

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

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****Title: When Night Grows Softer, Hope Returns to Lead Us****

Sophie struggled to maintain control over her breathing as Torin's gaze locked onto hers, a predatory intensity radiating from him. He approached her with a deliberate grace that sent a thrill of apprehension coursing through her veins. Despite the instinctive urge to flee, she stood her ground, waiting with bated breath until he was mere inches away. In an instant, his lips crashed against hers, firm and insistent, igniting a fire deep within her.

Sophie surrendered to the moment, losing herself in the rhythm of his kisses. Each press of his lips urged her closer, and before she knew it, he lifted her effortlessly, wrapping her legs around his waist. With a swift motion, he pressed her against the wall, his mouth continuing to claim hers with an intensity that left her breathless.

Drowning in a sea of sensations, Sophie's heart raced wildly in her chest, each beat echoing her desire for this incredible man. When Torin's mouth finally left hers, she instinctively chased after him, feeling the warmth of his lips travel down the side of her neck. She tilted her head, granting him better access, and gasped softly as he nibbled gently on her skin. A low, breathy moan escaped her lips, surrendering to the pleasure he was drawing from her.

He explored her body with a fervor that sent her spiraling into new heights of ecstasy. But then, a sharp bite startled her, and she cried out, the sudden pain catching her off guard. Yet, as quickly as the discomfort arrived, it transformed into a wave of warmth and pleasure. She found herself moaning against him, lost in the intoxicating sensation of his kisses, which had grown more fervent and demanding.

In her mind, a whisper echoed, "Mine." Confusion wrapped around her thoughts, but another voice broke through the haze: "My beautiful mate." This time, there was no mistaking it—she had undeniably heard Torin's voice in her head. Yet, the thought was fleeting, overshadowed by the fervor of his kisses that left her senseless.

Gradually, Torin began to slow his pace, kissing her with a gentle tenderness that contrasted with the earlier urgency. He pulled back slightly, his eyes searching hers as he asked, "How are you doing, baby?" His voice was rough, laced with the raw power of his wolf, his eyes shimmering with an otherworldly glow.

Sophie felt a tremor run through her entire body, the aftermath of their passionate encounter still coursing through her. "That was incredible," she managed to reply, her voice shaky yet filled with awe.

Torin drew her closer, a playful smirk dancing on his lips. "You think that was good? Just wait until I make you fully mine," he promised, his voice dripping with sensuality.

A shaky breath escaped Sophie as she leaned into him, grateful for his steady presence. She felt as though she might crumble under the weight of her emotions. "Did you talk in my head?" she asked, curiosity lacing her tone.

He nodded, his gaze unwavering. "Yes," he confirmed.

"That's incredible," she said, her eyes widening with wonder. "Can I do the same thing to you?"

Torin hesitated, a thoughtful expression crossing his features. "I'm not sure, since you're not a wolf," he admitted.

Sophie furrowed her brow, intrigued. "How do you do it?"

"Just imagine talking directly to me," he suggested, his tone encouraging.

Closing her eyes, she focused on him. "Torin," she whispered in her mind. When she opened her eyes, she found him watching her intently.

"That's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard," he said, his voice low and sincere before capturing her lips once more.

Suddenly, a thought intruded upon their intimate moment. "Paul's here; we'd probably better let him look at your shoulder," he said, breaking the spell.

Sophie sighed inwardly, wishing they could remain wrapped in each other's arms. *I'd much rather keep doing this,* she sent to him, her heart racing at the thought.

Torin shuddered, a visible reaction to her mental message. *You have no idea what you do to me, baby. We'd better stop while I still can,* he replied, his voice thick with desire.

A smile spread across Sophie's face, buoyed by his response. Torin opened his eyes and gazed at her with a tenderness that made her heart swell. He cupped her cheek gently. "I love being able to hear you in my head."

"Me too," she whispered, her voice soft yet filled with sincerity. But then, Torin's demeanor shifted as he carefully pulled the strap of her tank top aside to inspect her wound.

"It's still bleeding. Let's get Paul to take a look at it. Are you good?" he asked, concern etched across his features.

Sophie ran her fingers through her curls, attempting to gather herself. "I'm okay," she replied, though she felt anything but. He smiled at her reassuringly. "It's okay, baby. I like you looking ravished," he teased with a smirk, and she felt her cheeks flush.

He moved toward the door, unlocking it with a practiced ease. Moments later, Paul knocked and entered, a broad grin spreading across his face. "Congratulations," he said, his eyes twinkling with mischief. Sophie could feel her face heat up, a blush creeping across her cheeks. "Come sit on the bed. Let me look at your shoulder."

Grateful for Paul's relaxed demeanor, she complied, relieved that he didn't make these situations awkward. "Let's apply some pressure to the wound and see if we can get it to stop bleeding naturally. Does it hurt?" he asked, his tone professional yet gentle.

Sophie paused, weighing her response. "It does now a little. It didn't before," she admitted, glancing at Torin, who was watching her with that infuriating smirk.

"Then I did my job," he said to her smugly, and she felt a wave of embarrassment wash over her.

Oh my word, Sophie thought, mortified at the implication of his words. She could feel her face burn as she recalled the earlier intimacy. Thankfully, Paul merely smirked, allowing her faux pas to slip by unnoticed. Still, she felt as if she could die from the embarrassment.

Paul continued applying pressure, and as he worked on her shoulder, the pain began to intensify. She bit her lip, determined not to react, not wanting Torin to feel guilty. But when Paul pressed down again, trying to staunch the flow of blood, she winced involuntarily.

"You're hurting her," Torin growled, stepping closer, his protective instincts flaring.

Paul turned his attention to her, concern etched on his face. "I'm sorry, Sophie. Let's get you a painkiller," he said, his voice soothing. Torin disappeared for a moment, and Paul stepped away to gather the medicine.

Sophie attempted to stand but quickly realized her mistake. The injury, previously dulled by adrenaline, now throbbed painfully, and she felt herself sway. Just as she began to lose her balance, Torin's strong arms enveloped her, lifting her effortlessly.

As he carried her back to the bed, she closed her eyes, the dizziness overwhelming her senses. He laid her down gently, ensuring she was comfortable.

"Here," Paul said, re-entering the room with a small bottle of pills. Torin accepted them, offering them to her along with a bottle of water to help her swallow them down. Once she had taken the medication, he carefully settled her back against the pillows.

Torin stood up from the bed, and Sophie felt a pang of disappointment. "Are you leaving?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

"No, I'm just going around to the other side," he reassured her, kicking off his shoes before climbing onto the bed beside her. He pulled her close, taking care to avoid her injury. "Do you need to change your clothes, baby?" he inquired, his voice gentle.

"This is close enough to what I wear to bed anyway," she replied, feeling a sense of comfort in his presence.

"Okay. Just rest and let the pain pills work. I'll hold you until you drift off," he murmured, his warmth enveloping her.

Sophie tried to relax, but the pain in her shoulder made it difficult. "I'm sorry you're in pain," he said softly, and she could hear the concern lacing his words.

"It's okay," she replied quietly, content to simply be in his arms. After a few moments of silence, she summoned the courage to ask, "What happened to the wolves who killed your parents?"

"I tracked them down and killed them with the help of my pack," he answered, his voice steady yet filled with a dark intensity.

"Good," she said, her heart swelling with admiration for him. She wanted to say more, to delve deeper into his past, but the painkillers were beginning to take effect, and her eyelids felt heavy.

"Just rest, Sophie. I'll keep you safe," Torin promised, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead.

"I know," she murmured, feeling a warmth spread through her. *I love you,* she sent to him, her heart laid bare.

I love you too, more than anything in this world, he replied, his voice resonating in her mind. As she succumbed to the gentle pull of sleep, his words were the last thing she heard, wrapping her in a cocoon of love and safety.

Conclusion

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

****Chapter 92****

As the first light of dawn crept through the curtains, Sophie stirred awake, finding herself enveloped in solitude. She blinked against the soft glow, her mind slowly piecing together the remnants of sleep. A curious sensation washed over her as she assessed her body; surprisingly, her shoulder felt remarkably better than it had the night before.

With a gentle stretch, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, and that's when her gaze fell upon a single rose resting on the nightstand, accompanied by a pristine white envelope.

Intrigued, she reached for the envelope, her fingers brushing against the delicate paper. With a slight hesitation, she opened it, revealing a simple yet heartfelt card.

Sophie,

Thank you for last night. Knowing you bear my mark is the greatest feeling in the world. My wolf was actually calm last night for the first time in a very long time. I can't wait until I can have you in my bed every night and hold you as you drift off to sleep. It's my new favorite pastime.

I love you, Sophie, and can't wait to spend the rest of our lives together.

— Torin

A warm smile spread across her face as she read his words, her heart swelling with affection. The morning seemed brighter, infused with the promise of love and connection. After a moment of savoring the note, she slipped out of bed and headed for the shower, allowing the warm water to wash away any lingering remnants of sleep.

As she stood under the cascading water, she took her time, letting her thoughts wander. She could still feel the warmth of Torin's embrace, the way his presence wrapped around her like a comforting blanket. After her shower, she rummaged through her closet, selecting a lovely green blouse that she had admired during her last shopping trip. Paired with a pair of white jeans that Madison had coaxed her into buying, she felt a spark of confidence.

She carefully styled her hair, using product to enhance her curls, and adorned herself with delicate earrings, pulling her hair back slightly on the sides. A light touch of makeup completed her look, and with a final glance in the mirror, she felt ready to face the day.

As she descended the stairs, the aroma of coffee brewing in the kitchen beckoned her. Just as she was about to reach out to Torin through their bond, a sudden knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

Without a second thought, she approached the door, curiosity piqued. Upon opening it, she was met with the sight of two unfamiliar men standing before her. They were strikingly tall and lean, impeccably dressed in sharp suits that seemed to radiate an air of authority.

"Uh, can I help you?" she asked, her voice steady despite a flicker of unease settling in her stomach.

The man in front inhaled deeply, a small smile playing on his lips. "Oh, I think you'll be able to help me just fine." A chill ran down Sophie's spine; something about his demeanor set off alarm bells in her mind.

"Actually, this isn't a good time," she said, her voice firm. "Maybe you could come back later?" She reached for the door handle, but before she could grasp it, the man stepped forward, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat.

He seized her wrist with a grip that felt like iron. Sophie blinked up at him, shock coursing through her veins. She had lived among shifters, yet she had never witnessed anyone move with such speed. Fear wrapped around her like a vice.

"Sophie, are you okay?" Torin's voice echoed in her mind, but she was unable to respond, her focus consumed by the man's unyielding grasp.

"Torin!" she gasped, trying to wrench herself free, but his hold was unbreakable. Panic surged within her as adrenaline flooded her system, her training kicking in. She threw a punch, but it landed harmlessly against him, eliciting a mocking laugh.

"You're a wily little thing, aren't you?" he taunted, just as the second man joined him, effectively pinning her down. They maneuvered her off the porch and down the steps, and just then, the door swung open behind them.

"Hey!" Kyle's voice rang out, and Sophie felt a surge of hope as a wolf leaped through the air toward them. The man holding her released her, instinctively defending himself against the sudden attack.

Madison's wolf followed suit, charging at them with fierce determination. In that chaotic moment, Sophie felt herself being grabbed again, this time by the second man, who began dragging her away.

A howl pierced the air, and as she looked up, her heart soared at the sight of three wolves racing toward her. At the forefront was her magnificent black wolf, unwavering in his charge. He leaped at the man who had been holding her, while Liam's wolf joined forces with Torin, pinning down the assailant with a ferocity that sent shivers down her spine.

Max and Kyle quickly subdued the second man, and Sophie watched in awe as Torin shifted, his eyes blazing with an intensity she had never witnessed before. "You touched my mate," he growled, his voice low and filled with a dangerous authority. "You've signed your own death warrant. Why are you here? Why would you break a century-old pact and step foot on pack lands?"

The man simply stared back at Torin, a smirk plastered across his face, unbothered by the chaos surrounding them. Sophie's heart raced as she noticed more wolves gathering, their growls echoing in the air, teeth bared in a show of solidarity.

“Enforcers, get my mate into the house and keep her safe,” Torin commanded, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife. Within moments, she was enveloped by no less than four wolves, their presence both reassuring and alarming.

“Go inside, Sophie,” Torin urged fiercely through their bond, the urgency in his tone unmistakable.

Normally, she would have protested, wanting to stay by his side, but the genuine fear in his voice silenced her objections. She cast one last glance at Torin, her heart heavy, before swiftly moving toward the house.

As she entered, she closed the door behind her, retreating to her room to give the guys some space to shift back and dress. She knew Torin kept stacks of black sweatpants in the front closet, a practical arrangement for moments like these.

It wasn't long before she heard the front door slam, followed by Torin's voice rising above the others. Taking a deep breath, she emerged from her bedroom, her heart pounding as she spotted Torin striding toward her. He enveloped her in a tight embrace, his worry palpable.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice laced with concern.

“I'm fine,” she reassured him, trying to soothe his anxiety. “I'm safe.” For a moment, he held her tightly, as if afraid to let go, until finally, she felt him relax slightly. Pulling back just enough to look into his eyes, she asked, “Who were those men?” Even to her own ears, the tremor of fear was evident in her voice.

Torin's gaze darkened, and she could sense the weight of his thoughts. “Shoot straight with me, Torin,” she pressed, her heart racing.

“Vampires,” he replied, the word hanging in the air like a dark cloud.

Sophie felt her world tilt on its axis. “Vampires?” she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper. “I didn't even know they existed.” The revelation felt like a bombshell, shattering her understanding of reality.

“They exist, alright,” Torin said, his voice filled with anger. “But we haven't had any dealings with them in over a hundred years.”

“Why here? Why now?” Liam's voice cut through the tension, and Torin turned to face him, not relinquishing his hold on Sophie. Max stepped up beside Liam, his expression equally grave.

“I don't know, but I have a sinking feeling we won't like the answer,” Torin rumbled, his eyes narrowing. He turned to Liam. “Assemble the pack. Tell them we meet in thirty minutes.” Liam nodded, determination etched on his face as he moved to comply.

"Max," Torin continued, "gather all the enforcers. We double security everywhere, including night watches. Nobody guards alone. Groups of two always." Max nodded and hurried off, leaving Torin and Sophie alone in the hallway.

The tension radiating from Torin was palpable, and Sophie felt a surge of concern. "What can I do?" she asked, her voice steady despite the chaos around them.

"Stay safe. Until we figure out what's going on, you are with me every second of every day," he stated firmly, his eyes locking onto hers.

"Okay," Sophie replied simply, the weight of his words settling over her like a protective shield. Torin leaned down, pressing a quick kiss to her lips, but it was fleeting, filled with urgency.

"Do what you need to do. Get something to eat. We leave in ten minutes," he instructed before turning away.

Sophie leaned against the wall in the hallway, watching him go, a sense of foreboding creeping into her thoughts. The world around them felt irrevocably altered, and she could see the cracks in Torin's unshakeable demeanor.

What did this all mean? Only time would reveal the answers, and she could only hope that they would possess the strength to confront whatever lay ahead.

We will, Torin reassured her in her mind.

Sophie smiled softly, feeling a flicker of hope. Yes, they would face it together.

Always, came his resolute response, echoing in her heart.

Conclusion

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

Chapter 93

Sophie stood before the mirror, her heart racing as she fought against the rising tide of panic. She squeezed her eyes shut, desperately seeking calm amidst the whirlpool of anxiety churning within her. Eight hours had flown by in a blur of preparation for her bonding ceremony with Torin, and now, the moment they had both been waiting for was finally upon them. The reality of it all felt surreal, almost dreamlike. This day was not just important for them; it was crucial for their entire pack.

They needed this day. A reprieve from the weight of uncertainty that loomed over them like a dark cloud. Just one day to set aside their fears and troubles, to celebrate the bond they shared. The thought of bringing joy to their fellow pack members filled her

with a sense of purpose. She and Torin were about to offer them a much-needed escape, a chance to revel in happiness, even if just for a fleeting moment.

Yet, the shadows of the past few weeks loomed large. Since the vampires had intruded upon their territory, an unsettling quiet had settled over the pack. There was a palpable tension in the air, a collective understanding that something significant was on the horizon. Everyone was bracing themselves for the storm that was bound to come. Torin had been tirelessly investigating the breach of their treaty, delving into the reasons behind the vampires' audacious arrival. But despite his relentless efforts, he had yet to uncover any answers, and the frustration etched on his face weighed heavily on her heart. Sophie was grateful for this day; he needed it as much as anyone else.

With a deep sigh, Sophie reminded herself that once the ceremony was over, they would finally be bonded—mated, married, however one chose to define it. The mere thought of that future filled her with excitement, but it was not the source of her current distress.

No, her anxiety stemmed from the very dress she wore. It was undeniably beautiful—exquisite, in fact—but it felt like a costume, a facade that didn't quite reflect who she truly was. The soft cream fabric shimmered with sequins, strapless and boasting a daring plunging neckline that hugged her every curve. And those curves, thanks to her newfound health and the nourishment she had received from the wolves, were now more pronounced than ever. To add to her discomfort, the dress featured a scandalous slit that reached well past mid-thigh. Paired with towering nude heels, she felt more like a model on a runway than a woman preparing for a sacred bonding ceremony.

The dress had been lovingly crafted by one of the talented women in the pack, and Sophie understood the honor that came with wearing it. The other ladies had assured her of that repeatedly, yet she found herself wishing it was a bit less revealing. Throughout the day, the older, mated women had fussed over her, offering their guidance and support. Madison had been her constant companion, helping with her hair and makeup, but even she hadn't seen Sophie in the dress yet. Sophie took a deep breath, willing the panic to dissipate. It was nearly time to step outside, to embrace the moment.

"Are you ready?" Greta, the kind-hearted woman who had assisted her all afternoon, asked gently.

Sophie turned to her, forcing a smile. "Yes. Thank you for everything you did for me today."

Greta's eyes sparkled with warmth. "It's my greatest honor to help the mate of our alpha prepare for her bonding ceremony." She handed Sophie a wrap designed specifically to cover the dress during transit. Sophie accepted it gratefully and followed her out to the waiting car, climbing in with care.

Max was behind the wheel, and Sophie felt a wave of relief wash over her. His presence provided a sense of security that she desperately needed. She didn't want to engage in conversation; all she wished for was to focus on breathing, on calming her racing heart. The drive to the beautiful hall where the shifters held their weddings and events felt like it passed in an instant. Max opened her door, extending his arm to her. Trembling slightly, she placed her hand on his arm, and together they walked toward the building.

As they entered, the sound of music enveloped her, a gentle melody mixed with the soft hum of voices. Suddenly, panic gripped her once more, and she froze in place. Max glanced down at her, concern etched on his face. "I can't do this, Max," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He studied her intently. "What do you need?"

"I need to see Torin," she confessed, her heart aching. Without a word, he nodded, understanding her urgency.

Torin? She reached out through their bond, her heart pounding.

"Sophie, are you okay?" Torin's voice was laced with concern.

"I need you. I'm in the lobby," she replied, a wave of relief washing over her as she felt his presence drawing closer.

"I'm on my way."

Max remained by her side as they waited, a silent pillar of strength. Moments later, the double doors swung open, and Torin strode in, looking dashing in his tuxedo. But Sophie couldn't focus on his appearance; the air felt thick, and breathing became a struggle.

Torin closed the distance between them, positioning himself to shield her from the curious gazes of the guests. Max discreetly stepped aside, granting them a moment of privacy. Torin's gaze was locked onto hers, filled with a mixture of love and concern. "Sophie?" he asked softly, his voice a balm against her frayed nerves.

"I can't do this," she murmured, her eyes dropping to the dress that felt like a heavy weight on her shoulders.

"Is it the dress?" Torin's voice was low, almost a whisper. She nodded, feeling utterly miserable. Torin swiftly removed his jacket and draped it around her shoulders, a comforting embrace. Sophie clutched it tightly, as if it were a lifeline.

He guided her to a corner of the room, shielding her from the prying eyes of the crowd. "I'll protect your privacy," he assured her, standing resolutely with his back to the room.

“Sophie?” Madison’s voice broke through the tension, confusion lacing her tone. Torin stepped aside, allowing Madison to approach.

“Help her find another dress,” he commanded, his alpha authority unmistakable. Madison nodded eagerly, ready to assist.

“But what about everyone waiting?” Sophie protested, her heart racing.

“They’ll wait a little longer,” Torin replied, determination evident in his voice. He turned and strode back through the doors, leaving Sophie in Madison’s capable hands.

Madison turned to her, concern etched on her features. “I’m so sorry, Sophie.”

“Can we just get out of here?” Sophie pleaded, feeling utterly defeated. Madison nodded in agreement. Sophie tightened Torin’s jacket around herself, seeking comfort in its warmth, and began walking, feeling the reassuring presence of Max right behind them.

The ride back to Torin’s house was steeped in silence, the weight of the moment hanging heavily in the air. Once they arrived, Madison and Sophie headed straight for Sophie’s room, where she swiftly kicked off her heels and peeled away the confining dress. She quickly donned a pair of comfortable leggings and a sweatshirt, her heart still racing. Turning to Madison, panic etched on her face, she exclaimed, “What am I going to do?”

Madison didn’t respond immediately; instead, she began rummaging through Sophie’s closet, determination in her eyes. After a moment, she emerged with a dress still encased in a garment bag. Gently, she laid it on the bed and unzipped it, revealing the fabric within.

Sophie stared at the dress, her breath catching in her throat. “Try it on,” Madison encouraged, her tone firm yet supportive.

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Sophie didn’t hesitate for even a heartbeat. With a swift motion, she stepped into the dress, feeling the fabric hug her form as Madison expertly zipped it up from behind. Turning to face the mirror, Sophie couldn’t help but admire the sight before her. The dress was a stunning black, perfectly fitted, with a wide neckline that elegantly framed her collarbone. Its long sleeves were tailored to perfection, accentuating her arms, while the scalloped hem danced just above her knees, adding a playful touch. The overlay of delicate lace, intricately scalloped, lent an air of sophistication that made her feel like she had stepped into a fairy tale.

"It's beautiful," Sophie breathed, her voice barely above a whisper. "But I don't understand. Where did it come from?"

Madison's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Torin bought it for you! He stumbled upon it while he was at a shop for business. He said it looked like it was made for you, so he couldn't resist. He told me to keep it safe in your closet for a special occasion. And I think today definitely qualifies, don't you think?"

A wave of emotion washed over Sophie, causing tears to well up in her eyes. "Yeah, I think so," she replied, her voice thick with gratitude.

"Don't you dare cry," Madison commanded, her tone playful yet firm. "We don't have time to redo your makeup. Now, just hold on for a moment." With that, Madison rummaged through the bottom of the garment bag and triumphantly produced a small jewelry box. She opened it to reveal a pair of exquisite black diamond earrings that sparkled under the light. "These are to match your ring," she said, her smile wide and proud.

Sophie shook her head in disbelief. "He's too good to me," she murmured, almost to herself, overwhelmed by the thoughtfulness of it all.

Madison grinned, her eyes glinting with mischief. "Well, it's about time you had someone in your life who treats you like this. Now, let's find your black heels and get you to your mating ceremony!"

Once they arrived back at the venue, Torin was there, waiting for them with an air of anticipation. He strode towards Sophie, his gaze fixed on her with an intensity that made her heart flutter. As she slipped off his jacket and handed it back to him, he glanced down at her, a warm smile spreading across his face.

"Is this better?" he asked, his voice low and inviting.

Sophie nodded, her heart swelling with emotion. "It's so beautiful, Torin. Thank you."

He leaned down, pressing his lips against hers in a soft kiss. When he pulled back, Sophie felt a rush of warmth. "I'm sorry," she whispered, guilt creeping into her voice. "I know I kept everyone waiting. I just—"

Torin interrupted her, his eyes fierce and protective. "Never apologize for wanting to keep your body hidden from the eyes of other men," he declared, stepping closer. "Your body is mine and mine alone." His words were a promise, a fierce declaration of his love. He kissed her again, more passionately this time, before taking her arm and guiding her toward the grand double doors.

Just as they approached, the doors swung open, revealing Liam, who slipped through with an infectious grin. "I just wanted to congratulate you both before the ceremony starts. We all know that afterwards, I won't be able to get near you!" He reached out and

enveloped Torin in a warm hug. "I'm so happy for you, man." Torin clapped him on the back, and Sophie couldn't help but smile at the camaraderie between them.

Then, Liam turned his attention to Sophie. "You look stunning, Sophie," he said, bending down to give her a quick embrace. He took her hand, about to speak, but Sophie was suddenly lost in a vision. A bright light enveloped her, and then she saw it—a simple brown sign that read "Hilltown High School," with a fierce tiger mascot painted beneath it.

The vision faded as she was jolted back to reality. A low growl erupted from Torin, and she heard Liam's apologetic voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't even think about it. I was just going to give her some advice about marrying you," he said, his tone defensive. Torin growled once more, his protective instincts flaring as he turned to Sophie, blocking out Liam completely.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern etched across his features.

Sophie beamed at him, feeling a rush of affection. His eyes narrowed, suspicion creeping in. "You saw something, didn't you?"

Sophie nodded, a playful smile tugging at her lips. She relished the moment, wanting to tease Liam just a little.

"What? What did you see? Tell me, Sophie. What was it? What does she look like? Where is she?" Liam pressed, trying to edge past Torin.

Sophie burst into laughter, and Torin smirked, stepping aside to let Liam get a better look. Liam's expression turned sour as he realized he had been played. "That's not funny," he grumbled.

"Oh, but it really is," Sophie teased, her laughter ringing out. "Fine, I'll tell you. I saw a sign. It's not much to go on, but you'll have to figure it out."

"Just tell me," Liam urged, impatience bubbling over.

"Hilltown High School. There was a tiger mascot beneath it," Sophie revealed, her tone light but mischievous.

"Hilltown High School," Liam echoed, contemplating the information. He turned to Torin, excitement sparking in his eyes.

"Go," Torin urged, his voice firm yet encouraging.

"What about the vampires?" Liam asked, his voice dropping to a whisper, the weight of concern creeping in.

"We don't know anything yet. When I have more information, I'll let you know. If I need you, I'll call you back," Torin replied patiently, his demeanor calm.

“What about your ceremony?” Liam asked, his tone almost childlike, like a kid being told to wait for candy.

“Go,” Torin reiterated with a smile. “Just stay in contact with me.”

“I will,” Liam said, stepping back with a grin. “I guess I’m going back to high school!” He slapped Torin on the back one last time, saluted Max, and dashed out of the room, excitement radiating from him.

Sophie watched him go, amusement dancing in her eyes. “Does he have any idea where he’s going?” she asked, a chuckle escaping her lips.

“Nope,” Torin replied, shaking his head with a grin.

“What if he can’t find her?” she questioned, her brow furrowing slightly.

“He will,” Torin stated with unshakeable confidence.

“How can you be so sure?” she inquired, turning to him, curiosity piqued.

“Because I believe in the impossible. Just as you came to me, Liam’s mate will find him. Fate wouldn’t have it any other way. Besides, he has the finder on his side.” With that, he extended his arm, and she placed her hand on it, feeling a surge of warmth and connection. “Are you ready, beautiful?” he asked, his voice soft yet filled with anticipation.

Sophie smiled brightly. “Yes.” For the first time in her life, she felt enveloped in love, surrounded by people who truly cared for her. It felt incredible—so incredibly good. She was filled with excitement about the future and all the endless possibilities it held.

As the doors swung open, all eyes turned toward them, anticipation hanging in the air. Just before they began to walk, Torin leaned down, his breath warm against her ear. “I want to see you in that dress again later, in our room, where I can take my time peeling it off you,” he growled, sending a rush of heat through her cheeks.

Sophie felt herself blush deeply, a smile breaking out on her face. Torin chuckled, a dark, alluring sound that sent shivers down her spine as he began to lead them forward into their shared future.

****THE END... for now****

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****Chapter 95****

Talya forcefully zipped up her backpack, the metallic sound echoing in the quiet room, and turned to face her reflection in the mirror one last time.

She scrutinized her appearance critically.

Too short. That was the undeniable flaw she couldn't seem to remedy.

Her long, golden hair flowed down her back, shimmering like a heavy chain of sunlight. For years, she had contemplated cutting it, dreaming of a fresh look, but Brandon had a peculiar attachment to it. He considered it his personal domain, a symbol of his preference. He adored long hair, and so she kept it that way—no questions asked. It was as straightforward as that.

Aside from her striking blue eyes, which she always felt were a window to her soul, she couldn't shake the feeling that there wasn't a single part of her body that truly belonged to her anymore.

"Talya, breakfast is ready in the kitchen," her grandfather's voice called out, breaking her reverie.

As she stepped into the living room, she saw Pops slouched in his recliner, his eyes glued to the newspaper, the world outside fading into a blur.

"Thanks, Pops, but I'm alright," she replied, her tone smooth, masking the truth. The toast and bagels he had bought were nothing short of culinary landmines. If she gained even a single pound, Brandon would fix her with that cold, clinical gaze that sent shivers down her spine for days on end.

"Is Grams still in bed?" she asked, the knot in her stomach tightening with concern.

"Yeah, she's not feeling too well this morning," he replied, his voice edged with worry.

The weight of his words settled heavily on Talya's chest. "Not well" translated to more medication, and more medication meant more money spent. She would have to plead with Joe for extra night shifts at the diner again, a thought that filled her with dread.

"Don't worry, sweetie. She'll be fine," Pops reassured her, his smile an attempt to lighten the mood.

Talya leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss on his cheek, feeling a flicker of warmth from his presence. "I'm off now. I'll be back late tonight after my shift," she said, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

"You work too much," he grumbled, the concern etched on his face.

She offered no response. If she didn't work, they wouldn't eat. And Brandon? He was like a prince who had no concept of the word "wait."

Just as she reached for the door, a car horn blared from the driveway, cutting through the morning stillness like a knife.

6:22 AM.

Chapter 95

Classic Brandon.

Talya sighed, feeling the weight of inevitability as she stepped outside.

The Mustang was idling at the curb, its engine purring like a contented beast. Brandon lounged in the driver's seat, flanked by his ever-present entourage, Mitch and Trevor. Together, they formed an inseparable trio—a three-headed monster of popularity and inflated egos.

"Hey, baby," Brandon greeted her, leaning over as she slipped into the passenger seat, planting a quick kiss on her cheek.

Talya expertly ignored the wolf whistles that erupted from the back seat, her cheeks flushing slightly.

To the world outside, Brandon was the epitome of perfection: the star quarterback, wealthy, and undeniably handsome. When he had swept Talya off her feet during their sophomore year, every girl in school had turned green with envy, their whispers trailing behind her like shadows.

But only Talya knew the darkness that lurked behind those brown eyes when anger took hold. Her ribs still remembered the ache from that one time he had lost his temper.

"Excited for the game tonight?" Brandon asked, his voice brimming with enthusiasm as he floored the gas pedal, tires screeching as they tore out of the driveway.

Talya simply nodded, her heart racing for reasons beyond the thrill of speed. The wind whipped through her hair, stinging her face like a relentless whip. She had voiced her discomfort once, and the result had been a harsh lesson. Brandon had unceremoniously dumped her on the side of the road, unleashing a torrent of anger for what felt like an eternity.

Since then, she had learned to keep her mouth shut, to swallow her complaints like bitter pills.

At school, Brandon paraded her around like a trophy, draping his arm around her shoulders as if to showcase his prized possession. It wasn't until first period ended, and he dashed off to handle "team business," that Talya felt a momentary sense of relief wash over her.

"Hey, Talya," a voice called out, breaking through her thoughts.

“Morning,” she replied, offering mechanical smiles to the faces of classmates she barely recognized.

It wasn’t until she spotted Sage that her expression softened into something genuine.

Sage was her anchor in the storm, quiet yet brilliant, a safe harbor in the chaotic sea of high school life.

“Ready for the physics quiz?” Talya asked, knowing full well that Sage could ace it in her sleep.

As they walked down the bustling hallway, laughter and chatter swirling around them, a sudden collision sent Sage sprawling to the floor, the impact echoing in Talya’s ears.

“Oops. My bad,” Brittany’s voice dripped with sarcasm as she loomed over them, a sneer playing on her lips. “Didn’t see you there.”

Rage ignited in Talya’s chest, a fire that threatened to consume her. “Are you blind?” she shot back, her voice laced with indignation.

Conclusion

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****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn – Chapter 96****

Brittany’s eyes widened, the heavy false lashes almost weighing them down like curtains.

She was clearly taken aback, never expecting Talya-Brandon’s typically meek little pet to actually stand her ground and bite back.

Sage’s complexion drained of color. She yanked my arm with urgency, her voice tinged with panic. “It’s okay, Brittany! She’s just... tired. Let’s get out of here.”

Talya glanced back over her shoulder. Brittany and her entourage were strutting away, giggling like a gaggle of geese.

A pack of fools, completely oblivious, prowling like hyenas on the hunt.

The fire still raged within Talya’s chest, a fierce heat that made her lungs feel as though they were on fire. She inhaled sharply, spinning around and marching toward the classroom, her pace quickening with each step, too furious to care about where she was headed.

Thud.

She collided with something solid, a wall of muscle that felt as immovable as steel armor.

Pain shot through her, her nose stinging as tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

Before she could crumple to the ground in a humiliating heap, a pair of strong, steady hands gripped her arms, preventing her from falling.

Talya looked up.

And up.

Wow. What on earth did they feed this guy?

He towered over her like a mountain, blocking her escape.

Even through the fabric of his shirt, she could see the muscles beneath, as if he were sculpted from granite. His hair was a perfect shade of blonde, and the stubble on his jaw looked carefully groomed—the kind that was undeniably attractive but would definitely leave her skin tingling if he got too close.

But there was something unsettling about the whole vibe.

Brandon liked to parade around, believing he was the Alpha, the ruler of this school. But standing next to this man?

Brandon was nothing more than a child playing dress-up in his father's oversized suit.

The man's gaze descended upon her, a playful smirk dancing on his lips.

For a moment, Talya's mind went blank. It wasn't solely because he was strikingly handsome—though he was distractingly good-looking—but rather the overwhelming aura of power radiating from him.

"I'm Sage. This is Talya." Sage's voice cut through the tension like ice water splashed on a hot day.

What was she doing? Why was she staring at a stranger like some lovesick fool? If Brandon saw this...

"Talya."

The man uttered her name, his voice low and raspy, like sandpaper brushing against her most sensitive nerves. A jolt of electricity coursed up her spine, leaving her momentarily breathless.

It wasn't just his voice that captivated her. It was the intensity of his electric blue eyes.

He didn't regard her as just another stranger.

No, he looked at her like a wolf who hadn't eaten in days, and she was the rare steak laid out before him on a silver platter.

"I like that name," he murmured, his gaze tracing the line of her jaw with an intensity that felt almost predatory.

He was undressing her with his eyes, and it made her heart race in a way that both thrilled and terrified her.

Get a grip, Talya. Don't act like a naïve village girl who's never seen a man before.

"I'm Liam."

Liam. The name echoed in her mind, almost instinctively, as if it were meant to linger there.

"We're late." Sage pinched her arm sharply, her voice dropping to a fierce whisper. "If your boyfriend sees..."

Boyfriend.

The word hit her like a hammer on a hangover.

Fear washed over Talya, clearing her mind of everything else.

Brandon. If he found out she was conversing with a guy like this... her ribs would be in serious trouble tonight.

Right. We need to leave. It was nice meeting you, uh, Liam."

She stumbled back, desperate to escape the gravitational pull of this human black hole.

Just as she turned to flee, she caught a glimpse of Liam's expression.

It had changed.

The flirtatious smirk was gone, replaced by a flash of raw, unadulterated rage.

That look... as if someone was trying to snatch food right from his mouth.

Was it because she mentioned a boyfriend?

"I'll be seeing you, Talya."

His voice was calm again, but his face had turned into an unreadable mask. With a curt nod, he disappeared down the hall, leaving a lingering tension in the air.

Talya collapsed into her desk chair, her heart still racing like a wild drum against her ribs.

"You okay?" Sage whispered from behind her, concern lacing her tone.

"Fine. Why do you ask?"

"I've never seen you look so... lost."

"Not lost," she hissed, her palms clammy with sweat. "Terrified. That guy didn't feel human. He felt like some dark god descended to wreak havoc."

"Whatever he is, forget him before Brandon arrives."

Talya nodded, forcing herself to crack open her textbook, though the words swirled in a blur.

Moments later, Brandon sauntered into the room, plopping down in the seat beside her. He flashed that disingenuous smile, draping his possessive arm over her chair as he regaled his friends with tales of the weekend party.

Talya's gaze remained glued to the page, but all she could see were those piercing blue eyes. That predatory stare.

Liam. Who was he? There was no way he could be a student.

Someone like him appearing at school? That was a recipe for disaster.

The rest of the day dragged on like a slow torture.

At lunch, Talya scanned the cafeteria like a thief in search of treasure. She was terrified of seeing him, yet there was an odd sense of anticipation bubbling beneath her skin. But he wasn't there. She released a breath she didn't realize she was holding, feeling an unexpected pang of disappointment. Had she lost her mind?

Finally, the last period arrived.

Gym. Her personal hell. The only silver lining was Sage, who was equally unimpressed.

"Let's just get this over with," Sage grumbled, her tone heavy with reluctance.

Talya wanted to echo that sentiment, but the words died on her tongue. She was rooted to the spot, her feet refusing to move.

In the center of the gym, clipboard in hand.

Liam.

He had changed into tight athletic wear that hugged every contour of his body, practically an anatomy lesson come to life.

He lifted his gaze.

His eyes locked onto hers with the precision of a laser-guided missile, cutting through the chaos of thirty students to find her.

A slow, dangerous smile curled his lips.

Talya inhaled sharply.

The new gym teacher?

She was utterly doomed. Her nightmare hadn't just escalated; it had transformed into a complete catastrophe.

Talya stared at Liam, her heart racing.

He turned his head slightly, as if he sensed the weight of her gaze, and in the next heartbeat, their eyes met.

Conclusion

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

Talya felt a suffocating weight in her chest, as though the very air around her had thickened into a dense fog. It wasn't until Sage gently nudged her that she broke the spell, gasping in a desperate breath that filled her lungs with much-needed oxygen.

"What on earth is he doing here?" she whispered, her voice barely above a breath.

"I have no clue," Sage replied, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"Line up," came the command.

Liam didn't bother with a whistle; his voice sliced through the silence like a knife, calm yet authoritative, effectively muting the entire gym.

Coach Stanley, wise enough to recognize the shift in energy, stepped aside, allowing Liam to take center stage.

"This is Liam Graves," the coach announced, his tone imbued with a mixture of respect and unease. "For the next few weeks, if you want to avoid failing, you will listen to him."

Fantastic. Talya rolled her eyes internally, feeling as if she had just been thrust deeper into her own personal hell.

There stood Liam, a formidable presence in the middle of the court. The gray sleeveless hoodie he wore clung to his muscular frame, showcasing every sinew, every curve of power. He didn't appear to be here to teach self-defense; he looked more like a wrecking ball ready to take down a building.

His piercing gaze swept across the gym like a searchlight, inevitably landing on Talya. A playful smirk danced on his lips, sending a shiver down her spine.

"Simple lesson today," he announced, his voice low and magnetic, laced with that unmistakable bad-boy charm. "How to make an attacker regret being born."

A wave of suppressed squeals rippled through the girls, a mixture of excitement and dread.

Please, Talya thought, shaking her head slightly. If the attacker was built like Liam, the only viable survival strategy would be to play dead.

"I need a volunteer," he declared, his eyes locking onto Talya with an intensity that made her heart race.

Of course.

Before she could even process the situation, Sage shoved her forward from behind. "Go on. Don't be a wuss."

Each step Talya took felt like a march toward her own execution. The pressure mounted with every footfall, the mingled scents of aftershave, sweat, and raw masculinity crashing over her like a tidal wave, making her stomach twist in knots.

"Face away from me," he commanded, his tone short, authoritative.

Talya complied, turning her back to him, exposing herself completely to the predator behind her.

"Listen up," his voice was right beside her ear, hot breath ghosting over her neck, raising goosebumps along her skin. "When an attacker grabs you from behind..."

Too close. This felt like a violation, a breach of personal space that made her skin crawl.

In the next heartbeat, his arm shot across her chest, yanking her backward and pinning her against his rock-solid body.

Thud.

Talya's back collided with his chest, and in that moment, her mind went blissfully blank. Panic surged through her, and buried memories clawed their way to the surface, threatening to drown her.

She froze, caught in an emotional whirlwind. She could hear Liam speaking, feel the rumble of his chest against her back, but the words were lost to her, muffled by the chaos in her mind.

Images flooded her consciousness—being pinned against walls, trapped in cars, gasping for air.

The air vanished. The gym lights blazed a blinding white, and Liam's voice became an indistinct buzz.

Her lungs spasmed violently. Talya opened her mouth, desperate to draw in air, yet found herself unable to inhale even a single molecule.

She squeezed her eyes shut, her body trembling uncontrollably. This wasn't shyness; it was a full-blown physiological breakdown.

"Talya?"

The playful arrogance in Liam's voice had vanished, replaced by something akin to panic.

The iron grip on her arm loosened.

But Talya couldn't stand. Her knees felt like jelly, and she began to slide downward, gravity pulling her into a spiral of despair.

"Breathe," his voice was urgent now, a burning hand gripping her shoulder. "Talya, look at me. Breathe."

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, attempting to pull in a breath, but the panic had taken over completely. She was spiraling, unable to draw in any air.

Just when she thought she might lose consciousness, Sage rushed in, wrapping her arms around Talya. The solid contact shattered the panic instantly, and Talya greedily gulped in air. Sage's hand rubbed soothing circles on her back, grounding her in the chaos.

"Is she okay?" a low voice asked, concern lacing his tone.

"She is, but maybe you should just keep your distance," Sage replied, her voice polite yet icy.

Talya didn't catch Liam's response; her head was buzzing, the remnants of the panic attack lingering like a hangover. All she wanted was to escape.

“Do you think it would be alright if we left now?” Sage asked, her tone laced with urgency.

“Yes. Of course. Please take Talya to the school nurse. Make sure she’s okay,” she heard Liam say, his voice now tinged with concern.

Sage led her away, and Talya kept her gaze fixed forward. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck prickling; he was still watching her.

The instant the door swung shut behind them, Talya collapsed onto the nearest bench, burying her face in her hands, her heart racing.

Mortifying. Pure, unadulterated shame washed over her.

“You scared the hell out of me,” Sage crouched down in front of her, concern etched on her features. “What happened? Did he hurt you?”

Talya’s stomach twisted painfully.

How could she possibly articulate what had just transpired? How could she admit that her boyfriend had triggered memories that left her feeling like a victim? No. She refused to be “Poor Talya.”

“Nothing,” she finally said, lifting her head and forcing a weak smile. “Just low blood sugar. Skipped breakfast.”

Sage stared at her for a long three seconds, skepticism written all over her face. But she didn’t push.

“Fine,” Sage sighed, patting her knee gently. “Low blood sugar it is. Let’s change. I want out of this place.”

Talya shot her a grateful look, appreciating the unspoken understanding between them. Best friend privileges: no questions asked, just unwavering support.

They changed quickly, the urgency of the moment propelling them forward. If she could just catch the bus, she could escape this testosterone-filled hellhole.

And Brandon? He was still at practice. If she ran fast enough...

As Talya pushed open the locker room door, she skidded to a halt, nearly colliding with a wall of muscle.

Liam.

Conclusion

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****Chapter 98****

Leaning against the cool, sterile wall of the corridor, he had his arms crossed tightly, his long legs stretched out in front of him, creating a barrier of sorts. The moment he caught sight of her, he straightened up, a slow, deliberate movement that spoke volumes of his resolve.

He hadn't gone anywhere. No, he was waiting—waiting for her, as if the world around him had faded into a blur, leaving only her in sharp focus.

“Nurse hasn't seen you,” he remarked, his gaze fixed on her with an intensity that made her skin prickle. His voice was low, tinged with a hint of irritation that was impossible to ignore. “Lying isn't a good look, Talya.”

A shiver danced across her scalp. Was he some kind of human radar, able to sense her unease from a distance?

“I'm fine,” she insisted, forcing the words out through clenched teeth. “I don't need a doctor.”

He took a step closer, and she could feel the pressure of his presence rolling back in like a relentless tide, threatening to drown her.

“You were terrified,” he said, his penetrating gaze boring into her eyes as if he were trying to unearth the secrets buried deep within her. “That wasn't low blood sugar. That was fear. Who scared you like that?”

It felt like an interrogation, a wolf catching the scent of blood and refusing to let go until he found the wound. The intensity of his scrutiny made her heart race, and she felt cornered.

“If you don't want to—” she began, desperate to deflect his concern.

“Yo, Talya babe,” a voice interrupted, slicing through the tension like a knife.

In that instant, her blood turned to ice, a chill creeping down her spine.

A sweaty arm snaked around her neck from behind, yanking her back against a damp, unwanted chest.

Brandon.

If Liam made her anxious, Brandon made her feel downright nauseous.

Liam's expression shifted in a heartbeat. The curiosity that had once danced in his eyes vanished, replaced by a raw, primal violence. His gaze dropped to the arm encircling her neck, and she could see the barely contained fury brewing within him, as if he wanted nothing more than to sever that limb from its body.

Brandon, oblivious to the tension, tightened his grip, marking his territory like a dog claiming a fire hydrant. "Been waiting for you," he complained, then turned his glare toward Liam. "Who's this? Why are you cornering my girlfriend?"

Talya felt the heat rise to her cheeks, an uncomfortable flush spreading across her face as she avoided Liam's gaze. "I'm teaching self-defense to the P.E. class," Liam replied smoothly, his tone casual, but the undertone was anything but.

Brandon made a sound that was almost a growl, but Talya couldn't quite interpret it. "Well, make sure you keep your distance from my girl," he said, his tone possessive.

Mortified, Talya placed her hand on Brandon's chest, her voice barely above a whisper. "Stop."

She stole a glance at Liam and found him staring intently at her hand resting on Brandon's chest. The weight of his gaze made her heart race, and she quickly dropped her hand, feeling a rush of embarrassment wash over her.

She glanced between Brandon and Liam, unable to suppress the instinct to compare the two. Brandon was undeniably attractive, handsome even, but Liam? He was in a league of his own. Taller by several inches, both of them shared a muscular build, yet Liam exuded a magnetic energy that was impossible to ignore. When Liam's gaze shifted back to hers, she quickly averted her eyes, reminding herself that now was not the time to get lost in those thoughts.

"Well, I have to take off. I'll see you in class on Wednesday, Talya and Sage," Liam said, his tone light, yet the weight of his presence lingered in the air. Without another word, he turned and walked away.

Brandon watched him leave, a scowl etched on his face. "I don't like that guy," he muttered, and Talya kept her mouth shut, knowing that anything she said would only fuel the fire. "Don't be late again. I can't afford to be late to practice." With that, he leaned down and pressed his lips against hers, a possessive kiss that left her feeling both exhilarated and trapped. He then turned and headed toward the guys' locker room, allowing Talya to finally exhale deeply, the tension easing from her shoulders.

"All righty then," Sage chimed in, her voice breaking the silence. Talya turned to her friend, who wore a playful grin. "That was fun," Sage added, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Talya managed a small laugh, though it felt strained. "You have a weird sense of humor. Thanks for staying with me," she said, her sincerity shining through.

“Of course! You’d do the same for me. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Sage replied, pulling Talya into a quick hug before parting ways.

As Talya began walking toward the bus stop, her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. It had been a day filled with chaos, and yet, it wasn’t over just yet.

She still had a six-hour shift at the diner waiting for her.

Thankfully, her evening unfolded in a much calmer manner than her day had begun. The night was relatively easy, nothing out of the ordinary to disrupt her rhythm. Just as she was about to clock out, two sharply dressed men entered the diner and settled into her section.

With a resigned sigh, Talya made her way over to them, mentally preparing herself for the unexpected delay.

So much for getting out of here on time, she thought, forcing a cheerful smile onto her face as she approached their table.

“What can I get for you tonight?” she asked, her voice bright, though a feeling of unease fluttered in her stomach.

Both men looked up at her, and she felt like a deer caught in headlights, heart racing as she fought to maintain her composure.

She pushed the unsettling thought aside, reminding herself to stay calm. They’re just customers, she reassured herself, determined to make the best of the situation.

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

The first man lifted his gaze, locking eyes with Talya. “I’ll take a black coffee and a bowl of whatever soup you have on hand,” he stated, his voice steady yet devoid of warmth. Talya quickly scribbled the order down, her pen gliding over the notepad as she focused on the task at hand.

“And what about you, sir?” she inquired, turning her attention to the second man, who sat across from his companion.

“Same,” he replied, his eyes still glued to the table, as though he found the grain of the wood more interesting than her presence.

“Alright, I’ll fetch that for you,” she said, forcing a cheerful tone into her voice as she pivoted away from their table. As she walked toward the kitchen, she concentrated on

maintaining a calm demeanor, even though her heart raced slightly. “Hey, Joe?” she called out, her voice echoing slightly in the bustling diner.

Joe turned from his post at the grill, a spatula in hand and a hint of grease on his apron. “What’s up, sweetheart?” he asked, his tone warm and inviting.

“Could you take care of those two guys in my section?” Talya requested, lowering her voice. “I don’t know what it is about them, but they’re giving me the creeps.” She glanced back at the men, who remained engrossed in their silent conversation.

Joe’s brow furrowed slightly in concern. “Sure thing. You just leave them to me. Why don’t you clock out early and head out the back door? I’ll handle it from here.”

A wave of relief washed over Talya. “Thanks, Joe,” she replied, her shoulders relaxing just a bit.

“Anytime,” he said with a nod. “Have a good night, and be careful on your way home.”

“Thanks, you too,” she replied, her gratitude genuine as she untied her apron, letting it fall to the floor. She stepped outside into the cold night air, the chill biting at her skin. Spring was supposed to be here, but the evening still bore the remnants of winter’s chill. She shivered slightly, quickening her pace to the bus stop. Fortunately, the bus arrived just as she reached the curb.

Once aboard, Talya plugged in her headphones and leaned back against the seat, savoring the brief moment of tranquility before returning home. She noticed a few messages from Brandon lighting up her phone but chose to ignore them for now. She would respond once she settled in.

Upon arriving home, she slipped through the door quietly, locking it behind her with a soft click. She was careful not to disturb her grandparents, who she knew needed their rest. As she passed their room, she peeked in and saw them both peacefully asleep. It was a comforting sight; her grandmother had been struggling with health issues lately, and Talya often worried about her.

Lingering for a moment outside their door, Talya remembered she had meant to ask Joe for more hours. She would have to make a point to do that tomorrow night. With a resigned sigh, she made her way to her room, pulling out her homework. The next two hours were a blur of equations and essays, and by the time she finished, exhaustion washed over her. She changed into her pajamas and collapsed onto her bed, surrendering to sleep.

The following morning, Talya hurriedly dressed after a quick shower, her mind racing with thoughts of the day ahead. She styled her hair into a simple updo, a habit she had grown accustomed to for school. Passing her grandpa, who was settled in his usual chair with a newspaper, she leaned down and kissed his cheek. “How’s Grandma today?” she asked, concern lacing her voice.

He sighed, the weight of worry evident on his face. "Not very well. She had another rough night." Talya frowned, her heart sinking at the news. Tonight, she would definitely ask for more hours. "Don't you worry, kiddo. She'll be okay. You just focus on school and have a good day," he reassured her.

"Love you, Grandpop," she said, waving as she stepped outside, where Brandon awaited her with his friends.

"You're coming to the game, right?" Brandon asked as they pulled into the school parking lot, his tone expectant.

"I forgot about it," she blurted out before catching herself. "But I'm sure I can make it," she added quickly, hoping to avoid any disappointment.

"The game starts at 7 p.m. You need to be in your seat by 6:45, wearing your jersey," he instructed, as if she hadn't heard this a hundred times before.

"Got it," she replied, suppressing an inward sigh. She knew she would have to find someone to cover her shift so she could leave early and also squeeze in a trip home to grab her jersey emblazoned with Brandon's name and number. So much for wanting more hours, she thought, a twinge of frustration bubbling within her. At least the season was nearing its end; just a couple more games to get through, depending on how the team performed.

"Are you coming or what?" Brandon asked impatiently, prompting Talya to grab her backpack and hop out of the car.

In her first class, Sage sat behind her, but today she was unusually quiet. Talya waved at her but didn't engage in conversation. Her mind was elsewhere, not entirely focused on her studies, though she was confident in her ability to ace her classes without too much effort. The day flew by, and at work, she managed to find someone willing to cover her shift, allowing her to leave early.

At precisely 6:45, Talya slipped into her seat at the game, a wave of relief washing over her as she settled in. She plugged in her headphones, closing her eyes for a moment, seeking solace before the chaos of the game began. She hoped Sage would arrive soon; her friend was a constant source of support at these events. Just as she began to unwind, a tap on her shoulder startled her. She opened her eyes to find Liam standing beside her, a grin plastered across his face.

"Hey," he greeted, his enthusiasm infectious.

"Uh, hey," Talya managed, feeling a mix of surprise and uncertainty.

"Is this seat taken?" he asked, gesturing to the empty spot next to her. Panic surged through her momentarily as she considered the implications of his question.

Conclusion

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

"You can't sit there!" The words escaped her lips before she could even think them through. Talya's heart raced at the thought of Brandon's reaction if he found her watching his game next to another guy. He would absolutely freak out. She watched him tilt his head, a curious expression crossing his face as he assessed her.

"My friend Sage is going to sit there," she added hurriedly, hoping to defuse the situation before it escalated.

"Okay," he replied nonchalantly, but then, to her utter dismay, he stepped in front of her and slid into the seat beside her. Talya turned to him, her eyes widening in disbelief.

"You can't sit there either!" she exclaimed, her voice tinged with urgency.

"Is somebody sitting here?" he asked, raising an eyebrow as if challenging her.

"Well, no, but..." Talya faltered, her mind racing to concoct a valid reason.

"Then I think I can," he said with a playful wink that made her stomach churn.

Talya stared at him, panic rising within her. How was she going to get rid of him? If Brandon caught sight of this guy, it would spell disaster for her. She could only imagine the chaos that would ensue—Brandon was unpredictable, and she feared for both herself and Liam. She needed a plan, and fast.

"Talya," came Liam's warm voice, wrapping around her like a comforting blanket. "I can feel your fear. What's wrong?" She didn't dare look at him; she was too busy trying to rein in the mini panic attack brewing inside her.

"Talya, look at me," Liam commanded, his tone shifting to one of authority that she couldn't ignore.

Reluctantly, she turned her head to face him. He was so close—too close for comfort. In an instinctive reaction, she tried to lean back in her chair, craving some distance.

"Hey, Talya." The familiar sound of Sage's voice was like a lifeline thrown to her in turbulent waters.

"Sage!" she exclaimed, her relief palpable as she turned to her friend. "I'm so glad you're here! I was wondering when you'd arrive."

Sage narrowed her eyes, clearly skeptical of Talya's overly enthusiastic greeting, but Talya brushed it off. She quickly stood up, her thoughts racing. "You can sit here," she insisted, eager to create some space. "That way I won't have to crawl over you when I go to the bathroom or grab a drink or snack," she rambled, almost incoherently.

In a flurry of movement, she practically shoved Sage into the seat she had just vacated and slid into the one next to her. Now, Sage was sandwiched between Liam and Talya, and Talya took a deep breath, attempting to calm her frayed nerves.

Before she could fully settle, the music blared to life, and the announcer began introducing the away team.

16:34

1 Ran From My Psycho Step-brother Straight Into The Alpha's Land

24.69

Chapter 100

Finally, it was time for the home team. Talya stood up, clapping dutifully, as was expected of her in this moment. She watched as Brandon charged onto the field, and her breath hitched when their eyes met. It was a fleeting moment, but she could see the instant he noticed Liam sitting beside her.

She watched him stiffen, tension radiating from him like a palpable force. With a flutter of anxiety, she closed her eyes for a brief second, grateful that he wasn't sitting next to her. She couldn't even begin to imagine the fallout if he had been. When she opened her eyes again, Brandon was jogging toward her, a familiar pre-game ritual that made her stomach twist in knots.

She hated this part. But out of obligation, she stood when he hopped into the stands, allowing him to pull her into his arms. He pressed his lips to hers, and the crowd erupted in cheers. Talya was used to these public displays of affection, even if they made her skin crawl. What she wasn't prepared for was the intensity behind Brandon's kiss. His grip was almost painful, and he attempted to pry her mouth open, but she stubbornly kept it closed.

Not in front of all these people, she thought defiantly. But then he bit her lip, and she gasped in shock. He seized the opportunity, forcing his way into her mouth. Talya was so taken aback that she didn't even attempt to fight back.

A heartbeat later, he pulled back, grinning down at her for the sake of the crowd. Yet, she could see the smoldering fire in his eyes, a warning that sent a shiver down her spine.

He leaned closer, his breath hot against her ear. "I'm watching you," he murmured, and the ominous tone of his words sent a chill racing through her. She watched as he flashed a grin and waved at the crowd before vaulting back over the railing and sprinting across the field.

Talya sank back into her seat, feeling a numbness wash over her. She fought back the tears that threatened to spill, her fingers brushing against her bruised lip, where she could still feel the sting. She wiped away the blood, determined not to let her emotions break free.

Sage leaned in closer, concern etched on her face. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

Talya nodded, unable to find her voice, fearing that if she spoke, she would dissolve into tears. As the game commenced, she sat up, only then realizing that Liam was gone. "He left after Brandon's kiss," Sage explained, her tone matter-of-fact. Talya leaned back, lost in her tumultuous thoughts.

At halftime, she turned to Sage, and her heart skipped a beat when she noticed Liam sitting next to her friend. He had obviously returned at some point during the first half. "I'm going to brave the line for the bathroom. Want to come?" she asked, a hint of determination in her voice.

Conclusion