

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

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

****Chapter 111****

To her own surprise, it took very little time for Talya to drift off into a peaceful slumber.

In her dream, she found herself wandering through an expansive field. The grass swayed gently in the breeze, reaching up to her waist in certain spots, yet it did not hinder her movement in the least. As she walked, her gaze was captivated by a vibrant tapestry of wildflowers blooming in every conceivable hue, creating a breathtaking panorama that stretched out before her. The beauty of the scene enveloped her, and Talya felt a wave of tranquility wash over her. It was as if the very essence of serenity had settled around her, urging her to breathe deeply and let go of her worries.

Eventually, she came upon a grand tree, its branches sprawling wide and its leaves whispering secrets in the wind. Drawn to its majestic presence, she decided to take a moment to rest beneath its shade. The coolness offered a welcome respite from the warmth of the sun. Talya's eyes wandered to a nearby creek, its crystal-clear waters glistening in the light. She envisioned herself kicking off her shoes and socks, letting the refreshing water envelop her feet. But for now, she was perfectly content to simply sit in the comforting embrace of the tree's shadow. With a soft sigh, she leaned back and closed her eyes, allowing the world around her to fade into a gentle hush.

After what felt like an eternity of blissful stillness, a sound broke through the tranquility. Talya's eyes fluttered open, and she was startled to find a wolf standing merely a few feet away from her. A rush of panic surged through her, but before she could react, a surprising warmth and sense of safety enveloped her. She gazed at the wolf, feeling an inexplicable connection rather than fear. "That's because there is nothing to fear from me," a voice resonated in her mind, ethereal and soothing.

Startled, she looked around, searching for the source of the voice, but found no one else in sight. Her attention returned to the wolf, who had taken a few tentative steps closer, settling down on his haunches right before her.

"Talya," the voice called again, clear and melodic. She blinked, incredulous. Surely, the voice wasn't emanating from the wolf, was it?

"Are you talking to me?" she asked, a hint of disbelief coloring her tone, feeling somewhat foolish for even posing the question.

"I am communicating with you," the wolf replied, his mouth remaining still, yet the voice echoed in her mind. Talya couldn't help but wonder if she was losing her grip on reality.

"The mind is a fragile thing," the wolf continued, its gaze steady. "It only exists within one dimension. Yet, there are other dimensions where it can thrive, if one only opens themselves to the possibilities."

Talya remained silent, her thoughts racing as she tried to comprehend the surreal encounter. She didn't feel threatened by the wolf, but the peaceful calm she had felt moments ago began to slip away, replaced by a sense of bewilderment.

"Relax, and allow your mind to embrace the possibilities," the wolf urged, its voice gentle yet firm.

"What possibilities?" Talya questioned, her curiosity piqued but her confusion still evident.

"The ones that are coming," the wolf replied cryptically. Then, without warning, it stood and gracefully walked away, disappearing into the fabric of the dream. Talya watched in astonishment, her mind swirling with questions.

With a start, Talya sat up in bed, rubbing the remnants of sleep from her eyes. "Okay, that was the strangest dream ever," she muttered to herself, shaking her head as she swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up.

After dressing in her favorite black leggings and a casual button-down denim shirt, she made her way into the kitchen, her thoughts still lingering on the dream. "Good morning, Grandma," she greeted cheerfully, a smile brightening her face.

"Hi, my sweet angel! Did you sleep well?" her grandmother inquired, her voice warm and inviting.

"Mmm," Talya replied noncommittally, her mind still caught up in the bizarre dream. "Hey, Grandma?" she said suddenly, a thought popping into her mind. "Would it be alright if I invited a friend over for lunch on Saturday before my shift at the diner? He lives alone and doesn't get home-cooked meals very often."

"Of course, dear! Bring him over," Grandma replied without hesitation. "Is he that man you mentioned before?" Talya nodded, feeling a rush of excitement. "We'd love to meet him."

"Great! Thanks so much," Talya beamed, bending down to plant a kiss on her grandmother's cheek. "I've got to run now. Love you!"

“Love you too, Talya,” Grandma called after her, her voice trailing softly behind.

Stepping into the living room, Talya spotted her Grandpop, comfortably settled in his chair. “Love you, Grandpop,” she said, her heart swelling with affection.

“Love you, Tally-bear,” he replied, using the endearing nickname he had called her since childhood, and it brought a smile to her face as she moved toward the front door.

As she opened the door, she was taken aback to see Liam casually leaning against his car in the driveway, a confident grin on his face. She quickly shut the door behind her, her heart racing slightly. “Liam, what are you doing here?” she asked, curiosity mingling with surprise.

He straightened up, his demeanor relaxed. “I’m here to drive you to school,” he said, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

“But why?” she pressed, still trying to wrap her mind around his sudden appearance.

Liam chuckled lightly, a sparkle of mischief in his eyes. “You’re a smart girl; you’ll figure it out,” he teased, before walking around to open her door for her. He effortlessly lifted her backpack off her shoulders and tossed it into the back seat before shutting her door with a gentle click. As he slid into the driver’s seat, Talya found herself still pondering his cryptic words.

“Thank you again for last night,” she said, breaking the silence, her voice laced with genuine gratitude. “I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t shown up when you did.” A shiver ran down her spine at the thought.

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” he replied, his tone serious, but his eyes softened as he glanced at her.

The car was enveloped in a comfortable silence for a few moments, and Talya decided to lighten the mood. “I had the weirdest dream last night,” she said with a chuckle, hoping to spark a conversation.

“Yeah? What was it about?” he asked, a smile playing on his lips.

“It was so bizarre! I dreamed I was in this stunning place filled with tall grass and wildflowers. There was a creek flowing nearby and this enormous tree. I sat down under that tree and closed my eyes, but when I opened them again, there was a wolf sitting right in front of me,” she recounted, her voice animated. Liam turned his head quickly to look at her, but then returned his focus to the road, a flicker of concern crossing his features. “And then I heard this voice. I couldn’t tell where it was coming from, but it felt so real,” she added, her laughter bubbling up again. “Anyway, I told you it was a weird dream.”

When Liam remained silent, she glanced over at him, noticing the frown etched on his face. "What did the wolf say?" he asked, his voice low and serious.

"What?" Talya replied, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of her dream, Talya awakens to a renewed sense of possibility and connection, igniting a spark of hope within her. The surreal encounter with the wolf serves as a catalyst, urging her to embrace the unknown and the potential that lies ahead. As she moves through her morning, her interactions with her grandmother and Grandpop are imbued with a warmth that reinforces the bonds of family and love, grounding her amidst the uncertainty of her thoughts. The dream, though strange, has awakened something deep within her, a yearning for connection and the courage to reach out to others, exemplified by her decision to invite Liam over for lunch.

As she steps outside to find Liam waiting for her, the weight of the dream lingers in the air, intertwining with the palpable tension of their budding relationship. His unexpected arrival not only signifies a shift in her daily routine but also hints at the unfolding journey they are about to embark on together. Talya's heart races as she recounts her dream, unknowingly drawing Liam closer to the deeper implications of her experience. The wolf's message of embracing possibilities resonates within her, foreshadowing the changes that await. In this moment, Talya stands at the threshold of new beginnings, ready to explore the paths that lie ahead, guided by the gentle whisper of hope that promises to illuminate even the darkest nights.

112

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

"Tell me, what did the wolf say in your dream?" he inquired once more, his curiosity piqued.

Talya paused, her mind racing to capture the fleeting memories of her dream. "Oh," she began, her brow furrowing in concentration. "I can't quite recall. It was something about how our minds are one-dimensional, yet they're far more complex than we realize. Or something along those lines. I just can't remember the specifics." She stole another glance at Liam, but he appeared to be lost in a labyrinth of his own thoughts. A comfortable silence enveloped them as Talya turned her attention to the world outside the window, watching the scenery drift by. Before long, they arrived at the school parking lot. Liam parked neatly against the curb.

"Thank you so much for the ride. I'll see you in class tomorrow," she said, her smile brightening her face.

"I'll swing by to pick you up after school and take you to work," he corrected her, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"You really don't have to do that, Liam. I don't mind taking the bus," she protested gently, but Liam was already shaking his head, resolute.

"Not after what happened last night. I'm taking you. I'll be here at three," he stated, his voice firm and final.

"Okay," Talya replied, feeling a mix of gratitude and confusion. "Have a good day, then," she added, unsure of how to navigate the unexpected warmth of their exchange.

His expression softened as he met her gaze. "You too. I'll see you after school," he said, a hint of warmth in his eyes.

Talya smiled, feeling a flutter of something unnameable in her chest, and closed the door behind her. She began to make her way toward the school's entrance when suddenly, Sage appeared beside her, seemingly out of thin air.

"You scared me!" Talya exclaimed, placing her hand over her heart in surprise.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt your private moment," Sage replied, her grin wide and mischievous.

"Oh, come on," Talya laughed, dismissing Sage's teasing.

"Seriously, what's going on with you two? He picked you up for school?" Sage pressed, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Talya sighed, remembering the tumultuous events of the previous night. "I had a rough experience last night. Liam came to my rescue and took me home. Because of that, he insists on driving me now," she explained, a hint of gratitude creeping into her voice.

"What happened? Are you alright?" Sage asked, concern etched on her face. As they walked towards their lockers, Talya recounted the harrowing details of her night, her heart racing as she relived the fear. "Wow, that's terrifying! I'm so relieved you're okay, and even more grateful that Liam was there for you," Sage said, her voice low.

Talya nodded, but a sense of unease crept in. "It's a bit strange, though, isn't it?" she mused.

"Which part?" Sage inquired, tilting her head.

"Well, the fact that Liam just showed up out of nowhere to save me. I mean, what was he doing out at that hour?" Talya questioned, her brow furrowing in thought.

"Maybe he was at the diner earlier and just hadn't left the area yet," Talya suggested, trying to rationalize it.

“Or perhaps he was waiting around until you finished work to ensure you got home safely,” Sage replied, a teasing lilt in her voice.

Talya chuckled softly. “I doubt it. I think he just happened to be nearby.”

Sage shrugged, her expression skeptical. “Maybe,” she conceded, but the doubt lingered in her tone.

The conversation faded as they approached their first-period classroom. Upon entering, Talya spotted Brandon and Stephanie, and her stomach twisted in discomfort. She rolled her eyes, pushing past them to find her seat. As she settled in, Sage leaned closer, a grin plastered on her face. “What?” Talya asked, feeling a mix of annoyance and curiosity.

“You walked right past them without flinching! You’re getting over him, just like I knew you would,” Sage whispered, her excitement palpable.

Talya smiled, a flicker of pride igniting within her. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Of course, it helps that you’re spending time with Mr. Sexy himself,” Sage continued, her voice barely a whisper, but filled with mischief. Talya could only offer a shy smile in response. “You like him, don’t you?” Sage pressed, her eyes gleaming.

Talya remained silent, but the smile on her face spoke volumes. It lingered, brightening her mood throughout the morning until lunchtime arrived, when everything took a sudden turn for the worse.

Just as Talya was about to step into the bustling lunchroom to meet Sage, Brandon, Mitch, and Trevor blocked her path. Talya looked up at Brandon, noticing the bruised and swollen state of his nose, and a small, involuntary smile crept onto her lips.

“What’s so funny?” Brandon sneered, invading her personal space.

Talya quickly wiped the smile away, her heart racing. “Nothing,” she replied, her voice steady.

“You think this is a joke? You think it’s funny that idiot broke my nose?” Brandon challenged, his tone dripping with menace.

“No, I’m not laughing at your injury, but I’m not sorry he put you in your place,” Talya shot back, standing tall and resolute. “You were being a complete jerk to me. He saw it and did something about it.” The fire of defiance ignited within her; she was tired of being a doormat for him to walk over.

Brandon glanced around the hallway, his expression darkening as he stepped closer. Talya felt a wave of unease wash over her as she realized that Trevor had positioned himself behind her, effectively blocking her escape. She crossed her arms defiantly and

met Brandon's gaze head-on. "He's not here to save you now, is he?" Brandon taunted, his voice low and threatening.

"I don't need him to rescue me," Talya asserted, her heart pounding with determination. "I can stand up for myself."

She was done being the victim of his bullying. For nearly three years, she had allowed him to push her around, but no more.

Brandon advanced, a predatory glint in his eyes. "Can you?" he challenged, grabbing her arms and attempting to spin her around, just as he had in class. But Talya was not going to let that happen. She fought back fiercely. "What is wrong with you?" she shouted, her anger boiling over. Without a second thought, she kned him as hard as she could in the groin.

He doubled over, gasping for breath, but she didn't stop there. In a swift motion, she kned him in the face, connecting solidly with his already broken nose.

A scream of pain erupted from him, and blood sprayed everywhere, painting the hallway in a vivid reminder of her defiance.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of her confrontation with Brandon, Talya felt a surge of empowerment coursing through her veins, a stark contrast to the fear that had once paralyzed her. She had reclaimed her voice, her strength, and in that moment, she realized that the darkness she had endured was not a reflection of her worth but a catalyst for her transformation. As the chaos of the lunchroom faded into the background, she understood that she was no longer the girl who needed saving; she was a force to be reckoned with. The fear that had once held her captive began to dissipate, replaced by a newfound sense of agency and courage.

With Liam's unwavering support and the bond she shared with Sage, Talya felt a flicker of hope igniting within her, illuminating the path forward. The warmth of their friendship and the promise of brighter days ahead filled her heart, reminding her that she was not alone in her journey. As she stepped out of the lunchroom, the lingering echoes of her defiance resonated within her, a testament to her resilience. Talya knew that while the night may grow softer, it was her own hope that would lead her into the light, guiding her toward a future where she could embrace her true self, unburdened by the shadows of her past.

Trevor lunged at Talya from behind, catching her off guard. A rush of adrenaline surged through her veins, igniting a fire within. She was fed up, utterly exhausted from the relentless bullying. Without a moment's hesitation, she spun around, her fist connecting squarely with Trevor's face. The satisfaction of that punch was fleeting, however, as she quickly realized he wasn't going to just brush it off.

Fury flashed in Trevor's eyes, and he retaliated with a forceful strike that sent Talya's head snapping back. Stars exploded in her vision, and she staggered, disoriented. The chaotic sounds of shouting and commotion filled her ears, but all she could focus on was the pain radiating from her cheek. Suddenly, she felt herself being yanked backward, the principal's voice booming through the chaos. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, his tone sharp and authoritative.

"Talya attacked us," Brandon chimed in, his voice dripping with false innocence. "We were just minding our own business on our way to lunch. Look what she did to me!" He turned to display his bloody nose, a pathetic attempt to garner sympathy.

The principal's gaze shifted to Talya, his expression a mix of anger and disbelief. "Is that true?" he asked, his voice rising.

"No, they..." Talya attempted to defend herself, but her words were cut short.

"Did you do that to his nose?" he interrogated, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, yes, but..." Talya's explanation was abruptly halted as the principal pointed toward his office.

"My office. Now." His command was firm, and Talya felt her heart sink. She glanced around, searching for Sage in the crowd, but her friend was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it was better this way; she didn't want Sage to get dragged into this mess.

As she walked, Talya became acutely aware of the warm trickle of blood seeping through her fingers, staining her shirt. Panic rose within her as she realized her blouse was ruined, several buttons missing. She clutched the fabric together with one hand while the other instinctively reached up to touch her cheek. A sharp wince escaped her lips as she felt the jagged cut left by Trevor's punch. In the heat of the moment, she had barely registered the pain, but now it was all-consuming.

Upon reaching the principal's office, he extended a phone toward her. "Call your parents for a ride. You're suspended for three days," he stated matter-of-factly, as if delivering a mundane announcement rather than a life-altering consequence.

Talya's heart dropped, disbelief washing over her. "But I didn't..." she started, only to be interrupted.

"Would you prefer it to be a week?" he challenged, his tone unyielding.

"No, sir," she mumbled, feeling defeated. The truth was, she had no parents to call. But she was good with numbers and had memorized Liam's phone number. With a flicker of hope, she dialed, praying he would be available to rescue her.

"Hello?" came his voice, warm and inviting, instantly bringing tears to her eyes.

"Hey, um, Mom?" Talya stumbled over her words, fighting to keep her emotions in check, hoping Liam would play along.

"Talya?" he replied, confusion evident in his tone.

"Can you come pick me up?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Talya, what's going on?" he inquired, concern lacing his words.

"I got into trouble, and the principal told me to call my parents to come get me. So, can you come?" she pleaded, desperation creeping into her voice.

"Of course, but first, tell me what's happening. Are you okay?" he pressed, the sound of movement indicating he was already on his way.

"Yeah, just please come," she urged, her voice cracking as she fought back a sob.

"Talya, what's going on? You're scaring me," he said, the urgency in his voice making her heart race.

"I, I..." The words lodged in her throat, a sob breaking free as she struggled to articulate her fear.

"I'm on my way. I'll be there soon," he reassured her, and with that, she hung up, handing the phone back to the principal. She needed to escape his office before he realized it was Liam coming to get her. The last thing she wanted was for him to deny her that comfort.

"She's on her way. I'm going to grab my backpack and meet her up front," Talya declared, trying to keep her voice steady.

"No, you're not. You don't need your backpack. That's the whole point of expulsion. You'll receive zeros in every class and assignment, so don't bother," he retorted, his hands firmly planted on his hips. "We have a strict no-fighting policy, and you just violated it. You're fortunate you're not being expelled entirely. Test me, and I can make that happen," he warned, his gaze piercing.

Talya fought back tears, swallowing her pride. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry. It won't happen again." With that, she turned and walked out, her legs feeling like lead as she exited just as the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. Mortification washed over her as she navigated through the throngs of students, clutching her blouse closed, blood trickling

down. She kept her head down, using her hair to shield her face from the curious stares.

Finally, she made it outside and sank onto the cold concrete steps, anxiously awaiting Liam's arrival. Minutes felt like hours until she finally spotted his car barreling into the parking lot. She lowered her head, unsure if her trembling legs would carry her to him.

Liam knelt in front of her, his expression shifting from concern to something more intense. He gently brushed her hair back, his silence amplifying the gravity of the moment. Talya couldn't meet his gaze; shame washed over her. "Who did this to you?" he asked, his voice low and gravelly, a stark contrast to his usual tone.

"Can you just take me home?" Talya pleaded, desperation seeping into her words.

"Talya, look at me," he insisted, his voice firm yet filled with concern. As she met his gaze, she recoiled at the anger simmering in his eyes. "I'm going to ask you one more time. Who did this to you?"

"Please," she whimpered, her voice hitching on a sob. "Just take me home. Please," she begged, feeling utterly vulnerable.

Liam's hand found the back of her head, drawing her closer. "Okay. Shh, it's alright. I'll take you home." He lifted her effortlessly, cradling her against his chest. The sudden movement startled her, and she instinctively clutched her blouse, trying to keep it together.

Yet, Liam didn't falter. He kept his gaze fixed ahead, determination etched on his face.

He opened the car door and gently placed her in the front seat. Leaning over, he secured her seatbelt, then closed her door and dashed around to the driver's side, his expression a mixture of concern and resolve.

Conclusion

As Talya settled into the car, the warmth of Liam's presence enveloped her, offering a stark contrast to the cold reality she had just faced. The adrenaline that had propelled her through the chaos began to ebb, leaving behind a heavy weight of embarrassment and fear. Yet, as she glanced at Liam, his unwavering support ignited a flicker of hope within her. In that moment, she realized she was not alone; despite the turmoil and the pain, there was someone who cared enough to stand by her side. His gentle demeanor reassured her that she could lean on him, that she could share her burdens without fear of judgment. The world outside blurred as they drove away from the school, the chaos of the day fading into the background.

With each passing moment, Talya felt the tension in her chest begin to ease, replaced by a burgeoning sense of resilience. The confrontation with Trevor had been a catalyst, forcing her to confront not only the bullying but also her own strength. As they navigated

the familiar streets, she knew that this was not the end of her story, but rather the beginning of a new chapter. With Liam beside her, she felt emboldened to reclaim her narrative, to stand up for herself in ways she had never imagined possible. The road ahead might be uncertain, but for the first time in a long time, Talya felt a sense of hope blossoming within her, ready to lead her toward healing and self-acceptance.

114

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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Talya gazed out of her window, the world outside blurred by the tears that threatened to spill over. She fought valiantly to keep them at bay, but her resolve crumbled, and a single tear escaped, trailing down her cheek and landing on her blouse. The sight of it made her heart sink deeper. Liam, sitting beside her, noticed her distress and instinctively placed his hand on her knee. It was a simple gesture, yet it radiated warmth and comfort, a small solace in her turbulent emotions.

“Talya,” he began gently, his voice soft yet firm, “if you want to go home, I can take you back. But I understand if you’re not quite ready to face your grandparents yet. How about this: I can bring you to my place for a while? You can clean up, and when you feel a bit better, we can figure out what to do next.”

Talya glanced down at her shirt, torn and stained with blood, the sight of it twisting her stomach into knots. She grimaced, the reality of her situation sinking in.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” she replied quietly, her voice barely above a whisper.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, the weight of unspoken words heavy in the air. Soon, Liam pulled into the driveway of a quaint little house, its charm almost comforting amidst the chaos of her thoughts.

He exited the vehicle and came around to her side, opening the door with a determined look. With a swift motion, he unbuckled her seatbelt and lifted her effortlessly into his arms. Talya didn’t resist; instead, she nestled her head against his chest, allowing herself to be carried.

Liam carried her inside, his grip secure and reassuring. He brought her directly to the bathroom, setting her down gently on the sink as if she were as light as a feather. He met her gaze, his expression serious yet tender. “I have a friend who’s a doctor. I think it’s important to call him and have him take a look at your face. It’s still bleeding, and I’m worried it might need stitches. Would that be alright with you?”

Talya nodded, feeling the weight of everything pressing down on her. The aftermath of the day’s events was beginning to settle in; pain radiated from her face, her body felt

heavy and sore, and a wave of nausea rolled through her. A headache was brewing, threatening to take over.

Liam quickly FaceTimed his friend. "Liam, to what do I owe the privilege of this call?" a cheerful voice responded from the other end.

"Hey Paul, I need your expertise. Can you take a look at Talya's face and tell me if you think she needs stitches?" Liam asked, his tone serious now.

"Of course," Paul replied, his demeanor shifting as he focused on the task at hand. "Let me see it."

"Hang on just a second," Liam said, and Talya watched in confusion as he placed the phone down. In one smooth motion, he pulled his shirt over his head, draping it carefully over her, ensuring not to aggravate her injury. Once he adjusted it around her, he picked up the phone again. "Okay, we're ready."

Talya felt a wave of gratitude wash over her for his thoughtfulness. The shirt provided a much-needed distraction from her torn and bloodied one.

Liam angled the phone towards her. "Hey Talya, I'm Paul, a friend of Liam's," the man introduced himself, his voice a blend of warmth and professionalism. "I want to get a good look at your face, alright?"

As Liam maneuvered the phone per Paul's instructions, Talya caught a glimpse of the man on the screen. He looked to be around Liam's age, with a friendly smile that put her somewhat at ease.

"That's a nasty cut, Talya," Paul remarked, his tone shifting to one of concern. "What happened?"

"I got punched," Talya replied flatly, the words leaving her lips devoid of emotion.

An uncomfortable silence enveloped the room as both men processed her words. Liam's gaze remained fixed on her, his concern palpable. She couldn't tell if he was waiting for her to elaborate or simply absorbing the gravity of her situation.

"I don't think it will need stitches," Paul finally said, breaking the silence. "Liam, if you dress it properly and keep it clean, it should heal fine. Do you have all the supplies you need for that?"

"Yeah," Liam responded, relief evident in his tone. "Thanks, Paul. I really appreciate it."

"Anytime," Paul replied easily. "Just let me know if you need anything else. Be gentle with her," he added, a note of caution in his voice.

Liam nodded, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. "I'm trying," he admitted, a touch of humor creeping into his words. "It's a lot harder than I thought it would be. I guess I

should have been easier on Garrett,” he said, eliciting a laugh from Paul before they both signed off.

Talya felt a bit lost in the conversation, as if she had missed some crucial details. “Give me just a second,” Liam said, disappearing from the room for a moment. He returned shortly, wearing a fresh shirt and carrying a first aid kit. Talya felt a wave of relief at the sight of the shirt; she didn’t need any more distractions right now.

Liam opened the kit and began pulling out supplies. “Alright, this may hurt a little,” he warned.

Talya groaned inwardly. Whenever someone said that, it usually meant it would hurt a lot. As he began to clean her cheek, she couldn’t suppress a sharp hiss of pain. “Wow! You weren’t kidding!”

“I’m sorry,” Liam said, his voice laced with regret. “I have to get it clean.” He continued to work diligently, applying ointment and a bandage with careful precision. “All right. That’s the best we can do for now. Hopefully, it will heal naturally. I’ll see if I have anything smaller for you to wear. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Talya closed her eyes, waiting for him to return. The pain in her face was relentless, and all she wanted was to take some painkillers and lie down. A minute later, Liam reappeared, holding a shirt in one hand and a water bottle in the other. He opened a pack of pain relievers and handed them to her, along with the water. “Here you go,” he said softly.

“Thank you,” she replied, grateful for his thoughtfulness.

“I think this shirt might fit a little better. It’s the smallest thing I own; hopefully, it will work for you. After you change, you can lie down and let those pain relievers kick in,” Liam suggested, leaving the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

Talya took her time removing Liam’s shirt and peeling off her torn one. She slipped the new shirt over her head, and though it was still a bit large, it was a welcome change. She crumpled her ruined shirt into a ball and tossed it into the trash can, feeling a sense of finality. Picking up Liam’s other shirt, she stepped out of the bathroom in search of him.

He met her in the hallway, and she offered him back his shirt. “Here,” she said, handing it over.

“Do you want to lie down for a little bit and let your medicine start to work, or do you want me to take you home now?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

“I think I’ll lie down for a little while, if that’s okay. My head and face are killing me,” she admitted, the pain evident in her voice. His expression tightened, but he remained silent, guiding her to the couch. He rearranged the pillows, ensuring she was

comfortable before he disappeared for a moment. When he returned, he draped a warm blanket over her. “Just rest, Talya,” he said soothingly, his voice a balm to her frayed nerves.

“Please just wake me up at 3:00, so I don’t miss work,” she requested, knowing she needed to keep her responsibilities in mind. He didn’t respond verbally, but she sensed he had heard her.

As she settled into the pillows, she attempted to find a comfortable position. Her head throbbed, and her face felt like it was on fire. She focused on calming her thoughts, hoping to drift off to sleep so the medicine could take effect. Her mind wandered to the strange dream she had experienced earlier that morning, a fleeting memory that brought a sense of peace. Slowly, she surrendered to the heaviness of her eyelids and drifted off into a much-needed slumber.

Conclusion

In the quiet sanctuary of Liam’s home, Talya began to feel the weight of her turmoil lift, if only slightly. The warmth of his care enveloped her like a protective cocoon, easing the sharp edges of her pain and fear. As she nestled into the couch, the chaos of the day faded into a distant echo, replaced by a flicker of hope that perhaps she wasn’t as alone as she had assumed. Liam’s gentle presence acted as a balm, reminding her that even in the darkest moments, there are those willing to stand by our side, offering comfort and understanding. The simple act of being cared for ignited a spark within her, a quiet promise that healing—both physical and emotional—was within reach.

As sleep began to claim her, Talya felt a profound sense of gratitude for Liam’s unwavering support. The moments of vulnerability they shared transformed into a fragile yet beautiful connection, one that hinted at the possibility of brighter days ahead. In the depths of her slumber, she found solace in the knowledge that she was not defined by her scars but rather by the strength it took to face them. With each breath, she embraced the notion that hope, like the dawn, would return to guide her through the night, illuminating the path toward recovery and renewal.

115

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Talya stirred awake after what felt like an eternity, her senses clouded with grogginess and a dull ache radiating through her body. A quick glance at the clock on the wall revealed the unsettling truth: it was well past 3:00 PM. “No,” she murmured, her heart racing in a panic. She propelled herself out of bed, taking a few unsteady steps before a wave of dizziness washed over her, threatening to pull her back into the abyss of unconsciousness.

“Whoa,” came Liam’s voice, a grounding presence amidst her disorientation. He reached out, grasping her arms with a firm grip, steadying her as the world around her swayed like a ship caught in a storm.

“I’m supposed to be at work! Why didn’t you wake me?” Talya’s voice was laced with a mix of irritation and confusion, her frustration bubbling to the surface.

“Talya, you’re in no condition to go to work,” Liam replied calmly, his eyes filled with concern. “I already spoke to your boss. He understands you’ve been injured and won’t be making it in today. He even suggested you take a few days off to recuperate. Besides,” he added with a hint of humor, “you really don’t want to show up at work with a bandage on your face, do you?”

Talya sighed, the crankiness within her simmering. “Well, no, but I should have been the one to decide,” she retorted, crossing her arms defensively.

“Are you hungry?” Liam shifted the topic with a gentle smile, as if sensing her mood. “I went out and picked up some soup from a nearby restaurant. I thought it would be easy for you to eat with your injury,” he said, his tone lightening the atmosphere.

“What time is it?” Talya asked, her mind still foggy as she tried to grasp the situation.

“It’s a little after 4:00,” Liam answered, placing a comforting hand on her back as he guided her to a small table. Talya sank into the chair, her body still protesting the movement. Liam rummaged through a brown paper bag, pulling out a container with a lid. “It’s broccoli and cheddar soup. I figured you’d like that,” he said, setting it down along with a spoon.

He then produced a small baguette, offering it to her. “You can have this; I won’t eat it,” Talya said absentmindedly, her focus already shifting to the soup. “Thanks for the soup. I love broccoli and cheese soup.”

“Do you not like bread?” Liam asked, pulling out another container of soup from the bag.

“Oh, I love bread. I just can’t have it,” Talya replied, blowing gently on her spoon before taking a cautious bite of the soup, careful not to open her mouth too wide to avoid pain in her cheek.

Liam settled into the chair across from her, his brows furrowing in curiosity. “Are you allergic?”

Talya blinked at him, caught off guard. “To the soup?” she asked, her voice tinged with confusion.

“No, the bread,” he clarified, gesturing to the baguette still in his hand.

“Oh, no, I just can’t eat carbs,” she explained, a hint of embarrassment creeping into her voice.

“Why can’t you eat carbs?” Liam pressed, genuinely curious.

Talya met his gaze, a mixture of frustration and resignation flooding her. “Because look at me,” she said, gesturing vaguely to herself.

Liam frowned, clearly not grasping her implication. “I don’t understand.”

Talya rolled her eyes, exasperated. “Look at me. Do I look like someone who should be eating carbs?”

His frown deepened. “I’m not following you at all.”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” she replied, her tone sharp.

“Apparently, yes,” he said, a slight smirk playing on his lips.

“I’m fat, Liam,” Talya stated bluntly, the words hanging heavy in the air.

Liam stared at her, his expression shifting from surprise to disbelief. Then, unexpectedly, he burst into laughter. Talya set her spoon down, crossing her arms in defiance. But as Liam’s laughter faded, his expression turned serious. “You’re serious,” he said, disbelief lacing his voice. “You think you’re fat?”

“Well, I’m definitely not thin,” Talya shot back, her tone defensive.

“Talya, you’re not fat,” Liam insisted, his voice firm and unwavering.

“Right, I’m just curvy,” she replied sarcastically, using air quotes around “curvy” to emphasize her point.

A heavy silence settled between them. Talya leaned back in her chair, suddenly feeling less hungry. “I think I’m just going to go,” she said, pushing herself away from the table.

“Talya,” Liam’s voice called after her, a note of urgency creeping in.

“Thanks so much for taking care of me and for picking me up. I really appreciate it,” she said, standing up and turning away, eager to escape the conversation.

“Talya,” he said again, but she ignored him, determined to leave. Yet, his voice, now authoritative, stopped her in her tracks.

“Talya!” he called, and she turned back to face him, her heart racing. “Who told you you were fat?” he asked, his voice low and intense.

“Liam, please stop. No one told me; I can look in a mirror,” she replied, exasperation spilling over.

“Who told you?” he pressed, his tone unwavering.

Talya sank back into her chair, feeling the weight of his question. “Brandon, okay? He always made me watch what I eat. He reminded me that I needed to watch my figure, especially since I was no longer a cheerleader. He reminded me all the time that I was fat. Okay? Do you feel better now?” she said, angrily wiping a tear from her eye.

“Is that why you never eat anything?” Liam’s voice was filled with fury as he shoved his chair back and stormed over to the sink, gripping it tightly as if trying to contain his anger. Talya watched, unsure of how to respond to the storm brewing within him. “Liam?” she finally ventured, her voice trembling.

He took a deep breath, bending over the sink for a moment before turning to face her, his eyes ablaze with emotion. “You have no idea how much I want to kill him,” he said in a low, guttural tone. Talya’s eyes widened in shock. “Brandon?” she asked, disbelief coloring her voice.

He nodded, and Talya found herself at a loss for words, unsure how to process his anger. Liam took a few steps toward her, his expression softening slightly. “Talya, you listen to me. You are not fat. Nobody in the world would call you fat. Do you have curves? Yes, and most men find that incredibly attractive. You need to change your thinking and understand that you are not fat. Brandon is no longer a part of your life. You eat what you want to eat and eat until you’re full. Do you understand?” he asked, his tone firm yet encouraging.

Talya felt a flicker of hope ignite within her, and she nodded slowly, wanting to calm him down. “Starting now,” he added, his eyes locked onto hers with unwavering intensity.

She stared at him for a moment, feeling the weight of his words. Slowly, she sat back down in her chair, picked up her spoon, and took another cautious bite of the soup. She had intended to appease him, but as the rich flavors danced on her tongue, she was reminded of just how delicious it was. Her gaze drifted to the bread on the table, and she hesitated.

“Eat the bread,” Liam urged, his voice gruff yet gentle. Not wanting to provoke him further, Talya picked up the baguette, tearing off a piece and dipping it into the soup.

She chewed slowly, savoring the taste. “I haven’t had bread in so long,” she confessed, a hint of joy creeping into her voice. She took another piece, dipping it again. “Oh, my word, that’s so good.” She looked up to find Liam watching her intently, a mixture of concern and admiration in his eyes. “What?” she asked, a hint of self-consciousness creeping in.

He leaned forward, brushing the corner of her lip with his thumb, his touch sending a shiver down her spine. "You had a little bit of soup here," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh," Talya breathed, feeling a warmth spread through her. "Thank you." She focused on her soup, the comforting warmth enveloping her. When she felt full, she leaned back, a satisfied smile on her face. "That was so good. Thank you."

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

"What kind did you get?" she asked, curiosity piqued.

"Beef stew," he answered, a hint of pride in his voice.

Talya smiled. "Figures."

Liam raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "How so?"

"You're a meat and potatoes kind of guy, aren't you?" she teased, her smile returning.

"Guilty as charged," he admitted, and Talya noticed the tension in his shoulders easing.

But as she settled back into her chair, a shadow of worry crossed her face. "What am I going to do, Liam?" she asked softly, vulnerability creeping into her voice. "I'm expelled for three days. I'm going to fail everything for the rest of the week. How do I explain this to my grandparents? They're going to be so disappointed in me. What if it throws off my GPA?"

The weight of her concerns hung in the air, but for the first time that day, she felt a glimmer of hope. Amidst the chaos of her thoughts, she realized that maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't have to face it all alone.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of their emotionally charged exchange, Talya began to recognize the power of vulnerability and the importance of support. As she savored the warmth of the soup and the comfort of Liam's presence, the weight of her insecurities felt just a little lighter. The harsh words of her past echoed in her mind, but they no longer held the same power over her. Liam's unwavering belief in her worth began to seep into her consciousness, igniting a flicker of hope that had long been buried beneath layers of self-doubt. She realized that while the road ahead might be fraught with challenges, she no longer had to navigate it alone.

Liam's steadfast encouragement acted as a balm for her wounded spirit, allowing her to envision a future where she could embrace herself without fear or shame. As they shared light-hearted banter over their contrasting soup choices, Talya felt the stirrings of resilience within her. The prospect of facing her academic struggles seemed daunting,

yet the thought of leaning on Liam and finding strength in their connection offered a glimmer of reassurance. In that moment, surrounded by warmth and understanding, Talya understood that hope, much like the night that softens into dawn, could return to guide her through even the darkest of times.

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

****Chapter 116****

“What happened?” Liam inquired, his voice steady yet laced with an undercurrent of tension.

Talya met his gaze, her expression a mixture of uncertainty and hesitation. For a heartbeat, silence enveloped them, thick and heavy, until Liam broke it, his patience wearing thin. “Just spill it. I’m already angrier than you can possibly imagine, so whatever it is, just get it out.” He leaned back, crossing his arms defiantly across his chest, as if bracing himself for the storm.

With a resigned sigh, Talya realized that Liam wasn’t going to let this go easily. “I was just on my way to lunch when Brandon intercepted me. I might have smiled a little when I noticed his nose,” she confessed, a hint of mischief creeping into her tone. “As you can guess, that didn’t sit well with him. He had some choice words for me, and I... well, I had some for him too. I ended up kicking him in the groin and then kneed him right in the nose. Of course, that set off the fountain of blood again, and he was howling like a banshee. Before I knew it, Trevor was behind me, grabbing me, so I turned and punched him. That didn’t make him very happy, and he gave me this,” she said, gesturing to her bruised face.

Liam remained eerily still, his eyes locked onto hers, assessing every nuance of her expression. “So, Trevor is the one who did that to you?” he asked, his tone deceptively calm. Talya scrutinized him, sensing an unsettling intensity in his demeanor—he was too calm, too collected. It sent a shiver down her spine. She nodded slowly. “What did Brandon say to you?”

“Nothing,” Talya replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Not a sufficient answer,” Liam countered, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Seriously, he didn’t say much at all. I did most of the talking,” Talya insisted, hoping to deflect his probing.

“Well, what did you say?” Liam pressed, his determination unwavering.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied, trying to dismiss the conversation.

"Yes, it does. I need to know exactly what happened," Liam said, his voice firm, leaving no room for argument.

"Why?" Talya shot back, her frustration bubbling to the surface.

"Because I just do. Now, tell me exactly what you both said," he demanded, his tone leaving no room for defiance.

"Fine," Talya relented, exasperation spilling from her lips. "He asked if I thought it was funny that you broke his nose. I told him no, but I thought he deserved it, and I was glad someone finally put him in his place for once. Then he had the nerve to say you weren't around to protect me this time, and... well, you know the rest."

Liam abruptly pushed his chair back and stood, the sound echoing in the tense silence. Talya's eyes widened in surprise; there was something different about him. His eyes seemed to shine with a fierce light. "There's one more thing I need to know, Talya," he said, his voice unexpectedly light yet heavy with implication. "Why did you freeze when I put you in that hold during gym class?"

A wave of dread washed over Talya, tightening her chest. "I don't want to talk about that," she replied, her voice trembling slightly.

Liam stepped closer, his presence commanding. "There will only ever be truth between us, Talya. And I need the truth," he stated, his seriousness cutting through the air like a knife.

"I don't want to talk about it," she insisted, standing up and folding her arms defensively. "It's none of your business," she snapped, the words escaping her before she could rein them in.

"Your business is my business," Liam retorted, towering over her, his intensity palpable.

Talya glared back at him, her frustration boiling over. "Trevor restrained me once for Brandon. Okay?"

"What did Brandon do to you?" Liam's voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper, laden with concern.

"Nothing. I kned him hard and warned him that if he ever tried anything like that again, I'd tell his dad. He's terrified of his father," Talya explained, her voice softening as she recalled the memory. "Nothing happened, but the fear of what could have happened terrified me," she admitted, her vulnerability surfacing. "I guess when you restrained me, it brought all that back, and I panicked."

"I'm sorry that I did that," Liam said, his voice low and sincere. Then, without another word, he turned and walked away, leaving Talya seated in stunned silence, her mind racing with uncertainty about what would unfold next.

Moments later, he returned, purpose etched into his features. He walked over to the counter, grabbing his keys and phone. "Lock the door behind me. I'll be gone for a few hours. When I get back, I'll take you to your grandparents," he instructed, his tone leaving no room for debate.

"Wait, Liam, stop," Talya said, rising quickly and moving towards him, panic threading through her voice. "What are you going to do?"

"My job," he replied tersely, but Talya paused, taking in his appearance for the first time. He was clad in black biker boots, dark jeans, a fitted black t-shirt, and a leather jacket that screamed danger.

He had transformed from the boy-next-door into someone formidable and intimidating.

"I know what you're planning," Talya said quietly, her heart racing.

Liam shook his head, a slight smirk playing on his lips. "No, I don't think you do."

"Please don't do this," Talya pleaded, her voice trembling with fear and desperation.

"I have to," he replied resolutely, turning away from her.

"Liam," she called out one last time, her voice thick with emotion.

He turned to face her, stepping closer, his gaze fierce. "What Brandon doesn't understand is that I will always be here to protect you," he said in a dangerously low tone. "It's time he learned that." Without another word, he strode out the front door, leaving Talya staring after him, her heart heavy with dread.

After several agonizing minutes, she forced herself to rise and lock the door, her legs shaky beneath her. She returned to the couch, exhaustion settling over her like a heavy blanket. This situation was spiraling out of control, and she had no clue what awaited her that night, but deep down, she sensed it wouldn't end well.

After a brief pause, Talya resolved to take action. Time wouldn't pass if she merely sat and stared at the clock. She stood and made her way into the kitchen, tidying up after their dinner, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. Once finished, she grabbed her phone and noticed five messages and two missed calls from Sage.

Without hesitation, she dialed her number, her heart racing. Sage picked up on the first ring. "I am so sorry," Talya blurted out before Sage could even greet her. "I know I'm a horrible friend."

"Oh, you are absolutely right about that! I've been worried sick about you. I heard what happened. I called and called, went to your work, even checked your grandparents' house," Sage vented, her voice laced with concern.

"You didn't tell them what happened, did you?" Talya asked quickly, anxiety creeping in.

"I made up some ridiculous excuse about needing a homework assignment from your room. What on earth, Talya? What happened? Where are you? Are you okay?" Sage fired off her questions, her worry palpable.

"Okay, okay," Talya said, trying to calm her friend. "First off, I'm at Liam's house."

There was a moment of silence before Sage pressed, "Tell me everything."

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the confrontation with Liam, Talya found herself engulfed in a whirlwind of emotions, each one more complex than the last. The weight of her vulnerability had been laid bare, and the fear that had gripped her during their exchange lingered like a shadow. Yet, amid the chaos, there was a flicker of something new—a burgeoning sense of hope ignited by Liam's fierce promise to protect her. As she tidied the remnants of their dinner, her heart raced not just with anxiety but with the realization that she was not alone in this fight. The bond they shared, forged in the fires of conflict and vulnerability, was stronger than she had ever anticipated.

As Talya dialed Sage's number, seeking solace in her friend's familiar voice, she felt a renewed sense of purpose. The night ahead loomed uncertain and fraught with danger, but she was no longer the scared girl frozen in fear; she was a warrior ready to reclaim her narrative. With each word exchanged with Sage, she began to weave the threads of her story, stitching together the fragments of her strength and resilience. The night may have been dark, but it was also softening, allowing hope to seep through the cracks. Talya understood now that while the path ahead was fraught with challenges, she had the power to face them, emboldened by the love and loyalty of those who stood beside her.

117

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Talya recounted every detail of the day's events to Sage, her voice tinged with worry. "I'm honestly convinced that Liam is going to—"

"—kill them?" Sage interjected, her tone steady and reassuring.

Talya shook her head vehemently, her brow furrowed in concern. "No, you didn't see how he was dressed. It was like he was ready for a fight!"

Sage held her ground, a hint of amusement in her eyes. "I didn't say he wouldn't break into their homes and give them a taste of their own medicine, but I'm certain he won't go that far."

"That's not exactly comforting, Sage," Talya retorted, her voice laced with anxiety.

“Sorry,” Sage replied, though her lack of remorse was evident in her tone. “But honestly, I can’t believe you got expelled for three days. These next few days are going to feel like an eternity.”

Talya let out a sarcastic laugh. “Oh, yeah, because ruining your life is my favorite pastime.”

“You should feel a little guilty,” Sage teased, a playful smile creeping onto her face.

Talya sighed deeply, her expression turning serious again. “But really, you need to be cautious over the next few days. I have no idea what’s going to unfold tonight, but steer clear of those three at school. I wouldn’t put it past them to come after you to get back at me. Just... keep your guard up, okay?”

“I promise I will,” Sage assured her, a note of determination in her voice. “By the way, how’s your face doing?”

“It’s definitely sore tonight, but thankfully, no stitches were needed. That’s a small victory,” Talya replied, trying to remain optimistic. “So, with any luck, it should heal in a few days.”

“Thank goodness you didn’t have to work tonight. That would have been a nightmare,” Sage remarked, relief evident in her tone. “I’m really glad Liam stepped in and got you out of it.”

“Yeah, at first I was annoyed, but now I can’t imagine having to work all night,” Talya admitted, a hint of gratitude softening her voice.

“What’s on your agenda for the next three days?” Sage inquired, her curiosity piqued.

“Well, if my face heals enough that I don’t look like I just crawled out of a horror movie, I’ll keep my hours at work,” Talya said, a hint of a smile returning.

“That sounds like a plan,” Sage said, nodding in agreement. “And during the day, you can help out Grandpa and Grandma around the house. You never really get the chance to do that.”

“Exactly,” Talya agreed. “But hey, I don’t want to keep you from your homework. Thanks for checking in on me. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Absolutely! Just keep me updated, okay? Let me know what goes down tonight,” Sage urged, her eyes filled with concern.

“I will. Fingers crossed it doesn’t involve me bailing Liam out of jail,” Talya said, her voice heavy with dread.

Sage laughed softly. “I don’t think you can bail someone out if they’re facing murder charges.”

“Not exactly what I needed to hear,” Talya muttered, rolling her eyes.

Sage chuckled lightly. “Okay, I’ll let you go now. Just text me, all right?”

“I will,” Talya replied, her voice a mix of weariness and determination. “Bye.” She hung up the phone, feeling a wave of uncertainty wash over her. “Now what?” she pondered aloud, rising from her seat and meandering into Liam’s kitchen. She recalled him mentioning that he rarely enjoyed home-cooked meals; perhaps she could whip up something as a token of gratitude for his help earlier. However, after rummaging through the cabinets and refrigerator, she realized that her culinary aspirations would have to wait. It seemed he truly lived off takeout.

As the hours dragged on, Talya found herself spiraling into a state of restlessness. The television screen flickered in front of her, but her anxiety rendered her unable to focus on anything. With no schoolwork to occupy her mind and a lack of interest in her phone games, she muttered to herself, “I’m officially losing my mind.” Her gaze darted to the clock on the stove for what felt like the hundredth time that hour. It was well past ten.

She considered texting Liam to check on his whereabouts, but the thought of potentially alerting him if he was indeed hiding out at Brandon’s made her hesitate. With a resigned sigh, she collapsed back onto the couch, her agitation escalating with each passing moment. The throbbing pain in her face only added to her discomfort. Finally, she decided to lay down and rest, propping up a few cushions she had previously used and wrapping herself in a cozy blanket. She doubted she would fall asleep so soon after her long nap, but to her surprise, slumber overtook her.

In her dream, Talya found herself once again in that enchanting field. This time, she kicked off her shoes and socks, reveling in the sensation of the cool water as she waded into the clear creek. The chill was refreshing, invigorating even, and she couldn’t help but laugh as she splashed about, feeling utterly carefree in this serene landscape. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the wolf had returned. Excitedly, she climbed out of the water, snatched her footwear, and made her way to the tree where the wolf rested. Settling at its base, she watched him intently, curious if he would speak this time.

Time slipped by, and impatience began to gnaw at her. She fidgeted with the blades of grass around her, shifting her feet restlessly as she kept her gaze fixed on the wolf, awaiting his words. Yet, he remained motionless, his piercing eyes locked on her. The stillness felt reminiscent of her early school days, when her first-grade teacher would scrutinize her every move.

“Okay, I can’t stay silent any longer. Are you going to talk?” she finally broke the silence, her voice echoing in the still air. The wolf remained still, his gaze unwavering. Frustrated, Talya slipped her socks and shoes back on. “Well, it was nice seeing you again,” she said, rising to her feet. She brushed the dirt off her clothes and was just about to step away when the wolf finally spoke.

"It takes skill to be quiet, to sit still, to wait," he said, his deep voice resonating in the tranquil space.

"Oh, thank goodness you finally spoke! I was starting to think I had imagined all of this," Talya exclaimed, relief flooding her.

"Sometimes it takes a lifetime to acquire those skills, especially for humans," the wolf replied, his tone contemplative.

Talya frowned, pondering his words for a moment. "I suppose wolves are inherently good at being quiet and still," she mused aloud.

"It is in the stillness that you find strength," the wolf said, his gaze steady and wise.

Conclusion

As Talya awoke from her dream, the weight of the wolf's words lingered in her mind, echoing with a newfound clarity. The stillness she had experienced in her dream mirrored the tumult of her waking life, where anxiety and uncertainty threatened to overwhelm her. Yet, in that serene moment by the creek, she had discovered a semblance of peace, a reminder that strength often lies in patience and reflection. The challenges she faced with Liam and the looming threat of his reckless choices felt less daunting now, as she realized that navigating these turbulent waters required not only courage but also the ability to pause and assess her surroundings. With the dawn breaking outside, Talya felt a flicker of hope ignite within her, a promise that even amidst chaos, there was space for resilience.

Determined to embrace this newfound perspective, Talya rose from the couch, ready to confront whatever awaited her. The earlier tension in her chest began to dissipate, replaced by a sense of purpose. She would not merely react to the chaos around her; instead, she would take charge of her narrative, supporting Liam while also safeguarding herself. The wolf's wisdom reminded her that stillness and reflection could be powerful tools, guiding her through the storm. As she prepared to face the day, Talya understood that hope, like the softening night, could illuminate even the darkest paths, leading her toward a future where she could stand strong against adversity and remain true to herself.

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

****Chapter 118****

"Riiight," Talya responded, her voice elongated as she tried to process the wolf's cryptic words. The truth was, she felt a tangle of confusion knotting in her stomach, unsure how to interpret that statement.

"You will need strength in the days to come," the wolf had said, his tone serious and foreboding. Then, without another word, he turned and walked away, leaving Talya behind, staring at his retreating figure, her mind swirling with questions.

Talya sat up abruptly, her breath coming in heavy gasps as reality began to settle back in. It took her a moment to shake off the remnants of the dream that had felt so vivid. Blinking away the haze, she glanced at the clock on the wall—11:30 PM. A sense of urgency washed over her; she was acutely aware that Liam could be out for the entire night, and she needed to get home, find her bed, and let the weight of the day slip away into sleep.

With a quick motion, she gathered her phone and her purse, the familiar weight of them grounding her. She unlocked the front door and stepped out onto the porch, the cool night air hitting her face like a splash of cold water. Closing the door behind her, she pulled up the map app on her phone, noting that a bus stop was just two blocks away. She took a deep breath, steeling herself, and made her way down the steps and onto the driveway.

"Where are you going?" Talya jumped, her heart racing as she spun around to see Liam emerging from the shadows beside the house. The night was dark, but the moon cast a soft glow, illuminating his bare chest. A frown creased her brow as she took in his black sweatpants and bare feet. "Why are you out here?" she asked, her voice tinged with disbelief. "Why are you sneaking around in the dark without clothes on?"

Liam looked down, his expression shifting to one of mild annoyance. "I have pants on," he shot back defensively, crossing his arms.

"Yeah, well, that's all you have on," Talya replied, her arms folding across her chest in a gesture of irritation.

Liam shrugged, dismissing her comment as he stepped closer. "Come on, let me just grab a shirt, and I'll take you home." He gestured toward the house, his tone softening. Talya felt too weary to protest. As he walked past her, he disappeared into the house for a brief moment.

When he returned, he was clad in a simple t-shirt that seemed to fit him well. "How is your face feeling?" he asked, his voice laced with genuine concern.

Talya sighed, stifling a yawn that threatened to escape. "It's okay," she mumbled, though the truth was far from it.

"Come on, let's get you home," he said gently, placing a reassuring hand on her lower back as he guided her toward the car. The drive was enveloped in a heavy silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Is Brandon still alive?" Talya finally broke the silence, her voice barely above a whisper.

Liam's head snapped toward her, his expression sharp. "Does it matter?" he asked, his tone gruff and defensive.

"Of course, it matters," Talya replied, a hint of frustration creeping into her voice.

"Why?" he pressed, his brows furrowing in confusion.

Talya felt exasperation rise within her. "Because I don't want to have to come bail your backside out of prison!" The words slipped out before she could rein them in, but there was a truth to her frustration.

"You sure that's the only reason?" he challenged, his voice still gruff, yet there was a hint of something softer lurking beneath.

"What are you getting at, Liam?" she shot back, impatience bubbling over. She was drained, both physically and emotionally, and the pain in her face was a constant reminder of the day's events.

The car was quiet for a moment, the tension palpable, before Liam asked, "Do you still have feelings for him?"

Talya's heart sank at the question. "Seriously?" she replied, disbelief coloring her tone. "Oh yes, I still have feelings for the guy who dumped me without a word, moved on to another girl, and now harasses and beats me. Yeah, I still have feelings for him. So please, be careful with him," she added, her sarcasm sharp.

Liam fell silent, and Talya felt the weight of unspoken words hang in the air between them. When he finally pulled into her driveway, he stepped out of the car and opened her door, but neither spoke as they walked up to the front door. Talya unlocked it and paused to turn to him. "Thank you for coming to get me today," she said quietly, her voice softening.

Liam looked down at her, his expression unreadable. "You're welcome. Get some sleep," he replied, his tone gentle yet firm. With that, he turned and walked back to his car. Talya watched him for a moment, a swirl of emotions churning within her before she stepped inside, closing and locking the door behind her.

The next morning, Talya opened her eyes with a groan, the alarm blaring insistently. She rolled over to silence it, her body protesting with aches, particularly in her face. Memories of the previous day flooded back, and she stifled another groan that threatened to escape her lips.

Despite the exhaustion weighing her down, she had set her alarm deliberately, wanting to avoid worrying her grandparents if she didn't wake up for school. They were blissfully unaware of the chaos that had unfolded, and she intended to keep it that way. A plan began to form in her mind for how to explain her absence from school over the next

three days and the cut on her face. But that was a problem for another time. Right now, all she craved was coffee. A lot of it.

Dragging herself to the kitchen, she still felt the remnants of sleep clinging to her. As she stepped into the room, she froze in the doorway, her breath catching in her throat. There sat Liam, casually conversing with her grandparents at the table, and the sight sent a jolt of surprise through her.

He looked up and smiled at her, a warm, easy smile that made her heart skip a beat. "What are you doing here?" she blurted out, her voice sharper than she intended. Her mind was still foggy, and she couldn't help but wonder just how much he had divulged to her grandparents. A quick glance at their faces revealed nothing.

"Talya, don't be rude," her grandmother gently admonished, her tone light but firm.

Liam met her gaze and winked, a playful glint in his eye. Talya rolled her own eyes, ignoring the flutter in her stomach as she made her way to the coffee pot. She poured herself a generous mug, adding a splash of French vanilla creamer—one of the few indulgences she allowed herself. Taking a sip, she sighed in contentment; this was exactly what she needed to start the day.

"Our Talya doesn't function well in the morning without coffee," she heard her grandmother say behind her, a teasing lilt in her voice. "But you probably already knew that, didn't you?"

Talya frowned, refusing to turn around. "Not yet, but I'm still learning everything there is to learn about Tally Bear," Liam chimed in, the nickname making her nearly choke on her coffee.

She coughed, trying to regain her composure, and when she finally managed to breathe normally again, she turned to find him grinning at her, clearly amused.

"Honey, maybe you should go put some clothes on, and then we could talk," her grandmother suggested quietly, her tone almost motherly.

It was only then that Talya became acutely aware of her appearance. A quick glance down confirmed her worst fears; she had literally rolled out of bed in short shorts and a tank top. The only saving grace was a sweatshirt she had thrown over her tank, but it hung open, leaving her feeling exposed. Mortification washed over her as she caught Liam's gaze, and he was clearly trying to suppress a laugh.

"Yeah, I'm gonna go change," Talya said, her cheeks burning as she turned and practically bolted from the room. She could hear Liam's warm, rich laughter following her, and she shook her head in exasperation as she hurried to her room, desperate to escape the embarrassment.

Conclusion

In the quiet aftermath of the night's turmoil, Talya found herself navigating the delicate balance between vulnerability and resilience. The cryptic warning from the wolf lingered in her mind, a reminder that strength would be paramount in the days ahead. As she faced the remnants of her past with Liam by her side, the weight of her emotions began to shift. The tension between them, once fraught with uncertainty, now held the promise of understanding and perhaps something deeper. Talya's gratitude for Liam's presence, juxtaposed with her lingering fears about Brandon, illuminated the complexity of her heart. It was a reminder that healing is rarely linear, and while the scars of yesterday still ached, the possibility of hope flickered like a candle in the dark.

As morning broke, Talya's encounter with Liam and her grandparents marked a new chapter in her journey. The warmth of laughter and the mundane rhythm of familial life offered a stark contrast to the chaos she had endured. In the light of day, as she fumbled through her embarrassment, a sense of normalcy began to weave itself back into her life. The playful banter with Liam hinted at a burgeoning connection that could transcend the pain of her past. With each sip of coffee and each teasing exchange, Talya felt the tendrils of hope wrapping around her heart, whispering that perhaps the night, with all its darkness, had indeed grown softer, allowing her to see the light of new beginnings.

119

"Talya," Liam began, but she cut him off, her heart racing as she grappled with her emotions.

Conclusion

In the tumultuous aftermath of their confrontation, Talya stood at a crossroads, her heart heavy yet oddly buoyed by Liam's presence. The tension in the room shifted as she realized that beneath the annoyance and frustration lay a burgeoning connection, one that offered her solace in the chaos of her life. The emotional weight of her struggles began to feel a little lighter, as if the very act of sharing her burden with Liam had forged an unspoken bond between them. His unwavering support, despite the messiness of it all, sparked a flicker of hope within her—a reminder that she wasn't alone in her fight against the shadows that loomed over her.

As the day unfolded, Talya felt a tentative resolve take root. With each moment spent with Liam, she found herself grappling not only with her fears but also with the realization that vulnerability could lead to strength. The scar she had been so desperate to hide became a symbol of her resilience, and with Liam's encouragement, she began to embrace it as part of her story. Their playful banter, laced with genuine concern, illuminated a path forward, one where she could navigate her challenges without the burden of secrecy. In the delicate balance of their newfound relationship, Talya

discovered that hope, once dimmed by fear, could indeed return to guide her through the night.

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

****Chapter 120****

Talya exhaled sharply, shaking her head in defiance. “No, Liam. It’s time for you to go. I really need to focus and get to work.”

Liam, ever the helpful friend, raised an eyebrow. “What exactly do you have to do? You’re not heading off to school today, are you?”

Talya couldn’t help but roll her eyes, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “Thanks for the reminder, Liam. But no, I’m planning to dedicate these three days to some projects for my grandparents. You know, the ones I never get around to because life is just too hectic.”

“I can lend a hand,” Liam offered, his enthusiasm evident.

But Talya was quick to shake her head again, her resolve firm. “No, thank you. You really should go and do whatever it is that keeps you busy.” She tilted her head, a spark of curiosity igniting within her. “Actually, what do you do?”

“I work at a developing firm,” he replied, his voice steady.

Talya’s eyes widened in surprise; she hadn’t seen that coming. “Really? I can’t quite picture you stuck behind a desk in a suit and tie all day long.”

“I pull off a suit quite well,” he replied with a smirk, his confidence shining through. Talya couldn’t help but imagine him in a tailored suit, but she kept that thought to herself.

“Honestly, Talya, I’ve noticed a few things around the house—mostly outside—that could use some attention,” he continued earnestly. “Let me help you.”

For a brief moment, Talya found herself battling internal conflict. Her pride urged her to refuse, but was that truly fair to her grandparents? They could definitely use all the assistance they could get. With a reluctant sigh, she relented, “Fine.”

A grin spread across Liam’s face, lighting up his features. “Great! I’ll just grab some supplies from my car. I’ll be back in a jiffy.” Talya trailed behind him, her curiosity piqued about what he had in store. When he popped open the trunk, her jaw dropped in astonishment.

“What is all this?” she exclaimed, her eyes wide.

"I made a quick stop at the store this morning before coming over," he replied casually, already lifting supplies and making his way toward the deck. Talya joined in, grabbing two cans of paint and hauling them onto the porch. Once they had everything arranged, Talya turned to Liam, eager to know their game plan.

"So, what's the strategy?" she asked, her excitement bubbling beneath the surface.

"I figured we could start out front and gradually work our way inside. The front porch, steps, and railing all need re-staining. I'll also replace the boards on the stairs to make them sturdy and safe. The front door could use a fresh coat of paint, along with a new handle and deadbolt. I even bought mulch for the flower beds and some new plants. Oh, and the shutters need a little love too. That should be plenty to get us started."

Talya blinked, taken aback by the extent of his plans. "Wow, that sounds amazing! I don't have the funds to pay you back right now, but I promise I'll make it up to you as soon as I can," she vowed earnestly.

"No," Liam replied, looking directly at her. "You don't need to repay me. This is something I genuinely want to do."

"But what about your job?" Talya questioned, her brow furrowing with concern.

Liam shrugged nonchalantly. "I kind of took an extended leave," he said, his tone vague. "So, I'm all yours," he added, wiggling his eyebrows playfully. Talya couldn't suppress her laughter; it bubbled out of her, and Liam's smile widened in response.

"You have a wonderful laugh. You should let it out more often," he said softly, his gaze warm.

Talya turned away, her cheeks slightly flushed. "What should we tackle first?"

"You might want to change out of that outfit," he suggested, nodding toward her casual attire.

"Good point! I'll be right back. Do you need anything while I'm inside?" she asked, already on her way. Liam was busy sorting through supplies, completely absorbed in his task.

"Nope, I'm all set," he replied, not looking up.

"Okay, I'll be back shortly," Talya said, dashing inside. She rummaged through her drawers, finally settling on an old tie-dye shirt and a worn pair of shorts. As she stepped back outside, she casually informed her grandpop that she and Liam were going to do some work together. She chose not to elaborate; she didn't want him to feel obligated to lend a hand. Slipping out the front door, she announced, "Alright, put me to work!"

Liam handed her a paint tray filled with a lovely blue hue. "Ooo, this is really pretty! What's this for?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with interest.

"I thought it would look great on the shutters," he replied with a grin.

Talya beamed back at him. "That would be perfect!"

"Have you painted before?" Liam inquired, his tone light.

Talya frowned, crossing her arms. "Of course I have! I'm not completely helpless, you know."

"I know you're not," Liam said with an easy smile. He turned to retrieve a paintbrush and roller, bringing them back to her. "Here you go."

"Thanks," Talya said, accepting the tools and settling down by the window to get started. She carefully taped around the shutters first, concentrating on her task. Meanwhile, Liam produced a portable speaker, connecting his phone to it. Soft, easy-listening music floated through the air, and for the first time in ages, Talya felt a wave of relaxation wash over her. After finishing the first coat on the shutters of the first window, she moved on to the second, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

"Have you had any more dreams about the wolf?" Liam asked after a while, breaking the comfortable silence.

"I did," Talya admitted. "I actually had another dream while I was at your house. I dozed off on the couch for a bit. It wasn't long, but it was just as strange as the first one."

"How so?" Liam pressed, intrigued.

"I think he was trying to tell me that I need to learn to be quiet," Talya said, her brow furrowing in thought.

Liam burst out laughing, and when she glanced at him, he wore an innocent expression that only made her smile wider. "He mentioned something about quiet being a strength or something like that. But honestly, it's a good thing I don't put much stock in dreams," she said, chuckling. She didn't notice the way Liam's expression shifted, a shadow crossing his face as he absorbed her words.

Conclusion

As the day unfolded, Talya found herself enveloped in a sense of camaraderie and warmth that she had long forgotten. The laughter shared between her and Liam, the gentle rhythm of their work, and the soothing music created a sanctuary from the chaos that often consumed her thoughts. With each stroke of paint on the shutters, she felt layers of her anxiety peeling away, revealing a newfound clarity and purpose. The projects for her grandparents, once a daunting task, transformed into a shared

endeavor that rekindled her connection to her family and her own sense of self. The presence of Liam, who willingly stepped into her world without expectation, was a reminder that support could manifest in the simplest acts of kindness.

In this moment of collaboration, Talya began to understand the value of vulnerability and the strength found in asking for help. Her earlier defiance faded, replaced by an appreciation for the bond they were forging. The laughter and lightness between them hinted at something deeper, a connection that promised to blossom further as they continued their work. With the sun setting and shadows growing longer, Talya realized that in allowing Liam into her life, she was not just opening her heart to friendship but also to the possibility of healing and hope. As the night approached, she felt a gentle whisper of optimism, reminding her that even in the darkest times, light could find its way back, illuminating paths she had yet to explore.