

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

101

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

“Sure,” Sage replied, her voice light and breezy. Talya found herself caught in a whirlwind of thoughts, pondering whether it was wise to engage with Liam at all. Ignoring him seemed like the safest choice, but as he stood behind Sage, his presence loomed larger than life, compelling her to glance his way.

“Bathroom break,” he announced, a casual grin spreading across his face, as if they were sharing a private joke. Talya, feeling a wave of discomfort wash over her, quickly averted her gaze and remained silent. She started to weave her way through the sea of people, but after five long minutes of pushing and shoving, frustration began to bubble within her. Being on the shorter side always made navigating through crowds a Herculean task.

Just when she thought she would never escape the throngs of bodies, Liam appeared right in front of her, his demeanor as relaxed as ever. “How about I lead?” he suggested, his smile disarming. “Just hang on to my shirt, and I’ll steer us through this chaos.” Before she could muster a protest, he turned around, confidently pushing his way into the crowd.

Talya weighed her options and, feeling a desperate urgency from her overactive bladder, decided to seize the moment. With one hand, she grasped Sage’s hand behind her, and with the other, she clutched the fabric of Liam’s shirt, hoping he would indeed be her guiding light through the human maze.

To her astonishment, the crowd seemed to part effortlessly for Liam, as if they sensed his determination. In mere moments, they reached the entrance of the bathrooms. Liam glanced back at her, his expression calm and reassuring. “I’ll wait for you,” he said simply, then leaned against the wall opposite the women’s restroom, exuding an air of patience.

Talya didn’t respond verbally; instead, she hurried into the bathroom, Sage trailing closely behind. Once they emerged, she spotted Liam approaching them with an easy smile that made her heart flutter. “Ready?” he asked, his tone light, as if they were embarking on a fun adventure rather than just returning to their seats.

His relaxed demeanor was infectious, and Talya felt herself unwinding in his presence. She offered him a shy smile and nodded, feeling a warmth spread through her. He pointed to his back, and without hesitation, she gripped the back of his shirt once more. Sage clasped her other hand tightly, and together they navigated their way back through the bustling crowd, Liam leading the way with an air of confidence.

Before long, they found their way back to their row of seats. Talya released her hold on Liam's shirt, feeling a mix of relief and gratitude as she settled back into her spot, ready to immerse herself in the rest of the game.

The second half unfolded swiftly, and Talya became completely engrossed in the action on the field. With each play, her heart raced, and when the final whistle blew, signaling their victory, she let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. They had won! The tension melted away, replaced by a sense of triumph that she knew would make her journey home much more pleasant.

Brandon could be insufferable when their team lost, and the thought of that made her stand up and stretch, shaking off the remnants of her anxiety. Sage turned to her, a broad grin lighting up her face.

"That was a good game," she said, her excitement palpable.

Talya nodded in agreement, her own smile breaking through. "It really was, and they won! So, my ride home will be in a good mood," she added, relief washing over her.

Sage's knowing smile told Talya that she understood all too well the dynamics of post-game emotions. "Are you okay if I head out now?" she asked, her tone casual but with an undercurrent of concern.

"Yes, thanks," Talya replied, pulling Sage into a quick hug. Sage smiled at Liam, a silent acknowledgment passing between them before she made her exit.

As the crowd began to disperse, Liam stepped closer to Talya. "Want help navigating the crowd?" he offered, his voice steady and reassuring. Talya looked up at him, her heart racing as she tried to decipher his intentions. She was uncertain about the kindness he was showing her, but all she could see reflected back was genuine warmth.

Turning her gaze towards the throng of people, she realized that reaching the guys' locker room, where she was supposed to meet Brandon, would be a daunting task on her own. The thought of using Liam's impressive height and broad frame to her advantage was tempting.

"That would be great, if you don't mind," she finally replied, her voice tinged with hope.

Liam's smile widened, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "Not at all," he said, the sincerity in his tone making her feel a little lighter, as if the weight of her worries had begun to lift.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

****Chapter 102****

Liam navigated the bustling crowd with an ease that belied the chaos surrounding them. Talya pointed the way, her heart racing as they approached the locker room. "Thanks for getting me here," she said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, a nervous habit she had developed over the years.

"You're welcome," he replied, his tone casual, yet there was an underlying tension in the air.

"You really don't have to stick around," she added, her voice a little softer. "Brandon will be out in just a minute." The unspoken truth hung between them; Talya was keenly aware that Liam's presence would complicate things when Brandon emerged. She didn't want to deal with the awkwardness, for either of them.

Liam paused for a moment, his gaze lingering on her. There was a flicker of understanding in his eyes. "Have a good night, Talya," he said, his voice steady but somehow heavier.

"Thank you; you too," she replied, watching him turn away. As he walked off, a sense of relief washed over her. Talya turned her attention back to the locker room, fatigue settling in her bones. She leaned against the cool wall, closing her eyes, wishing for the sound of Brandon's team to filter through the door soon. The footsteps echoing in the hallway didn't warrant her attention; they could easily belong to some of the other players' girlfriends.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar voice broke through her thoughts. "Hey beautiful, were you waiting for me?" It was laced with a teasing tone, accompanied by laughter that made her skin crawl.

Talya chose to ignore them, convinced they weren't addressing her. That was until she felt a light touch on her shoulder, sending a jolt of alarm through her. Her eyes flew open, and she was met with the sight of three guys, their expressions a mix of amusement and something darker. Panic surged within her as she realized the hallway was deserted.

The first guy stepped closer, brushing her hair aside with a predatory grin. "You look lonely. We can take care of that," he said, his voice dripping with a sinister charm.

Talya's heart raced, pounding against her ribcage like a caged bird. "I have a boyfriend," she asserted, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "You really don't want to be here when he comes out," she added, hoping to deter them.

Their laughter echoed mockingly in her ears. The guy leaned in even closer, his finger tracing down her cheek in a way that made her skin crawl. "I think we'll take our chances," he murmured, his breath warm against her face.

A rush of fear coursed through her veins. There was no way she could fend off all three of them; they were clearly football players, their physiques intimidating. Just as despair began to settle in, she heard her name being called.

"Liam!" Her heart leapt at the sound of his voice. She looked up just in time to see the three guys turn toward him. "Is that your boyfriend, baby?" the front guy taunted, stepping closer to Talya, as if to assert his dominance.

"Yes, and you'd better step away from her now." Liam's voice was low and dangerous, a stark contrast to the easygoing demeanor he usually carried. Talya's eyes widened at the intensity of his words. She had never heard him sound so fierce.

When the trio didn't budge, Liam sprang into action. In one swift motion, he seized the first guy and slammed him against the wall with a force that left Talya speechless. Shock washed over her; it was as if he had thrown a feather instead of a person. The other two guys instinctively stepped back, their bravado dissipating.

"Okay, dude. We're moving away," the guy who had touched her stammered, eyes wide with fear.

Liam didn't hesitate. He was in front of him in an instant, his voice low and filled with menace. "Don't ever touch her again."

"W-we won't," the guy squeaked, genuine terror evident in his voice. Liam released him with a rough shove, and the three of them scrambled away, disappearing down the hallway.

Talya turned back to Liam, who was still glaring in the direction they had fled. She took a tentative step toward him, but his fierce gaze held her in place, making her feel both safe and vulnerable.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice gravelly, lacking the warmth she had come to associate with him.

Words failed her; all she could manage was a nod. He took a step closer, and at that moment, the locker room door swung open behind her. Panic gripped her as she turned to see the players filtering out. Brandon was among the first, his face lighting up when he spotted her.

"Hey, baby!" he called out, a wide grin breaking across his face. "We won!" His voice boomed, and several teammates cheered in the background.

Brandon swept her up into his arms, spinning her around in a whirlwind of excitement before crashing his lips against hers, much to the delight of his friends. Talya felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment, the attention making her squirm.

“Can we just go?” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, hoping to escape the spotlight.

Brandon, however, was oblivious to her discomfort, laughing and joking with his teammates. Finally, he grasped her hand, leading her down the hallway and out into the cool night air. The raucous laughter of his friends echoed behind them as they made their way to the car, the chaos of the evening still swirling in Talya’s mind.

As they pulled into the driveway, Brandon glanced over at her, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “You sure you don’t want to go out with us?” he asked, a playful tone in his voice, unaware of the storm of emotions brewing within her.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

****Chapter 103****

“No, I really can’t. I’ve got homework waiting for me. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she replied, her voice firm yet tinged with regret. With that, she swung open the car door, stepping out before he could muster any arguments to persuade her otherwise. The cool evening air greeted her as she hurried up the front steps, her heart racing slightly with the thrill of independence. Once inside, she exhaled deeply, a wave of relief washing over her as she shut and locked the door behind her.

Her gaze flickered to the clock on the wall, and she winced as the numbers registered: it was already past 11:00 PM. Time had slipped away from her once again. She dashed toward her room, the weight of her homework pressing on her mind. Ignoring the growl of her stomach—an unwelcome reminder of her skipped dinner—she resolutely decided that it was far too late to eat. The thought of gaining weight was enough to quell any hunger pangs.

Settling at her desk, she buried herself in her assignments, the soft rustle of paper and the scratch of her pen the only sounds breaking the silence of the night. The hours slipped by, and before she knew it, she had completed her homework. With a yawn that seemed to echo in the stillness, she prepared for bed, her eyelids heavy with fatigue. The moment her head hit the pillow, she drifted into an immediate, dreamless sleep.

As the days rolled into the following week and a half, time began to blur. Talya found herself caught in a whirlwind of responsibilities, with little room to breathe. Between the demands of school and her job, she was stretched thin. Joe had been generous enough to offer her extra hours, and she found herself working late into the night, often not

finishing until 11:30 PM. The weekends were no different, filled with additional shifts that drained her energy further.

While the extra income was a welcome boost to her paycheck, the toll it took on her was becoming evident. She felt like a tightrope walker, balancing her studies and work, all while trying to keep her homework in check. Exhaustion settled in her bones, but she refused to complain. She understood the bigger picture, the reason behind her relentless hustle, and that kept her going.

Finally, Friday night arrived, ushering in the last game of the season. Talya had arranged for someone to take over her shift so she could leave early and support her team. A flicker of hope ignited in her chest as she wondered if Liam would show up again. It had been a while since she had seen him outside the classroom; he had yet to acknowledge her presence since that first day.

The hours at work seemed to fly by, each tick of the clock bringing her closer to the moment she could leave. She was just finishing up a round of drinks when she heard her name being called from the kitchen.

“Talya!” Joe’s voice rang out, pulling her from her thoughts. She stepped into the kitchen, her heart sinking slightly at the urgency in his tone.

“Talya,” he repeated, his brow furrowed as he flipped burgers on the grill. “Cally just called in sick. She can’t cover for you tonight. Do you mind staying? We’re already short-staffed because Sam’s out too.”

Talya’s heart sank further. Normally, she wouldn’t hesitate to help out, but tonight was different. Missing the game would undoubtedly infuriate Brandon, and she couldn’t bear the thought of letting him down.

“Is there anyone else we can call?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady. “I wouldn’t usually mind, but it’s the last game of the season.”

Joe glanced at her, his expression apologetic. “I know, honey, and I’m really sorry. I just don’t have anyone else available.”

“What about Carl?” she suggested, desperation creeping into her tone.

“Out of town,” he replied, shaking his head.

“Jenny?” she tried again, clinging to hope.

“She’s back at college,” he said, his voice tinged with sympathy.

Talya closed her eyes for a brief moment, feeling a wave of frustration wash over her. “I’m really sorry. I wouldn’t ask if I had any other option,” Joe said, his eyes filled with

regret. She nodded, not wanting him to feel guilty. He was doing his best, and she understood that.

“It’s fine. Brandon will understand,” she said, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. As she spoke, she silently prayed that her words would hold true. She pushed aside her fears, knowing there was nothing she could do to change the situation.

With a deep breath, she grabbed a stack of menus and headed to a table where a family had just settled in. She greeted them warmly and took their drink orders, trying to focus on her work. When she finally had a moment to herself, she quickly typed a text to Brandon, knowing he might not see it until after the game—or perhaps at halftime—but she wanted him to know she had tried.

Talya: Hey, I’m really sorry. I won’t be able to make it to the game tonight after all. We’re short-staffed at work, and my replacement canceled. I know you’ll play great and win. Good luck!

With a heavy heart, she sent off a similar message to Sage, explaining her predicament. Sliding her phone back into her pocket, she pushed thoughts of Brandon and the game from her mind. There was nothing more she could do.

The clock ticked on, and her shift flew by in a blur. Soon, it was 10:30 PM. Talya found herself glancing at the front door repeatedly, wondering if Brandon would stop by the diner. She couldn’t shake the worry about whether they had won. Checking her phone became a nervous habit, but there were no new messages.

Finally, she relented and shot off a quick text to Sage.

Talya: Did they win?

As she continued her work, she eagerly awaited a reply, hoping for even a glimmer of good news. When she finally had a brief moment to check her phone again, she saw a message from Sage waiting for her.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

****Chapter 104****

Sage: “Not sure. I didn’t go. Sorry you got stuck at work.”

Talya slipped her phone back into her pocket, feeling a mixture of disappointment and anxiety. She had been eagerly waiting to hear from Brandon, hoping for some good news about the game. Perhaps it had run longer than expected, or maybe it had gone into overtime. But as the clock struck eleven and the minutes ticked by with no message from him, a knot of worry began to form in her stomach. What if something had gone

wrong? She pushed the thought aside, focusing instead on helping Joe finish up with the closing tasks at the café.

By the time the clock read 11:30, she decided it was time to leave and made her way to the bus stop. The air felt cool against her skin, and she was acutely aware of the late hour. She kept her gaze fixed on her surroundings, her heart racing slightly as she navigated the dimly lit streets. Thankfully, the bus stop was just around the corner. Once she arrived, she barely had to wait a couple of minutes before the bus pulled up. Climbing aboard, she quickly sent a text to Brandon.

Talya: “Hey, I’m so sorry I missed your game. How did it go? Did you win?”

She pressed send and stared at her phone, her heart pounding with anticipation. As the bus jolted forward, she felt a flutter of hope. But when she reached her stop and saw that he still hadn’t replied, a sense of dread washed over her. What if he was ghosting her because she hadn’t been there to cheer him on? She exhaled sharply, frustration bubbling to the surface. There was nothing she could do about it now; all she could hope for was that he would calm down and they could sort things out tomorrow.

But the days dragged on, and luck was not on her side. Saturday and Sunday slipped away without a word from Brandon, despite her attempts to reach out multiple times. She had long shifts at work to keep her mind occupied, yet every night as she lay in bed, her thoughts spiraled back to him. What would he be like at school on Monday? Would he even acknowledge her?

Her answer came swiftly on Monday morning. Talya stood at the bus stop, her anger simmering just beneath the surface. Brandon hadn’t come to pick her up, leaving her with no choice but to take the bus to school, and now she was bound to be late. She had texted him twice and even called, but he remained silent. The disbelief washed over her—how could he do this to her over something as trivial as missing one game? She was determined to confront him the moment she set foot in school, assuming she could get there in time!

Finally arriving at school, she realized she had missed most of her first class. With a resigned sigh, she opted not to enter for the last ten minutes, instead choosing to wait outside the classroom for Brandon. When he finally emerged, he was surrounded by laughter and camaraderie, completely oblivious to her presence. She called out his name, desperation lacing her voice, but he didn’t even glance her way. A wave of humiliation washed over her as she felt her heart sink.

With her head hanging low, she hurried off to her second class, trying to shake off the sting of rejection. As she settled into her chair, she pulled out her phone and saw a text from Sage.

16:35

16.35

“I’m staying home today because I’m sick.”

Talya quickly typed a reply, expressing her hope for Sage’s swift recovery. But as she sat there, she couldn’t escape the feeling of eyes on her. The whispers and curious glances from her classmates felt like daggers, and she couldn’t tell if they knew about Brandon’s indifference or if it was just her imagination. All she wanted was for the day to end.

When the bell finally rang for lunch, Talya had reached her breaking point. She resolved to ignore Brandon completely. If he wanted to talk, he knew where to find her. With that thought in mind, she made her way to the lunchroom, but deep down, she wished she had stayed away. The atmosphere felt charged, and she could sense that her day was far from over.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

****Chapter 105****

Talya trudged into the lunchroom, her gaze fixed firmly on the floor, as if the tiles held some kind of solace. Fatigue weighed heavily on her shoulders, and frustration simmered just beneath the surface. She longed for the day to end, for the relentless ticking of the clock to finally grant her some relief. As she crossed the threshold into the bustling lunchroom, a peculiar hush seemed to envelop the space, wrapping around her like a thick fog.

Curiosity piqued, Talya lifted her head, and her breath caught in her throat.

Before her, Brandon was seated at his usual table, surrounded by his entourage of friends. But it wasn’t the sight of him that held her captive; it was the girl who was practically draped over him, her laughter ringing out like a cruel taunt. Talya felt as if she had been struck motionless, the scene before her freezing time itself. As if sensing the weight of the moment, Brandon finally released the girl from his embrace, standing up with a flourish. He caught Talya’s gaze for the briefest instant, a flicker of recognition passing between them, before he leaped onto the bench, commanding the attention of the entire room.

“Three cheers for our victory last night!” he bellowed, his voice booming with exuberance.

The lunchroom erupted in cheers and whistles, a cacophony of excitement that filled the air. “As is our custom,” he continued, his voice rising above the noise, “after the last game of the year, the quarterback announces who he will be taking to Prom. This year, I asked Stephanie; and she said yes!” The cheers crescendoed, drowning out his words as he pulled the girl up beside him, wrapping her in an embrace that felt like salt in

Talya's wounds. Their kiss was public and unabashed, a display that made her stomach churn.

Talya felt as though the air had been knocked out of her lungs, a visceral pain settling in her chest. She glanced around and noticed the eyes of her peers upon her—some whispered, others pointed, while a few wore expressions of pity that felt more like daggers. She needed to escape, to flee the scene before her emotions spilled over. With a swift turn, she attempted to make her exit but collided with a solid form.

"Whoa there," came a familiar voice as warm arms steadied her. Talya looked up to find Liam, his expression unreadable but focused. Yet, his eyes weren't on her; they were scanning the room, clearly fixated on the scene that had just unfolded behind her.

"Excuse me," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, thick with the threat of tears. She had to get away before she utterly humiliated herself.

"Don't give him the satisfaction of seeing you run away," Liam said, his voice low but laced with an intensity that made her pause. He looked down at her, jaw clenched tight, as if he were holding back his own frustrations. "Turn around and face him. Hold your head high. Then walk away. And whatever you do, do not shed a tear for him." His words, fierce and commanding, ignited a flicker of strength within her, compelling her to suppress the tears that threatened to spill over.

With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and turned to confront Brandon.

To her surprise, he was already looking in her direction, anger etched across his features. She crossed her arms defiantly, glaring at him as if to say she wouldn't be broken. With that, she turned and strode out of the lunchroom, her legs trembling with every step, as if they might buckle beneath her at any moment.

"Talya!" Liam's voice called out behind her, but she pressed on, unwilling to stop. Anger, hurt, and confusion swirled within her like a tempest, and all she wanted was to escape to the safety of her home. She knew she was running away, that it made her a coward, but today was just too much. "Talya!" he called again, but she kept moving, her resolve unyielding. Suddenly, a firm hand grasped her wrist, halting her progress.

Liam turned her to face him, but she couldn't bear to meet his gaze.

"Please. I just want to go home," she pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper, laced with desperation.

A silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken words. She braced herself for an argument, but to her surprise, he softened. "Okay. Let me give you a ride home," he offered, his tone genuine. Talya hesitated, ready to protest, but the thought of waiting for a bus in her current state made her reconsider. If he was offering, why not accept? It was his problem if he got in trouble for it later; she just wanted to escape.

“Thank you,” she muttered, still avoiding his eyes, feeling a mix of gratitude and shame.

“Will you look at me?” he asked gently, and she finally met his gaze. His eyes searched hers, as if trying to unravel the tangled mess of emotions swirling within her. “Please tell me you’re not brokenhearted over this,” he said softly, yet there was an unmistakable edge to his voice that hinted at his concern.

Talya felt a surge of confusion. Was she sad about Brandon? Not really. If she were honest, she had wanted out of that relationship almost from the beginning. Yet the manner in which it had ended stung deeply—he had tossed her aside for someone else without a second thought, and that hurt more than she cared to admit.

“I see,” Liam said, breaking into her thoughts. She looked up at him, poised to say something, anything, but the words eluded her. His expression was a mask of neutrality, but she could sense the undercurrents of his emotions. “Come on. Let’s get you home,” he said, starting to walk, and she instinctively fell into step behind him.

They navigated the hallways together, her heart still racing. At the office, she informed them she was heading home due to feeling unwell. Then, she followed Liam outside, where he led her to a sleek, expensive car that gleamed under the sunlight. She had no idea what kind of car it was, but its luxurious appearance was undeniable. He opened the door for her, and she slid into the plush seat, feeling the comfort envelop her like a warm blanket.

As Liam settled into the driver’s seat and started the engine, silence filled the air, punctuated only by the soft hum of the car. Talya stared out the window, lost in her thoughts, the world outside a blur of colors and shapes.

Before she knew it, they were pulling into her driveway. She hadn’t even realized she had told him where she lived; the details of that conversation were a fog in her mind. As the car came to a stop, Liam rounded the vehicle and opened her door again. She grabbed her bag, stepping out into the cool air. Turning to him, she managed a small, “Thank you for the ride.”

He looked down at her, his expression inscrutable, yet there was something in his eyes that made her heart race. Then he nodded, and she ascended the stairs to her home, not daring to look back.

Conclusion

106

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

As Talya stepped through the door, the warm, inviting aroma of tomato soup enveloped her senses, making her stomach rumble in response. A small, involuntary smile crept

onto her lips; it was a sure sign that Grandma was up and about. There was something truly magical about her grandma's homemade tomato soup, a recipe that seemed to cradle her heart in warmth and nostalgia. Paired with a gooey grilled cheese sandwich, it was the epitome of comfort food, the kind that could chase away even the darkest of days.

With a soft thud, Talya tossed her backpack onto the couch, the familiar sound echoing in the quiet of the small house. She made her way into the cozy kitchen, where her grandma stood stirring a pot on the stove, her back turned but her presence radiating warmth. As she turned around, her eyes widened with concern. "Talya? What are you doing home in the middle of the day? Are you feeling alright?"

A wave of relief washed over Talya, and her smile broadened. "Hey, Grandma! I'm okay, really. Just had a rough day. The school office said I could come home." She stepped closer, wrapping her arms around her grandmother, inhaling the comforting scent that reminded her of home—lavender and something sweet, like cookies baking in the oven. In that moment, she felt a rush of emotion, and a few tears escaped her eyes. Quickly, she stood back, wiping them away before Grandma could notice.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Grandma's astute gaze seemed to pierce through Talya's attempts to hide her feelings. Talya swallowed hard, the lump in her throat making it difficult to respond. She shook her head, unable to articulate the storm brewing inside her. "Oh, honey, please tell me what's happened," Grandma urged gently, concern etched on her face.

With her hands covering her face, Talya felt the tears begin to flow freely. Her grandma guided her to the small kitchen table, where she sank into a chair, the weight of her emotions crashing over her like a wave. Just then, the back door creaked open, and she heard her Grandpop's familiar voice. "What's going on?" he asked, his tone filled with concern.

"I don't know," Grandma replied softly, rubbing Talya's back in soothing circles. "She hasn't said much." Talya fought to regain her composure, wanting nothing more than to reassure them that she was fine.

"It's okay," she finally managed to choke out, her voice barely above a whisper. "I just had a really bad day at school," she sniffed, trying to steady herself.

"Was it that boy?" Grandpop asked, his voice gruff but laced with concern.

Talya sighed deeply, knowing she couldn't avoid the truth any longer. She had to share the details of her heartache. Just as she was about to speak, a knock echoed through the house, drawing her attention. Grandpop moved to answer the door, and a moment later, he returned with Sage, who trailed behind him like a ray of sunshine breaking through the clouds. Talya's eyes widened in surprise. "What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice thick with emotion.

“Did you really think I would let my best friend suffer alone?” Sage replied, her eyes sparkling with determination.

In an instant, the tears returned, and Talya leaped from her seat to envelop Sage in a tight embrace. “Aren’t you sick?” she asked, pulling back to look at her friend. Sage merely shrugged, a playful grin on her face.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she said, her voice a bit raspy, her cheeks slightly flushed. Talya felt a pang of guilt for dragging her friend into her troubles, yet gratitude swelled in her heart.

“Would you like some soup, Sage?” Grandma asked, her voice warm and inviting.

“Ooo, yes please!” Sage exclaimed, her eyes lighting up at the thought of Grandma’s famous soup. Moments later, all four of them were gathered around the table, bowls of steaming tomato soup and crispy grilled cheese sandwiches before them, the atmosphere filled with camaraderie and comfort.

After a few moments of silence, Grandpop finally broke the tension. “So, are you going to tell us what happened?” he asked, his voice gentle yet probing.

Talya sighed, the weight of her emotions pressing down on her. “It’s really not that big of a deal. I’m just really tired today,” she said, trying to deflect their concern. But when she saw their unwavering gazes, she knew she couldn’t hold back any longer. “I had to work on Friday night, and I missed Brandon’s game. He ignored my calls and texts all weekend, and then today, after class, he just brushed me off. When I went to the lunchroom...” she paused, taking a shaky breath. Her eyes met Sage’s, and she felt the hurt resurface. “He was sitting with Stephanie on his lap, kissing her. Then he stood up and announced he’s taking her to Prom,” she finished, her voice heavy with defeat.

“I’m so sorry, Talya,” Sage said softly, her empathy shining through. “I wish I could have been there for you.”

“It’s okay,” Talya replied, her gaze drifting to her grandparents. They were silent, Grandma’s expression filled with sadness while Grandpop’s face twisted with anger. Talya let out a long sigh. “It’s dumb. I wanted out of the relationship anyway; I don’t know why it hurts so much.”

“Because he’s a jerk,” Sage chimed in, her voice firm with conviction.

Talya couldn’t find a reason to argue. She turned to Sage, curiosity piquing. “How did you know to come here?” she asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Liam called me,” Sage explained, her tone lightening. “He said he just dropped you off and that you were having a really bad day and probably needed a friend.”

Talya's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?" she asked, her heart fluttering at the thought. "How did he get your number?"

Sage shrugged nonchalantly. "He's a teacher now; he probably has access to phone numbers."

"I can't believe he did that," Talya murmured, a mix of surprise and gratitude washing over her.

"Who's Liam?" Grandma asked, her curiosity piqued as she glanced back and forth between the two girls.

Sage shot a pointed look at Talya, who felt the heat rise in her cheeks. "He's just a guy," Talya began hesitantly.

"You don't say," Grandpop interjected, a teasing lilt in his voice.

Laughter bubbled up around the table, lightening the mood. "He's an incredibly handsome guy who teaches self-defense at school, and he's totally into Talya," Sage added with a cheeky grin.

Talya felt her face flush deeper. "No, he's not," she protested, but Sage shot her a look of disbelief.

"Well, he's not," Talya insisted, but Sage merely shook her head, unconvinced.

"Does he treat our Talya better than Brandon did?" Grandpop asked, his tone serious but supportive. Sage nodded vigorously. "Then I like him already," Grandpop declared, a satisfied smile on his face. Grandma nodded in agreement, her eyes twinkling with approval.

In that moment, Talya's heart sank a little, knowing that the truth was far more complicated. She didn't have the heart to tell them that Liam wasn't interested in her romantically; he was simply being kind. But for now, surrounded by her family and her best friend, she felt a flicker of hope igniting in the warmth of their love.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

****Chapter 107****

Talya had reluctantly given in to her grandparents' insistence to skip school on Tuesday. They meant well, of course, and she appreciated their concern, but the truth was that she still worked her evening shifts. She didn't want to burden Joe, her boss, with her absence. Yet, deep down, she knew she wasn't quite ready to face the world at

school. The thought of seeing everyone—of facing their gazes—felt like an insurmountable mountain.

But by Wednesday morning, something shifted within her. A small voice urged her to confront her fears head-on. She couldn't hide forever. Grandpop, with his gentle, reassuring smile, drove her to school. The ride was slower than usual, but there was a comforting rhythm to it, a welcome change from the chaos of her thoughts. As he dropped her off, Talya felt a mix of dread and determination wash over her.

As she approached the school building, a familiar hand slipped through her arm, anchoring her. It was Sage, her steadfast friend, and at that moment, Talya couldn't have been more grateful.

"You ready for this?" Sage asked, her voice a blend of encouragement and understanding. Talya nodded, though the knot in her stomach twisted tighter.

"I got your back," Sage affirmed, her grip tightening reassuringly.

"Thank you," Talya replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She drew in a deep breath, trying to quell the storm of emotions swirling inside her. She longed to feel confident again, to reclaim the girl she used to be before everything changed. But the fear of that girl being lost forever loomed large in her mind.

Once inside the building, the atmosphere felt suffocating. As she stepped into the main hallway, it felt as if every pair of eyes was trained on her. Maybe they were; she couldn't bring herself to look up and confirm. Instead, she focused on her locker, retrieving her books with mechanical precision, desperate to avoid any confrontation.

When she arrived at her classroom, her heart sank. There was Brandon, leaning casually against the doorframe, his arms wrapped possessively around Stephanie. A wave of anger and hurt surged within her, but before she could process it, Sage gave her a gentle push, urging her forward. Talya's legs, stiff and reluctant, carried her into the room, and she was relieved to sink into the safety of her seat.

Sage slid into the seat beside her, leaning in to whisper, "Game face."

Talya took another deep breath, pushing her tumultuous emotions aside. She would deal with them later, in the solitude of her thoughts. Right now, she needed to survive the class without succumbing to tears or the urge to hurl something at Brandon. The unpredictability of her emotions left her feeling like she was walking a tightrope, ready to tumble at any moment.

Finally, the bell rang, signaling the end of first period, and Talya seized the opportunity to escape the classroom. The next three hours dragged on like an eternity, each tick of the clock amplifying her anxiety. Lunchtime loomed ahead, and she dreaded it. The thought of facing the cafeteria filled her with dread, but Sage was insistent.

“Come on. You can do this. The first day will be the hardest,” Sage encouraged, her tone firm yet kind. With a reluctant nod, Talya followed Sage into the lunchroom, her heart racing.

As she entered, her gaze was immediately drawn to Brandon and Stephanie, but she quickly averted her eyes, determined not to let them steal her focus. She could do this. She forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand—getting food. After navigating the line, she and Sage found a table far removed from the couple. Talya managed to force a few bites of her salad down, but most of her time was spent studying for a quiz in the next period.

The subsequent classes dragged painfully, each moment stretching into what felt like hours. Finally, the last period of the day arrived—gym class. Talya felt a wave of reluctance wash over her. She had no choice but to go; she didn’t want to leave Sage hanging. With a heavy heart, she changed quickly and made her way to the gym, her eyes scanning the room for Liam. But as soon as their eyes met, she looked away, a mix of emotions swirling within her.

Coach Stanley had them start with laps, a mindless routine that allowed her to push her thoughts aside. But soon, they gathered at the center of the gym where Liam was set to instruct them. Just as he was about to speak, Coach interrupted, his voice booming.

“You’ve all been practicing well, but remember, in the real world, your attacker won’t be someone who’s trained. Today, you’ll practice with the football team. They’ll provide excellent, unpredictable practice.”

Talya’s heart sank at the thought. She heard Sage let out an angry huff beside her. Taking a deep breath, Talya focused on maintaining her calm. She wouldn’t let Brandon’s presence affect her. She refused to show him how deeply he had hurt her. She didn’t even glance at the door as the football team sauntered in, filling the air with their boisterous energy.

As the Coach briefed the boys, Talya felt her palms grow clammy.

“Boys, you know your roles today. When I call your name, choose a partner. If you don’t have a preference, I’ll assign you,” Coach said, and Talya’s anxiety spiked.

When she heard the name “Brandon,” her heart dropped.

“Talya,” he called out immediately. Talya squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the whispers and giggles ripple through the room like a wave. She struggled to keep her breathing steady, reminding herself to stay grounded. When she finally opened her eyes, she was met with Liam’s intense gaze, a flicker of anger crossing his features.

Once everyone was paired off, Coach handed the floor over to Liam.

“All right, you know what to do. Just stick to your training, and you’ll be fine,” he encouraged, but Talya found no solace in his words.

With a sharp whistle, Liam signaled the start of practice. Talya knew the moment had come—she had to confront her fears. With a deep breath, she turned to face Brandon, who stood mere feet away, arms crossed and a smug grin plastered across his face.

“You ready for this?” he taunted. Talya’s throat tightened, and she couldn’t trust her voice to respond, so she nodded instead.

As she turned to face away from him, she felt his presence loom closer. Before she could brace herself, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, holding her tightly against him.

“Try to get out of this,” he whispered mockingly in her ear, his grip so constricting it sent a jolt of pain through her. She knew bruises would bloom on her arms from his hold.

“You’re hurting me,” she managed to say softly, a plea that felt almost insignificant. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Liam’s head whip around, concern etched across his face. But how could he have possibly heard her?

“Then get out of the hold,” Brandon sneered, his voice dripping with disdain.

Talya steelled herself, determined not to let him win. She had to find a way to break free—not just from his grip, but from the shadows of her past that threatened to engulf her.

Conclusion

108

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

Talya’s simmering anger acted as a shield against the icy grip of fear that had paralyzed her the day Liam had seized her. In that moment, she felt an immense sense of gratitude for her own fierce resolve. With determination coursing through her veins, she began to implement the self-defense moves she had practiced tirelessly, each step etched into her muscle memory. Yet, despite her efforts, Brandon’s arms remained unyielding, a fortress she could not breach.

“Are you even trying?” he sneered, his breath hot against her ear, sending shivers down her spine. “Want to know what I did last night?” he whispered, his tone dripping with malicious glee. Talya had no desire to hear about his escapades. She turned her mind away from his taunts, focusing on the sound of her own heartbeat, which thundered in her ears. “She was more than eager to come into my bed, unlike somebody else I used to date,” he added, his voice laced with venom.

She chose to ignore his jab, feeling a surge of frustration. All she wanted was for this torment to end. The pressure behind her eyes intensified, and she sensed the dam holding back her tears beginning to crack. If she didn't escape his clutches soon, she feared she would break down, and the thought of crying in front of him filled her with dread and humiliation.

Blinking rapidly, she fought against the wave of emotions threatening to overwhelm her. Anger coursed through her—anger directed at him for his cruelty and at herself for allowing this situation to unfold. She gathered her strength and attempted to wriggle free once more, but Brandon only tightened his grip, as if sensing her desperation. Just then, a whistle pierced the air, cutting through the tension like a knife.

"Everybody gather around," Liam's voice boomed, commanding and authoritative. It was a tone that demanded respect, one no one dared to defy. Talya noticed Brandon hesitating, his arms slowly dropping, but he eventually released her. She quickly stepped away, rubbing her arms as if to erase the imprint of his hold. As she joined the others, she positioned herself at the back, hoping to blend into the crowd.

"Talya and Brandon up front," Liam called out, his voice sharp and unexpected. Talya jumped at the sound, unaccustomed to such a commanding tone from him. Without thinking, she moved forward, her heart pounding. Brandon sauntered up beside her, a smug grin plastered across his face, as if relishing the attention. Liam's gaze flicked to her, and she noticed his eyes darken, a storm brewing beneath the surface. Talya swallowed hard, sensing the fury radiating off him like heat from a fire.

"Talya, were you able to break Brandon's hold on you?" Liam asked, his voice cutting through the air, addressing the entire class.

She caught a glimpse of Brandon's triumphant smirk and felt a wave of shame wash over her. "N-no," she stammered, hating the tremor in her voice that betrayed her vulnerability.

Liam turned to the class, his expression serious. "Talya is facing what many of you may encounter in real life. She's small, and Brandon is a big guy. She can't overpower him, so what does she do? What do you do when the techniques you know aren't effective?" He paused, his eyes narrowing as he focused on Brandon. "I'm going to be Talya now, so you can see what to do. Brandon, come here and grab me just like you did Talya."

Talya watched as Liam's confidence radiated, and she felt a flicker of hope. Brandon approached, a hint of hesitation flickering across his face before his cocky demeanor returned. He wrapped his arms around Liam, who was several inches taller, creating an awkward hold. "Tighter," Liam instructed, his voice steady. Brandon complied, his grip becoming even more constricting.

"Now," Liam said, addressing the class with an intensity that commanded their attention. "What do you do when what you know to do doesn't work? Improvise."

In an instant, Liam drove his elbow into Brandon's stomach with a force that left the class gasping. Before anyone could react, he swung his hand back, striking Brandon's nose with a swift motion. Without losing momentum, he twisted, seizing Brandon's arm and yanking it upward as he pushed Brandon to the ground, wrenching his arm behind him in a painful hold.

Liam bent over Brandon, a picture of calm authority, and glanced at the class. He hadn't even broken a sweat. "See? You improvise." The room erupted into applause, while the football team stood in stunned silence, their quarterback writhing on the floor in shock.

"You broke my nose!" Brandon howled, his voice a mix of disbelief and pain. Liam, unfazed, pressed him back down as he stood tall, arms crossed, watching Brandon with a cool detachment. Coach Stanley approached, his expression stern as he stood beside Brandon.

"That's enough, Brandon. Trevor and Mitch, take him to the school nurse," he ordered, gesturing towards the door. Brandon's friends moved in to support him, but not before he hurled one last string of curses at Liam, who remained unfazed.

Talya was close enough to overhear Coach Stanley murmur to Liam, "You better be glad football season is over." With that, he turned and blew his whistle. "Class dismissed."

As the students filtered out, Talya lingered, still processing the whirlwind of events. "Are you okay?" Liam's voice broke through her thoughts, rough yet concerned. She glanced up at him, her heart racing.

"Yeah," she replied, unsure of how to articulate the whirlwind of emotions swirling within her.

Liam gestured toward the door, and she turned, searching for Sage. Spotting her friend right behind, Talya felt a sense of relief wash over her. As they walked toward the exit, she paused and turned to Liam. "Thank you," she said simply, her voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, acknowledging her gratitude. Yet, she couldn't shake the frown that creased her brow. "You shouldn't have done that, though."

"Why not?" Liam asked, his expression curious.

"Because you made him angry—really, really angry. Believe me, that's not a good position to be in," she warned, shuddering at the thought.

Liam stepped closer, his voice dropping to a low, serious tone. "Does he hurt you when he's angry?"

Talya felt a chill run down her spine at the question, but she chose to ignore it. “Just be careful, and watch your back. He’ll be out for blood,” she cautioned, her concern evident.

“I’m not worried about him,” Liam replied, his confidence unwavering.

Talya frowned, frustration bubbling up within her. “Well, you should be.”

Liam scoffed, shaking his head. “Brandon can’t hurt me; I’m just worried he might retaliate against you. You tell me if he threatens you,” he said, anger lacing his words.

Talya found herself nodding, wanting to appease him, even as a part of her bristled at the thought. “You’d better get changed and get to work,” he urged gently.

His words jolted her back to reality. “Yeah. Well, thanks again. I have to admit, it was kind of satisfying to watch you break Brandon’s nose like that,” she said, a small smile creeping onto her face.

Liam returned her smile slowly, a look that sent butterflies fluttering in her stomach. “Good,” he said, his tone lightening. Then, without another word, he turned and walked away, leaving Talya to suppress the sigh that threatened to escape her lips. She needed to focus; work awaited her.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

Chapter 109

Talya felt a wave of relief wash over her as she stepped into the bustling diner. The clatter of dishes and the hum of conversations surrounded her, creating a comforting cocoon that allowed her to momentarily forget about her own life. Instead of dwelling on her worries, she could immerse herself in her work, focusing on delivering excellent service.

“Hey Talya, someone just sat in your section!” called out Jenny, one of the other waitresses, her voice laced with playful enthusiasm. “And I must say, he is quite the catch!”

Talya chuckled softly, shaking her head. Jenny had a knack for noticing the good-looking patrons, and it was no secret that she loved to flirt. With a light-hearted roll of her eyes, Talya made her way to her assigned table. As she approached, Liam looked up from his seat, a warm smile spreading across his face. A flutter of excitement ignited in her stomach, and she fought to suppress it.

“Liam, what brings you here today?” she inquired, pausing at his table, her curiosity piqued.

“Just grabbing a bite to eat,” he replied, his grin widening.

Talya couldn’t help but mirror his smile. “What can I get started for you?”

“I’ll have a coffee, a glass of water, and I’d like a double portion of meatloaf, a baked potato, and some broccoli,” he said, his eyes glinting with mischief.

Talya blinked in surprise, her eyebrows arching slightly. “You want two portions of meatloaf? Just so you know, one serving is pretty generous,” she remarked, trying to wrap her head around his order.

“Absolutely, yes,” he confirmed with a playful smirk.

Talya shrugged, jotting down his order with a sense of resignation. “Alright then, I’ll put that in and fetch your drinks.” She turned on her heel and headed to the kitchen. After placing his order, she returned with his coffee and water, setting them down on the table with a flourish.

“Here you go! Coffee and water. Would you like any cream or sweetener?” she asked, her tone light and friendly.

“Just cream, please. Thanks!” he replied, his eyes sparkling with appreciation.

“Sure thing! Just let me know if you need anything else,” Talya said as she moved away, making her rounds to check on the other tables. Although she felt a twinge of guilt for not spending more time with Liam, the diner was swamped with customers, and she had to prioritize her duties.

After a flurry of activity, Talya returned to Liam’s table, presenting his receipt with a bright smile. She glanced at the two empty plates before him and quipped, “I’d ask how your meal was, but I think the answer is pretty evident!”

His laughter rang out, rich and infectious, causing Talya’s heart to flutter. “It was fantastic! I don’t get many home-cooked meals these days, and this meatloaf reminded me so much of my mom’s cooking,” he said, a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

“Do you not cook at all?” Talya asked, genuinely intrigued.

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “Nope, cooking isn’t my strong suit.”

Curiosity piqued, she pressed on, “So, do you live alone?”

He hesitated for a moment, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face. “You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to,” she quickly added, realizing she might have overstepped.

“Not at all,” he replied, his smile easing her worry. “I don’t mind answering. Yes, I live by myself at the moment.”

His response was somewhat cryptic, but Talya decided to let it slide. “If you’re ever interested, my grandma loves cooking for people. You should come over sometime; she makes amazing homemade meals,” she suggested, her voice hopeful.

Liam regarded her for a moment, and a wave of panic washed over Talya. “I mean, you don’t have to if you don’t want to,” she stammered, feeling flustered.

“I’d love to,” he interrupted, his voice steady and sincere.

“It’s a date then!” Talya blurted out, immediately regretting her choice of words. “I mean, not a date! It’s not a date, it’s just a... um...”

Liam stood up, his tall frame casting a shadow over her. “It’s a date,” he affirmed with a grin before heading towards the front to settle his bill.

Talya watched him walk away, her heart racing as she struggled to catch her breath. She glanced down at the table and her eyes widened in disbelief as she spotted a hundred-dollar bill lying there. Without thinking, she snatched it up and dashed after him.

“Liam!” she called out, her voice cutting through the din of the parking lot. He turned, his expression shifting to one of concern as he approached her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his brow furrowing with intensity.

“Nothing’s wrong! You left this on the table,” she said, extending the bill toward him, her heart pounding in her chest.

He looked down, then back at her, confusion etched on his face. “That’s for you. It’s your tip,” he stated matter-of-factly.

Talya stared at him, incredulity washing over her. “It’s a hundred-dollar bill!” she exclaimed, her voice rising slightly.

“I know,” he replied, a playful grin playing on his lips. “I’m the one who left it.”

“You can’t leave a hundred-dollar tip!” she protested, her cheeks flushing. “I barely had a chance to serve you!”

Liam erupted into laughter, the sound warm and inviting. “Keep it! You earned it,” he insisted.

“Well, only if you’re absolutely sure,” Talya replied, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

“I’m sure,” he reassured her, his gaze unwavering.

With a reluctant smile, Talya folded the bill and tucked it into her apron pocket. "Thank you," she said, her heart swelling with gratitude.

"Anytime. Come on, I'll walk you back inside," he offered, gesturing toward the diner.

"Oh, you really don't have to do that. I'll be fine," Talya replied, feeling a flutter of warmth at his kindness.

"I want to," he insisted, already taking steps toward the entrance. Talya hurried to catch up with him, and they walked back to the restaurant in comfortable silence. He held the door open for her, and she stepped inside, feeling a strange mix of excitement and nervousness.

"Thanks, Liam," she said, her smile bright as she turned to face him.

"Anytime, Talya," he replied, his eyes sparkling with sincerity.

As she walked back into the bustling diner, Talya felt a renewed sense of energy. The rest of her shift flew by in a blur of activity, and she welcomed the distraction. Finally, when she clocked out for the night, she felt a wave of fatigue but also a hint of exhilaration. "Goodnight, Joe!" she called out to her boss as she left the diner.

Stepping out into the cool night air, Talya began her walk towards the bus stop. As she approached, she noticed a man already waiting there. She paid him little mind, opting instead to pop in her headphones and take a seat on the bench. Just as she settled in, she felt the presence of the man shift in front of her. Looking up, she realized he was addressing her.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry. What did you say?" she asked, pulling her headphones out.

"I was just wondering what time it is," he said, his tone casual.

"Oh, it's 11:15," Talya replied, moving to put her headphones back in, but he continued speaking.

"What's a pretty young thing like you doing out here all alone so late?" he asked, his voice dripping with a disconcerting familiarity.

Talya looked up at him, trying to gauge his intentions. The question seemed innocent, yet there was an underlying tone that made her uneasy. "I just wrapped up my shift at work," she said, forcing a smile.

"Got it. Where do you work?" he probed further, his interest seemingly piqued.

"Not too far from here," she replied vaguely, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

"Are you heading home now?" he continued, his gaze unwavering.

Talya nodded, glancing around for the bus, willing it to arrive sooner rather than later.

As she reached for her headphones again, he stopped her once more. "I've seen you here before waiting for the bus. You ride it often late at night," he remarked, an unsettling familiarity in his tone.

Talya's heart raced, and she chose not to respond this time, feeling the hairs on her arms prickle. "You know, I have my car not far from here. I could give you a ride home; you wouldn't have to wait for the bus," he offered, his smile widening unnaturally.

The air around her thickened with tension, and she felt a chill run down her spine.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn****

****Chapter 110****

It was official. Talya was beginning to feel the creeping tendrils of panic wrapping around her heart. "I think I'll just wait for the bus. Thank you," she replied, her voice laced with a polite but unmistakable tension.

"Come on," he urged, stepping closer. His hand rested on her arm, a gesture that felt more intrusive than comforting. "Just come with me. It will be quick; you won't have to wait for the bus."

Talya stood her ground, her heart pounding in her chest as she took a deliberate step back. "No. I'm waiting for the bus," she asserted, her voice firm and unwavering.

The man took another step toward her, and instinctively, she retreated, only to find herself colliding with a solid chest. "Hey baby, I was looking for you," came Liam's voice, a familiar sound that instantly soothed her frayed nerves. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her protectively against him. "Come on, I'll take you home."

Talya felt a rush of relief wash over her, and she nodded, almost blindly, her heart racing not just from fear but from the warmth of Liam's presence. She glanced back at the man who had been looming over her, noting the scowl that twisted his features. Thankfully, he remained silent, perhaps recognizing that he was outmatched.

Liam guided her, turning her so she was nestled against his side, his arm securely around her shoulders as they began to walk away from the bus stop. Each step felt liberating, and as they turned the corner, she spotted Liam's car idling nearby. The sight of it brought a wave of relief that washed over her like a cool breeze on a hot day.

Without uttering a single word, Liam opened the car door for her, helping her settle inside with a gentleness that made her heart flutter. He squatted beside her, his

expression softening. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice low and soothing. Talya simply nodded, still trying to steady her racing heart.

"I'll be right back. Lock the doors behind me," he instructed as he stood, his demeanor shifting slightly to something more serious.

"Wh-where are you going?" Talya asked, a note of worry creeping into her voice.

Liam's gaze met hers, and for a moment, she felt the weight of his concern. "I just have to deal with something. I'll be right back." The warmth that had filled his eyes moments before was replaced by a steely resolve.

"No, please," she pleaded, instinctively reaching out to grasp his hand. "Please, don't leave me. I just want to go home," she confessed, her voice trembling with vulnerability.

He hesitated, looking down at her with a mix of understanding and determination before finally nodding. Carefully, he closed the door behind her, and she heard the reassuring click of the locks engaging as he made his way around the front of the car. He slid into the driver's seat, his silence heavy with unspoken thoughts. Without a word, he shifted the car into drive and maneuvered it away from the street where the bus stop was located.

Liam reached over, taking her hand in his, his grip firm and reassuring. "You're okay, Talya. I won't let anything happen to you," he promised, his voice steady. Talya glanced at him, and the confidence in his words wrapped around her like a warm blanket, easing the tension that had coiled around her heart. The drive home felt swift, and by the time they arrived, she could feel her muscles relaxing, the fear beginning to dissipate.

"How did you happen to be there?" Talya asked, curiosity threading through her voice as she turned to face him, puzzled by his sudden appearance.

Liam shrugged nonchalantly, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Just happened to be at the right place at the right time."

"Well, thank you. I really appreciate it, and thank you for the ride," she said sincerely, reaching for the door, but Liam stopped her.

"Talya, I don't want you taking the bus home anymore this late at night. It's not safe for a beautiful girl like you," he stated, his tone serious.

A warmth blossomed in her chest at his compliment, but she quickly pushed it aside. "I have to. It's my means of transportation."

"Not anymore it isn't," Liam countered firmly. "I'll pick you up and take you home each night. Just give me your cell phone. I'll put my number in it," he said, extending his hand expectantly.

Talya stared at him, taken aback. "You can't take me home every night," she replied, her voice tinged with disbelief.

"Why not?" he asked, genuinely surprised.

"Well, because I'm sure you have more important things to do than play chauffeur for me," she explained, trying to inject some practicality into the conversation.

"This is something I want to do," Liam insisted, his gaze unwavering. "Come on; give me your phone."

After a moment's hesitation, Talya finally relented and handed him her phone. She watched as he inputted his number, a smile breaking across her face when he handed it back to her. "My sexy hero? Really?" she laughed, incredulous at his choice of title.

Liam flashed her a cheeky grin. "If I'm going to be your knight in shining armor, I gotta have a cool name," he replied, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"And My Sexy Hero is what you came up with?" Talya teased, shaking her head in amusement.

"It was the best I could think of in the heat of the moment," he said, his grin widening.

"Fine, My Sexy Hero. Thank you for bringing me home," she said, tucking her phone back into her pocket, the warmth of their banter lingering in the air.

Liam nodded, his expression softening. "You're welcome."

"Try not to break any more noses, okay?" she said with a playful grin, her heart lightening.

"I can't promise that," Liam replied, matching her smile with one of his own.

Talya laughed, the sound ringing out in the quiet night as she climbed out of the car. She walked into her home, a smile still lingering on her lips, feeling lighter than she had just moments ago. It felt good to laugh, and only Liam had the power to pull her from the depths of fear into the warmth of joy, even if it was just for a fleeting moment. Shaking her head, she thought to herself, that man.

Conclusion