

Chapter 1

Maria walked up the steps to her front door, digging through the shiny blue purse she never left without. Her foot caught on a crack in the otherwise smooth stone, sending her stumbling as she reached out to balance against the wall. A man walking his dog turned to look at her, but she just removed her heels and gave him a hard stare in return.

Giving up, Maria poured the contents of her purse onto the floor below. She rummaged through the accumulated junk— receipts, old train tickets, cigarettes, and a handkerchief she'd forgotten about. A glimmer of gold shimmered through the pile, and she pulled it out, checking whether it was the right key or not. Once she was satisfied, she shoved everything back into her purse, including the silk gloves she'd removed earlier for convenience.

Picking up her shoes in one hand, and unlocking the door with the other, she sighed with relief. The door swung open, and Maria grasped her purse to take inside.

The first thing she noticed was the television. It was blaring the Looney Tunes theme—an irritating melody she'd heard so much she knew it off by heart.

"Bruce?" She called out, setting down her things and walking into the living room.

As she peeked around the corner of the door frame, she gasped at the mess left in the room. All of her son's toys were scattered about, the lamp was lying on the floor, and one curtain had a large rip running through it. Maria stepped further into the room to examine the mess, and the absence of her son finally hit her.

"Bruce!" She yelled this time, looking frantically about the room. Her son was supposed to be home by now— school had ended an hour ago.

The woman hurried out of the lounge and back into the hallway. She entered the kitchen and examined it. There was nothing out of place, but her son was still missing. Maria swallowed the fear building up inside of her, and dashed up the stairs to Bruce's room. Just like the kitchen, everything was fine, excluding Bruce's vacancy.

She leant against the window, and searched for any sign of reassurance that Bruce was okay. The familiar shine of her son's bike glared up at her, meaning he had cycled home safely.

A sense of relief washed over her. Maybe he had walked to a friend's house, or was helping the elderly neighbours with their errands.

Maria decided to wait for her husband to return home. Maybe he knew where Bruce was.

It was six pm. Maria's husband should have been home an hour ago, and Bruce had been missing for two hours.

Giving up her wait, she got up from where she had been mindlessly watching Looney Tunes, and walked to the telephone. She dialed the numbers of her husband's office.

The phone rang for a minute until a woman's voice replied on the receiver.

"Hello, this is the America Fare Insurance Group helpline. What can I help you with today?"

"Uh- hello, I'm Maria Truman—Jason Truman's wife. He works at your office. I was just wondering, is he working overtime or something? He didn't tell me anything about it."

"Oh, no, Mr Truman didn't check in today. Do you know why?"

Maria felt as if she'd stopped breathing.

"No-" she stuttered, "I haven't seen him at all today. Sorry, uh- thank you very much." She hung up the phone abruptly.

Shaking, Mrs. Truman rushed out of the house, heading for Mr and Mrs Franklin's home. The woman rapped on the door sharply, and she could see a figure approaching through the distorted glass window. Once the door opened, Maria spoke before Mr Franklin could greet her.

"Have you seen Jason at all? Did you see him leave the house or come back or anything?"

"Oh, hello, Maria! No, I didn't see him leave the house this morning. Why, did something happen?"

Maria hesitated before answering, "I just- he hasn't come home from work yet. And I can't find Bruce. Have you seen Bruce either? His bike's out so I'm assuming he came back from school on time."

"Actually, I didn't see him go to school today. He usually leaves around the same time I water the garden." The man responded.

Maria held her face in her hands and drew in a shaky breath. "Oh, what do I do? Jason didn't check in to work this morning, and Bruce didn't go to school. Should I- should I call the—" She cut herself off, then whispered "the police?"

Mr Franklin smiled warmly. "I'm sure there's no harm in it. Come inside, use my telephone."

Maria thanked her neighbour profusely as she stepped inside and followed him to the kitchen where a telephone was mounted on the wall. She dialed for the police, and answered the questions appropriately. Once she was done, she hung up the telephone and took a sip from the tea Mr Franklin had brewed her.

"They said they'll be here to investigate anywhere from half an hour to two. Do you mind if I go back to my house and wait for them?"

Two years had passed since Maria's husband and son went missing.

When the police arrived at her house, all they did was take a few notes. They told her to call them if her family was still gone by the next day.

They were.

After many investigations, the police branded Jason and Bruce as missing. Over time, the case drew to a close. There were no witnesses, and none of Jason's family knew anything. The office Jason worked at and the local school both insisted they hadn't noticed anything suspicious the day before the disappearance.

Over time, the case was dismissed, and as the police gave up their search, so did Maria.

Maria stumbled over to the front door of her house, giggling maniacally. It was clear as day she was drunk—proven by the occasional hiccup and her struggle to get the key into the door lock. When the key finally lodged itself inside, she turned it, and threw her arms up into the air in triumph.

"Whoa!" She shouted, and laughed again.

The woman noticed her cat, Whiskers, sitting on the staircase, and distractedly clambered up the steps to stroke him.

"Whiskers.. Whiskers" she called, and fell into a laughing fit again when the cat turned to look at her. She lightly tapped his nose, then walked back down the stairs to shut the door she'd left wide open.

As soon as the door clicked shut, she heard footsteps coming from the kitchen. Slowed down by the alcohol, Maria took a minute to fully turn around and notice the man before her.

The stranger had familiar auburn hair, deep brown eyes, and thin lips pressed together in a tight line.

"Jason?" She realised, her accusation followed by a hiccup. The man nodded.

"Yeah. I've got something important to tell you."