

(Finale: Part 1 of 2)

Chapter 60: Minnie

Earlier on Friday afternoon

It was the familiar scent of Luke Dawson.
I put my lunch tray away and turned around. He stood in the cafeteria with a hundred pair of eyes watching him. Now that he was on track to becoming a player on a D1 college basketball team, there were rumors that he could be in the NBA.
"Join us for lunch?" Luke invited me, "We came to eat here, since that's where you are."
Behind him, Austin was kicking people off the center table and Chad looked uncomfortable at how unsanitary everything was.
"Is someone going to clean this? Where's the service in this place?"
These boys were used to lunch in a private classroom with food delivery, music and the incrow. Divas.
Luke slid his arm around my waist, leading me towards them.
"I'd like to join, but I have mathlete practice," I said, declining the offer. "I'm on the team again and my technique's rusty."
If only he found me earlier during lunch when I was eating at LUCKY's table. The entire conversation had been based on him.
Luke tried to conceal his disappointment, but he was never good at it. I smiled at how adorable that was. His arm around my waist didn't release. If anything, he squeezed me closer to him until I kissed his cheek.

Then he let me go. I didn't want to leave him. Since he was a senior, he barely had any classes with me except for math. And I longed to spend more time with him during the day.
At least we had our date tomorrow.

Luke's POV

Luke walked towards the guys as they sat at a now empty lunch table. The table remained empty for 0.345 seconds before a group of girls flocked around them.
"We came out here and she didn't even join us?" Austin asked in dismay, watching Millie exit the cafeteria.
Chad took his mu in back from a girl who had flirtatiously taken it off his tray. He scooted closer to Austin and randomly changed subject.
"Luke," Chad said, "there's a girl I want to introduce you to. She's perfect, man. Hot and funny, plays tennis and speaks three languages. I could set you up this weekend. You two would be a great match."
Luke stared at him. Austin also stared at him.
"What are you even saying?"
"What?" Chad asked, "Did I miss something?"
Aer a minute, Luke sighed and let Austin explain.
"Luke and Millie are kind of a thing."
Chad dropped his mu in. "What?! When did that happen?!"
No one knew how Chad missed this. Luke and Millie's relationship had played out right in front of him. From the grotto to his own circus party...

"You know I got your back," Austin said, "but you are f'cking clueless sometimes, bro."
Chad flicked a carrot at him. Austin caught it, "Tonight I'm joining Millie and Bianca and those girls at some bar. I'll make sure Millie has a good time." He promised Luke, "And there'll be no drama. I swear."

Four hours later, Millie's POV

"THE COPS ARE HERE!" someone yelled.
Austin was pressed up against the wall as he was being cued for disobeying orders. He'd shoved an o icer who was aggressively holding me. Our whole group was being rounded up and taken round back. Onlookers at the bar began to record the scene.
Chris Hayes had made a quick getaway, not wanting to stick around for law enforcement.
I knew Austin was wishing some of the other guys were here for backup. He hadn't been able to stop the me-Kelly-Julia confrontation by himself.
I didn't expect to blow up at her the way I did. A couple weeks ago, I began to suspect that Julia slept with my ex-boyfriend while we were dating... I'd seen the signs. They call me oblivious, but I'm just collecting receipts.
Anyway, this night was not going according to plan.
"OW! YOU PULLED MY HAIR!" Bianca screamed as she accidentally landed in the fight.

Kelly yelled at Julia, "BITC."
"This way," an o icer directed them, herding the group to a back o ice. He was gru with me, showing my arms tighter until I felt a searing pain.
"Stop! No one is touching my comedic muse!"
The fighting stopped. Even the security guards paid attention.
Where had I heard that voice before?
"Don't make me come myself," he said.
The punishing grip on me loosened and the police o icer backed up.
That's when I saw my rescuer. The gambler in the leather jacket from the Surfside Shack.
He was still wearing a leather jacket.
"You like to make an entrance, don't ya?" the gambler picked me up and adjusted my own lopsided jacket, "About time you showed up."
He chatted away, leading me to a front row seat by the stage, while everyone else backed away. "I told you about my gig a long time ago and I was about to take it personal. Now come on, kid, you'll be sitting in the front row."
One minute ago I was being arrested, and now I was front row in a comedy show.
Sometimes I think my life is the comedy.

Austin slinked into the chair behind me. The o icers were allowing us to stay now that the gambler had said so. The others began to recover by the bar. Julia fled in tears.
"Hey Austin, thanks for being there for me," I whispered as the lights dimmed and the gambler got on stage.
"No problem," he muttered, while he stared down at his phone with a frown, "Hey Millie... Isn't this your necklace?"
I looked at his phone. He had a group chat open and in the middle of the screen was a picture of my mother's necklace. The one I lost at Chad's charity event.
"Where did you find it?!" I gasped, taking his phone and zooming in.
It didn't. Chad and Luke did. It was on the hood of his car.
What?!

Luke and Chad's perspective

It was getting late and Luke was running out of time. He wanted to have some things prepared for his date with Millie tomorrow. And he made Chad cancel his evening plans to help out.
Chad had parked his car on the side of the street as they carried boxes back from a store. The storeowner had stayed open late, especially for them.
"Let me get this straight," Chad said, while they walked back, "Jake wrote a song for her, sang it at the grotto and you still got with her that night? Damn, you got game."
He was still catching up on the whole Millie-Luke backstory.
"Can you write it down for me?" Chad suggested, "Or type it. That way I can make edits directly. You can't leave us out of this story."
Luke sighed, putting one of the boxes on the hood of Chad's car, "Can you open the door?"
"Bro, be careful! This is an expensive car," Chad exclaimed, almost dropping the box while he inspected non-scratches on the hood, "We took my beautiful baby into some shady part of town, near those sh*theads at Alpine place."
Both boys stopped talking. They saw it at the same time: a prescription bottle tucked under one of the windshield wipers on Chad's car.
"What is that?"
"Is someone following us?"
"Keep an eye out, while I put the boxes in the back. We're not opening it until we're inside the car," Luke said, thinking quickly on his feet.
Chad kept watch. He stared into the darkness, snapping his head around at every tiny sound. From a mouse scurrying into the gutter to a plastic bag rustling on the sidewalk.
They piled into the car. Chad popped the lid of the prescription bottle o . A silver necklace slid out and into the palm of his hand.
"What the-"
"It's Millie's," Luke said, recognizing it immediately, "She was wearing it the day of your charity event."
"This the thing she lost? We spent all day looking for her necklace. I thought we were talking about 18 karat gold. This is some janky."
"Take a picture and send it to Austin. He's with her now," Luke said, "I'm going to talk to the boys hiding over there."
"Who?" Chad asked, having missed that part while he was 'keeping watch'.
Three kids on bicycles were lingering in the shadows. Luke walked towards them and they scrambled onto their bikes, ready to take o .
"Take it easy," he told them, "I'll ask you a simple question."
They stayed tense but stayed put. They were very young. Luke wondered what the hell they were doing out here so late.
"Have you seen anyone come by in the last twenty minutes?"
They shook their heads.
"No one came to my friend's car over there?" Luke pointed at Chad.
One of the boys said, "Nah. We waiting for it to happen."
"Waiting for what?"
"They're rich boys," the boys talked amongst each other, "Look at that car."
Luke realized what was happening before the boys explained it.
"You in gang territory now," a boy said, "Bad things happen on this side of the street."
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Luke looked back and, sure enough, he saw two cars rolling down the street and stop at the corner. The drivers called out to Chad.
Luke's phone started to ring. He was about to ignore it when he saw the caller ID. It was Millie. Despite the showdown in front of him, he immediately accepted her call.
"Hey Millie, how are you? Everything ok?" he asked, concerned when he heard her stressed voice.
"I'm fine. We had a crazy half hour. Bar fight, partly my fault and the cops."
Austin suddenly came on the phone, "Millie can't speak anymore. She's being watched by a comedian who's about to go on stage. Long story. Anyway, how did you find that necklace, man? Where are you?"
"I'm outside that store in Alpine we used to go to for those wacky games," Luke said, keeping an eye on Chad's conversation with the gang.
A motley crew gotten out of their car, faces covered in bandannas or low caps. Chad locked his doors and the sound made the gang howl with laughter. They circled him.
"Uh... LUKIE!" Chad called out, standing alone. "I think we're going to need you here."
"What's going on?" Austin yelled through the phone.
"Nothing yet," Luke answered, walking into the situation.
Before he hung up, he heard Austin yell, "I'M COMING!"
Suddenly, Christopher Hayes and two friends jumped the wall in the alleyway and scrambled to their feet. They'd been running from the Laughing Heads bar, where they'd shaken o the one o icer who was on their tail. And they'd dropped into the middle of this.
"Hey," Luke greeted them casually.
Chris Hayes looked from Luke... to Chad... to the ten gang members standing in front of them.
"I was just with your girlfriend," Chris said, "and she's causing all kinds of chaos back there. You two are made for each other."
"What?" Luke reacted, "Is she ok?"
"Yo, you have bigger problems to focus on," Chris' friend indicated the gang narrowing in on them.
"We're good now," Chad said in relief, "These are your people, aren't they?"
The look Chris gave him was p'ssed. "Because we come from the same neighborhood? You want to say that again?"
Some of the crowd whistled, taking even more joy out of what they were about to do.
"But for real, you're friends with these guys," Chad insisted, getting increasingly nervous, "The happy Alpine crew."
"They are not my crew..." Chris let the comment hang in the air, "We're equally f'cked."
His two friends backed him up.
"I'm said, in a cold voice, "It's two to one now. We can take them on."
"What?!" Chad freaked out.
A gang member slid his knife against the side of Chad's car, creating a screeching sound like a fingernail on a chalkboard.
"Don't touch my mother f'cking car," Chad said as he got punched in the face.
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"How much money do you have?" one of the gang members asked.
They were deciding what to do. They had been on their way somewhere, before getting distracted by Chad's fancy car. Now they could see the boys wouldn't go down easy.
"Nothing," Chris answered, "There's only one rich boy here and you can have him."
"Hey!" Chad yelled, clutching his bloody nose.
Chris unbuckled his belt. He pulled it o , wrapped his belt once around his hand and used it as a whip. "What? We aren't friends."
Luke rolled up his sleeves, "You're about to be brothers now."
Luke swung a ferocious punch at the leader and knocked him out cold. He'd targeted the decision maker to cause confusion and gain a momentary element of surprise. They were outnumbered a er all.
"What the- where d'you-"
"He boxes in his spare time," Chad said gleefully, dodging a right hook.
"Take the necklace! They have a necklace!" the boys from the bike called out, "And the car!"
The attacks got more intense and the blows were heavy set. Despite being outnumbered, the fight was even-matched. Damage was being done on both sides.
Austin ran into the fight, yelling, "I'm here!"
The Laughing Heads bar was not far away and he'd been sprinting for the last five minutes straight.
"Only you? You didn't bring backup?"
"I am the backup."
The fight submerged him. It was still two-to-one but the gang was armed. Chris' friend got sliced by a knife on his right arm and Chad was being kicked to a pulp by his car. Austin was dodging as much as he could, but getting tired quickly.
Chris had three boys on him, fighting to take him and his whip down. And suddenly, shining against the dark street, were blinding taillights. Motorbikes appeared under a deafening roar. It got everyone's attention. And there, sitting in the back secret of the leading bike, was Millie.
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Millie's POV

Sometimes, when you walk in on a devastating scene – when you see the boy you love bloodied up and his best friend lying on the cold pavement – things begin to move in slow motion.
The deafening sound of the motorbikes faded into the background. The screaming became a shrill melody that I overlooked.
My vision could only see those I loved. Their pain and my hope to rescue them.
My little hope.
I felt the gambler's men push past me and rush to break up the fight. The gambler sat me on his bike and yelled in my face not to move. I could barely process what he was saying. My eyes were on Luke.
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"Go go go go go," one of the gang members yelled when the bikers took on those closest to Austin.
Austin was rescued and pushed out of the fight. The attackers surrounding Chris began to flee, knowing the bikers would go for them next. The fight escalated in intensity since the bikers brandished their own weapons.
Luke and Chad were the furthestest away.
In the scramble that followed, one of the gang grabbed a semi-conscious Chad and pulled him up by the scru of his shirt. "Give us the necklace and we'll leave."
He held a knife to his neck. Chad felt the cold metal pressing against his skin. The biker-rescuers were furthest away from them. They wouldn't get here in the next few minutes.
"He doesn't have it," Luke said, loudly even though he was being wrestled back, "I do."
Chad's eyes rolled, but he couldn't get the words out. Luke didn't have the necklace; he was just protecting him.
The knife released the pressure from his neck and drops of blood leaked out of a shallow cut. The gang members cornered Luke now. Chad tried to see what was happening, but they blocked his view. He could only hear the threats.
"He's trying to help me," Chad called out.
His mind was racing back and forth: let Luke take the fall or go down with him? It's hard to be brave. In a painful, life-threatening situation, the easiest option is to stay quiet.
The necklace was the last attempt the gang members had of leaving this street fight with something. They hadn't stolen the car and only Chad carried cash, which they had taken out of his wallet. This necklace could be pawned o for a good amount.
"He doesn't have the necklace," Chad repeated, "I do."
With bruised hands, Chad reached into his pocket and pulled out the silver jewelry. The gang members turned around, but before they could grab it from him, he said.
"And you're not touchin' it."
He raised his hand and yelled, "Catch!"
Chad threw it into the air, aiming towards the only person free in this entire mess. The only person sitting on a bike, away from any danger.
Millie.
"CATCH!"
Millie's face turned into one of absolute horror as she realized she was expected to do something athletic.
Surrounded by his attackers, Luke sighed, "Oh, we're f'cked now."
Millie had never in her life caught anything. She knew that, he knew that. Why didn't Chad know that?
Some of the gang who could break free from the bikers ran towards her. She jumped o the bike, running around in circles.
"Hands together, knees bent," she whispered, remembering the words of advice she had received as she stared up at the shiny piece of jewelry flying against the night sky like a shooting star.
"Stay calm... stay calm," she repeated, losing her calm, "STAY CALM!"
Plop.
The necklace landed with a firm plopp into her hands. Her fingers curled across the cold metal, as she stared incredulously at what had happened.
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They were all gone. The bikers had driven the others away. The danger had subsided and the ambulance was on its way. Chad was rolling in the gutter and Chris' friend was bleeding heavily.
Luke limped towards her, eyes only on her. Blood was on his hands and he was drained. She ran into his arms and he pressed his hands on either side of her face. His dark blue eyes lightened at the sight of her.
"Minnie."
He kissed her once. He kissed her twice. He didn't stop kissing her.
"You caught it. You actually caught it," he said in between kisses, "I'm so proud of you."
"An obnoxious boy once told me not to let something good slip between my fingers," she responded, feeling a deep emotion.
"Sounds like one delusional guy," Luke smirked.
"Yeah, well, he isn't the only one."
Luke whispered, "You're my heroine, Millie. You rescued me."
His charming smirk was contagious. His lip was cut and his body was bruised, but he was smiling.
"I can't wait to date you," he said.
"Luke, you're injured. Maybe we should postpone our date until you-"
"I'll go on this date limping if I have to. It's tomorrow. And even tomorrow's too long."
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AIN: Tears almost coming to my eyes. There will be another chapter! I thought I could squeeze it all into one, but the characters refused. So there will be one more.
Some mysteries remain (like who put the necklace?) and the long awaited date night...
Now that we've made it all the way here, I don't want us all to disappear forever. As of 10 minutes ago, I created an Instagram account for everything TPND related. The insta handle is: @NatalieInACorner (#NFTBR)
It stands for 'never forget the raccoon' ;) Hope you give it a follow if you enjoy this story and we can help support each other in writing, in this community and to relish the Millie/Luke vibes a little longer.

P.S. You can scan the QR code at the top for a shortcut