

## When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

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

**\*\*Chapter 11\*\***

As Sophie yanked the drawer open, her eyes fell upon a familiar sight: the crumpled purple t-shirt emblazoned with cross-eyed cats. It lay there in the corner, a mockery of fashion, as if it were a punchline to a joke that had long since lost its humor.

She didn't even bother to glance at her roommate, who was clearly pretending to be asleep, the blanket pulled up to her chin as if it could shield her from the world.

With a resigned sigh, Sophie snatched the shirt and slipped it over her head.

Was it hideous? Absolutely. But in this dismal place, where comfort was a rare commodity, the t-shirt was both dry and warm—a small victory in a daily battle for survival. Dignity? That was a luxury she couldn't afford anymore. The only rule that mattered was to endure.

Once dressed, she settled cross-legged on her bed, hugging her knees tightly to her chest. An hour or two stretched ahead of her, a yawning chasm of time that she needed to fill with anything to distract her from the gnawing emptiness in her stomach.

Her thoughts drifted back to earlier that day, the memory of the man she had encountered etched into her mind like a brand. She had only glimpsed him once, yet every detail was vividly imprinted in her memory—the oppressive aura he exuded, the sharp, chiseled features of his cold visage.

But it was his eyes that haunted her, those fleeting moments of molten gold. Was it merely a trick of the light, or had those obsidian irises truly shifted in color?

The next morning, Sophie donned the cat shirt once more as she made her way to work, thankful for the apron that would shield her from scrutiny throughout the day.

As she and Helen dove into their tasks, Sophie felt a pull to address something that had been nagging at her since yesterday.

"Hey, Helen," she began, choosing her words with care.

“Hmmm?” Helen replied, her focus on arranging the supplies for the day.

“I don’t mean to pry,” Sophie continued, hesitating slightly, “but is the shop struggling?” She could feel the weight of her words as they hung in the air. Helen turned to face her, a flicker of surprise in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I just overheard what you said to those police officers, and I... well, I just thought I should ask.”

Helen waved her hand dismissively, a kind smile softening her features. “Not at all, dear. You’re part of this now. I love this shop,” she said, her gaze sweeping fondly around the space. “My husband and I built it nearly thirty years ago. It’s always been a success, but after he passed...”

Her voice trailed off, and Sophie felt a pang of empathy.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured, her heart aching for the loss Helen had endured.

“It’s okay,” Helen replied, a wistful smile gracing her lips. “It’s been five years now. I miss him terribly. We shared a beautiful life together, building this business from the ground up. It thrived, but he was the heart of it all. He knew every customer by name, remembered where they were from, what they loved to drink, even the names of their pets. I swear, people came in just to chat with my Bob,” she said, a warmth in her tone that spoke of cherished memories.

“After he was gone, I became so consumed with keeping the shop running that I lost that personal touch, and it shows. Business isn’t what it used to be,” she added, a hint of sadness creeping into her voice. “Cynthia helps me as much as she can, but she has her own family to care for.”

A spark of hope flickered in her eyes as she turned to Sophie. “But now that you’re here, we seem to be attracting some attention again.”

They worked in a comfortable silence for a while, but Sophie’s mind began to wander. She pondered ways to breathe new life into the shop. Customers trickled in as they opened, but her thoughts remained tangled in the web of potential solutions.

An idea began to take shape in her mind, slowly solidifying into something tangible.

During her break, she immersed herself in business books, searching for strategies to help the shop flourish once more.

On her way back to the coffee shop, she was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she nearly collided with Liam, who appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

“Liam!” she exclaimed, startled. “You surprised me.”

“Cat girl,” he replied, his enthusiasm noticeably diminished compared to their previous encounters. She noticed his arms were crossed, a defensive posture that made her

uneasy. “Nice walking you to your car yesterday,” he added, a hint of sarcasm lacing his tone.

Sophie grimaced, the memory of their awkward encounter flooding back. “About that, I...” her voice trailed off, uncertainty creeping in.

“No explanation?” he asked, raising an eyebrow, a teasing glint in his eyes.

Sophie crossed her own arms defiantly. “Nope. I don’t owe you an explanation. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work.”

She brushed past him, stepping into the shop with purpose.

“Rawr,” she heard him call after her, the playful tone making her roll her eyes. “The cat’s got claws. I like it.”

He followed her inside, and Sophie shook her head, trying to suppress a smile as she moved to grab her apron. But when she returned to the front, her breath caught in her throat.

There he was—the man from yesterday—looking just as striking as she remembered.

The door creaked open again, and she caught sight of the other man from the previous day lingering by the entrance.

She stole a quick glance at him, and her heart raced. He was terrifying.

Sophie turned back to Liam, who was speaking animatedly, but she couldn’t focus on his words. Her mind was reeling.

“Right?” he prompted, breaking through her daze.

Before she could respond, Liam stepped aside, revealing the imposing figure behind him.

“Anyway, forget all that. Sophie, this is the boss. Torin. Torin, meet Sophie.”

The air in the room seemed to thicken, stifling her breath.

Torin was a mountain of a man, his broad shoulders blocking out the light as he stepped forward. The fabric of his suit strained against muscles that seemed ready to burst through the seams.

As he extended his hand, a wave of aggressive energy washed over Sophie, making her heart race. She hesitated, instinctively wanting to recoil, but she forced herself to take a step forward. She was a waitress now, not a fugitive.

The moment their skin made contact—

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**\*\*Chapter 12\*\***

A sudden jolt of hot electricity surged through her arm, sending a shiver of sensation that rattled her very teeth. This wasn't the harmless zap of static electricity; it felt ominous, like a warning bell tolling in the back of her mind.

Sophie instinctively yanked her hand back, cradling it protectively against her chest. Her heart raced as she looked up, only to be met by a pair of pitch-black eyes that seemed to pierce right through her. There was an intensity in his gaze that sent a chill down her spine.

"Pleasure, Sophie," he said, his voice a low, gravelly rumble, reminiscent of stones grinding against glass. It was a tone that commanded attention, one that felt impossible to ignore.

Her knees quivered beneath her, a mix of fear and an inexplicable thrill coursing through her. Damn it. That voice was like a cheat code, unlocking something within her that she wasn't ready to confront. She nervously tugged at her apron, suddenly acutely aware of the two silly cats printed on her t-shirt, feeling utterly out of place.

Thank God for Helen, she thought, a small flicker of relief lighting up her mind.

"Helen! Torin! What brings a busy man like you here?" Helen's voice rang out, bright and cheerful, as she bustled over, her presence a welcome distraction.

Torin finally broke his intense gaze, but Sophie could still feel the heat of it lingering on her skin, like a sunburn that wouldn't fade. "I'll be coming around more often," he stated, his words hanging in the air with an unsettling finality.

It felt less like a promise and more like a veiled threat, and Sophie couldn't shake the feeling that she was being drawn into something far beyond her control.

Taking the opportunity to escape behind the safety of the counter, her little fortress, she asked, "What can I get you?"

"Large. Black." His response was curt and to the point, as if he were paying by the word.

Sophie turned to the coffee machine, her heart racing. The weight of his gaze pressed down on her back, making her skin crawl. Her hand trembled slightly, causing a few coffee grounds to spill onto the counter.

Calm down, she chided herself. He's just a rich guy. Nothing to be scared of.

She rang him up, her heart pounding as she calculated the total, and he handed her a crisp fifty-dollar bill. Sophie reached for the register, her fingers brushing against the cool metal.

“Keep it,” he said flatly, cutting through the air like a knife.

Her hand froze mid-motion, suspended in disbelief.

The coffee was only a couple of dollars. That meant he was tipping her over forty dollars.

Sophie stared at him, shock and pride clashing within her. She was a fugitive, scraping by, but she wasn’t a beggar.

“Sir,” she managed to say, her voice tight with resolve. “The change is forty-six dollars.”

“I said, keep it.” Torin’s frown deepened, his tone unyielding.

Sophie’s grip tightened around the thin bill, her knuckles turning white as she fought against the urge to just let it go. In that fleeting moment, her mind raced with survival calculations: subtract the cost of the coffee, and the rest could buy her shampoo, a toothbrush, maybe even a shirt from a thrift store that didn’t make her look entirely ridiculous.

Poverty had a way of eroding your dignity, and she felt it keenly in that moment.

“Helen,” Sophie called out, forcing herself to look away from Torin. “Do we have a tip jar?”

She wanted to follow the rules, to avoid any accusations of theft.

Torin’s eyes narrowed, and he opened his mouth, but before he could speak—

“Oh, Torin!” Helen clapped her hands, her delight palpable. “This is perfect for the shop’s general fund. We can finally replace that coffee filter!”

With a bright smile, she reached over and gently plucked the bills from Sophie’s hand, tucking them away into the safe drop.

Gone. Just like that.

Sophie’s hand hung in the air, empty and aching. The tiny spark of hope that had flickered in her chest was extinguished, leaving behind a cold, hollow sensation. She wanted to scream, to snatch back what was rightfully hers.

But she was just the new girl. The homeless girl. She swallowed hard against the bitter lump in her throat.

“That’s great,” she managed to squeeze out, her voice barely above a whisper.

Grabbing a rag, she scrubbed the counter with fervor, keeping her head down to hide the tears that threatened to spill.

It’s fine. Don’t be pathetic. It wasn’t yours anyway.

When she finally composed herself and turned back around, Torin was still there, and he looked furious.

His jaw was clenched so tightly it seemed capable of snapping steel. The air around him crackled with a barely contained energy, a storm brewing just beneath the surface.

Sophie jumped, startled by his presence. “Did you... need something else?” she stammered, her voice wavering.

He leaned forward abruptly, his massive frame looming over the counter, invading her personal space in a way that felt both intimidating and oddly exhilarating. His shadow enveloped her, making her feel small.

Leaning close to her ear, he spoke in a low growl that was meant for her alone. “Next time I say ‘keep the change,’ it means the money is for you.”

His dark eyes bore into hers, searching for understanding.

“Do you understand?”

With that, he spun on his heel and stormed out, the glass door rattling in his wake.

Sophie stood there, heart racing, replaying his angry command in her mind. What was his problem?

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

The afternoon slipped away in a haze, each minute blending into the next like colors on a painter’s palette. Once her workday was over, Sophie made her customary pilgrimage to the library, a sanctuary where the scent of old books mingled with the promise of escape. After losing herself among the shelves, she headed to the shelter, her heart swelling with anticipation as she thought of Olivia. It was only when she found herself teaching the little girl the graceful movements of sign language that the tension in Sophie’s frazzled nerves began to unwind, like a tightly coiled spring finally letting go.

But as always, tranquility was a fleeting visitor.

Later that evening, Sophie retreated to her room, hoping for a moment of solace. Instead, she was greeted by the sight of her roommate—an embodiment of chaos—sprawled across her bed, headphones firmly in place, blissfully unaware of Sophie's presence. It was a familiar scene, one that had played out far too many times.

Sophie didn't waste her breath on futile attempts at communication. With a determined stride, she made her way to the dresser, her heart pounding with a mix of dread and expectation.

As she yanked the drawer open, her breath caught in her throat.

Empty.

A wave of disbelief washed over her as she froze in place, fingers stretching into the back of the drawer, searching for any sign of her belongings. All she felt was the rough texture of wood splintering under her fingertips.

Her spare t-shirt. Her only change of underwear. The little toiletry kit Renna had gifted her... All vanished.

Whipping around, she shot a glare at her roommate, who remained blissfully ignorant, eyes closed, foot tapping to a rhythm only she could hear, a smirk dancing at the corners of her lips.

Rage ignited within Sophie's chest, a fiery explosion that felt like gasoline being doused with a match.

Her fists clenched so tightly that her knuckles popped, the urge to drag the girl off the bed by her hair and smash that self-satisfied expression into the wall surged through her veins. Honestly, she had replayed that fantasy in her mind a hundred times, crafting the perfect revenge.

Yet, logic wrapped around her like a rusty chain, suffocating her thoughts.

Fighting back would mean eviction.

Eviction meant sleeping on the streets. And sleeping on the streets meant becoming a target for Brody, who would relish tearing her apart.

Endure. Just endure it.

As the clock ticked, Sophie took a deep breath and slammed the drawer shut with a resounding bang.

Her roommate finally opened her eyes, feigning innocence, even daring to arch an eyebrow as if challenging Sophie to confront her.

With her heart racing, Sophie stormed into the shower block. She yanked the curtain shut with a fierce tug and sank down against the cold concrete wall. No soap. No shampoo. She allowed the hot water to cascade over her skin until it turned crimson, desperately trying to wash away the filth of humiliation that clung to her like a second skin.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally stood up.

With no fresh clothes to change into, she resigned herself to washing the very outfit she wore.

She crept into the laundry room, her movements stealthy, checking for any sign of life. The coast was clear. She quickly stripped down, her heart racing.

Inventory of a life: One pair of underwear. One hideous cat t-shirt. Black leggings. Socks.

She tossed everything into the washer, set it to the fastest cycle, and huddled in the corner, wrapped in a towel that felt more like sandpaper than comfort.

The longest thirty minutes of her life stretched before her like an endless road.

Curled into a ball on the icy tiles, every second felt like the cold gnawed away at her last shreds of dignity.

Finally, the washer's mechanical hum ceased. But the dryer still needed time.

The door creaked open, and in walked a group of women, laughter spilling from their lips like confetti. They carried laundry baskets on their hips, their jovial chatter filling the room. But when they spotted Sophie huddled in the corner, wet and vulnerable, their laughter evaporated into an eerie silence.

Then the whispers began, sharp and cruel.

"Is that the new girl?" "Does she seriously have no clothes?" "Pathetic..."

Sophie felt their stares piercing her bare shoulders like a thousand needles.

Shame surged through her, igniting her cheeks with heat. She lifted her chin defiantly, fixing her gaze on the spinning dryer, willing herself to be deaf to their ridicule.

Laugh. Go ahead and laugh.

The shame didn't break her; instead, it stoked the flames of anger within her. Anger was a powerful ally. Tears? They were a sign of weakness.

The moment the dryer stopped, she snatched her scorching hot clothes, flinging them on her body before bolting from the room.



Back in her room, she buried herself under the thin blanket, setting her alarm for 4 AM, a reminder of the struggles yet to come.

Hunger twisted her stomach into knots. Lying there in her damp t-shirt, she listened to the rhythmic sound of her roommate's snores, staring into the suffocating darkness.

Happy eighteenth birthday. No cake. No gifts. Just theft, humiliation, and the constant urge to run for her life.

Morning arrived, and Sophie woke before her alarm could blare. She dragged herself to the communal sinks, fighting against the fatigue that clung to her like a shadow.

No toothbrush. With a sigh, she rubbed her teeth with a damp finger. No face wash either. Her gaze fell on the bottle of pink industrial hand soap sitting on the counter.

Stop being a princess.

She pumped a handful of the harsh soap and scrubbed her face vigorously. The chemical lemon scent made her stomach churn, but it was a small price to pay for not looking like a greaseball.

Glancing in the mirror, she took in her reflection: dark circles under her eyes, pale skin, hair tangled into a messy bun—an unfortunate result of not owning a brush—and that ridiculous cat shirt that made her look as if she had raided a toddler's closet.

With a forced smile that resembled more of a grimace, she tossed her towel into the bin and stepped out into the biting 4 AM wind, head held high.

Whatever slap the world had in store for her today, she was ready to hit back.

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**\*\*When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn – Chapter 14\*\***

The morning slipped away in a whirlwind of tasks and responsibilities. Time seemed to race ahead when one was too busy to indulge in self-pity, and Sophie found herself caught in that very current.

During her lunch break, she sought refuge in the library, a sanctuary away from the chaos of her day. There, in the quiet embrace of books and knowledge, she pulled out scraps of paper and began to draft business plans, her heart racing with each idea she penned down. These were not just idle thoughts; they were lifelines for Helen, a way to prove to herself that she was more than just a cog in the wheel, more than someone who merely pushed buttons for coffee.

As she made her way back to the shop, a sudden chill gripped her, halting her steps.

Torin.

He stood against the wall outside, his posture relaxed yet commanding, hands tucked deep in his pockets, exuding an aura of indifference that belied the tension in the air. The people around him navigated a wide berth, as if he were a storm cloud threatening to unleash rain.

Sophie pressed her lips into a thin line, her heart quickening. She attempted to sidestep him, to slip past without engaging, but Torin was quick to intercept her.

With a swift movement, he straightened, effectively blocking her escape. In his hand, he clutched something tightly. Before she could fully comprehend the situation, he thrust it into her chest with a force that left no room for debate.

“Take it.” His voice was a sharp command, chilled and unyielding.

Sophie’s gaze dropped to the object in her hands.

A coat.

Not just any coat—a substantial, luxurious wool coat, its plaid pattern woven in rich hues of deep brown and burgundy. The fabric practically radiated wealth, and the texture felt so exquisite against her fingers that it made her palms slick with unease.

“It’s freezing out here, and you’re walking around looking like a refugee,” he remarked, his frown deepening as his eyes scrutinized her thin t-shirt with evident disdain. “Put it on.”

A spark of defiance ignited within Sophie. What was this? An act of charity? A gesture of pity?

“I’m not cold,” she retorted, her voice edged with irritation as she attempted to return the coat to him. “I don’t need your—”

“It’s forty below. You want to die out here?” he interrupted, his voice rising slightly.

“I don’t—”

Torin stepped closer, invading her personal space. A wave of raw energy washed over her—testosterone, cedar, tobacco—an overwhelming presence that demanded submission.

He leaned down, his gaze locking onto hers with an intensity that felt predatory. “Don’t make me say it twice, Sophie.”

His voice dropped to a low, gravelly tone that sent shivers down her spine. “Wear it. Or I’ll dress you myself.”

With a reluctant huff, she snatched the coat from him, her anger flaring as she shoved her arms into the sleeves.

Instantly, warmth enveloped her, a comforting embrace that contrasted sharply with the biting cold outside. The coat was heavy and soft, infused with his scent—a mix of cedar and something uniquely him. It felt... safe. The shivering that had plagued her moments ago ceased, and her shoulders relaxed against her will.

Torin observed her as she fumbled with the buttons, his stormy expression softening just a fraction.

“There’s something in the pocket,” he said abruptly, his voice low and serious. “Don’t lose it.”

Before she could muster a response, he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving her stunned in his wake.

Sophie stood rooted to the spot, her heart racing. Hesitantly, her hand slipped into the deep pocket of the coat. Her fingers brushed against something solid—a thick stack of paper.

With trembling hands, she pulled it out.

Hundreds. A neat stack of hundred-dollar bills.

Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at his retreating figure, swallowed by the wind. What was Torin’s game? And why did wearing his coat evoke a sense of security she hadn’t felt in years?

—

Sophie’s thoughts swirled chaotically as she donned her apron and stepped back into the bustling shop.

“Hi, Sophie,” a familiar voice broke through her reverie before she reached the counter. It was Kevin, the police officer from a few days prior.

“Hi, Officer,” she replied, forcing a smile. “What can I get for you today?”

“It’s Kevin,” he corrected, his eyes lingering on her as he waited for her to acknowledge the shift in their dynamic.

“Kevin,” she relented, her heart fluttering slightly. “What can I get for you?”

After he placed his order and settled the payment, Sophie turned to prepare his drink. Helen took a moment to chat with him, and Sophie busied herself with other customers, her mind still partially lost in thoughts of Torin and the unexpected gift.

Once she finished, she heard her name called again. Turning, she was surprised to find Kevin still lingering. "So, are you new to this shop or new to the area?" he inquired, his interest evident.

Sophie fought to maintain a neutral expression, unsure how to navigate this conversation. "I'm new to the area," she answered, her voice steady.

"How do you like our city?" he pressed, his tone friendly.

"It's great," she replied, a genuine smile breaking through her earlier distractions. "Where do you live?" he asked, curiosity evident.

Before she could respond, the door swung open, and a few customers entered, providing a welcome distraction. "Welcome to Sip and Drip!" she called out cheerfully. "Excuse me," she added, turning back to Kevin with what she hoped was a casual smile.

"Catch you later," he said, returning her smile and waving as he made his exit.

As the door closed behind him, Sophie exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She dove back into her work, the minutes slipping by quickly.

After her shift, she made her way to the library, her heart racing with anticipation. Armed with printer paper and a pencil borrowed from the librarian, she settled at a table, eager to put her plans into words. She couldn't wait to share her ideas with Helen, hopeful yet uncertain about how they would be received.

Once she completed her notes, she folded the paper with a bright smile, excitement bubbling within her. Tomorrow, she would present her thoughts to Helen.

As she strolled toward the library's front door, her heart skipped a beat when she spotted Liam leaning casually against the wall, engrossed in a magazine.

As she approached, he straightened up, setting the magazine aside.

"Cat girl," he greeted with a playful smirk.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, crossing her arms defensively.

"Can't I just come to the library to catch up on my reading?" he replied, feigning innocence.

"No. You're not the type to spend time in a library. When was the last time you were in a library before today?" she challenged, raising an eyebrow.

“Fine,” he conceded with a frown. “I’m here to walk you to your car.”

“Why?” Sophie asked, confusion furrowing her brow.

“Can’t a guy just walk a girl to her car? It’s called being gentleman-like,” he replied, but his tone didn’t convince her.

Sophie remained skeptical, staring at him in silence until he finally broke. “Fine, Torin told me to do it.”

“Why?” she pressed again, frustration bubbling within her. The whole situation felt absurd.

What was wrong with these guys? Why did they care so much?

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

Sophie found herself in a predicament, one that felt increasingly suffocating with each passing moment. How was she going to escape this situation? First and foremost, she had no car at her disposal, and there was absolutely no way she was going to let Liam accompany her all the way to Hope House. The thought alone was mortifying; it felt like a public admission of defeat. Besides, that journey was far too long for someone dressed in a sleek designer suit and polished shoes—hardly the attire for a casual stroll.

“Um, I just need to go to the bathroom. Then I’ll be ready,” Sophie said, her voice laced with feigned innocence, hoping he would buy her excuse.

Liam nodded, his trust evident in his demeanor. “I’ll wait right here for you,” he replied, his tone reassuring.

As she turned away, a grin crept onto her face. He was far too trusting for his own good, and she couldn’t help but feel a flicker of mischief ignite within her. With a quickened pace, she retraced her steps back into the library, heading toward the restrooms. But instead of continuing on the straight path, she began to zigzag through the towering shelves, her heart racing with the thrill of her little escapade. It was a game of cat and mouse, and she was determined to win.

Eventually, she reached the back exit she had discovered during her last escape from Liam at the coffee shop. She cautiously opened the door and peeked outside, scanning for any sign of him. To her relief, he was nowhere in sight. Taking a deep breath, she slipped out onto the sidewalk and made her way down the street that led to Hope House.

With each step, she felt a mixture of anxiety and exhilaration. She managed to reach Hope House without being caught, though the chill of the evening air seeped through her clothes, making her wish she had worn her new coat. But leaving it at the shop had been a calculated risk—she couldn't afford to lose it to her roommate, who might see it as an irresistible temptation. Not to mention the cash she had stashed in the pocket; she needed every bit of it when she returned it to Torin.

As Sophie stepped into Hope House, she headed straight for the dining area. The moment she entered, her stomach growled in protest, reminding her just how long it had been since she last ate. She joined the line, her heart sinking as she caught sight of the evening's dinner spread. A casserole of some sort paired with lima beans—a combination that made her stomach churn. Lima beans were her absolute least favorite.

She took her plate and found a seat at a table, her appetite battling against the unappetizing meal before her. The previous dinners had been quite enjoyable, but this one was a struggle. With determination, she forced a few bites down, but the taste was simply unbearable. Just when she thought she might gag, her eyes caught a glimpse of a fruit bowl on the counter.

With newfound hope, she jumped up and grabbed an apple, relishing the crispness of the fruit as she returned to her table. As she was finishing her snack, Amy and Olivia appeared at her table, their presence a welcome distraction.

"Hey, how's it going?" Sophie greeted them, her spirits lifting.

Amy beamed at her while Olivia waved enthusiastically. "I found something that might work in the afternoon and evenings," Amy announced, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"That's great!" Sophie replied, genuinely happy for her friend.

"Yeah, it's a start," Amy said, her tone hopeful as she glanced away, perhaps contemplating the challenges that lay ahead.

Sophie's heart ached for both of them. Why was it that life seemed to throw relentless hurdles at some while others glided through with ease? It was a question that lingered in her mind, one she couldn't shake off.

After their brief chat, Sophie made her way back to her room, her thoughts swirling as she considered checking the free room again. She was nearly overwhelmed with joy when she stumbled upon an entire box filled with travel-sized toiletries. Someone must have just made a generous donation.

A wave of gratitude washed over her as she rummaged through the box. She found a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, a razor, and even a hairbrush. But what thrilled her the most was a small bottle of body wash. She eagerly opened the cap and inhaled the sweet scent of vanilla—her absolute favorite.

A smile spread across her face as she savored the aroma.

In another box, she discovered feminine products and a brand-new pack of underwear. The sight of the underwear nearly brought tears to her eyes; it felt like a small victory. She sifted through the clothes that had been dropped off, unearthing two shirts that might fit her. Gathering her treasures, she pondered how to keep them safe from theft this time.

She ventured into the shower room, scanning for a hiding spot, but came up empty. Determined, she headed to the laundry room, only to find it equally unhelpful. Finally, she returned to her room and decided to stash her newfound belongings under her bed, praying her roommate wouldn't discover her secret hiding place.

The next morning, Sophie awoke with a sense of excitement bubbling inside her. She could hardly wait to share her ideas with Helen. After a refreshing shower, she dressed in the t-shirt she had found the day before. As she looked in the mirror, she grimaced at the fit—it was baggier than she had anticipated, and the yellow hue was far less appealing than it appeared in the box.

But she caught herself, reminding herself that it didn't matter. It was a shirt, and it was certainly more than she had yesterday. With a determined nod, she piled her hair on top of her head in her signature work style and finished getting ready.

Arriving at work a few minutes early, Sophie was relieved to find Helen already there, ready to let her in. "Good morning!" she chirped as Helen opened the door.

"You're here early," Helen remarked, a hint of surprise in her voice.

Sophie nodded, a spark of eagerness igniting within her. "I had something I wanted to run past you," she said, her voice a mix of hope and apprehension.

"Go for it," Helen encouraged, gesturing for Sophie to share her thoughts as she busied herself with preparing products.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie steeled herself. Here goes nothing.