

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****

The sound of the camera shutter echoed like a gunshot in the stillness of the street, piercing through the night air.

Sloane felt her heart plummet, a sinking sensation that twisted her stomach into knots. Oh, hell no. This was not happening.

Without a moment's hesitation, she pivoted on her heel and took off, her feet pounding against the pavement as she fled into the darkness.

But the man was unnaturally quick. It was almost as if he had been waiting for this moment, and now he was surging after her with a speed that sent a chill down her spine. She didn't dare glance back, but the sound of his footsteps reverberated in her ears, growing louder, closer, and more menacing with each passing second.

Panic surged through her veins, propelling her forward as she darted into a narrow alley, desperate to find some way to escape. In a frantic attempt to slow him down, she shoved several heavy trash cans into his path, her heart racing as she risked a quick look over her shoulder.

What she saw made her blood run cold. The guy leaped over the obstacles with a single, fluid motion, as if they were nothing more than mere hurdles.

Damn it. Since when do meatheads know parkour?

As she rounded the corner, Sloane's mind raced. She had to think fast. In a split-second decision, she swung her arm back and hurled her backpack to the left, the weight of her belongings feeling like a lead anchor. Meanwhile, she sprinted to the right, her heart pounding in her chest.

That bag contained everything she had left in this world. But her life? Breathing? That was non-negotiable.

She chanced a glance behind her, and her heart soared momentarily when she saw the man lunge for her backpack. Yes! That was it!

But then, like a clap of thunder, a voice rang out, sending a jolt of fear through her.

“Brody.”

Panic surged through her like a lightning strike. Her legs turned to jelly, and she stumbled, nearly crashing into the unforgiving concrete.

It’s over. Of course he’s here. Why would anything go right for me?

She was being chased by at least two people, both of whom were faster and stronger. How could she possibly escape? Was this how her story ended? A spectacularly tragic demise in an alleyway?

Just when despair threatened to engulf her, she spotted it—a rusty, old bus belching diesel fumes, a miracle in the chaos of her life.

At the mouth of the alley, the bus was just beginning to pull away, and without thinking, Sloane sprinted toward it like a woman possessed, her arms flailing wildly in a desperate attempt to get the driver’s attention. Luckily, the bus was slow to start, and the doors hissed open just as she reached them.

With a surge of adrenaline, she threw herself inside, and the doors slammed shut behind her with a finality that felt like a lifeline.

Gasping for breath, she quickly checked the wad of cash in her pocket. Thank God. Earlier that day, she had taken three hundred dollars out of her bag. Small victories mattered in times like these.

She shoved her fare into the machine and ducked into a window seat, pulling her hoodie tightly around her for comfort and concealment.

Through the glass, she caught sight of Brody and the man with her bag storming onto the platform, just seconds too late. Brody made a move as if to chase after the bus, but the other guy grabbed him by the shoulder, holding him back with a grip that spoke of familiarity and control.

In a fit of rage, Brody snatched her backpack from the man’s grip and hurled it to the ground, the sound echoing like a gunshot in her ears. Then, he snapped his gaze up, his eyes locking onto hers with a fury that was palpable.

Pure, burning hatred radiated from him.

She recognized that look. It was a look filled with unhinged malice, a desire to destroy.

He pulled out a glinting switchblade, the metal catching the faint light as he pointed it directly at her through the window.

Next time I see you, you’re dead.

Sloane understood the threat loud and clear. A cold shiver ran down her spine, a visceral reaction to the danger that loomed. Message received, you psycho.

As the bus rounded the corner, the nightmare began to fade from view. She slumped back into her seat, her body still trembling with adrenaline.

But she couldn't afford to relax just yet. Her eyes darted to the route sign at the front of the bus, and her blood ran cold once more.

Fixed route. Unless Brody had suddenly lost his mind—which, unfortunately, she doubted—he would drive to the next stop to intercept her.

She had less than twenty minutes to figure something out.

Think. Think.

With determination, she stood up, yanked her hair tie out, and let her messy curls cascade down her shoulders. It was time to channel her inner damsel in distress, even if it tasted like bile.

"Excuse me," she said, leaning toward the driver, her voice trembling slightly.

He didn't even glance her way. "Ma'am, take your seat. Pull the cord for the next stop."

"No, um..." she stammered, desperation creeping into her voice. "I really need to get off before the next stop. Please..."

"Not happening. No unauthorized stops. That's the rule." Impatience dripped from his tone. "Take. Your. Seat."

"But it's an emergency! I—"

"Sit down right now, or I'll call the police to meet us at the next stop." He turned his head sharply, glaring at her with a mix of annoyance and authority.

Fantastic. A rule-follower. Just what I needed.

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away, ignoring the curious stares from the other passengers as she slunk back to her seat.

Great. Just great.

No one was going to help her. No one ever did. Why would they start now?

She sat down, forcing herself to breathe deeply, but the panic was rising within her like a tidal wave, threatening to drown her in despair.

If she didn't figure this out, Brody would find her in mere minutes.

Not happening.