

## **Prologue**

*"Think Michael, think.."*

*It's just a front door not a landmine and you're going to walk to it. Just take a deep breath slowly, like they do in the movies and it's going to be okay.....*

*No conversations, keep it brief and grab your damn kid, simple.*

*"Simple?" Nah, there was nothing simple in this, not with this pounding heartbeat and definitely not in facing Vida again....*

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## **Chapter 1**

I was sure I could handle it. One week, two, maybe even three. I could wait it out. I would be patient for Tommy's sake and mine.

Two painful months later, my patience paid off. I finally got to see my son Williams "Tommy" McClain.

My ex-wife Vida McClain was a bitter woman who had tried everything in her power to keep Tommy and I apart. She had rubbished my name to friends, family, colleagues and even the Court.

Her antics had failed. The judge granted me visitation rights causing Vida to totally lose it. She finally resorted to making excuses each time I asked to see Tommy, saying why I couldn't come to get him. Last week her excuse was a rude, " he's sleeping at his friend Eric's house", and the week before was "he's out of town with my sister Amy".

I knew those lines but I kept calm. I had played her games for years and allowed her to manipulate me over and over again even in front of Tommy.

It had hurt initially, but twelve years was enough to break any man. Twelve years of absolute horror had gotten me the tough skin. She wanted the pleasure of making me bitter. I swore with a clenched fist, not if my name was Michael McClain. I would deny her that pleasure.

On the drive over to the house where I used to live, a pit formed in my stomach and my palms became sweaty. I knew this feeling, it was the "Post-Vida thing."

An anxiety I had come to know since I met Vida.

I prayed in my head that a baseball game would be enough for my son to forgive me for walking out without saying goodbye.

I had hurt him, I knew. But there was only so little a man could do before he lost his soul. I had heard stories of men who had driven themselves over the edge, I knew it was only a matter of time before I did mine.

Still, I could've held on. Not until his mother Vida inflicted injuries on herself and put the blame on me so I'd take the fall in court and get a restraining order to stay away from them. That was it. The last straw. I couldn't take it anymore.

Over the past several years she had provoked and belittled me and I had swallowed every bitter bile peacefully. When she pulled that final stunt, that was the deal breaker, so I packed my stuff and left.

No good-byes, nothing.

Last thing I wanted was for my son to see me give up, but when I got served out of the blue to appear in Court, I lost it. I tried to approach her and we got into a major confrontation in front of Tommy. She got mad at something I said and threw a vase at me which ended up hitting me in the head. In return, I called her some names I didn't even know I had in my vocabulary, mean names that expressed just how much I despised her. I doubt Tommy would ever forget them though. This was the part I hated. Having to put my son through our messy relationship. He was so young and didn't deserve any of it.

But neither did I.

I turned the radio on to my son Tommy's favourite station anticipating his entering my car. It was a beautiful day of 36 degrees with no possible chance of rain for a Dodgers Baseball game. I didn't want our past to ruin everything I had planned for our big day ahead including that sick leave I had made Gary put me on.

I vowed that I would never put myself in a situation where I could potentially traumatised my son for life again, well, if I hadn't done that already.

Grimacing, the thought of seeing my ex-wife's face made my heartbeat accelerate and my breathing became rasped.

"Think Michael, think"

It's just a front door not a landmine and you're going to walk to it.

I inhaled deeply, trying to regain control of my nervous system. This "Post-Vida thing" was getting real tight and I made a mental note to check in with my psychologist as soon as possible.

I wanted this handoff to go as smoothly as possible for Tommy's sake, but with Vida, you just never knew. She had all sorts of things up her sleeve, a walking time-bomb, she was scheming, calculating, cunning, crafty as a fox, wily with words yet shrewd, devious and conniving so much that all the bad words in the dictionary fit her perfectly.

If the Devil needed an assistant, she would play the role best.

Funny how I thought I had found forever in this woman. Well, forever trauma I guess. And to think I spent twelve years with her, making excuses each time, putting up with her antics, hurting every single day, is a question I ask myself till today. Looking back, I realised the only answer I could come up with was Tommy. I had to do this for him.

Just take a deep breath slowly, like they do in the movies and it's going to be okay.....

No conversations, keep it brief and grab your damn kid, simple.

I stepped out of the car and approached the front door with fear.

"Simple?" Nah, there was nothing simple in this, not with this pounding heartbeat and definitely not in facing Vida again....

Once I rang the bell, I took a step back and leaned on the bannister begging my legs to cooperate while feigning a smile.

"Deep breaths one more time"

Before I could finish my pep talk, the door swung open with fury, and there stood the meanest pair of eyes almost shooting lasers at me. Of course, the queen of my doom was here.

"Hello Vi. Where's our son?" I asked, trying to keep it brief and probably stall my nausea.

"He's upstairs getting a few things," she replied grudgingly.

"Where are you taking him?" she asked, folding her arms. No smile, no indication of even letting me in.

Well, that was fine by me.

"We are going to see the Dodgers baseball game, then probably out to eat," I replied quickly before I stuttered.

Before she could get another word out, my little man slowly came downstairs, backpack in hand and stood beside her. My heart squeezed in tenderness at how much he had grown.

"Hey Sport!" I said, brushing my hand across the top of his head enthusiastically.

Vida knelt down facing him, took both his hands and said in her best sly voice, "If you get to Daddy's house and something terrible happens or if Daddy gets upset and hollers at you, call me and I will come and get you, okay?"

Great. Another well played Vida strategy.

"Make me the bad guy and play good cop"

This was another way for her to turn my son against me and also instil fear inside me.

I reached for my son's hand but he just looked at it and then looked at his mother.

Obviously Vida had scored one with that earlier remark. I planted a smile. He looked up, the expression on his face bland. He didn't seem happy to see me and I couldn't blame him. The poor kid had looked up to me so much, yet I had walked out abruptly on him. No calls, no texts, he probably had a lot of unanswered questions and guilt.

No, I'd make it up to him. Tommy deserved that much.

" Are you ready to go Champ? Game starts in an hour." I said, swallowing hard to fight off my disappointment when he replied with a cold stare.

I put my hands in my pockets and watched him give his mother a hug. He looked at me once more and finally walked over to my car.

"I don't want to sit in the front with you," he said as I was about to open the passenger door.  
"I'll ride in the backseat".

That was random. But if that was what he wanted, then so be it.

"Okay, no problem Champ".

As soon as he got in, he automatically slid behind the driver's seat and looked out the rear view window waving at his mother. I could tell he was sad and disappointed in me but I was hoping to make today a father son reunion. That's what I had told Gary to fully convince him to sign me on a sick leave.

Barely hanging on to a thread of sanity after I left Vida, it was Gary who had picked me up from depression and handed me this well paying job. My buddy from high school and college days, he had always had my back, never for once believing Vida's lies.

"Work is what you need man," he had said and right he was, for only after months of immersing myself into corporate paper work could I almost forget the mess I had plunged myself into. Right now though, I was done hiding. Today I would gain Tommy's trust back. He was my son, the only piece of me worth fighting for.

I turned his favourite station up hoping that it would lighten the mood. Few minutes later, we pulled up to the stop light.

It was a beautiful day. I pulled down the windows to enjoy the fresh air and then glanced to my right to admire the elderly couple enjoying the beautiful weather with their windows down too.

I envied them. Pure bliss they had. Some of us just had pure misery. They gave me a warm smile and a wave. Nice people.

I returned a wave of course, before turning my attention back to the road.

Well, it is what it is, I sighed deeply.

Michael McClain felt it before he saw it coming. The sharp impact of the bullet across his skull, the piercing and subsequent tearing of muscle and the bloody burst as it cut through an artery.

The haemorrhage was almost instantaneous. It took less than ten seconds, not even enough to take one last look at his most precious Tommy.

Michael McClain's head slumped over the steering wheel with the sound of the horn loudly drowning Tommy's frightened shrieks. The car veered over hitting the elderly couple's car at the intersection before skidding to a stop.

Frightened pedestrians scrambled for safety. The elderly couple sat frozen in their seats, for seconds ago, they had waved out to the man whose blood now splattered all over the window of the driver's side.

It took the continuous screams of a child in the passenger seat of the car behind to jolt them back to reality.

Responding quickly, they jumped out of their car to retrieve the boy, worrying that he might be the next target for whoever the shooter was.

But the child was no longer screaming, he sat perfectly still and wore an ominous look over his beautiful face. As they jerked the car door open, a tear filled eye implored them calmly.

"I want to call my Mommy."

"Are you okay?" The elderly woman asked, approaching the backseat on the driver's side looking confused.

"Mommy is not going...to... to cry anymore, Mommy is go....going to be okay now. She said that if Daddy was dead, then...then...everything would be okay."

She couldn't hear him. Whatever this child was mumbling. Motherly instincts took over as she rushed to open the door. One look at his panic-stricken face and she felt sadness wash over her. Reaching over to pull him out, her eyes finally caught sight of the .45 calibre gun in his hand. Covering her mouth, she bit back a scream and yelled for her husband to call 911. She grabbed the hand that wasn't holding the gun and pulled the little boy out of the car into their red convertible.

She listened as the sound of sirens wailed in the distance. Their approaching noise caused the little boy to shake immensely.

"Hey there little one, We're going to get you some help and everything is going to be okay" she reassured him, squeezing his small shoulders gently.

Everything is going to be okay?

She had just witnessed a murder and the surviving victim or suspect held a gun. And he looked like he was barely 12 years old. No, everything was definitely not okay. But how could she tell that to the poor child? She just couldn't.

And so she began to sob. Until she could hear her husband's faint voice directing the ambulance to the car where she sat hugging the little boy. She did not stop sobbing even as her husband pulled her out from the tight grasp of the poor child who was now screaming loudly as the medics began to roll the bloodied mess of his father into their ambulance.

The police would do their job. They had to make way for the officers to handle the child. She did not know why she had done it, but she was sure of one thing.

They would never find that gun. No, she had made sure to slip into her corset as they hugged. The boy was traumatized enough. And she was sure as hell, that kid was no murderer.