Chapter 2: Jude and Hope

Encircled by the presence of those who care for him, he feels no lingering sorrow from the past. Chapter 2 unfolds with no weight of regret from investing time and energy into people who never deserved his kindness. As they walk, Malcolm hesitates mid-step, his expression etched with something unreadable, but he waves it off, urging them to keep moving.

Their path leads them to Washington Square Park, where the late afternoon light drapes everything in gold, and the sound of children's laughter echoes through the air. The city moves around them, lively and chaotic, yet an unspoken tension remains between them, thick as the summer humidity. Malcolm's steps slow as his gaze locks onto a couple seated on a nearby bench, their conversation silent yet heavy, their gestures sharp with unspoken emotion.

Watching them, he wonders if Malcolm is thinking of Sophie, if he is recalling the quiet conflicts that grew between them like cracks in a once-solid foundation. Perhaps he sees his own reflection in their strained interaction, recognizing the same weight of words left unsaid. He turns to Malcolm, ready to offer something—advice, comfort, an opening for discussion—but Malcolm is already looking at him, his stare piercing, searching.

There is something in that look that unsettles him, a weight behind it that makes him feel as though every fractured part of himself has been laid bare. He is not ready for this—not for the truth buried within him, not for the feelings he has never dared to fully acknowledge. The loneliness that grips him in the dead of night, the cold emptiness that coils around his ribs, the doubt that gnaws at the edges of his mind—he has kept them locked away, unwilling to face them.

He has spent years wondering if he has ever truly known love or if he has only ever existed as a quiet presence in other people's lives, a ghost lingering at the periphery. The shame that festers inside him, dark and heavy, makes him question whether he has ever belonged anywhere or if he has simply been tolerated, a temporary fixture rather than something permanent. Admitting any of this aloud feels impossible, the words catching in his throat before they can ever form.

Malcolm speaks, his voice steady but thick with something unspoken. "Jude," he says with certainty, his tone carrying the weight of something far deeper than reassurance. "Whatever you choose, we're here for you. You are not your past. You are not your scars."

For a moment, time seems to hold still, the city's noise fading into a distant hum as those words settle between them. He cannot respond, not because he doesn't want to, but because something within him shifts, like a door creaking open after years of being sealed shut. He nods, a small movement, but in that moment, it feels like the first step toward something different, something unfamiliar yet necessary.

Maybe healing isn't about erasing the past but about learning to exist alongside it, to acknowledge it without allowing it to define him. Perhaps vulnerability isn't a weakness, but a form of courage, an acceptance of the truth rather than a retreat from it. Love, he begins to realize, is not a transaction, not something to be earned or repaid, but something given freely, something that does not demand proof of worthiness.

They stand in the park, the city continuing its endless rhythm around them, yet in this moment, everything feels suspended, weightless. For the first time in a long time, he considers the possibility that he is not meant to endure alone, that he is not beyond saving. He allows himself to entertain the idea that maybe—just maybe—he is allowed to want more, to need more, to hope for something better.

As the warmth of the late afternoon fades into evening, something within him settles, quiet but undeniable. He is not whole, not yet, but for the first time, he lets himself

believe that maybe one day, he could be. And in that moment, in the quiet understanding of something shifting, he feels, perhaps for the first time, the true weight of what it means to belong.