

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

8

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

****Chapter 8****

The moment Liam left, Sloane found herself engulfed in a whirlwind of anxiety. Her heart raced as she replayed the conversation in her mind, each word echoing like a haunting melody. She couldn't shake the feeling that he would return, knocking on the door with more questions, probing into the depths of her secrets. Georgia. That name lingered, and she could still hear the way he had noticed her accent, a subtle reminder of her past life that she desperately tried to distance herself from.

After what felt like an eternity, her shift finally came to a close at two o'clock, and Sloane seized the opportunity to slip out the back door, her instincts urging her to be cautious. She moved quickly, her heart pounding with every step as she made her way to the public library. It was a sanctuary, warm and inviting, offering the promise of anonymity that she craved.

Inside, she made a beeline for the business management section, her fingers grazing the spines of the books as she selected a small stack. Each title represented a new path, a chance to reinvent herself. Finding a quiet corner table, she settled in, feeling the weight of her past lift slightly. In her previous life, she had been destined for college, a path that now felt like a distant dream. But here, among the pages of these books, she found a new kind of education. If she wanted to remain in Hopewell, she had to be more than just a barista; she had to become an asset, someone Helen couldn't do without.

Hours slipped away as she immersed herself in the text, her eyes straining against the dimming light. The librarian's gentle announcement of closing time pulled her from her reverie, and she reluctantly gathered her things, feeling as if she had just begun to scratch the surface of a new world.

The journey back to Hope House was a stark contrast to the warmth of the library. The biting cold wind whipped through her thin hoodie, a cruel reminder that she was still exposed, still vulnerable. Each gust felt like a whisper of her past, a reminder that danger was never far behind.

Dinner at the shelter was predictably dreary, a somber affair marked by the familiar sight of meatloaf. Sloane sat alone at a table, her head bowed, lost in her thoughts until a sudden clatter broke through her reverie. A tray was unceremoniously dropped onto

the table across from her, and she looked up to find a woman with weary eyes offering a tentative smile. Beside her was a little girl with curly brown hair, perhaps five years old, who seemed to radiate innocence.

"Mind if we sit?" the woman inquired, her voice gentle yet filled with a hint of uncertainty. "I'm Amy. This is Olivia."

"Sophie," Sloane replied, shifting over to make space for them.

As she watched, Amy signed something to the little girl, and it dawned on Sloane that Olivia was deaf. The little girl turned her curious brown eyes towards Sloane, and in that moment, Sloane felt a flicker of hope ignite within her. Hesitating for just a moment, she set down her fork and raised her hand, fingers fumbling as she attempted to recall the letters from a long-forgotten third-grade project.

S-O-P-H-I-E.

Olivia's expression transformed instantly. The cautious look melted away, replaced by a radiant, gap-toothed smile that lit up her entire face.

"Wow, she says 'Nice to meet you,'" Amy translated, a soft chuckle escaping her lips. "She wants to teach you more, if you're willing."

A lump formed in Sloane's throat, and she felt warmth flooding her chest. In the past week, everyone she had encountered seemed to embody some threat or enigma—Brody, Liam, her own roommate. But Olivia was different. She was simply pure, untainted by the complexities of adult life.

"I'd love that," Sloane whispered, her voice barely audible.

For the next hour, the weight of her tumultuous existence began to lift. She was no longer a fugitive, but just a girl learning to communicate in a new way, discovering how to express "Friend" and "Thank you" with her hands. It was the first genuine smile she had worn since leaving Georgia, and it felt like a small victory.

However, the moment of joy was fleeting. The inevitable curfew loomed, and Sloane found herself retreating to Room 109, where her roommate lay sprawled on her bed, headphones in place, staring blankly at the ceiling. The atmosphere in the room was thick with unspoken tension, a palpable hostility that made Sloane's stomach churn.

Quietly, she gathered her toiletries—hand soap and a rough towel—and made her way to the communal showers. As the water cascaded over her skin, she scrubbed fiercely, trying to wash away the remnants of fear that Liam's piercing blue eyes had instilled in her.

He knows I'm not from here.

Once back in her room, she crawled into bed, pulling the thin blanket up to her chin, seeking solace in its frail warmth. The silence enveloped her, heavy and suffocating. Tomorrow. She had to focus on getting through tomorrow. Make coffee, keep her head down, save money.

As her eyes fluttered shut, she remained blissfully unaware that tomorrow would bring challenges that would shatter her resolve to remain invisible.

The next afternoon, the atmosphere in the shop felt charged, as if a storm was brewing just beneath the surface. Static electricity danced across Sloane's skin, raising the fine hairs on her arms in anticipation.

"Welcome to Sip and—"

But the greeting faltered in her throat as Liam's voice sliced through the air, unmistakable and commanding. "Hey, Cat Girl," he called out, and her heart sank.

He wasn't alone.

Behind Liam strode a man whose presence seemed to consume the room, making it feel suddenly claustrophobic. He was breathtakingly handsome, a striking figure that commanded attention. Taller than Liam, his raven-black hair framed a face with a jawline so sharp it could cut glass. The suit he wore exuded an air of wealth and authority, clinging to broad shoulders that seemed capable of bearing the weight of the world.

But it was his eyes—intense and piercing—that locked onto hers with an unsettling familiarity. In that moment, Sloane felt the world around her fade away, leaving only the two of them in a silent standoff.