

## When Night Grows Softer Hope Returns To Lead Us by Asa Rowan Finn 1

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**\*\*Chapter 1\*\***

There were only two ways to escape the clutches of a deranged stepbrother: in a body bag or on the run.

Without a moment's hesitation, Sloane chose the latter.

With a racing heart, she held her breath and cracked the door open just a fraction. The hinges barely made a sound, almost as if they were aware of her plight. It was only then that she felt the pressure in her chest ease slightly, allowing her to exhale the breath she had been holding tight.

Thank God for small mercies.

Tightening her grip on the strap of her backpack, she slipped out into the dim hallway, carefully easing the door shut behind her. Her heart pounded against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat echoing in the stillness of the house.

As she stealthily made her way past Brody's room, a sudden noise froze her in place.

Sloane dared not breathe. She focused her gaze on the closed door, her body rigid with fear. She was waiting for the monster to emerge.

Seconds felt like hours. Nothing happened. Just the sound of Brody rolling over in his sleep.

Letting out a shaky breath, she felt a wave of relief wash over her. Crisis averted—for now.

With renewed determination, she crept down the rest of the hallway, her fingers trembling as she fumbled with the chain lock on the front door.

Click.

The moment the door opened, the outside air rushed in, cold and biting against her skin. Sloane didn't dare look back. She sidestepped the porch step that always creaked—a landmine she had memorized the hard way—and bolted into the night.

She sprinted the eight blocks through the darkness, pushing her legs harder than she ever thought possible. It felt as if the devil himself was snapping at her heels, urging her to run faster.

By the time she reached the safety of the bus stop, her lungs were on fire, and her throat tasted metallic, like copper.

Quickly, she yanked her hoodie down, shoving her wild red curls inside, shrinking into the shadows like a terrified, exhausted ninja.

**\*\*Chapter 1\*\***

Pure torture.

Keeping her head down, she white-knuckled the strap of her backpack. Aside from the three hundred dollars she had managed to swipe from her stepdad's pocket, everything she owned was stuffed inside that bag. The money wasn't much, but considering he had seized her entire inheritance, she figured they were even now.

Actually? She considered it a down payment for the years of therapy she was going to need to untangle this mess.

Thoughts of her dad pierced through her mind, and that familiar ripping sensation clawed at her chest.

If he were still here, she wouldn't be in this situation. Her stepdad was a monster, but Brody? Brody was a nightmare wrapped in muscle. Built like a tank, his sole purpose in life seemed to be making hers a living hell.

Just last night—on what was supposed to be her eighteenth birthday—Brody and his friends had cornered her, hurling insults and filth.

Honestly? She had wanted nothing more than to tear his face off.

But she was outnumbered and overpowered. If she had been able to fight back, she wouldn't have spent the last two years in this hellhole.

But she was done enduring. She had made a solemn promise to herself: turn eighteen and get the hell out.

It was the only way. No one was dragging her back to that nightmare—not even her mother.

She had tried to convince her mom to leave with her, but it was like talking to a wall. Going back now would be a suicide mission for both of them.

Sloane blinked, forcing back the hot tears that threatened to spill over. Nope. Save the breakdown for later.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed behind her.

Adrenaline surged through her veins like a lightning bolt. She spun around.

A guy with a leather bag was approaching her. Sloane instantly dropped her gaze, pretending to focus on her shoes, but her body tensed, rigid as stone.

Calm down. Just calm down.

As the man drew closer, alarms blared in her head, urging her to run. She didn't recognize him, but that meant nothing. Brody had a plethora of sketchy friends. Who knew if this was just another new face trying to impress that piece of trash?

She tried to steady her breathing. Seriously, Universe? Where the hell is that bus?

Without a phone, the wait felt agonizingly long. Finally, unable to bear the suspense any longer, she risked a glance up.

Her breath hitched in her throat.

The man was staring directly at her.

Before she could even react, he raised his phone.

Click.