

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

21

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Sophie and her roommate had just finished their dinner, the remnants of their meal still lingering in the air, and now they were ready to part ways. Sophie had a pressing task ahead of her—laundry. She needed a clean shirt to wear for tomorrow, and the thought of rummaging through her belongings filled her with a sense of urgency. With a sigh of relief, she noted that her roommate was out of the room once again, granting her a brief moment of solitude.

Entering her room, she knelt down on the floor, her fingers brushing against the cool surface as she reached under the bed to retrieve her laundry. “No, no, no,” she muttered under her breath, anxiety creeping in.

As her heart raced, she began to pull everything out from beneath the bed—old shoes, dust bunnies, and forgotten trinkets scattered around her. But the suit coat, the one she held dear, was nowhere to be found. Panic surged within her as dread coiled tightly around her chest. She buried her face in her hands, feeling a wave of nausea rise from her stomach, threatening to choke her.

What was she going to do? The price of that coat was a mystery to her, but she knew it was worth a small fortune. Anger flared up, hot and relentless, right on the heels of her panic. How could her roommate have taken it? This was the last straw—she was fed up with her roommate’s habit of borrowing without asking.

Moments later, her roommate strolled back into the room, completely unfazed. Sophie, feeling the fury bubble up inside her like a boiling pot, stood up abruptly. “Where is it?” she demanded, her voice sharp and accusatory. But her roommate, seemingly indifferent, walked over to her own bed, ignoring Sophie’s inquiry. “Where is it?” Sophie pressed again, her tone growing more heated.

Her roommate continued to dismiss her, lying down on her bed and donning her headphones as if Sophie were invisible. In that moment, Sophie felt a surge of frustration. She closed her eyes, trying to breathe through the anger, but it was futile. With a swift movement, she marched over and yanked the headphones away from her roommate’s ears.

Her roommate bolted upright, anger flashing in her eyes as she swore at Sophie. But Sophie had reached her limit. "Where's the jacket?" she demanded once more, her voice tinged with desperation.

In an unexpected twist, her roommate stood, invading Sophie's personal space. "It's gone. I sold it," she declared, her tone dripping with malice.

Sophie couldn't help but let out a derisive laugh, disbelief washing over her. "You couldn't have sold it! I was only gone for thirty minutes!"

But her roommate's laughter was chilling, a sound that sent shivers down Sophie's spine. "Shows how much you know," she taunted, and before Sophie could even process the words, a fist collided with her stomach, the impact knocking the breath out of her. She crumpled to the floor, pain radiating through her body as her roommate followed up with a brutal kick to her ribs, forcing her into a protective ball.

After two more vicious kicks, her roommate knelt beside her, a smirk on her face. "Don't ever take my headphones away from me again," she hissed, leaving Sophie gasping for air on the floor.

Sophie lay there, her breath coming in shallow gasps. This wasn't the first time she had endured such violence; it felt like a cruel, repetitive nightmare. She had learned to breathe through the pain, knowing that eventually it would subside. With great effort, she pushed herself into a sitting position and crawled toward her bed, finally collapsing onto it, her body aching.

As she turned her back to her roommate, she felt a twinge of fear but was too engulfed in pain to care. Facing the wall, tears began to stream down her cheeks, each drop a testament to her despair. She lost track of time, the world around her fading away until, at long last, exhaustion took over and she drifted into a restless sleep.

The next morning, when her alarm blared, Sophie was jolted awake, and the realization of her pain hit her like a freight train. Every movement felt like a monumental effort, and the mere act of rolling over was a challenge. Despite the agony coursing through her, she forced herself to get out of bed, dragging her weary body toward the shower.

Each step felt like wading through molasses, but she persevered. The shower was a small reprieve, though washing her hair was out of the question; the pain in her ribs made that impossible. After dressing and managing to pull her hair into a messy topknot, she pushed herself onward, determined to keep moving despite the discomfort.

She dropped her belongings into her drawer, resigning herself to the fact that there was no point in hiding them. Her roommate was fully aware of where everything was now. Glancing at the clock, she grimaced; it was already 4:15. She had underestimated how long it would take her to get ready. With a heavy heart, she slipped out of her room, closing the door quietly behind her. The thought of the long, cold walk ahead threatened to bring tears to her eyes, but she steeled herself, refusing to let despair take hold.

There was no other choice. If she ever wanted to escape this place, she needed to keep her job. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped into the darkness, only to be met with an unexpected sight—Liam was leaning against the same car he had used to bring her home the night before.

Her heart skipped a beat as she halted in her tracks. “What are you doing here?” she asked, a mix of surprise and curiosity in her voice.

Liam opened his mouth wide and let out a massive yawn, mumbling something under his breath.

Sophie couldn’t help but grin for a fleeting moment, momentarily forgetting her pain. Clearly, someone was not a morning person. She approached him, trying her best to walk smoothly, concealing the discomfort she felt. Liam opened the door for her, and as she climbed into the backseat, she gritted her teeth, bracing herself against the pain.

Once inside, Liam settled into the driver’s seat and started the car. Sophie had to admit, this was a far better option than trudging to work in the biting cold and darkness. “Thank you for picking me up,” she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You didn’t have to,” he replied, his tone casual.

Liam merely grunted in response, and Sophie couldn’t suppress a smile. The ride was swift, and before long, they arrived in front of the shop. She glanced at the clock and noted it was still a few minutes shy of four-thirty. The lights of the shop were off, indicating that Helen must not have arrived yet.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

****Chapter 22****

“You can hold off on getting out until she arrives,” Liam murmured, his eyes gently closed, head resting against the seat in a way that suggested he was savoring the moment of peace.

Sophie couldn’t help but smile at the sight of him. A mischievous thought crossed her mind—if only she had a phone, she could capture this moment and save it for a rainy day, perhaps as leverage for future playful blackmail. Just a few moments later, the familiar sound of Helen’s arrival broke the stillness as she turned on the lights. “She’s here. I’m going to head inside,” Sophie announced softly, her voice barely above a whisper. She opened the car door and began to slide out, a sense of gratitude washing over her. “Thanks again for the ride. I really appreciate it, but you don’t have to do this again. I can manage just fine.”

Liam responded with a nonchalant grunt, and Sophie stepped out of the car, feeling the cool air wrap around her as she entered Helen's shop, which had been unlocked just for her.

"Good morning!" Helen called out cheerfully, her voice bright and welcoming. "You ready for this?"

Despite the ache that throbbed in her body, Sophie couldn't suppress her excitement. She felt a rush of anticipation for the new opportunities that lay ahead. Slowly, she made her way behind the counter, where Helen had laid out all her supplies in a neat array. "This is all perfect, Helen. Thank you for gathering everything and for giving me this chance," she said, her heart swelling with gratitude.

"Well, giving you a chance has certainly paid off in hiring you, so let's see how this goes," Helen replied with a warm smile. "Unless you need me, I'm going to start prepping for the opening."

"I've got this," Sophie replied, nodding confidently. She turned and walked towards the backroom to grab an apron. As she entered, her eyes landed on the coat hanging there—the one Torin had given her. A wave of guilt washed over her as she recalled how she had forgotten it in the morning rush while trying to prepare for work. How was she going to approach him about it and, more importantly, how could she repay him? A heavy sigh escaped her lips; the weight of it all felt overwhelming. She shook her head, determined to push those thoughts aside and focus on the task at hand.

A few minutes later, Sophie found herself covered in flour, her hands dusted white and a smile spreading across her face. It had been ages since she had made these cinnamon rolls, yet the process felt as natural as breathing. The comforting rhythm of kneading the dough brought back a flood of memories—warm, joyful memories of Saturdays spent in the kitchen with her father.

The sweet scent of cinnamon and sugar wafting through the air triggered a rush of nostalgia, and before she realized it, a solitary tear slipped down her cheek, landing softly on her apron. She missed her father deeply, and a bittersweet ache settled in her heart. What would her life have been like had he not passed away? Would they still be making these rolls together every weekend?

"You okay, dear? You're unusually quiet this morning," Helen's voice broke into her reverie as she approached Sophie, concern etched on her face.

Sophie turned to her, managing a smile despite the wave of emotions swirling within her. "Making these cinnamon rolls makes me a bit nostalgic. I used to whip these up with my dad every Saturday. He passed away when I was twelve, and every time I make them, it feels like he's right here with me," she confessed, her voice tinged with both sadness and warmth.

Helen wrapped her arm around Sophie's shoulders, offering a comforting squeeze. "Thank you for sharing that with me. Sometimes, the best way to remember someone and honor their legacy is to share what you loved doing together. I believe you'll be able to do just that with these cinnamon rolls."

Sophie nodded, feeling a flicker of hope. "I think you're right." If these rolls turned out to be a hit, perhaps they could serve as a balm for her heart, a way to share the special bond she once had with her dad with others. With renewed determination, she continued her work.

Before long, she had the first pans warming near the oven, allowing the dough to rise in a cozy, warm environment. The coffee shop opened its doors, but Helen encouraged Sophie to keep at it with the cinnamon rolls. By six o'clock, the first pans emerged from the oven, and the air was filled with the mouthwatering aroma of cinnamon and vanilla. Customers who walked in were pleasantly surprised by the new offering, and nearly every one of them left with at least one roll. Sophie felt a swell of satisfaction as she received rave reviews from the early patrons.

As she finished the last of the rolls, she turned her attention back to ringing up orders and filling requests. They kept the pans of cinnamon rolls in the oven on low heat, ensuring they remained warm and inviting. Sophie was relishing every moment, but she could feel the toll of the previous night creeping up on her. The mixing, the pulling from the oven, and the constant movement were starting to weigh heavily on her. A part of her craved a pain reliever, but the thought of asking Helen for some made her hesitate. She didn't want to explain why she needed it or what had happened. She couldn't risk jeopardizing this job.

Just then, the familiar sound of the bell jingled as the door swung open, and Sophie turned, forcing a bright smile onto her face. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw Torin, Liam, and their usual companion step into the shop. "Cat girl," Liam called out, his voice teasing yet warm.

Sophie couldn't help but notice that Liam seemed to be in a much better mood than he had been earlier that morning. "What is that divine smell?" he asked, his expression shifting to one of genuine curiosity.

Conclusion

23

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Helen stepped closer to Sophie, her voice bright with enthusiasm. "You know, these are Sophie's homemade cinnamon rolls."

Liam, feigning an exaggerated swoon, pressed his hands dramatically over his heart. "You can brew amazing coffee and bake like a pro? Marry me!" he exclaimed, his laughter ringing through the café.

Just then, Torin strolled up behind Liam, emitting a low, almost growling sound from his throat. Liam turned to him, chuckling, but chose to hold back any further comments. "I'll take a large dark roast coffee with a splash of cream and two of those delectable cinnamon rolls," Liam ordered, his tone playful yet earnest.

Sophie rang him up, taking his cash with a smile. "Looks like you're feeling a bit more human today compared to this morning," she teased, trying to suppress her laughter.

Liam's expression dropped into a mock frown. "Hey, I wasn't that bad," he protested, crossing his arms in a show of indignation.

Sophie erupted into laughter, only to regret it as a sharp pain shot through her stomach. She fought to maintain her smile, even as she caught her breath. "You were pretty bad, though," she replied, her tone light but sincere. "I was genuinely worried about leaving you in the car."

"Well, nobody should be awake at that ungodly hour, let alone be out and about," Liam said with a dramatic roll of his eyes, clearly still perturbed by the early start.

Sophie beamed at him and turned to prepare his coffee and cinnamon rolls, her heart lightening at their banter. She returned with his order, placing it in front of him. Her gaze drifted to Torin, who was observing her with an intensity that made her pulse quicken. Today, he wore another impeccably tailored suit, and the memory of their last encounter flooded her mind uninvited. Without thinking, she blurted out, "I need to talk to you."

Torin didn't flinch or show any sign of surprise. "Okay," he replied, his voice steady. He then ordered two large dark roasts, served black. Sophie felt her cheeks flush as she moved to prepare his coffee. Why was it that he always made her feel so flustered?

Taking a deep breath, she managed to steady her nerves before handing him his coffee. When he didn't step back from the counter, she looked up, her heart racing. "Can I get you something else?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You said you wanted to talk," he reminded her in a low, measured tone.

Sophie mentally kicked herself. "Oh, right, I did. I mean...", she faltered, glancing at Liam, who had turned away from them. She turned back to Torin, her voice a mix of urgency and hesitation. "Is it okay if I speak with Torin for just a minute?"

Helen waved her off, her expression encouraging. "Of course! Go ahead. You're past your break time anyway," she said with a reassuring smile.

Sophie inhaled deeply, stepping out from behind the counter. She could feel Torin's gaze on her, heavy and expectant. She tried to walk normally, but the weight of his attention made it increasingly difficult. As she moved toward a table that offered some privacy, her heart pounded in her chest. Just then, a couple entered the café, and Sophie greeted them with a warm smile.

"Welcome to Sip and Drip!" she called out cheerfully.

The couple nodded in acknowledgment, passing by Sophie and Torin. In an attempt to sidestep them, Sophie inadvertently moved at the same time as the woman, resulting in the woman's large bag colliding gently with her stomach. It wasn't a hard hit, but enough to knock the wind out of her, sending a wave of pain radiating through her ribs.

"Sorry!" the woman mumbled as she hurried past.

Sophie couldn't muster a reply, her breath caught in her throat. Suddenly, she felt a firm hand on her elbow. Torin turned her to face him, his expression darkening. "Who hurt you?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

Sophie struggled to catch her breath, blinking back tears that threatened to spill. "I'm fine," she gasped, though the words felt hollow.

"You're not fine," he said, his tone rising with barely contained fury.

As she finally managed to draw in a full breath, she straightened up, meeting his intense gaze. Fear gripped her as she saw the anger simmering in his eyes. She tried to pull her arm from his grasp, but he held on firmly, not hurting her but unwilling to let go. "What happened?" he demanded, his voice laced with concern.

Sophie shook her head, trying to dismiss his worry. "I just got hurt," she said, attempting to minimize the situation. "I need to tell you something."

"Tell me who hurt you first," he insisted, his voice taking on a commanding tone.

"No," she replied, her heart racing. It felt pointless to share; there was nothing he could do, so why bother?

She watched as his expression darkened further. "Sophie," he warned, stepping closer, his presence overwhelming.

Just then, Liam interjected, stepping up beside Torin. "Those cinnamon rolls were amazing!" he exclaimed, breaking the tension. He glanced between them, and something unspoken passed between the two men. Torin's grip on her arm loosened slightly, but his concern remained palpable.

"She's hurt," Torin said, his voice strained, as if the effort to stay calm was taking its toll.

Sophie glanced at him, surprised by the depth of his worry. He looked on the verge of losing control, and she hadn't even revealed what she needed to discuss yet. "I need to confess something," she blurted out, desperate to redirect their focus away from her injury. Both Liam and Torin turned their attention to her, surprise etched on their faces.

Meeting Torin's gaze, she felt a wave of dread wash over her. "I don't know how to say this, and I'm so sorry. I really am. I hope you can forgive me. I promise I'll pay you back. I'm not sure when, but I will—I pr—"

"What?" Torin interrupted, his tone sharp, revealing his impatience.

Sophie squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the weight of her confession. "I lost your suit jacket," she whispered, her voice trembling with regret. When silence followed her admission, she risked a glance at Torin. To her surprise, he didn't appear as furious as she had anticipated.

"Okay," he replied simply, his expression unreadable.

"Okay?" she echoed, bewildered. "You mean, okay?" she asked, searching for some sign of his feelings.

"It's not okay," she insisted softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "You don't understand. It's gone. I can't even imagine how much it costs. I—" She lowered her voice, glancing around the café to ensure no one else was listening. "I don't have the kind of money to replace it. I'm so sorry. I should have never taken it with me. I knew she would take it. I'm so sorry." Tears of frustration and pain threatened to spill over, but she fought them back.

"Sophie," she heard Torin say her name gently. She looked up, meeting his piercing gaze. "Did someone take the jacket?" he asked, his tone calm yet probing.

Sophie nodded, her heart sinking further. "Did you try to get it back?" he inquired, his voice steady.

Another nod from her. "Is that how you got hurt?" he asked, his words slow and deliberate, as if she were a child.

Sophie hesitated, then nodded again, feeling trapped. An angry curse slipped from his lips, and she watched as he dropped her arm, striding out of the shop without another word.

Sophie stood there, stunned, her heart racing as she processed what just happened. Turning to Liam, who was watching her with a sympathetic expression, she felt a mix of emotions swirling within her.

"He's not mad at you," Liam said gently, his voice soothing amidst the chaos of her thoughts.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****Chapter 24****

Sophie cast a glance over her shoulder, her heart sinking as she thought of Torin's retreating figure. "Uh, I think he's really angry," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

"He is," Liam replied, his tone steady and reassuring. "But not at you," he emphasized, his gaze fixed on her with a hint of understanding. Sophie raised an eyebrow, skepticism etched across her features, but she chose silence over confrontation.

With a heavy sigh, she relented, "Come on," Liam urged, his voice warm with encouragement. "You're on your break. Let's go grab a bite to eat."

Sophie turned to him, her brow furrowed. "Didn't you just devour two cinnamon rolls?"

"That was merely a snack," he shot back, a playful smirk dancing on his lips.

"Come on," he insisted, nodding toward the door with an air of determination.

"Um, I'm not so sure I should join you," Sophie hesitated, uncertainty creeping into her voice.

"You absolutely should," Liam replied, undeterred by her reluctance. "Let's go. We'll meet up with Torin."

"Oh, no, no. That's really not a good idea," Sophie protested, her conviction deepening with every word. "I don't think he wants me around."

"Well, that just shows how little you understand," Liam countered, leaving Sophie even more perplexed.

"Fine," she conceded, aware that arguing would lead nowhere.

"Okay, grab your coat and let's get moving," Liam said, his voice leaving no room for dissent. Sophie opened her mouth to voice another objection, but he cut her off smoothly. "You want Torin to calm down? Wear the coat," he instructed, a knowing glint in his eye.

With a resigned shake of her head, Sophie turned to retrieve her coat from the back room. "Have fun," Helen called out cheerfully as Sophie stepped outside. Sophie turned, giving her a small wave. The cool air greeted her like an old friend, and she tightened the belt of her coat around her waist. Admittedly, it felt good to be warm for a change.

As she turned, her eyes caught sight of Torin a short distance down the block, engrossed in a phone call. Beside him stood the familiar figure of his companion, always lurking in the background. "Let's go," Liam urged, already striding toward Torin. Sophie fell into step beside him, her heart racing as they approached. The closer they got, the more she could hear Torin barking orders into his phone, his tone sharp and authoritative. She felt a pang of sympathy for the unfortunate soul on the other end of the line.

As Torin ended the call and turned around, his gaze fell on her, and for a fleeting moment, she swore she saw a flicker of softness in his demeanor. "We're going to get some lunch," Liam announced brightly. Torin began to shake his head, but Liam quickly added, "Sophie's hungry." The words seemed to halt whatever protest was forming on Torin's lips, and he simply nodded. Sophie turned to Liam, who shot her a wink, prompting her to roll her eyes in exasperation.

Liam began walking again, and Sophie followed, her heart fluttering with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. Torin fell into step beside her, his phone still in hand, leaving the conversation between them unspoken. She noticed the other guy, Max, trailing behind them, his presence a silent shadow.

Liam led the way to a restaurant that surprised Sophie with its elegance. As they entered, she took in the surroundings, her expectations shattered. This wasn't a fast-food joint; it was a refined establishment, and the three men surrounding her were clad in designer suits that only accentuated her own casual attire—a t-shirt that hung a size too large, leggings, and sneakers. Suddenly, she felt woefully out of place, her only saving grace being the stylish coat she wore.

A hostess approached them, her smile bright and welcoming. "Mr. Mercer, what a pleasure to see you. Would you care for your usual table?" she inquired, her tone dripping with familiarity.

"No, a table for four near the fireplace, please," Torin responded, his voice firm and no-nonsense.

The hostess's smile faltered slightly, but she quickly masked it. "Of course. Right this way," she replied, gathering menus and leading them further into the restaurant.

Sophie hesitated, placing a hand gently on Torin's arm. "Um, I don't think I'm going to stay. I'm not really dressed for something like this and..."

"You're staying," Torin interrupted, his tone brooking no argument. He placed a hand on her back, guiding her through the restaurant with a surprising gentleness. When they reached the table, he pulled out a chair for her, and she sank into it, struggling to suppress the grimace that threatened to break her facade. Torin settled into the seat beside her, and she immediately felt dwarfed by his imposing presence. He was a mountain of a man, intimidating and so close, making her heart race.

Reaching into his pocket, Torin produced a bottle of ibuprofen, popping it open with a practiced ease. He shook out two pills into his palm and extended them toward her. "Here," he said, his voice low and steady.

Sophie blinked in surprise, momentarily taken aback. "Thank you," she managed to say, accepting the pills from him. She quickly swallowed them down with a sip from the water glass in front of her. As she glanced at Torin, she noticed the concern etched into his features. She offered him a smile, but he didn't return it; instead, he seemed to frown even deeper, his brow furrowing in thought.

Searching for a distraction, Sophie picked up the menu, and her eyes nearly popped out of her head at the prices listed. Everything was exorbitantly expensive, even for a lunch menu. After skimming through the offerings, she settled on a modest cup of soup—the least costly option available. Between that and the bread on the table, she figured she would manage. Just then, her stomach betrayed her with a loud growl, and she felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. Liam chuckled from across the table, clearly amused by her predicament.

Torin, noticing her discomfort, picked up the basket of bread and handed it to her. Her face burned even hotter, but she took a roll, hoping that nibbling on it would keep her stomach quiet. She tore off a small piece, glancing around to see that none of the men had even glanced at a menu. Torin was still focused on something on his phone, while Max loomed silently behind them.

"We haven't been officially introduced yet," Sophie said, trying to break the ice. "I'm Sophie."

"I'm Max," he grunted back, his tone curt and uninviting.

Sophie blinked, surprised by his brusqueness. He was even more intimidating than Torin, which was saying something. She took a sip of her water, attempting to calm her racing heart, but her nerves only intensified. Just then, their waitress arrived, and Sophie's relief was short-lived as she caught sight of her. The waitress was young, probably just a year or two older than Sophie, and she exuded confidence and beauty. With long, flowing blond hair and a figure that seemed sculpted to perfection, she was the epitome of allure. Her makeup was flawless, and her "assets" were prominently displayed. Sophie swallowed hard, feeling acutely aware of her own plainness in comparison. She truly didn't belong here among these men in this luxurious restaurant.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

****Chapter 25****

"Mr. Mercer," she practically sang, her voice dripping with sweetness. "It's such a pleasure to see you again! What can I get for you today?" Her long, glossy hair

cascaded over her shoulder as she leaned closer, her gaze unwaveringly fixed on Torin, a glimmer of mischief dancing in her cold blue eyes.

Sophie turned her head away, exasperation bubbling up inside her. Rolling her eyes, she felt the tension in the air. "She'll go first," Torin said, nodding his head towards Sophie, as if handing her the baton in this awkward relay.

The waitress's icy blue eyes locked onto Sophie's, sending a shiver down her spine. There was a palpable animosity there, a silent declaration that Miss Beauty Queen was not pleased with her presence among these men today. Sophie quickly glanced down at her menu, even though she had already made her choice. "I'll take the French onion soup in a cup, please," she stated, her voice steady despite the scrutiny.

To her surprise, three heads turned in her direction. "What?" Sophie asked, bewildered by their reaction. "That's not enough food for a bird," Liam scoffed, his tone dripping with mockery.

Torin brushed off Liam's comment, redirecting his attention to the waitress. "I'll have the smothered chicken with mashed potatoes, and the largest steak you have, with broccoli and a baked potato," he ordered, his voice firm and commanding. Sophie's eyes widened in astonishment at the sheer volume of his order. Max and Liam followed suit, both opting for hefty steaks as well, their appetites seemingly insatiable.

Sophie leaned back in her chair, bemused. It had to be a guy thing, or perhaps a money thing, she mused silently, shaking her head at the display of machismo.

As the waitress departed with their orders, Liam launched into a steady stream of conversation, filling the air with his banter. The atmosphere lightened momentarily, but after a lull, Torin turned his piercing gaze towards Sophie. "So, what part of town do you live in?" he inquired, his tone casual, yet Sophie felt the weight of his scrutiny.

Her eyes widened in surprise. She shot a quick glance across the table at Liam, who sat back with his arms crossed, a smirk plastered on his face. He simply nodded, as if encouraging her to speak. If looks could kill, she would have shot daggers at him for leaving her to fend for herself in this moment.

Torin's gaze remained fixed on her, and she could feel the intensity of his stare. "Anything you want to tell me?" he asked, his voice low and probing.

Liam shook his head, feigning innocence. "Nope, boss," he replied, a hint of amusement in his tone.

Torin's attention snapped back to Sophie, and she felt a wave of discomfort wash over her. "What about you, Sophie? Anything you want to share?" he pressed, his voice firm.

"No, not particularly," she replied, trying to maintain her composure.

“Just tell him,” Liam interjected from across the table, his tone urging. “He’s going to find out anyway, and it would be better coming from you.”

Sophie shot another glare at Liam, who merely shrugged in response, his expression unreadable.

“Will one of you please explain what’s happening before I completely lose it?” Torin’s voice rose with frustration, his annoyance palpable.

Sophie glanced at him, noting the tension in his posture—arms crossed over his broad chest, leaning forward in his chair, pinning Liam with a fierce glare.

“Fine,” Liam conceded, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “I’ll spill, but only after we eat. We don’t need you blowing your top in here and ruining lunch. Let’s just enjoy our meal, and then we can talk about it.”

Torin’s expression darkened, but he relented, agreeing to wait until they were alone. Thankfully, the waitress returned shortly with their food, and Sophie wasted no time diving into her soup. She closed her eyes, savoring the first bite.

Liam chuckled, “That good, huh?”

Sophie merely shook her head, too engrossed in her meal to respond. She was relishing every spoonful, but her eyes couldn’t help wandering toward the plate of chicken and mashed potatoes that Torin had ordered. It looked utterly delectable, and she felt a pang of envy that he hadn’t touched it yet. Mashed potatoes had always been her weakness.

As if he could read her thoughts, Torin slid the plate over in front of her. “That’s for you,” he said quietly, his voice almost a whisper.

Sophie blinked in surprise, her heart fluttering at the unexpected generosity. “But I ordered soup,” she protested weakly.

“Eat it,” he insisted, his tone brooking no argument.

“I can’t just take your food,” Sophie argued.

“I ordered it for you,” he clarified, his gaze unwavering.

“But—” she started to protest again.

“Stop arguing with me and eat your meal,” Torin said, his voice rising slightly in irritation.

“Yes, Dad,” Sophie muttered under her breath, a grin threatening to break through her serious facade. She glanced up to see Liam choking back laughter and Max’s eyes wide in disbelief.

"I told you," Liam said, directing his amusement towards Max.

Sophie chose to ignore them and focused on the delicious food in front of her. She took a generous bite of the mashed potatoes, letting out a soft moan of delight. "These are so good," she exclaimed, her eyes lighting up.

When she looked up, she found all three men staring at her, their expressions a mix of surprise and amusement. "What? They're really good!" she defended, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Liam opened his mouth to say something, but a sharp look from Torin silenced him, and he merely smirked instead.

Determined to savor her meal without further distractions, Sophie concentrated on her food. She wasn't sure when she would have the chance to enjoy such a feast again.

Eventually, when she felt she could eat no more, she leaned back in her chair, satisfied. When the waitress returned to ask if they wanted dessert, Torin turned his attention to her. Sophie shook her head, feeling full to the brim. Torin, however, didn't hesitate. "Whatever you have that's chocolate, and a coffee for me," he ordered confidently.

"Coffee for me," Liam chimed in, and Max followed suit, placing his own order.

Torin turned back to Sophie, one eyebrow raised. "Coffee?" he asked, as if expecting her to change her mind.

She shook her head again, a smile creeping onto her lips.

Within minutes, the waitress returned, balancing three steaming cups of coffee and a plate that held the largest piece of chocolate cake Sophie had ever seen. The waitress slid the decadent cake in front of Torin, who, with a casual flick of his wrist, pushed it toward her.

"It's for you," he said, his tone softening slightly.

Sophie's heart swelled at the gesture, and she couldn't help but smile. "You really didn't have to," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, overwhelmed by his kindness.

Conclusion

26

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Sophie grasped her fork with a sense of eagerness, ready to dive into the delightful dessert before her. However, just as she was about to take her first bite, Liam's teasing

voice cut through the air. "You're not going to argue with Torin about it first?" he asked, a playful smirk dancing on his lips.

With a defiant spirit, Sophie took a generous bite, her cheeks bulging with cake. The moment she tasted it, a laugh erupted from Liam, filling the space with warmth. Sophie closed her eyes in bliss, a soft moan escaping her lips as she savored the flavor. It was heavenly, possibly the most exquisite thing she had ever tasted. She took another mouthful and moaned again, the sweetness wrapping around her senses like a comforting hug.

Torin shifted closer, his presence suddenly intense as he leaned in, his breath warm against her ear. "You need to stop making sounds like that in public," he murmured, his tone teasing yet serious. "Or I'm going to have to kill every guy that is close enough to hear you."

Sophie felt a rush of heat flood her cheeks, turning her face a deep crimson. In her surprise, she nearly choked on the rich cake. Across the table, she heard a cough that suspiciously sounded like a laugh. Embarrassed, she muttered an apology, her voice barely audible. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Torin's gaze remained locked with hers, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "I didn't say I didn't want to hear it again, just not in public," he said, his voice low and teasing.

Confusion washed over Sophie as she searched his expression for clarity. His eyes seemed to pierce through her, and without breaking their gaze, he slowly reached out, brushing his finger against the corner of her mouth. He brought that same finger to his lips, sucking it in as if savoring the taste. "You're right. It's delicious," he said, his voice deep and gravelly.

In that moment, Sophie felt as if her face could burst into flames. She wanted nothing more than to disappear beneath the table. Pushing the plate away, she declared, "I can't eat anymore."

Before she could even finish her sentence, Liam had seized the plate, devouring the remaining piece of cake in three swift bites. Sophie couldn't help but laugh, "That was impressive," she remarked, admiring his voracious appetite. He flashed her a grin, and from the corner of her eye, she caught Torin's gaze lingering on her, though she quickly looked away, feeling a mix of shyness and intrigue.

When their waitress returned, she leaned over to collect their plates and cups, inadvertently giving the men a rather generous view. Sophie shot her a glare, grateful that the men seemed oblivious to her discomfort. "Was everything okay?" the waitress asked, her tone cheerful.

"Yes, thank you," Torin replied dismissively, and Sophie felt a grin tug at her lips. However, that smile faded when Torin turned his attention to Liam. "All right. Let's have it."

A heavy feeling settled in Sophie's stomach, akin to a rock weighing her down. Suddenly, the realization of how much she had eaten hit her, and she wished she had restrained herself. "What time is it?" she interjected, her voice laced with anxiety. "I need to get back to work."

"You have time," Torin said, his tone firm yet calm.

Sophie felt a flicker of uncertainty. Did that mean she still had a few precious moments left in her break, or was it an indication that he simply didn't care about the time? Either way, she realized she was at their mercy until they decided she could leave.

Catching Liam's encouraging nod, Sophie closed her eyes, feeling the weight of the moment settle on her shoulders. This was her responsibility. She was alone in this. Turning her gaze to Torin, who was watching her with an intensity that made her heart race, she took a deep breath.

"All right. So here's the thing," she began, her voice wavering slightly. "I may have misled you with more than just the car." She winced, bracing herself for his reaction.

His eyes narrowed, a storm brewing within them. Sophie rushed to spill the truth before she could lose her nerve. "I don't have a house," she confessed, her heart pounding.

Torin's frown deepened. "An apartment?" he asked, his voice laced with confusion.

"Well, um, close, it's sort of like that. You see, I—"

"Sophie," Liam interjected, cutting her off with a serious look. He turned to Torin, his expression unwavering. "She's staying at Hope House," he stated plainly.

Sophie watched as Torin's expression shifted, surprise etched across his features. He fell silent, standing abruptly and pulling out his wallet, laying down two crisp hundred-dollar bills on the table. Sophie's eyes widened in shock, but before she could process what just happened, Torin was at her side, extending his hand. "Let's go."

She placed her hand in his, allowing him to pull her to her feet. Despite the anger radiating from him, he was surprisingly gentle. "Are the pain pills kicking in?" he asked, concern flickering in his eyes. Sophie nodded, feeling a mixture of gratitude and apprehension.

As she stood, he released her hand but placed a firm hand on her elbow, guiding her through the bustling restaurant. Once outside, he led her down the street, turning a corner as his frustration bubbled to the surface. "Why, Sophie?" he demanded, his voice tinged with urgency.

Confusion washed over her. "Why what?" she replied, her brow furrowing.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were staying in a homeless shelter?” His anger was palpable, each word strained as if it took all his effort to contain it.

Sophie felt her defenses rise. “I don’t know. Maybe because it never came up in conversation. Hi, I’m Sophie, and I live in a homeless shelter,” she said, a hint of sarcasm creeping into her tone.

Torin closed his eyes, exhaling a frustrated breath. “Is that where someone took the jacket from you?” he asked, his voice low and controlled.

Sophie nodded, her heart sinking. “My roommate did,” she admitted quietly. “She keeps taking my stuff. I tried hiding it, but she found it and took it. I tried to get it back, but she said she sold it.”

“Is she the one who hurt you?” he asked, his voice steady but laced with concern.

Sophie nodded again, feeling the weight of her words. “I took her headphones off her head when she wouldn’t listen to me. That made her mad. She kicked me a few times... with her boots on.” Looking up, she saw the fury etched on Torin’s face. “I’m so sorry,” she stammered. “I will get the money and repay you. I know it was really valuable.”

Torin nearly exploded with frustration. “I don’t care about the coat! I care that you got hurt over it!”

“Oh, I’m okay,” Sophie replied, trying to downplay her pain.

“You’re not okay,” Torin insisted, his voice firm.

“It’s totally fine,” she reassured him, though her heart raced at his intensity.

Torin crossed his arms, his expression unwavering. “Show me your stomach.”

“What?” Sophie gasped, taken aback by his demand.

“Let me see your stomach,” he repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument.

“No,” she said defiantly, crossing her arms over her chest.

Torin softened his approach, his voice turning gentle. “Just let me check the bruising to see if you need to get checked out at the hospital.”

“It’s fine,” Sophie argued, her resolve beginning to waver.

“Sophie,” he warned, his voice low and serious. “No, this is stupid. It’s fine.”

“Please, Sophie. Please let me just look and make sure you’re okay. I’m not trying to be inappropriate,” he pleaded, his eyes earnest.

Feeling cornered, Sophie finally relented. She was learning quickly that when it came to Torin, he always found a way to get his way in the end, and it was exhausting to resist him. Today had already drained her emotionally, and the pain in her stomach added to her weariness.

Conclusion

27

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Sophie let out a heavy sigh, her breath escaping like a whisper of defeat. She took a step back, creating a small distance between herself and Torin. With deliberate movements, she untied the belt of her coat, allowing it to fall open, revealing the fabric of her shirt beneath. The chill in the air sent a shiver down her spine as she hesitated, her fingers trembling slightly as she lifted her shirt, inching it up toward her bra.

Torin, kneeling before her, was suddenly struck by what he saw. A curse erupted from his lips, raw and unfiltered, as he took in the sight of her stomach.

Sophie flinched, a wave of shame washing over her. She had avoided looking at it, knowing that facing the reality of her injuries would only amplify the pain she felt. But when Torin's fingers brushed against her skin, instinct kicked in. Her muscles tensed, and a small sound of discomfort escaped her throat, startling her.

Torin's gaze met hers, and in that moment, she could see a storm of emotions swirling in his eyes—anger, concern, and something else she couldn't quite place. Gently, he pulled her shirt back down, standing to face her fully. He stepped closer, closing the gap between them, his voice low and filled with remorse. "I'm so sorry that I inevitably caused that."

Sophie shook her head, her heart aching at his words. "It's not your fault," she insisted, though deep down, she felt the weight of their shared history pressing down on her.

"No, you're not going back there tonight," he stated firmly, his tone leaving little room for argument.

Surprise flickered across Sophie's face as she looked up at him. "I have to," she replied, her voice tinged with desperation.

He shook his head, his resolve unyielding. "No, Sophie."

"No, you don't understand. I have to go back. I'm watching a little girl tonight so her mom can work. She's deaf, and I need to be there to help her. I can't just bail on her," Sophie explained, her heart racing as she fought to make him see reason.

Torin's expression hardened, his head shaking in vehement denial. "You can't tell me what to do. I have to go back there. Besides, I don't have anywhere else to go. If I don't go there, I'll be out on the street."

A harsh sound erupted from his throat, filled with frustration, and Sophie met his gaze, her heart sinking. The turmoil in his eyes momentarily softened, revealing a vulnerability that took her by surprise. "Promise me you won't do that," he pleaded, his voice cracking with desperation.

Sophie couldn't help but let out a small laugh, though it was laced with sadness. "I'm not trying to sleep on the street, Torin. That's why I keep insisting I have to stay where I am. You're the one who keeps trying to convince me not to go back."

Torin closed his eyes for a brief moment, as if gathering his thoughts. Sophie had noticed he often did that when he was troubled or anxious. When he opened them again, they had returned to their usual dark hue. "You have to get back to work. We'll discuss this after your shift ends," he said, the finality in his tone making it clear that the conversation was over—for now.

"Okay," Sophie replied, nodding in agreement. She knew she needed to keep the peace if she wanted to return to her responsibilities. "But I have to be back at Hope House by two fifteen to watch Olivia."

Torin nodded, though his expression remained clouded with concern. "We'll figure something out. Come on. Helen's going to think we kidnapped you."

As they walked side by side, Sophie felt a warmth spread through her, a small comfort in the midst of the chaos. "Torin," she said, breaking the silence. He turned to look down at her, a hint of curiosity in his eyes. "Thank you for lunch. That was one of the best meals I've ever had, and that chocolate cake was to die for!"

"You're welcome," he replied, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"What was my part of the bill?" she asked, her brow furrowing slightly as she remembered her own desire to contribute.

"Sophie," he growled, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

"What? It's not like it was a date or anything. I just want to take care of my meal," she argued, though a playful smile danced on her lips.

Torin's gaze intensified, and she felt a shiver run through her. "I took care of it. You don't owe me anything," he insisted, his tone brooking no argument.

"Well, thank you then for lunch," Sophie said, a genuine smile breaking through her earlier tension.

Their conversation faded into a comfortable silence as they continued walking, but Sophie didn't notice until they were nearly back at the shop that Max trailed behind them. She hadn't heard him approach, and the realization startled her. Outside the shop, Liam stood with his eyes glued to his phone. When they drew closer, he looked up, and Sophie was taken aback by the expression on his face. He rarely showed anger. "What is it?" Torin asked, his voice tense as he sensed the shift in the atmosphere.

Without a word, Liam handed the phone to Torin. The moment Torin saw the screen, a curse slipped from his lips, his expression darkening. Sophie had no idea what was displayed on the phone, but the gravity of the situation was palpable. Torin passed the device to Max, who reacted with an angry sound, confirming that whatever was happening was serious.

"Go inside the shop, Sophie," Torin instructed, his gaze fixed firmly on the street, avoiding her eyes.

"Oh, okay. Well, thanks for lunch," she said awkwardly, feeling the weight of the moment. When neither of them acknowledged her, she turned and slipped inside the coffee shop. Helen was busy serving a customer, and Sophie quickly grabbed an apron from the back before reemerging at the front. "I'm so sorry I'm late. The guys took me out for lunch," Sophie said, trying to brush off the tension.

Helen waved her concerns away with a smile. "It's fine, Sophie. It's not every day you get to go out with three incredibly good-looking men, am I right?" she teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Sophie felt her cheeks flush. "Well, yeah, but it's not like that," she protested, though a part of her wondered if there was some truth to Helen's playful insinuation.

"Sure, it's not," Helen said with a knowing smile, and Sophie couldn't help but return it as she settled back into her work. Deep down, she understood that her relationship with Torin was complex, layered with unspoken feelings and shared struggles, but for now, she focused on the tasks at hand, pushing the thoughts to the back of her mind.

Conclusion

28

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Liam strolled into the shop not long after, his presence instantly recognizable. He approached the counter and ordered a steaming cup of coffee, his usual charm evident but overshadowed by an unusual seriousness. After receiving his drink, he settled himself at a table positioned near the front of the store, his gaze occasionally drifting to the entrance as if he were waiting for someone. Sophie returned to her tasks, feeling

the familiar rhythm of the afternoon wash over her. As the minutes ticked by, the shop began to fill with the sounds of chatter and clinking cups, but Sophie felt a tug of curiosity about Liam.

When her shift finally came to a close, she was taken aback to find Liam still there, absorbed in whatever was happening on his phone. "Liam, I had no idea you were still here. What's keeping you so busy?" she inquired, her tone light but laced with genuine curiosity.

He looked up, a smile gracing his lips, though it lacked the usual playfulness. "I just can't get enough of you, darling," he replied, his voice dripping with that familiar teasing lilt. Sophie shook her head, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation. He was such a character, always full of playful banter.

As she turned to leave, Liam's voice halted her. "What are you doing?" he asked, standing up now, his demeanor shifting to something more serious.

"I'm done for the day," she replied, a hint of confusion creeping into her voice.

"Oh," he said, his brow furrowing slightly. "I lost track of time." He stepped outside ahead of her, and as they emerged into the evening air, Sophie's attention was immediately drawn to two imposing figures standing by a sleek Land Rover. A sense of recognition washed over her as she realized they were connected to Liam. This was confirmed when he approached them, engaging in conversation.

Sophie couldn't help but marvel at the men in this town; they all seemed to possess an almost mythical charm, muscular and handsome. Yet, in her mind, none could compare to Torin—he was in a league of his own.

"Liam, who are these guys?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

Liam gestured toward them with a casual wave. "Sophie, this is Kyle and Levi," he introduced, pointing to each of them in turn.

Kyle stepped forward, a broad grin illuminating his face. "Nice to meet you, Sophie," he said, extending a hand which she shook, feeling the warmth of his grip.

Levi, not to be outdone, offered his hand next. But as Sophie placed her hand in his, a sudden flash of light erupted in front of her, causing her to jerk back instinctively. She caught a glimpse of confusion etched on his features.

"You okay, Sophie?" Liam asked, concern threading through his voice.

She nodded, though a swirl of uncertainty churned within her. That same strange phenomenon had occurred when she had shaken Liam's hand, but she hesitated to voice her thoughts. It was baffling—why did it happen with Liam and Levi but not with

Torin or Kyle? She hadn't yet shaken Max's hand; perhaps she should try that soon to see if the same thing occurred.

"Let's get going," Liam said, ushering her toward the back seat of the vehicle. He closed the door with a soft click, and Sophie felt a twinge of unease as Levi slid behind the wheel, while Kyle took the front passenger seat. Liam joined her in the back, the atmosphere thick with unspoken tension as Levi pulled away from the curb.

As they drove, Sophie felt an unsettling knot tighten in her stomach. After a few turns, she suddenly realized, "Wait, this isn't the right way," she exclaimed, her voice rising in alarm.

The two men in the front seat continued their conversation, seemingly oblivious to her distress. She turned to Liam, urgency lacing her words. "Liam, I need to go to Hope House," she insisted, her heart racing.

Liam turned to her, shaking his head slowly. "Torin's orders," he stated matter-of-factly, as if that single phrase could quell her rising panic.

Stunned, Sophie blinked in disbelief. "Excuse me?" she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Sophie, please," he said, his tone softening, but she felt her frustration boiling over.

"Don't 'Sophie please' me. I have to get back to the House. I don't take orders from him—he's not my boss!" Anger surged through her, fueled by the ticking clock. Every second that passed meant she was getting later to Olivia. "Please," she implored, desperation creeping into her voice. "Someone is counting on me to watch her daughter. I have to be there by two fifteen!"

Liam's expression softened with compassion, but it only fueled her anger further. "I'm sorry, Sophie. I can't," he said, turning his gaze out the window, avoiding her eyes.

Sophie stared at him, fury boiling within her. "Call him," she commanded, coldness flooding her veins. Liam hesitated, but after a moment, he sighed and pulled out his phone. "Give it to me," she urged, her voice firm.

He brought up Torin's number and pressed send, handing the phone to her with a resigned expression.

"Sophie," came Torin's deep voice, resonating in her ear. She felt a flutter of nerves, but she pushed them aside, determined to make her case.

"It's Sophie," she said, surprised by how calm her voice sounded despite the tempest of emotions swirling within her. "Your men believe they're not taking me back to Hope House."

"That's correct," he replied, his tone clipped.

"You said we would figure something out! This is not figuring anything out!" Sophie's frustration boiled over, her voice rising.

"Sophie, I can't let you go back there. I'm sorry," he stated, his voice firm and unwavering.

"No, please," she pleaded, her heart racing as she fought to keep her composure. "You don't understand. Amy needs this job. I promised her I would watch Olivia."

"I'm sure she can work something out," Torin interjected, his tone dismissive.

"She can't! Olivia's deaf. She can't just be dropped off anywhere. Please, Torin, I have to go there. I need to keep my promise," she insisted, her voice cracking with emotion.

A heavy silence enveloped the phone call, and Sophie closed her eyes, wishing desperately for him to understand. "I'm sorry," he said again, his voice resolute. "I can't let you go back there."

Rage ignited within her. "What do you mean you can't let me go back there?" she nearly shouted. She noticed the men in the front flinch at her outburst, but she was too furious to care. "You don't own me! You can't dictate where I go. This is kidnapping if I don't want to go where you're taking me! I will call the police if you don't let me go!"

"Sophie," he warned, his voice low and filled with tension. She could sense his anger brewing, but she was beyond caring.

"If you do this, I won't forgive you," she said, her words heavy with conviction. She would not be the reason Amy lost out on this opportunity, nor would she let disappointment cloud their lives again.

"That's a chance I'll have to take," Torin replied, his voice steady.

And with that, Sophie felt a wave of defeat wash over her. She tossed the phone at Liam, who caught it deftly and pressed it to his ear. She heard him mutter a few words, but her mind was racing too fast to focus on them. Anger coursed through her veins like fire. He had no idea what it was like to struggle out there, to fight for every small victory. She could picture the disappointment etched on Amy and Olivia's faces if she didn't show up.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the seat, feeling the first tear slip down her cheek. Who would have thought she would be crying over the prospect of returning to a homeless shelter? It wasn't the place itself; it was the desire to help Amy and Olivia that tugged at her heart. They had been the only ones to show her kindness when she needed it most.

Sophie allowed herself a brief moment of self-pity before wiping her tears away. She refused to be a victim. She had escaped a powerful group once before; she could do it again.

Conclusion

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

****When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn – Chapter 29****

Sophie's gaze flicked nervously to the clock on the dashboard. The hands pointed to 2:05. A surge of determination coursed through her veins. If she could just find a way to escape, perhaps she could make it to safety in time. The exact location of her captors was still a mystery, but she was confident she could decipher it. Her eyes darted to the door, and her heart raced when she noticed it was unlocked.

This was the opportunity she had been waiting for. But timing was everything; she needed to strategize her exit carefully. It would be foolish to leap out when they were at a standstill—there was no doubt they would catch her in an instant. Conversely, making a break for it while they were speeding would be equally disastrous. She needed to wait for the perfect moment.

Her gaze shifted to Liam, who was still engrossed in a phone call, his attention fixed outside the window. This was it—her moment. She was acutely aware that if Liam sensed her intentions, he would be on her like a hawk. The vehicle came to a halt at a traffic light, and she noticed they were about to turn right. With her heart pounding in her chest, she held her breath, calculating her next move.

As the car slowed for the turn, Sophie seized the moment. She yanked the door open with all her might and felt the rush of adrenaline as she hit the pavement, sprinting away from the vehicle. Behind her, she could hear the furious shouts of Liam, but she didn't dare look back. The silver lining was that their car was trapped in traffic; they would have to move forward before they could pursue her.

Her feet pounded against the concrete, each step a mix of fear and exhilaration. Her stomach protested, a reminder of her exhaustion, but she pushed those thoughts aside. She darted into the first shop she spotted, praying it would have a back exit. Luck was on her side—it did. She weaved through the aisles, her heart racing, and burst through the back door into the cool air outside.

Without missing a beat, she dashed across the street and slipped into another store, her mind racing with the need to stay hidden. She ducked behind a shelf, trying to catch her breath, but the familiar sensation of panic clawed at her insides. Finally, she emerged into an area she recognized, a small victory in her long journey. It was going to be a grueling trek back, but she had to keep moving.

With every step, she felt the weight of her fatigue pressing down on her. Her muscles ached, and she could feel the cold seeping into her bones, but she refused to let it deter her. She was getting closer to freedom, and that thought pushed her onward.

Suddenly, a voice broke through her thoughts. "What do we have here?" She looked up, her heart sinking as she spotted a man approaching her with a predatory grin. Panic surged through her veins, and she instinctively took a step back, only to find another figure blocking her retreat.

"Please, just let me pass," she pleaded, trying to sound braver than she felt.

They laughed, a sound that sent chills down her spine. The man in front stepped closer, his demeanor threatening. "I don't think so."

Fear gripped her heart, and she realized she needed to act quickly. The guy behind her seized her hair, yanking her head back painfully. In that moment, something primal awoke within her; adrenaline surged as she fought back. She had faced danger before, and she wasn't about to go down easily. With a swift motion, she slammed her head into the man behind her and kneed the one in front, then spun around and bolted.

She had no clear destination in mind, only the instinct to escape. The sound of shouts echoed behind her, urging her to run faster. She turned a corner, her heart racing with the hope that she had eluded them, but then one of the men lunged at her, tackling her to the ground. A scream tore from her lips as her body hit the pavement, and the world around her blurred as she fought to maintain consciousness.

Just when she thought it was over, she felt a sudden shift. The weight on top of her vanished as someone collided with her attacker. Sophie scrambled to her feet, her head spinning, and took off once more, driven by sheer willpower.

Despite the angry shouts trailing her, she rounded another corner, only to crash into someone solid. Reflexively, she struggled against the embrace that wrapped around her.

"Sophie, it's me. It's Liam. You're safe," he said, his voice cutting through her panic.

She clutched the front of his shirt, desperation pouring out of her. "You have to help me! Those guys..."

"It's okay, Sophie. You're safe now," Liam reassured her, his grip firm yet gentle. "Let's get you to the car." He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, guiding her away from the chaos.

"Wait," she halted, panic surging anew. "I think someone is fighting them. We can't just leave them!"

"It's Kyle and Levi. They're fine. Come on," he urged, his voice steady but insistent.

“No! We need to help them!” she exclaimed, fear clawing at her heart. The thought of her friends getting hurt on her account was unbearable. What if those men had weapons? She struggled against Liam’s hold.

He tightened his grip, a mix of concern and authority in his eyes. “Believe me, Sophie. They can handle themselves. They’re more than capable.”

As Liam pulled her along again, Sophie felt her focus slipping. The world around her began to sway, and spots danced in her vision. She opened her mouth to voice her distress, but the words wouldn’t come.

The last thing she registered before the darkness enveloped her was the sound of growls—a fierce, primal clash echoing in the distance. She knew she was losing the battle against unconsciousness as she succumbed to the waiting shadows.

Conclusion

30

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Sophie gradually stirred from her slumber, her senses slowly reconnecting with the world around her. A haze of confusion enveloped her mind, and a dull ache pulsed through her body. She remained still for a few moments, attempting to grasp her surroundings, to piece together the fragments of her memory. With a hesitant flutter, she opened her eyes, only to be met with a stark and unfamiliar room. Panic surged within her as the realization dawned: she was in a hospital. In a frantic rush, she propped herself up, only to be met with a wave of dizziness that threatened to pull her back into unconsciousness.

“Easy there, Sophie,” a soothing voice broke through her disorientation. She turned her head to see Madison, the kind woman she had met at Hope House, seated beside her. Madison’s warm smile provided a flicker of comfort amidst her turmoil. “I wish I had known who you were when we first met. I could have saved you and everyone else a mountain of trouble,” she remarked, her tone light yet laden with unspoken implications. Sophie’s mind raced, but she couldn’t afford to dwell on Madison’s words; a torrent of questions flooded her thoughts.

“Where am I? What time is it?” she blurted out, her voice shaky and laced with anxiety.

“You’re in Hopewell Hospital,” Madison replied, her demeanor calm and reassuring. “It’s a little after eight a.m.”

“I’m late for work!” Sophie exclaimed, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, urgency coursing through her veins.

Madison placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, grounding her. "Torin called Helen and informed her about what happened. She expressed her concerns and suggested you take a few days off to recover."

Before Sophie could process this information, the door swung open, and a familiar figure stepped inside. It was Kyle. A flicker of surprise crossed her mind as she wondered what he was doing here. "Hey, beautiful," he greeted, effortlessly lifting Madison into his arms. Sophie turned her gaze away, feeling a pang of awkwardness as they shared a kiss. It became clear why he was present.

Madison, breaking away from Kyle's embrace, turned to Sophie with a bright smile. "Sophie's awake!" she announced, her voice filled with genuine delight.

"I see that," Kyle replied, his own smile widening as he looked at Sophie.

"Why am I here?" Sophie asked, confusion still clouding her thoughts.

Kyle and Madison exchanged a knowing glance. "What's the last thing you remember?" Kyle inquired, his expression shifting to one of concern.

"I remember running from those guys," Sophie recounted, her brow furrowing as she tried to piece together the fragmented memories. "Then there was fighting... it was strange. It sounded like a dog fight, but... worse." She shook her head, frustration bubbling within her. "I don't really know. I guess I lost it. Liam said you and Levi were fighting them. Are you okay?" she asked, worry etched on her face.

Kyle's grin returned, though it felt slightly out of place. "We took care of them," he assured her, but Sophie couldn't decipher the reason behind his amusement. It must be a guy thing, she thought. Then, his expression turned serious. "I'm sorry they hurt you. They'll never hurt you again." Sophie chose not to delve deeper; some answers felt too heavy to bear.

Her gaze wandered around the room, a wave of panic washing over her. "I wish I hadn't been brought here," she whispered, the unspoken worry of a looming hospital bill gnawing at her insides.

Madison reached out, her hand resting gently on Sophie's shoulder. "You hit your head pretty hard, Sophie. We had to get you checked out," she said softly, her eyes filled with empathy. "Speaking of which, how does your head feel? The doctor will want to see you now that you're awake. Kyle, can you go inform the nurses?" He nodded and stepped out, leaving the two women alone.

Sophie gingerly touched the back of her head, wincing at the tenderness. "It's still sore, but I'll manage," she replied, forcing a brave smile.

With a determined effort, Sophie pushed herself to stand, swaying slightly as she fought to regain her balance. Madison instinctively moved closer, ready to steady her.

"You really shouldn't be getting out of bed just yet until the doctor clears you," she advised, her voice gentle yet firm.

"I can't stay here any longer," Sophie insisted, her voice rising with urgency. "Where are my clothes?"

"Sophie," Madison tried again, concern etched on her face. "Please just wait until the doctor arrives to check on you."

"I can't," Sophie exclaimed, panic rising in her chest. "I need to get out of here. I can't afford to be here." The last words escaped her lips in a whisper, shame washing over her.

"Oh, Sophie, Torin's covering the bill," Madison replied, her tone softening. "I'm so sorry. I just assumed you knew. I should have mentioned it."

Confusion clouded Sophie's features. "Why is Torin covering the bill?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"Because it's his fault this happened to you. He pushed you to run away. Men," she said with a resigned shake of her head.

Suddenly, a memory flickered in Sophie's mind. "Amy and Olivia! I have to tell them what happened," she said anxiously, guilt gnawing at her. She felt she had let them down when they needed her most.

"It's okay," Madison said, her voice calm and soothing. "Torin arranged for someone to look after Olivia at Hope House. He explained everything to Amy. She felt terrible for you." Just then, Kyle re-entered the room, his presence a welcome distraction.

Sophie blinked, her mind racing as she processed Madison's words. "He did?" she asked, her voice tinged with disbelief. Madison nodded, and Sophie glanced around the room as if hoping to summon Torin himself.

"Torin doesn't have much of a bedside manner, so we sent him away," Madison explained, a playful smirk dancing on her lips. Kyle made a comment that Sophie couldn't quite catch, and Madison playfully elbowed him in the stomach, but he merely chuckled, unfazed by her gesture.

In that moment, the heaviness of her situation felt a little lighter, even if just for a heartbeat.

Conclusion