

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****

****Chapter 3****

Sloane's gaze swept across the bus interior like a hawk searching for prey. Her eyes darted from one end to the other, scanning every face, every movement.

With each mile that passed beneath the bus, an unsettling truth settled in her stomach: she was inching closer to a nightmare. Brody was undoubtedly waiting for her at the next stop, knife in hand, eager to finish what he had started.

I can't just sit here and let him find me.

Suddenly, her eyes locked onto a window situated near the back of the bus.

That's the one.

With determination, Sloane turned her body, forcing her trembling hands to steady themselves. She stood up, head bowed, and made her way toward the empty seat at the back, her heart racing with every step. As she sat down, she cast a furtive glance at the window. It was a tight fit, but she was confident she could squeeze through.

Her eyes roamed the bus once more. Most passengers were absorbed in their phones or drifting into slumber. No one seemed to be paying attention to her corner of the bus.

Good.

Kneeling on the seat, she reached for the latches, her breath caught in her throat.

Don't make a sound. Please, don't make a sound... Thank you, God.

She swiftly manipulated the side latches, her fingers working quickly. Now, only the top latch remained. It was a tricky maneuver; she had to stand to reach it, leaving herself vulnerable for a few precious seconds. She had to be quick.

Click. Done.

She dropped back into her seat, her heart pounding like a drum, forcing herself to take deep, calming breaths. It was time to embrace the madness.

She understood that the moment she pushed that window open, the alarm would blare, alerting everyone to her desperate escape. She needed to scramble out like a rat fleeing a trap before anyone had a chance to react. As for the fall?

Compared to Brody's knife? A broken leg would feel like a day at the spa.

There was no more time to waste. The next stop was too close for comfort.

Sloane inhaled deeply and shoved the window open with all her strength.

BEEP-!!!

The blaring alarm pierced the air, a cacophony of chaos erupting inside the bus—screams, shouts, confusion. But Sloane didn't care. She planted her hands firmly on the edge of the window and vaulted herself out.

She hit the concrete with a jarring thud.

Pain shot through her knees and shoulders as she rolled across the ground, the rough surface scraping away layers of skin.

Before she even came to a complete stop, she was up on her feet, propelled by adrenaline that dulled the pain in an instant.

Two words echoed in her mind, urgent and demanding:

Run. Now.

The driver's furious curses faded behind her as she darted into a nearby residential area. She tore through lawns, sprinting between houses like a fugitive on the run. Which, in reality, she was.

She ran until her lungs felt like they would burst, finally emerging onto a street corner.

Glancing at a street sign, she regained her bearings. If her memory served her right, a major bus hub was just a few blocks away.

Don't slow down. Keep moving.

She raced toward it, desperation fueling her speed.

Please let there be a bus. Come on, Universe, throw me a bone.

She risked a quick glance over her shoulder. The coast was clear.

Good. I've lost them.

As she neared the bus stop, she forced herself to slow down, flipping the switch in her mind from fugitive mode to that of an ordinary pedestrian in a heartbeat. She roughly shoved her messy red hair back under her hood, adjusting her breathing, trying to hide the wreckage of her appearance beneath the fabric.

A few people were waiting at the stop. Sloane approached, deliberately avoiding eye contact, standing in the shadows, trying to appear calm. Yet, only she knew that her palms were slick with cold sweat.

The wait felt like an eternity.

Finally, the bus rumbled into view, a noisy, beautiful chariot of escape.

Sloane scanned the area with a hawk-like vigilance until it came to a halt. She yearned to rush the doors, but logic held her back. She forced herself to wait in line, paid her fare, and boarded the bus.

Once inside, she scanned the passengers at lightning speed.

Luck is on my side. All strangers. No one's looking twice.

Safe.

Keeping her head down, she made a beeline for the back corner of the bus. She sank into the seat, her eyes glued to the door, internally screaming:

Close the door. Go. Stop stalling.

Only when the doors hissed shut and the bus shuddered into motion did her nerves finally begin to relax.

She leaned her head against the cool window, trying to soothe her racing heart, which felt as if it might explode. She glanced at the digital sign at the front.

Next Stop: Marietta.

A twenty-five-minute ride. It was a major hub; a place where she could easily vanish into the crowd.

Sloane attempted to relax. Her eyelids felt heavy, weighed down like lead, but she dared not close them.

Because in her world? Blink, and you bleed.

