

The Last Guardian

Chapter 11

Harry hit the Smallville market just after dark, feeling a little ridiculous that this was now his routine. Of all the heroic things he'd done, pushing a wonky shopping cart through a small town grocery store ranked pretty low on his list of daring exploits. Lana was three steps ahead of him, already plucking produce from the bins. It was good that she knew what she was doing, because Harry had no idea about the differences between good veggies and bad. She wore a faded hoodie and jeans, and the barest trace of makeup. Her straight, black hair was tied up in a messy bun. She was talking to herself, muttering about how the strawberries looked terrible, and tossing a sad-looking box of them back onto the pile.

Harry hung back, watching her. If he were being honest, he was quite enjoying himself. There was something charming about Lana doing household things, like getting mad at overripe bananas or telling him how much she disliked a certain yogurt brand. She had a little frown line between her eyebrows that appeared when she was trying to choose between nearly identical cartons of milk.

"Is this what your life was like before I crash-landed in it?" Harry asked as he caught up to her. He reached past her for a can of ravioli after spotting a 10% off sticker on the shelf.

She rolled her eyes. "No, my life was way more glamorous. Sometimes I'd treat myself and eat my instant ramen by candlelight." She smirked. "You've really raised the bar around here, Harry."

He placed the can in the cart. "I'm glad to see you're recognizing my positive influence."

Lana made a show of choosing between two fancy wedges of cheese. "You do have a certain ... effect on people," she said, stealing a glance at him.

Harry shot her a lopsided grin. "That almost sounds like a compliment."

"It is," she said, smiling prettily as she put a wedge into the cart.

He bumped her with his hip, making the cart swerve into her path. She squeaked, then whacked him with a bundle of celery, which promptly broke apart. A few of the stalks tumbled to the ground. Lana looked at him and huffed with her hands on her sexy hips. "Look what you've done!" she declared. Harry tossed her a boyish smile, and Lana couldn't help but smile back. She then flicked him in the forehead and said, "Will you please pick that up before we get into trouble?" Harry chuckled, scooped up the wayward stalks, and put them in the cart.

They meandered through the store, bantering about every little thing. Harry took every opportunity to poke fun at American food culture. "You people really do love your peanut butter, don't you?"

Lana countered with jabs at his Englishness. "Are all of you allergic to spices, or is it just you?" It was easy and felt normal with her. Harry truly felt lucky to have somehow stumbled upon such a wonderful person.

As they reached the freezer aisle, Harry's phone rang. He checked the caller ID. The number was local, but he didn't recognize it. He answered anyway. "Hello?"

"Harry Potter?" the voice on the other end asked.

"Speaking."

"This is Gwen at Smallville Properties. I just wanted to let you know that the sale went through. The keys will be ready for pickup tomorrow morning." Harry blinked. He hadn't expected it to happen so fast.

"That's wonderful news. Thanks," he said, glancing at Lana, who was examining a bag of frozen peas like the store might be trying to scam her on the price.

"No problem. Congratulations on the house."

He hung up and pocketed the phone. For a second, he considered not saying anything tonight. Then he saw the way Lana's face softened when she looked at him, and he knew he couldn't keep it to himself.

"Hey," he said, nudging her with his elbow. "Remember how I put in a bid on your old house?"

She nodded, her smile fading a little. "Yeah. What about it?"

"It's mine now," he said, trying not to sound too pleased with himself. "I just got the call. I can pick up the keys tomorrow."

Lana didn't say anything for a moment. She just stared at him, the corners of her mouth twitching. Harry watched her process it, and her eyes dropped to the floor before darting back up to meet his.

"That's ... wow," she said. Her voice was flat and kind of sad.

Harry searched her face. She really did look sad. Lana wasn't very good at hiding her emotions. "Are you okay?"

She gave him a tight smile. "Yeah. I mean ... That's great. I'm happy for you." He waited. Lana was a terrible liar.

She bit her lip. "It's just ... I didn't think you'd actually move out this soon. I mean ... you just started staying with me."

Harry smiled at her. "I'm not going anywhere until you're good and ready. Besides, the house still needs work done."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. She tossed the bag of peas back into the freezer and shoved her hands into her hoodie pockets. "You're really leaving, then?" she asked quietly.

He stepped closer. The freezer air made goosebumps rise on her neck. "I'll be, what, ten minutes down the road? You can come over any time you want."

Lana nodded, but her eyes looked shiny. "Lana," he said, his voice suddenly serious. "You know I'm not leaving you behind. I'll be with you any time you want or need me."

She shrugged with tense shoulders. "I'm being stupid," she said. "Sorry."

He reached for her hand and tugged it out of her pocket. "You're not stupid," he said. "You're my best friend."

She smiled and blushed a little. "I had better be."

Harry pulled her in for a hug, right there in the middle of the freezer aisle. She was cold, but Harry made her feel warm. She closed her eyes, pressed her cheek against his chest, and wrapped her arms around his waist. She slowly breathed in his scent, and it slowed her hammering heartbeat.

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "If you want ..." he said, "... you could always move in with me."

She froze, and Harry smiled. "The house is huge, and you can have your old room back."

She leaned back and looked up at him. "You want me to live with you?"

He nodded. "Only if you promise not to cover the house in girly stickers again."

Lana smacked his shoulder, but she was laughing now, the tension gone. "I can't believe you want to live together. I mean ... we kind of already are, but ..."

"Is that a yes?"

She pretended to think about it. "If I say yes, can I paint my room a different color?"

"Absolutely."

"Do I have to do your smelly laundry?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Not unless I have to do yours."

She smiled prettily at him, her beautiful hazel eyes shining. "Then yeah. I'll move in."

She felt the relief settle into her bones. Harry gave her another squeeze, then let her go. She wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve, then smacked him in the gut with the back of her hand for making her worry.

"You're buying me dinner tonight, since you're such a hotshot homeowner now," she said, her old spark back.

"Deal. Dollar menu, here we come," Harry said. He went into the freezer, grabbed two bags of frozen peas and carrots, and tossed them in the cart.

They finished their shopping and took the long way home, laughing about how they'd decorate the farmhouse. Lana wanted to paint her room purple. Harry said he'd turn the barn into his workshop. When they got back to the apartment, Lana put the groceries away while Harry sprawled on the couch, watching her and thinking about the way her eyes had sparkled in the freezer aisle. It only took her a few minutes before she happily bounced over to him.

"Come on!" she chirped, grabbing his wrist and tugging him to get off the couch. "You're taking me out to eat, remember?" she reminded him. Harry groaned and stood up. She hugged his arm and marched him out to her waiting car.

The Last Guardian

Harry showed up at the real estate office a minute after opening. It was very early in the morning, and he wasn't even fully awake yet. Lana was waiting for him in the car. The secretary was about a hundred years old, had a phone wedged between her shoulder and cheek, and looked like she was already ready to go home.

"I'm Harry Potter. I'm here to pick up the keys for the house," Harry said, showing her his ID.

She finished her call and dug around in a drawer until she found an envelope. "Sign here," she said, sliding a bundle of paperwork toward him.

Harry signed his name on each line, not bothering to read the fine print. The woman looked at his signature, looked at his face, and then handed over the manila envelope with a muttered,

“Congratulations.” The poor woman looked as tired as he felt. Harry stepped away and dug through the envelope. It was filled with papers, and when he turned it upside down, a set of keys slid out into his palm.

The keys rattled in his hand, and he stood there for a second, expecting someone to pop out and tell him that there had been a mistake. Instead, the secretary picked up the phone again and dialed a number. Seeing that there was nothing left to do, Harry left.

The Last Guardian

After school, Lana found him waiting by the flagpole. She wore tight jeans and a faded blue sweater. She looked as lovely as always. “Are you ready?” she asked.

Harry smiled and nodded. “Let’s go see what we’re dealing with,” he told her. She smiled and bounced in place, then grabbed his sleeve and pulled him toward her car.

“You’re driving,” she said, tossing him the keys.

He looked at the car, then at her. “I thought you said my driving scared you enough to take ten years off your life?”

She snorted. “It does, but I want to get started on my take-home math test. So, for the love of god, please keep it under ninety this time.”

He shrugged and got in. He started the engine, and Lana fiddled with the radio, finding a station that suited her tastes. She then turned the volume down until it was just background noise. Lana pulled out her test and began working. Harry drove with one hand on the wheel, the other drumming on the center console. Harry didn’t bother talking. He let Lana do her work in peace.

The sky was clear and blue, and a massive flock of birds flew overhead as they drove down the two-lane road. When they turned down the gravel lane that led to the house, Lana looked up from her test. She stared out the window as the house got bigger and bigger.

Harry parked in front, killed the engine, and looked at her. “Are you ready to go in?”

She nodded and started putting her stuff away. He got out, walked around, and opened her door like a gentleman. He then bowed with a flourish of his hand.

She rolled her eyes, but the corners of her mouth curled up. “You’re so weird,” she chuckled, but took his hand as she climbed out.

They stood on the porch for a minute. The paint was peeling, and the swing hung at an odd angle. Harry used the key, but the door didn’t open. He jiggled it, twisted the knob, and finally shoulder-checked it open. “I guess it needs to be oiled,” Lana stated as she followed him in.

Inside, the house smelled like stale air. The floor creaked under their feet, and sunlight filtered in through the dirty windows, lighting up the swirling dust motes.

“Home sweet home,” Harry said, voice echoing in the emptiness.

Lana wandered ahead of him, trailing her hand along the dusty banister. She peeked into the living room, which was bare except for an old rug and a single, mismatched curtain.

“We used to have a big ugly couch in here,” she said, her voice soft. “I think my aunt bought it at a garage sale for ten bucks. It smelled like mothballs.”

Harry smiled teasingly. “Shall I conjure one up for you? Only the finest estate-sale crap for milady.”

She smiled and poked him in the ribs, then moved to the kitchen. The linoleum was curling up at the edges, and there were three different kinds of wallpaper fighting for dominance.

“Oh god,” Lana said. “I forgot how ugly it was in here.”

Harry flicked his finger, and the entire kitchen glowed green. The wallpaper and linoleum vanished, leaving bare walls and concrete floors. New, sparkling white tile appeared on the floor, and the ancient-looking refrigerator disappeared from sight.

Lana gawked at him. “Show-off.”

Harry chuckled. “You can decide what color you want the walls and tiles. I can easily change them,” he told her.

They moved upstairs, and the stairs creaked so loudly that Lana flinched every time she put her weight down. She was afraid she might fall straight through.

“Can you fix the stairs?” she asked. “I don’t want to have a nervous breakdown every time I go up and down the stairs.”

Harry pointed at them, and a wave of green light rolled up the steps. The wood gleamed, the stain lightened, and the creaks went silent. Lana took a tentative step and smiled. “You’re amazing.”

Harry huffed on his fingernails and buffed them on his shirt. “What can I say?” he smugly stated.

She led him to the master bedroom. The door squealed loudly when she opened it. The room was a big square with windows on two walls and a closet with a door that hung crookedly. Lana poked her head into the closet. “I used to hide in here when I was mad at my aunt, but she

always found me.” She ducked inside, then stepped out, cutely wrinkling her nose. “It smells like old socks.”

Harry eyed the closet, and a pulse of magic swept out. The door straightened, the wood polished itself, and the air cleared. “There,” he said. “It’s fit for all your hiding needs.”

She crossed her arms and looked at him with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. “Don’t get cocky.”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “Hey, I’m just that good.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t deny it. They checked out the guest room. It was smaller and sadder, with yellowing wallpaper and a single bare lightbulb. The floor sagged in the middle. “Can you make it less ... slumpy?” Lana asked.

Harry snapped his fingers. The floor leveled out, and the lightbulb transformed into a modern-style ceiling fixture. The wallpaper shed itself, revealing clean, white walls. “Nice,” Lana said. “You should go into home improvement.”

They walked into the room at the end of the hall. It had been Lana’s when she was still living there. The walls were painted a yellowish eggshell color. Lana stared at the room for a moment. She wasn’t sure what she wanted to do with the room just yet.

The hallway ended at the upstairs bathroom. Lana opened the door and shook her head. “Wow,” she said, “It’s gone downhill since I was last here.” The tub was stained, several tiles were chipped, and the sink was caked with crud.

Harry flicked his wrist. The faucets sparkled like new, and the crud disappeared from the sink. The tiles reset themselves, the cracks vanishing and the grout turning bright white. The tub shone like new, with gleaming chrome handles. All the hard-water stains disappeared. Lana reached in and turned the hot tap. Crystal clear water gushed out. “That’s actually impressive,” she said, running her hand under the water.

“I live to please,” Harry chuckled.

They finished the tour in the downstairs bathroom, which was somehow even worse. There was a dead bug in the corner, and the toilet looked like it had seen better days. Harry didn’t bother with subtlety. He swept his hand in a wide arc, and the room shimmered. The tiles and porcelain transformed all at once, and the bug vanished. Lana stepped inside and looked around. “That’s so much better,” she said with a pleased smile.

“Yeah, not bad,” Harry agreed as he looked around for anything else that needed fixing.

They stood in the hallway for a second, not sure where to go next. Lana stepped up to him and slowly slipped her arms around his waist. "Thanks for fixing up the place," she said quietly as she squeezed him. "It means a lot."

He looked at her. "You mean more," he teased with a handsome smile. She blushed and turned away.

They walked back to her old room. She stood in the center, looking around. "It's weird," she said. "I thought coming back here would be strange, but it actually feels ... good."

He nodded. "I can repaint it for you ... any color you want."

She thought about it. "Purple, but not too dark."

Harry pointed at the wall, and a green flash later, the room turned deep, regal purple.

She tilted her head. "Maybe a little lighter?"

He tried again, and the walls softened into a lighter purple. She examined it for a second, then frowned. "Less blue, more ... lavender?"

He zapped it one last time, and the room glowed with a soft, floral shade that made the white trim pop. She spun in a slow circle, then clapped her hands excitedly. "That's perfect," she said with a pretty smile.

Harry chuckled and rubbed her back. "If you get tired of the color or change your mind, I can always change it again," he reminded her.

She hugged him tightly, and her face pressed into his shirt. "Thank you," she sincerely told him. Lana was amazed at how kind and generous he was toward her. She caught herself breathing deeply and taking in his scent. Realizing what she was doing, her cheeks burned with embarrassment, but it was too good to stop.

He squeezed her back, feeling the slow, steady beat of her heart against his ribs. She pulled back, gifted him a dazzling smile, and asked, "Do you want to get pizza tonight?" He chuckled and nodded, and Lana squeezed him one last time before letting him go.

They headed downstairs, and Lana was already talking about how she was going to decorate the kitchen and living room. Harry listened, not bothering to interject.

The Last Guardian

The Talon was dark, cold, and quiet below, but upstairs, the apartment was warm and full of soft light. Harry lounged in the bed as the TV played quietly in the background. The comforter was

pulled up to his hips, and he wore nothing but a pair of gray boxer briefs. His hair was a mess from his shower earlier ... not that it was much better during the daylight hours. He looked relaxed, if not for the slight crease between his eyebrows as he watched some cheesy murder mystery on the television.

He heard Lana turn off the shower and step out. The bathroom fan hummed for a while, then cut off. There was a thump, then a tangle of footsteps. She was cursing under her breath, which made him quietly chuckle. A moment later, she appeared in the doorway, rubbing at her damp hair with a fluffy white towel.

Lana wore a faded blue t-shirt that barely reached her upper thighs. Her bare legs gleamed with water, and she was still pink from the shower's scorching water. Her long, dark hair clung to her neck in wet ropes. She stopped in the doorway, blinking at the light.

Harry smiled at her. "You took a long time. I thought you might have drowned in there."

She stuck out her tongue and came into the room. "I have a lot of hair, in case you haven't noticed," she said, rubbing her scalp with the towel. She padded over to her side of the bed and sat down, legs crossed under her. She kept drying her hair, tipping her head back with every pass.

The movement tugged her shirt up, exposing the crotch of her pale green panties. Harry noticed, as he always did. She noticed him looking, then glanced down and realized that half her hip was on display. Lana blushed hard and yanked the shirt lower. The tips of her ears went pink. She kept her eyes glued to her towel, too embarrassed to look over at him.

Harry smiled and made a show of stretching his arms behind his head. "Don't let me stop you," he said. "You're putting on one hell of a show."

She huffed and threw the towel at him. It landed with a wet splat on his handsome face. "Pervert," she said, but her words didn't have any kind of bite.

He laughed. "I'm just appreciating the view."

She rolled her eyes, but her lips stretched into a small smile. She reached for her hairbrush, but her fingers were still wet, and it slipped from her hand. The brush tumbled under the bed. "Dang it!" Lana groaned and dropped to her hands and knees, hunting for it.

Harry was tempted to snap his fingers and magically retrieve the brush, but he was having too much fun watching her crawl around. "Do you need a hand?" he asked, his voice full of amusement.

She shot him a look from under her wet hair. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

“I’ll neither confirm nor deny it,” Harry said with a cheeky smile.

Lana crawled back up, brush in hand, then flopped onto the bed with a dramatic groan. She worked the brush through her hair, hissing whenever she hit a tangle. She caught Harry looking again. “What?”

“If you want to get dry faster, I could ... you know.” He made a vague gesture, wiggling his fingers in the air.

She paused and pulled the brush from her hair. “Oh, right. Mr. Magic Pants.” She set the brush down and twisted to face him. “Do you promise not to make my shirt fly up this time?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

He raised three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

She squinted at him, then said, “Go ahead then.”

Harry reached over with one hand, snapped his fingers, and a burst of green light shimmered over her body. Her shirt billowed, but stayed down, and her hair flew upward as if she’d been hit with a gust of wind. It lasted less than a second. When it was over, every drop of moisture had vanished. Her hair was dry, smooth, and gleaming, and her shirt and skin were warm and toasty.

She twisted a strand of hair in her fingers. “It always feels good when you do that. Thank you.”

He gave her a little salute. “You’re welcome.”

Lana crawled under the comforter, scooching all the way over until she was pressed against his side. She tucked her legs under his and pressed her icy cold feet against his hot skin. She sighed and dropped her head onto his shoulder. Her hand slid over onto his muscled stomach, and Lana gently caressed his skin.

Harry looked down at her. “So, is this an invitation for naughty fun time, or do I need to make a reservation?”

She smacked him in the stomach, but didn’t pull away. “You’re not as funny as you think you are,” she said. Her voice was drowsy, but he could see her smiling.

“I beg to differ,” he replied.

She hummed in contentment and closed her eyes. He wrapped his arm around her, careful not to jostle her too much. He played with a strand of her hair, spinning it between his fingers. Harry completely forgot about the boring TV show. The only light came from the TV and the bedside lamp. Lana yawned. “Don’t you ever get tired?” she asked, mumbling through her words. Lana always fell asleep well before Harry did.

He considered it. "I do after I use my powers a lot. Usually, I have to force myself to go to sleep."

"Mhmm," she hummed and scooted even closer, nestling deeper under his arm. Her hand drifted up and settled on his chest, right over his heart. She spread her fingers, feeling the steady beat.

He looked down at her. Her lashes were impossibly long and thick, and her mouth was slightly parted. She looked content and peaceful. He watched the rise and fall of her shoulder with every breath.

She peeked up at him. "Hey, Harry?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Yeah?"

She seemed to think about her words. "Thanks for being here and for asking me to live with you."

He squeezed her gently. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

She smiled, closed her eyes, and let herself relax. Harry reached over with his free hand, turned off the TV with the remote, and then the lamp. The room was instantly black. He could see her perfectly, even in the dark, but he kept his eyes closed and listened to her breathing as she drifted off.

The Last Guardian

Across the street, hidden in an alley, Jason Teague watched the window. He stood in the shadows with his hood pulled up. He'd been there for an hour, his eyes fixed on the faint square of light that belonged to Lana's bedroom. He saw her silhouette pass behind the curtain. He then saw the light go out, plunging the room into darkness.

He let out a long breath, fogging the air in front of his face. He punched the side of his fist against the brick wall, hard enough to split the skin over his knuckle. He didn't feel it. His hands were numb from the cold and adrenaline. He stood there for a minute, his jaw clenched, while blood dripped onto the frozen concrete. He turned, limped his way down the alley, and vanished into the night.