

## 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 41\*\***

That evening, as Sophie sat down to dinner, her phone rang unexpectedly. Glancing at the screen, she noticed an unfamiliar number lighting up. Curiosity piqued, she answered, "Hello?"

A familiar voice responded, "Hey Sophie, it's Kevin."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Oh, hi," she replied, her tone a mix of surprise and uncertainty. She excused herself from the table, feeling the weight of her family's gaze, and made her way to the sanctuary of her room, gently closing the door behind her.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," Kevin said, his voice warm yet laced with a hint of apprehension.

"You're good. What can I do for you?" Sophie inquired, her mind racing with questions about the purpose of his call. She hadn't anticipated this conversation, and a flutter of anxiety danced in her stomach.

"I was wondering if I could take you to dinner tomorrow night?" he asked, his tone hopeful.

Sophie paused, caught off guard by his invitation. The prospect of dinner with Kevin stirred a mix of emotions within her. Part of her hesitated—she wasn't sure she wanted to go—but the last thing she wanted was to hurt his feelings. "Um, sure," she finally said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Great! I'll swing by to pick you up around six. Does that work for you?" he asked, his enthusiasm palpable.

"S-six? Uh, yeah, I can make that work," she responded, feeling a slight tremor in her voice.

"What's your address?" he continued, oblivious to her internal turmoil.

“Oh, um, just a second,” Sophie said, her heart racing. She muted the call and tiptoed down the stairs, glancing at her family who were engaged in their own conversations. “What’s the address here?” she asked, feeling a wave of awkwardness wash over her.

Kyle, Madison, and Levi paused their chatter, looking up at her with varying degrees of curiosity. “Who wants to know?” Kyle asked, his tone edged with suspicion.

“Uh, Kevin, this police officer from the coffee shop,” she explained, feeling a flush creep up her cheeks. “He, uh, wants to take me out to dinner.”

Levi’s gaze dropped to the floor, while Madison and Kyle exchanged glances, their expressions unreadable. “So, I need the address,” Sophie prompted, her discomfort growing.

“Tell him you’ll meet him there,” Kyle suggested, his tone dismissive.

Sophie felt a pang of confusion. “You guys don’t have to take me. He said he can pick me up,” she insisted, hoping to quell their apparent disapproval.

“We’re taking you,” Kyle replied firmly, returning to his meal as if the conversation were closed. Sophie sighed, sensing the finality in his words, and trudged back up to her room.

Once inside, she took a deep breath, trying to steady her racing heart. “Kevin? Sorry about that. Um, can I actually just meet you there? It works better for, uh, my schedule,” she stammered, feeling embarrassed by her own awkwardness.

“Sure,” he replied with an ease that put her somewhat at ease. “I’ll send you the name of the restaurant and the location so you have it on your phone.”

“Great, thanks,” Sophie said, her voice slightly brighter.

“I’m really looking forward to this, Sophie,” he added, his tone sincere.

“Oh, great,” she echoed, though her enthusiasm felt forced.

“All right. I’ll see you then,” he said, a note of finality in his voice.

“Okay,” Sophie replied, a hint of uncertainty lingering in her tone. “Bye.”

As she plopped down on her bed, her appetite had vanished, replaced by a gnawing sense of anxiety about the upcoming dinner. The hours dragged on, each tick of the clock amplifying her nervousness for tomorrow night.

The following day sped by in a blur of activity. The café buzzed with customers, and by eleven, they had sold out of cinnamon rolls. Helen, the owner, sang Sophie’s praises throughout the day, her excitement infectious. Business was thriving, and Sophie felt a swell of pride for her contribution.

Kevin popped in briefly, sharing a few words with her, but the rush of customers made it impossible for her to engage in a lengthy conversation. She chose to skip her break, wanting to stay busy amidst the bustling crowd. Before she knew it, the clock struck one.

"Phew," Helen exclaimed as Sophie clocked out. "What a fantastic morning!"

"It definitely was," Sophie replied, a smile spreading across her face.

"And it's all thanks to you," Helen said, her eyes sparkling with gratitude.

"That's not true," Sophie said, though a warm glow of satisfaction filled her chest. It felt good to be acknowledged for her hard work.

"I think we need to up the cinnamon roll count," Helen suggested, her brow furrowed in thought. "What do you think?"

Sophie nodded enthusiastically. "We've sold out every day. I think adding one more batch each day would be a smart move. We can see how it goes."

She made her way to the back room, grabbing her coat. Just as she was tying the belt around her waist, Helen approached her, holding out an envelope. "Here's your pay. I included a little bonus for all your hard work."

"You didn't have to do that," Sophie said, accepting the envelope with a mix of gratitude and surprise.

"I wanted to," Helen replied, her gaze steady. "I put it in cash, assuming that would be easier given your situation. But if you prefer a check, I can arrange that."

"No, this is perfect. Thank you so much," Sophie said, feeling genuinely touched.

She wrapped her arms around Helen in a quick hug before stepping out of the shop, her heart lighter than it had been in a long time. The ride back home with Kevin and Levi was quiet, each lost in their own thoughts.

Once back at the house, Sophie hurried to her room, eager to see what was inside the envelope. As she opened it, her eyes widened in disbelief. There, neatly stacked, was fifteen hundred dollars. She counted it again, her heart racing. It was real, and for less than a month's work, she felt a surge of accomplishment wash over her.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, reveling in the feeling of financial independence. No longer would she have to rely heavily on others. After stashing the money safely away, she changed into her workout clothes and headed to the basement for training.

"How was work?" Madison asked during one of their breaks, her tone curious.

Sophie beamed. "I got paid."

Madison grinned back, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "That's awesome! It sounds like things are really turning around for you."

"Yeah, maybe I can make it after all and not feel like such a loser," Sophie admitted, a hint of vulnerability creeping into her voice.

Madison frowned slightly. "You shouldn't feel that way. You're doing great."

Sophie shrugged, a mixture of emotions swirling within her. "It's just nice to have some money now to pay my own way. Speaking of which, I need to start paying rent if I'm going to be staying here."

Madison shrugged in response. "You can take that up with Torin," she suggested casually.

Sophie nodded, her mind racing with thoughts of her newfound independence. They returned to their training, and before she knew it, the clock struck four. "Oh," she said, standing up abruptly. "I'd better get ready for my date."

"Okay," Madison replied, a knowing smile on her face.

As Sophie climbed the stairs, she couldn't shake the feeling that everyone was treating her differently ever since she mentioned her dinner with Kevin. It was as if the air had shifted, and she wondered if her excitement was palpable to those around her.

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**\*\*Chapter 42\*\***

With a determined shake of her head, Sophie dismissed the nagging thought that had briefly intruded upon her mind. She dashed up the stairs, her heart racing with excitement and nerves, eager to take a shower and prepare herself for the evening ahead. This was not just any outing; it was a date, something she had never experienced before.

Once the warm water cascaded over her, washing away the day's worries, she stepped out, feeling refreshed. The steam filled the bathroom, and as she toweled off, she turned her thoughts to her wardrobe. Standing before her closet, she rifled through an array of new clothes, each piece representing a fresh start. However, after trying on at least a dozen outfits and feeling increasingly frustrated, she realized she was in over her head. "I need help," she muttered to herself, deciding to seek out Madison.

As she ventured into the living room, she found Madison deeply engrossed in a book, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Madison!" Sophie exclaimed, her voice tinged with

urgency. "I really need your help! I have no idea what to wear on this date. I've never done this before. Can you please help me?"

Madison looked up, her expression shifting from surprise to a reluctant understanding. With a resigned sigh, she replied, "Fine, let's see what we can do." She followed Sophie into her room, her eyes scanning the array of clothing strewn about.

"Okay, let's start with this," Madison said, pulling out a long-sleeved black cable-knit sweater. Sophie's heart raced as she remembered trying it on before; it was stunning, with a round neckline that fell just off her shoulders, and delicate detailing on the sleeves. Next, Madison retrieved a pair of dark wash skinny jeans. "These should do nicely. Go ahead and try them on. I'll be right back."

Sophie quickly changed into the sweater and jeans, feeling a mix of excitement and apprehension. A soft knock interrupted her thoughts, and Madison stepped back into the room. "Let's see how those fit," she said, handing Sophie a pair of sleek black suede boots, complete with a stylish buckle on the side. Sophie slipped them on, feeling a rush of confidence as they hugged her feet perfectly, albeit slightly loose. "They fit great! Are you sure it's okay for me to wear them?" she asked, her voice laced with uncertainty.

"Absolutely," Madison replied, rummaging through Sophie's accessories. "Here, try these." She handed Sophie a pair of shimmering silver hoop earrings. Sophie put them on, admiring how they caught the light. "Perfect! Now, let's tackle your makeup and hair," Madison declared, leading her to the bathroom.

"Where's all that new makeup we bought?" Madison asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Sophie hurriedly gathered the items and plugged in the straightener Madison had convinced her to buy.

As she applied moisturizer, foundation, and powder, Madison took over the makeup application, expertly enhancing Sophie's features. "You have such beautiful hair," Madison remarked, carefully straightening each strand. "Why do you always keep it up?"

Sophie shrugged, a hint of embarrassment creeping in. "I usually have it up because of work. It's just easier that way."

Madison shook her head, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "It's such a lovely color. You really should consider getting a trim. Would you come with me to my hairstylist next time? A fresh cut would make your hair even more stunning."

"Sure," Sophie replied, her curiosity piqued.

Madison deftly left most of Sophie's hair down, pulling back just a few strands on the sides. "There! All done. Want to see?" she asked, stepping aside with a flourish.

Sophie turned to the mirror and gasped. The reflection staring back at her was almost unrecognizable. "I really like it," she said, her smile genuine. "It's pretty but not overdone." Madison had chosen neutral tones for her makeup, giving her a fresh and natural look.

"Wow, you're right; it does need a trim," Sophie mused, running her fingers through her hair. It had been ages since she'd straightened it.

"Definitely," Madison agreed. "We'll take care of that soon. But for now, let's focus on getting you ready for tonight." With that, she removed the bobby pins from the sides and transformed Sophie's hair into an effortlessly chic messy side bun that Sophie knew she could never replicate.

"Much better," Sophie said, admiring the final look.

Madison beamed with pride. "You look fantastic!"

Just then, a knock echoed from the door. "Sophie, are you going on your date or what?" Kyle's voice rang out, impatience evident.

"Relax, Kyle," Madison shot back, rolling her eyes. "She's coming."

Sophie followed Madison down the hallway, her heart pounding. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Kyle's expression shifted to one of disbelief as he took in her outfit. "She's wearing that?" he questioned, incredulity dripping from his tone.

Sophie halted, glancing at Madison for reassurance. Madison, with a swift nudge to Kyle's arm, said, "Knock it off. She looks beautiful!"

"I know. That's the issue. You're letting her go to that guy looking like that?" Kyle countered, trailing Madison as they descended the stairs.

Sophie lingered behind them, feeling a mix of confusion and embarrassment. She caught snippets of their conversation, Madison's voice low and firm. Kyle's frustration was palpable, but she couldn't quite grasp the reason behind it. "Well, I called him," Kyle finally announced.

"Good," Madison replied, her tone softening. "He needs to make a move." Turning to Sophie, she flashed a bright smile. "Now, give me a smile!" she instructed, snapping a quick picture on her phone. "All right, girl. Go have a blast!"

"Wait, you're not coming with?" Sophie asked, a wave of panic washing over her.

"On your date? No way!" Madison chuckled. "I have dinner to make. You can tell me all about it when you get back." She leaned in to give Kyle a quick hug and kiss, and before Sophie could protest, she was being ushered out the door.

The car ride was steeped in silence, a tension hanging in the air. As they neared the restaurant, Kyle turned to her, his expression serious. "Do you have your phone?" he asked, his tone suddenly protective.

Sophie nodded, her stomach fluttering. "Yeah, I do."

"Good. We're not going to come in, but if anything feels off, you call us, and we'll be there in a heartbeat. Understand?"

"Wait, you're staying?" Sophie asked, confusion clouding her mind.

Kyle returned his gaze to the front. "Yep."

"You really don't have to stay. I know Madison's making dinner," she reassured him, feeling guilty.

"We'll eat when we get home," Kyle replied, his voice betraying his reluctance.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you out," Sophie murmured, guilt creeping in.

Levi, sitting quietly in the backseat, met her eyes. "We're fine. Kyle's just grumpy because he's missing Madison. We'll be good. Just focus on staying safe."

Sophie could hardly believe her ears; Levi rarely spoke. "Okay," she replied, feeling a strange sense of comfort. As she sat in contemplation, Kyle turned to her again.

"Are you going in? Or did we bring you all this way just to sit in the car?" he asked, a hint of teasing in his voice.

"Sorry," Sophie said, her cheeks flushing. "I'm just trying to muster the courage to go inside."

Kyle's expression softened. "You'll be okay, Sophie. I'm sorry for being a jerk. You look beautiful. Now go in and enjoy yourself," he encouraged.

Sophie felt a swell of gratitude, her heart warming at the kindness he showed. He was the big brother she had always wished for. Taking a deep breath, she whispered, "Thank you." Gathering her resolve, she reached for the door handle and opened it.

In an instant, Levi was there, extending his hand to help her out of the car. As she placed her hand in his, an unexpected brightness flooded her vision, forcing her to quickly drop his hand and wait for her eyes to adjust. She looked up, puzzled by the astonished expression on his face. She needed to figure out why this happened whenever she touched certain people, but for now, she had a date to focus on. With newfound determination, she slid out of the car, steadying herself.

Levi closed the door behind her and led her toward the restaurant, the weight of anticipation hanging in the air as they approached the entrance.

## Conclusion

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Sophie stepped into the warmly lit restaurant, the gentle hum of conversation enveloping her like a soft embrace. She scanned the room, her heart fluttering with anticipation, but Kevin was nowhere in sight. "I don't see him yet. I'll just wait here for him. You don't have to wait with me," she said, glancing at Levi, who stood beside her, his expression a mix of concern and loyalty.

Levi's sharp gaze swept over the restaurant's patrons, taking in the ambiance. "I'll wait," he replied, his tone firm, as if determined to stay by her side despite her insistence.

Minutes trickled by—fifteen, maybe twenty—and unease began to creep into Sophie's mind. She found herself wrestling with the thought that perhaps she had been stood up. Just as doubt began to settle in her chest, the door swung open, and Kevin walked in, a charming smile lighting up his face. "Hey, sorry I'm late," he said, making his way towards her. "You look ravishing," he added, leaning down to plant a gentle kiss on her cheek.

"Thanks," Sophie replied softly, a blush creeping up her cheeks.

She turned to inform Levi that he could leave, but to her surprise, he had already slipped away. A quick glance around the restaurant confirmed her suspicion—he was indeed gone. Kevin engaged the hostess, and soon they were led to a cozy corner table, the flickering candlelight casting a warm glow around them.

"I'm sorry I'm late. The life of a police officer. What can I say?" he said, flashing a charming smile that made Sophie's heart skip a beat.

"No problem," she replied, her own smile growing as she picked up the menu, grateful for the distraction it provided.

After perusing the options multiple times, she finally settled on a grilled chicken salad, the thought of anything heavier making her stomach churn. She hadn't realized just how nervous she was until now.

The waitress approached, taking their orders and collecting the menus. As Sophie took a sip of water, she felt an unsettling void where her security blanket of conversation had been. "So, how was your day?" Kevin asked, leaning back in his chair, his demeanor relaxed.

"It was good. The shop was really busy, so that's good," she replied, trying to keep her tone light.



Kevin nodded appreciatively. "Yeah, it's really picked up business. I'll bet Helen is glad she hired you," he remarked, his voice warm with sincerity. Sophie felt a flutter of pride at his words, but the attention made her slightly uncomfortable. "How about you? How was your day?" she asked, eager to shift the focus back to him.

"Crazy," he said, launching into an entertaining tale about a domestic situation he had dealt with earlier. His stories flowed effortlessly, each one more captivating than the last, and Sophie found herself leaning in, completely engrossed.

As their food arrived, Sophie felt a wave of relief wash over her; now she had something tangible to focus on.

Time slipped away, and to her surprise, Sophie realized she was genuinely enjoying herself. Just as she was leaning in to catch the next part of Kevin's story, a sudden commotion caught her attention. She turned her head towards the noise, her breath hitching in her throat. The storm that was Torin was approaching, and he was headed straight for their table.

Her heart raced as she watched him, disbelief flooding her senses. Torin was here, and his piercing gaze was locked onto Kevin, not her. What was happening? A sense of foreboding washed over her, and she felt as though she was on the precipice of something monumental.

Torin arrived at their table, arms crossed, a fierce glare directed at Kevin. "Can I help you?" Kevin asked, his voice steady despite the tension in the air.

"Uh, Kevin, this is Torin, my..." Sophie hesitated, her mind racing for the right word. "Friend," she finally managed, the term feeling inadequate as it left her lips.

"Sophie, go to the car with Liam," Torin commanded, his voice low and unyielding, his eyes never leaving Kevin. Panic surged within her. She didn't want to leave Kevin alone with him, not with the way Torin's presence felt like a looming storm cloud. But staying might only escalate the situation.

She glanced across the table at Kevin, uncertainty etched on her face. "Um, I guess I'd better go. Thank you for tonight. I had a really g—"

"Go," Torin barked, cutting her off with an edge of authority that sent a shiver down her spine.

Kevin stood, defiance written all over his face. "You don't have to go, Sophie. You're with me. I'll take you home." His eyes remained locked on Torin, a silent battle of wills unfolding between them.

"That's okay. I'll just... go," Sophie said, her voice faltering as she awkwardly stood up and slipped on her coat.

Kevin broke his gaze from Torin to look at her, concern etched in his features. “Are you being threatened, Sophie? Are you safe?” he asked, his voice laced with genuine worry.

A low, menacing growl rumbled from Torin, and Sophie felt the tension in the air thicken. Things were spiraling out of control, and she needed to defuse the situation, but how?

“Good evening, everybody, this is a nice place,” she interjected, her voice ringing out like a lifeline. Relief flooded her when she spotted Liam, the easy-going presence she was so grateful for. “Sophie, you look beautiful tonight. Let’s get you to the car,” he said, gently guiding her with a hand on her elbow.

Sophie shot a quick glance at Kevin. “Thank you for a lovely time,” she said, her heart heavy with unspoken words.

“I’ll call you,” he replied, but his words earned him another low growl from Torin, a warning that reverberated through the air.

Before she could say anything more, Liam was leading her away from the table, their pace quickening as they navigated through the restaurant. Sophie dared to look back, her stomach twisting as she saw Torin take her place at the table, leaning in and speaking in a low voice. She shuddered, grateful not to be on the receiving end of whatever he was saying.

Liam led her outside to a different waiting car, one that felt unfamiliar and foreboding. He opened the door for her, and she slid inside, relief washing over her as he shut the door behind her. Levi and Kyle emerged from another car, their expressions grave as they approached Liam. Though she couldn’t hear their conversation, the looks on their faces spoke volumes—trouble was brewing.

Moments later, the door to the restaurant swung open, and Torin stormed out, Max following closely behind. Sophie’s heart raced at the sight of Max; she hadn’t even realized he’d been inside. She shrank back in her seat, praying fervently that Torin wouldn’t spot her. But he turned, his gaze piercing through the tinted windows, and her heart dropped.

“Pick another car, pick another car,” she chanted silently in her mind, but her hopes were dashed as Torin approached, opening the passenger door and sliding into the seat beside her. A groan of despair nearly escaped her lips as Max took the driver’s seat, and they pulled away from the curb.

Sophie stole a glance back, seeing Levi, Kyle, and Liam walking towards their own vehicle, their expressions grave and concerned. The weight of Torin’s presence pressed heavily against her, and she could sense the anger radiating off him. She should have been terrified, but a traitorous part of her felt a flutter of exhilaration at being so close to him again.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, taking in his scent—an intoxicating mix of masculinity and a hint of cologne that sent her heart racing. She scolded herself as her eyes flew open, chastising her emotions for betraying her. She took a steady breath, trying to calm her racing heart.

What had just happened back at the restaurant? Sophie glanced at Max, who sat silently, an enigmatic figure that seemed to embody the essence of a silent but deadly guardian. He had a way of appearing wherever Torin was, and she couldn't help but wonder about the nature of their relationship. Why would someone like Torin need a bodyguard? It was a question that lingered in her mind, adding to the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions swirling within her.

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Questions swirled chaotically within Sophie's mind, each one more exhausting than the last. It had been an interminably long day, and the end still felt far away. As the car continued its journey, she felt an urgent need to reach home, to evade a confrontation with Torin that she dreaded. A grimace crossed her face as she considered her situation. The likelihood of dodging that encounter felt almost nonexistent. With every passing moment, her frustration mounted like an unyielding tide.

What had I done to deserve this? Why did Torin burst in like a storm, disrupting everything? He had no right to intrude like that. I was simply on a date. Now, I'll never be able to look Kevin in the eye again. He made me feel foolish, exposed.

By the time they finally pulled into the driveway, anger simmered within Sophie, having built up like steam in a pressure cooker. They should never have left me alone to stew in my thoughts, she chastised herself. As the car came to a stop, she flung open her door before the engine had even shut off. Without a second thought, she leaped out and dashed inside, the sound of Torin calling her name fading behind her. She couldn't bear the thought of facing him at that moment.

Sophie stormed into the house, barely noticing Madison's startled expression. "Sophie? Are you okay?" Madison's voice was laced with concern.

Sophie barely registered the question as she barreled toward the stairs, her heart racing. Just as she reached the first step, she heard Torin's voice, deep and commanding, slicing through her thoughts. "Sophie."

Anger flared within her, and she spun around to confront him. She had reached her limit. "What, Torin?" she snapped, her voice sharp as a knife. "What do you want? Isn't it enough that you ruined my date, humiliated me in front of everyone at the restaurant,

and dragged me home early? What more could you possibly want from me?" Her arms crossed defiantly over her chest, a barrier against his looming presence.

His eyes darkened, narrowing as he took in her furious stance. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Max entering the house, his expression unreadable as he headed into the living room. Moments later, Levi, Liam, and Kyle followed suit. Liam and Levi made their way into the living room, while Kyle approached Madison, whispering something that Sophie couldn't catch. It felt as though the entire household was holding its breath, anticipating the storm that was about to unfold.

"I can't do this," Sophie declared, exasperation bubbling over as she threw her hands up in frustration. Ignoring Torin's plea behind her, she turned and made her way toward the stairs, needing to escape the tension that filled the air like a thick fog.

Once in her room, she quickly grabbed the bag Madison had insisted she buy, her heart racing with determination. She tossed in some underwear and socks, a pair of leggings, jeans, a few shirts, and her favorite pajamas. Then, she moved to the bathroom, clearing out her cosmetics and shower supplies, each item feeling like a weight lifted from her shoulders. After zipping the bag shut, she slipped the cash Helen had given her into her pocket and picked up the coat Torin had gifted her.

With the bag slung over her shoulder, she descended the stairs, the atmosphere shifting as she entered the living room. The voices that had filled the space abruptly ceased, and Sophie rolled her eyes, fed up with the entire situation. Torin stood against the wall, a scowl etched across his face, his gaze following her every movement.

Without hesitation, she strode up to him and thrust the coat into his hands, forcing him to accept it. "The money's in the pocket. Thank you for everything you've done for me. I left most of my clothes behind so Madison can return them. I only took a few, and I'll make sure to repay you for them. Thank you for everything." Her voice was steady, but her heart raced as she turned to face the others in the room.

Everyone stared at her, shock evident on their faces. "Thank you all for your kindness. I will never forget it," she added, her voice softening as she glanced at each of them. With that, she turned toward the door, her resolve firm.

But Torin was there, blocking her path. "Where do you think you're going?" His voice was low and growly, filled with an anger that made her heart race.

"I'm not sure yet. I'll figure it out on the way," she replied defiantly, her determination unwavering.

He crossed his arms, his expression hardening. "No, you're not."

"Yes, I am," she shot back, her stubbornness flaring.

"Sophie," he warned, his tone a mix of frustration and concern.

“Torin,” she replied, matching his intensity.

“Hey, Sophie, let’s figure this out. Can we at least talk?” Liam’s calm, kind voice came from behind her, and it cut through her anger like a warm knife through butter. Some of her fight dissipated at his gentle tone. She didn’t want to be a jerk to everyone who had shown her kindness. He stepped closer, standing beside her. “Come on. Let’s at least talk this through. It’s too late to go anywhere tonight anyway,” he suggested, extending his hand toward her.

Sophie hesitated for a moment, torn between her anger and the warmth of his offer. But when she heard Torin’s low growl of frustration, she took Liam’s hand, a small act of defiance. In that instant, the bright light returned, illuminating everything around her. This time, she couldn’t pull her hand away from Liam’s; he held on tightly.

The brightness faded, and Sophie caught a fleeting glimpse of trees, a parking lot, and a flash of hair before everything went dark.

Suddenly, she felt herself being yanked backward, stumbling as someone steadied her. Confused, she looked up to see Liam approaching her, his expression a mix of anger and concern. But it wasn’t her he was focused on; it was Torin. “Don’t touch her again,” Torin growled, his voice low and threatening.

“I felt something,” Liam replied, frustration evident in his tone. “There’s something about her. I just need to figure it out...”

“No,” Torin interrupted, his voice a fierce warning.

Sophie stood in the center of this brewing storm, confusion swirling within her. She felt lost, caught in a whirlwind of emotions.

“It’s not like that,” Liam insisted. “I’m not trying to do anything; I just need to understand what’s happening.”

Sophie’s confusion deepened, and suddenly, her shoulders slumped under the weight of exhaustion. The wonderful day she had experienced had been washed away by the chaos of the night.

Her emotions were a tangled mess, and she felt on the verge of tears, overwhelmed by everything.

Large hands gently turned her around, and she looked up to find Torin’s gaze fixed on her. “Get some sleep; you look exhausted,” he said quietly, his voice softer despite the remnants of anger on his face.

Sophie nodded, too drained to argue. The thought of dealing with all of this tonight felt impossible, let alone finding a place to sleep. Wordlessly, she turned and trudged back up to her room. She didn’t even bother unpacking her bag; she would need it again

tomorrow. Quickly, she changed into a pair of flannel pants and a long-sleeve shirt, washed her face, brushed her teeth, and collapsed onto her bed. Her heart was a jumbled mess, and her mind was too weary to confront any of it. Thankfully, sleep came swiftly, enveloping her like a comforting blanket.

But then the dream hit her hard and fast. She found herself running through a dark forest, panic coursing through her veins as she tried to escape. No matter how fast she ran, she felt trapped, as if the ground beneath her feet was pulling her back. "Help me," she cried out in desperation. "Please, someone help me!"

The angry howls of wolves echoed behind her, each sound sending shivers down her spine. She screamed, her heart racing, knowing she wouldn't escape in time. Suddenly, she halted, her breath hitching as an enormous, snarling wolf appeared before her, its lips curled back to reveal vicious fangs. Terror coursed through her, and just as the creature lunged toward her, she screamed, feeling a searing pain in her thigh. The agony was unbearable, and she screamed again, her voice echoing into the night.

"Sophie, Sophie!" A voice pierced through the darkness, calling her back to reality.

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Sophie's frustration erupted as she kicked her feet and yelled into the dimness of her room. "Sophie, stop," a commanding voice cut through the air, and her body froze instantly at the sound.

"Torin?" she called out, her voice quivering with the remnants of fear and confusion.

"Yes," came his deep, gravelly response. "Are you okay?"

In that moment, Sophie felt anything but okay. Her heart raced, and a wave of anxiety washed over her, but she was determined not to reveal her turmoil to him. She nodded, even though he couldn't see her in the shadows. Taking a deep breath, she attempted to steady herself. "It was just a bad dream; I'm sorry to bother you," she added, her words laced with a hint of embarrassment.

"What was it about?" he inquired, his tone shifting to one of genuine concern.

"Just my past," she replied, her voice low and heavy. She wasn't in the mood to delve into the dark corners of her mind with him, not now.

She felt the mattress shift as he settled himself at the edge of her bed, and his presence was both comforting and intimidating. "Are you okay now?" he asked, his voice softer than she had ever heard it with her.

“Yes,” Sophie murmured, her gaze fixed on the wall. “I’m sorry for waking you.”

“You didn’t,” he reassured her, and for a brief moment, silence enveloped them. “Was it about when you were attacked?” he asked gently, his voice almost a whisper.

“Yeah,” Sophie admitted, her heart tightening at the memory. She was still grappling with the fear that clung to her from the dream, a shadow in her mind that refused to dissipate.

“You’re safe here, Sophie. Nothing and no one can touch you,” Torin said firmly, his words wrapping around her like a warm blanket.

Sophie let out a humorless laugh, a sound devoid of joy, and remained silent, the weight of his promise heavy in the air.

“Why did you laugh?” Torin probed, his brow furrowing in confusion.

Sophie shook her head, a bitter smile tugging at her lips. “You obviously don’t know my brother and his friends,” she replied, the thought of them sending a chill down her spine.

Torin fell silent, and Sophie took the opportunity to lie back down, hoping he would take the hint and leave her to her thoughts. To her relief, he did.

After a moment, he stood up. “Get some sleep,” he instructed gently, walking toward the door. “And Sophie,” he called out, pausing before leaving.

“Yes?” she almost whispered, her heart racing again.

“They’d have to get through me to get to you, and that’s never going to happen,” he declared with unwavering conviction. Without waiting for a response, he closed the door behind him, leaving Sophie staring at the empty space where he had been. She felt a mix of gratitude and confusion, unsure how to respond to his fierce promise. Fortunately, the weight of exhaustion soon overtook her, and it didn’t take long for her to drift back into slumber, this time without the haunting dreams.

The next morning, Sophie woke up, groggy and disoriented. She dragged herself into the shower, the warm water helping to wash away the remnants of the night’s fears. By 3:30, she was dressed and ready to face the day, albeit with a lingering weariness. She made her way down to the living room, plopping down onto the couch, her body begging for rest. The fatigue was palpable; between her shifts at the shop and the relentless training sessions with Madison, she felt like a walking zombie.

Leaning her head back against the couch, she closed her eyes for just a moment, seeking solace in the silence. Suddenly, she felt a gentle hand on her knee. “Sophie,” a familiar voice broke through her haze. She opened her eyes to find Torin crouched in front of her, concern etched on his face.

“Do you need to take the day off?” he asked, his brow furrowing slightly.

Sophie glanced up at the clock and gasped. It was already past 4:00. “I’ve got to get going,” she stammered, the realization jolting her into action.

Torin stepped back, allowing her to stand. He moved ahead of her to the door, handing her coat to her with a silent gesture. Without a word, she slipped it on, feeling the warmth envelop her. He walked her out to the car, holding the door open for her before shutting it gently behind her. Max was already in the driver’s seat, his expression focused as he prepared for the day ahead.

As they drove, Sophie couldn’t help but study Torin’s profile. He appeared completely composed, alert, and impeccably dressed in his suit, a stark contrast to her own appearance. Her hair was still damp from the shower, hastily braided, and she was clad in leggings and a long-sleeved white t-shirt, a far cry from the polished look he effortlessly maintained.

She leaned her head back against the seat, contemplating the day ahead. Before she knew it, they had arrived at the shop. Torin opened her door before she could reach for the handle, and together they walked toward the entrance. Helen greeted them with a warm smile as she opened the door, and Sophie slipped inside, ready to grab an apron and dive into the whirlwind of work.

As the store opened, the morning rush hit them hard. It was busier than usual, and around six a.m., a raucous group of four guys entered. Their loud banter filled the air, and if it weren’t so early, Sophie might have assumed they had been drinking. But what did she know? Maybe they had indeed partied all night.

She busied herself making their drinks, carrying them over to their table while politely ignoring their relentless flirting. “Here are your coffees,” she said with a forced smile, setting the cups down before turning to fetch some cinnamon rolls. Balancing four plates, she returned to their table, but just as she was about to place the plates down, one of the guys tripped her, sending her tumbling into another man’s lap.

Mortification surged through her, and she scrambled to stand, but his arm was locked around her waist, holding her in place. Panic set in, and memories of Brody and his friends flooded her mind, the fear gripping her heart.

But then, Torin and Max appeared as if summoned by her distress. “Release her,” Torin commanded, his voice cold and lethal. The man complied immediately, and Sophie scrambled to her feet, her cheeks burning with embarrassment.

“Go back behind the counter, Sophie,” Torin instructed quietly, his authority brooking no argument.

Sophie nodded, her heart still racing, and hurried back to the safety of the counter. Thankfully, Helen was in the back room, blissfully unaware of the chaos that had just



unfolded. Seeking refuge, Sophie decided to join her for a moment until she felt steadier on her feet.

A few minutes later, she emerged from the back room, only to find the table completely empty. The earlier commotion had vanished, leaving her with a mix of relief and lingering anxiety.

Conclusion

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

Sophie picked up a rag, her fingers brushing against its rough texture, and stepped into the dining area, peeking cautiously around the corner. In the back, she spotted Max and Torin, their heads bent together in concentration as they worked. A flutter of warmth spread through her chest at the sight of Torin, but she quickly shook it off. She returned to the kitchen, brewing two steaming cups of dark roast coffee, the rich aroma filling the air. She placed two cinnamon rolls on a plate, their sugary glaze glistening temptingly. She would have liked to add more treats, but she didn't quite see Max and Torin as the dessert-loving type.

With a steadying breath, she made her way back towards their table, her heart racing slightly. She could feel Torin's gaze on her, a warm weight that made her acutely aware of her movements. She focused intently on balancing the plate and cups, determined not to spill. Setting them down in front of Torin, she met his eyes for a brief moment, feeling a rush of something unnameable. "Thank you," she managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper. But before she could linger, she turned to leave, only to feel a firm grip around her wrist.

"Are you okay?" Torin's voice was low, laced with concern. She looked back at him, noting the lingering anger in his eyes, a storm hiding beneath the surface.

"I'm okay," she replied, hoping to reassure him. He searched her face for a moment, and she could see the tension in his shoulders ease slightly at her answer.

He released her wrist, and Sophie felt a strange mix of relief and disappointment wash over her as she walked back to the front of the café. As the minutes ticked by, several customers filtered in, and she busied herself with their orders. But as the day wore on, a sense of unease settled in her stomach. Torin had left without a word, and she couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment that clung to her.

The following days passed in a blur, each one stretching longer than the last. Sophie didn't see Torin, nor did she hear from him. She had no way of knowing whether he was out of town or simply preoccupied with his own life, and asking felt like an insurmountable hurdle. By Friday afternoon, the café had quieted down, and she was

grateful to be nearing the end of her shift. Just as she was about to breathe a sigh of relief, two customers walked in. Sophie approached them, ready to take their order, but her voice caught in her throat when she caught sight of the gun pointed directly at her.

“Just come with us willingly, and nobody gets hurt,” the man said, his tone unnervingly calm.

Time seemed to freeze as Sophie stood frozen in place, her heart pounding violently against her ribs. She silently willed Helen to stay in the back, but at that moment, Helen emerged, her eyes widening in horror as she dropped the cups she was holding. Their eyes met, and Sophie tried desperately to convey a sense of calm through her gaze, though her mind raced with fear. She had to think of a way out of this, but in her panic, she completely forgot about Kyle and Levi, who were still in the café.

In an instant, Sophie was yanked from behind the counter and slammed onto the floor. A scream escaped her lips, the shock of the impact sending adrenaline coursing through her veins. The weight that had pressed down on her vanished, and she heard Kyle’s voice urgently instructing her to “Stay here.” She caught a glimpse of him as he vaulted over the counter, his movements swift and determined. Sophie scrambled to sit up, huddling beneath the counter, her heart racing as she sought safety. Helen was just a few feet away, mirroring her actions, fear etched across her face.

Suddenly, chaos erupted around them. The sounds of a scuffle filled the air, and then came a deafening explosion that pierced through the noise—a gunshot. The glass window shattered, and Sophie instinctively covered her ears, desperate to block out the cacophony. Panic surged through her as she felt a hand on her knees, and she opened her eyes to see Kyle crouched in front of her, blood splattered across his shirt.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice strained.

Sophie stared at him, her mind struggling to process the scene. The ringing in her ears drowned out everything else. “You... you’ve been shot,” she stammered, horror creeping into her voice.

He glanced down, a flicker of concern crossing his face. “It’s not my blood. Are you hurt anywhere?” His eyes scanned her for injuries.

Sophie shook her head, relief flooding her momentarily. “Good. We’ve got to get this cleaned up. Just stay here; you don’t need to see this. You too, Helen.” He turned to Helen, who simply nodded, her face pale with fear.

Kyle stood up and moved cautiously around the counter. A moment later, Sophie heard him curse under his breath, confusion washing over her as she tried to understand what was happening.

Then, the door swung open.

“Hands in the air where I can see them,” a voice barked, familiar yet terrifying. “Down on your knees.” A wave of dread washed over Sophie as she recognized Kevin’s voice directing his commands at Kyle and Levi. Panic surged within her, and she quickly stood, only to squeak in alarm as three officers’ guns swung in her direction, Kevin’s included.

“Get down, Sophie!” Kyle shouted urgently.

Kevin shifted his focus back to the others. “What happened?” he demanded, his tone sharp and authoritative.

Fear gripped Sophie as she realized the danger of the moment. “They saved me,” she gasped, her heart racing. “Two guys came into the shop with a gun and told me to come with them. Kevin and Levi stopped them.”

As the officers moved to cuff Kyle and Levi, escorting them toward the front, Sophie’s voice broke through the chaos. “Wait!” she called out, desperation coloring her words. “What are you doing?” She turned to Kevin, her eyes wide with disbelief. “They didn’t do anything! I told you, they saved us!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Kevin replied, his tone flat. “A gun was discharged, and two people are dead. Self-defense or not, I have to take them down to the station.”

Sophie’s heart sank as she looked helplessly at Kyle and Levi, who had only acted to protect her and Helen. Kyle’s eyes locked onto hers, a mix of urgency and reassurance. “Sophie, Torin’s on his way. Don’t leave until he gets here. Just go in the back room.” He tried to say more, but an officer yanked him toward the door, and Sophie felt a surge of panic as they vanished from her sight.

With them gone, the fear crept back in, wrapping around her like a suffocating blanket, even though Kevin and the other officers remained. Kevin stepped closer, his demeanor shifting slightly. “Why don’t you go in the back room?” he suggested, his voice softer now. “I’ll wait to get your statement until the guys get here and get this cleaned up.”

“Thank you,” Sophie mumbled, her voice barely a whisper as she turned toward the back room. Yet, she didn’t get far; her legs gave out beneath her, and she collapsed onto the floor where she had sat moments before. Numbness washed over her, her ears still ringing, and a wave of nausea churned in her stomach.

Silence enveloped her for a while, broken only by the distant sounds of chaos outside. But soon, she heard a commotion at the front of the café. Torin had arrived.

Conclusion

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

Sophie found herself enveloped in a heavy silence, her senses dulled and her mind struggling to grasp the chaos around her. At first, there was nothing but the pounding of her heart, a drumbeat of anxiety echoing in her ears. Then, like thunder breaking the stillness, Torin's furious voice cut through the air. "I will kill everybody in this shop if you don't let me get to her." His words were fierce, a storm of anger that sent chills down her spine.

She caught snippets of muffled conversation, voices blending into a haze of confusion, but the details eluded her. All she could focus on was Torin's unwavering intensity. "Try me," he growled, a challenge that hung in the air like a dark cloud. Sophie felt an urge to rise, to intervene, to somehow defuse the situation before it spiraled further into madness. Yet, her legs betrayed her, trembling like jelly beneath her.

Moments later, Torin was before her, his presence a fierce shield against the chaos. His eyes roamed over her, a fierce determination etched into his features as he searched for any sign of harm. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice a low rumble filled with barely contained fury. Sophie managed a nod, the action feeling like a monumental effort. "Let's get you out of here," he commanded, his hand gently but firmly grasping her elbows as he pulled her to her feet. She swayed, her balance faltering, but somehow, she steadied herself against his strength. He maintained his grip on one elbow, guiding her around a corner. "Don't look," he instructed, his tone brooking no argument.

But it was too late. Her eyes betrayed her, drawn to the horrific scene before her. Two men lay sprawled on the floor, their lifeless eyes fixed on the ceiling, as if searching for answers in the void above. One of them had a gaping hole in his chest, while the other's neck twisted at a grotesque angle. Blood painted the floor in a gruesome tableau, and a wave of nausea surged within Sophie, her stomach churning as her legs buckled beneath her. Just as the world began to spin, she doubled over, emptying her stomach onto the cold, hard floor. Torin, unwavering, pulled her along, but the sickness surged again, and she retched a second time. By this point, her legs were no longer her own; Torin was practically carrying her, dragging her through the shop as if she were weightless. No one stopped them as they fled the horror behind.

When they reached the front door, Max swung it open, his expression a mix of urgency and concern. Garret was there too, quickly ushering her outside and into the waiting car. He opened the door, and with a gentle yet firm hand, helped her inside. Sophie leaned her head against the cool leather seat, shutting her eyes tightly, desperate to block out the images that haunted her mind. She heard Torin speaking to Max, his voice low and urgent, but the words faded into the background as she fought to regain her composure.

"Are you okay?" Max's gruff voice broke through her fog.

"Yes," she whispered, though the word came out garbled, barely recognizable even to her own ears.

A few moments later, Torin slid into the passenger seat beside her, tension radiating from him. "Let's go," he instructed Max, his focus shifting to Sophie. "Helen's okay." He

turned to her, and Sophie felt the weight of his gaze, though she struggled to focus on his words.

"She's in shock," she heard someone say, the voice indistinct and distant. It might have been Torin or Max; she couldn't tell.

Sophie tried to retreat into her mind, blocking out the cacophony of sounds that swirled around her. Her ears were still ringing, and her stomach continued to roll like a turbulent sea.

Eventually, the car came to a jarring halt. The door swung open, and Torin leaned over her, unbuckling her seatbelt with a swift, practiced motion. Before she could protest, he scooped her up in his arms, carrying her inside with a determination that left no room for argument. "Is she okay?" Madison's voice floated to her, laced with concern.

"She's in shock. I think she's okay, but I need you to check to be sure," Torin replied, his voice steady yet urgent. "Kyle informed you of what went down?"

Sophie didn't catch Madison's response, her mind still foggy from the ordeal. "I need you to stay here and be with Sophie," Torin instructed. "Max and I will head to the police station and sort out this mess. I'll make sure the guys get home tonight."

Madison murmured something else, but Sophie was too lost in her own world to register it. Her stomach churned again, a familiar wave of nausea rising, and she knew she had to escape the chaos for a moment. She stood, legs shaky beneath her, and made her way to the bathroom. Leaning over the toilet, she heaved for what felt like an eternity, but when nothing else came up, she splashed cold water on her face and brushed her teeth, the minty freshness a small comfort against the turmoil within her.

As she emerged from the bathroom, she found Torin standing in the hallway, his phone pressed to his ear. "Yeah," he said curtly before hanging up and striding over to her. "I have to go. Another of my guys is going to come stay with you and Madison. He'll make sure you're safe."

Sophie nodded, though she couldn't meet his eyes. He lifted her chin gently, searching her gaze as if trying to uncover the depths of her turmoil.

"I'm good," she managed to say, though she felt anything but.

"It's okay to not be strong all the time," he said softly, his voice a soothing balm against her frayed nerves. "Get some rest and eat something. That will help." And just like that, he was gone, Max following him out the door, leaving Sophie in a whirlwind of uncertainty.

With a heavy sigh, she descended the steps, feeling the weight of the world pressing down on her. Madison approached, wrapping her arms around Sophie in a comforting embrace. "You okay?" she asked, then grimaced, realizing the foolishness of her

question. "Of course, you're not okay. That was a dumb thing to ask. Can I get anything for you?"

Sophie shook her head, grateful for Madison's concern but feeling overwhelmed. They sank into the couch together, the silence heavy between them. "Have you heard from Kyle?" Sophie ventured, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Not since he first told me what happened. I'm so sorry that happened, Sophie. That must have been terrifying," Madison replied, her sympathy palpable.

"It's not something I would ever want to be a part of again; that's for sure," Sophie admitted, the weight of her words hanging in the air.

Just then, a knock echoed through the room, and Madison rose to answer it. She returned with a man following closely behind her.

"Sophie, this is Wyatt," she introduced, her tone brightening slightly. Sophie looked up at him, noting that like the others she had met, he was tall and undeniably handsome. He lacked the bulk of Max or Torin, but his physique was still impressive.

"Nice to meet you, Sophie," he said kindly, extending his hand. Without thinking, Sophie placed her small hand into his larger one, and in that instant, a bright light exploded behind her eyelids, causing her to jerk her hand back in shock. Wyatt looked at her, confusion etched on his face, mirroring the bewilderment swirling in her own mind. She had no explanation for what had just happened, nor did she know how to make sense of it.

"I'm going to work on dinner," Madison announced, breaking the tension.

"I'll help," Sophie said, rising to her feet despite the lingering unease.

"You don't have to. You can rest," Madison insisted, concern lacing her voice.

"I need something to focus on," Sophie replied, determination creeping into her tone.

"All right. Then let's get to work. We're making fajitas tonight," Madison said, pulling out pans and ingredients with a renewed sense of purpose. "You start on the peppers and onions," she instructed, handing Sophie a bag filled with vibrant peppers and another filled with onions. "I'm letting you off tonight because of the day you had, but tomorrow, it's back to working out."

Sophie nodded, grateful for the distraction as they began to chop and prepare, the rhythmic motions of cooking grounding her amidst the chaos of her thoughts.

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

Sophie nodded appreciatively, feeling a wave of relief wash over her as she took a moment to breathe. The brief respite was just what she needed. Madison, ever the lively spirit, decided to play some music, filling the air with vibrant melodies that danced around them as they settled into their tasks. Sophie felt a sense of comfort in the silence that enveloped her; she was grateful for the absence of conversation that allowed her to focus on the work at hand.

Just as they were putting the finishing touches on their preparations, the door swung open, and in walked Kyle, Levi, Max, Liam, and Torin, their presence instantly brightening the room.

“Perfect timing,” Madison chirped, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm as she made her way toward them. Kyle, with a warm smile, opened his arms wide, and Madison stepped right into his embrace, their camaraderie evident.

“It smells amazing in here,” Liam remarked, his eyes lighting up at the sight of the spread. Without hesitation, he reached for a pepper from the tray, but Sophie was quick to intervene, smacking his hand playfully.

“No snitching,” she warned with a grin, her tone teasing.

“Hey, come on!” he protested, feigning indignation but unable to hide the smile creeping onto his face.

Sophie chuckled softly, enjoying the light-hearted banter. Just then, Torin entered the kitchen, his imposing figure pushing Liam aside with a gentle grunt. He paused in front of Sophie, his expression softening. “You doing okay?” he asked, his voice low and sincere.

Sophie nodded, feeling a flicker of warmth at his concern. She stepped around him, eager to bring the guacamole she had prepared to the table. Madison, busy setting everything up, turned her attention to Torin. “Are you staying for dinner?” she inquired, glancing over her shoulder.

Sophie stole a glance at Torin, curious about his response. He hesitated, his eyes locking onto hers for a fleeting moment before she quickly looked away, feeling a rush of warmth. “I’m staying,” he finally replied, his tone steady.

The guys jumped into action, helping to carry the various dishes to the table, and they all squeezed into the space, making it a bit cramped but cozy nonetheless. Sophie found herself wedged between Liam and Torin, the lively atmosphere buzzing around them as everyone began to pass the dishes.

The chatter faded as they dug into the food, and Sophie marveled at how quickly they devoured the meal. These guys had an impressive appetite, and she couldn't help but smile at their enthusiasm. Just then, her phone buzzed, and she stood up to retrieve it from the kitchen. Seeing Kevin's name flash on the screen, she hesitated, contemplating whether to answer. Ultimately, she decided she should; it might be important given the events of the day.

"Hey, Kevin," she answered, her voice steady.

"Sophie, I just wanted to check in on you. How are you holding up?" he asked, genuine concern lacing his words.

"I'm okay," she replied softly, making her way toward the stairs, hoping to find some solitude in her room.

"I know today was overwhelming. You're probably not used to being in that kind of situation. If you need someone to talk to, remember I'm just a call away," he offered, his tone reassuring.

As she entered her room, she moved to close the door behind her, startled when a hand caught it, pushing it open once more. Torin stepped inside, shutting the door firmly behind him. Sophie stood frozen, confusion swirling in her mind. What was he doing here?

"Sophie?" Kevin's voice broke through her thoughts, pulling her back to the conversation.

"Oh, sorry. What did you say?" she stammered, still captivated by the presence of the towering figure in her room.

"I mentioned that I really enjoyed our last evening together, before we were interrupted. I was hoping we could arrange another outing soon, especially since we didn't really get to finish our last date," Kevin continued, his voice smooth.

"Oh, um," Sophie swallowed hard, her mind racing.

In an instant, Torin was right in front of her, his imposing presence demanding her attention. He extended his hand, and Sophie blinked in confusion, unsure of what he wanted.

"Give me the phone," he instructed, his voice low and firm.

Startled, she complied without thinking, handing over the device. Torin's gaze bore into hers as he lifted the phone to his ear. "I guess I wasn't clear enough the other night," he said, his tone icy. Sophie took a step back, her heart racing. "Sophie's not going out with you for dinner again. She's not interested. You need to back off and stop calling



her,” he stated, his voice brokering no argument. “And quit showing up at the coffee shop to see her. She’s off-limits.”

With that, he hung up, holding the phone out toward her. Sophie stood frozen, her mind reeling.

“What in the world, Torin?” she finally managed to voice, her confusion morphing into frustration. He crossed his arms, his expression unreadable, but Sophie refused to be intimidated by his size. She met his gaze, unyielding. “Why would you say all that to Kevin?”

“Did you want to go on a date with him?” he shot back, his tone challenging.

“That doesn’t matter. It was my choice,” she retorted, feeling a surge of defiance.

“You can’t go out with him because you’re going out on a date with me,” he declared, dismissing her words entirely.

Sophie gaped at him, her mouth agape in disbelief. “No, I’m not,” she said, utterly bewildered.

“Yes, you are,” he countered, his confidence unwavering.

“You never asked me,” she said, still reeling from the turn of events.

“Yes, I did,” he insisted, his tone matter-of-fact.

“When?” Sophie asked, desperation creeping into her voice. She would have remembered if Torin had asked her on a date!

“Just a moment ago,” he replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“That wasn’t asking, Torin; that was demanding,” she argued, her frustration bubbling over.

Torin huffed, clearly exasperated. “Fine. Will you go on a date with me?” he asked, his voice softening slightly.

“No,” Sophie replied, her heart racing.

“Sophie,” he warned, stepping closer, his demeanor shifting as he invaded her personal space. Sophie instinctively took a step back, her pulse quickening. “Don’t push me,” he said in a low voice, a hint of warning lacing his words.

Sophie continued to retreat, her back hitting the wall, leaving her with nowhere to escape. He moved closer still, their bodies almost touching. “I wanted to give you time to adjust to this, letting you process everything. So understand this: no more dates with any other guys but me.”

His hand slipped beneath her hair, gently cradling the back of her neck, and he leaned in, their faces mere inches apart. In that moment, Sophie felt frozen, her breath caught in her throat, unable to move or speak. Then, just as suddenly, the moment passed. Torin stepped back, creating a distance between them once more. "I'll be here tomorrow night at seven to pick you up. Be ready," he instructed, turning on his heel and striding toward the door. He left her room, closing the door behind him with finality.

Sophie slid down the wall, her legs trembling beneath her, unable to support her weight any longer. She stared at the spot where Torin had just stood, her mind racing. She was in so much trouble.

Conclusion

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

The following morning, Sophie found herself enveloped in the comforting embrace of sleep, courtesy of a phone call from Helen. "The shop won't be opening today," Helen had informed her. The words were a relief, freeing Sophie from the usual morning rush. Instead, the shop was undergoing a transformation—a new window installation and a thorough professional cleaning were on the agenda, all in hopes of reopening the next day.

With an entire day stretched out before her, Sophie finally stirred awake around six o'clock, her body protesting against the early hour. She felt a surge of gratitude for the unexpected time off and decided that a grand breakfast was in order for everyone in the house. After all, they had been so generous in catering to her needs lately.

She rummaged through the cupboards, pulling out flour, sugar, and cinnamon to whip up a batch of cinnamon rolls. The sweet, spicy aroma that would soon fill the kitchen was enough to make her smile. As the dough began to rise near the warm oven, she opened the fridge, eager to see what other culinary delights she could conjure up. A quick inventory revealed a treasure trove of ingredients, and soon, her kitchen counter was a chaotic but delightful display of eggs, ham, cheese, and grilled onions, all waiting to be transformed into a massive baked omelet.

Sophie's mind raced as she considered the ravenous appetites of her housemates. A stovetop omelet would never suffice, she decided. With determination, she set to work on two pounds of crispy bacon, two packs of savory link sausages, and two skillet brimming with golden, fried potatoes. Surely, this feast would be enough to satisfy their hunger. As an afterthought, she brewed a pot of rich, aromatic coffee to complete the spread.

Liam was the first to descend from the upstairs, drawn by the mouthwatering scents wafting through the house. His eyes lit up, and a broad grin spread across his face. "I

knew staying here was the right decision last night,” he declared, stepping into the kitchen and immediately sampling the food. Sophie brandished a spatula in mock threat, but he was too quick, snatching a cinnamon roll and spinning away just in time. He took a bite, his eyes fluttering shut in bliss. “These are incredible.”

Moments later, Levi joined them, followed closely by Kyle. “Good morning,” Kyle greeted her cheerfully, while Levi merely mumbled a half-hearted acknowledgment, prompting a playful grin from Sophie. “Should we wait for Madison?” she inquired, glancing toward the staircase.

Kyle chuckled, shaking his head. “Not unless we want to wait until ten!” he teased.

“I heard that!” came Madison’s voice, slightly disheveled as she made her way down the stairs. She shot a glare at her husband, who merely laughed and stood up from the table.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said, his tone playful and affectionate.

She crossed her arms defiantly, maintaining her glare, but it was clear that her resolve was wavering. With a chuckle, he pulled her into a warm embrace, planting a kiss on her lips and murmuring sweet nothings. Sophie couldn’t help but smile at their exchange, diverting her gaze to give them a moment of privacy. Once Madison had a steaming cup of coffee in hand, she seemed to perk up, and Sophie took that as her cue to start serving breakfast.

Just then, the front door swung open, and Sophie’s head snapped up in surprise. Torin stepped inside, closing the door behind him. The guys greeted him with enthusiasm. “You’re just in time!” Liam exclaimed, his mouth full of cinnamon roll. “Sophie made breakfast, and it’s phenomenal.” He took another bite, groaning in delight. “You need to marry me, woman!”

Torin playfully smacked the back of Liam’s head, causing him to choke slightly, while Kyle erupted into laughter at the scene.

Sophie remained in the kitchen as Torin approached, and her heart raced at the sight of him. He was clad in a pair of well-fitted jeans and a black short-sleeved t-shirt, his hair still damp from a shower. She had only ever seen him in a suit before, and while he carried that look with confidence, this casual attire revealed a rugged masculinity that took her breath away. The shirt clung to his muscles in a way that made her heart flutter, and she found herself momentarily lost in admiration.

He stepped closer, hovering just behind her without making contact. Leaning down, he whispered, “Smells amazing.” The warmth of his breath sent shivers down her spine, and she gripped the counter to steady herself, hoping he was indeed referring to the food and not the effect he had on her. Only when he moved away did she feel she could breathe again.

Catching Madison's eye, she saw her friend smiling knowingly. Sophie quickly focused on filling a plate, turning to hand it to Torin. "Here you go," she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

"Thanks," he replied, his deep voice sending a thrill through her.

Once she had filled the last plate and delivered it to Levi, she returned to the kitchen to prepare her own meal. As she dished out her food, Torin took the plate from her hands and headed toward the table. An idea struck her, and she decided to pour him a cup of coffee. She carried the steaming mug to the table, where Torin was already seated.

To her surprise, he pulled out her chair, a gentlemanly gesture that made her heart skip a beat. Settling into her seat, she leaned across him to place the coffee in front of him. "Thanks," he murmured, his voice low and intimate, brushing against her ear.

Sophie leaned back, trying to maintain a semblance of normalcy. She picked up her fork, taking small bites while listening to the lively conversation around her. Laughter erupted from Liam's antics, and soon she found herself swept up in the banter, relaxing enough to truly enjoy the meal.

Once they finished eating, Sophie and Madison began tackling the dishes, the guys expressing their gratitude for the hearty breakfast as they cleared out of the kitchen. All except for Wyatt, who wandered off somewhere in the house at Torin's insistence to stay.

"What do they do for work?" Sophie asked, her curiosity piqued as the kitchen fell silent around them.

"Torin runs a brokerage firm in town, and all the guys work for him," Madison explained, wiping down the counter.

Sophie raised an eyebrow, surprised. She had never imagined the guys in stuffy offices all week, but what did she really know about their lives?

"Torin owns most of the town," Madison continued, a hint of admiration in her voice. "He spends a lot of time checking up on businesses, seeing how he can help improve things for the owners and the community."

"Huh," Sophie mused, her mind picturing Torin in action, a leader of sorts. That felt much more in line with the man she knew.

"He also owns a lot of property, so he's constantly making sure everything runs smoothly," Madison added after a thoughtful pause.

Sophie glanced at her friend, the words sounding a bit odd but intriguing nonetheless. Once they finished cleaning the kitchen and putting everything back in order, Sophie found herself with a rare stretch of free time—something she didn't often have.

“So, what do you want to do for the day?” Madison asked, her eyes sparkling with possibilities.

Conclusion

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

“I really don’t know,” Sophie replied, a hint of uncertainty lacing her voice. “All I know is that I need to be ready to head out by seven tonight. The rest of the day, though, I’m completely free.”

Madison raised an eyebrow, her expression reflecting a mix of curiosity and disapproval. “So, you’re going out with Kevin again?” she asked, her tone suggesting she wasn’t too thrilled about the idea.

Sophie tilted her head, puzzled. “What’s wrong with Kevin?” she inquired, genuinely intrigued by her friend’s reaction.

Madison shrugged nonchalantly, her lips pursing slightly. “He’s just not the right fit for you,” she declared, her voice firm yet casual.

Sophie frowned, feeling a bit defensive. “I’m not entirely sure what that means. But tonight, I’m actually going out with Torin,” she corrected, a spark of excitement igniting in her chest.

Madison’s eyes widened, and she let out a high-pitched squeal. “Really? Torin? That’s amazing!”

Sophie raised an eyebrow, surprised by her friend’s enthusiasm. “So, it’s okay for me to go out with Torin, but not Kevin?” she asked, trying to understand the sudden shift in Madison’s attitude.

“Exactly!” Madison affirmed, a grin spreading across her face. “We have so much to do before your big night!” With that, she grabbed her phone and dialed a number, her fingers flying over the screen. A few moments later, she hung up, her excitement palpable. “Okay, first things first, we need to fit in your training for the day, and then we’ll hit the road.”

Sophie’s heart raced with a mix of anticipation and trepidation. “Where are we going?” she asked cautiously, a hint of wariness creeping into her voice.

“We’re getting you date-ready!” Madison called out over her shoulder as she bounded up the stairs, her energy infectious.

“I have a feeling I’m not going to like this,” Sophie muttered, her voice trailing off as Madison disappeared into her room.

With a resigned sigh, Sophie made her way to her own room to change into workout clothes. Two hours later, she trudged back upstairs, feeling the weight of exhaustion settle on her shoulders. Just as she stepped into the hallway, Madison’s voice rang out, “We’re leaving in five!”

Sophie hurriedly threw on her clothes, snatched her purse, and grabbed her coat. She felt a knot of anxiety in her stomach, unsure of what Madison had planned for her.

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The day unfolded in a whirlwind of activity, just as Sophie had anticipated. First, Madison whisked her off to the hair salon, where her favorite stylist had graciously squeezed her into the schedule, thanks to Madison’s insistence that it was an emergency. They moved on to manicures and pedicures, which Sophie had initially thought was unnecessary but soon found herself enjoying.

Next, they ventured to Madison’s favorite boutique, where Sophie protested that she didn’t need a new dress. “I have nothing that will work for tonight,” Madison insisted, her determination unyielding.

When they finally returned home, Sophie hoped for a moment of respite, but Madison had other plans. “We’re just getting started!” she exclaimed, ushering Sophie into the bathroom. She instructed her to shower and shave while maintaining the integrity of her blowout. After that, Madison meticulously applied Sophie’s makeup and touched up her hair, transforming her into someone unrecognizable.

As the clock ticked closer to seven, Sophie felt the weight of exhaustion pressing heavily on her. “Are you ready to see the final product?” Madison asked, her excitement bubbling over.

Sophie nodded, her heart racing. Madison took her hand and led her into her room, where a large mirror awaited. “Close your eyes,” she instructed. Sophie complied, anticipation coursing through her veins. “Okay, you can look now.”

Sophie opened her eyes and gasped at her reflection. She hardly recognized the person staring back at her. The stylist had trimmed several inches off her long hair, layering it and adding delicate blonde highlights that danced in the light. The blowout had given her hair an enviable shine that she had never experienced before.

Next, her gaze shifted to the dress. Initially skeptical about wearing a dress, she was now completely taken by the thin navy-blue fabric that showcased the cold shoulder style—something she hadn’t even known had a name until Madison informed her. The dress hugged her figure just above the knees, perfectly paired with nude heels and elegant jewelry that completed the look.

Madison had outdone herself, and Sophie couldn't help but smile. "You should really consider becoming a makeup artist," she said, admiration evident in her voice.

Madison laughed, a bright sound that filled the room. "I'll take that as a compliment," she replied, clearly pleased.

Sophie continued to admire her reflection, her heart swelling with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. The blush and lipstick were perfect, but it was her eyes that truly captivated her. Madison had crafted a smokey eye look that Sophie knew she could never replicate, and it made her feel both bold and beautiful.

As Madison handed her a clutch to borrow for the night, Sophie turned away from the mirror, a wave of apprehension washing over her. "I look really dressy. What if we go somewhere casual?" she asked, biting her lip.

"First of all, you'll look fantastic no matter where you end up. Second, it's Torin. He's definitely taking you somewhere fancy," Madison assured her, confidence radiating from her.

Just then, the sound of the front door creaking open interrupted their preparations. The unmistakable voices of the guys floated through the air, and Sophie's heart raced when she heard Torin's deep voice. Panic gripped her. "I don't know if I can do this," she admitted, turning to Madison with wide eyes.

"Breathe. You're going to be just fine. I promise. Now go," Madison urged, giving her a gentle push towards the door.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie stepped into the hallway. When she reached the top of the stairs, she froze, her breath hitching in her throat. Torin stood by the kitchen, looking up at her with an expression that made her heart flutter. Dressed in a sharp suit, he looked absolutely stunning. As she descended the stairs, he moved toward her, and they met on the first step. With her heels and the added height of the step, she found herself eye-to-eye with him.

"You look beautiful," Torin said in a low, sincere voice, his gaze softening as he reached out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"You got your hair done," Sophie replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

"It looks really good," he complimented, his tone genuine. "Are you ready?"

Sophie took another deep breath, feeling a surge of confidence. "Yes," she affirmed, her voice stronger now.

With a gentle touch, Torin wrapped his hand around her elbow, guiding her out of the house. As they stepped into the living room, a chorus of whistles and playful catcalls erupted from the guys. Sophie's cheeks flushed crimson, while Torin shot them an

annoyed look. Liam chimed in from the back, "If he doesn't treat you well, give me a chance!"

Sophie chuckled, and Torin growled playfully in response. They finally made their way outside, where Torin led her down the steps toward an impressive car parked in the driveway. Sophie stopped in her tracks, her eyes widening as she took in the sleek, luxurious vehicle. "What kind of car is that?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

"A Bugatti," Torin replied with a casual shrug, as if it were just an everyday occurrence.

Sophie mentally noted to look it up later; she had no doubt it was worth a fortune. Torin opened the door for her, and Sophie awkwardly climbed into the low-sitting car, feeling a mix of excitement and apprehension. The interior was immaculate, just as one would expect from such an expensive vehicle. Torin slid in effortlessly beside her, and she couldn't help but admire how smoothly he maneuvered his larger frame into the seat.

"No Max tonight?" Sophie asked, trying to break the ice.

Torin shook his head. "Nope. Just you and me," he said, glancing over at her with a warm smile. "You ready?"

Sophie took another deep breath, feeling the thrill of the evening wash over her. "Yes," she replied, her heart racing with anticipation.

As Torin pulled out onto the road, Sophie couldn't help but wonder what the night had in store for them.

Conclusion