

Prologue

Never Too Late

"I love those who can smile in trouble, who can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection...they whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves their conduct, will pursue their principles unto death."

— Leonardo da Vinci

Miriam darted down the long corridor to confront Bruce before he entered her son's bedroom.

"Where is that stupid kid? I need to teach him a lesson!" Bruce roared.

"Your son is not stupid!" she said.

"My son?" He taunted her. "How do I know he isn't the bastard of some idiot from that hellhole where I found you?"

She glared at him at eye level. "How do I know that you aren't that idiot? You were there often enough."

He stared back at her with cold, hard eyes. "You're the one who spawned that imbecile who can barely read."

A whimper came from the closet, and Bruce stepped inside the room despite her efforts to stop him.

She moved between him and the closet, planting her feet. "Quit scaring him! Why are you so angry? What has he done?"

"What has he done?" He gestured to the far wing of the mansion. "He was in my study, looking through my books. Snooping into my business!"

Fear chilled Miriam as she continued to hear her son cry, and Bruce turned his full attention to the sound.

"He's just starting to read. Maybe he's trying to impress you."

"Well, I'm not! He needs a proper education, and I intend to give him one."

"Bruce, don't," She pleaded.

He backhanded her, knocking her to the floor. His jeweled ring left a trickle of blood on her cheek.

She touched her face in disbelief. Shock and fear coursed through her when she saw his burning rage. He'd yelled and belittled them more than enough, but this was the first time he dared to strike her, and there was murder in his eyes.

The whining from the closet turned into sobs. Bruce kicked aside a toy dump truck as he advanced toward the closet. The truck collided with a toy shelf, and the cacophony of toys crashing to the floor only stoked his reddening face.

"Bruce!" bellowed a voice down the hall.

He turned; his gritted teeth retreated behind the thin line of his lips.

Miriam recognized the voice that had only spoken to her and her son with kindness and gentleness. Yet, Bruce feared it and listened with only contempt and defiance.

He sneered at her, "I will knock some sense into the boy someday." He left and slammed the door behind him. The click of his heels faded as he retreated down the marble-tiled hallway toward the source of the voice, Bruce's father.

She opened the closet, and Marcus cautiously emerged. She wrapped her arms around him, and he clung to her.

"Everything will be okay," she said.

"Mom, am I stupid?" Marcus asked in a shaky voice.

"No," she replied. "You are the best son a mother could ever want."

Then he handed her a book, a journal of some kind. "I'm sorry. I wanted to show Dad I could read grown-up stuff."

Bruce and his mobster friends would kill anyone for the secrets in the book. Chills ran along Miriam's spine when she thought of what they'd do to a little boy. Already, he'd been scarred both heart and mind.

Bruce and his father argued in his father's study. Their words echoed down the long corridor. Bruce yelled and howled. Arthur's voice was commanding and confident.

Bruce bragged that he was a self-made man. Miriam didn't know why Arthur never stopped his activities or whether he could, but she knew he wasn't involved in it.

Bruce only wanted a whore, not a bastard. He would've tossed her in the trash if he'd known. Somehow, Arthur found her. He took her in as if she were family, gave her a small wing of the mansion, protected her, and provided for her and her child, his grandson. He never asked for anything in return.

She looked again at the book. Where should she take it? To the police? He probably owned them. Bruce's father? That might risk even his safety. No, she had to get this book out of the mansion.

She pulled out a travel bag from the closet and stuffed the book inside. "Let's pack some of our things. We need to leave."

Little Marcus asked, "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere he can't touch you."

Marcus touched his mother's face. "Or you?"

At that moment, she wanted to burst into tears. If Bruce resorted to violence now, they weren't safe here.

At the end of the multi-car garage, under a car cover, she found an old black Buick. *No one will miss this.* She checked the glove box and found the keys. She piled their two bags into the back. Marcus hopped into the front seat.

The car passed through the gate when it automatically swung open for them. Miriam's heart raced as they made their daring escape, but fear of what Bruce might do gripped her. Marcus, barely able to look over the dashboard, was thrilled by the excitement of the escape.

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As night fell, she checked into a hotel she hoped was out of Bruce's influence. Leaving might have been a rash decision, but she had often thought about it. With that book stowed away, she prayed it would be the leverage she needed over him someday.

Or it might be our death sentence.

Once safely in their room, Marcus wouldn't settle down and began to cry. "Mom, where's my blanket?"

She searched his bag in a panic. How could she have forgotten it? That had been a source of comfort since he was a baby.

"Tomorrow, I promise, I'll buy you a new one, okay?"

His eyes drooped down, and he nodded.

"Now, let's get to bed, and we'll leave in the morning."

Without it, he couldn't settle down, nor could she.

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Against her better judgment, she dragged Marcus and herself to a local Walmart for supplies and the promised blanket.

When she picked up a cart, Marcus raised his arms, expecting to be put in it. It had been too long since she had gone shopping with him; Arthur's staff had taken care of their needs.

"No, you're seven and too big for the cart. C'mon, let's get some treats for our trip."

Marcus stood there looking down, pouting, his bottom lip drooping nearly past his chin.

She took his hand and placed it on the cart. "Help me push the cart."

Once they turned down the cracker and cookie aisle, his eyes widened. If he hadn't been so shaken, he'd probably have rushed to his favorites. They chose several boxes that were close at hand.

Finally, she hurried to the bedding aisles to find a new blanket for their new start. Up and down the aisle, Marcus looked at the themed blankets, superheroes, space cowboys, and even race cars. Nothing caught his attention.

Then, an idea struck her, and she went to the next aisle, where she found the perfect one, although he was too disappointed to notice.

As she rounded a corner heading to the cash registers, a voice made her freeze with terror. Marcus heard it first and shook. She couldn't make out the words but recognized Bruce's voice. It was seething, venomous, and devoid of civility.

Bruce must have spotted the car.

Trembling, Miriam slipped behind the women's clothing, pulling Marcus along with her.

She peeked through the dresses. Bruce challenged a store associate, and from Bruce's posture, raised voice, and finger-pointing, she knew the young store clerk was in trouble.

Suddenly, he pushed the young man back into a display, causing him to fall onto the floor and scatter the snacks everywhere. Another store employee rushed to the scene of the scuffle.

Turning her back on the scene, she slumped down, closed her eyes, and cursed herself for coming out in public. Marcus sat close to his mother and hugged her arm. At that moment, she didn't know how to reassure him. *Or is he reassuring me?*

A voice next to her said, "Is he yours?"

Looking up toward the voice, she saw an older woman with a kindly smile who gestured with her head toward the commotion.

"I had one of those, too," she said.

Close to tears, Miriam quietly said, "We need to get out of here."

Peering through the clothes again, she watched the store manager trying to de-escalate the situation. Bruce was livid and yelling at everyone.

She turned back to the old woman. "There's no way the manager can appease him."

"Don't worry about Hank. He's stalling until the police come." The old woman looked back at her. "But let's get you out of here."

Confused, she just stood there.

The woman took hold of Miriam's cart and headed toward the checkout line. "I'll take care of these for you."

Miriam fumbled around in her purse for the cash. "What if he sees you? I can't ask you to take this risk."

"Risk? No harm in an old woman shopping," she winked.

Miriam tried her best to smile, but still trembled inside.

The woman gestured to the back of the store. "Go toward Automotive. They have an exit there. Tell Ralph that Christina sent you. He'll let you out. Then, circle around to the front and meet me next to your car."

All she could do was nod and sneak toward the back with Marcus in tow.

After navigating through the parking lot from the back, they met the woman by their car. They loaded her supplies into the vehicle.

The woman fished into her purse momentarily when Miriam received a text.

Arthur: He's tracking your phone

Miriam: What do I do?

Arthur: Relax. The police will keep him busy for a while.

Arthur: That car you borrowed is a 1987 Buick Regal GNX, worth over \$100K. I'll send you the name of someone who can give you a fair price.

Miriam: What about *him*?

Arthur: Go see the man in the morning and give him your phone. There's no need to return to the store for another SIM card; he'll help from there.

Miriam: Thank you!

Arthur: Keep that boy safe.

The old woman gave Miriam a note with "Christina" and her email address. "Stay in touch. I want to know that you made it out okay."

Christina took her by the hand. "God bless you and watch over that boy."

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When they arrived at the motel, they unloaded the car. Miriam had to calm herself and her son after even more drama. She pulled Marcus close to show him the new blanket.

"I have something for you." Miriam pulled out an ordinary blue and green one. "I am sorry we forgot the old one, so I bought this specially for you."

He had a puzzled look on his face. Pointing to the label in the corner of the package, she asked, "What does this say?"

Marcus slowly read, "King Size." His eyes lit up.

"Do you want to try it out?" She spread it over the hotel bed.

Marcus eagerly jumped onto the bed, and she helped him wrap himself in it. He poked his head out of the end, grinning. Playing and hiding in his pop-up tunnel was one of his favorite things until Bruce threw it away. Now, the delight in his eyes as he rolled around in his new blanket warmed Miriam's heart.

At one point, he crawled or jumped out of it into Miriam's arms. "Thanks, Mom."

All the heightened terror from the evening began to settle down with a comforting hug from her son. She loved that embrace. She didn't think she would be able to survive without him.