

## 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\*\***

Marietta.

Loane didn't care about the view outside the bus window. The moment the vehicle came to a halt, she sprang into action, her heart racing. There was no time for contemplation, no time to choose a direction. Her eyes caught sight of another bus, its engine rumbling, preparing to depart. Without a second thought, she dashed forward, her feet pounding against the pavement.

She squeezed through the pneumatic doors just a heartbeat before they hissed shut behind her, the sound echoing in her ears.

"Close call, kid," the driver chuckled, amusement lacing his voice.

Loane merely nodded, a jerky movement that barely acknowledged the comment. She fumbled with her cash, shoving it into the driver's hand, and then slunk into a corner seat near the front, her body sinking into the worn fabric.

This bus was bound for Jacksonville. It wasn't until the road signs began to flash past, confirming that she had indeed crossed state lines, that Loane finally allowed herself to lean back against the seat.

Crossed state lines.

The thought sent a shiver of relief through her. It meant she was putting a vast expanse of distance between herself and that hellhole in Georgia. Between her and the monster named Brody.

But even with that small victory, she knew she couldn't stop. She had less than three hundred dollars tucked away in her pocket and the clothes on her back. To pause meant to risk everything, to put herself in danger again. Stopping was not an option; it felt like a death sentence.

The next three days transformed Loane into a wandering specter, drifting through states like a lost soul.

Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee... the names outside the window blurred together, a dizzying swirl of landscapes, and her meager three hundred dollars vanished just as quickly.

Board. Sleep. Off. Transfer.

This monotonous cycle continued until the early hours of the third day, when she found herself in a desolate layover in Minnesota.

Standing before a massive map, Loane felt as if the world was closing in on her, the weight of her circumstances threatening to crush her spirit.

Three days without a shower. Her hair, a greasy, tangled mess, clung to her scalp, and even she could smell the stench that clung to her like a second skin. The gnawing hunger in her stomach had long since faded, replaced by a chilling numbness that settled in her core.

Heard that's what happens when you starve. Not exactly a great sign.

She stared at the map, a wave of despair washing over her.

With only enough cash for one last ticket, the world felt impossibly vast, yet there wasn't a single place that felt like it could be her refuge. Where the hell is a fugitive supposed to go?

Just when she was about to succumb to hopelessness, a flyer at the bottom of the map fluttered in the breeze, catching her eye.

Hopewell, Wisconsin.

Hopewell. A well of hope?

Hope.

The word resonated within her, igniting a flicker of something she hadn't felt in a long time. Any place with "hope" in its name couldn't be all bad, right? Honestly?

God knows I need some of that right now.

It was as if a strange intuition had taken hold of her, whispering that this was it.

She waited patiently for the other passengers to shuffle off the bus, feeling the heaviness of her legs as she finally forced herself to stand. They felt like lead weights, anchored to the ground.

Three days of bus rides, sleeping upright, and surviving on vending machine crackers had turned her into a walking zombie.

As she stepped onto the pavement, the cold air hit her like a slap across the face.

This wasn't the humid chill of Georgia. No, this was a sharp, biting cold that pierced through her thin hoodie, making her shiver involuntarily. Loane wrapped her arms around herself, scanning the street for any sign of life.

It was... quiet. Too quiet.

The streets were unnaturally clean, devoid of trash or graffiti, and even the few people passing by seemed different. They moved with a purpose, a fluid grace that made Loane feel awkward and conspicuous. They were all fit, healthy, radiating a vitality that she felt she had long lost.

In that moment, she felt like a grime-covered rat scurrying through a showroom of purebreds.

Blend in, she told herself. Just find a job. Get cash. Keep moving.

As she walked past a few restaurants, the mouthwatering aroma of frying bacon nearly brought her to her knees. Her stomach growled violently, a reminder of her hunger, but she forced her feet to keep moving. Buying a meal meant forgoing a place to sleep tonight.

She needed money. Now.

Her eyes darted across the storefronts like a radar, scanning for any opportunity until they landed on a handwritten sign in a glass window.

Help Wanted. Shift starts 5 AM.

A coffee shop. Sip and Drip. Warm yellow light spilled out onto the sidewalk, inviting and cozy. It looked safe.

Loane adjusted her beanie, tugging it lower to conceal her greasy red curls, took a deep breath to steady her racing heart, and pushed the door open.

A bell jingled overhead, announcing her arrival. The rich scent of roasted coffee beans enveloped her instantly, wrapping around her like a warm blanket, comforting and familiar.

"Hi! Welcome to Sip and Drip, I'll be right with you!" a cheerful voice called out, pulling her further into this new world of possibilities.