

When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

Time seemed to come to a standstill. The ambient sounds of the coffee shop faded into a distant hum, as if the world around Sloane had been muted. She felt as though she were anchored to the floor, ensnared in the depths of his dark, penetrating gaze. The intensity with which he looked at her was disarming, as if he were peeling back the layers of her very essence, exposing the truths she had buried deep within.

And then, it happened.

As he continued to gaze at her, the darkness in his eyes began to swirl, transforming into something otherworldly. A flash of molten gold-amber erupted from the black depths, wild and radiant, flooding her vision with a warmth that was both alarming and enchanting.

Sloane gasped, instinctively taking a step back, her mind racing. What was that? What did it mean?

Before she could gather her thoughts, Liam intervened, stepping directly in front of the enigmatic man, effectively blocking her view. With a firm hand on the dark-haired man's chest, he pushed him toward the door with an urgency that surprised Sloane.

"Outside," Liam muttered, his usual playful demeanor stripped away, replaced by a seriousness that sent a shiver down her spine. "Now."

The dark-haired man maintained his unbroken gaze on Sloane, even as the door swung closed behind him, severing their connection.

Sloane gripped the counter tightly, her breath coming in shallow gasps. Her heart raced, pounding against her ribs like a frantic drum. Who was that man? What had just transpired with his eyes?

The door creaked open again, causing Sloane to jump in surprise.

It was only Liam. He strolled over to the counter as if nothing had happened, his expression seemingly untroubled, as if he hadn't just ejected a towering figure from the establishment.

“Sorry. The boss had to take a call,” he lied smoothly, his tone casual. “Three coffees. Dark roast.”

Sloane nodded numbly, her mind still reeling as she prepared the drinks on autopilot. Her hands trembled as she handed the cups over to Liam, who took them without his customary quip, leaving her in a state of confusion.

Leaning against the back counter, Sloane fought to steady her breathing. Just a trick of the light, she told herself repeatedly. Just stress.

She turned to wipe down the register, desperate for a distraction from the whirlwind of thoughts swirling in her mind.

Cling-ling.

18:04

****Chapter 9****

“Welcome to...” Sloane began, forcing a smile as she looked up.

Her heart plummeted.

Standing in the doorway were two police officers, their presence commanding and serious.

The younger officer stepped forward, his face devoid of any hint of a smile. His hand rested on his belt, and his gaze was fixed intently on her.

“You,” he said, advancing toward the counter with purpose. “You’re new here.”

Sloane felt her world tilt dangerously off its axis. Brody had found her. Or perhaps they were aware of the money.

She was trapped behind the counter, with no back door, no avenue of escape.

Her body tensed, muscles locking up as she braced herself for the inevitable words: You have the right to remain silent. Her eyes were drawn to the officer’s hand resting on his belt, anticipating the cold metal of handcuffs.

But to her astonishment, he didn’t reach for anything of the sort.

Instead, the stern line of his mouth broke into a smile, his shoulders relaxing as a boyish, almost bashful grin illuminated his face.

“I haven’t seen you before,” he continued, his authoritative tone melting into something warm and friendly. “I usually know everyone on the morning shift.”

Sloane blinked, her mind struggling to catch up with the unexpected turn of events. He wasn't reaching for a weapon. He wasn't reading her rights. He was... flirting?

For the first time, she truly looked at him. The terror that had clouded her vision dissipated, revealing that he was younger than she initially thought—perhaps only a few years her senior. There was no malice in his gaze, only a genuine curiosity.

"I..." Her voice emerged as a mere squeak, barely audible. She cleared her throat, willing her racing heart to calm. "I started yesterday."

"And she's doing amazing. She's a great addition around here," Helen chimed in, bustling over to stand beside Sloane, her presence a comforting anchor.

Helen's warm and relaxed demeanor was the final reassurance Sloane needed. If Helen wasn't frightened, then perhaps this wasn't a raid after all.

Sloane exhaled a shaky breath, feeling the adrenaline that had gripped her body start to ebb away, leaving her knees feeling weak. Just a customer. He's just a customer.

"I bet she is," the officer replied, flashing a grin that made Sloane's heart flutter. "Hey, Helen, how's business?"

"Not bad. Things could be better, but at least I'm still in business, right?" Helen responded with a bright smile.

Sloane glanced between them, her pulse gradually slowing to a more manageable rhythm. "You get your coffee yet?" Helen asked, her tone light.

"I'm ordering now," the officer said, turning his attention back to Sloane, his smile growing wider. "Can I get a large drip with hazelnut?"

Sloane nodded, moving to the coffee machine. Her hands still trembled slightly as she poured the coffee, but the oppressive weight of dread had lifted. She brought the two cups back to the counter, eager to appear composed.

"Here you go," she said, handing the younger officer his drink.

"Thanks so much..." He paused, waiting for her name.

"Sophie," she supplied, the lie rolling off her tongue more easily this time.

"Sophie," he repeated, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "I'm Kevin."

He extended his hand for a shake.

Sloane hesitated for a brief moment. Shaking hands with a cop felt like stepping into a trap, but refusing would be awkward. With a tentative resolve, she placed her hand in

his, bracing herself for a jolt, for anything resembling the strange energy she had felt around the other men in town.

But no—just a warm, dry palm enveloped hers.

She withdrew her hand quickly, letting out a silent sigh of relief. Normal. He's just normal.

"Well, thanks for the coffee, Sophie. Take care," he said, offering a friendly wave.

18:04

****Chapter 9****

"Have a good one," Sophie called out to him and the older officer as they made their way toward the front door.

"Wow, you're on a first-name basis with the police already. That's pretty impressive," a voice chimed in, startling Sloane as she spun around.

10

Continue Regular Chapter Reading Below

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

****Chapter 10****

Liam leaned casually against the counter, a playful smirk dancing across his lips as he surveyed the room.

"I thought you left," Sophie exclaimed, her hand instinctively clutching her chest as if to steady herself from the surprise of his presence.

His eyebrows shot up in mock surprise. "Trying to get rid of me, huh?" he teased, his voice laced with amusement.

"Oh, no, of course not," Sophie stammered, her words tumbling out in a flurry as she attempted to smooth over the awkwardness of the moment.

Liam chuckled, the sound rich and warm. "Sure, you weren't," he replied, his tone light and teasing. "So, Sophie," he continued, still comfortably propped against the counter. "Why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

Sophie felt a wave of nervousness wash over her. "Oh, um," she began, her mind racing for something interesting to say. Thankfully, just then, Helen breezed in, a welcome interruption.

"If you want to get to know Sophie, take her on a date," she declared with a knowing smile. "Now, leave her alone and let her get back to work, Liam." Sophie felt her cheeks flush with warmth, a mix of embarrassment and delight. She glanced down, avoiding his gaze.

Liam laughed lightly. "Okay," he said, straightening up. "Can I get your number, Sophie?" He fished his phone out of his back pocket, the screen lighting up in the dim light of the café.

"No," Sophie replied instantly, her voice firm despite the fluttering in her stomach.

Liam stared at her, his expression a mix of confusion and disbelief. "How do you not have a phone?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

Sophie shrugged, trying to downplay the situation. "I manage just fine," she said, her tone casual, but Liam wasn't ready to let this go.

"What do you do in case of emergency?" he pressed, his concern evident.

She smiled softly, tilting her head. "People survived before there were cell phones, Liam," she said, her voice light. He looked at her as if she had just suggested something outrageous. Unable to contain herself, Sophie laughed, and finally, he returned her smile, the tension easing between them.

"Well, tell me you at least live in a safe place," he said, his voice turning serious.

Sophie stiffened at his question. The last thing she wanted was for him—or even Helen—to know where she lived. "It's perfectly safe," she replied, attempting to project an air of confidence. In truth, she hoped it was safe enough.

"Go ahead and clock out, Sophie," Helen called from the back, breaking the moment. "I'll just wait while you clock out. Then I can walk you to your car, since you don't have a phone and all," she added with a grin.

Sophie stared at Liam, bewildered. "What is with you and phones? I am perfectly fine. You don't need to walk me to my car," she stumbled over the last word, her heart racing.

"Fine," he relented, a hint of disappointment in his voice. Sophie felt herself relax slightly. "But I'll wait outside for you," he added, making his way toward the door. A moment later, the bell jingled, signaling his departure.

Sophie stood there, staring at the spot where he had just been. "What in the world is wrong with that man?" she muttered to herself, shaking her head in disbelief.

Helen, overhearing her, chuckled. "It seems hiring you was a smart decision. Business from handsome young men apparently seems to be picking up," she teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Sophie felt her face heat up as she clocked out, heading toward the back. Oddly enough, despite his persistent attention, she didn't feel threatened by him. It was a strange sensation, one that left her feeling both confused and oddly comforted.

Just then, Cynthia entered as Sophie tossed her apron into the laundry basket. "How did it go today?" she asked, slipping on her own apron.

"It was good," Sophie replied, forcing a smile. Her mind wandered to Liam—was he still waiting for her? The last thing she wanted was for him to discover her secret about being homeless.

She was lost in thought, trying to devise a plan to avoid him when Helen casually mentioned, "There is a back door, should you ever need it." Sophie looked at her, surprised. Helen winked and gestured for her to follow.

When Helen revealed the door, Sophie turned to her, gratitude flooding her heart.

"Go on before he figures out what you're doing," Helen urged gently.

"Thanks, Helen," Sophie said, her voice filled with appreciation as she slipped out the back door in a hurry.

Sophie hurried in the direction of the library, relieved to find she could still access it from this street. A broad smile spread across her face as she entered, feeling a sense of triumph at escaping the awkward encounter.

She made her way to her favorite reading nook, settling in with a book before it was time to return to Hope House.

Later that evening, Sophie attended her second sign language lesson with Olivia. After dinner, she ventured into the free room, hoping to find more clothes to borrow. Disappointed by the lack of options, she made her way back to her room.

Just as she entered, her roommate barged in, brushing past her without a word. "Hi, I'm Sophie," she introduced herself, extending her hand.

"Don't care," the girl replied brusquely, flopping onto her bed and immediately putting on her headphones.

Sophie exhaled, frustration bubbling inside her.

Just let it go, Sophie. It doesn't matter, she reminded herself, trying to shake off the annoyance. She sat on her own bed, unsure of how to fill the silence that enveloped the room. Looking out the window, she wondered about her mother.

Does she miss me? Does she even know I'm gone? The thoughts crept in again, uninvited, as she pondered what it would be like to belong to a loving family, one that was whole and warm.

Shaking her head, Sophie pushed those thoughts away. Nothing good ever came from longing for something unattainable. Instead, she decided to focus on preparing for tomorrow. She walked over to her dresser, carefully laying out her clothes for the next day, determined to make the most of it.