

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

7

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

****Chapter 7****

4:15 AM.

Sloane stirred awake, her body alert before the shrill cry of her alarm could pierce the stillness of dawn. Her internal clock remained stubbornly attuned to the rhythms of Fugitive Time—an existence spent sleeping with one eye cracked open, adrenaline coursing just beneath the surface like a coiled spring, ready to snap.

There was no time to linger in the haze of sleep. She shuffled into the communal bathroom, splashing her face with icy water that sent a jolt through her system. With deft hands, she wrestled her wild, fiery curls into a tight bun, a makeshift crown of defiance against the chaos of her life. She then pulled on the only clean outfit left in her meager wardrobe: a pair of black leggings that hugged her legs and an oversized t-shirt she had scavenged from the donation bin, its fabric soft but worn.

As she stepped out of the Hope House, the enveloping darkness felt like a thick blanket, smothering and complete. The streetlights that dotted Hopewell were too far apart, casting long, eerie shadows that stretched like fingers across the pavement, creating pools of yellow light surrounded by deep, inky blackness. Sloane tightened her hoodie around her, lowering her gaze to the ground, her thoughts racing.

Walk fast. Don't run. Running attracts attention.

Yet, the familiar prickling sensation danced along her skin—a haunting reminder that she was not alone. The feeling of unseen eyes boring into her back sent a shiver down her spine.

She halted beneath a flickering streetlight, her heart thudding in her chest as she whipped her head around, scanning the empty street. Silent houses loomed like sentinels, their darkened windows offering no comfort.

But she could sense it. She could feel it deep in her bones. A shadow flickered near an alleyway half a block back, moving with a speed that felt unnatural, too low to the ground.

A dog?

No time to ponder. Without a second thought, she practically sprinted the last two blocks to Sip and Drip, her heart racing in her chest. Fumbling with the lock, her trembling hands struggled, but she finally managed to throw herself inside, slamming the door shut and securing it behind her with a decisive click.

“Morning, sunshine!” Helen’s warm voice called from the back, the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the air.

Sloane leaned against the door, her breath coming in ragged gasps. “Morning,” she managed, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

She quickly grabbed an apron and dove into the comforting rhythm of her morning routine. Grinding beans, wiping down counters—these mundane tasks anchored her in a world where, for a few fleeting hours, she could forget that she was a runaway. In this moment, she was simply Sophie, the barista.

As the clock ticked toward 8 AM, the bell above the door jingled, announcing the arrival of a customer.

“Welcome to Sip and—” Sloane looked up, her voice trailing off as she froze in place.

The figure stepping through the door was... overwhelming.

He was tall, with tousled dirty-blond hair and a physique that screamed athleticism. But it wasn’t merely his appearance that caught her off guard; it was the energy he radiated. He strode into the café with an air of confidence that seemed to fill the room, commanding attention without uttering a word.

He approached the counter, his piercing blue eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that made her pulse quicken. He didn’t smile right away. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, inhaling as if he were savoring an unseen scent.

Sloane fought the instinct to step back. Did he just... smell me?

“You’re new,” he stated, his tone casual, yet his gaze was sharp, scrutinizing her every detail.

“First week,” she replied, striving to keep her voice steady despite the flutter of anxiety in her stomach. “What can I get for you?”

Leaning an elbow on the counter, he invaded her personal space just enough to send her heart racing. “I’m Liam. And you are?”

“Sophie,” she lied effortlessly, the name rolling off her tongue as if it were her own.

“Sophie,” he repeated, testing the name with a knowing look that suggested he wasn’t buying it. “You’re not from Wisconsin, Sophie. That accent has Georgia written all over it.”

Sloane gripped the edge of the counter, her knuckles turning white in her effort to maintain composure. “I move around a lot. Coffee?”

A grin spread across Liam’s face, a wolfish charm that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Large dark roast. No sugar.”

As she turned to prepare the drink, she could feel his gaze piercing through her, a heat that felt far more predatory than flirtatious. It wasn’t the look of a guy admiring a girl; it was the scrutiny of a hunter assessing an intriguing puzzle.

With careful precision, she handed him the cup, deliberately avoiding any brush of their fingers.

“Thanks, Cat Girl,” he remarked, glancing at the whimsical cat graphic on her borrowed t-shirt.

“It’s Sophie,” she corrected, her voice tinged with a firmness she hoped masked her unease.

“We’ll see,” Liam shot her a wink that felt both teasing and challenging. He took a leisurely sip, his gaze never wavering from hers as he raised the cup to his lips. “See you around, Sophie.”

With that, he turned and strode out, the door chiming softly behind him. Sloane watched through the window as he paused on the sidewalk, pulling out his phone to type something quickly. He glanced back at the shop one last time before continuing on his way, leaving her breathless and bewildered.

Sloane let out a long, shaky breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, her mind racing with questions and an unsettling sense of intrigue.