

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

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****Chapter 31****

“Are you feeling hungry?” Madison inquired, her tone shifting to a lighter note as she tried to divert the conversation. “We could order some room service while we wait for the doctor to arrive.”

Sophie turned her gaze towards her friend, a stubborn frown creasing her forehead. “I need to go to work,” she insisted, her voice firm and unwavering.

Madison’s expression softened with concern. “Sophie, I really don’t think that’s a wise decision. You took quite a blow to your head. It’s going to take some time for you to heal properly. But,” she raised her hand, cutting off any potential argument, “let’s just wait to hear what the doctor has to say first.”

With a reluctant sigh, Sophie acquiesced. She settled onto the edge of the bed, her mind swirling with thoughts of her job, the responsibilities awaiting her, and the nagging feeling of being sidelined. The wait didn’t stretch on for long. The door swung open, revealing a doctor who entered with a clipboard in hand, his demeanor professional yet approachable. “Sophie,” he greeted her, “how are you feeling today?”

“Pretty good,” she replied, attempting to sound more assured than she felt.

“Let’s take a look at you, shall we?” he suggested, his voice calm and reassuring.

Madison glanced at Sophie, giving her a gentle nod. “We’ll step outside for a bit, Sophie,” she said, and with that, she and Kyle slipped into the hallway, leaving Sophie alone with the doctor.

As the doctor began his examination, the door creaked open once more, and two police officers entered the room. The sight of them made Sophie jump; her heart raced as she instinctively glanced at the doctor, who maintained a steady, calm gaze. “Sophie, the officers are here to take your statement regarding the attack. I’ll return once they’re finished,” he said, standing up and nodding to the officers before stepping out.

Sophie felt a wave of panic wash over her as the officers approached. The tension in the air was palpable, and just then, Kyle strode confidently back into the room, standing beside her. The officers turned to him, their expressions unreadable. “We need to speak to the victim alone,” one officer stated firmly.

Kyle crossed his arms defiantly. “Not happening. She’s my sister, and I’m staying right here,” he asserted without a hint of hesitation. Sophie’s heart swelled with gratitude and surprise at his boldness. She glanced at the officers, who exchanged glances but ultimately conceded to his demand.

Sophie couldn’t help but wonder how they had bought that fabrication. She and Kyle didn’t share any resemblance. Shaking off her thoughts, she focused on the officers. “Miss, can you tell us what happened?” one of them prompted, his pen poised over his notepad.

Closing her eyes for a fleeting moment, Sophie took a deep breath, trying to gather her fragmented thoughts. She could feel Kyle’s eyes on her, filled with concern. In that moment, a protective instinct surged within her, compelling her to shield him and Madison from any potential fallout.

With a steadying inhale, she began, “I was walking back to where I live yesterday around two fifteen in the afternoon.”

“Which is where?” an officer interjected, his tone professional yet probing.

“Hope House,” Sophie replied softly, a hint of vulnerability creeping into her voice.

The officer’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You’re homeless?”

A flush of humiliation crept across Sophie’s cheeks, but she managed a quick nod, feeling exposed under their scrutiny.

The officer taking notes turned his attention to Kyle. “You’re homeless too?” he asked, his tone skeptical. For a brief moment, panic seized Sophie’s heart, fearing their fragile story was about to crumble.

“I’m not. I live with my wife. We’ve been trying to get her to move in with us, but she refuses,” Kyle lied effortlessly, his voice unwavering.

Sophie held her breath, hoping against hope that the officers would buy his story. Fortunately, they seemed to accept it without further question, turning back to her. “Please, continue,” one officer urged.

Taking another deep breath, Sophie pressed on. “I was on my way to the house when two men stopped me—one in front and one behind. The one behind me grabbed my hair, and…” she faltered, memories flooding her mind. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the vivid images.

“It’s okay,” she heard one officer say gently. “You’re safe now.” Sophie opened her eyes and nodded, feeling a small measure of comfort in his words.

“What happened next?” he pressed.

“My adrenaline kicked in, and I knew I had to escape. I hit the guy behind me with my head and kicked the one in front of me in the...” she hesitated, searching for the right term, “private area,” she finally managed. “Then I ran. I ran into a friend, and he helped me get away,” she explained, her voice steadying as she recounted the events.

The officer who had been taking notes paused, his brow furrowing in thought. “You just happened to run into a friend?” he asked, skepticism creeping into his voice.

Sophie nodded, emboldened by the truth of her words. “He had been looking for me,” she stated, conviction lacing her tone. “I think he heard me screaming, and that’s when he came to help. He put me in his car, and I guess he brought me here. I was passed out.”

The other officer leaned in, his gaze fixed on her intently. “And what about the men who attacked you?” he inquired.

Sophie sensed Kyle inching closer, a protective aura radiating from him. She didn’t dare meet his eyes.

“I’m not sure what happened to them,” she replied, her voice steady. It was the truth; she genuinely didn’t know their fate. “I woke up here a little while ago,” she concluded.

The officers continued to ask a few more questions, most of which were repetitions of what she had already shared. The note-taking officer jotted down a few final details before closing his notebook. “All right, that’s all we need for now. Make sure to get some rest, Miss,” he said, and with that, both officers exited the room.

Sophie felt a wave of relief wash over her. She looked up at Kyle, gratitude evident in her eyes. “Thank you for being here with me,” she said sincerely.

He nodded, a warm smile breaking through his earlier tension. “Thanks for protecting Levi and me,” he replied, his tone lightening the mood.

Just then, Madison entered the room, her expression laced with concern. “How did it go?” she asked, her voice filled with worry.

“Sophie handled it all perfectly,” Kyle chimed in, his pride evident.

Madison turned her attention back to Sophie. “Are you okay?” she asked, her eyes searching for any signs of distress.

Sophie nodded, but before she could respond further, the doctor reappeared, clipboard in hand. “Now, Sophie, let’s try that again,” he said, ready to continue his examination.

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For the next five minutes, he bombarded her with a flurry of questions, each one aimed at gauging her feelings and state of mind. His eyes roamed over her, assessing her condition with a practiced gaze. He gently examined her head, performed a few routine checks, and finally nodded with a satisfied smile. "All right, Sophie. I believe you are free to go. Just make sure to take your time easing back into things," he advised, his tone both professional and warm. "I want you to check in with your primary doctor in three days. If you experience any neck pain, tingling, numbness, or vomiting, please come right back to the hospital."

Sophie nodded, relief flooding through her. The doctor stood, straightening his coat with a slight rustle before announcing, "I'll have the nurse start the discharge process."

"Thank you," Sophie replied, her voice a mixture of gratitude and lingering anxiety.

With a nod, he exited the room, leaving her alone for a moment. A deep sigh escaped her lips; she was finally free to leave this sterile environment.

Madison approached her with a bright smile. "That's fantastic! You can finally get out of here," she exclaimed, her enthusiasm infectious.

Sophie glanced down at the hospital gown that felt more like a prison than a garment. "Do you think I could take a shower?" she asked, her brow furrowing slightly in uncertainty.

"I don't see why not. Let me just check with the nurse," Madison replied, her voice laced with reassurance.

"I'll handle it," Kyle interjected, already striding out of the room with purpose.

Sophie perched on the edge of the bed, her heart racing with anticipation. She didn't have to wait long; Kyle returned almost immediately, a triumphant grin on his face. "Nurse said it's all clear," he announced.

With a deep breath, Sophie pushed herself up, momentarily swaying as she steadied herself. "Do you need help?" Madison asked, concern etched on her features.

Sophie shook her head, a hint of determination in her eyes. "No, I'm okay," she assured them. "Everything you need is already in the shower. I brought some of my clothes for you to wear for now. I figured we were about the same size. I hope that's alright," Madison added, a note of uncertainty creeping into her voice.

“That’s perfect. Thank you so much,” Sophie replied, her heart swelling with appreciation. She made her way to the bathroom, feeling a flicker of excitement at the prospect of washing away the remnants of her hospital stay.

Once inside, she found everything she needed, thanks to Madison’s thoughtful gesture. The hot water cascaded over her, and as she scrubbed away the grime of the past few days, she began to feel more like herself. Even though it was just a simple outfit of leggings and a sweatshirt, it felt luxurious compared to the hospital gown. She quickly braided her hair, feeling a sense of normalcy return.

Stepping out of the bathroom, she was greeted by the arrival of a nurse, who was there to assist with her discharge. A few moments later, she found herself being wheeled through the hospital corridors in a wheelchair, Kyle at her side. “I still don’t understand why I have to be in a wheelchair,” Sophie mumbled, her frustration evident.

“It’s hospital rules,” the nurse replied, overhearing her grumbling.

As they rolled outside, a chill swept over her, and she shivered involuntarily. Kyle halted the wheelchair and helped her to her feet. He guided her toward the waiting vehicle, a sleek black Land Rover where Levi was stationed behind the wheel. He assisted her into the backseat, and Madison slid in beside her. Kyle took his place in the front passenger seat, his demeanor calm yet watchful.

Levi turned to look back at her, concern etched across his features. “How are you holding up, Sophie?” he inquired gently.

“I’m fine,” she replied, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “Thank you, both of you, for saving me from those men. I really appreciate it,” she said sincerely, her heart full of gratitude. Both men nodded in acknowledgment, and Levi shifted the car into gear, pulling away from the hospital.

“You’re taking me to Sip and Drip, right?” she asked eagerly, leaning forward in her seat.

There was a brief silence before Madison responded, her tone serious. “You can’t go back to work today, Sophie.”

“Why not?” Sophie questioned, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Madison stared at her as if she had lost her mind. “Because you were just released from the hospital,” she said, her voice firm.

“But I’m fine; the doctor said so!” Sophie protested, her determination rising. “Look, I don’t want to cause any more problems. I know what happened yesterday was completely my fault. I just really need to get back to my job, please.”

Madison glanced toward the front seat, where Kyle ran a hand through his hair, a look of concern crossing his face. He exchanged a helpless shrug with Levi, who seemed equally uncertain.

"Fine," Kyle finally relented, though his voice was laced with resignation. "But Torin's going to kill us."

Sophie frowned at that, feeling a pang of guilt. She didn't want to say or do anything that might sway their decision, so she remained silent, settling back into her seat and watching the streets blur past them. Soon enough, they arrived in front of Sip and Drip. "Thank you so much, all of you. I really appreciate it," she said, her heart swelling with gratitude once more. The guys nodded in acknowledgment, and Madison offered her a warm smile.

"We'll see you soon, Sophie," Madison said, her voice filled with encouragement.

Kyle opened the door for her, and she climbed out, feeling the cool air against her skin. She walked around to the front of the car, where Levi was holding the door to the shop open for her. "Thank you," she said as she passed him, surprised when he followed her inside. Perhaps he was just ordering coffee or something.

Helen emerged from the back, her face a mask of concern. "Sophie, how are you?" she asked, her voice tinged with worry. She stepped out from behind the counter and enveloped Sophie in a warm hug. "You aren't supposed to be here," she scolded gently.

"The doctor gave me the all-clear," Sophie replied, a smile breaking through her anxiety.

"Are you sure?" Helen pressed, her brow furrowing. "You can take a few days off if you need to."

Sophie shook her head, determination shining in her eyes. "I really want to be here and work."

"Alright, dear," Helen finally relented, though her expression remained cautious. "But you need to be honest with me and with yourself if you're not feeling up to it."

Sophie nodded in agreement and made her way around the counter to grab an apron. As she tied it around her waist, a wave of peace washed over her; this was where she belonged, where she could begin to feel normal again. Inhaling deeply, she savored the rich aroma of coffee that filled the air, a comforting reminder of her passion.

Stepping out onto the shop floor, she noticed a few customers in line. Without hesitation, she dove into her work, taking orders and crafting drinks with renewed vigor. After a brief lull, she ventured out into the shop to wipe down tables, her heart racing with purpose.

As she moved through the room, she was surprised to see Levi seated at a table, his attention focused on his phone. When she approached him, he looked up, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Levi, what are you doing here?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm here to keep an eye on things, make sure you stay safe," he replied, his voice steady.

Sophie frowned, feeling a mix of appreciation and annoyance. "I appreciate that, but you don't need to do that. I'm fine. Yesterday was just a random thing. It won't happen again."

Levi nodded, his expression serious. "Thanks, Sophie; but I'm staying. Boss's orders."

"Well, if I can't convince you to leave, can I at least make you a drink?" she suggested, her smile returning.

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"I'll come order something in a little bit," he said, a playful smile dancing on his lips.

"Okay," Sophie replied, her voice light as she stepped back toward the counter. The familiar jingle of the door announced the arrival of a few more customers, and Sophie slipped back into her routine, her energy revitalized by the bustling atmosphere. She chatted with the patrons, skillfully persuading a couple of them to try the special of the week. The delighted squeals of a group of teenage girls as they tasted the drink filled her with warmth; it seemed like a promising sign of success.

Just as she was pouring someone's drink, the shop door swung open with a soft creak. "Welcome to Sip and Drip!" he called out, his voice a comforting presence in the busy café. Sophie finished the drink, her movements fluid and practiced, and made her way back to the counter. With a cheerful smile, she turned to greet the next customer. "What can I get—" But the words caught in her throat as she met the fiery gaze of her next customer.

"Torin, what can I get for you?" she managed to ask, her heart racing.

"Why are you here?" he nearly growled, his tone sharp enough to cut through the café's cozy ambiance.

"I work here," she replied, her voice steady despite the tension in the air.

Torin closed his eyes, a visible effort to rein in his frustration. Sophie sensed the storm brewing beneath his composed exterior. "You are supposed to be resting," he insisted,

his voice low and intense. "You're recovering from a concussion." The last word was practically spat at her, loaded with concern and anger.

Sophie widened her eyes, her surprise morphing into defiance. She crossed her arms, a protective barrier. "Well, the doctor gave me the all-clear, so I came to work," she shot back, determination lacing her words.

"The doctor's an idiot," he retorted, his voice rising slightly. "Anyone with a brain knows you shouldn't be working after just having a concussion."

Sophie leaned forward, gripping the counter as if it were her lifeline. "You're trying to tell me what I should or shouldn't be doing again. I would have thought yesterday's drama would have taught you that approach won't work with me," she challenged, her heart pounding.

"Sophie." His deep voice held a warning, a low rumble that sent shivers down her spine.

"Torin," she fired back, her resolve hardening. She was done being controlled by domineering men; she had fought too hard to escape that life.

They stood locked in a silent battle of wills until Levi strolled in and took his place beside Garret. "Hey, Sophie, I think I might get that coffee now. Boss, you want anything?" He glanced at Torin, who remained silent, stepping back slightly and folding his arms in a defensive posture.

Sophie turned her attention away from the man in his expensive suit—who looked far too good for his own good—and focused on preparing Levi's drink. After handing it over, she turned back to Torin, her expression pointed. "Are you leaving now?"

His dark eyes bore into hers, unwavering. "I'm not leaving until you go home and rest," he stated firmly.

"Well, then I guess you're not leaving for a while because I'm staying," Sophie countered, her voice steady.

"Then I guess I'm staying," Torin replied, a hint of stubbornness in his tone.

"Well," Sophie elongated the word, a playful smirk creeping onto her face, "technically, you need to order something if you're going to stay. Those are the rules," she said with a casual shrug, hoping to dismiss him.

His expression darkened further. "Black coffee," he commanded, slapping a twenty down on the counter before turning away, his back to her as he walked off.

Sophie exhaled, a rush of frustration escaping her as he departed. The interaction had drained her, leaving her feeling weary. Her hands trembled slightly as she grabbed a cup for his coffee. Though she tried to project an air of confidence, the truth was that

Torin intimidated her more than she cared to admit. She peeked over the counter and spotted him seated with Levi, their conversation a mix of casual camaraderie and unspoken tension.

Debating whether to leave his coffee on the counter, she ultimately decided against it; he was still a customer after all. Just as she was about to approach him, the door swung open once more. Looking up, she was taken aback to see Amy and Olivia walk in. A surge of relief washed over her as she hurried around the corner to embrace them both.

"We were so worried about you," Amy exclaimed, her voice laced with concern. "Are you okay?"

"I am," Sophie assured her, her smile genuine. "I had a concussion, but I'm okay now."

"That's just awful, what you went through. Was it near the house?" Amy asked, her tone dropping to a hushed, worried whisper.

"Yes," Sophie replied, the memory still fresh in her mind.

"I feel like it's my fault," Amy confessed, her brow furrowed with guilt.

"Oh, no," Sophie rushed to reassure her. "It just happened. It's not anybody's fault."

Yet, Amy's expression remained troubled, and Sophie felt the weight of the conversation pressing down on her. "How's the new job?" she asked, eager to shift the focus away from her own troubles.

"It's really good," Amy replied, her face lighting up. "I'm really hoping it works out this time. By the way, I need to thank your friend for sending a babysitter for Olivia. That was so kind of him. Do you have his number? I wanted to thank him personally." She looked at Sophie, her eyes bright with expectation.

Sophie hesitated, the weight of Torin's gaze heavy on her back. She could feel the tension in the air, the unspoken words lingering between them. "Uh, yeah. I can get that for you," she said, her voice faltering slightly. She thought to herself, Oh great, I'm going to have to face him. "Actually, he's here right now if you want to, you know, talk to him," Sophie stammered, her heart racing.

"He is? Really? Where?" Amy asked, her eyes scanning the shop. Sophie could see the moment her gaze landed on Torin and Levi. Levi faced away, but Torin was looking right at them, his expression unreadable.

Amy turned back to Sophie, her eyes wide with disbelief. "That's him?" she asked, incredulous.

Sophie nodded, feeling a mix of pride and embarrassment. Amy turned back to Torin, then whistled softly. "Now that is a man," she said, her tone teasing. "Are you," she leaned in closer, "you know..."

Sophie stared at her, confusion etched on her face. "Am I what?"

"Sleeping with him?" Amy whispered, her voice barely containing her excitement.

Sophie nearly choked on her own spit, her cheeks flushing with shock. "What? No!" she whispered back, horrified.

"Why not?!" Amy pressed, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I would! Can you imagine what that would be like..."

Sophie quickly slapped her hand over Amy's mouth, cutting her off. "No more," she hissed, a mix of embarrassment and amusement bubbling within her.

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Amy gave a slight nod, her enthusiasm bubbling over. "Okay, okay. I apologize. I just got a bit carried away there. You don't come across a man like that very often, and one who's genuinely nice? That's practically a rarity."

Sophie shook her head, a soft sigh escaping her lips as she briefly closed her eyes, trying to gather her thoughts. "It's a good thing your daughter isn't around to hear all this," she remarked quietly, her voice laced with concern.

Amy grimaced, a hint of guilt crossing her features. "Yeah, I know. I really am sorry."

Sophie knelt down in front of Olivia, her hands moving gracefully as she signed a few words to her. Olivia's face lit up with a radiant smile as she signed back enthusiastically, her little fingers dancing in the air.

In an exuberant display of affection, Olivia threw her arms around Sophie, nearly knocking her off balance. She signed that she was glad Sophie was okay, her joy infectious. Sophie felt a lump form in her throat as she swallowed back the emotions that threatened to spill over. She smiled warmly at Olivia and stood back up, brushing off her momentary vulnerability. "All right then. If you think you can keep your excitement in check, I'll take you over and introduce you to him."

Amy nodded eagerly, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "I promise I'll behave. I'll be good." Sophie walked over to the counter, her thoughts momentarily drifting to Torin as she grabbed the coffee.

The sensation of Torin's gaze upon her was palpable as they approached, yet she didn't dare to look up until she reached their table. Setting the steaming cup down in front of him, she heard his low voice murmur, "Thank you."

"Torin," Sophie began, her eyes glued to the table, avoiding direct contact. "This is Amy and Olivia." Torin stood up, his demeanor warm and inviting.

Amy extended her hand toward Torin, who reciprocated the gesture with a firm handshake. "Thank you so much for sending over the babysitter. She was a true godsend, and Olivia had such a wonderful time with her."

Torin's smile was genuine, lighting up his face as he regarded Amy. A pang of jealousy shot through Sophie unexpectedly, but she quickly suppressed it, focusing on the moment. Just then, the door swung open, and Sophie turned to help the new customer, leaving Amy and Olivia in the company of Torin and Levi. She mentally noted the need to discuss Amy and Olivia with Torin at the earliest opportunity.

The shop buzzed with a steady stream of customers after that. At one point, Amy and Olivia waved goodbye to Sophie, who returned the gesture with a smile. When the line finally dwindled, Sophie glanced at the clock, noting it was almost one. Relief washed over her—her headache was intensifying, her stomach was in knots, and an overwhelming fatigue was settling in. She grabbed a towel and spray, preparing to clean the tables.

As she began wiping down the table closest to the window, she cast a glance outside, hoping to gauge if any more customers were on their way. Just as she turned her head, a man emerged from around the corner across the street, causing Sophie to freeze in place. A wave of fear washed over her, and she felt an instinctual urge to flee, yet her body remained rooted to the spot. When the man glanced up, Sophie instinctively ducked behind the beam by the front door, her heart racing as she wondered if he had seen her. It felt as though the air had been sucked from her lungs, leaving her gasping for breath.

A familiar presence loomed in front of her, and she didn't need to open her eyes to know who it was. "Sophie, what's happening?" Torin's voice was low, filled with concern.

Keeping her eyes tightly shut, she managed to whisper, "Nothing."

"I can practically sense the fear radiating from you. Don't even think about telling me it's nothing," Torin replied, his tone sharper now.

The door to the shop opened again, and without thinking, Sophie moved instinctively, finding herself standing behind Torin. He spoke to someone, but her heart was pounding so loudly that she couldn't catch his words. She squeezed her eyes shut even tighter, terrified that if she opened them, she would see her step-brother. A fresh wave of dread coursed through her veins.

Torin took hold of her elbow, guiding her through the shop with a steady hand. He glanced over his shoulder, saying something to Levi. Then, with a swift motion, he pulled her into the one-person bathroom at the back of the shop, closing the door firmly behind them. He released her arm and stepped closer, creating a barrier between her and the outside world.

Sophie's mind raced, clouded by fear. He found me. All my efforts to escape have been in vain. What will I do now? I have no money to run again. What if he finds me? I can't go back there! The thought of returning sent her into a spiral of panic, and she felt as if she couldn't breathe.

"Sophie," Torin called gently, shaking her lightly to bring her back to the moment. "Sophie, please talk to me. What's going on?"

Just then, a knock echoed through the small bathroom, sending another wave of terror through her. "No!" she shouted, grabbing his arms in desperation. "Please, don't let him in!"

Torin placed his hands firmly on her shoulders, his gaze steady and unwavering. "Sophie, look at me," he commanded softly but firmly. Reluctantly, she lifted her eyes to meet his. "It's just Levi. He's checking on us. Whoever you're afraid of can't hurt you here. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise."

Sophie searched his eyes, finding sincerity that calmed her racing heart. She nodded, allowing herself to believe in his words.

"Take a deep breath," he instructed, and she complied, inhaling deeply as he gently wiped away the tears that had escaped down her cheeks. With her eyes still closed, she focused on her breathing, trying to regain her composure. "Are you feeling better now?" he asked, his voice a soothing balm.

Sophie nodded again, a small flicker of relief igniting within her. "Open your eyes, Sophie," he urged gently. Unable to resist, she obeyed, looking up at him. The concern etched on his face was palpable, and it melted her heart in an unexpected way. "I'm just going to open the door and check with Levi. I'll be right back," he reassured her.

A surge of panic surged within her, and she wanted to grab his arms, to implore him to stay. But she fought against the urge, barely managing to restrain herself.

Torin held her gaze for a moment longer before stepping out of the bathroom. As soon as he was gone, Sophie's legs gave way beneath her, and she sank to the floor, her body trembling. It felt like an eternity, but it was only a minute or two before Torin returned. He stepped back into the bathroom, his expression a mixture of relief and concern as he crouched down in front of her.

"Everything is okay," he said, his voice steady. "Whoever you saw is long gone. Helen thinks you're just in the bathroom, which you are," he added with a small, reassuring

smile. "I'll tell Helen you're not feeling well. Levi already started the car. Let's get you out of here," he said, extending his hand toward her.

Sophie's head had cleared somewhat now that the initial wave of fear had passed. "I just need to finish my shift," she replied, her voice firm yet shaky.

Torin's expression shifted instantly, his demeanor closing off like a book being shut.

"Sophie," he warned, his voice taking on a tone she was becoming all too familiar with.

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"Please," Sophie implored, her voice barely above a whisper. "Just let me finish what I'm doing, and then I'll come with you. I promise. I just want to do my job."

The urgency in her tone was palpable, a mixture of desperation and determination.

"I can't afford to lose this job."

Torin, standing with arms crossed and brow furrowed, countered her plea. "You're not going to lose it, Sophie," he insisted, though the tension in his voice hinted at his concern.

"Please, Torin," she replied, softening her stance, her eyes pleading with him.

With a resigned sigh, Torin's posture relaxed slightly. Sophie could sense that she had managed to sway him, if only just. He extended a hand, a silent offer for her to rise from her crouched position.

"Finish what you need to do, but I'm not leaving your side," he declared, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Sophie nodded in agreement, grateful for his understanding. She stepped into the bustling space of the café, her heart racing as she resumed her task of wiping down the tables. The familiar scent of coffee and baked goods wrapped around her like a warm blanket. When she spotted Helen, the café manager, she couldn't help but smile back at her.

"Alrighty, Sophie. Go ahead and clock out. Thanks for coming in today. Now, go home and get some rest," Helen said, her voice cheerful and encouraging.

Sophie returned the smile, her heart lightening. "I plan to," she replied, her voice filled with genuine gratitude.

After clocking out, she removed her apron, the fabric heavy with the day's work. Slipping into her coat, she made her way toward the front door, feeling Torin's presence close behind her. He placed a reassuring hand on the small of her back, guiding her toward the waiting car. With a polite gesture, he opened the back door for her and closed it gently once she was seated. He took his place in the passenger seat, his demeanor still serious.

Levi, the driver, started the engine, and the car rolled out of the parking lot. An enveloping silence settled in, broken only by the hum of the tires against the pavement. Sophie glanced out the window, her heart fluttering with uncertainty. They weren't heading to Hope House. The thought made her stomach twist uneasily.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her voice tentative as she broke the silence.

"To one of my houses," Torin replied curtly, his eyes fixed ahead, revealing a hint of irritation.

Sophie felt the weight of his mood, and rather than press further, she fell silent, her mind racing with questions. What did he mean by "one of my houses"? The plural struck her as odd. Who had multiple houses? She couldn't shake the feeling that this time, she wouldn't be heading back to the shelter.

Thoughts of Amy and Olivia flitted through her mind. If there was enough space, perhaps they could join her. She wanted to help them; they had shown her kindness when she needed it most. But she would bide her time, waiting for the right moment to bring it up. She needed to gauge Torin's mood first.

As the minutes ticked by, fatigue began to weigh heavily on her. Her body ached, and the dull throb at the back of her head was a constant reminder of the day's exhaustion. They drove farther than she anticipated, the landscape shifting outside her window. Eventually, the car slowed, pulling into a long, winding driveway.

Sophie's curiosity piqued as she peered out, her breath catching at the sight of a charming stone house nestled among the trees. It was quaint, with a small front porch and two rocking chairs that beckoned her to sit. The isolation of the place felt comforting, and she felt an unexpected warmth toward it.

As Levi brought the car to a stop, Sophie opened the door and stepped out, taking in the serene surroundings. Just then, she noticed Torin emerging from the car, his phone pressed to his ear, clearly engaged in a conversation. He gestured for her to head toward the house, and she complied, excitement bubbling within her.

But as she moved, the sound of tires crunching on gravel caught her attention. Turning, she saw Kyle and Madison approaching. Madison waved enthusiastically, and Sophie returned the gesture, her heart lifting at the sight of familiar faces.

From the backseat, Liam stepped out, a smile breaking across his face as he made his way toward her. "How are you doing?" he asked, genuine concern etched into his features.

"I'm good," Sophie replied, her smile mirroring his.

"Sure, you are," he teased lightly, pulling her into a gentle hug. Just then, a low growl echoed from somewhere behind her. Liam released her, and she turned, scanning the area, but no one else seemed to react.

Madison, ever the leader, strode confidently toward the house, prompting everyone to follow. As Sophie reached the door, she glanced back, catching Torin's gaze. He was still on the phone, but his eyes were fixed on her, a silent communication passing between them before she quickly turned away and stepped inside.

The interior of the house took her breath away. To her left, a spacious kitchen basked in sunlight, complete with a serving counter and a round table beneath a sparkling chandelier. To the right, a cozy living room awaited, furnished with plush couches arranged around a large television. A staircase led to what she assumed were the bedrooms, and everything radiated warmth and comfort.

Madison wasted no time, heading straight for the kitchen and rummaging through cabinets for pots and pans. Sophie followed her lead, eager to help. "Can I pitch in?" she asked, her enthusiasm bubbling over.

Madison hesitated for a moment, as if considering saying no, but then she must have seen the eagerness in Sophie's eyes. "Sure! I'm making a quick lasagna, Caesar salad, and garlic bread. Could you start browning the meat for me?"

"Of course!" Sophie replied, rushing to wash her hands before diving into the task. "Did you buy all these groceries today?"

"I ordered them for delivery," Madison explained, expertly boiling water and chopping romaine lettuce. "One of the guys helped put them away."

As Sophie stirred the meat, she noticed the guys had migrated to the living room, their voices rising in excitement as they watched a sports game. The atmosphere felt alive, and for a moment, she allowed herself to relish the sense of belonging.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Torin stepped inside, his presence commanding immediate attention. His gaze locked onto hers, and he called out, "Sophie, a word please."

A wave of anxiety washed over her, reminiscent of being summoned to the principal's office. She shot a quick glance at Madison, who offered a reassuring smile, bolstering Sophie's courage. Taking a deep breath, she moved toward Torin, trying to avoid his intense gaze.

He led her into the living room, where the television was promptly turned off, and everyone sat up, their focus shifting to the two of them. Torin positioned himself in front of the screen, commanding the space. Unsure of where to sit, Sophie opted for the couch where Liam had been sitting. Torin shot Liam a disapproving look, gesturing for him to move.

With a playful grin, Liam stood and leaned against the wall, a silent acknowledgment of Torin's authority.

Just then, the front door creaked open, and Sophie turned to see Max entering the room. His sudden appearance startled her; she hadn't seen him in a while and wondered where he had been. He leaned against the back wall, a casual observer in the tense atmosphere. Torin seemed unfazed by Max's presence, but Sophie felt the weight of the gathering eyes upon her.

"Alright, let's get right to it," Torin said, his voice steady as he turned his dark gaze toward Sophie. "What happened today?"

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Sophie gazed at him, her expression a mixture of confusion and disbelief. "Um, what?" she stammered, her mind racing to comprehend the sudden seriousness in his tone.

"What happened today?" he reiterated, his voice deliberately slower, as if he were speaking to a child.

"I heard your question," Sophie snapped, irritation creeping into her voice. She furrowed her brow, feeling a twinge of defiance. "I just don't understand why you felt the need to ask it." Torin's brow furrowed in response, but Sophie felt a growing indifference to his expression. She was becoming accustomed to his disapproval.

"I asked because today, someone posed a threat to you. If there's a danger, we all need to be aware of it," Torin replied, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, his stance radiating protectiveness.

"But why do you care?" Sophie pressed, her voice tinged with skepticism. "I barely know any of you. I'm just a nobody." The weight of her words hung in the air, heavy with self-doubt.

"No, you're not," Liam interjected, his voice warm and reassuring. "You're a good person, someone we've come to know and care about. You show kindness to others and help those in need. Now it's time for us to return that kindness to you. You're part of

our group now, and if anyone is after you, we'll handle it. We've got your back," he said, as though it was the most natural thing in the world to offer such unwavering support.

Sophie blinked back tears, feeling the warmth of his words wash over her like a gentle tide.

"It's been a long time since anyone had my back," she confessed softly, her gaze lingering on Liam's earnest expression.

Liam nodded, his face set with determination. "It's time to change that," he asserted, his voice firm and unyielding.

"Sophie," Torin's low, gravelly voice interrupted her thoughts. She turned to meet his gaze, and in that moment, she saw the anger simmering just beneath the surface. He didn't need to say anything more; his silent acknowledgment spoke volumes.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie felt a mix of apprehension and resolve. "I don't even know where to begin," she admitted, her voice trembling slightly. She closed her eyes, seeking solace in the darkness behind her eyelids. It felt easier to share her story when she wasn't being scrutinized. "I grew up as an only child," she began, a small smile gracing her lips as she recalled her past. "My upbringing was filled with love. My parents adored each other and cared for me deeply. We weren't wealthy, but we were happy. My life was quite ordinary until I turned twelve." She swallowed hard, the memory prickling at her throat. "That's when my dad died," she said, surprising herself with her composure. "I never expected how quickly everything would unravel after that," she whispered, her voice barely audible in the stillness of the room.

The silence enveloped her, and Sophie took a moment to gather her thoughts. With her eyes still closed, she pressed on.

"My mother remarried less than a year later. I never understood why it happened so fast. Perhaps we were struggling financially, and I was too young to grasp it. Regardless, she married my step-father," she said with a bitter laugh. "He was a real piece of work. He managed to turn my mother against me, got her addicted to depression medication, and siphoned off the money my father left for us." Taking a steadying breath, she continued, "He also brought his son into the marriage—Brody," she said, shuddering involuntarily at the mere mention of his name. "He was a few years older than me and turned my life into a nightmare. He tormented me relentlessly, and as I grew older, his cruelty only intensified. He and his friends made my existence unbearable, hurling lewd comments and vile suggestions my way. Then Brody escalated..." Her voice faltered, and she felt the couch shift beside her, prompting her eyes to snap open.

"It's just me," Madison said softly, her presence a comforting anchor.

Sophie inhaled deeply and leaned back, this time keeping her eyes wide open. She focused on a spot on the floor, trying to ground herself. "Brody and his friends began

doing terrible things to me. They would lock me in the basement for days, depriving me of food and water. They would inflict horrible acts upon me, waiting to see how I would react. They never left marks that would be visible, ensuring no one would suspect the truth of my suffering. They did... so many awful things." A heavy silence fell over her, and she found herself lost in the painful memories.

"Was it ever sexual?" Madison asked gently, her voice low and careful.

"No," Sophie replied immediately, the word escaping her lips like a shield. "They made crude comments and would touch me, but nothing overtly graphic. Until the end..." Her voice trailed off, the weight of the memory pressing down on her.

"What happened?" Madison prodded, her tone encouraging yet soft.

"I knew that once I turned eighteen, everything would change. Brody kept reminding me of that fact, as if he relished the idea. They were terrified of doing anything to me before then, but after that, it was open season. That's why I had to run. They watched me like hawks for months leading up to my birthday," she explained, the memory flooding back with vivid clarity. "Someone was always tailing me, as if they feared letting me out of their sight. Then one night, I..." Her voice faltered, and she fell silent, the weight of her story pressing heavily on her.

Madison rubbed her back in a soothing gesture. "What happened?" she asked softly, her empathy palpable.

"I—" Sophie shook her head, fighting against the memories that threatened to overwhelm her. "I don't know. They blindfolded me and drove me somewhere. I had to walk for what felt like ages. I stumbled and fell countless times while Brody and his friends laughed at my misery. Then they removed my blindfold. They tied me to a tree and left me there. I begged them not to do it, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. It took me hours, but I finally managed to escape. I ran blindly, not knowing where I was headed—only that I had to get out of those woods. And then, out of nowhere, a massive wolf attacked me. It bit me," she said, her voice trembling as the memory flooded back. "I remember it hovering over me, and then two more joined it. These weren't small wolves; they were enormous, with fangs that seemed to glisten in the moonlight. I thought I was going to die."

Sophie fell silent, the weight of her story lingering in the air.

"What happened after that?" Madison asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I don't know," Sophie admitted, her voice shaking. "I woke up on the floor of my room. I have no idea how I got there. I would have dismissed it all as a dream, but my clothes were filthy, and I had bite marks on my thigh. I never told anyone. Who would believe that a girl was attacked by three wolves and lived to tell the tale? That day, I resolved to escape. With my eighteenth birthday approaching, I knew I had to get away. I left on the morning of my birthday."

Sophie's voice trailed off, a heavy silence settling around them as the gravity of her experiences hung in the air.

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They caught up to me before I even stepped onto the first bus, but somehow, I managed to slip away. However, they did manage to grab my bag. I boarded that bus, and for three long days, I rode, not knowing where I was headed, until I found myself here, with nothing but the clothes on my back and not a single penny to my name." Sophie inhaled sharply, her emotions bubbling to the surface. "So, there you have it. My incredible tale. You see what a prize I am now?" she added, her voice laced with bitterness.

As the front door slammed shut, Sophie's gaze flicked toward it, her heart sinking. Torin was gone. Her eyes widened in disbelief, and she turned to Madison, who was wiping away a stray tear. "It's okay," Madison reassured her softly, her voice trembling slightly. "He's just angry."

"Angry at me?" Sophie asked, her voice barely above a whisper, uncertainty creeping in.

"No, sweetheart," Liam chimed in, his tone firm yet gentle. "He's angry about what you've endured. We all are." Kyle grunted in agreement, his face a mask of sympathy.

Sophie felt a strange warmth at their words, but she was at a loss for how to respond. The idea of someone feeling anger on her behalf was foreign to her. Kyle moved closer, wrapping an arm around Madison, who leaned into him, creating a barrier that made Sophie feel like an outsider once more. A wave of loneliness washed over her, prompting her to stand up. She needed air, a moment to breathe away from the suffocating tension. Torin was likely long gone, occupied with matters far more pressing than her.

No one stopped her as she walked out the front door, the cool night air hitting her like a gentle reminder of her solitude. She quickly scanned the surroundings, relief flooding her when she realized Torin was nowhere in sight. She settled into one of the rocking chairs on the porch, pushing herself back and forth slowly, letting the quiet envelop her. Time seemed to stretch into eternity.

Eventually, the silence was broken by the creak of the front door. Liam stepped outside, his expression softening as he approached her. "Madison's got dinner ready. Come join us," he said, his voice a gentle command.

Sophie was too exhausted to protest. She rose, following him back inside. Max was absent again, and Torin had yet to return; however, Kyle, Levi, and Madison were

gathered around the table, their chatter filling the air with warmth. Liam pulled out her chair, a small gesture that made her heart flutter with appreciation as she took her seat.

As the conversation flowed, Sophie leaned back, a piece of garlic bread in her hand, nibbling at it while she absorbed the lively atmosphere around her. For the first time in ages, a flicker of hope ignited within her. Maybe, just maybe, she had stumbled upon a place where she could truly belong.

After dinner, Madison offered to help her settle into a room for the night. "Kyle and I will be staying here with you for a little while, if that's okay," she said, her tone light yet sincere.

Sophie couldn't help but chuckle softly. "Of course, it's okay. It's not my house, after all. Plus, I would hate to be alone."

"I completely understand that. So, why don't you try to get some sleep? What time do you have to be at work again? Unless I can convince you to take a day or two off to let your body heal?" Madison suggested, her eyes hopeful.

Sophie shook her head firmly. "Nope, I need to help Helen."

"That's what I figured," Madison replied with a sigh. "What time do you have to be at work again?"

"Four thirty," Sophie answered, the early hour sending a shiver down Madison's spine.

"That's such an ungodly hour," she exclaimed, shuddering dramatically. "I probably won't see you in the morning. One of the guys will be taking you—Liam, Levi, or Kyle. I'm not sure who drew the short straw," she added, a playful grin spreading across her face.

"I hope it's not Liam," Sophie chuckled. "He's definitely not a morning person."

Madison laughed, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm going to tell him you said that."

"Please do," Sophie replied, her smile genuine.

"Let me get out of here so you can get some sleep. I left more clothes in the bathroom for you. Just let me know if you need anything else," Madison said, rising from her chair.

"Hey, Madison," Sophie called out, a thought striking her. "Do you think Kyle would be willing to train me to fight better? I know how to fight for survival, but I want to be better prepared to defend myself."

Madison nodded, her expression turning serious. "I know he would, but I'll ask him. Maybe I could help too."

Sophie looked at her in surprise. "You know how to fight?"

Madison laughed lightly. "I've trained quite a bit over the years."

"That's amazing! Would you be willing to train me?" Sophie asked, her excitement bubbling over.

"Of course! Let's start tomorrow when you get home from work," Madison suggested enthusiastically.

"That would be perfect." Sophie paused, her heart swelling with gratitude. "Thanks for everything you're doing for me."

Madison's expression shifted, a hint of sadness creeping in. "I'm truly sorry for what you've been through."

Sophie felt a lump form in her throat at her words. "Thank you," she managed to reply, her voice barely above a whisper.

Madison reached out, pulling Sophie into a warm embrace before leaving the room. Sophie changed into the pajamas Madison had left for her, the fabric soft against her skin as she prepared for bed. A few moments later, she crawled under the covers, a smile spreading across her face. "This is so soft," she murmured, sinking deeper into the warmth.

As she snuggled into the blankets, a sigh of relief escaped her lips. Yet, images of her attack in the woods flickered through her mind, and she fought against them, determined to push those memories away. She knew they were resurfacing due to the day's events, and she hoped the nightmares wouldn't haunt her tonight.

But luck was not on her side. Sophie screamed when someone shook her awake. "Sophie, wake up. It's okay," a soothing voice said. Disoriented, she sat up, her eyes wide with fear, trying to grasp her surroundings. "Shh, it's okay. It was just a bad dream," she heard the voice again, and after a moment, she recognized it as Madison.

Taking several deep breaths, Sophie tried to steady her racing heart. Madison's hand rested gently on her back, rubbing soothing circles. "Just breathe. Everything's okay," she said, her voice calm and reassuring.

"I'm sorry," Sophie whispered, her voice trembling.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Madison replied, her tone filled with compassion. "I heard you screaming and knew I had to wake you up. I couldn't let you endure that alone."

"I'm okay now," Sophie assured her, feeling a sense of comfort wash over her.

"Do you want me to stay in here?" Madison asked, concern etched on her face.

“No, I’m okay. You should go back to Kyle. Thank you for waking me up,” Sophie said sincerely, grateful for Madison’s presence.

Sophie felt the bed shift as Madison stood up, and she lay back down, tucking the covers around her once more. She could hear Kyle’s low voice in the hallway, followed by Madison’s soft response. A few moments later, silence enveloped the house again. Sophie glanced at the clock, groaning softly when she realized it was only a little after midnight. It was going to be a long night.

Too scared to drift back into sleep, she didn’t want to disturb Kyle and Madison, so she lay there quietly, focusing on anything but her nightmares. Thoughts of the shop, of Helen, and the need to turn the business around swirled in her mind.

Then, her thoughts landed on Torin. She wondered where he had vanished to and when she would see him again. It shouldn’t bother her that he wasn’t around—not at least, that’s what she tried to convince herself.

Time dragged on, and Sophie dozed in and out of sleep. Finally, the moment arrived when she knew she had to get up.

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****Chapter 38****

Sophie quietly slipped out of the warmth of her bed, the chill of the morning air nipping at her as she moved. She rummaged through her clothes, pulling out a pair of jeans that Madison had generously gifted her. However, as she tried them on, she found they hung loosely around her waist, making her feel a bit lost in them. With a sigh, she opted for her trusty black leggings, which hugged her comfortably. She paired them with a long-sleeved gray shirt that belonged to Madison, its soft fabric a reminder of her friend’s warmth.

After undoing her braid, she ran her fingers through her hair, contemplating how to style it for the day. With a decisive nod to herself, she gathered her hair into a high ponytail, securing it with a hair tie. Feeling somewhat put together, she made her bed, smoothing out the covers with a sense of accomplishment before heading out into the hallway.

As she descended the stairs, the dim light from the kitchen illuminated her path. The world outside was still cloaked in darkness, but the glow over the stove provided just enough light for her to navigate her way to the living room.

“Good morning, Sophie!” came a voice that startled her. She hadn’t noticed Kyle had already come downstairs. “Sorry to startle you,” he added, a hint of amusement in his tone.

"Whew, no worries," Sophie replied, her heart still racing as she attempted to regain her composure.

"Would you like some coffee or breakfast or anything?" Kyle offered, his voice friendly and inviting.

"I'm good, thank you," Sophie answered, grateful for his thoughtfulness.

"Alright then, let's go. Levi's waiting out front," Kyle said, gesturing towards the door. Sophie followed him, her mind already racing with thoughts of the day ahead.

"Hold up. Let me go first," he instructed, and she stepped back, allowing him to lead the way. With a firm hand, she closed the door behind her, ensuring it was locked tight. The cold air hit her like a splash of ice water, and she hurried towards the car, eager to escape the chill. Kyle opened the back door for her, and she slid into the seat, grateful for the warmth inside.

"Morning," she greeted Levi, who sat in the front seat, his expression unreadable. He merely grunted in response, his eyes still heavy with sleep.

Kyle turned to Sophie with a grin. "He's not a morning person," he said, playfully slapping Levi on the back, eliciting a small grunt from him.

Sophie couldn't help but smile. "Neither is Liam," she chimed in, recalling the many mornings they had spent together, both groggy and reluctant to face the day.

Kyle laughed heartily. "No, he's definitely not."

"But you are?" Sophie asked, her curiosity piqued.

"I have to be. Madison hates mornings and sleeps like the dead. One of us has to be functional," he replied with a grin that warmed her heart. The affection in his voice made her wonder what it felt like to be loved so completely by someone. She shook off the thought, redirecting her focus to the day ahead.

"Thanks for the ride," she said, breaking the silence.

"Of course," Kyle said easily, and Levi nodded in agreement, though his eyes remained fixed on the road.

The drive was quiet, filled with the soft hum of the engine and the occasional rustle of their movements. When they arrived in front of Sip and Drip, Sophie opened her door and stepped out, feeling the cool air again. Kyle came around and stood beside her, his demeanor serious.

"Next time, wait for me, alright? I always want to make sure it's safe before you climb out," he instructed, his protective nature shining through. Sophie stared at him for a

moment, slightly taken aback, before nodding and following him into the shop. She couldn't help but think about how seriously they took their security.

"Good morning!" Sophie called out cheerfully to Helen, who responded from the back room. "Alright, well, I'm going to get to work now. Thanks again for the ride. Uh, will you pick me up from work later, or should I find a ride?" she asked, feeling a bit awkward.

Kyle gave her a puzzled look just as Levi stepped into the shop. "We're staying," Kyle stated firmly, moving through the shop towards a back table. Sophie noticed a laptop bag slung over his shoulder, and Levi carried one as well. She blinked at them, unsure of what to make of their sudden commitment to her safety.

"You don't need to stay here all day. I'm perfectly safe," she insisted, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "You can go back home or do whatever."

"Can't," Kyle replied, his focus on setting up his laptop. "Boss's orders."

Sophie felt a wave of frustration wash over her, but she also recognized the need to respect their decision. "Really, it's not necessary. I—"

Levi looked up, his expression serious. "Boss said we stay here all day. So, we're staying," he declared, leaving no room for argument.

"Well, okay then. I'll grab you guys some coffee in a little bit," she said with a resigned smile before turning away and heading behind the counter to grab an apron, ready to dive into her work.

A couple of hours later, she carefully balanced two steaming cups of black coffee and two plates laden with cinnamon rolls as she approached the guys. They were both engrossed in their work, but as she set the treats down on the table, their heads snapped up. Kyle inhaled deeply, a grin spreading across his face.

"Enjoy," she said, her smile brightening as she turned to leave. As she walked back to the front of the shop, the thought of starting a tab with Helen nagged at her mind, but she pushed it aside, hoping for some financial relief soon. Fingers crossed.

The day sped by in a blur of activity. Sophie took her break at the library, and to her surprise, the guys insisted on accompanying her. She tried to argue, but their determination was unwavering. They asked her what she usually did for lunch, and she couldn't help but chuckle at their horrified expressions when she admitted that she often skipped it altogether. They grabbed sandwiches on the way to the library, insisting on getting one for her as well. She offered to pay, but they both declined with firm shakes of their heads.

After her shift ended, Kyle and Levi escorted her to the car. Sophie climbed into the backseat, a contented smile spreading across her face. It had been a good day, busier than usual, and she felt a swell of pride knowing she had sold all her cinnamon rolls.

As they drove, Sophie found herself lost in her thoughts, so she was taken aback when they pulled into a shopping mall parking lot. "What are we doing?" she asked, bewildered.

"Madison is meeting us here to take you shopping," Kyle replied, his face contorting into a pained expression that made it clear he wasn't a fan of the idea. They parked, and Sophie watched as Madison emerged from the car next to theirs. To her surprise, Kyle pulled her into his arms and kissed her, a moment of tenderness that made Sophie look away, giving them a moment of privacy.

Once Kyle stepped out, Levi was right next to her, as if he had been waiting for her all along. Madison approached Sophie, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "You ready to go crazy?" she asked, her enthusiasm infectious.

"Uh, what's going on? I thought we were going to start training," Sophie said, confusion evident in her voice.

"I know. We were, but plans changed. We're going shopping instead. You need clothes. Then we'll train," Madison explained, linking her arm through Sophie's.

"But I don't have any money," Sophie whispered, a hint of panic creeping into her voice.

Madison simply pulled something from her pocket, flashing a sleek black card at Sophie. "This is Torin's black card," she said with a grin that could light up the darkest room. "Unlimited budget, so let's go!"

Sophie felt a mix of disbelief and excitement as Madison began to pull her towards the entrance, with Kyle and Levi trailing behind. She wasn't sure how to feel about this unexpected turn of events, but Madison's joy was contagious, and she didn't want to dampen it.

As they entered the first store, Madison's energy was palpable. "Alright! We have an entire wardrobe to build. Let's start with the basics and go from there," she declared, her eyes gleaming with determination.

"I don't know about this. I can't spend Torin's money," Sophie protested, feeling a knot form in her stomach at the thought of using someone else's wealth.

But Madison was already in motion, a whirlwind of fashion and enthusiasm. "What size are you?" she asked, not even pausing for a response.

"I'm not telling you," Sophie replied, stubbornly crossing her arms.

But Madison was undeterred, her excitement propelling her forward. Soon, she had a towering stack of clothes in her arms and was heading towards the dressing room. "Let's go!" she called over her shoulder, and Sophie followed, her mind racing with how she had found herself in this whirlwind of shopping and unexpected generosity.

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“Madison, I really can’t do this,” Sophie confessed, her voice laced with uncertainty.

“Just try stuff on,” Madison urged, her tone light but insistent. “Come on! We don’t want to keep the guys waiting, do we?”

The mention of the guys stirred something within Sophie, nudging her into action. She took a deep breath and stepped into the dressing room, the air inside feeling both cramped and filled with potential. “Try on everything,” Madison commanded playfully as she exited, leaving Sophie to confront the sea of clothing.

Sophie glanced around, her heart racing as she surveyed the racks. The sheer volume of choices was overwhelming, but she resolved not to overthink it. Instead, she dove into the task at hand, beginning with a pair of jeans. She slipped into several different styles, each one a test of fit and comfort, until Madison’s approving voice rang out. “That one! It’s perfect. Keep those. Let’s see what other colors or cuts they have in that style.”

With renewed determination, Sophie retreated into the dressing room, the minutes slipping away as she tried on item after item. Each time she emerged, Madison was waiting with another piece, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Madison declared that Sophie was done. Together, they gathered the clothes they weren’t keeping, a small mountain of fabric, and stepped out of the dressing room.

As they emerged, the guys stood at the ready, flanking the entrance like sentinels. Madison, in a burst of playful energy, tossed the pile of clothes onto Kyle, who caught them without a word, his expression a mix of bemusement and acceptance. Madison led the way, and the others followed, but a sudden realization struck Sophie like a bolt of lightning.

“Wait! Stop! We can’t buy all of those,” she exclaimed, panic rising in her chest.

Kyle halted, his brow furrowing in confusion, while Madison turned back, her hands on her hips. “What do you think you tried them on for?” she asked, a teasing lilt in her voice.

“I mean, I can’t get all of this! It’s going to cost a fortune,” Sophie protested, her heart sinking at the thought.

“It’s fine,” Madison replied, brushing off her concerns as if they were nothing.

"No, it's really not," Sophie insisted, her voice trembling with anxiety. "I can't spend Torin's money like this. It's way too much, and he's not even here to approve it!"

Madison shot a glance at Kyle, who, sensing the tension, pulled out his phone and began speaking to someone on the other end. Sophie was still grappling with her spiraling thoughts when Kyle handed her the phone. "What?" she asked, bewildered.

"Put it up to your ear," he gestured, his expression encouraging.

"Hello?" she ventured cautiously.

"Sophie," Torin's deep voice resonated through the phone, wrapping around her like a warm blanket. "Use the card. Get whatever you need. There's no limit."

"I can't do that," Sophie replied, her heart racing.

"Why not?" Torin pressed, his tone curious.

"Because, because it's not my money," she stammered, feeling the weight of the situation.

"Exactly. It's my money, and this is something I want to do," he stated firmly. Sophie found herself at a loss for words. "Just use the card, Sophie," he added, his voice softening, a hint of understanding in his tone.

Sophie shook her head vigorously, a mix of gratitude and dread swirling within her. She couldn't bear the thought of being in debt to him, and the idea of never being able to repay him loomed large in her mind. "I can't," she insisted, her voice barely above a whisper.

A heavy silence hung between them for a moment before Torin broke it. "Fine," he said, the rustling of something in the background accompanying his words. "Okay. What size are you?"

"What?" she asked, confusion washing over her.

"I need your shirt size, pant size, dress size, and shoe size," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Why?" Sophie questioned, her brow furrowing.

"So I can go shopping for you since you won't use my card to get what you need. Or better yet, maybe I can get Max to do it for me. Oh, and what's your bra and underwear size?" he added casually.

Sophie felt the heat rush to her cheeks. "Okay," she said quickly, her resolve crumbling. "I'll do it."

She didn't waste a moment handing the phone back to Kyle, practically dropping it into his hands. Madison turned toward her, a teasing glint in her eye. "Your face is red. What did he say?" she asked, mischief dancing on her lips.

"Nothing. Let's just get the clothes," Sophie replied hastily, making her way toward the checkout, Madison's laughter trailing behind her.

Madison seemed to have an endless supply of energy, dragging Sophie from store to store, each outing more exhausting than the last. Sophie complied, not wanting to face the consequences of Torin following through on his earlier threat. But when Madison pulled her into Victoria's Secret, Sophie felt a wave of panic wash over her. "I can't shop in here," she whispered, her cheeks flushing.

"Oh, come on! I shop here all the time. Gotta keep my love life interesting," Madison quipped, a playful grin spreading across her face.

"Ew," Sophie replied, cringing at the thought. "That's way too much information."

Madison laughed, unfazed. "Come on, or I'll make you talk to Torin again."

Sophie felt her face heat up at the mere thought. "No way." There was no chance she was going to let Madison call Torin and tell him she refused to shop at Victoria's Secret. The idea of what he might say made her stomach twist. Reluctantly, she let Madison help her pick out some bras and underwear, drawing the line at the more outrageous options that Madison suggested. After they finished, they checked out, both feeling a mix of relief and exhaustion.

As they exited the store, the guys were waiting for them, Kyle still on the phone. But as soon as he spotted them, he approached, handing the phone to Sophie. "Here," he said, his expression serious.

Sophie took the phone, pressing it to her ear. "I used the card and bought stuff, I promise," she assured Torin, her voice steady.

"Good," Torin replied, his voice warm. "Did you find everything you need?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, feeling a flicker of relief.

"Did Madison take you into every store in the entire mall?" he asked dryly, a hint of amusement in his tone.

Sophie smiled, her heart lightening. "That's exactly what happened."

"I figured. That woman loves to shop. Where did you just shop?" he asked, curiosity evident.

"I can't tell you that," she blurted, her cheeks flushing once more.

She heard a low chuckle from the other end, sending warmth through her. It was strange, but she couldn't recall ever hearing Torin laugh like that before; he was typically so serious. "Then I'll just have to imagine what it was," he said, his voice low and teasing.

Sophie found herself at a loss for a response, her mind racing. "I had a question for you," Torin continued, oblivious to her fluster. "If your step-brother were to disappear for an extended period, where would he likely go?"

Sophie gripped the phone tightly, dread washing over her. "Are you trying to find him?" she asked, panic flooding her voice.

"Torin, don't do that. He's dangerous, and his friends are dangerous. Please don't."

"Sophie, there's nothing to worry about. Your brother is not a threat to me," he assured her, his tone steady.

"No, you don't understand. He's... he's different, not like normal. I don't know how to explain it," she murmured, lowering her voice to avoid drawing attention.

"Sophie, listen to me," Torin said, his voice deep and commanding. "I need you to trust me. I can take care of myself. I work out for hours every day. I'm not worried about your punk of a step-brother. Have some faith."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you," Sophie blurted out, then continued awkwardly, "Or anybody else, of course."

He chuckled again, the sound soothing her nerves. "I appreciate your concern, but there's nothing to worry about. Now, any ideas?"

Conclusion

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

Sophie took a deep breath, her mind racing as she recounted the various haunts of her brother, those familiar places where he could easily lose track of time. "He often hangs out at the old arcade, or sometimes at the coffee shop on Maple Street," she listed, her voice steady but her heart pounding.

"Thank you for that," Torin replied, his tone serious. "But before you go, there's something crucial I need to discuss with you. If he's not at any of those places, it's highly likely he's trying to find you. I need you to be incredibly cautious, Sophie. Always be aware of your surroundings. Don't venture anywhere without the guys. Make sure they go outside first or step out of the car before you do. They're highly trained, and

they will protect you from anything that may come your way, but you have to allow them to do their jobs, alright?"

Sophie nodded, instinctively, before realizing he couldn't see her. "Okay," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I'm not telling you this to instill fear," Torin continued, his tone softening slightly. "I just want you to be prepared and safe. Kyle is picking up a phone for you today, one that has all our numbers saved in it. If you ever feel uneasy or if something seems off, you need to call us immediately. Understood?"

"Okay," she repeated, her heart beginning to race again as a wave of anxiety washed over her.

"Everything will be fine, I promise you that. Just stick close to the guys," Torin reassured her, his voice steady and calm.

"I will," she replied, her voice trembling slightly. "Just... be careful out there, okay?"

"I will," he promised, his voice firm.

"Hey, Torin," she said suddenly, her mind racing as she remembered something important. "I was wondering..." she hesitated, gathering her courage. "You remember my friend Amy and her little girl, Olivia?"

There was a moment of silence on the line, and Sophie felt her heart race. "What is it, Sophie?" Torin prompted, his voice breaking through her thoughts.

"Do you think it would be possible for them to stay with me at my house until they get back on their feet?" she rushed through her question, her heart pounding in her chest.

"I've already taken care of it," he replied, a hint of relief in his voice.

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked, her curiosity piqued.

"I got them settled into a small apartment and helped Amy arrange childcare for Olivia," Torin explained, his tone matter-of-fact yet warm.

Sophie was momentarily speechless, her heart swelling with gratitude. "... I had no idea. Thank you. Thank you so much for doing that. You have no idea how much that means to me," she said, her voice filled with emotion.

"I'm glad to help. Just be safe, Sophie," he said, and she could sense that their conversation was drawing to a close.

With a mix of disbelief and joy, Sophie passed the phone to Kyle, who engaged in a brief conversation with Torin. As she stood there, her mind raced with thoughts of how

Torin's kindness had brightened her day. She felt like she was floating on air, eager to check in with Amy and see how everything was going.

Madison, ever the enthusiastic friend, suggested they grab dinner before heading home. After enjoying a hearty meal at a local burger joint, they finally made their way back. Sophie and Madison busied themselves unpacking her new clothes, the excitement of the day still buzzing in the air.

"Thank you so much for today," Sophie said sincerely, her heart full of gratitude. "There's no way I could have managed all of that on my own."

"Of course," Madison replied with a grin. "What are friends for? Besides, I love spending someone else's money," she added with a playful wink. Sophie couldn't help but smile at her friend's lightheartedness.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to your training today. I promise we'll make up for it tomorrow," Sophie said, feeling a mix of guilt and determination.

After they finished organizing, Sophie prepared for bed, slipping into the softest flannel pants and a long-sleeved sleep shirt. She picked up her new phone from the end table, a sense of wonder washing over her as she crawled under the covers.

It was hard to believe that Torin had gifted her such a luxurious phone—the latest iPhone model, no less. She knew those weren't cheap, and a wave of confusion washed over her. Why was he doing all this? He clearly had the means, but surely there were more pressing matters he could attend to than spending money on her.

Her mind began to race with questions about his intentions. She opened her contacts and found his name nestled among her favorites. After a moment of internal debate, she finally mustered the courage to send him a text.

Sophie: Thank you so much for the phone and everything today. I really appreciate it.

She hesitated, wanting to add more, but ultimately opted for simplicity. She didn't have to wait long for a response.

Torin: You're more than welcome. Get some sleep. Know that you're safe.

A smile spread across her face as she set her alarm for three-thirty and closed her eyes, surrendering to sleep within minutes.

The next afternoon, as Sophie returned home, she found Madison waiting for her, a bright smile on her face. "You ready?" she asked, her enthusiasm infectious.

Sophie nodded, feeling a surge of excitement. "Let me go change really quick." She rifled through the clothes they had purchased, finally settling on a comfortable pair of

yoga pants and a sports bra, figuring it would just be the two of them for this training session.

Once dressed, she slipped on the new sneakers that Madison had convinced her to buy.

Madison led her down to the basement, her energy palpable. "I wasn't sure if Torin would have any equipment down here, but he has a few things. Alright, go ahead and stretch and get warmed up; then we'll dive right in."

Sophie followed her instructions, feeling a mix of anticipation and nerves.

"I picked these up for you," Madison said, handing Sophie a pair of boxing gloves. "They should fit you just right."

Sophie looked at her in surprise. "Ready to hit something?" Madison teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"So ready!" Sophie exclaimed, her competitive spirit ignited.

Madison laughed, guiding her to a punching bag. "Eventually, you'll train without the gloves, but for now, we'll start with them on."

For the next hour, Madison pushed Sophie to her limits, guiding her through a rigorous routine of punches and kicks against the bag. Then came the jogging, jump rope, push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, and more. By the end of their session, Sophie felt utterly spent, her muscles screaming in protest, while Madison appeared as energetic as ever.

"Wow, you weren't kidding. You've been doing this for a long time," Sophie said in awe, her admiration evident.

Madison smiled, a sense of pride in her voice. "Yeah, it's a passion of mine. Come on, let's grab some supper. Make sure to take a hot shower tonight and maybe some pain reliever. You're going to be sore tomorrow."

Madison wasn't joking. The next day, Sophie woke up feeling as if she had been hit by a truck. A hot shower helped ease some of the stiffness, and she managed to get through her day at work. Later, she met Madison downstairs for round two of their training.

The days flew by in a whirlwind of activity. Sophie would spend her days working at the shop, then come home to train with Madison for a few hours, followed by a quick dinner before collapsing into bed, only to repeat the cycle the next day.

Despite the exhaustion, Sophie felt invigorated. She could sense her strength growing, both physically and mentally. Work was thriving as well; customers were flocking to the shop, eager to try her famous cinnamon rolls, which were selling out faster than ever.

Sophie found herself enjoying the creative process, with customers even getting involved in suggesting new drinks and voting on their favorites.

Kevin, a familiar face from the shop, seemed to be stopping by more often. Each time he came in, he would strike up a conversation, but Sophie was usually too busy to engage. Finally, he mustered the courage to ask for her number. During a brief lull, she quickly jotted it down on a napkin and handed it to him.

“Thanks,” he said, a grin spreading across his face. “I’ll call you.”

Sophie smiled back, feeling a flutter of excitement, but she didn’t expect much to come of it. Little did she know, she was about to be pleasantly surprised.

Conclusion