

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 51****

The car glided through the evening streets, enveloped in a blanket of silence, the only sound punctuating the stillness being the gentle melodies emanating from the radio.

Sophie concentrated on her breathing, desperately trying to quell the whirlwind of nerves swirling within her. The anticipation was almost unbearable. Finally, they arrived at their destination—a restaurant that exuded elegance and sophistication. It was unfamiliar to her, but the lavish exterior hinted at an experience that promised to be memorable. As they pulled up to the entrance, a valet approached with a professional demeanor, ready to assist.

Torin stepped out first, then came around to her side, opening the door with a flourish. Taking his outstretched hand, she allowed him to help her out of the car, attempting to maintain her composure and avoid drawing attention. However, the challenge of stepping out gracefully in heels was more daunting than she had anticipated.

Once she was on solid ground, Torin offered his arm, and she instinctively wrapped her fingers around his impressive bicep. The sheer strength of his muscles was a revelation, and she felt a rush of warmth flood her cheeks. Sophie focused intently on keeping her balance, silently praying not to stumble as they walked.

The hostess welcomed them with a bright smile, her eyes sparkling with hospitality. “Mr. Lozano, right this way,” she chimed, leading them through the restaurant’s opulent interior. As they walked, Sophie couldn’t help but marvel at the decor—the soft lighting and plush furnishings created an atmosphere of intimacy.

They were guided to a private room, where the hostess seated them at a table positioned to offer a stunning view. Instead of sitting across from one another, they were nearly side-by-side, allowing for easy conversation and shared glances. Sophie turned her gaze towards the French doors that opened onto what appeared to be a secluded balcony. Beyond it, a series of fountains danced under the glow of color-changing lights, casting a magical aura over the evening.

“This is beautiful,” Sophie murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, as she took in the enchanting scene before her.

Torin's eyes met hers, and he nodded in agreement. "It truly is," he replied, his tone warm and genuine.

Curiosity bubbled within her, prompting her to ask, "Do you come here often?" The question slipped out before she could stop it, revealing her eagerness to learn more about him.

She didn't know him well enough to gauge whether this was a regular haunt for him, or if he brought every date to this exquisite place.

Torin set his menu down, leaning back in his chair as he scrutinized her with an intensity that made her heart race.

"I come here from time to time for business meetings," he began, his voice steady. "As for bringing other women here? No."

"Oh," Sophie replied, a wave of relief washing over her. Just as she was about to delve deeper into conversation, their waiter arrived, saving her from the pressure of filling the silence.

Sophie glanced at the menu, her eyes widening at the extravagant prices. After much deliberation, she settled on the king salmon with whipped potatoes and creamed spinach—the most affordable option, though still a splurge in her eyes. Torin, on the other hand, ordered a steak that seemed to cost a small fortune and requested truffle mac and cheese to start.

She had no clue what truffle mac and cheese entailed, but the mere mention of mac and cheese filled her with hope. It had to be delicious, right?

Once the waiter departed, Torin turned his full attention to her, and Sophie felt the familiar flutter of nerves return.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she blurted out, her cheeks warming under his gaze.

He nodded, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "I've wanted the opportunity to talk, just the two of us."

Sophie felt a shift in the air, a seriousness settling over them. "There are things I need to discuss with you—things I haven't shared about myself. I want there to be nothing but honesty between us."

"Okay," Sophie replied slowly, her heart racing.

"Listen, Sophie, I—" he began, but she instinctively raised her hand to stop him, anxiety creeping in.

"If we're going to be honest with each other," she said, her voice trembling slightly, "you should probably start by calling me by my real name." His expression remained

inscrutable, and she took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come. “My name isn’t Sophie. I changed it when I got here to avoid my step-brother. My real name is Sloane,” she confessed softly, her heart pounding as she awaited his reaction.

“Sloane,” he repeated, his voice low and sincere. “That’s beautiful,” he added, reaching out to gently tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

The warmth of his touch sent shivers down her spine. “It suits you,” he said, and she couldn’t help but smile, feeling a connection deepen between them.

Just as he was about to say something more, the door swung open, interrupting the moment. The waiter entered, placing the truffle mac and cheese in front of Torin before swiftly leaving the room. Torin picked up the dish and slid it in front of Sophie. “You’ve got to try this,” he urged, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Sophie picked up her fork, hesitating for just a moment before taking a small bite. The explosion of flavors in her mouth was nothing short of heavenly, and she couldn’t suppress a small sound of delight. After swallowing, she looked at Torin, her eyes wide with amazement. “That’s incredible! Have you had this before?”

He nodded, a grin spreading across his face. Sophie took another bite, savoring the richness. “This is literally the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” she declared, her excitement bubbling over. “You have to try some!” She offered him a bite, her heart racing as he leaned forward, taking the morsel from her fork while holding her hand steady.

“The best I’ve ever had,” he echoed in a low voice, his gaze locked onto hers, and she felt the world around them fade away.

After a moment, he gently released her hand and turned to look out at the balcony, allowing her to catch her breath. Sophie focused on the mac and cheese, her heart still fluttering. Just as she finished, the waiter returned with salads for both of them, placing them down with a flourish. Sophie eyed her plate, filled with unfamiliar ingredients, and hesitantly picked up her fork, trying to navigate the colorful assortment.

“You’re not a fan of the salad?” Torin observed, watching her closely.

“Oh no, it’s, um, it’s... good?” she replied, the last word turning into a question as she pushed the greens around her plate. “It just looks like something they dug up in the backyard,” she added quietly, feeling a flush of embarrassment.

Torin burst into laughter, a rich sound that filled the room. “Are you saying it looks like grass?”

“More like weeds,” Sophie retorted, scrunching her nose in playful disgust.

He chuckled again, clearly enjoying her honesty. “I’ll be sure to let the chef know. He’s a friend of mine.”

Sophie's eyes widened in alarm. "Oh no, please don't do that! It's fine, really." To emphasize her point, she took a large bite of the salad, only to nearly choke on it.

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After a long struggle, she finally managed to swallow the last bite of her meal, a grimace escaping her lips as she choked it down. "Nope, I can't do it," she declared, her voice tinged with a mix of frustration and amusement.

Torin chuckled softly, an easy smile gracing his face as he lifted the plate from in front of her, stacking it atop his own empty one. Just then, the waiter approached with their orders. Sophie hesitated for a moment, then took a tentative bite of her dish. "Okay, this is much better," she exclaimed, her taste buds awakening to the delightful flavor of the whipped potatoes. A smile crept across her face as she savored the moment.

Her gaze flicked upward, catching Torin's intense stare fixed upon her. "You like it," he stated, his voice low and almost possessive, as if he had a vested interest in her enjoyment.

Sophie nodded, feeling a flutter of warmth at his attention. After a few more bites, curiosity bubbled within her. "So, what do you do for work?" she asked, her mind racing with the details Madison had shared, but she yearned to hear it from Torin himself.

He launched into an explanation about his job, his eyes lighting up as he spoke. It was a family business, he revealed, a legacy passed down through generations—from his great-grandparents to his grandparents, and finally to his parents. Sophie listened intently, asking questions and soaking in every detail. Time flew by as they engaged in this easy exchange, laughter and stories weaving a tapestry of connection between them.

Before they knew it, the waiter returned to clear their plates, inquiring if they desired dessert. Torin promptly ordered a steaming coffee and a slice of rich chocolate cake. When the waiter turned to Sophie, she simply shook her head, not feeling up to any more food.

Moments later, the waiter reappeared with Torin's coffee and a decadent slice of cake that looked almost too good to be true. As the waiter departed, Torin slid the cake toward her with a playful grin.

"I ordered it for you," he said, his smile infectious.

Sophie hesitated for just a fraction of a second before grabbing her fork, eager to indulge. She took a bite of the moist cake, and her eyes widened in surprise. "That is the best chocolate cake I've ever tasted; actually, it's the best cake, period!" she exclaimed, her voice brimming with excitement.

Torin chuckled, clearly pleased. "I'm glad you like it."

"Do you want a bite?" she offered, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

He shook his head, a warm smile spreading across his face. "I'm good, thanks."

With each forkful, Sophie savored the cake, relishing its richness. However, she soon reached a point where she could eat no more. "I am so full; you're going to have to roll me out of here," she joked, laughter dancing in her voice.

Torin grinned at her playful banter.

He rose from his seat, extending his hand toward her. "Come on. Let's go look at the fountains," he suggested, his tone inviting. She placed her hand in his, feeling the warmth of his larger palm enveloping hers. He gently closed his fingers around her hand, guiding her out onto the balcony.

As they stepped up to the railing, side by side, a shiver coursed through Sophie. She had forgotten her coat at the table, and the cool air nipped at her skin.

Noticing her discomfort, Torin dropped her hand and moved closer behind her. "Cold?" he asked, his breath warm against her ear. Sophie shivered again, but this time it was from a different kind of thrill. He slipped off his suit coat and draped it over her shoulders, the fabric enveloping her in his warmth. Then, he positioned himself closer behind her, placing his hands on the railing on either side of her, creating a cocoon of safety around her.

Sophie could feel his presence behind her, a strong and reassuring force. She fought the urge to lean back against his solid chest, instead focusing on the beauty of the fountains before them. "Are you still cold?" he inquired, his deep voice sending a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

"I'm better now," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper, breathless from the proximity between them. He shifted even closer, and an electric silence enveloped them as they gazed at the enchanting scene before them.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie was surrounded by the scent of Torin, an intoxicating aroma that filled her with warmth and comfort. They lingered in that moment, the world around them fading away, before Torin finally led her back inside. Sophie felt a pang of reluctance to leave, not wanting the magic of the evening to end.

Once inside, she returned his coat, and he settled the bill with ease. Standing once more, he extended his hand to her. She placed her hand in his, allowing him to pull her to her feet. He assisted her in putting her coat back on before guiding her through the restaurant and out to the front.

"Are you up for a short walk?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"Sure," she replied, tightening her coat around her for warmth. He led her to a sidewalk that meandered behind the restaurant, drawing closer to the fountains. As they strolled alongside the shimmering water, Sophie couldn't help but admire the beauty of the night. "This is beautiful," she murmured, her voice soft and filled with wonder.

Torin remained silent beside her, allowing the moment to unfold. "I want to show you one more thing; then we'll head back to the car," he said, his tone filled with excitement. He guided her onto a path that led toward the trees behind the restaurant.

As they walked, Sophie stumbled slightly in her heels. Torin instinctively placed his hand on her elbow, steadying her with a gentle touch. "Uh, this isn't where you take me into the woods and get rid of me, right?" she asked, her voice laced with nervous laughter.

Torin chuckled quietly, a reassuring sound that eased her tension. "No, I just want to show you something special."

He led her to a small clearing within the trees, and Sophie was taken aback when she noticed that the path continued onward. They walked for just a moment before it opened up into a breathtaking area.

"Oh, wow," Sophie gasped, her eyes widening as she took in the scene. In the center of the clearing was a small pond, illuminated just like the fountains they had admired earlier. Benches encircled the area, and a large wooden trellis loomed overhead, adorned with twinkling white lights that danced in the night. Beautiful plants hung from the trellis, some familiar to her, while others appeared exotic and enchanting.

She walked beneath the trellis, gazing up in awe at the stunning beauty surrounding her. Turning back to Torin, she exclaimed, "This is so incredible!"

Torin leaned against a post, a proud smile on his face. "I thought you might like it. This right here is what the restaurant is known for," he said, gesturing around them with a flourish.

"I can see why," she replied, still taking in the magical atmosphere. Just as she turned to ask Torin about the plants, she noticed him sniff the air, his demeanor shifting suddenly. He stiffened, a look of concern crossing his face.

In an instant, he was in front of her, pushing her behind him with a protective urgency.

Sophie stumbled slightly, grasping the back of his jacket to steady herself. He placed a firm hand on her back, holding her close against him.

“Don’t move,” he commanded, his voice low and serious. A wave of fear washed over her, the easy-going man she had just shared dinner with replaced by someone entirely different. Just as she opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, she heard it—a low, menacing growl echoing through the night.

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The wolf growled louder, a primal sound that resonated deep within her. “Sophie, Torin’s wolf doesn’t want anyone close to you right now. I’m going to put you down,” Liam warned.

“What? No!” Sophie shrieked, her grip tightening around him, panic coursing through her veins. The wolf’s growl escalated, a menacing rumble that sent shivers down her spine as it stalked closer.

“I’m sorry, Sophie,” Liam said, and in the next heartbeat, she found herself on her feet, Liam stepping back to create distance.

“Liam,” she cried out, dread pooling in her stomach as the wolf advanced. She felt paralyzed, unable to move, her breath caught in her throat. The sheer power emanating from the beast was overwhelming. It stepped closer, and in that moment, Sophie’s legs betrayed her. Her body simply gave up, collapsing to the ground like a rag doll. Yet before she could hit the earth, someone caught her, but in her daze, she couldn’t even tell who it was.

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Sophie stirred awake, her eyelids fluttering open to reveal the familiar ceiling of her room. For a fleeting moment, she lay still, gathering her thoughts like scattered leaves in the wind. But then, like a tidal wave, memories surged back—memories that clawed at her heart and sent a jolt of panic racing through her veins. With a sudden urgency, she threw off the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed, her feet hitting the cool floor. She had to escape this place, this moment. The destination didn’t matter; the only thing she knew was that she needed to leave.

Her gaze flicked to the clock on the wall—it read just past one in the morning. Everyone should be asleep, tucked away in their dreams. With determination, she slung her bag over her shoulder, the weight of it a reminder of her resolve, and crept towards the door, careful not to make a sound.

As she stepped into the hallway, she made her way towards the stairs, but froze mid-step. Seven pairs of eyes were fixed on her from the dimly lit dining area, their gazes piercing through the silence like arrows. Sophie felt her heart race as she stood there, caught in the spotlight of their attention, before she steeled herself and continued down the stairs.

At the bottom, Torin pushed his chair back and rose, crossing the distance between them with purpose. He stood before her, a wall of strength and concern. Sophie's eyes widened as she took in his appearance—scratch marks marred his arms, and a bruise darkened his cheek. Somehow, he looked better than she had feared after witnessing the chaos of the wolf fight, but the sight still sent a shiver down her spine.

"Sophie," he began, his voice low and edged with urgency. She shook her head, cutting him off before he could say more.

"Please, just let me pass," she implored softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Not if you're trying to leave," he replied, his tone firm yet laced with a hint of desperation. "Please, just let me explain."

"There's nothing to explain," she stated flatly, her heart heavy with betrayal.

"Will you please look at me?" he urged, his voice dropping even lower, as if the words themselves were fragile.

"I can't. You're a... you're a..." Sophie faltered, the words lodged in her throat, too painful to voice.

"A wolf," he finished for her, his eyes steady on hers.

Sophie inhaled sharply, the realization crashing over her like a wave. She couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze, instead directing her attention to the table where the others sat, pretending to be engrossed in their own conversations. A sudden clarity struck her. "You all are, aren't you?" she asked, her voice trembling with disbelief. The heads around the table nodded in unison. Her eyes locked onto Madison's, a flicker of hope battling the betrayal in her heart. "Are you?" she whispered, barely able to form the question.

Madison's nod felt like a knife twisting in Sophie's gut. "I wanted to tell you," Madison said, her voice heavy with regret.

"I wouldn't let her," Torin interjected, his expression fierce. "She was following my orders."

"Why?" Sophie demanded, finally meeting Torin's gaze, her frustration boiling over. "Why didn't you all tell me?"

"Because of this moment right here," he answered, his jaw tightening with suppressed anger. "I wanted to give you time to accept us. I knew about your past, how you had been attacked by wolves. I couldn't risk you finding out too soon and running away."

"I wouldn't have run away," Sophie protested, but Torin raised an eyebrow and nodded pointedly at her bag. She sighed, the weight of truth settling on her shoulders. "Okay. I probably would have," she admitted, her voice small. She glanced at the table of silent witnesses before returning her gaze to Torin. "I don't know what to do," she murmured, vulnerability creeping into her tone.

Corin reached out, gently cupping her cheek with his hand. "Don't run," he urged, sincerity lacing his words. "We can work through everything; just promise me you won't run."

"I don't know. I don't think... I can't..." Her voice trailed off as she looked up at Torin, fear swirling in her chest. "I'm scared," she confessed, her voice barely a whisper.

In an instant, Torin closed the distance between them, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. "I know. I'm so sorry. That's the last feeling in the world I ever wanted you to feel. Please just give me a chance to explain," he pleaded, his voice thick with emotion.

His desperation softened her resolve, and after a moment, she nodded, the gesture almost imperceptible. "Okay," she whispered, and his arms tightened around her, enveloping her in warmth.

"Thank you," he murmured, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Thank you for protecting me tonight," Sophie added, emotion welling in her throat.

"I will always protect you, Sophie," he vowed, his voice steady and sincere.

She pulled back slightly, wanting to see the truth in his eyes. "Why?" she asked, genuine curiosity etched across her features.

"Because you're mine," he declared, his eyes blazing with intensity. He stepped closer, his hand finding the back of her neck, and slowly lowered his head, giving her a chance to retreat if she wished. But she didn't. Their lips met in a gentle kiss, a moment that felt both electric and tender. Before she could respond, he pulled away, searching her eyes. "That was for earlier. It should have happened before our night was stolen away from us," he said softly.

Sophie was rendered speechless, her heart racing as she stared up at him. How could it be possible that this giant of a man, who seemed to carry the weight of the world, had any interest in her?

“Well, I need to go to bed,” Liam announced loudly, breaking the tension and causing Sophie to jump, suddenly aware of their audience. Heat flooded her cheeks, embarrassment washing over her.

Torin chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I have to leave tomorrow to take care of some pack business. Please promise you will stay until I get back so we have a chance to talk. I know you have questions, and I want to answer them, but I have to deal with tonight first.”

“Wait, what are you going to do?” Sophie asked, a hint of worry creeping into her voice.

Torin looked down at her, his large hand brushing through her hair with a tenderness that made her heart flutter. “Just taking care of some business. Nothing to worry about. I’ll be back in a day or two.”

“Are you going after the wolves who attacked us?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes,” he replied tersely, the gravity of his answer hanging heavily in the air.

“Will you be in danger?” she pressed, instinctively placing her hand on his arm, seeking reassurance.

His gaze shifted to where her hand rested, and for a brief moment, she saw a flash of something—anger, determination?—before it faded. “Nothing I can’t handle,” he assured her, his voice deep and steady.

“Torin,” she began, her concern evident. “Do you have to go? Can’t you just... I don’t know, let it go or something?”

He stepped closer, his expression fierce. “Those wolves attacked my—” he hesitated, a flicker of emotion crossing his face. “They attacked you; I can’t let that go,” he said, anger lacing his words. “I’m also trying to track down who those men in the coffee shop were working for and why they were after you.” She noticed the color in his eyes shifting, more vibrant than she had seen before. It dawned on her that this was a sign of his deep emotions—something she had never witnessed in him until now.

“Okay,” she said simply, the weight of the situation settling around them. She wouldn’t pretend to understand the world she had stumbled into, nor would she dictate what he should or shouldn’t do. “I’ll be here when you get back,” she promised quietly.

“Thank you,” he replied, his voice deepening as he relaxed slightly.

“I just have one question,” Sophie said, her curiosity piqued. He nodded, encouraging her to continue. “Are you, like, in charge or something? Everybody calls you boss and gets their orders from you?”

"I'm the alpha," he stated with a powerful authority that sent a thrill through her.

Sophie's heart raced at his words, the implications of his position settling in her mind. The night felt softer, yet the weight of their reality loomed large, and the path ahead remained uncertain, but somehow, hope flickered in the shadows.

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"Oh," Sophie murmured, her mind racing as she struggled to find the right words to respond.

"Liam's my beta," Torin elaborated, a hint of pride in his voice. "He's my second in command." The revelation hit Sophie like a cold splash of water; her eyebrows shot up in surprise, and she could feel her astonishment radiating from her expression. "I can see that you're surprised," Torin added, a knowing smirk playing on his lips.

"Hey, what's with all this secretive chatter? I'm a good beta," Liam interjected, striding over to join the conversation with a playful grin.

"Max is my top enforcer, responsible for all security matters. Levi, Kyle, Madison, and Wyatt are just a few of my enforcers," Torin continued, his tone shifting to a more serious note. "You haven't met the others yet."

"There are more of you?" Sophie gasped, her breath catching in her throat as she tried to process the enormity of what she was hearing.

The guys seated around the table erupted into laughter, and Torin shot them a disapproving glare that quickly silenced them. He turned back to Sophie, his expression softening. "We have nearly four hundred wolves in the Northwoods Pack," he explained, his voice steady but filled with a sense of responsibility.

Sophie stared at him, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Wow," Liam chimed in, still standing close by. "We're the largest pack in the country."

Sophie's gaze shifted to the other occupants in the room, her mind still grappling with the fantastical notion that these people could transform into wolves. "So, you all... turn into wolves?" she whispered, the weight of the revelation settling heavily on her shoulders. They nodded in unison, affirming her incredulous thoughts. Suddenly, a wave of fatigue washed over her; she felt utterly drained from the whirlwind of information. "You know what? I think I'm going to head to bed. It's getting late," she announced, her voice barely above a whisper.

Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and ascended the staircase, her mind screaming for relief from the overwhelming revelations of the night.

“Sophie,” Torin called out, his voice echoing behind her. She ignored him, quickening her pace toward her sanctuary. “Sophie,” he repeated, his voice now closer, urgency lacing his tone. If only she could reach her room... But just as she thought she was in the clear, he caught her hand, gently but firmly, turning her to face him. “Sophie.”

“Please, Torin, I can’t deal with this right now,” she pleaded, her eyes squeezed shut, as if that could block out the reality surrounding her.

“Your bag,” he said, his tone softening as he extended her bag toward her.

Sophie opened her eyes, startled to see him holding it out. “Oh, thank you,” she muttered, hastily taking the bag from him before retreating into her room. Once inside, she tossed the bag onto the floor and climbed into bed, the weight of the day pressing down on her.

She didn’t even feel like changing out of her clothes; after all, she would have to rise in just a couple of hours. Lying there, she stared at the ceiling, her thoughts swirling like a storm. She tried to piece together the fragments of what she had seen and heard, but no matter how hard she tried, it remained a tangled mess in her mind. Two long hours crawled by before she finally mustered the energy to get out of bed, the thought of work providing a much-needed distraction.

With mechanical precision, she braided her hair and slipped into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved dark purple sweater. She pulled on the black Converse sneakers that Madison had convinced her to buy, grabbed her coat, and left her room. As she descended the stairs, she was surprised to find Madison and Kyle seated at the table, deep in conversation. Madison rose to greet her, a look of concern etched on her face. “I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” she said earnestly.

Sophie felt a wave of understanding wash over her. “It’s okay. I get it,” she replied, not wanting to delve deeper into the emotional turmoil just yet. Madison seemed to want to say more, but Sophie cut in, “Why are you two still up? You must be exhausted.”

Madison’s face lit up with a grin. “Now that we’re no longer keeping our secret, I get to be part of your protection detail!”

Sophie blinked, momentarily taken aback. “Oh, right, because you’re a...”

“Enforcer,” Madison completed, and it was then that Sophie truly noticed her transformation. The sweet, nurturing woman she had known was replaced by someone who radiated strength and confidence, clad in tight black jeans, sleek black heeled boots, and a striking red V-neck shirt topped with a black leather jacket.

“Wow,” Sophie breathed, genuinely impressed.

“Right?” Kyle chimed in, wrapping his arms around Madison affectionately. “She’s one smokin’ hot enforcer. And to answer your question from earlier, we’ll be fine today. Wolves can go without sleep longer than humans can. Now, we’d better get going, or you’ll be late.”

The urgency in his voice snapped Sophie back to the present. “Right,” she said, shaking off the remnants of her earlier thoughts. They made their way outside, and she felt a wave of relief wash over her when she saw that the car was already running, the warmth radiating from it a welcome comfort.

The drive to the coffee shop was filled with lively chatter, Madison and Kyle exchanging playful banter while Sophie mostly gazed out the window, watching the world pass by in a blur of colors and shapes.

As she stepped into the coffee shop, a familiar, strong scent of cleaning products enveloped her, instantly triggering memories of her last visit. She paused, overwhelmed for a moment, when Helen came to stand beside her, linking her arm through Sophie’s. “You okay?” she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Sophie nodded, forcing a smile. “Are you?” she replied, wanting to return the sentiment.

Helen nodded resolutely, her eyes sparkling with determination. “It’s going to take more than that to stop us.” Sophie felt a flicker of hope at her words. “Here. We’ve installed new locks on the doors and new keys. I made an extra one for you.” Helen handed her the key, and Sophie accepted it with gratitude.

“Thank you for trusting me with this,” she said sincerely, her heart swelling with appreciation.

Helen chuckled lightly. “I think we’re way past that now, girl. I’d trust you to run the whole place for a month if I had to.” Sophie smiled, buoyed by Helen’s unwavering faith in her abilities.

“Are you ready to get back to work?” Helen inquired, her enthusiasm infectious.

“Yes,” Sophie affirmed, her spirits lifting.

“All right then. Let’s do this!” Helen exclaimed, and with that, Sophie made her way into the back room to grab an apron and prepare for the day ahead. The comforting aroma of fresh coffee beans soon filled the air, mingling with the sweet scent of baking cinnamon rolls. Sophie inhaled deeply, the familiar scents wrapping around her like a warm blanket. This was where she belonged; this was her happy place. A smile crept onto her face as she began serving customers, the shop buzzing with energy. News of the previous night’s events had drawn in a mix of patrons—some there to show support, others simply curious. Regardless of their reasons, both Helen and Sophie welcomed the business, grateful for the distraction it provided.

During a brief lull, Sophie carried a tray of coffee and cinnamon rolls to the back table where Kyle and Madison were huddled over a laptop, papers strewn about in disarray. Madison looked up as Sophie approached, her expression shifting from concentration to delight.

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"I've brought you both a little pick-me-up," Sophie announced cheerfully, balancing two steaming cups in her hands. She handed one to Kyle, saying, "Here's your black dark roast, just the way you like it," before turning to Madison with a flourish. "And for you, our special of the day: a delightful latte infused with cinnamon, maple, and a whisper of butterscotch."

"Ooh," Madison exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with excitement. She lifted the cup to her lips, savoring a small sip. "Oh my goodness; that's absolutely to die for!"

Sophie's heart swelled with pride at the compliment. "I'm so glad you enjoy it! I've been perfecting that recipe," she said, a smile dancing on her lips. "But I really must get back to work now." With a light step, she made her way to the front of the store, the warmth of her creation still glowing in her chest. That drink had become her favorite, a little piece of joy she treated herself to during her breaks, sipping it as she walked to and from the library.

As the clock ticked down to her break time, Madison coaxed her into stepping out for sandwiches from the little shop just a few doors down, despite the lunch Sophie had meticulously packed the night before. She usually prepared a simple sandwich and an apple, but the thought of fresh food and coffee was tempting.

"What do you do to keep busy when you're stuck in the shop all day?" Sophie inquired, glancing at Kyle, who had spent countless hours at Sip and Drip, his presence a constant comfort.

"Torin always has work for us," he replied, his tone casual yet vague, leaving Sophie curious about the details.

They strolled along the sidewalk, the sun casting playful shadows, when suddenly Kyle raised his hand, signaling them to halt. Madison instinctively stepped behind Sophie, creating a protective barrier between her and whatever threat loomed ahead. Kyle gestured toward the alley, and without warning, two men emerged from the shadows. Sophie felt a rush of adrenaline, her instincts kicking in as she prepared to defend herself, but before she could react, Kyle and Madison sprang into action, causing the intruders to flee in panic.

Madison turned back to Sophie, concern etched on her face. "Are you okay?"

“Yeah, but I didn’t even get to do anything,” Sophie pouted, a mix of frustration and disappointment bubbling inside her.

Kyle stepped forward, his expression serious. “I think we should get Sophie home,” he stated firmly.

“No,” Sophie interjected immediately, shaking her head defiantly.

Kyle’s eyes bore into hers. “They were wolves, Sophie. They could come back. I need to call Torin.”

“Wait,” Sophie insisted, her voice steady. “They’re gone now. They probably won’t return, especially knowing they can’t take you. Let’s just go back inside. Please, can we wait to call Torin until my shift is over? I’ve already missed so much time, and Helen needs my help,” she pleaded, her eyes wide with urgency.

Kyle glanced at Madison, who nodded in agreement. “Fine,” he relented, though his tone remained cautious. “But if they show up again, we’re out of here.”

“Agreed,” Sophie replied, relief washing over her as they made their way back to the shop.

They walked briskly, Madison and Kyle flanking her, both on high alert. Once they reached Sip and Drip, Sophie dove back into her work, her heart still racing from the earlier encounter. She noticed Kyle and Madison had settled at a table near the front door, their protective instincts still evident. A smile tugged at her lips as she served customers, but soon, a familiar voice cut through the buzz of the café.

“Sophie!” Kevin’s loud greeting made her grimace, but she forced a smile as she turned to face him. “Hey, Kevin,” she replied, her tone bright yet cautious.

“How’s my favorite barista doing today?” he asked, his grin wide and infectious.

Sophie couldn’t help but return the smile, despite the flutter of unease in her stomach. “I’m good! How about you?”

“I’d be a lot better if you’d agree to go out with me again,” he said, his eyes sparkling with hope.

Sophie froze, her heart sinking. She didn’t know how to respond. Kevin was a nice guy, but there was no spark between them—nothing like the connection she felt with Torin. Plus, she was acutely aware that Torin had made his feelings about Kevin clear. Perhaps Kevin hadn’t picked up on the signals, or maybe he simply didn’t care. Either way, the thought of going out with him again filled her with dread, especially considering the potential fallout with Torin.

"You're not going to leave a guy hanging, are you?" Kevin asked, his grin widening, oblivious to her internal struggle.

"I don't know," Sophie began hesitantly. "I think—"

"Don't think. Just say yes," he interrupted, his eagerness palpable.

"Well, I—" she tried to articulate, but he cut her off again.

"I'm a police officer, Sophie. Nothing bad is going to happen. You'll be perfectly safe unless you just don't like me. If that's the case, just say the word. I don't want to make you do something you don't want to do," he said, his voice tinged with hurt.

"No, no! It's not that. I do like you; I just—" she started, but he was already cutting her off again.

"Great! Then it's a date. I'll pick you up here at the shop tomorrow at one p.m." With that, he turned on his heel and left, leaving Sophie staring after him in disbelief.

What just happened? she thought, placing her hands over her face in exasperation. How did I end up with a date with him again? "Torin's going to kill me," she mumbled under her breath, the weight of the impending conversation heavy on her heart.

"Yes, he is," Madison chimed in, startling Sophie. "I really don't like that guy," she added, her anger evident as she glared at the door through which Kevin had just exited.

"I'm sorry! I don't know how this happened. I told him I didn't want to go out with him, but somehow, I'm going on a date with him again," Sophie confessed, her voice laced with frustration.

"Word of advice?" Kyle interjected, his tone serious. "Don't let Torin hear it from someone else. You need to be the one to tell him," he advised. "Call him as soon as your shift is done."

Panic surged through Sophie. "I can't call him!"

Madison's expression softened but remained resolute. "You need to. It will be better this way."

"Better for who?" Sophie challenged, but neither of them responded. Just then, a customer walked in, prompting Kyle and Madison to turn back to their table. Sophie took the customer's order and prepared their drink, but her mind was elsewhere, consumed by the looming conversation with Torin about her unexpected date with Kevin. How on earth was she going to break that news to a certain alpha?

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Sophie let out a weary sigh as she completed her shift and clocked out, a sense of dread settling in her stomach at the thought of having to speak with Torin. It felt as if the weight of the world rested squarely on her shoulders, and she had Kyle to thank for this predicament. He had made it abundantly clear that there would be no escaping this conversation.

As they walked across the street to where the car was parked, the evening air was cool against her skin, but it did little to ease her anxiety. The streetlights flickered on, casting a soft glow around them. Once they settled into the car, Kyle turned to her with a look that brooked no argument. "Call him," he commanded, his tone leaving no room for debate.

"But..." Sophie hesitated, her mind racing.

Kyle shook his head firmly, his expression unyielding. "Call him."

With a reluctant sigh, Sophie pulled out her phone, navigating to her favorites where Torin's number was stored. She pressed the call button and held the phone to her ear, her heart racing as it began to ring. Each tone felt like a countdown, amplifying her anxiety.

Torin picked up almost instantly. "Sophie?" His voice resonated with a deep intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. "What's wrong?" he demanded, concern laced with urgency. The abruptness of his tone startled her, leaving her momentarily speechless.

"Uh, Sophie," he snapped, his voice sharp. "What happened?"

Wow, he really is intense tonight. "Nothing happened," she finally managed, scrambling for the right words. "Well, I mean, something did happen, but Madison and Kyle handled it. There's no need to worry. That's not why I'm calling. I—"

"What happened, Sophie?" His voice dropped to a low, dangerous timbre that made her heart race even faster.

Sophie exhaled slowly, trying to calm the storm of emotions within her. "Look, it was nothing serious. Just two guys attacked us; Kyle said they were wolves. But like I said, nothing really happened. Kyle and Madison took care of them. By the way, Madison is amazing," she rambled, desperately trying to divert the conversation.

"Put Kyle on the phone," Torin demanded, cutting through her thoughts.

With an eye roll, Sophie pulled the phone away from her ear and passed it to Kyle, who took it as if he had been anticipating this moment. "Yeah," he said, his voice steady. "She's not hurt," he reassured Torin right away.

Sophie tuned out as Kyle began to recount the events of the evening, her mind drifting. She had lived through it; she didn't need to hear the details recounted again. When Kyle finished, he handed the phone back to her with a slight nod.

Reluctantly, Sophie took it. "Hello?" she said, her voice a mix of annoyance and fatigue.

"Are you okay?" Torin's voice was softer now, tinged with concern.

"I'm fine, just like I told you. Kyle and Madison took care of everything," she replied, a hint of irritation creeping into her tone.

"Kyle mentioned you have something else to tell me," Torin continued, his tone shifting back to that familiar intensity.

"Of course he did," Sophie said, shooting a scowl at Kyle, who merely shrugged. Taking a deep breath, she prepared to share the news that had been gnawing at her. "So, Kevin came into the shop today." She paused, sensing the silence on the other end. It was unsettling. "I don't really know how it all unfolded. I told him I couldn't go out with him, but..." her voice trailed off, uncertainty creeping in as she remembered the pressure he had put on her.

"Anyway, he kind of pushed me, and I sort of agreed to go out with him tomorrow," she blurted out, the words tumbling from her lips in a rush.

Silence stretched between them, and she felt a knot tighten in her stomach. "Torin?" she ventured softly.

"I'll take care of it," he said, his voice low and chilling, sending a shiver down her spine.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, suddenly worried about Kevin's safety.

"Not for you to worry about," he snapped, his anger palpable.

"Just don't hurt him or kill him or something! I'm pretty sure you can get into serious trouble for that, especially since he's a policeman," Sophie insisted, her voice rising slightly.

"Are you worried about him?" Torin growled, the edge in his tone sending alarm bells ringing in her mind.

"Don't give me that attitude! Of course I'm worried. I've seen what you're capable of," Sophie shot back, her frustration boiling over.

“Are you good if we take off?” Madison asked gently, breaking the tension that had built up between them.

Sophie nodded, but then paused. “Oh, wait,” she said, turning to Madison.

“What’s wrong?” Torin’s voice interrupted, sharp with concern.

“Oh, sorry, I was talking to Madison. Just a second, Torin,” she said quickly, covering the phone. She turned to her friends, her heart racing. “I left my purse in there. Just let me grab it really quick.” She wasn’t accustomed to carrying a purse, but now that she had some money of her own, she was trying to adjust. She wanted to be independent, to be able to pay her own way, whether it was for meals or shopping. “You guys can wait here. I’ll just be a moment.”

Stepping out of the car, she jogged across the street, her mind still swirling with thoughts of Torin and the looming confrontation with Kevin.

After using her key to unlock the shop, she stepped inside, taking a deep breath to steady herself. “Hey, Torin, I’m sorry. I just had to run in to grab my purse,” she said, holding the phone back to her ear.

“Are Madison and Kyle with you?” he asked, his voice laced with concern.

“No, they’re right outside, and please don’t get mad at them. I told them to wait in the car,” Sophie replied, her tone slightly defensive.

She hurried to the back room, retrieving her purse and making her way back toward the front of the shop.

“They’re supposed to stay with you at all times,” Torin reminded her, his tone firm.

Sophie rolled her eyes as she approached the front door. “You really are bossy,” she muttered under her breath. Just then, something outside caught her attention, and she glanced out the window, her heart dropping.

Her step-brother Brody stood there, flanked by two of his friends, and her breath hitched in her throat. Panic surged through her as she dropped to her knees behind a pillar, her heart pounding in her chest. Suddenly, she remembered she was still on the phone with Torin.

“Sophie, Sophie,” he called, his voice urgent.

“Torin,” she whispered, fear creeping into her voice. “He’s here.” The words barely escaped her lips.

“Who?” Torin asked, his tone sharp with focus.

“My s-st-step-b-brother,” she managed to stammer, her voice trembling.

There was a brief silence on the line before Torin spoke again. "Sophie, listen to me. I put out a pack call. Madison and Kyle are on their way. The others will be there soon. Go to the back room. Lock yourself in there until they arrive. Go, Sophie. Now."

If Torin's words hadn't spurred her into action, the sounds of a scuffle outside certainly would have. She stood up, adrenaline coursing through her veins, and began moving toward the back room. But as she glanced out the window, her heart sank. Madison and Kyle were still in their human forms, likely because they were aware of the public eye. But that wasn't what made her freeze; it was the sight of blood streaming down Madison's face that ignited a fierce anger within Sophie.

Madison didn't deserve to be dragged into this chaos; she was her friend, and Sophie felt a surge of protectiveness.

"Sophie, answer me!" Torin shouted through the phone, pulling her from her thoughts.

Startled, she replied, "I have to go out there! They hurt Madison!"

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

"Sophie, you need to listen to me. Get yourself into the backroom, right now! I'm not far behind," the urgency in Liam's voice pierced through the chaos.

Sophie spun around, her heart racing as a chilling sound echoed behind her. The color drained from her cheeks, leaving her feeling faint and vulnerable.

"Hello, sister. I've missed you," Brody's voice dripped with malice, sending a wave of dread coursing through her.

Panic surged within her, and she let out a scream, her instincts urging her to flee towards the back door. But before she could take a single step, Brody lunged at her, tackling her to the ground with a brutal force. Desperation clawed at her as she scanned the floor for her phone, her lifeline in this nightmare. She managed to sit up, fingers stretching out to grasp it, but Brody's foot connected with her side, sending her crashing back down.

With his knee pressing painfully into her back, immobilizing her, Brody reached out and snatched the phone from the floor.

"Looking for this?" he taunted, a smirk plastered across his face. Sophie's heart raced as she reached for it, but he pulled it away, lifting it to her ear. "I'm sorry, but Sophie's not available for a chat right now. She's a bit preoccupied," he added, his gaze fixed on her with a twisted smile.

Through the phone, she could hear Torin's furious voice, a roar of rage that echoed her own fear.

"Torin!" she screamed, desperation spilling from her lips. Brody seized her hair, wrenching her head back painfully, his breath hot against her skin.

"Miss me?" he sneered, and Sophie felt a cold wave of terror wash over her. She struggled to recall her training, but all she could feel was the paralyzing grip of fear. Brody loomed over her, his hold on her head forcing her into an awkward and agonizing position.

"You made a grave mistake by running away. You have no idea what you're up against. This is far bigger than you or me, little sister. There's no escaping what's coming for you. I'll be back when you least expect it, and next time, those wolves won't be around to save you," he threatened, delivering one last brutal kick that sent Sophie curling into a fetal position, the pain radiating through her body.

Suddenly, the door to the shop burst open with a force that startled her. Sophie blinked, her eyes wide with disbelief, and saw that Brody had vanished. Liam was at her side in an instant, his presence a reassuring anchor amidst the chaos. "Check the back!" he commanded, urgency in his tone. Dropping to the ground beside her, he asked, "Sophie, where are you hurt?"

She opened her mouth to respond, but the words wouldn't come. The impact of Brody's assault had knocked the breath from her lungs, leaving her gasping for air. Liam gently rolled her over, his voice soothing as he urged, "Take a breath, Sophie. Just breathe."

As she struggled to regain her composure, she felt another presence beside her. It was Torin, his expression a mixture of fury and concern as he leaned in close. "Where are you hurt?" he asked, his voice low and steady.

"Just my stomach and ribs," she managed to gasp, each word a painful effort. Breathing felt like a monumental task, and she could feel the weight of the world pressing down on her.

"Paul will be here any moment. Once he gives the okay, we'll get you out of here," Torin assured her, rising to bark orders with an authority that made her feel a flicker of hope. Sophie closed her eyes, wishing desperately for the world around her to fade away.

Paul arrived shortly thereafter, his presence a blur in her mind as he checked her injuries. She kept her eyes shut, focusing on the sound of his voice and the gentle touch of his hands. She felt the tightness of bandages around her ribs, and he handed her some pills, but she was too exhausted to respond, longing only to escape the nightmare that had engulfed her life.

As time passed, she felt herself being lifted again. She didn't open her eyes; she recognized Torin's familiar scent and the warmth of his arms. She wanted to look at

him, to reassure herself that she was safe, but her eyelids felt like lead. She heard Torin giving orders again, and then they were moving.

Moments later, she found herself in the backseat of a Land Rover. The voices of Liam and Max floated to her from the front, but she remained still, resting against Torin's chest, trying to quell the tumult in her stomach. Eventually, the vehicle came to a halt. Torin slid out effortlessly, still carrying her, and for a brief moment, she managed to crack her eyes open. The surroundings were unfamiliar, and confusion washed over her as they approached a beautiful log cabin.

"Where are we?" she managed to whisper, her voice barely audible.

"My place," Torin replied, his gaze steady and reassuring. Sophie felt a mix of emotions at his words. Did he own this place, or was it his home? She closed her eyes again, surrendering to the comforting embrace of his arms as he carried her inside.

Soon, she felt the softness of a bed beneath her. She struggled to open her eyes, but fatigue consumed her. "You're in my home, Sophie," Torin's voice was gentle, wrapping around her like a warm blanket. "I'll watch over you and keep you safe. Just rest now; let your body heal while the pain reliever works."

Sophie longed to respond, to express her gratitude, but the medication Paul had given her was too potent. She succumbed to the darkness, drifting away to a place free of pain and the terror of her stepbrother.

When she awoke later, a sharp gasp escaped her lips as pain shot through her body.

Torin stood before her, concern etched on his face. "Let me help you sit up so you can take these painkillers Paul left for you," he said softly, sliding his arm behind her and propping her up with careful precision.

Even with his gentleness, pain lanced through her, and she grimaced as she accepted the pills he offered. As soon as he lowered her back onto the bed, the medication took hold once more, pulling her back into the comforting abyss of sleep.

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****Chapter 59****

At long last, Sophie stirred awake, a gentle clarity washing over her, accompanied by a noticeable reduction in pain. Blinking against the soft light filtering through the curtains, she took a moment to survey her surroundings.

The room itself was quite spacious, albeit somewhat unadorned—exactly what one might expect from a bachelor's spare room. It had an air of simplicity, yet there was a certain charm to it that made it feel welcoming in its own right.

With a determined effort, Sophie managed to prop herself up against the pillows. Her body protested with a dull ache, but it was a far cry from the intense discomfort she had been experiencing earlier. A quick glance down revealed that she was clad in a long-sleeved pajama set, which brought her a small measure of comfort.

Just then, a soft knock echoed from the door. "Come in," she called out, her voice a little hoarse but steady.

"Hey, you're awake," Torin said, his tone surprisingly gentle, a stark contrast to the more brash demeanor she was accustomed to.

He leaned casually against the doorframe, his presence somehow both reassuring and protective. "How are you feeling?" he inquired, his eyes searching hers for signs of distress.

"Better than I was," she replied, her voice slightly stronger now.

"Do you want to get out of bed for a bit and check out the rest of the house?" Torin suggested, a hint of enthusiasm in his voice.

"I think I need to take a shower first. I'm sure I stink," she admitted, grimacing at the thought.

Torin chuckled softly. "You always smell amazing, Sophie," he said, his deep voice laced with sincerity. She knew he was being kind, but she brushed it aside with a wave of her hand. "If you're up for it, I'd love to give you a tour of the house and whip up something for you to eat. Then you can take a shower if you're still feeling okay," he added, his eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief.

Sophie nodded, and before she could protest any further, Torin swept her into his arms, lifting her effortlessly and carrying her out of the room.

"I can walk, you know," she protested weakly, but he merely smiled, his grip firm yet gentle as he carried her down the hallway and into a vast open area.

As they entered the space, Sophie's gaze roamed in awe. The home was breathtaking, unlike anything she had ever seen before. The walls, constructed from massive logs, added a rustic elegance, and the ceiling mirrored the same natural beauty. The open-concept design created an inviting atmosphere, where the large living room centered around a magnificent stone fireplace. A plush wrap-around couch and two inviting recliners were perfectly positioned to enjoy the warmth of the crackling fire. Above the fireplace, a large television hung, completing the cozy ambiance.

The living room seamlessly flowed into a spacious kitchen outfitted with gleaming stainless steel appliances and a long island that stretched the length of the room. To the side, a grand dining table sat beneath the expansive windows that overlooked a wraparound porch, inviting nature inside. Stairs led up to a loft area that offered a bird's-eye view of the living room below.

"This is beautiful," Sophie whispered, her voice barely above a breath.

Torin glanced down at her, a flicker of pride in his expression. "You like it?" he asked, his tone softening further.

Sophie couldn't help but chuckle, though it brought a twinge of pain. "Like it? It's like a dream home from one of those giveaway shows. It's incredible!" she exclaimed, her heart swelling with admiration.

Torin's lips curled into one of his rare smiles, a sight that warmed her more than the fire ever could. "Good," he replied simply, and he gently set her down on the couch, ensuring she was comfortable.

"Let's get you something to eat," he said, moving toward the kitchen with purpose.

"Okay," Sophie replied, her stomach growling softly in agreement.

As he rummaged through the kitchen, he turned back to her. "How about grilled cheese?" he suggested, his voice laced with a hint of playful challenge.

"You cook?" she asked, a spark of surprise lighting her eyes.

"It's just grilled cheese. I think I'll manage," he replied dryly, a smirk playing on his lips.

Sophie's curiosity piqued as she scanned the kitchen. "Where is everybody?" she asked, her mind racing with questions.

Torin glanced up from his task, a hint of pride in his demeanor. "This is my home. I live here by myself," he explained, the words hanging in the air.

"Oh," she said, taken aback. The enormity of the beautiful home suddenly felt more personal. "Um, am I just staying here for lunch and then going back home?" she ventured, her voice trailing off as uncertainty crept in.

"Right now, you need to eat; we'll figure out the rest later," Torin assured her, his tone firm yet comforting.

Sophie settled back against the plush cushions of the couch, her mind wandering as she awaited her meal. The house was a vision of beauty, and she couldn't help but imagine how she would personalize it. If she were to design her dream home, this would be the foundation. A few warm rugs, some vibrant wall art, a vase of fresh flowers, and perhaps a few flickering candles would transform it into a cozy retreat.

Her daydreams were interrupted when Torin returned, handing her a plate with a perfectly grilled cheese sandwich and a bottle of water.

"Thank you," she said, taking the plate from him. She tore off a piece and savored the warm, buttery goodness. "Are you going to eat anything?" she asked, her mouth still full.

"I'll find something," he replied, his tone casual as he stepped back toward the kitchen.

"You can have some of this," she offered, breaking the sandwich in half and extending it toward him.

"Eat it," he insisted gently, pushing it back toward her. "I'll find something more substantial," he added with a playful smirk as he disappeared into the kitchen.

Sophie finished her sandwich, feeling a sense of warmth from both the food and their interaction. "Thank you. That was really good," she said, wiping her mouth. "Do you think it would be okay if I took a shower now?"

"Are you strong enough for one?" he asked, concern etched on his features.

Sophie pondered for a moment, weighing her options. "Maybe a bath?" she suggested tentatively.

Torin nodded, his expression softening as he approached her. Without hesitation, he scooped her up again, carrying her back down the hallway to the room she had occupied.

He entered the bathroom and carefully set her down on the edge of the bathtub. As he turned on the water, pouring in some fragrant soap, he moved with a sense of purpose. He returned with two bottles and a pink loofah, placing them on the edge of the tub along with two fluffy white towels.

"I won't be far. If you call, I'll hear you," he promised, standing back to assess her comfort. "Will you be okay?" he asked, his eyes searching hers.

Sophie looked up at him, her heart swelling with gratitude. "I'll be fine. Thank you," she reassured him.

Once Torin stepped out, she began the slow, careful process of undressing. Finally, she eased herself into the warm embrace of the tub, letting out a contented sigh as the water enveloped her. The warmth was intoxicating, and for a moment, she considered staying there forever, but the thought of falling asleep or becoming too weak to climb out tugged at her mind.

She reached for the shampoo, noticing it was the same brand she used at her other house. After washing her hair, she opened the body wash, inhaling deeply. The scent of vanilla wafted up, her absolute favorite.

A few minutes later, feeling refreshed and relaxed, she decided it was time to get out of the bathtub. However, as she tried to rise, she found herself struggling. No matter how she shifted, there was no way to gain leverage without aggravating her ribs. Panic began to creep in, and just as tears threatened to spill, a familiar voice broke through the tension.

“Sophie, it’s me.” Madison’s voice was like a lifeline. “Can I come in?”

Sophie glanced down, relieved to see she was completely covered in bubbles, a playful shield against her predicament.

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“Yes,” she whispered, her voice barely a thread.

The door creaked open, and in walked Madison, her expression a blend of concern and determination. “Hey, Torin called me. He thought you might need some help when you were done,” she said, her voice warm and inviting.

Sophie sighed, the weight of her exhaustion pressing down on her like a heavy blanket. “Yeah. I can’t get up,” she admitted, her tone thick with misery.

“Let me help,” Madison offered, her hands moving swiftly behind Sophie’s back, gently easing her into a standing position. As she did, Madison quickly averted her gaze, her cheeks tinged with a hint of pink as she extended a towel for Sophie to wrap around herself. Sophie wrapped it around her body with a sense of urgency, the fabric soft against her skin, and hurriedly stepped out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. Meanwhile, Madison busied herself gathering Sophie’s clothes, her movements efficient and caring.

Madison handed Sophie a pair of underwear, which she quickly slipped on, feeling a small sense of normalcy return. Next came a cozy, clean sleeping shirt and soft pajama pants. Once Sophie was dressed, she sank onto the edge of the bed, her body weary and her mind racing.

“Can I brush your hair for you?” Madison asked, her voice gentle, as if she were afraid of disturbing the fragile peace in the room.

“Sure,” Sophie replied, grateful for the distraction. She sat quietly, allowing her mind to wander back to happier times. Her dad used to brush her hair, the soothing strokes a comforting ritual that now felt like a distant memory.

After a few moments, Madison finished braiding Sophie's hair, her fingers deftly weaving the strands together. Sophie then made her way back to the bathroom to brush her teeth, the minty freshness a welcome reprieve. They exchanged light conversation, but soon enough, fatigue began to creep back in. The dull ache in her ribs and stomach intensified, and Madison, ever attentive, offered to find some painkillers.

A few moments later, the door swung open, and Torin stepped in, his presence filling the room with a sense of calm. He helped prop Sophie up so she could take her pills, his touch gentle and reassuring. After she swallowed the medication, he laid her back down with utmost care, pulling the blankets snugly over her. "Thank you," Sophie murmured softly, her eyelids growing heavy as sleep began to claim her.

"I'll be in the room next to yours for the night. If you call out, I'll hear you. Get some sleep," Torin said, his voice a comforting balm. Sophie didn't reply; she simply closed her eyes, willing the haunting memories of her attack to fade into the shadows.

But luck was not on her side. The night brought with it a torrent of nightmares.

Sophie found herself running, her heart pounding in her chest. She could sense them closing in on her, Brody and his friends, their malicious laughter echoing in her ears. They couldn't catch her—if they did, she knew terrible things awaited her. Panic surged through her as she glanced back, her breath hitching in her throat. They were gaining on her.

She pushed herself to run faster, but her legs felt like lead. The familiar sight of a coffee shop loomed ahead, and she sprinted towards it, desperate for refuge. But as she burst through the door, horror washed over her; it wasn't the coffee shop at all—it was her old house, her old room. The realization sent a chill down her spine.

Frantically, she tried to lock the door, but the lock betrayed her, refusing to budge. In a panic, she shoved her dresser against the door, her heart racing as they began to pound against it. The dresser shifted, and she knew it wouldn't hold them back for long. Desperation clawed at her as she scanned the room, her eyes landing on a window she didn't remember being there. Without a second thought, she climbed out, her heart racing with the hope of escape.

But the howls behind her were relentless. She wasn't going to get away. A scream tore from her throat as one of them lunged at her. She fell to the ground, grappling with the creature, but her strength was waning. The wolf's powerful jaws clamped down on her shoulder, and pain radiated through her body like wildfire.

"This is what you deserve, Sophie," Brody's cruel voice taunted her, laughter dripping with malice. "Sophie, Sophie."

Sophie screamed again, fighting to escape her attacker. But then, a voice broke through the chaos—Torin's voice, steady and calm. "Sophie, it's me. Stop, you're hurting yourself."

“Torin?” she gasped, her voice trembling, disbelief mingling with relief.

“It’s me, baby. You’re safe. You’re in my house. Nothing and no one can hurt you here,” he reassured her, brushing her hair away from her sweaty face. As he moved closer, Sophie instinctively reached for his shirt, her heart racing with fear.

“Please don’t leave me,” she whimpered, hating the vulnerability that washed over her but unable to shake the terror of being alone in the dark.

“Never,” he promised softly. “I’m just going around to the other side of the bed.” He climbed in beside her, wrapping his arms around her with a tenderness that made her feel cocooned in safety. “Go back to sleep, Sophie. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

In that moment, Sophie felt a sense of safety she had never experienced before. She relaxed against him, the warmth of his presence lulling her back into a peaceful slumber.

The next morning, Sophie awoke to an empty room, a pang of confusion striking her. She turned her gaze to where Torin had been, or at least where she thought he had been. Was it all a dream? Slowly, she sat up, taking stock of herself. Surprisingly, she felt much better than she had the day before.

She glanced around for her phone but couldn’t locate it. Perhaps she had left it downstairs, she mused. With a determined sigh, she slid out of bed and made her way to the closet, pulling on a sweatshirt over her pajama shirt. Today, she assumed, she would be going home. A mix of emotions swirled within her at the thought.

As she stepped out of her room, the sounds of voices drifted from the kitchen. Curiosity piqued, she walked down the hall towards the open area. There, she found Liam sitting at the table with Paul, Max leaning against the wall, gazing out the window, and Torin approaching her with an expression of concern.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you woke up,” he said softly, standing before her, regret etched across his features. “I had to deal with some stuff.”

“It’s okay,” Sophie replied gently, trying to ease his guilt.

“No, it’s not. I said I would be there when you woke up, and I wasn’t. I’m really sorry,” he reiterated, his sincerity palpable.

Sophie placed her hand on his arm, grounding him. “It’s okay, Torin. I’m fine. What’s going on?” she inquired, nodding towards the guys.

“Nothing that can’t wait. Let’s get you some breakfast,” he suggested, his tone shifting to a more upbeat note.

Sophie made her way to the table, greeting Liam, Max, and Paul with a bright “Good morning.” Liam stood up, enveloping her in a gentle hug.

“How are you doing?” he asked, concern lacing his voice.

“Much better,” Sophie replied, settling into her chair carefully.

Yet, a nagging feeling stirred within her. Was it her imagination, or was everyone on edge? Liam, in particular, seemed far from his usual laid-back self. A knot of unease formed in her stomach as she wondered what lay ahead.

Conclusion