.

“My first home,” she said simply.

Lukas blinked. “This?”

She nodded. “Close enough to watch. Far enough to wait.”

“That’s... creepy,” he said, then hesitated. “And kind of comforting.”

She laughed softly.

“Can I show you something?” Jodie asked.

He nodded.

The world shifted—not outward, but inward.

For a moment, Lukas saw the tree house the way she did.

Not abandoned.

Not forgotten.

It glowed gently, layered with years of care, patience, and quiet presence. Every creak carried memory. Every shadow held intention.

It wasn't surveillance.

It was shelter.

The feeling wrapped around him like a blanket.

When it faded, Lukas exhaled shakily.

"That helps," he said.

"I hoped it would," Jodie replied.

He sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. "I keep thinking... if you were assigned to me, does that mean I wasn't enough on my own?"

Jodie sat across from him. "No."

He looked up.

"It means you were loved enough to be given help," she said. "Not because something was wrong. Because something mattered."

Lukas swallowed.

"So this—" he gestured between them "—isn't a correction?"

"It's a gift," Jodie said.

He nodded slowly, letting that settle.

Outside, the tree swayed gently in the night breeze.

For the first time since morning, Lukas felt calm.

Chapter Nine

(Parallel Lines)

Lukas arrived at the J. J. Turek Construction yard fifteen minutes early and still felt late.

The place was already awake. Engines idled. Steel clanged. Men moved with purpose, coffee cups balanced on dashboards and toolboxes. Lukas paused just inside the gate, taking it all in, grounding himself the way Johnnie had suggested the day before.

Observe first. Act second.

He checked his boots. His gloves. The lunch his mother had insisted on packing despite his protests.

Johnnie Turek spotted him from across the yard and gave a single nod.

“Morning,” Johnnie said when Lukas reached him.

“Morning, sir.”

“No sir,” Johnnie replied. “That’s for inspectors.”

Lukas smiled, tension easing a notch.

They walked.

Not toward any particular task at first—just the grounds. Johnnie talked about everyday things yet that sounded like instruction. Weather. Supply delays. A story about a mismeasured foundation from twenty years ago.

Lukas listened.

When Johnnie paused near a stack of lumber, Lukas noticed the slight warp in a few boards before being asked.

“Those’ll need rotating,” Lukas said carefully. “If they sit like that, they’ll bow worse.”

Johnnie looked at the stack. Then at Lukas.

“Good eye.”

That was all.

Mica Verholtz's mornings ran on controlled chaos.

Joe couldn't find his shoes. Mary insisted on wearing a princess dress that did not meet the daycare's definition of weather-appropriate. Cereal was spilled. A cup was saved from the edge of the counter at the last second.

"Shoes," Mica said calmly, already checking under the couch. "Princesses still wear jackets."

Joe grinned. "At Disneyland they do."

"Disneyland has different rules," Mica replied. "Like churros for breakfast."

Mary gasped. "Why don't we live there?"

"Because Mommy likes her job," Mica said, tying a shoe and kissing a forehead.

She liked it because it mattered.

Back at the yard, Lukas was assigned a small task that carried more weight than it looked.

Inventory. Nothing glamorous. Everything essential.

He worked slowly, checking counts twice, noting discrepancies without assuming error. When he finished, he brought the clipboard to Johnnie.

"These numbers don't match last week's log," Lukas said. "But I think it's because the delivery came early. I marked it."

Johnnie scanned the page.

"You didn't guess," he said.

"No," Lukas replied. "I checked."

Johnnie nodded once more.

Mica met Shurla Turek in the quiet corner of a café near City Hall.

Blueprints were spread carefully across the table. Mica spoke with clarity, not urgency—explaining a proposed community project focused on green space, walkable paths, and shared-use facilities.

Shurla listened without interrupting.

“You’ve thought about families,” Shurla said finally.

“They’re the ones who stay,” Mica replied.

Shurla smiled. “Good. The board will try to turn this into a headline. Don’t let them.”

Mica made a note. “I won’t.”

“And Lukas starts today,” Shurla added casually, stirring her tea.

Mica paused only a moment. “I hope it goes well.”

“So do I,” Shurla said. “He’s the kind you build with, not around.”

The afternoon wore on.

Lukas lifted, measured, asked questions when he wasn’t sure. He noticed a temporary barrier that angled too close to an access path and mentioned it quietly.

“We’ll fix it tomorrow,” Johnnie said. “Good catch.”

Lukas nodded, not realizing the note that had just been made—in Johnnie’s head, not on paper.

Mica dropped the kids off, then returned to her desk.

She adjusted her proposal based on Shurla’s advice, refining language, strengthening support points. Outside her window, a construction site buzzed—temporary fencing, foot traffic flowing around it in imperfect arcs.

She watched it for a moment, thoughtful.

Lukas finished his day tired in the right way.

As he left the yard, he felt something unfamiliar settle into place. Not confidence. Not pride.

Belonging.

Across town, Mica closed her laptop with cautious optimism.

Both believed they were finally standing on solid ground.

Neither could see how close their paths already were.

Chapter Ten

(Momentum)

By the end of the week, Lukas no longer felt like he was trespassing at the edge of the yard.

He still arrived early, but now the sounds made sense. The rhythm of engines, the shouted measurements, the metal-on-metal punctuation of work settling into order. He checked his gloves once, then stopped checking them at all.

Johnnie watched from a distance.

“Truck’s early,” someone called.

Lukas glanced at the delivery schedule. “Yeah,” he said. “Let’s stage it by the south fence until the path’s clear.”

No one argued.

That surprised him.

Jodie observed from where she wasn’t.

She stayed back now, farther than she had before. Lukas didn’t need hovering. He was learning to read situations, to pause, to act without apologizing for existing. She felt something dangerously close to pride.

Maybe we’re past it, she thought.

The idea settled too easily.

Near the perimeter of the site, temporary fencing traced an imperfect boundary between work and the public sidewalk. It wasn’t wrong—just unfinished. A gap that would be closed later. A detail waiting its turn.

A pedestrian slowed, uncertain.

Lukas noticed.

“Hold up,” he said, stepping forward. “Let me—”

The sound came sharp and unmistakable.

Bone doesn’t break quietly.

Someone cried out. Tools dropped. A man went down, clutching his arm at an angle that made Lukas’s stomach flip.

“No—no—” Lukas breathed.

Sirens followed quickly. Someone wrapped a jacket around the injury. Another person called out instructions too late to matter.

Lukas stood frozen, the memory of Sunday crashing back with brutal clarity.

He knew what this meant.

He turned.

Jodie was already there.

She hadn't meant to be.

This was worse. Someone was hurt. Lukas's hands trembled, his breath shallow, his face folding inward the way she had learned to recognize.

This wasn't embarrassment.

This was damage.

She hesitated.

And then she didn't.

The world lurched.

This time, Lukas felt it everywhere.

The sound didn't thin—it vanished. Motion peeled backward faster, farther. The sirens unwound. The fallen man rose without knowing why. Time didn't correct itself so much as retreat.

Lukas staggered.

He knew what was coming.

When the moment returned, Lukas acted before the gap even existed.

“Stop,” he called. “Back it up now. Fence stays closed until the Penbrook Supplies delivery's staged.”

People moved.

Earlier. Cleaner.

The pedestrian never hesitated. The truck rolled into place with room to spare. The gap never formed.

No fall.

No scream.

No sirens.

Lukas stood there, heart pounding, watching a version of the day that felt... better.

Different.

Completely.

Jodie joined him, careful not to touch him this time.

“That worked,” Lukas said.

She nodded. “It did.”

He exhaled, a laugh escaping despite himself. “I learned. That’s what this was, right? A second chance.”

Jodie didn’t answer immediately.

Around them, work continued. Normal. Uninterrupted.

“Maybe,” she said finally.

The word felt thin.

Later, when the day ended without incident, Lukas sat in his car longer than usual.

“So... how many times can you do that?” he asked quietly.

Jodie stood beside the open door, the yard emptying behind her.

She looked at him, then away.

“I don’t know,” she said.

That answer stayed with him all the way home.

Neither of them noticed the man who left the site earlier than he would have before, heading down a different street, toward a different afternoon.

The day had been fixed.

The pattern had not.

Chapter Eleven

(Common Ground)

The morning carried the smell of cut lumber and damp earth.

Lukas noticed it the moment he stepped onto the site—the way the air felt heavier near the stacks of timber, how the ground held yesterday’s rain just beneath the surface. His boots pressed into it with a quiet confidence he didn’t yet trust but was starting to accept.

He checked the temporary fencing along the west edge, made a mental note about the barrier that still needed securing, then turned back toward the center of the site.

That was when he heard her voice.

“Excuse me?”

Not loud. Not hesitant. Just clear.

Lukas turned.

She stood a few steps away, holding a folded set of papers against her chest, sunlight catching in her short, pale-blonde hair. It was buzzed close—practical, intentional—and it made her sky-blue eyes stand out sharply against the muted browns and grays of the construction yard.

“Do you know where I can find Shurla Turek?” she asked.

Lukas nodded immediately. “Yeah. She’s over by the trailers. I can walk you there if you want.”

Relief flickered across her face, brief but genuine. “That would be great. Thank you.”

He fell into step beside her, adjusting his pace without thinking so she wouldn’t have to match him. Gravel crunched underfoot. Somewhere, a drill whined, then stopped.

“I’m Lukas,” he said after a moment.

“Mica,” she replied. “Nice to meet you.”

They walked past a forklift idling near the supply shed, the sharp tang of fuel mixing with the cleaner scent of sawdust. Lukas gestured her around a shallow rut in the ground, instinctively placing himself between her and a swinging load of rebar.

“First time on-site?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” Mica said. “But first time here without Shurla already glaring at me from across the yard.”

He smiled. “She does that.”

She laughed—short, surprised. “I thought it was just me.”

They talked easily as they walked. About permits. About how Edenvue seemed to exist half in the present and half twenty years behind it. About Shurla’s uncanny ability to make everyone feel like they were both underprepared and secretly competent.

By the time they reached the trailers, Lukas felt a quiet shift inside himself. He wasn’t performing. He wasn’t rushing. He was just... there.

Mica stopped, adjusted the papers in her hands. “Thanks for walking me over.”

“Anytime,” he said. Then hesitated—just long enough to feel it, not long enough to lose it.

“Would you maybe want to get coffee sometime?” he asked. “Or lunch. If you’re not busy.”

She didn't look surprised.

"Sure," she said. "When?"

That single word—when—settled into him like something clicking into place.

They chose a café two blocks off Main Street. Not charming, exactly. Comfortable. The kind of place that smelled like espresso and toasted bread, with mismatched chairs and a chalkboard menu that changed based on whoever remembered to erase it last.

Mica arrived first, setting her papers aside before Lukas reached the table.

"You look less dusty," she said.

"Give it time," he replied, sitting. "I'm working up to it."

The server took their orders. Coffee for both. A sandwich neither of them had thought through yet.

Outside, a delivery truck passed, tires hissing softly against pavement still damp from morning rain.

"So," Mica said, wrapping her hands around her mug when it arrived. "How long have you been working with Shurla?"

"Not long," Lukas said. "Feels longer."

She nodded. "She has that effect."

They talked about work first—safely. Mica described the city project she was shepherding through its early stages: shared green space, safer walkways, places that invited people to linger instead of rush through.

"I design for families," she said simply. "People who plan to stay."

Lukas listened. Really listened. He didn't interrupt, didn't try to relate it back to himself too quickly.

"That makes sense," he said when she finished. "It feels... permanent."

She smiled at that. "That's the idea."

At some point, the conversation drifted. She mentioned her kids casually, the way people do when they don't expect it to be a problem.

“They’re great,” she said. “Exhausting. Loud. Way too into Disney.”

“Disney?” Lukas asked.

“Obsessed,” she said, rolling her eyes affectionately. “Joe thinks there’s a right way to eat everything. Mary thinks princess dresses are acceptable for all occasions.”

“That tracks,” Lukas said. “I’ve met Mary.”

She looked up sharply. “You have?”

“The park. Snow globes.”

Recognition softened her expression. “That was you.”

He nodded. “I’m... still sorry.”

She waved it off gently. “You didn’t have to do what you did afterward.”

“I wanted to.”

Silence settled—not awkward, just thoughtful. The kind that let you hear the low hum of conversation around you, the clink of dishes, the faint music playing too quietly to identify.

Across the room, Jodie watched.

Not close enough to hear, not far enough to miss the way Lukas leaned back instead of forward, how Mica’s shoulders relaxed as she spoke. Jodie felt something loosen inside her chest—pride, yes, but also a strange, hollow relief.

I didn’t do this, she thought.

And for the first time, that felt like both success and loss.

The date ended without fanfare. No promises, no dramatic linger. Just an easy agreement to do it again.

Outside, the afternoon light slanted warm and forgiving across the street.

Mica walked away thinking, That was easy.

Lukas stood there a moment longer, thinking, I didn’t mess it up.

For once, both thoughts were true.

Chapter Twelve

(Pressure Points)

The good feeling didn't fade all at once.

It thinned.

At first, Lukas thought it was just fatigue—the honest kind that came from real work and long days. He felt it as he crossed the yard that morning, boots crunching over gravel still slick with dew. The air carried the familiar mix of damp earth, diesel exhaust, and fresh-cut lumber. It was a smell that had begun to mean progress to him, a grounding scent that reminded him he belonged here, even if part of him still waited for someone to say otherwise.

Men moved around him with practiced rhythm. Tools clinked. Engines idled. Someone laughed too loudly at a joke Lukas didn't quite hear, and another voice answered with a curse that sounded more affectionate than angry.

He liked being there.

That realization still surprised him.

By Thursday, Lukas wasn't just following instructions. People stopped him mid-stride to ask where something should go, whether a delivery ought to wait, if a temporary brace looked right to him. He answered carefully, always pausing long enough to be sure he wasn't guessing. More often than not, the answers were met with nods—and action.

Johnnie didn't hover. That mattered more than Lukas would've admitted out loud.

From across the yard, Lukas could feel Johnnie's attention without feeling watched, the way a teacher knows when a student no longer needs correction. Jerry Hine passed him midmorning and clapped him once on the shoulder, smiling the way he always did—like the world was a decent place and he intended to prove it.

“You've got good instincts, kid,” Jerry said. “Don't lose 'em.”

Lukas smiled, awkward but genuine, and carried the weight of that sentence with him like a tool he didn't yet know how to use properly.

Mica's text came just before lunch.

Coffee later?

Lukas stood still in the middle of the yard, the noise around him fading slightly as he stared at the screen. His thumb hovered, hesitation not born of fear exactly—but of unfamiliar ease. Things didn't usually come to him this cleanly.

Yeah. I'd like that.

When he sent it, his chest tightened—not painfully, but with the strange sensation that something good was taking up space inside him. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and exhaled slowly.

It felt easy.

That made him nervous.

Jodie watched from where she wasn't.

She had learned quickly that restraint required more energy than action. Watching without touching. Listening without guiding. Letting Lukas move through the world on his own momentum instead of nudging him into better angles.

He didn't need her hand on his shoulder today. He didn't need her voice smoothing the edges of his thoughts. He walked the site with a steadiness that felt earned.

That should have felt like success.

Instead, it made her tired in a way she didn't like examining too closely.

The strain didn't come from a single point of danger. It came from accumulation—the subtle narrowing of margins. A delivery rerouted because of traffic. A crew reassigned mid-task. Temporary fencing extended farther than planned, then left there because it worked well enough.

No one mistake.

Just pressure.

The city board's response arrived just before noon.

Mica stood in Shurla's office, sunlight slanting across old paperwork and a mug that smelled faintly of strong tea. She read the email once, then again, slower the second time.

"They want public access maintained during phase one," Mica said, lowering the tablet. "Foot traffic can't be fully diverted."

Shurla leaned back, exhaling through her nose. "They always want miracles."

"That puts pedestrians closer to active work zones," Mica said. "Families. Kids."

"I know," Shurla replied, already reaching for her phone. "We'll coordinate. The construction lead is careful. Lukas is sharp. He notices things before they turn into headlines."

Mica hesitated. Something tightened in her chest—not panic, but unease.

"That's not—" she started.

But Shurla was already dialing.

By midafternoon, Lukas felt it.

More people on the sidewalk than there had been yesterday. Parents with strollers. Kids walking home from school, backpacks bouncing unevenly against narrow shoulders. The temporary fencing had shifted again—not incorrectly, but closer.

Too close.

He flagged it with the site lead, gesturing to the narrowing gap between barrier and path.

"We'll manage," the man said. "It's only for a day."

Lukas nodded, because arguing would've felt like overstepping—but the unease stayed with him, settling low in his gut like something unfinished.

It happened fast.

A child slipped free from a distracted parent, darting toward the open space with the unthinking confidence only children have. Lukas moved without thinking—calling out, stepping forward, raising a hand.

The equipment stopped with a jolt. Metal groaned. The child froze mid-step, eyes wide. The parent stumbled, catching themselves against a railing, breath coming in short, uneven bursts.

No one was hurt.

The moment passed.

But Lukas's heart didn't slow.

He stood there longer than necessary, watching the child get scooped up, watching the parent laugh shakily and apologize to no one in particular. His hands trembled before he shoved them into his pockets, grounding himself with pressure.

Across the site, Jodie felt it like a pulled wire.

Too close.

She didn't rewind.

She couldn't justify it.

Later, Lukas met Mica at the café.

The smell of roasted coffee and warm bread wrapped around them as they sat near the window, sunlight catching in the steam rising from their mugs. Mica talked about the board—about compromises, about how projects were never just plans but negotiations with reality.

He listened. Nodded. Asked the right questions.

But part of him stayed on the site, replaying the moment that had nearly tipped into something else.

“You okay?” Mica asked gently, noticing the way his attention drifted.

“Yeah,” Lukas said after a beat. “Just... busy day.”

She accepted that without pushing, and the ease of her trust unsettled him more than suspicion ever would have.

That night, Jodie stood in the tree house and watched Edenview settle.

Lights blinked off one by one. Cars passed, then thinned. The quiet felt earned—but fragile.

No disasters.

No corrections.

Just a web pulled tighter than before.

She told herself that was fine. That this was what restraint looked like. That letting things almost happen was part of learning.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that the absence of harm had come too close to meaning nothing at all.

Nothing had gone wrong.

And that frightened her more than if it had.

Chapter Thirteen

(The Shape of What Didn't Happen)

Lukas woke before his alarm, heart already working harder than the day required.

For several seconds, he lay still, staring at the pale gray ceiling, listening to the house breathe around him. Pipes ticked softly in the walls. The refrigerator hummed. Somewhere down the hall, his father snored once, stopped, then started again.

Everything was normal.

That was the problem.

Yesterday had gone right. Not just fine—right. Clean. Efficient. As if the day had been sanded smooth. Lukas had gone to bed with the uneasy sense that he'd stepped off a curb and only realized it after his foot landed safely on the street.

He sat up slowly, rubbing his face.

Nothing bad happened, he told himself.

But the absence felt heavy.

At the construction yard, the difference was subtle enough that Lukas almost missed it.

The air smelled the same—diesel, dust, fresh lumber warming under the sun. The morning chatter rose and fell in familiar rhythms. Tools clanged. Someone argued lightly about measurements near the fence line.

Yet something tugged at Lukas's attention like a loose thread.

The crew felt... thinner.

Not by much. One fewer voice. One fewer laugh drifting through the background noise. Lukas didn't consciously count heads—but he noticed the absence the way you notice a missing step on a staircase after you've already adjusted your footing.

"Where's Phil?" someone asked near the tool trailer.

Jerry Hine shrugged, sipping his coffee. "Left early. Said he had an errand across town. Something about his sister's car."

Lukas's stomach tightened.

Earlier than before.

He hadn't said anything to Phil. Hadn't even spoken to him yesterday. But the word early lodged itself in Lukas's mind and refused to move.

He forced himself to breathe and turned back to work.

Jodie stayed farther away than she had since the first rewind.

She watched Lukas from the edge of things, where presence became observation instead of influence. He moved differently today—calmer, more decisive. He stepped in sooner, redirected people before confusion could take root, anticipated problems that might have gone unnoticed before.

It was working.

That scared her.

This wasn't correction anymore.

This was optimization.

Each rewind didn't just erase an outcome—it reshuffled momentum. People arrived earlier. Left sooner. Took different paths because something felt right or wrong without them knowing why.

The world wasn't resetting.

It was adapting.

Across town, Mica felt it too—though she had no language for it.

Her meeting with the city planning committee ran short. A scheduling conflict had appeared overnight, forcing a key member to leave early. No one was upset. Apologies were exchanged. Papers were shuffled and promises made to reconvene.

“We'll pick this up next week,” someone said cheerfully. “No harm done.”

Mica nodded, but the phrase stuck with her as she walked out into the parking lot.

No harm done.

The day felt rearranged. Like furniture moved in the dark—not enough to trip over, but enough to make you hesitate before sitting down.

The truck took a different route because of the rewind.

That part was easy to trace—if you knew where to look.

When Lukas redirected the delivery earlier than before, the company dispatcher updated the route automatically. A minor adjustment. A left turn instead of a right. Two fewer lights. Three fewer minutes.

Phil left early because of that same adjustment.

The yard wrapped sooner. Tasks completed faster. The idle conversation that would've kept him there another fifteen minutes never happened. Phil decided to run his errand now instead of later, before traffic thickened.

He told himself it was efficiency.

Midafternoon, Lukas felt it without knowing why.

A sharp, breath-stealing sensation cut through him, stopping him mid-step as he crossed the yard. His hands clenched at his sides, nails biting into his palms.

It wasn't pain.

It was recognition.

He looked up, scanning the site, the street beyond the fence, the sky overhead.

“Do you feel that?” he asked Jodie quietly.

She had.

Not like before.

This wasn't pressure.

This was rupture.

Phil stood at the crosswalk two miles away, phone buzzing in his pocket as the delivery truck rolled toward the intersection on a green light that would have been red yesterday.

He hesitated—not because something felt wrong, but because he’d learned to trust small instincts over time. The light flickered. The driver glanced down for half a second.

A car horn blared somewhere behind him.

Phil stepped forward.

Jodie turned—not toward Lukas, but toward the invisible thread that tied cause to consequence.

For the first time since her assignment began, she saw the chain clearly enough to frighten her.

If Lukas hadn’t redirected the delivery, the route wouldn’t have changed.

If the route hadn’t changed, the truck wouldn’t be there now.

If Phil hadn’t left early, he wouldn’t be at that corner.

X had moved Y.

Y was now placing Z.

She couldn’t rewind this without unraveling something bigger.

And she knew—deep in the part of her that understood rules as more than words—that doing so again would not erase the damage.

It would only send it somewhere else.

Sirens wailed faintly across Edenvue.

Lukas looked up sharply, heart pounding.

“Do you hear that?” he asked.

Jodie didn’t answer.

She was already making a calculation that no angel was meant to make—not how to fix what was coming, but whether she was still allowed to try.

And whether saving one life again would only demand another in return.

Chapter Fifteen

(Just Enough)

Morning came without ceremony.

Lukas had slept, technically, but his body hadn't agreed with the definition. His eyes burned the way they did after long drives or bad decisions. The house was quiet in that soft, Sunday-adjacent way—too calm, too forgiving.

Jodie stood by the window, arms folded, watching the street as if it might do something unexpected.

“You don't have to keep looking,” Lukas said gently. “Nothing's happening.”

Jodie didn't turn. “That's what worries me.”

They'd agreed the night before. Not argued. Not debated. Just... arrived. The way people do when the alternatives are worse.

Phil had lost his leg.

Not his life. Not his family. But the thing he'd stood on for thirty years, the thing that anchored him in a trade that required balance and trust and muscle memory.

Johnnie had explained it carefully. Jerry had looked at the floor while he did.

Probably won't frame again.

That word—probably—had echoed in Lukas's head all night.

“I don’t want to undo everything,” Lukas said now, sitting at the kitchen table, hands wrapped around a mug that had long gone cold. “I just... I keep thinking about that moment. One step. One inch. If he’d shifted his weight—”

Jodie turned at last.

“That’s not how it works,” she said softly.

“I know,” Lukas replied. “But you said it’s not outcomes. It’s moments.”

She hesitated.

“That’s true,” she said. “But moments don’t exist in isolation. They’re held in place by other things. Pressure. Timing. People.”

“I’m not asking for a miracle,” Lukas said quickly. “Just... less.”

Jodie closed her eyes.

This was the first time he had framed it that way.

Less.

Not undo it.

Not fix everything.

Just... less harm.

“That’s the dangerous part,” she said. “When it feels reasonable.”

Silence stretched between them. The refrigerator clicked. Somewhere down the block, a car door shut.

Finally, Jodie nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “But we keep it narrow. We don’t touch the site. We don’t change the sequence. Just... Phil.”

Lukas exhaled, relief and dread arriving together.

The rewind did not welcome them.

There was no clean thinning of sound this time. No gentle unraveling. It felt like pushing against thick water, like forcing open something that preferred to stay closed.

Jodie braced herself, feet planted, hands slightly raised—not in command, but in resistance.

Time buckled.

Lukas felt the shift everywhere at once: behind his eyes, in his chest, in the strange sense that gravity had briefly forgotten which way it was supposed to pull.

The moment stretched—not backward, exactly, but sideways.

Phil's foot hovered half an inch higher than before.

A different muscle engaged. A fraction of weight redistributed.

The cost landed immediately.

Jodie staggered.

Lukas caught her without thinking, her weight heavier than it should have been, her breath uneven.

“Okay,” she said, forcing steadiness into her voice. “Okay. That’s—”

The world snapped back.

No alarms. No sirens. No visible fracture in the day.

Just the ordinary hum of a morning continuing as if it had never known another version.

The news came later.

Phil's leg couldn't be saved—but the damage was cleaner. No infection. Faster stabilization. A better prognosis for pain.

He'll walk, the doctor had said. Just... differently.

Lukas nodded through the explanation, guilt loosening its grip just enough to breathe.

Jodie stood beside him, pale, her focus too sharp.

“This was enough,” Lukas said quietly as they left the hospital. “We stop here.”

Jodie didn’t answer right away.

Then: “Yes.”

She meant it.

She had to.

—

The diner lights glowed warm against the early evening.

The same smell hit Lukas the moment they stepped inside—coffee, grease, something sweet that lingered in the air like memory. It felt grounding in a way he hadn’t realized he needed.

Debbie looked up from behind the counter.

“Hey,” she said brightly. “You’re early tonight.”

Lukas paused.

“Am I?” he asked.

Debbie frowned slightly. “Yeah. You were just—” She stopped herself, shook her head. “Never mind. Sit wherever.”

Jodie noticed the way Lukas’s shoulders tensed for half a second before relaxing again.

They slid into a booth.

Menus slapped down. Silverware clinked.

Normal.

Then the door opened again.

Joe spotted Lukas first.

“Hi!” he called, already halfway across the room.

Mary followed, jacket slipping off one shoulder, eyes lighting up when she saw him.

Mica stopped short, surprised—then smiled.

“Well,” she said. “This feels familiar.”

Lukas stood quickly. “Hi. I mean—hi. Um. This is—”

“Jodie,” Jodie said smoothly, standing. “Nice to meet you.”

“She’s a friend of my family,” Lukas added, the words coming easily.

Mica nodded, something about the phrasing settling her immediately.

Joe climbed into the booth beside Jodie without hesitation.

Mary followed.

They didn’t ask.

They didn’t hover.

They just... were.

Dinner unfolded the way good accidents do.

Debbie pushed two tables together without asking. Orders overlapped. Mary insisted on dessert first. Joe negotiated fries with the seriousness of a diplomat.

Jodie answered questions easily—about favorite colors, about animals, about whether she liked pancakes more than waffles.

“Waffles,” she said. “But only if they’re crispy.”

Mary approved.

Mica watched it all quietly.

Her kids were calmer than usual. Happier. Mary ate her vegetables without protest. Joe leaned against the booth, relaxed in a way that was rare.

Something about Jodie felt... safe.

Not impressive. Not flashy.

Just safe.

“You look good,” Mica said to Lukas at one point. “Tired—but good.”

“I feel... steady,” he replied honestly.

Debbie refilled coffee cups, eyeing them with a smile.

“You all look like you belong here,” she said.

Jodie stiffened—just a little.

Lukas didn't notice.

Disneyland came up the way important things sometimes do—by accident.

Joe started talking about rides. Mary declared she wasn't afraid of anything “except dragons.” Lukas admitted he'd never been.

Mica hesitated, then decided.

“We're going soon,” she said. “Would you want to come with us?”

The question hung there—not heavy, but real.

Lukas didn't overthink it.

“Yes,” he said.

Relief washed over him so strongly it surprised him.

Jodie watched him accept something she could never give.

Outside, the diner buzzed softly with life.

Inside, warmth settled where fear had been.

And somewhere beneath it all, unnoticed, something waited.

Chapter Sixteen

(False Vectors)

Morning arrived gently at the Alexander house.

Sunlight filtered through the thin kitchen curtains, landing in familiar places—on the counter where Sabrina kept the fruit bowl, across the corner of the table where Markus always left his keys, and along the back of Lukas’s chair like a hand resting there a moment longer than usual.

Sabrina was already moving, humming softly as she poured coffee. Not rushing. Not lingering. Just present in the way that made a house feel awake rather than occupied.

“You’re early,” she said, glancing at the clock as Lukas came in.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Lukas replied. He paused, then corrected himself. “I slept. Just... woke up ready.”

Sabrina smiled at that. “That’s a good thing.”

Markus folded his paper and set it aside. “Careful. Ready turns into busy real fast.”

Lukas grinned and reached for a mug. “I think I’m still learning the difference.”

Breakfast unfolded without ceremony. Eggs, toast, quiet commentary about the weather that contradicted itself twice before anyone noticed. Sabrina laughed longer than necessary at something Markus said—nothing especially funny, just familiar.

She reached across the table to brush a crumb from Lukas’s sleeve.

“You’ve got sawdust already,” she said.

“I haven’t even been to work yet.”

“Then it’s ambition dust,” Markus offered.

They laughed.

Lukas caught himself watching them—not anxiously, not sentimentally, just taking them in. The way Markus leaned back when he talked. The way Sabrina moved through the kitchen like she belonged to the space rather than occupied it.

He didn’t know why that mattered so much this morning.

The job site was efficient.

Not tense. Not chaotic. Efficient in a way that felt earned.

Johnnie moved through the yard with measured authority, fielding questions, checking progress, redirecting without raising his voice. Shurla stood near the temporary office trailer, phone tucked against her shoulder, one hand shading her eyes as she surveyed the site.

Lukas worked steadily, exactly where he was needed. He noticed a delay before it became a problem. He flagged a discrepancy in materials before anyone else tripped over it. He didn’t rush to fix things—he positioned them so they didn’t need fixing.

Johnnie watched this quietly.

At one point, an inspector arrived unannounced. Paperwork surfaced. A question about permits rippled through the site.

Lukas felt the old instinct rise—to overexplain, to apologize preemptively.

Instead, he waited.

Shurla handled it calmly. Johnnie backed her without escalation. The inspector left satisfied.

The tension dissolved.

Jodie observed from the periphery, invisible, unsettled by how smooth it all felt.

Not wrong.

Just... frictionless.

Joe Sr. spent his morning in fragments.

A cup of coffee he reheated twice and never finished. A text he typed, erased, then sent anyway. He watched Joe wrestle his backpack zipper while Mary narrated the injustice of socks.

“Dad,” Joe said, suddenly serious, “are you coming tonight?”

Joe Sr. paused. “I’m going to try.”

Mary climbed into his lap without asking. “You always try.”

He smiled at that, pressed his cheek to her hair.

“I do,” he said. “I really do.”

After they left, the house felt louder for being empty.

Joe Sr. stood in the kitchen for a moment, staring at the counter where Mica used to leave notes. He didn’t miss her exactly—not the way people expected.

He missed the shape of a family that used to exist without effort.

He grabbed his keys, hesitated, then checked the time.

He rearranged his schedule without knowing why.

Midday passed without incident.

The job site’s minor issues resolved themselves. Shurla and Johnnie walked the perimeter together, talking quietly about logistics, about timelines, about nothing that carried emotional weight.

Lukas checked his phone once—no messages.

He didn’t feel disappointed.

Just... oddly ahead of himself.

As if the day were unfolding faster than his body could fully register.

Later, at Elysian Park, Lukas and Jodie sat on a bench overlooking the lake. The sun was lower now, casting long reflections across the water.

“I feel like we’re doing it right,” Lukas said after a while.

Jodie tilted her head. “What’s ‘it’?”

“Life,” he said, then laughed at himself. “I know that sounds ridiculous.”

“It doesn’t,” she replied.

He stared out at the water. “Everything’s working. My parents. Work. Mica and the kids. Even the hard stuff feels... manageable.”

Jodie watched him carefully. “That scares you.”

“A little,” he admitted. “It feels like momentum without brakes.”

She considered that. “Momentum isn’t bad.”

“No,” Lukas said. “But it doesn’t ask permission.”

They sat in silence, the park settling around them.

“Do you think,” Lukas asked slowly, “that sometimes we fix things too fast to understand them?”

Jodie didn’t answer right away.

“I think,” she said finally, “that understanding isn’t always the goal.”

He nodded, accepting that.

They didn’t talk about rewinds.

They didn’t talk about consequences.

They didn't talk about anything that felt like warning.

That evening, Sabrina folded laundry with the radio on low. Markus fixed a loose hinge he'd been ignoring for weeks.

Joe Sr. sat in his car for a moment before turning the key.

Shurla reviewed notes she wouldn't need again.

Johnnie locked the office and stood looking at the site with quiet satisfaction.

And Lukas drove home, feeling grounded, steady, good.

Nothing was wrong.

Nothing was threatening.

Nothing felt broken.

And somehow—

That felt like standing on something that hadn't settled yet.

Chapter Seventeen

(What We Carry for Others)

The mall was louder than Mica remembered.

Not noisy exactly—just full. Shoes squeaked on polished tile. Music drifted from somewhere overhead, changing every few storefronts. Voices overlapped in bright, meaningless layers, punctuated by the sudden shriek of a child discovering something wonderful or unfair.

Joe walked half a step ahead of her, scanning storefronts with the seriousness of a cartographer. Mary lagged behind, fascinated by a kiosk selling phone cases shaped like animals.

“Mary,” Mica said without turning, “if you lick anything that isn’t food, we’re leaving.”

Mary considered this deeply. “Even the unicorn?”

“Especially the unicorn.”

Mary sighed, tragic. “This place is dangerous.”

Joe snorted. “You say that every time.”

“That’s because it keeps being true.”

Mica shifted the shopping bags higher on her arm, already recalculating whether she could make it through one more store without needing a break. She could. She always could. That didn’t mean she wanted to.

They ducked into a clothing store—one of those places that smelled faintly of fabric softener and optimism. Joe immediately disappeared into a rack of hoodies. Mary spun in a slow circle, watching her reflection multiply in angled mirrors.

“Okay,” Mica said, clapping once. “We are here for shoes. Not jackets. Not hats. Shoes.”

Joe nodded solemnly. “I know.”

He reached for a jacket.

Mica closed her eyes for half a second.

That was when a handbag slid off a nearby bench and hit the floor with a soft thud.

“Oh—sorry,” Mica said automatically, bending to grab it at the same time another hand reached down.

“No worries,” Sabrina said, smiling. “It was asking for it.”

They both straightened, still holding the bag between them for a moment longer than necessary.

Sabrina released it first. “You’ve got good reflexes.”

“Practice,” Mica replied. “Kids throw things.”

Sabrina laughed—not politely, but with recognition. “Yes, they do.”

Mary chose that moment to appear between them, holding a glittery shoe upside down. “This one is too fancy for running.”

Sabrina crouched slightly to look at it. “That’s important information.”

Mary nodded, satisfied to be taken seriously.

Joe returned, hoodie still in hand. “Mom, this one has a pocket inside the pocket.”

“That’s a jacket,” Mica said.

“It’s a feature.”

Sabrina glanced between them, amused. “Features are how they get you.”

Mica smiled despite herself. “That’s what I keep telling him.”

They stood there for a moment, neither in a hurry, the noise of the mall folding around them.

“You’re doing a good job,” Sabrina said casually, as if commenting on the weather.

Mica blinked. “With... the shoes?”

“With them,” Sabrina said, nodding toward Joe and Mary. “They’re comfortable in crowds. That’s not nothing.”

Mica felt the compliment land somewhere unexpected. “We practice,” she said lightly. “A lot.”

Mary tugged on Sabrina’s sleeve. “Are you a mom?”

Sabrina laughed. “I am.”

“Are you tired?”

“Always.”

Mary considered this, then nodded. “Okay.”

Joe glanced up. “Do you have kids our age?”

Sabrina smiled. “Mine’s grown.”

Joe’s eyebrows rose. “Like... all the way?”

“All the way.”

Joe looked impressed. “Did he live?”

Mica covered her mouth. Sabrina laughed so hard she had to lean against the bench.

“Yes,” she said, still laughing. “He lived.”

They talked a little longer—about shoe sizes, about growth spurts that seemed to happen overnight, about how kids always needed new things right after you thought you were done buying them.

No one exchanged names.

No one asked follow-up questions.

They didn’t need to.

When they finally drifted apart, it felt natural, like lanes in foot traffic shifting without effort.

The hardware store smelled like wood and metal and something faintly electrical.

Markus stood in front of a wall of hinges, holding two nearly identical ones and frowning like the fate of the house depended on this choice.

“They’re the same,” Joe Sr. said from beside him.

Markus glanced over. “They’re absolutely not.”

Joe Sr. leaned closer, squinting. “One’s shinier.”

“Exactly.”

Joe Sr. chuckled. “You fixing something?”

“Hinge’s been squeaking for three months,” Markus said. “I finally decided it deserved attention.”

Joe Sr. nodded. “They do that. Get louder when you ignore them.”

They moved down the aisle together without quite deciding to.

Joe Sr. picked up a box of screws, put it back, picked it up again. “You ever notice how instruction manuals assume you’ve already failed?”

Markus smiled. “They’re very judgmental.”

They stopped near a display of tools neither of them needed.

“Kids?” Markus asked, nodding toward a photo on Joe Sr.’s phone that flashed briefly.

Joe Sr. hesitated, then showed him. Joe and Mary, grinning at something off-camera.

“Yeah,” he said. “They’re... good.”

“That’s a relief,” Markus replied. “I hear mixed reviews.”

Joe Sr. laughed, then sobered slightly. “I just hope they remember I tried. You know? Even when it wasn’t smooth.”

Markus considered that. “Kids remember who showed up tired.”

Joe Sr. looked at him, surprised. “You think?”

“I know,” Markus said.

They stood there a moment longer, then both reached for the same tape measure and laughed.

“Guess I don’t need this,” Joe Sr. said, setting it back.

“Neither do I,” Markus replied.

They left the aisle lighter than they’d entered it.

Lukas saw his mother across the mall from a distance, laughing with a person he couldn’t see but was fairly certain it as Mica, while Joe and Mary argued quietly about shoes.

He didn’t interrupt.

Later, at the hardware store, he noticed his father talking with a man whose posture and tired patience felt familiar, even before he recognized Joe Sr.

Again, he didn't interrupt.

It felt important not to.

That evening, the mall lights dimmed in stages. The hardware store aisles went dark one by one.

People went home with bags, with screws, with nothing at all.

Everyone had done something small and useful.

No one knew it mattered.

Chapter Eighteen

(The Day That Worked)

The day began without resistance.

Lukas noticed it immediately—not because anything remarkable happened, but because nothing pushed back. His alarm went off when it was supposed to. The shower warmed quickly. His coffee tasted right. Even the sky cooperated, overcast enough to be comfortable, bright enough to promise clearing later.

It felt earned.

At the job site, everything landed where it should. Trucks arrived on schedule. Materials matched the manifests. Crews moved with the easy shorthand of people who had worked together long enough to trust each other's instincts.

Johnnie Turek gave Lukas a nod as he passed.

Not approval exactly.

Acknowledgment.

Shurla walked the perimeter with a clipboard, checking boxes she fully expected to check. When the inspector arrived, it was procedural, brief, almost boring.

The inspector left satisfied.

Nothing escalated.

No one held their breath.

By noon, the site hummed with the comfortable noise of progress.

Lukas stood back for a moment, hands on his hips, watching the frame take shape. He felt the unfamiliar pleasure of contribution without consequence—of being useful without being tested.

This, he thought, must be what competence feels like.

Across town, Sabrina navigated the grocery store with her usual efficiency. She found everything on her list, remembered the one thing Markus always forgot to ask for, and ran into a neighbor she hadn't seen in months.

They talked about nothing important and everything that mattered—weather, routines, whose kids were taller now.

Sabrina laughed easily.

Markus finished tightening the hinge at home and opened the door slowly, deliberately.

No squeak.

He stood there for a moment longer than necessary, then nodded once, satisfied. He didn't announce it. He just enjoyed the quiet.

Joe Sr. picked the kids up on time.

Joe talked nonstop about something involving numbers and a game that may or may not have existed. Mary sang a song that changed keys halfway through and didn't apologize for it.

Joe Sr. laughed more than he usually did.

He noticed it only later.

—

By late afternoon, Lukas felt something he wasn't used to feeling at the end of a workday.

Not exhaustion. Not relief.

Completion.

He walked home slower than usual, letting the day settle into him instead of racing ahead of it.

When he reached the yard, he looked up.

The tree house sat where it always had, nestled into the branches like it belonged there. The ladder creaked the same way it had since he was a teenager. The wood smelled faintly of sap and dust and something nostalgic he couldn't name.

Jodie was already there.

She sat cross-legged on the floor, jacket off, hair loose, looking entirely at ease in the small space. She smiled when she saw him.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," Lukas replied, climbing in and settling opposite her.

For a moment, they didn't speak.

The tree shifted gently in the breeze. Leaves brushed against the walls. Somewhere nearby, a lawn sprinkler clicked on and off.

"I think," Lukas said finally, "today worked."

Jodie nodded. "It did."

No hesitation. No caveat.

He leaned back against the wall, stretching his legs. “Everything lined up. Work. People. Timing. It felt like... we weren’t chasing anything.”

Jodie smiled at that. “That’s usually a good sign.”

They sat quietly, the way adults do when silence isn’t something to escape.

“You know,” Lukas said, glancing around, “I used to come up here when I wanted to feel like the world made sense. It was small. Predictable. I could see my whole yard.”

Jodie looked around the space, really looked at it. “It still is.”

He laughed softly. “Yeah. Just... scaled differently now.”

They talked about unimportant things.

About how odd it was that nostalgia didn’t feel sad tonight. About how strange it was to remember childhood without wishing to go back. About how good it felt to be tired for the right reasons.

Jodie listened more than she spoke.

At one point, Lukas said, almost offhandedly, “I don’t feel like I need fixing.”

Jodie met his eyes. “Good.”

He studied her face for a moment, then smiled. “I think we’re okay.”

She didn’t argue.

She believed it too.

The sun dipped lower, painting the edges of the yard in gold. Lights flicked on in nearby houses. Dinner smells drifted through the air.

Eventually, Lukas stood and brushed off his hands. “Same time tomorrow?”

Jodie smiled. “If you want.”

“I do.”

He climbed down first this time, steady, confident. When he looked back up, Jodie was still there, watching the yard the way she always did—not guarding it, just being present.

Nothing needed fixing.

And for once, that felt like progress.

Chapter Nineteen

(Impact)

Sabrina had the radio on low.

Not because she was listening closely, but because silence had a way of pulling her attention toward places she wasn't ready to visit yet. The song changed halfway through a thought she hadn't finished, and she adjusted the volume once—slightly too loud, then back again.

Traffic moved the way it always did. Uneven, but predictable. Brake lights bloomed and faded in patterns she'd learned without ever realizing it. Someone ahead hesitated at a yellow light, then committed.

Sabrina smiled faintly.

Good, she thought. People are paying attention today.

She checked her mirrors. Her hands rested comfortably on the wheel. She had groceries in the back seat and a list in her head that included dinner, laundry, and reminding Markus about the hinge—though she couldn't quite remember why that felt important.

Joe Sr. was three lanes over.

He wasn't late. He wasn't early. He wasn't rushing. His coffee sat untouched in the cup holder, long forgotten. One thumb tapped lightly against the worn seam of the steering wheel, a habit he'd picked up without meaning to.

He was thinking about Joe's backpack zipper—how it kept catching—and whether Mary would remember her sweater when it got cold later.

He didn't reach for his phone.

He didn't speed.

He just drove.

Johnnie Turek was locking up the site office.

The day had gone well. Better than expected, actually. Inspections passed. Deliveries landed where they should have. No one cut corners. No one got hurt. He checked the lock twice out of habit, then slid the key into his pocket.

Shurla stood near her car, flipping through notes she wouldn't need again.

"Tomorrow looks good," she said.

Johnnie nodded. "Feels like we're ahead."

Shurla smiled slightly. "Careful. I don't trust days that feel generous."

"Neither do I," Johnnie said, though his tone was light. "But I'll take it."

They parted without ceremony, each heading toward a different direction, carrying the quiet satisfaction of work done properly.

Lukas and Jodie walked side by side along a familiar stretch of sidewalk, the late afternoon air comfortable enough that neither felt the need to rush.

"I burned the dumplings," Jodie said matter-of-factly.

Lukas laughed. "Burned burned?"

"Charcoal-adjacent."

"That's progress," he said. "The first ones I made could've been used as paperweights."

She bumped his shoulder gently. "Sabrina says I'm rushing the timing."

“She’s right,” Lukas said. “Timing is everything.”

They talked about nothing important.

About a diner they hadn’t been to in a while. About how strange it was that routines were starting to feel earned instead of accidental. About how nostalgia didn’t hurt tonight—it just felt warm.

Jodie listened, smiling more than she spoke.

“I like days like this,” Lukas said. “Nothing dramatic. Nothing to fix.”

Jodie nodded. “They don’t announce themselves.”

They crossed the street together, not noticing the way traffic slowed unevenly up ahead.

Markus tightened the last screw on the hinge and opened the door slowly.

Quiet.

He leaned back against the frame, testing it again, then once more just to be sure. He exhaled, satisfied, and made a mental note to tell Sabrina later.

He didn’t write it down.

Mica stood in line at the community office holding paperwork she’d already reviewed twice. The fluorescent lights buzzed softly overhead. Her phone vibrated once in her bag, then went still again.

She didn’t check it.

Joe and Mary were with the sitter. Everything was accounted for. Everything was fine.

The sound wasn’t loud at first.

It arrived indirectly—metal folding somewhere it wasn’t supposed to, a sharp interruption in the background rhythm of the city. Traffic slowed. Someone braked too hard. Someone swore.

Then noise arrived all at once.

Not a single crash, but many. Motion redistributed itself violently, without coordination or intention. Cars stopped being objects and became forces. Glass shattered. Something heavy rolled.

Someone screamed.

Someone didn't.

The world lurched, corrected, and kept going.

Chili felt it like a sudden drop in pressure.

Not pain. Not fear.

Absence.

He stopped mid-step, the world around him blurring at the edges as something tore—not loudly, not dramatically, but cleanly. A thread pulled too many times finally giving way.

“Oh,” he said quietly.

This wasn't a mistake.

This wasn't something he could trace backward and fix.

This was permitted.

And it was irreversible.

Lukas's phone rang while he stood at a crosswalk, waiting for the light to change.

He almost ignored it.

He answered without greeting.

“Yes?”

The voice on the other end was careful. Not rehearsed, but restrained—the kind of voice people used when they were choosing words instead of speaking freely.

“There’s been an accident,” the voice said. “Multiple vehicles. We’re contacting family members.”

Lukas didn’t respond.

“We need you to come to Mercy General.”

“Who?” Lukas asked. “Who was involved?”

A pause. Paper shifting. Breathing.

“Your mother,” the voice said. “And... Joseph Verholtz.”

The light changed.

Lukas didn’t cross.

Jodie was suddenly beside him. She hadn’t heard the words, but she saw his face.

The hospital smelled like disinfectant and something older beneath it.

Plastic chairs lined the walls in a way that suggested permanence rather than comfort. A television mounted too high played a program no one was watching. A vending machine hummed steadily, indifferent.

Lukas sat because someone told him to.

Jodie stood nearby, hands folded, expression carefully neutral.

Markus arrived alone.

He didn’t speak when he saw Lukas. He just placed a hand on his shoulder and left it there longer than usual.

Time passed.

It did not announce itself.

Shurla arrived quietly, her posture composed, eyes already searching for information she knew might not exist yet. Johnnie followed not long after, his jaw set, his hands empty.

Mica arrived later, breathless and pale, Joe and Mary held close on either side of her. She asked questions that no one answered well. She sat. She stood. She sat again.

Joe Sr. was not there.

No one said why.

Lukas stared at the clock on the wall.

It was round. White. Ordinary. The second hand moved with ruthless consistency, clicking into place with mechanical indifference. He followed it around the face, waiting for it to hesitate.

Any second now, he thought.

He didn't know what he expected—a stutter, a pause, the smallest acknowledgment that something had gone wrong.

Nothing happened.

The hand reached twelve and kept going.

A nurse stepped into the waiting area.

She glanced at her clipboard, then up.

“Sabrina Alexander?” she said.

Lukas stood too quickly.

The clock continued to move.

It always would.

Chapter Twenty

(What Still Moves)

Hospitals never slept, but they did slow down at night.

The hall outside the trauma wing hummed with low, mechanical sounds—machines breathing for people, carts rolling by with soft rubber wheels, shoes whispering against polished floors. Voices stayed quiet here, even when there was no reason for them to be. Everyone seemed to understand that volume did not belong.

Lukas sat in a plastic chair against the wall, his back straight, his hands folded neatly in his lap as if someone might inspect them. He had not moved in a long time.

Across from him, a large digital clock hung above a double set of doors.

11:48 p.m.

The seconds blinked forward, one at a time.

Markus stood several feet away near the vending machines, staring at the options without reading any of them. He hadn't put money in. He hadn't moved his hands. He just stood there, shoulders slightly hunched, like a man waiting for instructions that weren't coming.

Mica sat with Joe and Mary pressed close to her sides. Mary's head rested against her shoulder, fingers twisted into the fabric of Mica's sleeve. Joe sat upright, rigid, his feet not quite touching the floor. He hadn't asked any questions. That worried Mica more than if he had.

A nurse walked by and paused, scanning a clipboard.

"Lukas Alexander?" she asked gently.

Lukas looked up at once. "Yes."

"She'll be with you shortly," the nurse said, already moving again.

Lukas nodded. He didn't say thank you. He returned his gaze to the clock.

11:49 p.m.

—

No one ever said now.

There was no moment when the room shifted or the air changed. A doctor appeared, spoke in careful, rounded sentences that felt designed not to catch on anything sharp.

“I’m very sorry.”

“We did everything we could.”

“The injuries were not survivable.”

Lukas heard the words, but they slid past him, catching only on one phrase.

Timing.

The doctor mentioned it once, almost in passing. The way impacts aligned. The way forces met at exactly the wrong moment.

Timing.

Lukas nodded when he was supposed to. He signed where they pointed. He answered questions with precision, his voice calm, even.

It wasn’t numbness.

It was focus.

Later—how much later, he wasn’t sure—Lukas found himself standing alone near the far end of the corridor. Jodie stood beside him, close enough that he could feel her presence even without looking.

She didn’t speak right away.

“You don’t have to hold it together,” she said finally, softly.

“I’m not,” Lukas replied.

He meant it.

His mind was already moving backward, replaying things not as memories, but as sequences.

The parking lot.

The first rewind.

The job site.

The second rewind.

Earlier action. Faster movement. Better decisions.

Better outcomes.

Except now.

“If I hadn’t learned so quickly,” he said quietly, eyes still on the floor. “If I hadn’t started acting earlier... people wouldn’t have moved the way they did.”

Jodie felt something tighten in her chest.

“That’s not—” she began, then stopped.

She didn’t know yet what was true, only that something was wrong with the shape of his thinking.

Lukas continued, almost conversational. “I thought getting better was the point.”

“It is,” Jodie said carefully.

“But improvement changes timing,” he said. “And timing changes where people are.”

He looked up at her then, not accusing—searching.

“I didn’t mean to get better this fast.”

Jodie reached for his hand. He let her take it, but his grip was distant, his thoughts already elsewhere.

She stayed with him through the night.

She brought him water. She sat beside him when the hallway emptied. She spoke to him as a person, not as what she was. She reminded him to breathe, to sit, to stand, to follow the slow, terrible process of leaving.

But underneath it all, something was wrong.

Jodie could feel it.

Not as guilt.

As scale.

This grief was too large for the place it occupied. It pressed outward, as if straining against an unseen boundary.

She didn't understand it yet.

Only that this loss didn't feel like an end.

It felt like a bend.

Near dawn, when the sky outside the windows began to pale, Lukas found himself back in the same chair he had started in.

The clock was still there.

5:06 a.m.

He watched the seconds pass, no longer hoping they would stop.

He wasn't waiting for time to break.

He was watching to see how it behaved when no one asked anything of it.

Jodie noticed.

And for the first time since she had been assigned to him, she felt afraid—not of what had happened, but of what he was quietly preparing to believe.

The clock blinked forward again.

Nothing stopped.

Chapter Twenty-One

(The Weight of Permission)

Jodie didn't remember leaving the hospital.

She remembered the cold.

The air outside had the wrong texture—too sharp, too clean, as if the world had rinsed itself while everything inside remained stained. She stood near the edge of the parking structure, one hand resting on the concrete rail, watching headlights thread through the early morning streets below.

Nothing felt torn.

That was what frightened her.

She closed her eyes and listened—not to sound, but to structure. To the rules beneath things.

Usually, loss felt like a snap—a clean severing that left tension vibrating in its wake. This didn't. This felt folded. Knotted. Like momentum redirected instead of stopped.

“That's not right,” she whispered.

Behind her, the world continued on without apology. A bird landed briefly on the rail beside her, cocked its head, then flew away.

Whatever had happened had already settled into place.

“You shouldn't be doing that.”

Jodie didn't turn.

“I know,” she said.

Chili stood several feet away, hands in his coat pockets, posture still, eyes serious in a way Jodie had never seen.

“No jokes?” she asked.

“Not today.”

That scared her more than anything else.

“This wasn’t at Lukas,” she said quickly, needing to say it aloud. “It passed through him, but it didn’t start with him.”

Chili nodded once. “Correct.”

“And it wasn’t malicious.”

“No.”

“And it doesn’t feel finished.”

Chili exhaled slowly. “Also correct.”

She turned to face him. “Then tell me what rule this broke.”

Chili met her gaze without softening his voice. “It didn’t break one. It bent several.”

Her stomach dropped.

“That’s worse.”

“Yes.”

They moved a short distance from the building, stopping near a cluster of trees that muffled the city noise. Dawn filtered through the branches, pale and undeserved.

“I want to fix it,” Jodie said.

Chili didn’t answer.

“I know I’m not supposed to,” she continued. “I know death locks the ledger. You drilled that into me.”

He watched her carefully.

“But what if—” She stopped, choosing her words. “What if it only needs a small correction? Not undoing. Just... adjusting.”

Chili shook his head slightly. “You don’t reopen a closed ledger without redistributing the balance.”

“So something else breaks.”

“Or someone else,” he said.

She swallowed. “Lukas remembers.”

“I know.”

“And that makes him vulnerable.”

“Yes.”

“And if he keeps pulling on this thread—”

“It will pull back,” Chili finished.

Jodie looked down at her hands. They were steady. That felt wrong too.

“This isn’t something I caused,” she said, needing the truth to anchor herself.

“No,” Chili agreed. “It isn’t.”

“But it’s something I can’t touch now, is it?” she said.

Chili didn’t answer.

The silence was the answer.

Inside the hospital, grief moved without coordination.

Markus sat alone in the driver’s seat of the family car, parked beneath the structure, hands resting uselessly on the steering wheel. The engine was off. He did not turn the key.

Johnnie and Shurla stood near the nurses’ station, voices low, making calls that could not be taken back. Their posture was practiced—capable—but something essential had gone missing behind their eyes.

Jerry Hine stood outside by the ambulance bay, bent slightly at the waist, hands on his knees, breathing through something that refused to be named.

And down a quieter hallway, a small, windowless room waited.

—

The room used for delivering bad news was painfully neutral.

Four chairs. A low table. A box of tissues placed with quiet optimism. No windows. No art.

Mica stood the entire time.

Joe sat beside her, feet planted, hands folded exactly the way Lukas had shown him earlier when things felt too large. Mary leaned sleepily against Mica's side, thumb in her mouth, trusting the stillness without understanding it.

Lukas stood just behind them.

The doctor spoke.

There were words Lukas recognized—impact, trauma, couldn't reverse, I'm very sorry. They formed a shape he already knew.

Mica did not cry.

She nodded once, slowly, as if the information were something she needed to store rather than feel. Her hand went instinctively to Mary's back. Joe didn't move.

When the doctor finished, there was a pause—the kind that invited collapse.

It didn't come.

“Can you give us a minute?” Mica asked quietly.

The doctor hesitated, then nodded and stepped out.

The door closed with a sound that felt far too final.

Joe looked up at her.

“Does that mean Dad isn't coming back?”

Mica inhaled, careful and deep.

“No,” she said. “It means he isn’t.”

Mary stirred. “Daddy?”

Mica crouched in front of them, placing herself between something dangerous and something fragile.

Lukas moved without thinking.

He knelt beside Joe—not touching, just present.

Joe’s jaw tightened. He didn’t cry. He leaned, just slightly, until his shoulder brushed Lukas’s arm.

That was all.

Lukas stayed perfectly still.

Inside, guilt folded inward, compressing into a shape without language.

If I hadn’t changed how people moved...

He did not let it reach his face.

Later—how much later, Lukas couldn’t say—he found his father near the elevators.

Markus stood staring at the closed doors, hands hanging uselessly at his sides, as if he had forgotten what they were for.

“Dad,” Lukas said.

Nothing.

“Dad.”

Markus blinked, eyes focusing and unfocusing again.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” Markus said quietly. “They keep asking me questions.”

Lukas nodded. “I know.”

He guided his father gently into a chair.

“I’ll handle it,” Lukas said. “Just sit.”

Markus sat.

Lukas spoke to nurses. Signed forms. Answered questions that felt unreal coming out of his mouth. He tracked names, times, instructions—treating reality like a work site that had to be managed one task at a time.

Across the room, Jodie watched him.

This wasn’t training.

This was burden.

—

Later still, Lukas and Jodie stood near the elevators, side by side, not touching.

“I keep thinking,” Lukas said quietly, “that if I’d done nothing, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“That’s not how causality works,” Jodie said gently.

He nodded, but she could tell he didn’t fully believe her.

He was already building a map in his mind.

A way back.

The clock down the hall ticked on.

Lukas looked at it—not with grief now, but with calculation.

“How far back,” he asked softly, “do you think time remembers?”

Jodie didn’t answer.

She couldn’t.

Above them, beyond ceilings and rules and ledgers carefully kept, something shifted—subtle, deliberate.

Permission had not been granted.

But it had been noticed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

(The Shape of a Fix)

Grief did not arrive all at once.

It came in pieces—unfinished sentences, unopened doors, cups of coffee poured out of habit and left untouched on counters that no longer needed them.

Edenvue slowed, but it did not stop.

That was the cruelest part.

Lukas

Lukas woke before his alarm and lay staring at the ceiling, counting breaths instead of seconds. The house was quiet in a way it had never been before. Not sleeping quiet. Absent quiet.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat there longer than necessary, grounding himself in routine. Socks. Shoes. Jacket. Keys.

He checked on his father.

Markus sat at the kitchen table, staring at a mug that had gone cold hours ago. He did not look up.

“I’m going to the funeral home later,” Lukas said gently.

Markus nodded once.

“I’ll be back before dinner.”

Another nod.

Lukas lingered, waiting for something—anything—but Markus remained still, as if motion itself had become optional.

So Lukas left.

Mica

Mica moved through the morning like someone underwater.

Joe was dressed and silent. Mary clung harder than usual, her small hand wrapped tightly around Mica's sleeve as if gravity itself could fail without warning.

At breakfast, Joe pushed his food around his plate.

“Dad didn't like eggs,” he said quietly.

Mica swallowed. “No. He didn't.”

Mary looked up. “Is Daddy still at the hospital?”

Mica crouched in front of her children, placing her hands gently on their knees.

“No, sweetheart,” she said. “Daddy's not hurting anymore.”

Mary frowned. “Then why does my chest feel funny?”

Mica pulled her close. “Because love doesn't know where to go when it's surprised.”

Joe leaned in, pressing his shoulder into Mica's side.

They stayed like that for a long time.

Johnnie & Shurla

Johnnie Turek stood in the garage, staring at a coil of extension cord he had no intention of using.

Jerry Hine hovered nearby, unsure whether to speak.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” Johnnie said finally.

Jerry nodded. “No.”

“I should’ve—” Johnnie stopped himself. He’d built his life on responsibility, on control. This thing had none of that.

Shurla watched from the doorway, arms folded tight across her chest.

“She’ll need help,” Shurla said quietly. “Mica. The kids.”

Johnnie nodded. “I know.”

“And Lukas,” she added.

Johnnie looked at her sharply.

“He’s carrying more than he should,” Shurla said. “I’ve seen that look before.”

Johnnie sighed. “He’s a good kid.”

“That’s what worries me.”

Jodie

Jodie felt the grief differently.

She didn’t feel loss the way humans did—not in absence, not in longing—but in imbalance. Like a room where the furniture had been rearranged just enough to make walking dangerous.

She watched Lukas move through the day—helpful, composed, useful—and felt the tension coiling beneath his calm.

He wasn’t breaking.

He was organizing.

That scared her.

The Theory

They met at the park late in the afternoon, the light slanting gold through the trees. The lake was still. Ducks drifted lazily, unaware of anything beyond the surface of the water.

Lukas sat on the bench where they'd once practiced silence.

"I keep replaying it," he said quietly. "Not the crash. Everything before."

Jodie listened.

"The rewinds," he continued. "They worked. Not perfectly, but they worked."

She chose her words carefully. "They didn't fix everything."

"No," Lukas agreed. "But they changed things. Direction matters."

Jodie felt something tighten.

"You're assuming you know what changed," she said.

Lukas nodded. "I know that it changed."

He looked out at the water. "Every time I stepped in—every time I helped—something shifted. So I'm thinking... maybe the answer isn't fixing things."

Jodie frowned slightly. "Then what?"

"Reducing pressure," he said. "Less intervention. Fewer ripples."

She said nothing.

"I don't mean going backward," he added quickly. "Just... being careful. Choosing when not to act."

Jodie searched his face. He wasn't reckless. He wasn't desperate.

He was calm.

"That sounds reasonable," she said slowly.

“And if something goes wrong?” Lukas asked.

Jodie hesitated.

“We reassess,” she said.

It wasn’t permission.

It wasn’t refusal either.

The air between them settled into something dangerously quiet.

Chili

From a distance, Chili watched.

He saw the logic forming, clean and elegant. He recognized the pattern—not rebellion, not arrogance, but compassion stretched past its limits.

He folded his arms.

They need to believe this, he thought. Or the lesson won’t hold.

He did not intervene.

Not yet.

False Control

That evening, Lukas did something small.

At a four-way stop near the park, he waited longer than necessary. Let another car go first. Then another.

Nothing happened.

No horns. No confusion. No near miss.

Jodie noticed.

She felt relief loosen something in her chest.

“See?” Lukas said quietly. “Less force. Less consequence.”

She nodded.

It felt right.

That was the problem.

Above them, time continued forward—unbothered, uncorrected.

The ledger did not close.

It adjusted.

Chapter Twenty-Three

(What Remains)

Grief rearranged itself differently in every room it entered.

In the Alexander house, it settled like dust—thin, persistent, coating everything without ever announcing itself. The air smelled the same. The floors creaked the same. But nothing responded the way it used to.

Markus sat at the kitchen table while Lukas and Jerry Hine spread pamphlets across the wood between them. Glossy covers, muted colors, tasteful fonts. Words like memorial service, celebration of life, private gathering. Each one offered a version of something none of them knew how to ask for.

Jerry cleared his throat. “We don’t have to decide everything today.”

Markus nodded slowly, eyes unfocused. “She didn’t like fuss,” he said. “Did she?”

Lukas answered immediately. “No. She liked things simple.”

Markus blinked, surprised. “Yes. That’s right.”

Jerry slid one pamphlet closer. “This place does small services. Music, if you want it. Or silence.”

Markus stared at the cover for a long moment. “She liked music,” he said, then faltered. “Didn’t she?”

Lukas reached across the table—not touching, just anchoring. “She did,” he said. “But not loud. Something soft.”

Markus nodded again, absorbing the certainty Lukas offered like a borrowed spine.

Jerry watched the exchange quietly. He recognized the pattern. He’d seen it on job sites, after accidents—when someone stepped into a role they hadn’t trained for because someone else couldn’t.

“Okay,” Jerry said gently. “We’ll start there.”

They talked through logistics: dates, locations, who should be called, who shouldn’t. Markus contributed when he could, but more often he deferred, letting Lukas translate grief into decisions.

When they finished, Markus pushed his chair back and stood too quickly, swaying.

“I need some air,” he muttered.

Lukas was up immediately. “I’ll walk you to the porch.”

Markus waved him off. “No. Stay. Finish this.”

The door closed softly behind him.

Jerry leaned back in his chair, studying Lukas. “You don’t have to carry all of this.”

Lukas didn’t look up. “Someone has to.”

Jerry didn’t argue. He simply gathered the pamphlets into a neat stack and slid them toward Lukas. “Then don’t carry it alone.”

Across town, Mica’s house felt fuller than it had in days—and emptier than ever.

Shurla Turek stood at the kitchen counter filling out forms with precise handwriting, occasionally glancing up to make sure Joe and Mary were still within sight. Johnnie moved quietly through the house, fixing small things that didn’t need fixing: a loose hinge, a door that squeaked, a porch step that shifted under weight.

Joe sat at the table, drawing. He didn't ask what he was drawing. He didn't need to.

Mary trailed Shurla like a shadow, asking questions that were really just anchors.

"Is dinner soon?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

"Is tomorrow school?"

"Yes."

"Can we have pancakes sometime?"

"Yes."

Mica watched it all from the doorway, hands wrapped around a mug she hadn't touched. The help was steady. Unobtrusive. Exactly what she needed—and exactly what reminded her of what she'd lost.

Johnnie joined her quietly. "We'll take care of the paperwork," he said. "You focus on the kids."

Mica nodded. "Thank you."

"And Lukas," Shurla added, looking up from her forms. "He's been checking in."

"I know," Mica said softly. "He doesn't have to."

"No," Shurla said. "But he will."

As if summoned, a knock came at the door.

Lukas stood on the porch with a bag of groceries and a tentative smile. Joe spotted him first.

"Lukas!" he called, jumping up.

Mary followed, wrapping herself around Lukas's leg without hesitation.

"Hey," Lukas said softly, crouching to her level. "Hi."

Joe hovered close. "Do you want to see my picture?"

“I’d love to,” Lukas said.

Mica watched him—how naturally he settled into the space, how easily the kids leaned into him. When he finally stood, she met his eyes.

“You don’t have to keep doing this,” she said gently.

“I know,” Lukas replied. “It helps.”

She nodded, understanding more than he realized.

Jodie observed all of it from the margins.

She saw Lukas functioning—competent, composed, needed. She felt pride, then something sharper beneath it. He was doing this without her.

She felt the pull before she heard the voice.

Chili appeared beside her on the sidewalk as dusk settled over Edenview.

“They want to see you,” he said.

Jodie’s chest tightened. “Is Lukas in trouble?”

“No,” Chili replied. “But you are.”

She looked back once—toward the house, toward the people holding each other up in imperfect, human ways.

“I tried not to interfere,” she said quietly.

Chili nodded. “Intent doesn’t erase impact.”

She didn’t argue. She only asked, “Can I say goodbye?”

Chili didn’t answer.

Which was answer enough.

Night fell gently, as it always did.

Lukas stood in his bedroom holding the pamphlets Jerry had stacked so carefully. He thumbed through them again, each option feeling equally wrong. He hadn't seen Jodie in two days.

Hadn't felt her.

That mattered.

He pulled on his jacket and crossed the yard, climbing the ladder to the tree house with practiced ease.

"Jodie?" he called.

Nothing.

The space felt hollow—like the furniture had been removed but you could still see the outlines in the carpet.

He set the pamphlets down. "I need help," he said quietly. "Just for a minute."

The air shifted.

She appeared near the far wall, as softly as breath fogging glass.

But she wasn't alone.

Chili stood beside her, hands in his coat pockets, expression unreadable.

Relief surged through Lukas so fast it almost knocked him backward.

"Where have you been?" Lukas asked, then caught himself. "I—I didn't mean—"

"I'm sorry," Jodie said immediately. Her voice was tight, controlled. "I should've told you. I wasn't allowed."

"Allowed by who?" Lukas asked, already knowing the answer and hating it.

Chili spoke calmly. "She's been summoned."

The word hit wrong.

"Summoned," Lukas repeated. "Like she missed a meeting?"

Jodie stepped forward. “Lukas—”

“No,” he snapped. “Don’t explain it.”

Chili added, “This isn’t her fault, but she doesn’t have a choice.”

That broke something open.

“No,” Lukas said, laughing once without humor. “It’s not.”

His voice rose, grief finally given teeth. “She didn’t make my mom die. She didn’t make Joe’s dad die. She didn’t ask for any of this.”

He turned on Chili. “You did. You and whatever rulebook you’re hiding behind.”

Chili didn’t flinch.

“She helped me,” Lukas said fiercely. “She helped all of us. And if you’re here to take her away because things didn’t go the way you wanted—”

“You think she caused this?” Lukas continued, voice rising now. “You think she broke something? She’s the only reason half of us are still standing.”

“No,” he said, shaking now. “You don’t have to apologize. Not to me.”

He looked at both of them, breathing hard.

“She helped me,” he said. “She helped all of us. And if you’re here to take her away because things didn’t go the way you wanted—”

“This isn’t punishment,” Chili said.

“Then what is it?” Lukas demanded.

Silence.

Lukas felt something inside him finally snap—not into despair, but into anger. Clean. Focused. Unfamiliar.

“Get out,” he said.

Jodie’s eyes widened. “Lukas—”

“I said get out,” he repeated, voice steady and dangerous. “Both of you.”

Chili studied him for a long moment, then nodded once.

“As you wish,” he said quietly.

Jodie hesitated, anguish written across her face.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered—not for leaving, but for everything else.

Lukas turned away.

When he looked back, the tree house was empty again.

He stood there for a long time, hands braced against the wall, breathing through the aftershocks.

Below him, the house was dark.

Above him, the night offered no answers.

Only the quiet certainty that time would keep moving—

With or without permission.

Chapter Twenty-Four

(Accounts)

The transition did not feel like movement.

There was no sensation of rising or falling, no wind, no weightlessness. One moment Jodie stood at the edge of Edenvue’s night, and the next she was somewhere that did not acknowledge distance at all.

The floor beneath her feet was white—not blinding, not luminous. Simply white, as if color had been deemed unnecessary. The air held no scent, no temperature. It did not press against the skin or retreat from it. It existed only to allow presence.

Chili stood beside her, hands in his coat pockets, posture relaxed in a way that felt practiced rather than casual.

“This isn’t a courtroom,” he said quietly.

“I know,” Jodie replied.

Ahead of them stretched a long room, neither narrow nor wide, furnished with nothing except a single desk placed with careful intention. The walls did not meet the ceiling at visible angles. Lines softened as the eye followed them, discouraging measurement.

At the desk sat the Supervisor.

There was nothing remarkable about them.

No wings. No glow. No symbolic adornment. They appeared human in the loosest possible sense—form without identity, presence without personality. Their attention rested on Jodie not as judgment, but as recognition.

“Assignment J-4472,” the Supervisor said, voice level and unadorned.

Jodie stepped forward instinctively.

“Present,” she said.

The Supervisor inclined their head—not acknowledgment, merely confirmation.

“This is a review,” they continued. “Not a trial.”

Jodie nodded. “I understand.”

“You understand the difference?” the Supervisor asked.

“Yes,” Jodie said. “Trials ask what happened. Reviews ask whether it should have been allowed.”

The Supervisor paused, then nodded once.

“That is correct.”

The air shifted—not dramatically, but perceptibly. The room did not change, but information did.

Jodie found herself standing within sequences.

Not memories.

Structures.

She saw moments stripped of emotion: vectors, intersections, probabilities collapsing into outcomes.

A parking lot.

A delivery schedule.

A truck idling longer than it should have.

She saw the first rewind—not as an act, but as a divergence. A branching that closed one path and forced energy elsewhere.

“If X does not occur,” the Supervisor said calmly, “then Y is not positioned to experience Z.”

The sequence moved.

A job site.

A man slipping.

An injury corrected.

Another divergence.

Another redirection.

Jodie felt something tighten inside her—not guilt yet, but recognition.

The images continued.

The truck again.

The driver—unsteady, unnoticed.

A missed interception.

Jodie’s breath caught.

She saw it then—not as blame, but as inevitability.

Her restraint.

Her silence.

Her decision not to intervene further.

Each choice removed friction.

Each removal increased velocity.

“This outcome,” the Supervisor said, “was not caused by malice.”

Jodie swallowed.

“Nor by intent,” they continued. “It was caused by inevitable permission.”

The images faded.

The room returned to stillness.

Jodie stepped forward, voice steady despite the pressure building behind her ribs.

“I didn’t choose the deaths,” she said. “I chose care. I chose not to impose will where it wasn’t mine to use.”

The Supervisor regarded her without expression.

“Care does not negate causality,” they replied. “Love does not mitigate consequence.”

“I helped him,” Jodie said, unable to stop herself now. “Lukas learned. He grew. He became better.”

“Yes,” the Supervisor said. “He did.”

“That matters,” Jodie insisted.

“It does,” the Supervisor agreed. “But not here.”

Silence followed—not as punishment, but as conclusion.

“Assignment J-4472,” the Supervisor said, “you exceeded your authority through restraint rather than action. This constitutes a precedent risk.”

Jodie’s hands curled into fists.

“Effective immediately,” the Supervisor continued, “you are removed as primary guardian to Subject L-1029.”

The words landed like weight.

“No,” Jodie said—not pleading yet, just stunned.

“The bond remains,” the Supervisor clarified. “It is dormant. Non-operational.”

Jodie took another step forward. “Please,” she said quietly. “I’m not asking to undo anything. I’m not asking for power. I just—let me stay.”

The Supervisor did not soften.

“Attachment does not grant jurisdiction,” they said. “And further unauthorized influence will result in total revocation of duty.”

That was the punishment.

Not separation.

Erasure.

Jodie closed her eyes for a brief, devastating moment.

When she opened them, Chili was beside her.

He had said nothing.

Now, as the Supervisor’s attention withdrew, he finally spoke.

“There’s nothing I can do,” he said softly.

She nodded. “I know.”

“You can’t fight this,” Chili continued. “And you shouldn’t.”

She looked at him then—not angry, just hollow.

“Where am I being sent?” she asked.

Chili hesitated.

“Two new assignments,” he said. “Both young. Both grieving.”

Jodie’s chest tightened.

Joe & Mary

Chili didn’t need to say the names.

“You’re being given what you asked for,” he added quietly. “Just not where you wanted it.”

The room began to dissolve—not into light, but into absence.

Jodie looked once, instinctively, toward Edenvue.

Toward a tree house.

Toward a man staring at a clock that would never stop.

He did not feel her.

That was the point.

As the space folded away, Jodie understood the final cruelty of the judgment.

Justice had been served.

Reality was intact.

And love—real, aching, human love—had not been considered a mitigating factor.

Chapter Twenty-Two

(What Stays)

The lake had always been loud with life.

That was the first thing Lukas noticed as he approached it that afternoon—the way nothing had paused for grief. Children shouted from the playground. Swings creaked in uneven rhythm. A dog barked at something invisible and important. Wind moved across the water in small, careless ripples.

It was cruel, in a way.

It was also necessary.

Picnic tables were scattered along the grass near the shoreline, some pushed together, some left apart, as if even the furniture couldn't decide how close people should sit. Paper plates, simple food. Nothing formal. Nothing heavy. A celebration of life that refused to pretend it was anything else.

Markus sat with Jerry and Johnnie near the water, hands folded, listening more than speaking. His face looked older than it had a week ago. Not ruined—just reconfigured.

Mica was closer to the playground, where Joe and Mary could be seen without being watched.

That mattered.

Lukas moved between groups the way he had learned to—quietly, without trying to anchor anyone unless they reached for him. He checked on his father. He checked on Mica. He checked on the kids.

And then he let himself stand still.

—

A short distance away, beyond the edge of the gathering, Chili and Jodie stood beneath a line of trees.

The lake reflected light upward, softening everything. Even judgment.

“It's done,” Chili said gently.

Jodie didn't look at him. Her eyes were fixed on Joe and Mary, who were arguing about whose turn it was on the swings.

"I know," she said.

Chili waited. He always did, when the moment mattered.

"You will not return as yourself," he continued. "Not to them. Not to him."

She nodded once.

"You'll look younger. Ordinary. Human in all the ways that count."

Another nod.

"No intervention," Chili said. "No correction. No protection. No rewinds. No comfort that bends probability."

Her fingers curled slowly into her palms.

"And Lukas?" she asked.

Chili's voice softened. "You may know him. He may know you. But he will never need you again."

That one landed.

Chili added, quieter now, "This is not erasure. It's restraint."

Jodie finally turned to him.

"And my name?"

He smiled faintly. "You pick."

She raised an eyebrow "Jamie"

He nodded "Jamie it is!"

She tested it under her breath. "Jamie."

It fit in a way she hadn't expected.

Chili stepped back. "Go on. They're waiting."

“I didn’t think angels waited,” she said.

“Neither did I,” Chili replied.

And then he was gone.

Jamie approached the playground slowly, hands tucked behind her back like a child who wasn’t sure she was allowed to interrupt.

Joe noticed her first.

He always did.

He stopped the swing with his foot and stared at her openly.

“You new?” he asked.

Jamie smiled—not wide, not careful. Just honest. “I think so.”

Mary leaned forward, her legs kicking idly. “Do you push?”

Jamie blinked. “I… I can try.”

“That’s okay,” Mary decided. “You look like you eat snacks.”

Joe considered this. “We have snacks.”

Jamie knelt near the bench where a paper bag sat. “I’ve been told that’s one of my best qualities.”

Mary hopped down and handed her a plate without hesitation.

It piled up quickly.

Sandwich. Chips. Two cookies. Something that might have been salad but was mostly dressing.

Jamie accepted it all solemnly and took a bite like it was the first meal she’d ever truly tasted.

Joe watched, impressed.

“You’re good at that,” he said.

“Practice,” Jamie replied, mouth full.

—

Lukas noticed the laughter before he noticed her.

That sound—unforced, unguarded—pulled his attention like a hook. He walked closer, instinctively scanning for the kids first.

They were fine.

Better than fine.

They were laughing.

And standing near them was a girl he didn’t recognize.

She looked young. Not fragile—just... open. Her hair caught the light in a way that felt familiar without being specific.

Joe saw Lukas and waved him over.

“Lukas! This is Jamie!”

Jamie stood quickly, nearly knocking over her plate.

“I’m sorry,” she said at once. “I didn’t mean to intrude. They invited me.”

“They do that,” Lukas said gently. “I’m glad.”

She met his eyes.

Something flickered.

Not recognition.

Not memory.

Just warmth.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Jamie said. “They looked happy. Your mom. And Joe’s dad. In the pictures.”

Lukas smiled.

It hurt.

It always did.

“Thank you,” he said. “They were.”

His eyes dropped to her plate, stacked absurdly high.

He laughed before he could stop himself.

“Wow,” he said. “I knew a lady once who could eat like you.”

Jamie looked down at the food, then back up at him.

She grinned.

“I’m not a lady,” she said seriously. “I’m a girl.”

For a beat, no one spoke.

Then Joe laughed.

Mary laughed harder.

Lukas laughed with them—really laughed—for the first time in days.

Jamie laughed too, and the sound was pure enough to ache.

They sat together by the lake as the afternoon stretched on, nothing fixed, nothing undone.

Just life.

Just what stayed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

(What Was Asked For)

Lukas didn't remember deciding to sit down.

One moment he was standing in the tree house, the pamphlets spread across the old wooden floor like fallen leaves, the smell of ink and cheap paper grounding him in something practical.

The next, he was sitting with his back against the wall, knees drawn up, staring at the empty space across from him.

Chili stood near the ladder opening, hands folded in front of him, posture careful. Not formal. Not relaxed. Something in between—like a man waiting outside a hospital room.

“I need you to listen,” Chili said.

Lukas didn't look at him.

“I've been listening my whole life,” Lukas replied quietly. “That's kind of the problem.”

Chili inhaled slowly, then let it out. “What you're feeling right now—this anger, this sense that something was stolen—that's natural.”

Lukas laughed once, sharp and humorless. “Natural?”

Chili didn't correct him.

Instead, he reached into the pocket of his coat and removed something Lukas didn't expect.

Not a book.

Not a glowing artifact.

A memory.

The air shifted—not with force, but with permission.

Sabrina sat alone in a small doctor's office.

The chair was too big for her frame, her feet barely touching the floor. The walls were painted a color someone had once decided was comforting. It wasn't.

The doctor spoke gently. Carefully.

Stage four.

Inoperable.

Months, not years.

Sabrina nodded as if she were being told the weather.

She didn't cry.

Not yet.

Later—much later—she sat alone in her car, hands resting on the steering wheel, staring through the windshield without seeing anything.

Then she whispered, "Okay."

That night, she knelt beside her bed.

Not dramatically. Not with desperation.

Just tired.

"I don't need a miracle," she said softly. "I know better than that."

She paused, gathering herself.

"But please... let my family survive me."

Her voice broke—not on the word me, but on family.

"Let Markus keep going. Let Lukas not disappear into himself. Let someone be there when I can't be."

She swallowed.

“Send whatever help you can spare. I don’t need to see it. I just need it to happen.”

The scene shifted.

Joe Sr. sat in his truck, engine off, forehead pressed to the steering wheel.

The divorce papers lay folded on the seat beside him.

He didn’t look like a villain.

He looked like a man who knew he’d failed at something that mattered.

“I screwed this up,” he said into the quiet cab. “I know that.”

His voice shook.

“But those kids—Joe and Mary—they deserve better than what I gave them.”

He stared at the dashboard, eyes wet.

“Please,” he whispered. “Let someone come into their lives who makes things lighter. Let Mica be happy again. Let my kids grow up knowing love didn’t end when I left.”

He laughed bitterly. “You don’t owe me anything. I get that.”

Then, softer: “Just... don’t let them be alone.”

The tree house returned.

The air felt heavier now—not oppressive, but full.

Lukas’s hands were trembling.

“That’s not—” he began, then stopped. “That’s not fair.”

“No,” Chili said quietly. “It isn’t.”

Lukas pressed his palms against his eyes.

“So I was—what?” he asked. “A response? A solution?”

Chili shook his head. “No.”

Lukas looked up.

“You were already there,” Chili continued. “You were the answer because you were capable of carrying it.”

Lukas swallowed hard.

“So all of this,” he said. “The timing. The meetings. The tree house.”

“Preparation,” Chili said.

“For what?”

“For surviving love,” Chili answered. “And loss.”

Silence stretched between them.

Finally, Lukas whispered, “Did they know?”

Chili shook his head. “No.”

“But they had faith,” he added.

Lukas closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, something in him had shifted—not healed, not resolved—but anchored.

“So what now?” he asked.

Chili didn’t answer.

He didn’t need to.

Final Chapter

(One Year Later)

The front door closed with the familiar sound of home settling in around them.

Disneyland bags—bright, oversized, and faintly ridiculous—were dropped onto the kitchen table in a pile that suggested enthusiasm had outweighed restraint. One bag tipped over, spilling mouse-eared hats and a souvenir lightsaber that immediately became a sword in Joe’s hands.

Mary shrieked with delight and bolted for the back door.

“Treehouse!” she shouted, already halfway down the hall.

Joe didn’t argue. He followed at full speed, the screen door slamming behind them as laughter poured into the yard like sunlight.

Lukas and Mica stood for a moment in the kitchen, listening.

“That might’ve been too much Disney,” Mica said, nudging one of the bags with her foot.

Lukas smiled. “You say that every time.”

“And every time I’m right.”

She crossed the room and straightened the framed wedding day photo on the wall—simple wood, no engraving. It showed the two of them laughing, Joe missing one shoe, Mary mid-spin. Someone had caught it without asking.

“I still think annual passes were a mistake,” Mica added.

“Give it a week,” Lukas said. “You’ll be planning the next trip.”

She glanced at him, amused. “You’re not wrong.”

Lukas moved to the sink and filled a glass of water, the ordinary motion grounding him. Outside the window, Joe and Mary tore across the yard, chasing each other toward the old treehouse with the kind of reckless joy only children carried effortlessly.

“My dad’s coming by tomorrow,” Lukas said, casually then took another sip of water. “To grab a few more things. He likes the condo.”

Mica nodded. “I’m glad.”

So was Lukas.

He turned from the sink just as Mica reached for his hand. Her fingers threaded into his without ceremony, warm and certain. Together, they walked toward the back door, stepping into the noise and motion of the yard.

Joe had reached the ladder first. Mary demanded fairness. The treehouse stood as it always had—weathered, quiet, waiting.

For the briefest instant, Lukas thought he saw something inside it.

A soft glimmer. A golden twinkle of light, almost playful.

Then it was gone.

He didn’t stop walking.

He didn’t look back.

He squeezed Mica’s hand and stepped into the afternoon, into the laughter, into the life that had kept going even when everything else had broken.

Some things come into our lives not to stay, but to make sure that we can.



Author's Note

Elysian Park began as a question I didn't know how to ask out loud.

What survives when protection ends?

What remains when help steps back?

And how much of who we become is shaped not by being saved—but by being trusted?

This story is not about angels fixing broken lives.

It's about love that arrives quietly, stays just long enough, and leaves people stronger than it found them.

Grief does not resolve neatly.

Joy does not erase loss.

But life—when shared—has a way of continuing anyway.

This book exists because I have been fortunate enough to know what it means to be loved without conditions, supported without control, and surrounded by people who make the ordinary sacred.

If this story leaves you with even a small sense of peace, then it has done its work.

Thank you for walking through Edenvue with me.

— J.L. McGoldrick