

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****

A woman approached the building, her arms straining under the weight of three enormous cardboard boxes stacked precariously high, obscuring her view. She was a sight to behold—tall with sun-kissed skin that glowed in the feeble sunlight, and her raven-black hair cascaded down her back like a waterfall of ink.

“Could you hold the door for me?” she called out, her voice steady and clear, betraying none of the effort it took to manage her burdens.

Sloane scrambled to her feet, her heart racing slightly as she rushed to the entrance. With a grunt, she pulled the heavy door open, feeling the cool air rush in.

The woman glided past her, a whirlwind of confidence. “Thanks! I’m Madison. You must be the new girl.”

Sloane stepped inside, her eyes wide with astonishment. Each of those boxes Madison carried must have weighed at least fifty pounds, yet she navigated the space with the effortless grace of a dancer, or perhaps a predator stalking its prey.

Madison set the boxes down on a counter with a resounding thud that reverberated through the floor.

“How on earth did you manage to carry all that?” Sloane blurted out, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Madison shrugged, a perfect, white smile lighting up her face. “Yoga,” she replied, her tone deadpan. Then, as if sensing something, she tilted her head, her dark eyes narrowing as they scrutinized Sloane. She stepped closer, taking a subtle sniff of the air around them.

Sloane tensed involuntarily. What was she doing? Why is she sniffing me?

“You look like you’ve been through a war,” Madison remarked, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. “Renee!” she called over her shoulder, her voice echoing in the open space. “Fresh meat!”

A shorter, older woman bustled out of a nearby office, her presence commanding yet warm. It was Renee, the manager, and Sloane felt a mix of apprehension and relief wash over her.

In less than twenty minutes, Sloane—now officially dubbed “Sophie”—was processed and ready to start her new life. Renee was strict but had a kindness that shone through her authoritative demeanor as she laid out the rules: Curfew at nine, out by eight AM, and chores were mandatory.

“You’re in luck,” Renee said, handing Sophie a key that felt heavy in her palm. “Bed 109 just opened up this morning. We rarely have space available.”

Sophie took the key, her hand trembling slightly. “Thank you,” she managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Room’s down the hall. Showers are on the left. Dinner is served at six,” Renee instructed, her tone brisk yet reassuring.

Sophie felt a surge of urgency as she almost sprinted down the corridor toward her new room. She desperately needed a shower; she wanted to wash away the lingering scent of the bus and the miles of travel that clung to her skin.

Unlocking the door to Room 109, she stepped inside. The space was small, containing two twin beds. One was meticulously made, while the other lay bare and uninviting.

Perched on the made bed was a girl who seemed to be around Sophie’s age. She wore headphones, her eyes closed in a world of her own. But as soon as Sophie entered, those eyes snapped open, revealing a pale grey hue that was both piercing and unfriendly.

Sophie hesitated for a moment. “Hi. I’m Sophie,” she introduced herself, trying to sound casual.

The girl didn’t return the greeting. Instead, she pulled one headphone off her ear and stated flatly, “I don’t care.”

“Okay,” Sophie replied, forcing her tone to remain neutral as she walked over to the empty bed and dropped her backpack onto it.

The girl sat up, her gaze following Sophie’s every movement with an intensity that felt almost tangible, like a weight pressing down on her. “You’re not from here,” she declared, not bothering to phrase it as a question.

“I’m from the south,” Sophie muttered, starting to unpack her meager belongings, trying to shake off the girl’s scrutinizing stare.

"You smell like trouble," the girl said, her voice low and filled with a warning. "Just a heads-up, Sophie. This town doesn't take kindly to outsiders, especially those who bring their own baggage."

Sophie turned to face her, a mix of irritation and defensiveness bubbling up inside her. "I'm just here to work," she stated firmly, hoping to quell the tension.

The girl scoffed, rolling her eyes as she slipped her headphones back on. "Good luck with that. And don't touch my stuff."

Feeling her heart race, Sophie turned away, the weight of the girl's hostility settling heavily on her shoulders.

With Madison's incredible strength and this girl's unsettling demeanor, Hopewell was starting to feel less like a refuge and more like a different kind of prison.

At least this prison had a lock on the door, she thought bitterly.

Grabbing her toiletries bag, Sophie headed for the shower, eager to cleanse herself of the day's events. She stripped off her clothes and stepped under the hot spray, letting the warmth envelop her. As the water cascaded over her, she finally allowed the tears to flow, the relief of being away from her past mingling with the anxiety of her uncertain future.

She was safe. For now.

But as she scrubbed her skin raw, a gnawing feeling settled in her stomach, one that whispered she had merely traded one danger for another. It was as if she had escaped from a wolf's den only to stumble straight into a bear's cave.