

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

5

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

In the dimly lit café, a woman was diligently wiping down one of the tables near the back. She appeared to be in her fifties, her kind eyes radiating warmth that instantly tugged at Sloane's heart. There was something inherently comforting about her presence, a motherly aura that made Sloane's chest tighten with a mix of longing and sorrow. The woman tossed the damp towel over her shoulder with a practiced ease and moved gracefully behind the counter, her movements imbued with a sense of purpose.

"What can I get for you, hon?" she asked, her voice infused with genuine kindness.

Sloane hesitated, her throat dry and raspy from lack of use. "I... saw the sign," she managed to croak out, clearing her throat to dispel the discomfort. "The help wanted sign."

The woman's face lit up like a sunrise breaking through the clouds. "Are you here to apply? Well, that just made my day! Come, sit down," she encouraged, gesturing toward a nearby table with an inviting smile.

With a mix of gratitude and anxiety, Sloane took a seat, acutely aware of the odor that clung to her after three long days of bus travel. The idea of being judged for her appearance gnawed at her, but she had no choice but to press forward.

"I'm Helen," the woman introduced herself, sliding a job application form across the table with an encouraging nod. "Now, tell me a bit about yourself."

Sloane's mind raced with panic. The truth was far too dangerous to utter aloud. How could she explain? Hi, I'm Sloane, and I'm fleeing from a stepbrother who has every intention of ending my life.

"I'm eighteen," she said cautiously, choosing her words as if navigating a treacherous path. "I'm a hard worker. I don't mind early mornings. And I really need this job."

Helen regarded her with a steady gaze. It wasn't one of judgment; rather, it felt like an assessment, as if Helen could peer through the layers of grime and exhaustion to the frightened girl hiding beneath. Sloane squirmed under that scrutiny, feeling exposed.

"What's your name, dear?" Helen asked gently.

“Sophie,” Sloane blurted out, the name escaping her lips before she could think. It was the first alias that popped into her mind. “Sophie... Ellis.”

Helen nodded slowly, her fingers tapping lightly on the application paper. “I’ll need your social security number, your address, references...”

The form loomed before Sloane like a death sentence. If she wrote down her real information, Brody would have a way to track her down. The very thought sent a shiver down her spine.

Suddenly overwhelmed, she stood up abruptly, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. “I’m sorry. I... I can’t fill this out. I really want the job, but I can’t do the paperwork,” she stammered, her heart sinking as she prepared to leave.

Stupid. What were you thinking? The self-recrimination echoed in her mind.

“Are you in trouble, Sophie?” Helen’s voice was soft, almost a whisper.

Sloane froze, her heart racing. She didn’t dare turn around. “I haven’t done anything illegal,” she murmured, the words barely escaping her lips. It was technically true, after all; stealing her own inheritance didn’t count in her mind.

A heavy silence hung between them, stretching out like an eternity.

“Be here tomorrow at five,” Helen finally said, breaking the stillness.

Sloane spun around in disbelief. “What?”

“We open at five-thirty. Shifts end at two. It’s minimum wage, plus tips,” Helen explained, her smile genuine and warm, a beacon of hope. “I have a feeling you’re a girl who knows how to work. Don’t make me regret this.”

“I won’t,” Sloane breathed, a wave of relief washing over her so intensely that she nearly swayed. “Thank you. Seriously.”

“See you at five, Sophie Ellis,” Helen replied, her tone light yet firm.

As Sloane stepped out of the café, her legs felt like jelly. She had secured a job—Step one: Survival—successfully completed.

Now, on to Step two: Find a safe place to hide before nightfall.

Even in this seemingly perfect, tranquil town, the unsettling sensation of being watched prickled at the back of her neck, a constant reminder of the danger lurking just out of sight.

The exhilaration of landing the job faded within minutes, replaced by the biting cold wind that cut through her thin hoodie, a harsh reminder of her homelessness in Wisconsin's October chill.

Keeping her head lowered, Sloane walked briskly, her mind racing with thoughts of where to find shelter.

She spotted two women walking a poodle and approached them cautiously. "Excuse me," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Is there a shelter nearby?"

The women exchanged a glance—not one of disgust, but rather one of pity. "Hope House," the taller one replied, pointing down the street. "Three blocks east. It's a big brick building. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," Sloane said, her heart pounding as she hurried away before they could ask any more questions.

A mere ten minutes later, she found herself standing in front of Hope House. The building loomed before her, a massive brick structure that resembled a fortress more than a shelter. There were no loiterers, no discarded trash—just a heavy oak door that seemed to guard the sanctuary within.

Reaching for the handle, she discovered it was locked.

Housing for women. Doors open at 5 PM.

Sloane slumped against the unforgiving brick wall, sliding down until she landed on the cold concrete. It was only noon. Five long hours stretched ahead of her, and her body was pleading for rest.

"Hey! You!"

Sloane flinched, her muscles tensing in preparation to flee. She looked up, her heart racing.