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When you let your heart's voice be the guide,

you may be able to change hearts.

If you speak through your life and your life is a story,

then you will change lives.

# Chapter One

## The Family

A crowd had gathered, their faces reflecting the shock and horror of the incident. The twisted metal, shattered glass, the irritating scent of gasoline, and burning rubber assaulted my senses. The taxi was crumpled and broken, the steam rising from its innards like the exhalations of a dying beast.

Dr. Brown, an emergency room physician known for his capacity to remain detached; a necessary shield against the perpetual tide of human suffering in



the hospital, found his daughter lying so still amidst the chaos.

The harrowing sight of his child placed him in an unfamiliar terrain. Upon seeing his daughter, Dr. Brown's immediate reaction was a mix of shock, fear, and an instinctive need to protect. "No, not my Lucy," his mind screamed in denial.

Upon reaching Lucy, Dr. Brown's interaction with the nurse conveyed an urgency that transcended his usual bedside manner. "She's, my daughter." The nurse's eyes, filled with a blend of professional empathy and human concern, met his. At that moment, their exchange went beyond mere words, conveying a mutual understanding of the gravity of the situation.

The nurse asked, "Was the woman driving the car related to you?"

## Three Months Earlier

The stadium was energetic with hopes, the loud vibration of pleasure. Fans from both teams filled the stands, but there was an unmistakable buzz about one player in particular: Oscar, a 14-year-old soccer sensation. Rumors of European leagues competing for him had only



heightened the sense of expectation. As he entered the field, there was a collective gasp, followed by thunderous applause. Confident Oscar jogged onto the arena, raising his hands to acknowledge the crowd and his teammates. But not all were captivated by Oscar's presence. The opposing team, a formidable force, strengthened by three of their city's top players, was not to be underestimated. They play with cohesion and intensity.

As Oscar took his position, a chorus of boos erupted from the section of the stadium packed with the opposing team's fans.

The atmosphere was charged, an intense tension hanging over the field as the game kicked off. Oscar was cool by the hostile reception, and despite his youth, he displayed maturity and composure on the ball that was beyond his years. His passes were sharp and accurate, and his movement off the ball was intelligent and purposeful. It wasn't long before the game's intensity escalated. A dangerous tackle sent Oscar tumbling to the ground. He rolled over in pain. Tom, his 45-year-old father jumped off his seat, full of anxiety and worry. The referee blew the whistle, signaling a foul. The crowd held its breath as Oscar positioned the ball for a penalty kick. Oscar with his resilience and spirit regained his feet.

And with his practiced motion, he shot the ball like a missile, curving slightly, and slammed into the back of the net, just beyond the goalkeeper's outstretched hands, scoring within the first five minutes. His fans erupted in cheers, chanting "Oscar, the legend!" in unison.

Despite the early lead, the game was far from easy. Oscar became a target, the opposition's frustration manifesting in constant, aggressive tackles.

After 15 minutes of relentless play, a particularly harsh collision brought him down once more. This time, he didn't get up. Tom, an ER Physician runs inside the field caring for his son.

The stadium fell into a hushed silence, the seriousness of the situation dawning on everyone. Players and fans alike watched in concern as ten agonizing minutes passed, with Oscar still lying motionless on the field.

Eventually, medics rushed onto the pitch, carefully carrying Oscar off to the sidelines. The coach, his expression a mix of worry and determination, called in their second-best player to fill Oscar's position. But the momentum had shifted.

Without Oscar's guiding presence, the team struggled to maintain their edge. The first period ended with Oscar's team trailing 2-1, a sobering reminder of the impact one player can have on the game.

In the stands, the mood had changed. Oscar's fans, who had started the match with cheers and chants, now sat in worried silence, their thoughts with the young star who had so quickly captured their hearts and imaginations.



The game continued on the field, but for many, their focus remained on the sidelines, where Oscar received medical attention, his future on and off the field hanging in the balance.

The second period of the game began with an air of uncertainty. The game resumed with a renewed intensity. Oscar, though visibly pained, moved with determination and skill. The referees, now more vigilant, began issuing yellow cards to the opposing team for their overly aggressive tackles. The message was clear: the rough play that marked the first period would no longer be tolerated. Twenty minutes into the game, the whistle blew,

signaling another penalty for Oscar's team. An opposing player committed a foul against Oscar. Oscar once again delivered, striking the ball cleanly into the net. The scoreboard read 2-2, and



the crowd erupted in cheers, the game now evenly poised.

But the opposition was quick to respond. Their best players, perhaps feeling the pressure, executed a series of precise, beautifully synchronized passes, terminating in a stunning goal.

The score was 3-2.

The atmosphere in the stadium was incredible, with every spectator on the edge of their seat. All eyes were on Oscar, the young prodigy who had already displayed remarkable resilience and skill. He needed to rally his team, lift their spirits, and lead them back into the game. In a masterful display of teamwork and strategy, the ball was passed across the field, from one player to another, moving in a complex pattern that even confused some of the fans. Oscar orchestrated this dance, his vision and understanding of the game shining through.

Then, in a moment that seemed to defy time, Oscar dashed from the midfield, a blur of speed and focus. He sent a perfect pass to the right side of the field, where Mike, one of his teammates, was perfectly positioned. With a swift and decisive kick, Micke scored, bringing the game to a thrilling 3-3 tie.

And in the game's final minutes, all were intense and physical, each team pushing their limits. With only five minutes left, his dribbles became longer, his passes more daring.

Then he twisted through defenders with a fluidity that made it seem as if the ball was an extension of his feet. He accelerated, his eyes scanning the field as he approached the penalty area, he found just enough space to unleash a powerful shot.



The ball flew past the goalkeeper, hitting the back of the net – a stunning goal. The stadium erupted in chanting Oscar's name and thunderous repetition. His team now led 4-3, a lead they maintained until the final whistle blew.

As the game ended, Oscar's teammates rushed to congratulate the extraordinary abilities of a young player who had already become a legend in their hearts. And the respect between the teams was evident as they shook hands and exchanged words of congratulations and encouragement.

## The Next Morning

In a cozy suburb, the sun gently rises, casting a warm glow over their house. The crisp new into the new school year, the green trees outside were beginning to hint of their leaves shaded.

While her 40-year-old mother Julia Brown, was baking pancakes for breakfast, and very busy in her morning ritual, when Lucy showed her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday pictures with her best friend Sarah taken last month, explaining how her best friend gave her the



best gift that she made just for Lucy. She bragged about why Sarah would as her best friend be forever.

The aroma of cinnamon and fresh coffee filled the air, a signal that another school day had begun. Julia hummed a tuned content. Her movements were a blend of efficiency and care.

Tom, the proud father of their three children, a 45-year-old doctor, returned home this morning from the long-lasting ER hospital shift kissing Julia in the kitchen, "Good morning love". And, despite being exhausted from work, Tom swiftly changed to his house duties and began fixing a loose hinge on the kitchen cabinet. "Honey, have you seen the Phillips screwdriver?" he asked, staring into the toolbox.

"Third drawer, next to the oven mitts," Julia replied without looking up, knowing exactly where every item in their house resided. On top of everything, her mind is a calendar, filled with the schedules and needs of her family.

Their eldest daughter, Grace, a senior high school student, entered the kitchen, her backpack slung over her shoulder. She moved to the coffee maker, pouring a cup for her mother and one for her father. "Morning, Mom, Dad," she greeted, her voice

still heavy with sleep. Grace thanked Mom for making breakfast today.

"Morning, sweetheart, you always say thank you. It's my routine to make you breakfast honey." Julia smiled, placing a plate of cinnamon toast on the table. "Did you finish your math homework?"

Grace smiled while taking a sip of her milk. "Yeah, it wasn't too bad. Calculus is starting to make sense."

Tom followed up on the conversation with a joke, "Did you have fun learning math?"

Grace responded, "You know Dad, I am always grateful for all the good things happening for me, and I enjoy learning Calculus."

Tom kissed Grace's forehead and said, "Thank you, Grace!"

Oscar, the new high schooler, the energetic boy, burst into the kitchen, his eyes wide with panic. "Mom, where's my blue soccer jersey?"

Julia didn't miss a beat. "In the dryer, sweetie. I washed it last night," she replied, pointing towards the laundry room.

Oscar then remembered, "Morning! Is there any orange juice left?"

"In the fridge, right where you left it," Julia said, a smile playing on her lips.

His energy was infectious, a contrast to the quiet calm of the early morning. Oscar shared his excitement about his soccer match, his words tumbling out in a rush. Grace listened, nodding and smiling, her presence a steady anchor in the lively conversation. You know I invited Mike and Jimmy for my birthday next week!

Tom asked, "Did anyone else know about Oscar's birthday party?"

With a smile on Grace's face she says, "Oscar is planning his party as he speaks."

Julia gave Oscar a plate just like Grace's breakfast.

Lucy finally arrived at the kitchen, clutching a stuffed bear, her hair a tangled mess. "I dreamt I was a princess," she announced, her eyes bright with the fragments of her dream.

Still half in her dream world, Lucy could make everyone laugh about how she danced with her best friend Sarah in that



Mansion. And she continued, “I was Princess Lucy and I jumped out of bed, put on my pink dress with the silver sparkles, and ran down the grand

staircase to meet Sarah. We hugged tightly, and I led Sarah inside. We first checked out the royal kitchen,



where we decided to bake chocolate chip cookies with Mom’s special recipe. Flour flew everywhere, and we made a big, fun jumble!”

Soon, it was time for Princess Lucy to take Sarah to her secret hideaway, a small tower at the corner of the palace. “We dressed up in costumes stored in an old wooden trunk to find our knights in a magical royal grand hall. Then we danced around in circles, laughing and skipping to the tune until our feet couldn't dance anymore. Exhausted but happy, I hugged Sarah goodnight as the stars sparkled outside the palace windows.



We promised each other to have another day of adventure very soon. As Sarah rode away in her family's carriage, I thought of all the fun we had.

Lucy's voice with an unwavering conviction paints a picture of her future, one where her dreams and reality mix. "I know that one day soon, I will be in the palace, where everyone whispers of my arrival. There, in the heart of its lavish grand hall, under the soft glow of crystal chandeliers, a beautiful cake will stand as the centerpiece, crafted with the finest ingredients and beautiful decorations to celebrate my arrival. This cake, a marvel of culinary art, will be baked solely in my name. As I approach, the room, all eyes will turn to me, not just as a guest, but as the guest of honor, the reason for this grand celebration. At that moment," Lucy claimed with her beautiful smile.

Tom chuckled, setting aside his tools to lift her onto a chair. "Okay Princess Lucy, would you like me to turn your bedroom into a fairytale by the end of the month?"

"Yes, please Dad!" she looked happy, her imagination already taking her back to her dreamland.

Julia listened to each of them, her heart swelling with pride. She offered advice, reminders, and encouragement of love and support.

Tom shared his plans to paint Lucy's room this month, a project they had been planning for days. "Lucy, what color did we decide on again?" he asked, pretending to forget.

"Pink! With glitter!" Lucy exclaimed with her philosophical excitement.

The breakfast table was a hub of joy and conversation, a daily ritual that grounded them and brought them closer. As the time to leave approached, Julia helped Lucy pack her school bag, ensuring her bear was safely tucked inside. Grace double-checked her bag, while Oscar grabbed a soccer ball, eager to show his friends his new moves.

Lucy, now joyful, chattered about her plans to build a castle for her make-believe superstars, her imagination painting vivid pictures in the air, then she left to create her miniature world on the living room floor, surrounded by dolls and toys.

Oscar hurriedly gathered his things for school. The usual morning chaos was in full swing, with Lucy's creative projects scattered across the living room, transforming the space into her imagination. To Oscar, these were Lucy's messes too complex to understand. Then they heard a sharp knock on the door, prompting Oscar to pause and announce, "I'm sure it's Mike visiting me to go together to school."

The relationship between Mike, Oscar's classmate, and Lucy was filled with threads of misunderstanding and rivalry. Mike, with his easy charm and talent for social navigation, often found Lucy's uncontrolled enthusiasm and lack of concern for convention more a nuisance than endearing.

As the door swung open, revealing Mike's expectant face, a wave of apprehension washed over Lucy. She knocked over her juice cup, the liquid spreading quickly across the floor. "Lucy, look what you've done!" Oscar shouted.

"It's okay, what else can we expect from Lucy? Hahaha," Mike chuckled, his words hanging in the air like a challenge. His laughter, though light, carried an edge, a subtle reinforcement

of the divide between his world and Lucy's. Oscar's smile faded at the comment, a silent acknowledgment of the discomfort it brought.

Grace showed up kneeling to help Lucy clean up. "It's okay, Lucy. Accidents happen," she soothed, her voice calm and reassuring. Oscar repeated, "Lucky, you have Grace around," he said, a hint of frustration in his voice. Julia joined them, a dishcloth in hand. "Let's just get it cleaned up," she said, her tone balancing firmness with understanding.

Tom kissed Julia goodbye, promising to pick up the paint after dropping off the kids at school. "Have a great day, everyone!" she called out as the children rushed to the door. Oscar dashes outside, soccer ball at his feet, practicing his kicks. Julia stood at the doorway, watching her family head off to their respective days. A sense of contentment washed over her. This was her world, her family, each member with their unique chances and dreams.

As the door closed behind them, Julia turned back to the kitchen, the heart of their home, ready to start her day.

The September morning had brought with it the promise of new beginnings and the enduring warmth of family love. She began cleaning a big mess left behind. Then, doing the laundry. And, finally vacuum cleaning and washing the bathrooms, especially the one used by Oscar.

The list continues with preparing the dinner for all. As the day progressed, the family navigated their tasks and hobbies, their interactions a blend of support, gentle teasing, and shared joy.

In moments of disagreement, Grace's diplomatic nature smoothed over ruffled feathers, her words a bridge between differing opinions.

For the evening in the family, when dinner was just winding down, they were engaged in their usual post-meal chatter. Oscar's excitement of his recent soccer match, dominated the conversation, recounting every play and goal with spirited enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, Lucy, burdened by a particularly challenging day at school, attempted to interject, eager to share her experience

with her teacher. Oscar's relentless narrative about soccer left scant room for others to speak.

Julia, already taxed from a day of supermarket runs and managing the household, noticed Lucy's mounting frustration. She felt her patience fraying. "Oscar, could you please let someone else have a turn to talk?" she interrupted, her voice tinged with irritation. "It's not always about soccer or you."

Oscar's expression shifted to one of surprise, unaccustomed to being lectured for his enthusiasm. The room fell into an uncomfortable silence. Realizing her tone had been harsher than intended, Julia softened her voice. "I'm sorry, Oscar. I didn't mean to snap.

Tom, attempting to defuse the tension, started to intervene, but sensing Julia's growing rage, he chose to retreat quietly to the kitchen. Grace entered the room, soothing her mother with a few gentle words before sitting down, adding a calming presence to the strained atmosphere.

Grace's interference turned the atmosphere to warm and content, a reflection of a family deeply connected despite their

occasional clashes. As night fell, the family settled into their routines, the house echoing with soft goodnights. In their respective rooms, each member of the family drifted off to sleep, their hearts full of the day's memories, looking forward to another day together in their lively home. Julia and Tom exchanged knowing glances, their hearts full of love for their unique, sometimes chaotic, but always family.

The next morning, Grace, already seated at the table with her schoolbooks spread out, glanced up at Oscar looking for his hoodie. "I'll get it for you, Oscar," she offered, rising from her chair. Julia serves her homemade pancakes, Tom discusses his plans for appliance improvements, and Oscar shares his excitement for his upcoming soccer match. Lucy chatters about her latest imaginary adventure, her eyes sparkling with innocence and wonder.

In the living room, Tom was knee-deep in blueprints and tools. "Julia, have you seen my tape measure?" he called out, rummaging through a toolbox.

"It's in the drawer by the fridge, dear," Julia called back with a tone of affection.

Lucy, in her usual imaginative charm, had decided to create an elaborate art project in the living room. Her vision was grand: a large mural made from a collage of different materials. She had gathered papers, fabrics, glues, and paints, spreading them across the floor and furniture.

In her creative zeal, Lucy had not only used the living room as her canvas but had also left a trail of materials and spills throughout the space. The paint had dripped onto the carpet, glue milky on the couch, and scraps of paper and fabric were scattered everywhere.

When Julia walked into the living room, her day already taxing her energy, the sight of the chaotic mess was overwhelming.

"Lucy, this is unacceptable! You can't turn the living room into a disaster area," she yelled, her voice reflecting her frustration and fatigue.

Lucy, startled and upset by her mother's reaction, began to cry.

"I just wanted to make something beautiful..."

Julia took a moment to compose herself, realizing that her understandable reaction was perhaps too harsh.



She sat down beside Lucy, gently explaining, "I understand you want to be creative, and that's wonderful. But we need to think about how we use shared spaces."

Lucy's imagination is as vast as the mess she often leaves in her wake. She floats through the house, leaving a trail of toys, dirty dishes, and clothes on the floor. Grace following Lucy picks up after her mess with a smile on her face despite the extra work.

As the day turns to evening, the family gathers for dinner. The table is a montage of their day's experiences. Tom's astonishing progress in Lucy's room, Grace's academic achievements, Oscar's soccer victories, and Lucy's imaginative tales.

Throughout the day, Grace held a special secret. It was a secret that gave her strength, a sense of peace, and a steadfast ability to care for each of her family members, even on days when the weight of her responsibilities felt heavy.

She reminded herself of their love and sharing their blessings. Every time she was grateful, she felt a gentle whisper in her heart that reminded her of more love and harmony.

When the morning sun cast its first light through Grace's window, it was Grace's reminder to be thankful with silence, saying, "Today is a new day, full of great possibilities to make a better version of myself." She heard the voice inside her, a melody that only Grace could hear. As Grace moves through her morning routine being grateful for everything she has, she helps her mother in the kitchen, ensuring her younger siblings get ready for school, with a quiet force that fills their house with her warmth. When Oscar couldn't find his soccer jersey or Lucy spilled her juice, it was Grace's gentle touch to turn potential moments of frustration into opportunities for kindness. Even in school, when the pressures of academics and the complexities of teenage social life loomed large, gratitude was Grace's invisible anchor.



The gentle nudge reminds Grace to be grateful and to believe in herself, to stay true to her values, and to approach each challenge with a calm, open heart, and almost mystical marvel.

When Grace, guided by her heart's whispers, said a word of encouragement to her brother or helped her sister, something remarkable happened. The atmosphere around her seemed to lighten, the edges of the day softened, and a sense of agreement enveloped the family.

This was most evident during family meals, especially during those lively breakfasts. When discussions turned into debates or when little arguments arose, as they often do in a family of five, Grace's presence, infused and acted like a balm.

Her words, her demeanor, and her very being radiated a profound positivity.

Her parents often wondered how Grace managed to stay so grounded and positive, unaware of the invisible force that whispered courage and love into her heart. Julia and Tom attributed all those to her maturity and her natural empathy.

Grace's strong belief was the force as real as the air she breathed. Even on days when Grace herself felt down, her faith was the only antidote for failure.

She could hear the whisper in her head, "Every day your authenticity and your love can change everything around you for the better."

And so, Grace moved through her days, a quiet peacemaker who continued to guide and support her family. Her family felt it in her hugs, her words, and her patient listening. It was a gift that Grace shared generously.

Every night, five minutes before sleep, Grace counted at least twenty things to be grateful for. With a smile, she listened to the gentle voice echoing in her mind. "And for each blessing I find myself to be grateful." The voice continued, "I choose to see the good in everything around me, I always have a positive mental attitude."

## Chapter Two

### Mona

One crisp autumn day, under the golden canopy of oak leaves, Lucy still dreaming of being a princess was sitting on a sun-warmed bench, drawing her part in that palace. Mona found herself seated next to Lucy. The two girls, both in the second grade, were an unlikely pair – Mona, the new girl with quiet confidence, and Lucy, who often retreated into the shadows of her insecurities. Mona turned to Lucy, her eyes gentle, "I love your drawing, Lucy. The colors are so bright! That's really beautiful, Lucy," she remarked, her voice genuine.

Lucy, clutching her artwork, glanced up, surprised. "Really? I'm not very good."

"That's not true at all," Mona countered, a gentle firmness in her tone. "You're talented. I wish I could create something like that." Mona's voice was soft but firm. "You have a real talent. I wish I could draw like that."

For Lucy, who lived in the long shadow cast by her sister's achievements, this was a novel experience. Mona's words were like an inspiration, cutting through the fog of self-doubt that often clouded her days.

Lucy looked at Mona, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. For the first time in her young life, she felt a confidence stirring within her and a seed planted and nurtured by Mona's kindness and belief in her.

As they walked back to class, Lucy's step was a little lighter, her head held a bit higher. And Mona, in her quiet way, had found a friend who made her emotionally less alone. School ends with a hopeful mystery in Lucy's mind.

As the night falls, Lucy enters Grace's room to ask for some wise advice as usual. Grace gave her little sister a nice smile and said, "I'm all ears."

Lucy tells her stories about meeting a new friend and then goes back to the class beside Sarah. And how Sarah doesn't like Mona. Sarah says, "The new girl is weird, don't you see that?"

Lucy continues, “She is just jealous because we have a smarter girl in our class.”

Sarah then challenged me asking me, “How do you know that she is the smartest?”

My answer was, “Because she said we are both smart, and besides she called me the smartest girl in school.”

“And, you believe her?”, Sarah responded.

Sarah asked the teacher, “Who is the smartest student?”

Our teacher responded, “Looking at grades I see, you are the best student in my class.”

Sarah turned to me and said, “Here is your proof.”

But, Mona, she understands whatever I say and then she calls me smart. And I think she is right.

There is a moment of silence when Grace wonders about Mona’s act in her sister’s school and changing her best friend Sarah’s relationship. Knowing that Sarah is a straightforward smart girl like Grace. And, that Sarah and Lucy have always been nice

together without any conflicts, then Mona is changing their emotional balance.

Lucy says Mona is my best friend now. But Sarah makes me feel bad.

“Sarah made a fool of me today in the class. She said she’s the smartest kid and I’m awkward.” Said Lucy.

Grace questions Lucy, “Maybe there has been some misunderstanding. What do you think if you give Sarah another chance, so you can have two best friends?”

In the days that followed, Lucy and Mona’s friendship blossomed. Mona always had a kind word for Lucy, lifting her spirits when she stumbled over an answer in class or when she felt invisible compared to her sister. Mona listened intently to Lucy’s stories about her family, her eyes never straying, making Lucy feel seen and heard in ways she seldom experienced.

Their friendship, an unexpected bloom quickly deepened. Mona’s words were a balm to Lucy’s bruised ego, her encouragement a steady presence in the face of classroom embarrassments or the sting of feeling second-best at home.



Lucy began to rely on Mona's reassurances. "You really think I'm good at math?" she asked one day, her voice tinged with hope.

"Of course," Mona replied with a smile. "You've got it in you, Lucy. I believe in you." "You're not just someone's little sister," she said, her voice laced with conviction. "You're unique, and you matter. You're not in anyone's shadow."

For the first time, Lucy felt a spark of self-assuredness ignite within her, fueled by Mona's unwavering support and confidence in her.

Mona was aware of Lucy's deep admiration for her older sister, a bond she envied quietly. She longed for such closeness in her own life, but she never let that envy color their friendship. Instead, she used her understanding to be there for Lucy in ways her sister couldn't be. Despite Mona's underlying envy of Lucy's familial bonds, particularly the admiration she held for her older sister, she never allowed it to taint their friendship. Instead, Mona's longing for similar connections made her more attuned to Lucy's emotional needs, offering her the understanding and support she craved.

The school principal, Ms. Thompson, often checked on Mona, a gesture reflecting the high regard the school held for her family. Mona, gracious as always, assured her everything was wonderful, especially now that she had Lucy as a friend.

Mona, in her understated manner, had found in Lucy a kindred spirit, someone who brought her out of her own shell, making her feel less isolated in her own quiet world. Their friendship, intertwined by threads of kindness and mutual understanding, stood even in the most unlikely of circumstances.

### Lucy's Wishes Come True

In their home, a storm brewed in the form of a young girl's desires and tears. Lucy, with the persistence of a heart set on its desires, had been pleading her mother for a playdate with Mona. Her requests, however, had met with hesitation, sparking a childish outburst of frustration.

Julia, turned to Grace, seeking counsel. Grace, with the wisdom that often accompanies the eldest sibling, tried to bridge the gap between her mother's concerns and Lucy's desires.

"Mom just wants to talk to Mona's parents first," Grace explained, "She loves us and wants to make sure everything's okay."

But Lucy caught in her difficult struggle of youthful impatience, fled to her room, her cries an inaudible echo down the hallway.

Julia and Grace soon found themselves in Lucy's room, full of drama. Julia, with a mother's gentle touch, raised a question. "Lucy, would you like to go to Mona's house this Friday after school?" she asked, her voice a blend of firmness and tenderness.

Lucy's tears gave way to a giggle, a rapid shift in mood typical of her age. "Her driver can pick me up and take me home," she beamed, her previous upset forgotten in the excitement of the prospect.

Julia, taken aback by the mention of a driver, turned to Grace for clarity. Grace, in her role as the intermediary, elaborated on Mona's family, their affluence, and their mansion a mere 20 minutes away. She recounted her own experience, how she had been given a lift by Mona's driver to a nearby shop during a lunch

break, an adventure that seemed to elevate her status in her younger sister's eyes. My teacher designated me to buy gifts for the class.

Julia's puzzlement quickly morphed into concern. "Why am I the last to know about what's happening?" she wondered aloud, a mix of maternal frustration and worry lacing her words. Grace, ever the peacemaker, calmly filled in the details of her day - how her teacher had chosen her, the 'wisest' child, to pick out gifts for the class, and how Mona's driver had conveniently offered his services following Mona's father's permission.

And so, the playdate was set. Friday arrived with the swiftness of time that cares little for adult worries or childlike anticipation. As they marked the end of another school day, the kids returned home. And soon after, Grace approached her mother. "Can I call Lucy down? The driver's here," she asked, her voice tinged with a hint of envy and excitement for her sister's adventure.

Julia, still harboring a mother's worries but tempered with the understanding that childhood was a time for friendships and new experiences, nodded her agreement.

The playdate was more than a simple visit; it was a step into a world unfamiliar to Lucy, a test of trust for Julia, and a chapter of childhood that would be etched in memory.

Lucy full of wonder received her last permission to enter the black stretched limousine and sat in the back. Her heart danced with excitement. She thanked her mother again. The smooth ride in her Mona's luxurious car made her feel like a princess in a fairy tale.

When Mona's driver announced their arrival at the ornate iron gates both sides slowly parted.



To either side of the driveway, lush green lawns stretched out

punctuated by vibrant flower beds with a symphony of colors. Their sweet fragrances mingled in the air and the distant chorus of songbirds provided a soothing soundtrack to the mansion. Gradually came into view, a breathtaking spectacle of architectural magnificence.

The driveway took gentle turns, each curve unveiling new aspects of the sprawling estate. She pressed her nose against the half-open window, her eyes sparkling with delight at every turn of the winding driveway.

The journey felt timeless, a passage through a realm of beauty and tranquility. Upon reaching the mansion's grand entrance, the driveway concluded in a spacious circular forecourt. As they approached the building, Lucy's eyes widened. The sheer size of the structure, its towering spires reaching into the cloudless sky, and the golden sunlight reflecting off the multitude of windows. The palace, home to Mona and her family, was not just a residence but an establishment of wealth.

Upon Lucy's arrival, a line of staff stood at the ready by the entrance, an impressive array of individuals whose sole purpose was to ensure the smooth running of this vast household. There were tailored suits butlers, their expressions solemn yet welcoming; maids in neat uniforms, their eyes curious yet respectful; and a multitude of other employees whose roles were less clear but no less important. They all bowed slightly as Lucy walked past, a gesture of respect that made her cheeks flush with a mixture of embarrassment and excitement.

Mona, with her radiant smile and open arms, was a blunt contrast to the formal atmosphere of the palace. She greeted Lucy like a long-lost sister.

"Welcome to my home, Lucy!" she exclaimed, her voice echoing slightly in the grand entrance hall.



As they moved through the luxurious corridors, Lucy's gaze rushed from one extravagant detail to another. The walls were decorated with intricate paintings that spoke of wealth, the floors covered in lavish carpets that muffled their footsteps, and



the air was perfumed with a delicate blend of flowers and spices.

The first stop was the grand ballroom. Its high ceilings soared above them, adorned with intricate paintings that depicted scenes of mythical elegance.

The chandeliers, resembling cascades of diamonds, cast a warm, glittering light that danced across the polished marble floor. Large, arched windows framed views of the meticulously landscaped gardens, creating a seamless blend of indoor luxury and outdoor beauty. The ballroom, with its gold-trimmed furnishings and luxurious drapes, spoke of countless nights of high society gatherings and elegant dances. Mona took Lucy to the heart of the palace the kitchen, a hive of activity and the source of mouthwatering aromas.



The kitchen staff, a team of seasoned chefs and bustling assistants, had been preparing for Lucy's visit with the kind of fervor reserved for state banquets. The centerpiece of their efforts was a magnificent cake, grand enough to match the surroundings.

The cake was a masterpiece, standing tall on a silver platter. It was adorned with intricate icing and delicate decorations, each detail meticulously crafted. On top of the cake stood two sugar cane statues, representing Mona and Lucy as princesses. The statues were not just confectionery; they were art, capturing the essence of their friendship in sugar and fondant. The kitchen staff, usually reserved and focused, couldn't help but display a hint of pride in their creation.

"It's beautiful!" Lucy gasped, turning to Mona with a smile that mirrored the joy in her voice. The kitchen staff, observing this reaction, exchanged satisfied glances, their hard work having paid off.



As Mona and Lucy admired the cake, the rest of the kitchen buzzed with activity. Cooks attended to simmering pots and sizzling pans, while assistants darted back and forth, ensuring that every detail of the evening's meal was perfect. The aroma of roasted meats, fresh bread, and exotic spices filled the air, creating an atmosphere of anticipation for the feast to come.

Mona guided Lucy through a series of luxury bedroom suites, each more lavish than the last.

One suite, designed in the style of an Italian apartment, featured elegant furnishings, delicate fabrics, romantic artwork, and state-of-the-art entertainment systems.

Mona's room was designed by herself. These were not just simple tubs but mini oases of relaxation, with massaging jets and mood lighting, offering a spa-like experience in the privacy of each room.

The tour was a revelation to Lucy proof of the lavish lifestyle that Mona and her family lived. It was the opposite of the simple yet warm environment of her own home. As Lucy absorbed the sights and sounds of this palatial residence, she couldn't help but feel a mix of awe and unfamiliarity. The palace was a world of luxury and extravagance, a far cry from the cozy, loving confines of her family home.

As they walked, the staff they encountered continued to perform their duties with a disciplined grace. Cleaners polished the already gleaming surfaces, gardeners tended to the perfectly manicured lawns and hedges, and servants moved silently through the halls with trays of food attending Mona and Lucy.

Lucy was astounded by the scale of the structure all, the meticulous care taken in every aspect of the palace's maintenance. She realized that what made this place truly remarkable was not just its physical beauty but the dedication of the people who worked tirelessly behind the scenes. Looking at Lucy's reactions, Mona said, "You must bring your brother for a swim."



As the day turned to evening, the palace began to take on a different character. Lights twinkled on in the gardens, casting a magical glow on the paths and flowerbeds. Inside, lamps were lit, casting warm pools of light in the grand hallways and rooms.

Finally, as night fell, Mona and Lucy, accompanied by a small entourage of staff, made their way to the dining room where the celebration would begin. The cake, now a centerpiece on a grand table, seemed to glow under the soft light. Respect filled the air as the evening unfolded, a perfect blend of friendship and splendor in the heart of the magnificent mansion.

When Lucy returned home from her adventure at Mona's palatial residence, the air was thick with curiosity. Grace, the older sister, eagerly awaited the tales of this otherworldly playdate.

"So, how was it?" Grace asked, her eyes wide with anticipation.

Lucy, still awash in the glow of her visit, launched into her story.

"Mona's house is like nothing I've ever seen, even bigger than my dream. It's gigantic, Grace! They have two swimming pools, one inside and one outside. It's like living in a resort!"

Grace listened; her fascination shaded with a hint of disbelief.

"Two swimming pools? Really?"

"And that's not all," Lucy continued, her voice a mix of awe and disbelief. "They have four drivers. Each parent has their own, and the kids do too. When Mona gets dropped off at school, her driver jumps out to open the door for her. And this is a picture of her bedroom."



Grace raised an eyebrow. "That's... quite something. And what about her parents? What do they do?"

Lucy shrugged, "I don't really know. Nobody does. But they go to Paris for Mona's clothes. Can you imagine that?"

The conversation hung in the air, a disparity to their own, more modest lifestyle. After a moment, Lucy's expression shifted from awe to contemplation. "Grace, do you think I could invite Mona for a playdate here? And maybe Sarah too?"

Grace, sensing the underlying need for approval in her sister's question, nodded thoughtfully. "That sounds like a great idea. But, Lucy, remember, our house might not be as big, but it's filled with love and enjoyment. That's what makes a home special."

Lucy's eyes brightened at the thought. "I want Mona to see that. To see how we live and play with Sarah too. Maybe they can become best friends!"

Grace watched her younger sister understanding behind her youthful eyes. Grace, with a thoughtful gaze and a gentle tone, turned to Lucy and began sharing her reflections on the timeless lessons of childhood. "You know, Lucy," she began, "childhood teaches us about wonder, about discovering new things, and most importantly, about the beauty of friendships. The core of any true friendship is the ability to share our worlds, no matter how grand or modest they may be."

She paused, ensuring Lucy was absorbing her words, then continued, "The key to life is to trust in ourselves and to stay true to our own nature. It's easy to get lost in trying to fit in or conform to what others expect or want from us, but our strength

lies in our authenticity." Grace's voice softened with sincerity. "And Lucy, it's important for you not to envy Mona's luxurious lifestyle. Envy can make us overlook our values. Remember, everyone's journey is different, and your journey is just as valuable and significant as anyone else's."

Grace leaned forward, her eyes reflecting wisdom. "I've learned from my own experiences to focus on my personal journey of growth, without letting myself be disturbed or irritated by what others are doing or having. By doing so, I've found a sense of peace and self-acceptance that's far more fulfilling than any external validation."

She concluded with a soft yet firm conviction, "That's the key to not just surviving, but truly thriving in our unique ways."



## Chapter Three

### The Trio

The teacher announced a group art class project, and Sarah, Lucy's previous partner, turned to pair up as usual. But in that moment, Mona, a master of social strategy despite her young age, made her move. With a calculated smile that seemed to mask deeper intentions, she turned to Lucy. "Let's partner up," her voice laced with innocence, Mona suggested with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. With the joy of sharing her artistic vision, Lucy's eyes sparkled with creative ideas.

Mona's words were sugar-coated, praising Lucy's ideas, and giving her a sense of security and partnership. But as the project progressed, Mona's tone shifted. "That's nice, Lucy, but what if we try it this way?" she would suggest. Her words, seemingly harmless, were each one undermining Lucy's efforts.

Mona's suggestions, always framed as improvements, began to overshadow Lucy's original ideas. Mona slowly undermined Lucy's abilities and confidence, leaving her questioning her

judgment. When Mona took charge, the balance of power shifted profoundly. Lucy's contributions became fewer, her voice quieter, her initial enthusiasm fading under the weight of self-doubt.

Lucy would suggest, "this way?" Mona's approvals, always framed as improvements, began to dominate Lucy's original ideas.

During lunch, Mona steered their conversations towards Sarah. Lucy shared her feelings and stories about her previous best friend, Sarah. Mona listened carefully, nodding, but later twisted Lucy's words. "Doesn't Sarah always need to be the star?" Mona asked, her tone dripping with two-faced concern.

Lucy, afraid of losing Mona's friendship, began to distance herself from Sarah. The more she prioritized Mona, the more she neglected her bond with others, falling deeper into Mona's web.

In the Brown family home, where the ordinary met the extraordinary in the lives of its inhabitants, a refined drama unfolded. It began with the determined pleas of young Lucy, whose recent visits to Mona's lavish residence had filled her with

an eagerness to reciprocate the hospitality. Her request to have Mona over for a playdate, however, was met with a mother's cautious hesitation. Julia had grown slightly wary of Mona, sensing something unsettling beneath the surface of her daughter's new friendship.

Lucy's persistence, fueled by the innocent desire to share her world with Mona, soon evolved into a storm of tears and frustration. The family home, usually a haven of warmth and understanding, echoed the emotional upheaval of a child's unfulfilled wishes.

After Grace's help, Lucy, armed with renewed determination, approached her mother once more. This time, her request was laced with the excitement of sharing her newly renovated room, a personal sanctuary that she had poured her heart into. Julia, sensing her daughter's earnestness, found herself at a crossroads between her maternal instincts and her wish to nurture Lucy's blossoming social life.

In a moment of contemplative compromise, Julia agreed to the playdate, but not without a critical condition - the inclusion of

Sarah, Lucy's long-time best friend. Julia's intuition guided her to believe that Sarah's presence would provide a balance to the dynamic, a grounding influence amidst the unpredictable waves of Mona's companionship.

Lucy, though initially taken aback by the condition, soon warmed up to the idea. The prospect of bringing together her old and new friends in her room was an exciting one. She envisioned a playdate where the joys of her world could merge with the contrasting personalities of Mona and Sarah, creating a cooperative childhood experience.

In conclusion, both Lucy and Julia found common ground. The decision for a trio playdate was set for the weekend, marking a new chapter in the unfolding story of Lucy's friendships. The Brown family home prepared to embrace yet another memory in its walls - a memory that promised positive learning, and the modest particulars of growing up.

## Mona's first time visiting the Brown's family home

Nestled in the bustling heart of New York City suburbs, there thrived a quintessential middle-class sanctuary - the Brown family home. The trio have their first playdate now.



But this time, in the last few schooldays of October evening, a delicate magic was stirring within these familiar walls.

The epicenter of this enchanting world was the petite, cheerful Lucy Brown. Her room might have been small, but her



imagination painted it vast and limitless. Fairy tales leaped off the colorful posters on her walls, and heroes from comic books whispered secrets of valor and courage, creating an inviting world of wonder. Her room was a stage for dreams, a gateway to every imaginative adventure a child's heart could crave.

Now, Lucy with twin braids of fiery red hair and a smattering of freckles like stars scattered across her cheeky, rosy face. She, as the host, was the most theatrical in this imaginative world; Lucy was the director, the playwright, and the leading lady. Lucy's world was a demonstration of the magic of childhood, a reminder of the power of imagination. She was a natural storyteller, captivating her audience and transporting them into her magical world. It was a world where superheroes sipped tea and an eight-year-old girl could be the queen of her universe. The twinkle in her eyes and her giggle made the girls laugh harder, even if they didn't fully understand the context of her parodies. Tom transformed Lucy's bedroom into a grand setting for the kids' tea party. And she dressed her favorite superheroes in an assortment of tiny hats and scarves seated around a petite tea set. Her best friends, Mona and Sarah now play together in school and outside. The dynamics between the trio were centered on Lucy's magnetic innocence and charisma that truly bonds them together. The tea party was in full swing. Every pour was a ceremony, every sip, a ritual of childhood friendship. Lucy

says, “Sip sip hooray!” Lucy was effortlessly igniting happiness in everyone around her.

Sarah, an overthinker nerdy girl, wore glasses too big for her face, her hair in a neat ponytail. Being the best student in her class. Her curious big eyes did not hide behind her spectacles. And, the respected Mona, with the wild river of imagination destroys Sarah's calm lake. Her thick hair was as fancy as can be decorated; her pink skin always glowed with life. The dynamics between the trio were captivating in their truly magical universe.



As the girls enthusiastically deliberated their philosophical opinions over the superior mythical creature, they visualized pink unicorns or purple dragons. Each 'tea' serving - in reality, lukewarm apple juice in tiny, colorful plastic cups - was met with ceremony and celebration, reflecting the deep, unspoken bond of their friendship.

Lucy, the cheerful one often stole the show. She played an endearing mimicry of her mother's adult conversations about

the best grocery deals or the latest neighborhood gossip. Even if half of it flew over Sarah and Mona’s heads, they adored Lucy’s dramatic executions, and the fun was easily swept away in their infectious laughter.

It was as if time stood still, capturing a perfect snapshot of Lucy’s world - a demonstration of the transformative magic of childhood in the suburb of New York City.

As the girls were deep in their exciting discussion about mythical creatures, the bedroom door creaked open at 7 PM. Lucy’s mother, Mrs. Brown, stepped in, her warm smile lighting up the room. She was a woman of grace and kindness, her eyes always twinkling with a motherly love that seemed to envelop everyone around her.

In her hands, she held a tray laden with freshly baked warm cookies, their sweet fragrance wafting through the room and making the girls’ eyes widen in surprise and delight.





The cookies were shaped like stars, moons, and hearts, with attention to detail and Mrs. Brown's understanding of her daughter's love for all things magical.

"Hello, ladies," she greeted, her voice as sweet as the treats she carried. "I thought you might enjoy some refreshments."

The girls looked at each other, their eyes wide with surprise and delight. They had been so engrossed in their tea party that they hadn't noticed the time passing, nor had they realized how hungry they were until the smell of the cookies reached their noses.

"Wow, thank you, Mrs. Brown!" Sarah exclaimed, her glasses slipping down her nose in her excitement.

Mona, acting as the imaginative one, added, "It's like we're real princesses at a royal feast!"

Lucy smiled at her friends' reactions, feeling a swell of pride for her mother. Mrs. Brown simply chuckled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, every princess needs her royal feast, doesn't she?"

As Mrs. Brown set the tray down and the girls eagerly reached for the cookies, the room was filled with a new kind of magic - the magic of unexpected surprises, warm cookies, and the simple joy of being cared for. With a final chuckle and a loving glance at the girls, Mrs. Brown exited the room, leaving the trio to their royal feast.

No sooner had the door closed behind her they decided for the next playdate at Lucy's room.

## Lucy's Next Tea Party

The playdate was a unique blend of history and fantasy - a time traveler's tea party. Lucy's room, now decorated with clocks and maps, was the perfect setting for a journey through time.

The girls, dressed in wide-ranging outfits representing different eras, gathered around the tea set. Lucy, in a Victorian dress, played the role of a gracious hostess from the past.

Sarah, dressed in a futuristic outfit, represented a traveler from a distant, advanced civilization. Mona, in a mix of medieval and Renaissance attire, completed the trio.

They sipped their apple juice tea, each sharing stories from their 'time'. Lucy entertained them with tales of knights and castles, Sarah spoke of technological marvels from the future, and Mona described mythical creatures from her medieval world.

The playdate was a delightful fusion of learning and imagination. They discussed history, pondered the future, and let their creativity soar. The tea party was not just an escape but an exploration of times, a testament to their shared curiosity and the unbounded nature of their friendship.

As the evening drew to a close, the time travelers returned to the present, leaving behind their imaginative journey. The mood had irrevocably changed. Mona, perhaps intentionally, knocked over a milk jar. Quick to blame Lucy for the spill, she played on Lucy's known clumsiness. Sarah's passive acceptance of this accusation only deepened Lucy's embarrassment.

Then a new debate sparked between Sarah and Mona. The topic had shifted from mythical creatures to a more personal contest - who would be the smartest princess at the tea party? Lucy's room, a familiar sanctuary of creativity and warmth, was transformed into an imperial court, with makeshift thrones and a plethora of shiny, costume jewelry that glittered like real royal treasures.

As Sarah and Mona put on their makeshift crowns and flowing makeshift capes, the air was thick with anticipation and excitement. They each assumed the role of a princess from a different kingdom, each bringing their unique strengths and qualities to the table.

The debate about who would make the smartest princess started as a playful discussion. Sarah, ever the academic, confidently claimed the title for herself based on her top grades. "A true princess must be wise and knowledgeable," she declared, adjusting her glasses with a queenly air.

Mona, however, was quick to challenge this notion. "But a princess must also be creative and imaginative," she countered,

her voice tinged with a need to assert her opinion. "It's not just about what you know, but how you think."

The conversation, initially light-hearted, began to take a competitive turn. Mona's insistence on creativity being paramount over academic achievements seemed to stem from a deeper desire to dominate and control the narrative.

Lucy, caught in the middle, felt her voice drowned out by the growing intensity of the debate. Her discomfort grew as the room that once echoed with pleasure now vibrated with the sounds of a heated argument.

In a dramatic turn of events, Mona, perhaps sensing the shift in dynamics, called upon FAVOS, a mysterious entity from her imagination. The temperature in the room dropped noticeably as FAVOS, a chilling figure clad in a black robe, materialized, and floated towards the window. Its eerie presence filled the room with a sense of dread



and mystery, a stark contrast to the playful fantasy they had been enjoying.

Lucy, overwhelmed by the sudden and unsettling appearance of FAVOS and the escalating argument between her friends, felt a surge of emotions well up inside her. Tears began to stream down her cheeks, a physical manifestation of the confusion she felt.

Sarah, upon seeing Lucy's distress, was jolted back to reality. The sight of her usually cheerful friend in tears was a sobering reminder of the impact of their words and actions. However, Mona seemed surprisingly unaffected by the emotional upheaval her actions had caused.

As FAVOS vanished through the window, the room, once a bastion of childlike wonder, now felt heavy with unspoken tension. The dynamic among the trio had shifted, leaving an imprint of confusion and unease. The playdate, intended to be a joyful escape, had inadvertently exposed the complexities of their friendship and the delicate balance of their feelings.

In the wake of their unsettling encounter with FAVOS, the girls, each lost in their thoughts, decided it was time to leave the cocoon of Lucy's room, stepping out into the more grounded reality of the family home.

As they quietly gathered their things, the solemn mood was the opposite of the bubbling playful debates that had filled the room just hours before. Lucy, feeling a mix of responsibility and concern, led her friends through the hallway, her footsteps echoing softly against the hardwood floors.

Meanwhile, in the living room, Lucy's mother, Julia, was on a phone call that would bring a jarring dose of reality crashing into their evening. Her conversation with Tom from the hospital's ER revealed the tragic news: Mona's driver, a constant presence in the young girl's life, had been involved in a severe accident. The gravity of the situation was intense in Tom's voice - the driver had not survived the incident.

Julia, processing the shock and the weight of the news, felt a rush of empathy for Mona.

The realization that the cheerful, carefree moments of childhood could be so swiftly interrupted by real-world tragedies was a sobering thought. She knew that she had to step in, not just as Lucy's mother, but as a guardian for other girls at that moment.

With a heavy heart, Julia ended the call and turned to face the girls, her expression a mixture of sadness and resolve. She gently explained the situation to them, her voice steady but filled with compassion. The news hit the girls like a wave, leaving them in stunned silence. Mona, in particular, seemed to retreat into herself, the loss of someone so integral to her daily life leaving her visibly shaken.



# Chapter Four

## The Rise of FAVOS

Understanding the need to bring the girls safely back to their homes, Julia took on the responsibility with a sense of maternal duty. She gathered their coats and ushered them to the car.

Shaking Julia hastily walked towards her car with Lucy and her friends on this New York's late December chilling night. They



immediately noticed an array of unusual drones hovering above them. These drones seemed extraterrestrial in origin and sounded like a monotonous bagpipe above them.

As Julia shepherded the girls into the car, her composed manner was replaced by visible shivers of apprehension. She cast anxious glances in the rearview mirror, trying to outpace the mysterious

drones that seemed to be nothing more than they could imagine.

The drive was filled with tension. The icy roads made the journey treacherous. In a sudden move, Julia swerved the car to the left, causing Mona to choke on her snack. Then reaching a major intersection, all traffic lights glowed a gloomy red. Another car, ignoring the traffic signals, sped through, barely avoiding a crash. This near miss added to the fear gripping Lucy's stomach. The children's voices, shaky with fear, called out, but Julia seemed distant, her focus entirely on the hazardous road ahead.

Lucy felt a surge of panic as she saw her friends crying beside her, their faces pale with terror. Julia's attention was momentarily captured by a burning building nearby, its flames reflecting in her eyes, filled with terror. To Lucy, it felt like a surreal nightmare, her mother seemingly lost in a world of her own.

Her anxiety at its peak, Julia noticed another car recklessly crossing the intersection. The surrounding chaos was

disorienting. Julia could barely hear her daughter, their pleas were drowned out by the overwhelming situation.

Tears clouded Julia's vision, and the cries of her daughter and friends pierced the heavy air. "Mom!" Lucy's voice was a faint whisper. Julia turned to her with an expression of distant concern. "I love you," she uttered in a spookily calm voice.

Mona looks at Lucy saying, "Look FAVOS is her!" Suddenly, a deep, raspy voice echoed in Mona's mouth, saying, "She is killing us!", sending chills down their spine.

Lucy tried to respond, but her words were lost in a sob. Her friends' cries and pleas for help echoed in the car, but the mysterious voice of FAVOS overshadowed everything.

Julia's gaze returned to the approaching building, its flickering flames exacerbating her sense of doom. Driven by panic, she accelerated, trying to escape the relentless drones. No matter how fast she drove, they remained in hot pursuit, a haunting reminder of a bottomless danger.

Then came a thunderous crash. The sound of metal crunching and glass shattering filled the air.

The world spun as their car collided with an unseen obstacle. Lucy felt the impact course through her, glass cutting into her skin. The last thing she heard before darkness engulfed her was the sound of her screams mingling with the mysterious, otherworldly hum of the drones.

## The Other Side of New York City

Tom, in the well-lit corridors of the hospital, busy in a web of accidental injuries and confusion felt something different. Unaware of the events transpiring with his wife and daughter, he reached for his phone, dialing Grace's number.

Grace, on the other end, was in a completely different headspace, unaware of the brewing storm. "Hey, Dad," she answered casually. "Mom is supposed to pick us up after Oscar's math tutor is done. We are still waiting!"

Tom's voice carried a weight of concern. "Grace, have you talked to your mom? She's not answering her phone, and I can't get through to Lucy either."

The contrast in their situations was extreme. Grace, concealed in the normalcy of her day, was clueless about her father's growing anxiety, and she replied. "No, Dad, I haven't. Maybe they're just busy doing something."

Not quite reassured, Tom wrapped up his work at the hospital, his mind racing with unknown possibilities. He tried calling Julia again, but the persistent silence on the other end only served to heighten his nervousness. With a sense of urgency, he left the hospital to pick up his children.

Upon seeing his Grace and Oscar, Tom's anxiety was evident, even as he tried to mask it with a nervous kiss. Oscar, ever the lighthearted one, took it in as usual, but Grace sensed something wrong in her father's conduct.

As they drove, Tom's usually calm composure was replaced by a sense of frantic urgency. "Grace, try calling your mom again, please," he urged, his eyes fixed on the road, his driving was uncharacteristic of him.

Now attuned to the seriousness of the situation, Grace dialed her mother's number, but she didn't pick up. The unanswered calls added an eerie silence to the car's atmosphere.

When they arrived home, Grace remembered what her father used to tell others in case of anxiety and stress. She asked her father to sit down, take a deep breath through the nose, and breathe out slowly through the mouth, as per his instructions said before. After the relaxing exercise, Tom decided to give Julia and Lucy some time. Grace, tried to maintain a peaceful context to keep Oscar focused on his homework.

As the hour ticked by with no word from Julia or Lucy, Tom's worry turned into a tangible fear. He decided to drive to their friends' homes, seeking answers to the silence that had enveloped his family. Oscar, absorbed in his schoolwork, barely registered his father's hasty departure, while Grace sat, her thoughts full of concern and confusion.

On that freezing night, the snow was still falling in thick, heavy flakes, blanketing the streets in a deceptive wrap of tranquillity.

It was the kind of winter night where the sky and the ground mirrored each other in a seamless expanse of white, and the air filled with frightening sounds. As he drove through the city, the usual hum of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street traffic was replaced by a dissonance of sirens. When he approached the intersection, he saw a flurry of activity. Ambulances, fire trucks, and police vehicles blocked the road. It was clear that a major accident had occurred.

His heart pounded in his chest as he parked the car and approached the scene on foot.



A crowd had gathered, their faces reflecting the shock and horror of the incident. The twisted metal and shattered glass, the scent of gasoline and burning rubber assaulted my senses, in that winter atmosphere. The taxi was crumpled and broken, the steam rising from its innards like the exhalations of a dying beast. The stretched limousine, its front caved in, was proof of the violence of the impact. A car, its chassis crumpled like paper.

The traffic lights swung wildly in the aftermath. The snowflakes, swirling in the chaos, were stained by the flashing lights of emergency vehicles that covered every direction. The victims of the accident were being tended to by an outbreak of first responders, their uniforms



shining against the white-washed world, their movements precise and urgent. The steam rising from the twisted engines mingled with the steam of their breath, creating a weird mist that distorted the lines between the living and the injured.

Above, the skyscrapers loomed, indifferent in their towering heights, their windows reflecting the chaos below as if it were just another day in the city that never sleeps.

But on the ground, time seemed to stand still, the usual harmony of city life silenced by the gravity of human fragility laid bare on the icy asphalt. A chilling thought crossed his mind, "Could they be amongst them?"



Before he could process the thought, a police officer stepped in front of him. "This is a restricted area," he said, his voice stern. But as the officer turned to deal with another onlooker, Tom seized the opportunity to slip past him. His heart nearly stopped when he saw Lucy being led to an ambulance. Relief was quickly replaced by fear. "Where was Julia?" he asked the nurse attending Lucy, explaining that he was the father.

The nurse checked his identification and, seeing the desperation in his eyes, allowed him to join his daughter in the ambulance.

The nurse turned to him, her face grave. "Was the woman driving the car related to you?" she asked.

# Chapter Five

## FAVOS in Control

In the sterile, dimly lit hospital intensive care unit, the air was thick with tension and unspoken fears. Julia lay motionless in the hospital bed, her breathing assisted by the quiet hum of medical machinery. Alarming tubes and wires around her pale skin, nevertheless the rhythmic beep of the heart monitor was the only indication of life in her otherwise still form.



At her bedside, Tom stood, his face a mask of anguish and disbelief. His once steady hands trembled hysterically as he clutched her hand, whispering pleas and prayers into the void of her unconsciousness. The lines on his face seemed to have deepened overnight, and his eyes, red and swollen, betrayed his struggle to maintain his composure.

The weight of the situation was fracturing his mental resilience, pushing him dangerously close to the edge of his own sanity.

Tom could not remember that early in the morning, Grace convinced their neighbors to drive her and Oscar to the hospital. Tom saw his reliable Grace, Oscar barely old enough to understand such an ugly reality with his face etched with panic and confusion, and Lucy injured in the same hospital. Grace had her arms wrapped tightly around her brother. Her eyes were wide with fear, darting between their father's crumbling figure and their mother's motionless body. Oscar, seemed frozen, his young mind struggling to process the scene before him.

The hospital room was now filled with a heavy silence, broken only by the occasional snuffle or quiet moan. The atmosphere was laden with a mix of shock, grief, and the fear of losing the anchor of their family.

Tom seemed lost in his world of pain, barely acknowledging his surroundings. Feeling helpless with tears he sought to provide some comfort to his children.

A nurse entered gently, her expression one of professional concern mixed with genuine empathy.

She took Tom to a corner and whispered, “Her heart had stopped, but our doctors did everything they could to save her.” Tom checked the monitors, and the nurse offered a gentle, reassuring to the family, but her words of comfort seemed to dissolve into the thick air of despair that enveloped the room.

Outside the window, the sky was a dull grey, mirroring the storm of emotions inside the hospital room. The family, each lost in their confusion, stood united in their vigil, clinging to the fragile thread of hope that the next day might bring a miracle. Tom felt as if the ground had been pulled out from under him.

Oscar stood motionless at the sight of his mother lying and his father consumed by grief, a wave of nausea suddenly gripped him. His stomach churned violently, an intense and uncontrollable reaction to the stress and fear that had been building up inside him.

Without a word, Oscar turned anxiously, a hand clutched to his mouth, and rushed out of the room.

His footsteps echoed in the hospital corridor as he made his way to the nearest bathroom, driven by a desperate need to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the room.

Bursting into the bathroom, he barely made it to the nearest stall before his body convulsed, and he threw up, the physical manifestation of the emotional instability he was experiencing. The cold tiles and the antiseptic smell of the bathroom formed a sharp contrast to the warm, familiar comfort he so desperately missed from home and his mother's presence.

Leaning against the cool wall of the stall, Oscar tried to catch his breath, his body shaking from the intensity of the experience. Tears mixed with sweat on his face, from the deep aching realization of how powerless he felt to change anything.

After a few moments, he rinsed his mouth and splashed water on his face, trying to wash away the traces of the evidence of his vulnerability. He looked at his reflection in the mirror, seeing a young boy forced to confront a reality far too harsh for his age.

Stepping out of the bathroom, he knew he needed to go back, to be there for his sister and his father, even if he couldn't make things better. With a heavy heart, he made his way back to the room where his family awaited, each of them navigating their painful journeys through this traumatic experience.

Tom had a sensation of a lump in his throat, telling himself, "My family, my world, was hanging by a thread if we would come out of this nightmare unharmed." And three of them held on together for the hope that their family would be whole again.

Through the glass window, the ICU room, with its array of wires and tubes, looked more like a scene from a movie than reality. Julia is on the hospital bed, her chest rising and falling in a rhythm dictated by the machines. Tom, Grace, and Oscar huddled together; their expressions displayed a range of concern and disbelief. A shiver ran down their backbones, with the sensation of someone watching them, but when they turned, they felt like Julia standing with them, all they met were the cold, impersonal hospital walls.

Meanwhile, Julia's experience was very different. She found herself in an unearthly state, a silent observer floating above her own body. The scene below was surreal, her physical form, surrounded by meticulous doctors and nurses, and through the glass, her husband and children, their eyes reflecting a storm of emotions.

"It's like a dream, isn't it?" Julia thought, her words were not structured but were echoing in her mind. She tried to reach out, her fingers passing through objects as if they were mist. "Tom, can you hear me?" she whispered, but her words fell on deaf ears.

In that bizarre limbo, she remembered Lucy, who had been admitted for broken bones and other injuries. With newfound freedom, Julia drifted through corridors to find Lucy, bandaged but stable. "You must tell them she's okay," she rushed back to tell Grace.

Julia hovered back to her body, torn between two worlds. she focused on Grace, her intensity growing. "Grace!" she shouted, unseen, unheard.

For a moment, Grace paused, her head tilting slightly, a frown wrinkling her brow. But then, confusion clouded her features, and she turned back to her father.

She saw tears in Tom's eyes, the silent strength in Oscar's clenched jaw, and Julia claimed. "I'm here, I'm still here," screaming to everyone.

The room felt heavy with unspoken words, with love and fear intertwining like the wires around her bed. In this strange, weightless existence, Julia understood something profound about presence and absence, about the invisible threads that connected them, in silence, even in the spaces where words fail.

As the nurse entered Julia's room for her routine check, she immediately sensed a shift in the atmosphere. Her trained eyes quickly scanned Julia, noting the significant changes.

First, it was the slight twitch in Julia's face, a faint frown that hinted at an internal struggle. The nurse moved closer, her hands expertly adjusting the equipment, her eyes never leaving Julia's face. She observed the slight line between Julia's brows, a



revealing sign of discomfort or pain that patients often couldn't verbally express.

Then, she noticed the change in Julia's breathing. It had become shallow and labored, in alarming contrast to the even, rhythmic breathing from just an hour ago. The nurse's fingers moved cleverly, checking the oxygen levels, confirming her concerns as she saw the numbers dip slightly below the normal range.

Glancing at the heart rate monitor, she saw another worrying sign. Julia's heart rate was gradually decreasing, a clear indication of escalating danger, mirroring the nurse's growing concern. She needed to alert the doctor; these changes could be the precursors to a more serious decline in Julia's condition. In those moments, the nurse was the guardian of the thin line between hope and despair, her observations and actions were pivotal in the battle to stabilize Julia's condition. Subsequently, the nurse asked the family members to leave the room. Then, the hospital staff arrived to do their best to save Julia again. Even Tom being a doctor in the same hospital, couldn't help.

Three doctors rushed into the room, barking orders at nurses, who moved quickly, their hands skilfully adjusting the various machines that were keeping Julia alive.

Every now and then, one of them would glance at the heart monitor, their faces tense. Despite the chaos, there was a sense of order, a rhythm that the staff followed. Each person knew their role and performed it with a level of precision and efficiency that was both inspiring and terrifying. It was a dance of life and death, and Julia was at the center of it.

Despite Grace's continuous requests to leave or to see Lucy, Tom's sense of reality which had blurred into a nonstop loop of worry did not change. His mind, in fear of losing Julia, and struggling with Lucy's condition made him vulnerable. He finally nodded, the gesture more reflexive than decision, entrusting Grace with the responsibility she was willing to shoulder.

Grace and Oscar, navigated through the hospital's echoing halls, each step mixed emotions agitating them. The apprehension of witnessing Lucy's condition darkened by the shadow of the hospital.

Upon entering Lucy's room, the sterile of her surroundings; casts, and the clinical hygiene of the hospital bed; were a contrast to the warmth that Lucy herself radiated. Despite her broken neck and legs, Lucy's spirit was incredible. The sight of her, bandaged yet stable, sent a wave of relief crashing through Grace. Lucy winked at her siblings, a silent message of resilience that colored the moment with a blow of lightness in the gravity of their situation.

Unable to speak, Lucy's eyes danced with defiance, as if she were orchestrating the very process of her healing, taking command over the chaos that had enveloped their lives. Grace and Oscar, standing by her bed, were drawn into Lucy's unspoken assurance, their fears momentarily softened by her presence.

Grace, with love and tenderness leaning forward, kissed Lucy's hair and shoulder. Oscar, young and less equipped to mask his

emotions, became restless, the stillness of the hospital clashing with the energy of his youth. Their stay was brief but profound, a moment of connection and reassurance that felt both brief and endless.

As they prepared to leave, Grace approached one of the doctors, who she knew was a colleague of Tom, requesting a cab to take them home.

Finally, in the late evening, Grace and Oscar stepped out of the hospital, leaving for the uncertain journey back to what they hoped would still be considered home.

The hospital's walls, white bandages, the artificial light—remained etched in their memories, the suffering they were experiencing. Yet, in those moments with Lucy, they found shades of hope that even in the most clinical of environments, the human spirit remains vibrant.

The night had fallen like a curtain, wrapping the city in darkness as Grace and Oscar arrived home with the day's griefs. The clock struck 7 PM, marking their return not just to a place of refuge but to a battleground of their emotions.

They left toward their rooms, a silent agreement to seek solace in sleep, despite the fears that danced through their minds.

Grace, usually committed to her evening rituals of gratitude, found herself engulfed in a storm of anger. The day's nightmare tore at the edges of her consciousness, challenging her belief in the goodness of life. The shadows of the hospital, the sight of Lucy incapacitated, and Julia's silent battle for life, all merged into a disharmony of her belief system. "This cannot be happening," she whispered into the darkness of her room.

Oscar, on the other hand, seemed to drift into sleep with an ease that contradicted the chaos of the day. His young mind, perhaps in defense, chose to sidestep the reality of their situation, choosing forgetfulness with innocence. Exhausted and confused, they lastly slept.

In their parents' absence, Grace's act like Oscar's guardian was much larger than she'd ever imagined. The first day passed in a blur of anxiety and makeshift meals, punctuated by a brief call from their father.

His voice, strained yet reassuring, promised a quick return. But hours stretched into days and Grace felt the excruciating pressure.

On the second day, the quiet from the hospital felt like a bad sign. That was when she remembered Ms. Foreman, the school counselor, known for her kindness and unwavering support for her students. Grace reached out to Ms. Foreman; her voice steady as she explained their situation. She spoke of the hospital visit and the silence that followed. Ms. Foreman listened with her heart as she was all ears, offering great support and making sure Grace knew the school had their backs.

The third day, when the dawn barely had a chance to cast its first light; the peace of the morning was shattered. Loud knocks, more like battering strikes than a police call, shook Grace from her uncontrolled sleep. The world outside their home had erupted into a scene straight out of a high-stakes drama. Police encircled their house, while a SWAT team, dressed in the secrecy of their uniforms, stood ready with their weapons, a silent threat.

Grace, heart pounding, confusion spinning in her half-awake mind, confronted the intrusion with a mixture of fear and defiance.

The sight of police officers at her door, their presence demanding and authoritative, was a blow to her reality. "What now?" she thought, her voice barely hiding the shiver of her apprehension and fear.

The senior officer, his demeanor unyielding, presented the warrant—a piece of paper that seemed to hold the weight of the world. "We are looking for Tom Brown," he stated, his voice carrying an expectation of compliance.

"My father? He's a doctor... at the hospital," Grace replied, her mind racing to connect the dots that seemed to scatter further with each passing second. "Why? What's happened now?" The questions dropped out, each one echoing her disbelief and the growing fear that their nightmare was far from over.

As the officers began their search, leaving no corner of their home untouched, Grace stood amidst the chaos, negative emotions brewing within. When the Police departed in search of

her father, the safety of their home, once unquestionable, felt violated, the morning's events reminded her of how quickly normalcy could be toppled.

In the moment, the aftermath of their misfortune seemed to stretch out before them, a path fraught with uncertainty and the shadow of a threat she couldn't yet understand. As the last senior officer declared their departure, the sense of urgency that had filled the air began to dissipate, leaving behind a heavy silence. Grace, standing in the doorway, watched the police and the black vans retreat from her home, a sense of menacing settling over her. The day had begun, but the darkness of the night remained, an indication of the madness yet to unfold.

The morning's anarchy, so sudden and invasive, had receded, but it left Grace feeling more helpless than ever. The reality of her family's situation, the hospital scenes, and now the police invasion merged into a relentless stress that breached her defenses. Overwhelmed, her knees buckled, and the world around her turned into a blur as she fainted, the solidity of the doorframe failing to offer support.



The house returned to silence for about two hours, until Oscar finally woke up. The quietness and hunger roused him and a child's forgetfulness at sleep's end, he ventured downstairs.

His voice, clear and expectant, broke the silence. "Mom, where is breakfast?" The normalcy of his question, a contrast to the week's events, echoed through the house.

Wandering in search of his mother, the sight that made him stop in his tracks, was Grace, lying motionless at the entrance. Another catastrophe in what was becoming a series of inexplicable events. Oscar's initial confusion quickly gave way to a rush of memories from the days before; the hospital, the worry for his mother and sister, the strange energy of concern that had enveloped their home—and now this. Tears leaped to his eyes, the fear, and the uncertainty, all came rolling back. He knelt beside Grace, his hands shaking in desperation. He put all his strength into his voice as he called out to her.

Grace's eyes trembled open to the sight of Oscar's petrified face, a mirror to her fear and confusion. "It's a nightmare, it doesn't exist, we are dreaming, right?" they said almost in harmony,

their voices in a hopeful plea for reality to reset to be nothing more than an illusion.

Yet, the reality was the harsh truth, and they were awake. The challenges confronting them were all too real. They hugged each other for encouragement of hope.

In the rich soil of their mind, seeds of failure grew rapidly. Grace and Oscar saw themselves towards upcoming disasters, facing the fear of loss of their parent and everything they had before. Their tears came easily thinking that way. Their hopes and dreams felt like distant memories as they drowned in a sea of doubt and pessimism, paralyzing themselves with negative thoughts.

It was as if they were handing their spirits over to the devil on a silver platter, their resilience shattered by the day's revelations. With their dad, mysteriously absent following a police raid on their home, going to school became pointless and three days slipped by.

In conclusion, their high school counselor and a close family friend, Ms. Foreman, showed up at their doorstep.

Her presence was a reminder of the reality of their agony. She brought news that felt like a gut punch: their father was caught in a web of serious allegations, from child abduction to an accident that took a life, turning their tragedy into a community drama. Ms. Foreman explained what happened in the last two days.

Tom faced the court, offering apologies that felt hollow against the weight of the accusations.

In a dramatic twist, he had even offered their home as compensation to the family of Sarah, a move that left Grace and Oscar bending. Now, with Tom behind bars and their world tipped over, Ms. Foreman's visit was less a courtesy and more a call to action.

Despite the confusion and hurt, Ms. Foreman believed in Grace's strength, in her ability to rise above the chaos and be the anchor their family desperately needed. Her plea was simple yet profound: help your father, be the calm in the storm.

Tom's actions in court, driven by emotion without a legal representative, had only deepened his troubles.

Disrespecting the court and its protocols, he had also been ordered as an unfit parent. Ms. Foreman warned them that government employees would force them to a foster home.

As Ms. Foreman laid out the grim scenario, it was clear that the path forward was daunting. Grace and Oscar needed more than just legal advice; they also needed a way to navigate their tangled emotions.

The days following Ms. Foreman's visit blurred into a single, continuous loop of despair for Oscar and Grace. School had become a distant thought, an obligation neither of them could bring themselves to face. Instead, they remained confined in their home.

The buzz of Oscar's alarm felt like a taunt, a reminder of another day when everything had changed yet nothing moved forward. His backpack lay untouched by the door.

Other school counselors had called several times, their tones a mixture of concern and frustration on the voicemail. "Oscar, we're worried about you. Please, let's talk about how we can help," she'd say. But Oscar couldn't bring himself to return her

calls. Talking meant admitting out loud that his life was crumbling, and he wasn't ready to hear the words echo in the air.

His father, once a source of laughter and comfort, had become a stranger. Oscar spent his days wandering through the house, each room a reminder of better times. Photos of family vacations, birthday parties, and everyday moments lined the walls, now touching artifacts of a past rapidly slipping away. The words of a formal acknowledgment of the collapse of his family, and the decision to send him to a foster home felt both shocking and expected, a final blow in a series of defeats.

Grace, at 17, felt the weight of responsibility heavier on her shoulders with each passing day. One chilly morning, driven by a mix of desperation and the need to do something, she decided. She would visit their father in prison. Perhaps, there might be some way to fix this mess. Oscar was left alone, and hunger bothered him. It was during one of these aimless walks through the living room that he heard a knock on the door. The sound was startling in the quiet. For a moment, Oscar froze, a mix of fear and curiosity pinning him in place.

Visitors had become rare, and part of him was terrified of who it might be. Approaching the door tentatively, Oscar's mind raced. Could it be Grace, back already with news of their father? Or perhaps it was Ms. Foreman, who came to check on them again, her presence both a comfort and a reminder of their dire situation. Opening the door revealed neither Grace nor Ms. Foreman.

## Oscar Left Home

Grace's late return home was quite alarming, she was shocked again.

The scene before her was a chaotic splash of blue and red lights flashing violently outside her house.

Police cars were parked haphazardly along the curb, a sign that something was terribly wrong.

A small crowd of neighbors, usually friendly and open, were now full of pity and concern.



The vibrant greens of Mrs. Robinson's Garden, where she and Oscar had spent countless hours playing as children, seemed dull and lifeless under the harsh glare of the police lights.

"What's going on?" Grace's voice was a whisper, barely audible over the hum of whispered conversations and the distant crackle of a police radio. Mrs. Robinson, an elderly lady who lived two doors down and always had a soft spot for their family, stepped forward.

Her eyes, which always reminded Grace of her mother, were filled with tears. "Oh, Grace," she began, her voice trembling, "it's the house. There's been a court order. Sarah's family... they're claiming ownership and they're selling it."

The words hit Grace like a physical blow, each one a punch that knocked the wind out of her. The house—their home—was all they had left of the life they used to have. It was supposed to be their sanctuary, not something that could be ripped away by a piece of paper and the cold, indifferent hand of the law.

"And Oscar," Mrs. Johnson continued, her voice breaking, "they took him. The social workers came and took him to a foster home, and now, they are searching for you."

Grace's knees felt weak, and for a moment, she thought she might collapse right there on the sidewalk. Oscar, her little brother, the one person she was supposed to protect above all else, had been taken from her, and she hadn't been there to stop it.

Anguish and guilt swirled within her. At that moment, Grace realized the full extent of their situation. She was truly alone; in a battle she had no idea how to fight. But amidst the overwhelming tide of emotions, a spark of determination ignited within her. She would get Oscar back, no matter what it took. The road ahead was uncertain, but she would walk it. For Oscar, for their parents, and she was determined to piece it back together, one step at a time.



## Oscar's New Daily Life

For Oscar, like stepping into another world; one where you kept your head down and stayed out of the way. But Oscar wasn't good at being invisible. The bullies found him on his second day, marking him as their new favorite project. He tried to fight back once, making things worse. The transition to life in the foster home marked a profound shift for Oscar, both in his environment and within himself.

Gone were the days of leisurely soccer games in the park, the laughter and camaraderie of teammates, and the joy of a well-earned victory.

In its place, is a void filled with loneliness and despair manifesting in a series of self-destructive habits in his young life.

Oscar's initial of the world of junk food began as a coping mechanism for the pain of separation from his family. What started as a sporadic treat quickly spiraled into a daily routine. Breakfasts of sugary cereals gave way to greasy food and dinners of microwaveable meals.

The weight gain was gradual but relentless. Soccer, once a passion that ignited his spirit and gave him purpose, was replaced by feeding on only pops' sugar. Exercise and play were abandoned.

As the pounds accumulated, Oscar's physical abilities diminished. Stairs became undefeatable obstacles, each step a reminder of what he had lost. His breath grew labored with force, a wheezing reminder of the choices he had made and the path he had taken.

The changes were not just physical. Oscar's mind, once sharp and filled with dreams of glory and personal achievement, grew foggy. His thoughts, once deep and expansive, became shallow, fixated on the immediate gratification of his next meal or snack. Ideas and ambitions were crushed under the weight of his self-doubt and self-pity, leaving him a shell of the hopeful young boy he once was.

Self-esteem and confidence, once the cornerstones of his identity, faded away. Decisions, even the simplest ones, became mountains too high to climb.

He deferred to others, unable to trust his own judgment, his voice silenced by the disagreement of his thoughts, and regret filled his mind. The taunts of "fat boy" from his peers were blades to his already fragile self-esteem, each word a confirmation of his worst fears about himself.



The vibrant, ambitious young boy who dreamed of scoring the winning goal in a championship game had been buried under layers of regret, self-pity, and lost opportunities. Haunted by nightmares of what could have been, Oscar started to feel like he was losing a bit of himself each day. The word "PTSD" was thrown around by the counselors at the foster home, but to Oscar, it was just another label in a long list of things he didn't understand.

## Chapter Six

### Facing FAVOS

Mrs. Robinson, a 70-year-old widow, lives in a spacious 5-bedroom house just two houses away from what used to be Grace's family home. Her days are filled with simple pleasures: reading books from her extensive library, tending to the few indoor plants that manage to thrive under her care, and listening to classical music, which fills the air with melancholy melodies that echo through the empty halls. Mrs. Robinson's days were marked by solitude, punctuated only by the occasional visit from a neighbor or a rare family member.

Grace's sudden appearance on her doorstep was a blowout of her routine, a disruption that Mrs. Robinson didn't know she needed. Initially wary of the implications of harboring a runaway, Mrs. Robinson's compassion quickly overrode her concerns. The decision to hide Grace in her basement was to her character, revealing a depth of empathy and courage.