

STARING DOWN FROM THE EDGE OF LIFE

The “Senior Citizen Hippie”

As Christmas 2019 approached, Lukas Wagner was staring down from the edge of life. He glared at the handgun lying on the table to his left, next to a glass of Chianti and two thinly rolled joints. He lit one of the joints, then tasted his wine as Van Morrison tunes blanketed the room. On this snowy December evening, he was sitting comfortably in his recliner in his cozy Bethel, NY home, which he bought in 1967. The recliner was the final gift his late wife, Rachel, gave him last Christmas. She’d passed away two months ago after battling breast cancer.

Lukas yelled, “Alexa, I love you!”

Alexa, the music-making toy his daughter Annie gave him, also last Christmas, replied, “It’s good to be appreciated.”

As Lukas admired the fluffy white snow gracefully falling outside, his antique clock emitted six loud *cuckoos*. Six o’clock. Christmas, his favorite holiday, was two days away, and he was reflecting on Rachel’s passing. Life with her was extraordinary, but since she died, it had been a living hell. All because of a lie that once seemed tame, but now felt like King Kong stomped on his soul. Bad thoughts raced through Lukas’s mind; Chianti, weed, and music were his prescriptions.

Lukas was a tall, physically imposing man of seventy-two years with a gentle presence. His parents died when he was four, and he was adopted by a loving couple with no extended family. In 1965 at the age of seventeen, Lukas quit high school and enlisted in the Marines. The “conflict” in Vietnam had not yet escalated, so it seemed safe. After basic at Parris Island and some additional training, he went to Vietnam.

There, Fate threw him a curve, as he fought in the violent Battle of Ia Drang Valley. Nearly three hundred Americans were killed and hundreds more wounded, including Lukas, who suffered a shot in his groin. He healed physically, but that wound, combined with his nagging PTSD, left him emotionally broken. He finished his Marine service filing records at Camp Lejeune until his discharge in 1967. While there, he got a tattoo, an eagle with the U.S. Marines motto, *Semper Fidelis: Always Faithful*. In private, Lukas battled his PTSD by getting stoned and reflecting on what he had to do in Nam.

Lukas returned to Bethel and bought his home, which he and Rachel gradually expanded over the years to meet their family's needs: an infant playground, a jungle gym swing set, a swimming pool, a sled riding hill. Papa Lukas's and Gramma Rachel's place represented joy for their daughter, their grandson, and, recently, their two great-grandchildren.

Lukas worked as a carpenter and eventually became a master craftsman. His carpentry skills, combined with his business acumen, helped him attain a comfortable level of wealth. After his discharge, he let his black hair grow long and kept it that way, although it was now silver-gray.

In spite of Lukas's current suicidal thoughts, he was a fun-loving guy who admired and respected women. He successfully attracted girls in high school, but after Nam and prior to meeting Rachel, he avoided women because he felt damaged.

In the summer of 1969, American culture and Lukas's hometown were on a fateful collision course with the *Woodstock Music & Art Fair*. After chaotic planning, the promoters negotiated with Max Yasgur to hold the concert on his dairy farm. They expected fifty thousand people, but about four hundred thousand hippies showed up—four miles from Lukas's home.

The “Guardian Angel”

Back in Lukas's current grim reality, he pondered how to relieve his torment and reunite with Rachel. There were two thick towels nearby he planned to place behind his head. Staring at his pistol, he considered the best bullet entry point.

A cell phone call from “Guardian Angel” startled him. It was Rachel's twin sister, Rose.

“Hey, Rose.”

“Merry Christmas, buddy. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Have you made holiday plans?”

“I talked with Robbie about visiting him, but I think I'll pass. This Annie thing has my brain fried.”

“I understand, Lukas. Maybe we should tell her everything.”

“No. Rachel was adamant.”

“I understand. You've been through a lot, Lukas, and we know you're hurting.”

“Rose, you're my guardian angel.”

Chuck

Shortly after that call, someone pounded on his front door.

“Who is it!?” Lukas shouted.

“Police! Open up!”

“Kiss my ass, Chuck.”

As his best friend, Chuck, came to join him, Lukas tucked his gun under the towels.

Chuck was jovial and tall with a stocky build and a shaved head. He had two tattoos, one on each arm: *Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!* which he got at eighteen on a drunken trip to New Orleans and a heart with Cupid’s arrow through it inscribed, *Joannie*.

Pulling up a chair, Chuck took a hit on the joint, then grabbed a beer in the kitchen and returned. He stared at the barren area by Lukas’s fireplace. “That’s weird—no Christmas tree in *your* house. Those gifts in the kitchen are for Wendy and Trey, right?”

“Yeah, I picked up a few things, but I haven’t had the energy to decorate. I’m sure Annie is discouraging Robbie and Kristina from visiting. She’s still pissed off at me.”

Annie was Lukas’s forty-nine-year-old daughter. After Rachel passed away in October, they’d had a falling out. Annie’s twenty-four-year-old son, Robbie, and his wife, Kristina, were caught in the middle. They had two children—Wendy, age four, and Trey, age two—and lived in Chester, an hour away.

Annie’s husband, Frankie, had died in a car accident in February. It was horrible for everyone, but especially for Annie, who lost her husband and her mother in an eight-month span.

Chuck said, “Joannie reminded me that tomorrow is your first Christmas since Rachel’s passing. Are you okay?”

“No, man, I’m a mess.”

Woodstock: Rachel

Chuck and Lukas were eight when they met as Little Leaguers, and they shared a firm mutual trust since. They were opposites. Chuck was gregarious while Lukas was laid-back. Chuck wanted to enlist with Lukas in ’65 but got a waiver. Later in ’69, he accompanied Lukas to Woodstock, where they met their future wives, attending the concert without their parents’ permission.

Chuck reminisced, “I remember the first time you saw Rachel. You were sitting on our blanket, stoned and drinking sangria from a pouch.”

Rachel Morgan was from Long Island, part of a wealthy and image-conscious family. Rose still lived on Long Island. Their mother was a political science professor at NYU, and their father was an esteemed corporate lawyer. Rachel and Rose went to private Catholic schools from first grade until their high school graduation in June 1969—two months before Woodstock. Rachel was the rebel, and Rose was the obedient one.

The sisters planned to study Political Science at the State University of New York at Albany. Rachel had a few rocky high school relationships, so her parents handpicked her mate, Brook Richardson, but they felt Rose was capable of finding a man on her own.

Rachel’s privileged upbringing came with comfort and security, but she didn’t care for its appearance-based nature. She loved her parents for providing a wonderful existence but resented their controlling tendencies. Brook was an only child who was also born into wealth. In the summer of '69, he was a college junior, intellectually, athletically, and socially mediocre.

“Yeah, she was beautiful with her long brown hair and amazing blue eyes. She caught me gazing at her as Sebastian played ‘Darlin’ Be Home Soon.’ I was freaked, but then she smiled at me.” Lukas pointed his finger at Chuck. “And you didn’t do bad either—Joannie’s amazing!”

Lukas and Chuck were at Woodstock from the beginning on Friday, when Richie Havens kicked things off. After an exhausting overnight hitchhiking journey, Rachel and Joannie arrived on Saturday morning.

Chuck remarked, “It’s a shame the girls didn’t see much of it. I remember us taking them out of there while Mountain was playing ‘Stormy Monday.’ Thank God I had the balls to ask the ladies to join us.”

Lukas replied, “No, shit. Who knew our future wives were teenage runaways?”

A Rift in the Family

Shifting back to the current reality, Chuck tried to guide Lukas from the darkness. “Is there anything we can do?”

“No, man. I wanted to tell Annie the truth, but that freaked Rachel, so I didn’t. Then she blurted out part of it on her freaking deathbed. I don’t think she intended to, but she was heavily medicated, and died two hours later. Annie’s hurtful reaction blew me away.”

A consoling Chuck responded, “She lost her husband and mother in a short time. Give her time, and you’ll get back to a righteous place.”

Woodstock: Runaways

Mentally, they slid back into the music, sipping on their drinks and watching the snow falling outside. Once Lukas and Chuck connected with Rachel and Joannie at Woodstock, they had a fantastic time—partying and listening to historically great music. The fellas went to Woodstock with loaded backpacks: water Thermoses, wine pouches, snacks, and weed.

The girls started to panic because they had to get home the next day before their parents returned from vacation, so the fellas offered to get them out of there on their motorcycles. It was a wild four-mile ride to Lukas’s home. After learning about the girls’ situation, they offered to drive them home in the morning. Their parents were due to come back on Sunday afternoon, so they had ample time. They agreed to get a good night’s sleep and leave early.

After showering and eating a meal, they hung out at Lukas’s home. Lukas put on Dylan’s new album, *Nashville Skyline*, which was mellow, enabling them to easily converse. Despite their gruff looks, the girls felt safe with Lukas and Chuck. Joannie and Chuck sat on the couch, while Rachel and Lukas sat on a cushy rug across the room.

Rachel passionately shared her story with a captivated Lukas. After a while, she sighed. “I’m sorry. All I did was whine about my bullshit. What about you, Lukas? What’s your story?”

It was one-thirty in the morning.

“Not much to tell, but I’m certain I’m falling in love with you. Could I please kiss you?”

Rachel didn’t say a word but gave him a welcoming look. Lukas slowly leaned forward and tenderly kissed Rachel for a few blissful minutes, then leaned back, relishing the experience. “We have an early start tomorrow. God, you’re beautiful.”

Rachel wished she could stay there forever.

The fellas set the girls up in the two bedrooms, and they slept on the couches.

A Confrontation on Long Island

After a good night’s sleep and breakfast, they headed to Long Island in Chuck’s VW van. They had an amazing time wearing out Chuck’s eight-track player. The musical highlight of the drive was a hit song called “Polk Salad Annie.” They played it several times and sang along.

An elated Rachel shouted, “If I have a daughter, I’m naming her Annie!”

They thought they arrived in time, but there was a police car in front of her house. In a bad twist of fate, their parents had returned home early. When their eighteen-year-old runaway daughters pulled up in a VW van with two elder hippies, they were frantic. The girls jumped out of the van and ran into the house. The young men leaned on the van as the girls’ fathers confronted them.

Lukas calmly said, “We met the girls at Woodstock and offered to get them home safely—which we did, sir.”

Both fathers did what looked like a choreographed 180 to confront the girls in the house. A cop then came over to interrogate Lukas and Chuck. After a brief discussion, he went inside to question the girls and returned.

“It looks like chivalry is not dead, gentlemen. Thanks for what you did.” Lukas asked about the girls. “They have some explaining to do, but thanks to you they’re safe.” The cop noticed Lukas’s *Semper Fidelis* tattoo. “Marine?”

“Marine and Vietnam vet. Ia Drang Valley in ’65—the beginning.”

The cop revealed a similar tattoo. “Operation Junction City in ’67. *Semper fi*, brother.” As they shook hands, the girls’ parents came out, apologized to the guys, and thanked them.

The girls followed and gave emotional hugs.

Lukas told Rachel, “I’ll be in touch. I meant what I said last night.”

He kissed her on her forehead, then eased into the van.

The Pregnancy

The days after Woodstock were eventful. Chuck and Joannie connected and got to know each other. Under pressure to pursue her parents’ goals, Rachel headed up to Albany with her sister a week later. Lukas passionately pursued Rachel during her first three weekends at school, a two-hour drive from Bethel. Though Rachel focused on her studies, being with Lukas dominated her thoughts, and she welcomed him every Saturday.

They got to know each other on a deep level. Eventually, they became intimate. Lukas felt revived, and Rachel hoped she could finally pursue happiness, but also started to feel nauseated. At that same time, Brook Richardson called Rachel to inform her he would visit on Friday.

“I don’t want to see you, Brook. I’m not feeling well.”

“I forgive you for the Woodstock thing. We had such a nice time together.”

“You forgive me? Oh my God! We had a nice time? Don’t come!”

Brook’s pathological sense of entitlement angered Rachel, whose fourth weekend at Albany was intriguing. She and Lukas agreed he would drive over and take Rachel back to his place for a few days of relaxation.

When Lukas arrived, he saw Rachel sitting next to Brook on a bench. Rose burst through the exit door, aggressively walked toward them, and grabbed Brook by his shoulders. She shook him as she told him Rachel wasn’t feeling well and to drive home *now*. As a dejected Brook departed, Lukas stayed out of sight. The girls sat quietly.

Lukas came to sit between them. “Is everything okay?” They simultaneously hugged Lukas, who joked, “Now *this* is the way to spend a Friday night.”

They laughed, and Rachel said, “I’m so glad you came, Lukas.”

“What’s the deal with that Brook dude?”

Rose stood. “Rachel and I just ended any hopes he had of being with her. Please don’t give that piece of shit another thought.” Lukas stared in amazement, sensing something heady was happening. “I’ll leave you two alone. It’s been an intense week.”

Rachel said, “Let’s take a ride. I’m hungry and I have something important to tell you.”

They went to Gracie’s Café, and Lukas sat nervously fidgeting with his silverware while Rachel went to the bathroom. When she returned, he asked, “Did your parents tell you not to see me? That’s not an option. I love you.”

“Lukas, I’m pregnant! I’m having your baby!”

Lukas was dumbfounded. In a much-needed distraction, their waitress came over and took their orders. Lukas then excused himself to the men’s room, splashed water on his face and reflected on this dilemma. As he wrestled with what to say, an inspiring wave of clarity engulfed him.

When he headed back, Rachel asked, “Are you angry?”

“I love you, Rachel. More than you can ever imagine.”

They ate their meals in silence. As they finished, Lukas asked, “How serious is your relationship with Brook?”

Rachel broke into tears, then stormed into the ladies room where she stayed for about ten minutes. Crazy with worry, Lukas asked the waitress to check on her. Shortly after, the ladies came out, and Rachel thanked the waitress for the great advice. She then sat down and grabbed Lukas's hand. "Please promise me you won't freak out."

A confused Lukas replied, "What are you going to tell me?"

"God damnit, promise me, Lukas."

Lukas calmed down as Rachel explained, "My parents put enormous pressure on me to go out with Brook, so I went on three dates with him. I wasn't attracted to him, but I gave it a shot. At the end of the first night, he kissed my cheek and said goodnight.

"After the second date, we went to Town Pointe Park, where young people go to make out. We talked and then kissed for a few minutes. It felt forced, and his hands wandered, so I pushed back and politely asked to go home. He later asked me out for dinner the next weekend, right before Woodstock, and I agreed, with the intention of ending things.

"Brook drank several beers at dinner and convinced me to go back to Town Pointe 'to just talk.' I thanked him for a nice dinner and quickly told him I didn't want to see him again. He became frustrated and tried to kiss me again, and I refused. But that night, he forced himself on me, and I mentally went to another place. Afterwards, we each covered up, and he drove me home. It was awkward, and he acted like everything was normal. When we got to my house, he tried to kiss me goodnight. I left in a daze; I don't think he realized what he did."

Abruptly, Lukas stood up, rubbed his eyes, then ran his hand through his hair. "I'll kill him."

A tearful Rachel was adamant she didn't want anyone else to know what Brook did to her. She felt ashamed and blamed herself.

A more rational Lukas said, "I'm so sorry to hear that you went through that. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm dealing with it, and I don't want to stir up shit with our families. It's all a blur. I wore a pretty dress knowing we were going to a nice restaurant, and I tried to be cordial. Did I mislead him? I've been trying to block out the entire ordeal. Meeting you at Woodstock moved me in a positive direction."

Lukas nodded. "That makes me happy. First off, it's bullshit that you misled him. What he did was wrong. Rachel, it's important that you know something." Lukas then turned his head

slightly and glanced out the window. He took a deep breath. “I’m sterile. My war wound did some internal damage, and I can never father a child. I’m so sorry to drop that on you, but you have to know, especially now.”

Rachel murmured, “So I’m carrying Brook’s baby.”

“Actually, you’re carrying *your* baby, and that is sacred. That piece of shit doesn’t deserve you, and he doesn’t deserve to be a father.”

“What are you suggesting, Lukas?”

As the waitress refilled their cups, they talked about their dilemma. They vowed to work things out and decided Rachel could quit school and move in with Lukas. Lukas was getting his feet on the ground as a carpenter and owned a home.

“How will your parents react?” Reality was sinking in, and Lukas considered how they could live with this lie.

“I’ll explain and offer to include them in our plans. It’s up to them if they want to support us.”

“What about Rose?” Lukas asked. “You have an incredible bond with her. Would this upset that?”

“Hell no, she has my back, and she respects you, Lukas. In fact, she told me today that she has a good feeling about you.”

“Okay, let’s sleep on it. I’ll take you to your dorm, get a hotel, and pick you up for brunch tomorrow.” He pointed at a sign promoting Gracie’s Saturday brunch special. “Please invite Rose. I have something to do in the morning; I’ll pick you up at noon.”

The next day, Lukas arrived at twelve sharp, and they luckily got seated at one of the same waitress’s tables. They enjoyed an amazing meal, feeling upbeat. After they ate, Lukas pulled out a modest but beautiful engagement ring, which he’d bought that morning, and got down on one knee.

“Rachel, will you be my wife?”

“Yes, Lukas, I’d love to be your wife.”

The waitress yelled, “Hey folks, they’re getting married! How about a round of applause?”

That set off a loud standing ovation. This amazing love story and the accompanying ominous lie had just taken an interesting turn.

Rachel, Rose, and Lukas made a pact. They would never tell this baby three things: (1) the name of the biological father, (2) Rachel was a rape victim, and (3) Lukas had a traumatic war wound. They agreed to take this to their graves.

Family Life

On the day prior to Christmas Eve 2019, the fellas were feeling good, and they were hungry. Chuck suggested they head to Francesca's for the holiday prime rib dinner.

"Dude, I'm way too scorched to drive, and it's snowing," Lukas said nervously.

"Joannie can drive us over, and we can get an Uber back. She has something going on later."

After a while, Joannie arrived. "Damn, you old geezers are smoking up a storm." She greeted Lukas, who got up and hugged her. "Are you okay, buddy?"

"I'm sorry, Joannie. I've been thinking about a lot of bad shit lately. I'm a wasted mess."

Turning her head to the side, she wiped tears from her eyes. "As you should be, my dear friend. You lost the love of your life, and you had a rift with your daughter, but Dr. Chuck has a cure—steak and adult beverages."

When they arrived at Francesca's, Joannie pulled Chuck aside. "Stay on Lukas like white on rice and help him get through this." A concerned Chuck hugged and kissed his amazing wife, and then the fellas went inside and devoured their much-needed prime ribs.

As their gargantuan dinners settled, the two old stoned-out hippies sat with shit-eating grins. They grabbed a table back in the bar and ordered a bottle of Chianti.

Chuck continued to reminisce. "It had to be tough asking Rachel's dad for permission to marry her."

"Yeah, we agreed the three of us should inform Rachel's parents about the pregnancy, then ask permission to get married. Thank God for Rose. She helped keep things calm. Her father initially flipped out, then yelled at Rachel about screwing up the arrangement with Brook."

"As I recall, Rachel's father was intense."

"Absolutely. Rose took him to another room for a while, and their mom sat with us. She was crying while staring at us with a big smile. Rose and her father came back, and he reluctantly said, 'You have my blessing, Lukas, but be kind to Rachel.' I assured him I would. That's when I decided Rose was my guardian angel."

Chuck refilled their glasses. “How are you feeling now?”

“Much better, thanks.” Lukas had started the evening planning to join Rachel in the afterlife. Now, thinking of the good old days, he was actually enjoying himself.

After their wedding, Lukas and Rachel moved into Lukas’s home and began life as a married couple with their secret held tightly. In April 1970, they had their beautiful baby girl, Annie, named after the song, “Polk Salad Annie.” Rachel’s mother and Rose visited often, and Rachel’s father gradually came to understand Lukas—his upbringing and his values. He was also impressed with his business savvy. Additionally, Brook Richardson got arrested in the summer for inappropriately touching a young lady. Mr. Morgan realized he was wrong.

Chuck continued, “Then you both lost your parents.”

“Yeah, tough times, man. Before we knew it, we were a functioning family. We loved the school stuff, soccer, Girl Scouts, music lessons. Annie was the center of our universe, and she had no idea about our dreaded secret. Fuck!” Lukas pounded his fist on the table, and their waitress rushed over to check on them. They both quietly acknowledged all was well.

As the DJ played Springsteen’s version of “Merry Christmas Baby,” Chuck said, “You were great parents and played the hand you were dealt. Annie was a great kid. You know Joannie and I couldn’t have kids, so we loved living vicariously through her. Then she had Robbie, and Robbie and Kristina had kids, and you became great-grandparents. Time really flew.”

Visitors

To Lukas’s surprise, Joannie returned, and she was accompanied by Rose. “Wow, great to see you.”

Rose responded, “We’ve been worried about you.”

Lukas’s cell phone interrupted; it was his grandson, Robbie. “Hey, Papa Lukas! Merry Christmas. I have an announcement. Kristina’s pregnant.”

Lukas plopped down in his chair. “Oh my God, that’s wonderful.”

Joannie and Rose joined the fellas for drinks, and a smiling Rose said, “It looks like you got the good news, buddy.”

Chuck and Joannie convinced Lukas to spend the night at their place and, after a good night's sleep, drove him home. Around ten a.m. on Christmas Eve, they quietly pulled into the driveway of his seemingly empty home. "Surprise!"

A Nostalgic Toast

Lukas's entire family was there and in full Christmas mode. Last night, Lukas's guardian angel led an effort to set everything up. His grandson, Robbie, handled Lukas's traditional Christmas Eve breakfast: waffles, eggs, hash brown potatoes, a fruit tray, whipped cream, and sausage from Tony Dee's Market in town. A fully decorated tree held gifts underneath, including the ones Lukas bought. In spite of his joy, Lukas noticed Annie's absence. He suppressed that thought and tried to relish the moment.

His great-grandchildren ran up and hugged him. "We love you, Papa Lukas. Merry Christmas!"

Overcome with emotion, Lukas burst into tears. He glanced over at the couch in a momentary panic, wondering where his revolver was, when Robbie brought him a plate of food.

"Here you go. I love you, Papa."

The swinging door from the kitchen then burst open. "Who wants a homemade cinnamon bun? I learned this amazing recipe from my papa, Mr. Lukas Wagner." A bewildered Lukas just stared at his beautiful daughter. She was aging gracefully, exactly like her mother had.

Walking over, Annie grabbed his hand. "Have a coffee with me, Papa."

Lukas followed her into the kitchen, and Annie gestured for him to sit at the table. She grabbed the coffee pot and stood over him, filling his cup. Then, while he waited for her to join him, Annie firmly slapped Lukas on the back of his head. "What the fuck, Papa! What were you planning to do with that gun? Don't you realize we love you?"

Lukas sighed, weak and vulnerable. "I desperately wanted to be with your mother. I haven't felt right since she passed. I was broken when I met her at Woodstock, and she fixed me. Then she left me, and I thought I lost you."

Annie sat down, then grabbed Lukas's hand and held it close to her heart. "You're like a superhero who swept Mom off her feet and rescued us. Yesterday, Aunt Rose broke your fifty-year-old vow and told me everything. Papa, I'm so sorry. I've been angry and resentful since Frankie died and all we went through with Mom. Then the news that you're not my biological

father. I took out my anger on you. In my defense, I didn't know about the violence you experienced in Vietnam and your terrible injury.

"I didn't know about my piece-of-shit biological father. I didn't know about your willingness to raise her daughter who wasn't biologically yours. I knew you loved Mom, but that is amazing. I acted like an impetuous teenager. Please, forgive me." Annie hugged Lukas.

Pulling away, Lukas looked into Annie's eyes. "I was there when you arrived. I changed your diapers. I watched you crawl and eventually get up and walk. I taught you how to ride a bike. I went to your recitals and sporting events. I comforted you when you were scared, and I did my best to intimidate the boys who pursued you."

"Yes, you did. I remember when you sat on the front porch on a date night, wearing military camouflage pants, a torn t-shirt, and a ragged John Deere hat. You poured iced tea into an empty Jack Daniels bottle and pretended you were cleaning a broken shotgun. That boy was scared to death after you had your 'talk' with him while slugging a long sip from the bottle."

Lukas shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and continued, "I was at your high school and college graduations. I was thrilled to dance the bride/father dance at your wedding—of course to your song, 'Polk Salad Annie.' We blew them away, kiddo! My God, you've been through so much."

Feeling relieved and oddly satisfied, Lukas took a deep breath and affectionally smiled at his daughter as he rubbed his chin. With holiday music playing in the background, Robbie walked in. "Please join us for the gifts exchange. The kids are going crazy."

Standing around the beautiful Christmas tree were all the people Lukas loved.

Annie announced, "Grab your beverage: coffee, orange juice, water, or one of those great mimosas Aunt Rose made." She held up her glass. "A toast. To an honorable man, a Vietnam vet, a successful businessman, my father and my hero, Lukas Wagner."

Everyone toasted, then gave Lukas a round of applause. Lukas's four-year-old great-granddaughter, Wendy, ran up to him. "Are you really a hero, Papa Lukas?"

A huge smile blooming on his face, he picked her up and kissed her. At her age, he'd lost his parents. How fortunate he was to be a part of Wendy's life.

Annie joined them, wrapping an arm around her father's waist. "Yes, Wendy. Papa Lukas is a superhero."

Chuck then shouted, "Speech! Speech!"

With a deep breath, Lukas regained his composure. “Thank you—all of you—for this beautiful gathering. To my beautiful Rachel, we miss you dearly. And to everyone here, 2019 has been a difficult year, but I’m confident 2020 will be a memorable one.”

THE END