

## 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\*\***

Torin placed a plate in front of Sophie, the aroma of freshly cooked eggs and golden toast wafting through the air. He then handed her a glass of vibrant orange juice, the color brightening the dull morning light. Rather than joining her at the table, he stepped back into the kitchen, his presence still palpable. Sophie turned her head slightly, a question bubbling up inside her.

“Did I leave my phone down here yesterday? I can’t seem to find it anywhere. And I can’t believe I didn’t ask this sooner, but did you inform Helen about everything that’s been happening—about my absence from work?”

“I called her,” Torin replied, his voice steady but lacking further elaboration.

With that, Sophie turned her attention back to her breakfast, deciding she would search for her phone once she finished eating. The thought nagged at her, but her hunger took precedence.

“How are you feeling today, Sophie?” Paul inquired, his tone warm and concerned.

“Much better, actually. I’m still a bit sore and stiff, but it’s nothing compared to how I felt before,” Sophie responded, a hint of relief washing over her as she spoke.

“Good to hear,” Paul said with a nod. “Before I leave, I’d like to check your ribs.” Sophie nodded, grateful for his attentiveness, and focused on finishing her meal. Moments later, she pushed her plate away, satisfied.

Paul stood up and approached her, his expression professional yet gentle. “May I?” he asked, gesturing towards her shirt.

“In the living room,” Torin interjected, moving behind her and placing a reassuring hand on her back, guiding her toward the living area. Sophie lifted her shirt, allowing Paul to carefully unbind her ribs for examination. Torin remained close, his presence a protective barrier, shielding her from the gaze of the others at the table.

“Everything looks good. It’s going to take a few more days for your ribs and the bruising on your stomach to heal completely. Just take it easy for a little while longer,” Paul

instructed, rewrapping her ribs with practiced care. Sophie nodded in agreement, appreciating his thoroughness.

"All right, well, I'm off," Paul said, giving a small wave to both Sophie and Torin before making his exit.

Torin gently guided her back to the table. "Sophie, can you do something for us? I want to see what happens when you touch one of the guys' hands," he suggested, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

"I'm game," Liam chimed in, rising from his seat with enthusiasm.

"Not you. Max," Torin replied, his irritation evident as he shot a pointed look at Liam.

Max turned his head, contemplating the request. After a moment of hesitation, he stepped forward, extending his hand toward Sophie. She glanced at Torin, seeking his approval. He nodded, albeit with an air of caution.

With a mixture of trepidation and resolve, Sophie reached out, her hand trembling slightly as it met Max's rough palm. The instant their hands connected, a brilliant light enveloped her, illuminating the space between them. Instead of pulling away, she remained still, allowing the vision to unfold. Images flashed before her: a table, a backpack, scattered books. Then, a girl appeared. The girl turned to face Sophie, and in that moment, Sophie gasped, instinctively releasing Max's hand, severing the connection.

"What did you see?" Max growled, an edge of urgency in his voice. Sophie struggled to regain her composure; the vision felt so vivid, as if the girl had been looking directly at her.

"What was it?" Max pressed again, stepping closer, his intensity palpable.

"Back off," Torin warned, his tone protective.

Sophie's gaze shifted to the other guys. All three were fixated on her, their expressions a mixture of curiosity and concern. "First, I saw a table, a backpack, and books. It could have been an office or maybe a library? Then I saw a girl. She turned and looked right at me," she explained, her voice trembling slightly.

"What did she look like? Where was she?" Max's growl deepened, frustration evident in his tone.

"I—I don't know," Sophie stammered, her heart racing. "It startled me so much that I dropped the... whatever it was."

In a sudden fit of anger, Max turned on his heel and stormed out of the house, the door slamming behind him with a resounding thud. "I don't understand. What...?" Sophie let the question hang in the air, confusion swirling within her.

Torin cast a glance down at her before stepping away, moving to lean against the kitchen island, his demeanor unreadable.

Sophie looked to Liam for support, but he remained silent, staring blankly at the table as if lost in thought. A sense of unease washed over her; she felt as though she was missing something crucial. Deciding to step away from the charged atmosphere, she stood up, determined to find her phone.

"What are you doing?" Torin asked, his voice slicing through her thoughts.

"Looking for my phone," she replied, making her way toward the living room. When she found no trace of it, she turned back to Torin. "Have you seen my phone?" she pressed once more.

He crossed his arms, a smirk playing on his lips. "I have it," he stated matter-of-factly.

Sophie frowned, her frustration bubbling to the surface. "Well, can I have it?" she asked, taking a few steps closer to him.

"No," he shot back, his tone firm.

Staring at him in disbelief, she repeated, "No? Surely, you're joking." But his expression remained serious, devoid of any hint of humor. She glanced at Liam, but he avoided her gaze, leaving her feeling isolated. "Why can't I have my phone?" she asked, bewildered.

Torin narrowed his eyes, a hint of challenge in his gaze. "Actually, it's my phone. I'm the one who bought it."

Sophie stared at him, fighting back the urge to cry, to feel weak and defeated. "You're right. I'll just buy one myself with my own money," she retorted, turning on her heel and walking down the hallway toward her room.

Taking her time, she got dressed for the day, slipping on her shoes and scanning the room for her purse. When she couldn't find it, a sigh of frustration escaped her lips. She would have to ask Torin about that too. With any luck, it would go better than the phone incident.

Returning to the kitchen, she approached Torin, her tone steady and calm. "Torin, do you know where my purse went?"

"It's in that closet," he said, nodding toward a closet near the front door.

Sophie walked over and opened the closet door, spotting her purse perched on the top shelf. However, there was no way she could reach it. Just as she was about to voice her

concerns, she felt Torin's presence behind her. He reached over her head, effortlessly grabbing the purse and handing it to her.

"Thank you," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. He looked down at her with an intensity that made her heart race before turning away and retreating back to the kitchen.

With her purse now on her shoulder, Sophie turned to face Torin and Liam. "Do you think one of you could give me a ride to the coffee shop?" she asked, her tone hopeful yet tinged with uncertainty.

They both stared at her, their expressions unreadable, making her feel self-conscious. "I'm obviously late; it's already halfway through my shift. But I figured I could at least put in a half day," she explained, standing there awkwardly, awaiting their response.

Torin finally met her gaze, his eyes serious. "Sophie, Helen hired somebody to replace you."

The words hit her like a physical blow, leaving her breathless. "What? Why?" she asked, her voice trembling. She glanced at Liam, seeking support, but he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I told her to," Torin replied, his tone devoid of emotion. "I sent one of the girls who used to work at our office to her."

Sophie stared at him in disbelief, her mind racing to process the implications. "You sent someone to replace me," she repeated slowly, trying to grasp the reality of the situation. Crossing her arms defensively, she asked, "Why would you do that?"

"I had to," he replied simply, as if that explained everything.

Sophie blinked, confusion swirling within her. "I don't understand what's going on. I have no idea why you're acting like such a jerk all of a sudden." She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "Would you please just give me a ride to the shop? That way I can talk to Helen and explain what happened. Maybe I can get my job back?"

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Torin's gaze sharpened as it fell upon her, a storm brewing behind his steely eyes. "No," he declared firmly, his voice leaving no room for negotiation.

Sophie felt an ache deep within her chest, as if her heart were fracturing under the weight of his refusal. "You don't understand," she pleaded, her voice tinged with

desperation. "I need that job." The urgency of her situation clawed at her throat, making it difficult to breathe.

With a predator's grace, Torin advanced towards her, his presence overwhelming. "I said no. You're staying here." His tone was final, as if he were sealing her fate with each word.

Crossing her arms in defiance, Sophie shot back, "You can't keep me here." The words tasted bitter on her tongue, but she had to stand her ground.

His lips curled into a smirk, a hint of challenge in his demeanor. "Watch me," he replied, turning on his heel and striding toward his office. She watched him go, her heart racing with a mix of anger and fear.

Turning to Liam, she sought answers, her voice trembling with confusion. "What is going on, Liam?" The hurt in her tone was palpable, and she could feel her insides twisting.

Liam stood up, his expression a mixture of sorrow and sympathy. "Sorry, baby girl. This is between you and him." With that, he made his way toward the front door, letting himself out with a soft click behind him.

Sophie felt the walls closing in around her, frustration bubbling just beneath the surface. What was happening? Why were they treating her like this? She waited a few agonizing minutes for Liam to leave, her mind racing, then glanced down the hallway where Torin had vanished. He was nowhere to be seen.

With determination igniting within her, she grabbed her purse and tiptoed toward the front door. She would walk—just walk—until she could catch a ride to the coffee shop. She couldn't let this job slip through her fingers; she needed to speak with Helen and clear up this colossal misunderstanding.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she turned the doorknob, moving slowly and cautiously. She cast one last glance over her shoulder, searching for any sign of Torin. There was nothing. With a deep breath, she opened the door wide, only to nearly stumble back as Max loomed in the entrance. "Going somewhere?" he growled, his presence intimidating.

Sophie instinctively stepped back, and Max entered the house, shutting the door with an air of finality behind him.

He strode into the kitchen, and Sophie followed him with her gaze, contemplating her options. She could make a break for it. "Don't even think about it," Max warned, his voice low and threatening.

"I'm faster than you. You'll never make it," he added, a note of confidence ringing in his tone.

Anger surged within her, urging her to challenge him, but deep down, she recognized the truth: he was faster, especially in her current state of exhaustion. Sophie felt drained and bewildered, but more than anything, she felt a profound sense of hurt. She shuffled back to her room, collapsing onto her bed.

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Lying back against the cool sheets, she closed her eyes, letting tears slip down her cheeks. She had genuinely believed she was forging a connection with these people. She thought that she and Torin shared something... significant. The realization that it was all a figment of her imagination cut deeper than any physical wound.

Repositioning herself on the bed, she nestled into the pillows, pulling the blanket tightly around her. The tears continued to fall as she surrendered to the fatigue that beckoned her into sleep, a temporary escape from the chaos of her thoughts.

Unbeknownst to her, the door creaked open. She remained oblivious to the gentle hand that reached out and brushed away the tears staining her face. If only she had seen the anguish etched on the man's features as he gazed upon his mate—perhaps it would have provided her with a flicker of solace.

Instead, she felt more isolated than ever, wrapped in a cocoon of loneliness.

The hours slipped away as Sophie remained in her room, lost in her sorrow. Torin approached her door, attempting to coax her into eating lunch, but she turned a deaf ear to his pleas. The day blurred into a haze as she dozed, her body still recovering from the emotional turmoil. It was only around four in the afternoon that she finally mustered the strength to rise from her bed. A shower was in order; she hoped it would help her feel more like herself again.

But first, she needed to find something to wear. She ambled over to the long dresser, opening drawers in search of clothing. To her surprise, they were filled with remnants from the other house. She pulled out a long-sleeved white shirt, a cozy grey sweater, and a pair of leggings. The ensemble looked inviting and warm, perfect for her current state of mind. Just as she was about to step into the bathroom, a knock echoed at her door.

"Sophie," Torin's voice came through, causing her to tense involuntarily. The hurt from their earlier confrontation flared within her. "You need to eat something," he insisted.

Sophie contemplated ignoring him, but she knew Torin well enough to anticipate that he might resort to forceful measures. "I'm not hungry," she finally replied, even as her stomach growled in protest.

"I can hear your stomach from here," he shot back, a hint of amusement lacing his tone.

"Go away, Torin," she retorted, her voice firm.

"You do realize I could kick this door down? The lock's not stopping me," he threatened, his voice dripping with bravado.

Sophie rolled her eyes, exasperated. "Yes, I know; but I would really appreciate it if you didn't. Now, I'm going to take a shower." With that, she retreated into the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

Sophie luxuriated in the warmth of the shower, the steam enveloping her like a comforting embrace. It felt heavenly, and she lost track of time, savoring the sensation until her legs began to tremble from standing too long. Finally, she stepped out, towel-drying her body before reaching for the vanilla lotion she found on the counter. She slathered it over her skin, reveling in the soothing scent. Dressed in her newly found clothes, she was in the midst of brushing her hair when another knock interrupted her solitude.

"I told you, I'm not hungry," she called out, her voice muffled through the door.

"Not even for pizza?" came a familiar voice, bringing a spark of curiosity to her heart.

Sophie whipped open the door, her eyes lighting up. "Madison!" she exclaimed, throwing herself into her friend's arms.

"Whoa, I missed you too," Madison laughed, her joy infectious. Sophie pulled back, wiping at her tears, now replaced with a hint of laughter.

"Are you okay?" Madison asked gently, concern etched on her face.

"Okay is a relative term," Sophie replied with a smile, feeling a sense of relief wash over her now that Madison was there. Perhaps her friend could help her make sense of the chaos. "Did you really bring pizza?" her stomach growled in anticipation.

"I did," Madison confirmed, her smile widening.

"What kind?" Sophie asked eagerly.

Madison grimaced playfully. "That disgusting kind you like—with barbecue sauce, cheese, pineapple, and chicken. Only because I love you. Normal people shouldn't eat pizza like that."

Sophie could practically taste it already. "Is it from Papa Louie's?" she asked, her excitement bubbling over.

"Would I get pizza from anywhere else? Come on," Madison said, linking her arm through Sophie's.

"It's girls' night! I've got movies, pizza, popcorn, and soda."

Sophie allowed Madison to lead her down the hallway, relief washing over her when she noticed that the house was blissfully empty. She let out a deep sigh, making her way toward the island where boxes of pizza were stacked high. Her mouth watered at the sight, and she quickly located the box she craved. Lifting the lid, she inhaled deeply, the aroma filling her senses.

"I think you just drooled a little," Madison teased, a grin stretching across her face.

Sophie couldn't help but return the smile. She grabbed two slices and placed them on her plate, snagging a can of Vanilla Pepsi to accompany her feast. Eyeing the boxes of kettle corn, she sighed in delight; Madison had truly gone all out, bringing all of her favorites.

"Do you think it's okay to eat out here?" she asked, glancing back at Madison.

Madison waved her forward with a grin. Taking it as a yes, Sophie settled onto the couch, feeling a sense of camaraderie and comfort envelop her like a warm blanket.

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Madison approached from behind, balancing a plate laden with pizza and a chilled can of Coke. With a satisfied smile, she set the plate and drink on the coffee table, then knelt to rummage through the duffel bag resting on the floor. As she pulled out a towering stack of movies, she placed them carefully on the end table, creating a small mountain of cinematic treasures. Sophie's eyes widened as she absorbed the sight of all those films.

"How many movies are we planning to watch?" Sophie inquired, curiosity lacing her voice.

Madison flashed her a playful grin. "We have a lot of classics to catch you up on!" She remembered the time she had asked Sophie about her favorite films, only to be met with a blank stare and the admission that she had never really had the opportunity to watch any movies during her childhood. "Alright, first up, we have the Twilight series. It's all about vampires and werewolves. I highly recommend them," she added, waggling her eyebrows mischievously.

"Then there are the Marvel movies—Captain America, the Hulk, Iron Man, Black Widow... do any of those names ring a bell?" Madison continued, her enthusiasm palpable. But Sophie merely stared back at her, confusion etched on her face. "Okay, moving on! Lastly, we have the chick flicks. Think classics like The Notebook, Titanic,



How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days, Pitch Perfect, Me Before You, or The Devil Wears Prada.” Madison glanced at Sophie, who remained silent, her expression blank.

“That’s an overwhelming number of options. I honestly have no clue. Just pick one for us,” Sophie finally replied, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

“Alright then, let’s go with Kate Hudson and Matthew McConaughey for the win—How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days it is! You’re going to love this one,” Madison declared, her excitement infectious. She swiftly set everything up, then settled down next to Sophie on the couch.

As the movie flickered to life on the screen, Sophie took a bite of her pizza, savoring the cheesy goodness. Soon, she found herself completely absorbed in the film, sharing laughter and the occasional tear with Madison. The two girls indulged in far more pizza than anyone would deem reasonable, their giggles filling the room as they moved from one movie to the next, pausing only to pop fresh popcorn.

At one point, Sophie wrapped herself in a soft blanket she had snagged from the back of the couch, feeling utterly content. She was having such a wonderful time that she wished it could last forever, but as the hours passed, her eyelids grew heavier, weighed down by sleep. Eventually, she felt herself being gently stirred, as if someone were moving her, but she was too exhausted to open her eyes. A light, feathery touch brushed against her forehead, but she couldn’t muster the energy to comprehend what it was. Soon, warmth enveloped her again, and she surrendered to the depths of a peaceful slumber.

The following morning, Sophie awoke from a deep sleep, her surroundings feeling foreign and confusing. She couldn’t recall how she had ended up in bed last night. As she sat up, a yawn escaped her lips, and she glanced down, relieved to find she was still dressed in the clothes from the previous evening. A smile crept onto her face as memories of the night flooded back—she couldn’t remember the last time she had enjoyed herself so thoroughly. She felt an overwhelming urge to find Madison and express her gratitude.

After a refreshing shower, she wrapped herself in a towel and ventured back into her room. Her gaze fell upon her closet, filled with a kaleidoscope of beautiful outfits. Today felt like a day to dress up, especially since it was clear she wouldn’t be heading to the coffee shop anytime soon. A frown flickered across her face as she thought about it, but she quickly shook it off. Perhaps today would be different; maybe yesterday was just a fleeting bad day.

Sophie settled on a soft pink tunic dress that nipped in at the waist before flaring out gently, ending mid-thigh. She paired it with cozy gray leggings and a cream cable-knit infinity scarf. Taking extra time to straighten her hair, she admired her reflection, feeling a spark of confidence. She adorned her ears with a pair of pearl teardrop earrings that caught the light just right. After applying a touch of makeup, she felt ready to face whatever the day had in store for her, even if she had no idea what that might be.

"Alright then," she murmured to herself, determination in her voice. "Time to step out of this room." With that, she opened her door and stepped into the hallway, immediately aware of the lively voices wafting from the kitchen. As she walked down the corridor, she came to an abrupt halt, her breath catching in her throat.

The scene before her was nothing short of shocking. Torin stood in the kitchen, shirtless and clad only in a pair of low-slung black sweatpants. But it wasn't his attire that seized her attention; it was the sight of his chest smeared with blood, one eye swollen shut and bruised, a nasty scratch marring his cheek, and several gashes crisscrossing his back as he turned. Liam was desperately trying to press a towel against Torin's chest, but Torin shoved him away forcefully. Max stood nearby, his expression a storm of anger.

A wounded sound escaped Sophie's lips before she could contain it. The room fell silent as everyone froze, and Torin turned to face her, his one good eye locking onto hers. Sophie felt paralyzed by shock, unable to process the gruesome tableau unfolding before her. Gathering her courage, she stepped forward, her voice barely above a whisper. "What happened to you?"

"It's not as bad as it looks," Torin grunted, attempting to downplay his injuries.

A humorless laugh escaped Sophie's lips, laced with disbelief. "Well, that's a relief because it looks like you got beaten to a bloody pulp," she retorted, anger bubbling beneath the surface. Torin grimaced at her words.

Liam chuckled, "You think this is bad? You should see the other guy." Sophie shot him a glare that silenced him immediately.

Determined to take control of the situation, Sophie shook her head. "Where's the first aid kit?" she demanded.

"I don't need—" Torin began, but she cut him off.

"Shut up," she snapped, her tone leaving no room for argument. Torin's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and she caught a glimpse of Liam's amused grin out of the corner of her eye, but she chose to ignore them both. Right now, her anger wasn't directed at Torin himself, but rather at the circumstances that had led to his injuries. And yes, she was still harboring some frustration over the events of yesterday. "Now, you have two options: either you take a shower first, and then we'll start bandaging you up, or I'll bandage you up first; your choice."

"I don't need you to—" Torin growled, his stubbornness evident.

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Sophie swiftly snatched the towel from Liam's hand, her heart racing as she stepped between Torin's legs. She could feel the tension in the air as she began to dab at the jagged cut marring his chest. The moment she leaned closer, intent on her task, she noticed his sudden silence—a stark contrast to his usual bravado. There was something intimate about their proximity, and she couldn't shake the feeling that he inhaled the scent of her hair as she focused on the wound. However, she brushed it aside, unwilling to dwell on the implications.

"You're going to get blood on your dress," he growled, his voice low and gravelly, almost a warning.

"Well, it's not mine; so, I guess I don't have to worry about it, now do I?" she shot back, a hint of sass in her tone. The banter felt familiar, a dance they both knew well.

"Sophie," he ground out, the way he said her name sending an unexpected thrill through her.

"Torin," she replied defiantly, her eyes narrowing slightly. "Now be quiet and let me clean you up." With that, she redirected her focus to the task at hand, her fingers working gently over the angry red cuts. Each mark told a story, and she could tell from their jagged edges that claws had inflicted them. A shiver ran down her spine as she pondered the potential infections lurking within those wounds. She retrieved antiseptic from the first aid kit, her heart pounding as she applied it to his injuries. Torin remained stoic, not a single sound escaping his lips, but she could only imagine the pain he must have been enduring. She fought against the tremor in her hands, concentrating on the feel of his well-defined muscles beneath her fingertips. It was hard not to be distracted by the intricate tattoos that decorated his arms and chest, each one a testament to his past.

"How long have you had your tattoos?" she inquired, curiosity getting the better of her.

"My alpha marks," he replied, his tone gruff yet oddly proud. Sophie raised an eyebrow in confusion, urging him to elaborate.

"They're my alpha marks," he repeated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "The more marks on a wolf, the more powerful he is."

That revelation made sense—his body was a canvas of strength and authority, and she understood now why he bore so many.

"You should check his legs for injuries too," Liam suggested with a cheeky grin, his eyes sparkling with mischief. Torin shot him a warning glare but kept his gaze fixed on Sophie, undeterred.

"Do you have injuries on your legs?" she asked, her voice steady as she maintained eye contact with Torin.

"No!" he barked, his tone gruff and defensive.

"I was just checking. Don't get cranky with me," she replied, rolling her eyes before returning her attention to his chest. Once she finished tending to those wounds, she inched closer, ready to address the cut on his face. She could feel the tension radiating off him as he inhaled sharply. Ignoring his discomfort, she delicately dabbed at the injury, cleaning it thoroughly before applying a soothing cream. He began to fidget, and she found herself channeling her inner caregiver.

"Sit still," she commanded, her voice firm as if she were addressing a restless child unwilling to sit still for a Band-Aid.

Suddenly, he shot up from the chair, the movement causing it to topple backward. He grasped her elbow firmly, steadying her as she stumbled. "I think I'm going to take a shower after all," he muttered, his tone gruff yet somehow softer.

Sophie watched him stride away, her heart racing, before she sank into the chair he had just vacated. As she settled in, she caught Liam's amused expression, and her scowl deepened.

"What?" she snapped, irritation bubbling beneath the surface.

"Nothing," he replied, still grinning like a Cheshire cat as he took a swig from his water bottle.

Turning her attention to Max, who was still gazing out the window, she noticed the tightness in his shoulders. "What happened?" she asked, her voice laced with concern, hoping for clarity.

"Not my story to tell," he responded brusquely, his tone leaving no room for further discussion as he slipped out the door. Once the front door clicked shut behind him, Sophie turned back to Liam, determination igniting within her.

"All right, spill," she demanded, her eyes narrowing.

He looked at her with a sympathetic glint in his gaze. "No can do, baby girl. That's between you and him. I'm not getting caught in the middle of that." With a stretch, he rose to his feet. "I need to check on a few things. I'll be back."

As Liam departed, Sophie let out a heavy sigh. If she wanted answers, she would have to confront the Alpha directly. Leaning back in the chair, she closed her eyes, trying to collect her thoughts while she waited.

Suddenly, a buzzing sound jolted her from her reverie. Opening her eyes, she scanned the room and spotted what she assumed was Torin's phone resting on the countertop. Curiosity piqued, she rose and walked over, intending to bring it to him in case it was

important. But as she glanced at the screen, her breath caught in her throat. The name displayed was Kevin.

Why would he be calling Torin? A sense of urgency washed over her—was he trying to reach her? Before she could overthink the situation, she quickly glanced down the hallway to ensure Torin wasn't approaching. With a racing heart, she snatched the phone and answered it.

"Hello?" she whispered, her voice barely above a murmur.

"Sophie? I finally got you. Are you okay? I've been trying for days to get ahold of you," Kevin's frantic voice crackled through the receiver.

"I'm okay," she replied, still keeping her voice low, hoping to avoid detection. She tiptoed toward the hallway, where the sound of running water assured her she had a few moments of privacy.

"What happened to you? You haven't been at work, Helen won't say anything about you, there's a new girl working there, and your phone keeps saying it's disconnected. I've been losing my sanity trying to track you down. Normally, I could just use police resources to trace your phone, but it's like your phone doesn't even exist. What's going on, Sophie?" he pressed, concern lacing his words.

"I'm sorry you were worried. I'm okay. I had some bad stuff happen to me." Sophie chose her words with care, not wanting to divulge too much. She didn't want him to think she was losing her grip on reality; he didn't need to know about her chaotic upbringing and the shadows of her past.

"Sophie, where are you?" Kevin asked, his voice growing more serious.

"Um, I don't actually know," she admitted softly, guilt creeping into her heart.

"Sophie, are you in trouble? Is somebody holding you against your will?" His calm tone was laced with urgency.

His concern struck a chord deep within her, and tears pricked at her eyes. She hated that her life had spiraled to the point where a simple act of kindness could bring her to the brink of tears.

"I think I'm okay; I mean, they're taking care of me," she said, her voice trembling.

"Who, Sophie?" he pressed gently, his tone unwavering.

"Torin and his men," she confessed, feeling a strange mix of loyalty and fear.

"Are they keeping you there against your will?" he asked, his voice a soothing balm.

"Well, no, I mean..." She hesitated, unsure of how to articulate her situation.

“Are you allowed to leave?” he inquired, his voice steady.

Sophie held her breath, the weight of the question hanging heavy in the air. After a long pause, she whispered, “No.”

“Are they the ones who took your phone?” he asked, his voice unyielding.

“Yes,” she admitted, her heart racing.

“Are they keeping you in the dark about what’s going on?” he pressed further.

“Yes,” she replied, her heart sinking with each word.

“Sophie, honey, those are all the signs of abduction,” he said, his compassion evident. “Tell me where you are, and I’ll come get you right away. I’ll get you to safety.”

“I don’t know,” Sophie said, uncertainty flooding her mind. They hadn’t harmed her, but why wouldn’t they let her go? Why had they taken her phone? And why was no one answering her questions? The more she contemplated it, the more bewildered she became. It did sound suspiciously shady.

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Kevin’s voice was soft, almost a whisper, as he posed a question that hung in the air between them like a fragile thread. “You don’t know if I’m coming to get you, or you don’t know where you are?”

“Both,” Sophie replied, her voice barely escaping her lips, laden with uncertainty.

“Well, now that I know you’re with Torin, I can track you down using this phone. I’ll take the choice out of your hands, sweetheart. I’ll ensure you’re safe, and then we can sit down and unravel everything that’s happening. Does that sound good?” As he spoke, Sophie gave a small nod, only to realize that he couldn’t see her acknowledgment through the phone.

“Okay,” she murmured, her heart racing. “I just... I don’t know if they’ll let me go.”

“Oh, leave that worry to me, honey. I’m a police officer. They’ll have no choice but to let you go.” Kevin’s confidence was palpable, but doubt gnawed at Sophie’s insides. “Just be ready,” he instructed, his tone firm yet reassuring.

“Okay,” she echoed, though uncertainty continued to swirl in her mind. She felt lost, trapped in a whirlwind of confusion. Just as she hung up, the door creaked open, and Max stepped inside.

Sophie instinctively clutched Torin's phone tighter in her hand. "Somebody called for him. I'll take it to him," she said quickly, her mind racing to craft a believable excuse.

Max simply nodded, moving towards the living room, leaving her alone with her thoughts. Heart pounding like a drum, Sophie made her way down the hallway, her mind a flurry of thoughts. She quickly deleted Kevin's call from Torin's phone, desperate to keep her secret safe. Just as she was contemplating her next move, the phone vibrated in her hand, startling her. Initially taken aback, she soon realized this could serve her purpose well. It would provide her with a legitimate reason to approach Torin.

With a determined breath, she paused just outside Torin's room and gently knocked on the door.

When Torin opened it, he stood before her clad only in a towel, his physique striking and powerful. Sophie felt her mouth go dry, her gaze momentarily drawn to his bare skin. She forced herself to focus on the injuries that marred his body. "Your injuries look a little better," she managed to say, her voice tinged with concern.

"Shifter healing. I bounce back quickly," he replied, his voice low and gravelly, but there was an undertone of strength that reassured her.

"Oh, your phone's ringing," she said, extending it towards him. The moment he took it, she turned on her heel, needing to put distance between them. She hurried into her room, grabbing her purse and a pair of soft grey boots along with warm socks. After slipping them on, she crept out of her room and made her way to the kitchen. She carefully placed her purse on a chair tucked under the table, hoping it would go unnoticed. If anyone questioned her about the boots, she would simply say she was feeling cold.

Sophie settled at the table, her eyes glued to the window, anxiety gnawing at her. Was she making the right choice? After a few tense minutes, her restlessness mounted. She stood up, pacing the floor, her mind racing with possibilities. Approaching the front door, she felt Max's presence behind her.

"You can't leave," he said, his voice firm.

Sophie sighed, frustration bubbling within her. "Yes, I know. Thanks for the reminder. I'm just walking." This was her cue, she thought bitterly. If they intended to keep their secrets, she didn't need to be a part of it.

Another twenty minutes dragged by, and Sophie felt the sweat bead on her forehead. Anxiety consumed her. What if her actions only complicated things further? Perhaps she should confide in Torin. Just as she wrestled with this thought, a police cruiser rolled into the yard, and her heart sank.

Max rushed to the window, his expression darkening. "Boss," he yelled down the hallway, "we've got a problem."

Sophie remained seated, frozen in uncertainty. Torin appeared moments later, and her breath caught in her throat. He looked formidable in a fitted black t-shirt, cargo pants, and sturdy boots. The injuries on his chest and back were concealed, but his face had already begun to heal. The deep scratch that had marred his cheek was fading, and even the swelling around his eye had subsided. He strode towards the door, anger radiating from him.

“Stay here,” he commanded, stepping outside with purpose. But Sophie had no intention of obeying.

With a steady resolve, she stood, grasped her purse, and moved towards the front door. Taking a deep breath, she opened it, stepping into the fray.

Four pairs of eyes turned to her, and Torin’s voice cut through the air, “Sophie, go back inside.”

Her gaze shifted to Kevin, who flashed a grin. “She’s with me. Come on, beautiful.” Sophie hesitated, the weight of the moment pressing down on her, but she felt an urge to move forward.

She heard Torin’s sharp intake of breath but didn’t meet his gaze. “Sophie,” he said, his voice deep and commanding, stepping protectively in front of her.

Suddenly, the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked echoed in the tense air, freezing them both in place. “Let her come to me,” Kevin’s voice rang out, steady and unwavering.

“Then put the gun away,” Torin replied, not budging from his position, his body a shield between her and the threat.

“Let her come, or I will be forced to use this,” Kevin warned, his tone cold.

With Torin’s focus momentarily diverted, Sophie seized her chance. “Don’t hurt them. I’m coming,” she said, her voice steady as she darted down the steps.

“Sophie!” Liam’s voice was filled with anguish as he took a step towards her.

“No,” Torin snapped, his voice sharp as a blade. “Don’t move. Let her go.” Those words struck Sophie like a physical blow, and tears threatened to spill from her eyes, but she willed them away. It’s okay, she reassured herself. This only confirmed that she was making the right choice. Without a backward glance, she slipped into the front seat of the police cruiser, keeping her gaze lowered. A few hurried words were exchanged before Kevin climbed in beside her, sealing her fate.



## Conclusion

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

**\*\*Chapter 66\*\***

“Are you alright, beautiful?” Kevin’s voice rang out, echoing slightly as he closed the car door behind him with a decisive thud.

Sophie merely nodded, her heart racing. As Kevin shifted the car into reverse, the gravel crunched beneath the tires, a sound that felt ominous in the stillness of the evening. Just as they were about to turn onto the main road, Sophie glanced up. To her dismay, she caught Torin’s gaze fixed intently on her. A wave of warmth washed over her, quickly followed by a chill of dread, and she looked away, inhaling deeply to steady herself.

The car rolled forward in a heavy silence, the kind that seemed to stretch endlessly. “Thanks for coming to get me,” Sophie finally broke the quiet, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kevin didn’t reply, his eyes focused on the road ahead. She stole a glance at him, searching for a hint of warmth or reassurance, but his expression remained unreadable. With a sigh, she turned her attention back to the passing scenery, the world outside a blur of shadows and fading light.

After what felt like an eternity, Sophie realized she had no clue where they were. “Are we driving into town?” she asked, her voice laced with confusion.

“No,” Kevin replied curtly, his tone leaving no room for further questions.

Sophie felt a jolt of surprise. “I thought we were heading to the police station,” she said, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

A chuckle escaped Kevin, but it was a hollow sound that sent a shiver down her spine. It didn’t sound like him at all.

“Oh, Sophie,” he said, his voice dripping with mockery. “Or should I say, Sloane?” The name hung in the air, heavy and accusatory. Sophie’s heart skipped a beat, and she froze, her mind racing.

“Yeah, I know your real name. I know all about you,” he continued, a sinister satisfaction evident in his tone.

Panic gripped Sophie like a vice. What was happening? “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she managed to stammer, her voice trembling.

Kevin laughed again, a chilling sound that echoed in the confines of the car. "I think you do," he said, his voice turning icy.

"What's going on? Where are we going?" Sophie demanded, her heart pounding in her chest.

"It's a little too late to be asking those questions, isn't it, Sloane?" he retorted, his eyes glinting with malice.

"Don't call me that!" Sophie snapped, her voice rising with defiance.

"Why? Does it bring back bad memories? Memories of your family?" he taunted, each word a dagger.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked, striving to keep her voice steady despite the fear clawing at her insides. She felt as if the air had been sucked from her lungs, and she was gasping for breath.

Ignoring her question, he leaned closer, his voice low and conspiratorial. "You have a very rare talent. I hear you can see wolves' mates just by touching them. Is that true?"

Sophie sat in stunned silence, her mind racing with a whirlwind of thoughts. Is that what happens when I touch the guys? The memories flooded back—her encounters with Max, Liam, and Paul, each touch revealing their true nature as wolves. But why hadn't it worked with Torin and Kyle? Was it because Kyle was married?

"I can tell you're thinking. So, it's true then?" Kevin pressed, not waiting for her to respond.

"Do you even realize how valuable a skill that is? Every alpha in the world would pay a fortune to have you come to their pack, even just for a few days. Can you imagine? You're going to make me a massive pile of cash, Sloane," he said, his glee palpable.

Sophie felt overwhelmed, her mind struggling to process the implications of his words. She leaned back against the seat, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to block out the reality of her situation. How had she misjudged this man? How had she allowed herself to be trapped in such a terrifying predicament? A single tear escaped, trailing down her cheek. Her impulsiveness had led her here, and now it felt like it might cost her everything.

The silence in the car was oppressive, broken only by the frantic beating of her heart. She needed to escape, to find a way out of this nightmare. She risked a glance at Kevin, wondering if he was a wolf, if he could move faster than she could comprehend. But it didn't matter; she had escaped before, and she would do it again.

Sophie remained perfectly still, hoping Kevin would mistake her for being asleep as she plotted her escape. Timing was crucial. She needed to get it right; there was no room for error. This would be her only chance.

Peering out the window, she assessed the road they were on—a semi-busy two-lane highway. Just as she was about to formulate a plan, the car began to slow down. Panic surged within her. Kevin pulled over to the shoulder and parked, his movements deliberate.

He exited the vehicle without a backward glance, leaving Sophie with a moment to weigh her options. Should she make a break for it? But before she could decide, her door swung open. Kevin reached in, unbuckled her seatbelt with a practiced ease, and yanked her out of the car.

Sophie fought against him, adrenaline surging as she struggled to break free. He gripped her arms with a force that felt like iron, pulling them behind her and snapping handcuffs around her wrists. The pressure was excruciating, and she winced, knowing it would leave marks.

He opened the back seat of the car, attempting to force her inside. Sophie resisted with all her might, her body thrashing against his strength. “Get in the car!” he shouted, shoving her with such force that her head collided with the side of the vehicle. Pain exploded in her skull, and black spots clouded her vision.

“Get in!” he yelled again, his voice a harsh command as he shoved her into the back seat, slamming the door shut behind her.

Dazed, Sophie righted herself on the seat, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. As she fought to regain her bearings, she felt a warm trickle of blood from the cut on her forehead, stinging as it dripped into her eyes. The front door opened, and through her blurred vision, she saw Kevin climb in, cursing under his breath.

Then, in a shocking twist, the passenger door swung open, and there was Levi. A flicker of hope ignited within Sophie, a small ember in the darkness that had enveloped her since getting into the car.

Levi turned to her, a smirk playing on his lips as he took in the cut on her forehead. “You already having problems with her?” he asked, feigning nonchalance. “You should have just knocked her out,” he muttered, fastening his seatbelt as if this were just another day.

But the flicker of hope extinguished almost instantly, replaced by a deep sense of betrayal. Levi had sided with Kevin. A wave of nausea rolled through her, churning her stomach as she realized she wasn’t much better—she had betrayed them too.

Sophie poured all her energy into finding a way to escape from the back seat. Kevin glanced back at her, laughter bubbling up from his throat. “You do realize you’re in the

backseat of a police cruiser, right? There's no escaping. Trust me, tougher criminals than you have tried and failed." His arrogance only fueled her anger, and she glared at the back of his head, determination hardening in her chest.

They drove for hours, the landscape outside shifting but offering no familiar sights. Sophie had lost track of time and place long ago. Peering out the window, she strained to catch a glimpse of anything that might provide a clue. "This is where he said he'd meet us?" Levi asked, breaking the silence.

Kevin nodded, pulling the car to a stop. He exited the vehicle, and moments later, Levi followed suit. Kevin opened the door and yanked Sophie from the car, his grip bruising as he maneuvered her.

Sophie stumbled, disoriented by the handcuffs and the sudden movement. Kevin forced her to stand beside him against the car, his presence an oppressive weight. "Now what?" Levi inquired, a hint of impatience in his voice.

The tension in the air was thick, suffocating, as Sophie prepared herself for whatever came next.

Conclusion

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

**\*\*Chapter 67\*\***

"Now, we wait," Kevin declared, his voice steady despite the chill that permeated the night air. Sophie felt the cold seep into her bones, a shiver racing down her spine as she took in her surroundings, her heart pounding in her chest.

Desperation clawed at her thoughts. She scanned the area, searching for any possible escape route. Waiting around to discover who might be coming for her was not an option. A haunting howl echoed in the distance, sending a tremor of fear through her. No, she thought fiercely, she would bide her time and seize the right moment to flee. If they caught her, if they ended her life, it would be a fate better than whatever dark intentions awaited her here.

With steely determination, she forced herself to remain still, her mind racing as she calculated her next move. The moment arrived when Levi ducked into the car, distracted. In a flash, she turned and drove her knee hard into Kevin's gut, sending him stumbling back. She followed through with a fierce kick that sent Levi reeling into the vehicle. But her hands were still bound, rendering her momentary victory bittersweet.

Without a second thought, she bolted toward the woods, her heart hammering in her chest. The sound of shouts erupted behind her, a stark reminder that she needed to act fast or risk being captured. There was no chance she could outrun them or find a place

to hide; they were far too close on her heels. Pushing herself to run faster, she could feel their presence gaining on her, the adrenaline fueling her flight.

In her haste, she stumbled over an unseen root and fell hard to the ground, the impact jarring her. Panic surged as she heard an angry growl nearby. Rolling onto her back, she screamed as a wolf lunged toward her. But before it could reach her, a massive black wolf collided with it mid-air, the two beasts grappling in a whirlwind of fur and teeth. Sophie turned her head, her breath hitching at the sight of the fierce battle, but it ended almost as quickly as it began.

The black wolf turned its gaze toward her, and a whisper escaped her lips, "Torin?"

The wolf approached her cautiously, its intense stare piercing through the darkness. Sophie awkwardly sat up, feeling a strange sense of comfort as the wolf settled beside her. "Th-thank you," she stammered, her body still trembling from the cold and fear. The wolf inched closer, and she found herself leaning against its warm, solid form. It remained still, yet she could sense its alertness—ears perked, muscles tense.

Moments later, a howl pierced the night air, and Sophie shivered in response, her heart racing anew. Then, she heard the cacophony of footsteps approaching. A quick glance at the wolf revealed that it was focused on the noise, yet it didn't seem alarmed.

Suddenly, Liam emerged from the shadows, barefoot and bare-chested, clad only in black sweatpants. He tossed a pair of pants toward the wolf, which caught them deftly in its jaws before darting away. Sophie felt an immediate pang of loss as the warmth of the wolf left her side. Liam knelt before her, concern etched across his features. "You okay, Sophie?" he asked, his voice laced with urgency.

"We need keys for the handcuffs," Torin interjected as he strode toward them, now dressed similarly to Liam, in black sweatpants that clung to his athletic frame.

"You don't want to just break them?" Liam suggested, a hint of frustration in his tone.

Torin shook his head firmly. "I don't want to risk hurting her wrists."

Liam nodded in understanding. "I'll find them. Max is handling the, uh..." He glanced at Sophie, his words trailing off. Torin merely nodded, and Liam took off into the night.

Torin knelt in front of her, his eyes narrowing as they fell on the cut marring her forehead. "What other injuries do you have?" he asked, his voice gruff but filled with concern.

Sophie closed her eyes for a brief moment, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill. When she opened them again, she met Torin's gaze with sincerity. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I thought I was doing the right thing." She paused, the weight of her actions crashing down on her. "I was wrong, and I truly regret it."

"It's my fault," Torin replied softly, his voice low and heavy with regret. "You should never have felt the need to run from me. It's my responsibility to make you feel safe, and I failed you. Will you come back with me to my house?"

Sophie hesitated, weighing her options before deciding to lay bare her fears. "I'm scared, Torin. I don't want to be locked up, left in the dark with... things. You took my ph-phone away and locked me in the house; then you got hurt and wouldn't tell me what happened," she confessed, her shivering betraying her confusion and vulnerability.

"I messed up, and I'm truly sorry. I promise to explain everything to you. Can I please take you to the house, get you warm, and check your injuries?" Torin's eyes pleaded with her, a silent promise of safety.

Exhausted and overwhelmed, Sophie nodded, hoping against hope that she wasn't making a choice she would later regret. In an instant, Torin swooped in, lifting her with surprising gentleness despite her hands being bound behind her. He navigated the rough terrain with ease, and she couldn't help but voice her concern. "Please tell me you brought a car," she urged, praying they hadn't arrived in wolf form.

Torin nodded, and as they emerged from the trees, relief washed over her at the sight of a Land Rover idling nearby.

Liam jogged toward them, a key held triumphantly in his hand. Torin adjusted his hold on her. "Wrap your legs around my waist," he instructed, and she complied with his help, feeling the warmth of his body envelop her. He secured one arm around her for support as Liam approached and unlocked the cuffs.

Sophie let her arms drop, wincing at the sudden rush of blood as the circulation returned. "It's going to hurt as the blood starts moving again," Torin warned gently, reaching up to rub her arms one at a time. Pain radiated through her upper arms, but it was a relief compared to the restraints. As the pain began to subside, she looked up at Torin, gratitude shining in her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly.

He frowned at the cut on her forehead. "The bleeding has stopped. We'll get it checked out as soon as we get home," he assured her, turning her so she was cradled sideways in his arms once more as he carried her to the vehicle.

Torin opened the back door and carefully set her inside before closing it behind her. Sophie leaned her head back against the seat, closing her eyes momentarily as she tried to gather her thoughts. Moments later, she heard three doors open. Max slid into the driver's seat while Liam took the passenger side. Torin settled in beside her, all three men still shirtless, their bodies taut and ready for action.

Sophie glanced out the window, suddenly feeling as though the car was too small, the air too thick for all of them. Turning to Torin, she asked the question that had been gnawing at her insides. "Is Kevin dead?"

Torin nodded solemnly, his expression unreadable.

"What about Levi?" she whispered, her voice barely above a breath.

"He's dead," Max replied flatly, and the starkness of his words sent a chill through her. She couldn't fathom the emotions swirling within the three men next to her.

"There was someone else. I don't know who. They were waiting for someone," Sophie said, her voice trembling with the weight of her revelation.

"I killed him," Torin stated, the words devoid of emotion, yet they carried the heaviness of a truth that would haunt them all.

Conclusion

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

**\*\*Chapter 68\*\***

Liam turned his head back, a frown creasing his brow. "Do you have any idea who that guy was?"

Torin's voice was sharp, clipped, as if he were slicing through the tension hanging in the air. "No."

Frustration bubbled in Liam's chest. "You should have kept him alive for questioning. Now we're left in the dark, knowing no more than we did before," he said, his tone laced with disappointment.

Torin emitted a low growl, a sound that sent a shiver down Sophie's spine. She instinctively flinched. "He was there for my mate," Garret's voice was gravelly, filled with the weight of his conviction. "Of course, I killed him."

Liam sighed, a heavy sound filled with understanding. "Yeah, I would have done the same thing," he replied, acknowledging the fierce protectiveness that came with their bonds.

Sophie's mind, however, was spinning wildly. The word mate echoed in her ears, a strange melody that both thrilled and terrified her. Mate. He called me his mate. Hadn't he almost said it before? But now he had confirmed it. What does that mean? Does it mean he owns me? A wave of fear washed over her, and her thoughts spiraled down a dark and daunting path.

Torin leaned closer, his presence both imposing and comforting. "I can smell your fear, Sophie. I can sense your panic. You have nothing to fear from me, mate. I promise to

explain everything once we're back at the house and alone," he murmured, his voice a soothing balm meant to ease her turmoil.

Yet, the very notion of being alone with him only heightened her anxiety.

Taking a deep breath, she attempted to calm herself. "Just rest now. It's going to be several hours before we get back home," Torin said softly, his tone coaxing her to find solace in the moment.

Sophie doubted she could rest; her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. But as the smooth rhythm of the drive lulled her, she felt herself begin to drift off. When her head jerked unexpectedly, Torin instinctively wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer against his warm, bare chest. She stiffened at first, but as he adjusted her position, his warmth enveloped her like a cozy blanket. "Just rest, Sophie," he commanded gently, his voice low and reassuring. For the first time that night, she felt a flicker of warmth seep into her, and she stopped resisting, allowing herself to relax against him. She could feel his head resting momentarily on hers, but she was already slipping into the comforting embrace of sleep.

Hours later, the vehicle finally came to a halt. Sophie blinked her eyes open, trying to gather her bearings. They were back at Torin's house, a place that felt both familiar and foreign. As Torin opened his door, he swept her up into his arms effortlessly. "I can walk, you know," she protested softly, a hint of defiance in her voice.

Torin remained silent, his focus unwavering as he carried her up the walkway toward the front door.

"Is she okay?" Madison's voice broke through the haze, filled with concern.

"Can you put me down?" Sophie asked again, her voice a gentle plea.

With a tender motion, Torin set her down on her feet, but before she could fully regain her balance, Madison enveloped her in a warm embrace, causing her to stumble back into Torin's solid chest. "Be gentle with her," Torin barked, his protective instincts flaring at the sight of Sophie's vulnerability.

Madison loosened her grip but didn't release her entirely. "I'm so glad you're okay," she exclaimed, her voice brimming with relief. As Madison stepped back, Sophie realized she was still leaning against Torin, her body weary and lacking the strength to stand independently.

"We need to get inside," Torin urged, his hand resting on the small of her back as he guided her up the steps. To her surprise, she noticed Wyatt and a few unfamiliar faces loitering on the wraparound porch. "Security," Torin whispered, a quiet reassurance meant for her ears alone. Sophie nodded, her heart racing slightly as she ascended the steps. Wyatt acknowledged her with a nod as they passed, a silent camaraderie in their shared understanding.



Torin opened the door, and they stepped inside. The familiar scent of the house enveloped her, and Sophie couldn't quite believe she was back here. Just hours ago, she had doubted whether she would even make it through the night. Liam, Kyle, Madison, Max, Wyatt, and a few other guys followed closely behind them. "I'm going to help Sophie for a few minutes. I'll be back," Torin informed the group, his tone brooking no argument as he began to lead her toward her room.

Once inside, he closed the door with a soft click, creating a bubble of intimacy around them. "I need to know if you have any injuries under your clothes," he said, his voice steady but laced with concern.

Sophie looked up at him, confusion flickering in her eyes. "I don't think so," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

He exhaled a breath he seemed to be holding. "Good, because I don't think I can handle having Paul deal with them right now. My wolf is really on edge after losing you," he explained, his eyes darkening with the weight of his emotions. "Do you have a tank top or something you can put on? I want to check your arms and make sure you're okay after having those cuffs on."

"I do. Can I take a shower first? I'm covered in filth from my fall," Sophie said, the thought of hot water and cleanliness sounding heavenly.

Torin nodded, his expression softening. "I'll wait for you out here."

"I'll be quick," she promised, not waiting for a reply as she slipped into the bathroom. The hot water cascaded over her, washing away the remnants of her ordeal, and she relished the sensation of scrubbing the mud from her skin. She made herself keep moving, focusing on the simple task of cleaning up. Soon, she emerged from the shower, dried off, and slipped into a soft purple tank top and a pair of comfortable sweatpants.

As she opened the bathroom door, she found Torin perched on the edge of her bed, now wearing a shirt that accentuated his muscular frame. He stood as she stepped into the room, his gaze immediately honing in on the dark bruises marring her arms.

Sophie instinctively crossed her arms over her chest, feeling exposed under his intense scrutiny. His expression shifted, and he reached out, his fingers brushing gently over the bruises. "I'm okay," she reassured him softly, trying to dispel the worry etched on his face.

His eyes met hers, and she could see some of the anger that had been simmering within him fade away. "Let me help you brush your hair," he offered, his voice now gentle and almost tender. Sophie nodded, grateful for the assistance, as her arms ached from the tension of the day. She removed the towel from her head and handed him the hairbrush.

It felt surreal to have him standing behind her, carefully brushing her hair. When he paused, she caught his reflection in the mirror. “I’m so sorry, Sophie,” he said, his voice thick with remorse. She turned toward him, her heart aching at the sorrow reflected in his gaze. “I thought I was protecting you.”

“From what?” she asked quietly, her voice barely a whisper as she hoped for the answers that had eluded her for so long.

He sighed deeply, the weight of his thoughts pressing down on him. With deliberate care, he placed his hands around her waist and lifted her to sit on the bathroom counter while he paced before her, clearly wrestling with the turmoil inside.

Sophie sat, watching him intently. “After your kidnapping, Paul figured out what you are. He came over that night to tell us,” he explained, the gravity of his words settling heavily in the air between them.

Conclusion

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

“What am I?” Sophie’s voice trembled, barely more than a whisper, as she braced herself for the truth she feared might shatter her world. Torin stepped closer, his presence enveloping her as he positioned himself between her and the countertop, his arms firm on either side of her, creating a barrier that felt both protective and suffocating.

“You’re a finder, Sophie—a mate finder,” he replied, his voice heavy with an emotion that pierced through the air like a blade.

His eyes, usually so vibrant, were now clouded with a mixture of anguish and urgency. “You are incredibly rare and highly sought after. I knew that every alpha in the country would be vying for your attention, desperate to bring you into their pack. In my panic, I made a grave mistake. I took your phone away, thinking it would keep you safe, and forced you to stay here, under my watchful eye. I thought I was protecting you, but in doing so, I only pushed you toward Kevin—the very person I wanted to shield you from.”

Sophie felt a whirlwind of emotions swirling within her, her mind racing with questions that begged for answers. But one question bubbled to the surface, demanding her attention more than the others. “Why did you let me go with Kevin? When Liam tried to step forward, you told him to let me go,” she said, her voice quaking as she struggled to mask the hurt that seeped through her words.

Torin's expression hardened, his frustration evident. "He had a gun, Sophie! I was terrified he would use it, and you would be caught in the crosshairs. That's why I told him to stand down," he replied, his voice rising with the intensity of his emotions.

Sophie couldn't deny that his explanation soothed some of her hurt. "But why were you beaten up?" she pressed, her curiosity piqued.

"I had just come from a challenge. I hadn't wanted you to see me like this," he admitted, his tone softening as he observed her confusion. "Someone—now we know it was Levi—let it slip that we have a finder here," he continued, his anger simmering just beneath the surface. "Word spread about you, and the first alpha came to challenge me for you."

"I don't understand. Why would he do that?" Sophie asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Torin studied her carefully, gauging her readiness for the weight of his next words. "That's a loaded question. Are you sure you want to know the answer?"

Sophie nodded, determination lighting her eyes. "Please, don't hold anything back. I want the truth, no matter how hard it is. I can handle it. I'm stronger than I look."

"I know," he said, a hint of admiration in his gaze. "You're my mate, Sophie. I realized it the moment I first laid eyes on you. The instant your sweet scent of vanilla reached me, I knew you belonged to me. I nearly lost control of my wolf when I caught your scent and saw you for the first time. I haven't lost control since I was ten," he confessed, shaking his head as if trying to dispel the memories. "Your vanilla scent hit me like a wave, and I was swept away. That's why I had to leave the store."

Torin turned away, beginning to pace as the weight of his words hung in the air. "As wolves, we spend our entire lives searching for our mate. We mate once, and it's for life. There's no room for mistakes. When we find our mate, it's an undeniable truth—the scent, the sound of their voice, we just know. I had heard about this my whole life, but I was completely unprepared when it finally happened. Before you, I was merely existing. The moment our paths crossed, everything shifted. My life, my pack—none of it mattered anymore. My sole purpose became to protect you and ensure your happiness." A dry, humorless laugh escaped him. "The only issue was that you knew nothing about me, about what I am, about our way of life. After hearing your story about how you were attacked by wolves and the fear that still lingers, I couldn't risk telling you the truth. I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. I fought my wolf every day. He is far less emotional, only seeing his mate and not understanding why we weren't already bonded."

Sophie felt an unspoken connection between them, a bond that transcended words. She had her suspicions about what it meant, but she didn't press for details. "After I met you," Torin continued, "I ensured you were always protected by having some of my wolves stationed at the shop. When I discovered you were living in a homeless shelter,

it felt like my world was crashing down. I wanted nothing more than to provide for you, to take care of you, but I knew I had to be cautious. When Kevin began hanging around the shop, I sensed something was off. He was fixated on you, even after I made it clear that you were mine. I never imagined he would go as far as he did, and that's on me. I'm sorry. It's my responsibility to keep you safe, and I failed you. I'm truly sorry, Sophie."

"You didn't fail me, Torin," she said, placing her hands on his shoulders, grounding him in the moment. "You saved me. You've always taken care of me. I'm so sorry I didn't see it sooner." Sophie swallowed hard against the wave of emotion threatening to overwhelm her.

"Then what exactly is a challenge? Why did you have to fight?" she asked, her curiosity ignited once more.

Torin leaned in closer, his hands framing her face, his intensity unwavering. "A female who hasn't completed the bond with her mate can be fought for. Another male can challenge her mate in a fight to the death. If he wins, he claims the female," he explained, his voice steady but laced with an undercurrent of anger.

"That's horrific," Sophie gasped, horror creeping into her voice.

Torin nodded solemnly. "It's not common. As wolves, we cherish our mates and the bond we share above all else. But in your case, it's different. Your unique power makes you a target for every alpha in the country. Wolves are a dwindling breed. Most never find their mates. For every ten wolves, there's only one female. Our birth rates in packs are alarmingly low. You have the potential to change that, Sophie. And that makes you both incredibly important and a significant target. That's why I was trying to keep you hidden, but it backfired spectacularly."

Sophie's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions, struggling to process all that she had just learned. "So, let me get this straight. You believe I'm your mate, and—"

Torin interrupted her with a low growl, his voice firm. "You are my mate."

"Don't growl at me! Okay, so I'm your mate, and you're saying that other wolves are just going to keep coming after us, trying to kill you to take me?" Her voice rose with each word, disbelief mingling with fear.

Garret, Torin's wolf, snarled protectively. "Nobody will take you. I will kill anyone who dares to try to take you from me."

Sophie placed her hands on his shoulders, feeling the tension radiating from him. "I can't let you do that."

"You don't have a choice, Sophie. You're mine, and I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe," Torin declared fiercely, his eyes burning with determination.

"Then how do we stop this? Is this just going to keep happening?" she pressed, anxiety creeping into her voice. Torin fell silent for a moment, contemplating the weight of her question. "Torin," she urged gently, "how do we stop it?"

The air between them crackled with tension, the uncertainty of their future hanging heavily as they faced the darkness ahead.

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"It all begins with a subtle connection," he explained, his voice steady yet laced with a hint of gravity. "The male bites the female, marking her as his own. That bite isn't just a fleeting gesture; it's a permanent seal, a mark that will forever indicate to other males that she belongs to someone. The scent they share afterward intertwines, creating another unmistakable sign for the pack that they are mated. While it's not an absolute barrier, it serves as a strong deterrent for most males," he continued, his gaze intense. "This bond also connects their minds. They can communicate silently, hear each other's thoughts, and feel each other's emotions. It's a profound connection, one that allows them to sense when the other is in peril."

Sophie's brow furrowed in contemplation, the weight of his words settling over her like a heavy cloak. "Wow, that's quite a lot to digest," she murmured, her voice tinged with uncertainty. "But what exactly does the full bond entail?"

"To complete the bond, we must mate," he replied, his voice dropping to a whisper that sent shivers down her spine.

"By mating, do you mean... we have sex?" she stammered, her cheeks flushing crimson.

A soft smile played on his lips as he reached up, his hand gently cradling her neck, his fingers tangling in her hair. "Yes, but it's so much more than that. In our world, it's akin to a marriage. The act itself is private, but we celebrate it publicly. The mating is indeed a physical act, yet it transcends mere intimacy. It's a profound intertwining of our souls. After the bite and the act of mating, the bond solidifies, locking into place in a way that can never be undone. It's eternal."

Sophie exhaled slowly, her mind racing to comprehend the enormity of his words. "That's a lot to take in," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I understand," he replied gently, his eyes softening. "That's precisely why I hesitated to share this with you. I didn't want there to be any barriers between us. But I realize now

that withholding this information was a mistake. I won't pressure you into anything," he assured her, his tone sincere.

"What if we decide not to pursue this?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"I've already made my choice," Torin stated firmly, his resolve unwavering. "But if you decide to reject me, I will respect your decision. However, I will always watch over you, ensuring your safety. It's my duty as your mate."

"You won't just move on to someone else?" Sophie questioned, her heart racing at the thought.

Torin shook his head vehemently. "You are everything to me, Sophie. There will never be anyone else who could take your place."

"What if you don't actually like me?" she pressed, her insecurities bubbling to the surface. "How do you know it's not just this... 'push' that's drawing you to me because I'm your supposed mate?"

"I don't expect you to grasp all of this immediately. That's perfectly fine; you didn't grow up as a wolf. But understand this: I have waited for you every single day of my life. Trust me when I say I know what I want. My wolf knows it too—not solely because you're my mate, the one destined to complete me. Even if fate hadn't brought us together, you would still have captured my attention."

"No other female has ever drawn me in the way you have. Believe me when I say this isn't just the bond speaking. We can take our time, see how things unfold between us. But please, if you have questions, come to me. Don't run away. I promise to do better at keeping you in the loop. Just don't turn your back on me." His voice dropped to a low growl, an edge of desperation creeping in.

"I won't," Sophie replied, grimacing at her own doubts. "But I still think you don't really want me; you just think you do. I mean, look at me. I'm hardly a supermodel or—"

Whatever self-deprecating remark she was about to make was abruptly silenced when Torin pulled her into him, sealing his lips over hers with an intensity that took her breath away. She gasped, and in that instant, he seized the opportunity, his tongue slipping into her mouth. Sophie's mind raced, caught off guard, yet her body instinctively responded, leaning into his strong, muscular frame. He enveloped her in his arms, drawing her closer until her lungs screamed for air. Reluctantly, he pulled back, but his grip remained firm around her.

Sophie looked up at him, her heart racing, and ran her tongue over her swollen lips as if trying to savor the moment. Torin dipped his head for another brief kiss, then buried his face in the crook of her neck, inhaling her scent deeply. She tilted her head to the side, granting him better access, feeling a rush of warmth at his closeness. "You have no

idea what you do to me,” he murmured, his voice a low growl that resonated through her entire being.

When he finally pulled back to meet her gaze, she noticed the shift in his eyes, the yellow hue becoming more pronounced. “Your eyes,” she whispered, captivated.

“My wolf is barely contained,” he admitted, his voice still gravelly with emotion. Torin closed his eyes, resting his forehead against hers for a brief moment before stepping back, creating a small distance between them. He extended his hand, inviting her to follow. “Come on. We need to leave this room.” He guided her to the door, his presence both commanding and reassuring. “I need to grab something from my room,” he said as they walked.

He stepped inside and returned shortly, a black sweatshirt in hand. “Here, you need to wear this,” he insisted, his voice low and serious.

“Oh,” Sophie said, glancing down at her own attire. “I can just get one of my sweatshirts; I don’t need to wear yours.”

He moved closer, urgency in his eyes. “I need you to wear it. It’s the closest I can come to marking you with my scent for now. Please,” he implored, his sincerity palpable.

Sophie was still grappling with the intricacies of this wolf culture. “Is this like a dog marking its territory?” she asked, half-jokingly, trying to lighten the mood.

Torin chuckled, a smirk dancing on his lips. “Sure, if that helps you understand. But can you just put it on? I can’t have you around all the males downstairs right now. This is the best solution I can offer. My wolf is really on edge.”

Conclusion