

Chapter One

“**S**top! Please stop!” Brenda pleaded.

Bruce dragged her out onto the porch of the pretty, white house they shared. The cement steps leading to the front yard cut into Brenda’s body as she bumped along them to the bottom. Blood covered the painted cement as her legs and arms were ripped open from the coarse cement. Bruce released his tight grip on her hair, causing her head to land in the muddy grass under her body.

“You’re a tramp! How could you do this? It’s not going to happen! I swear I’ll kill you first!” Bruce yelled as he wiped her blood off of his hands onto the wet grass. “Now get up and go in the house before you catch a cold.”

Brenda didn’t move. Her hands clung to her stomach and her face lay in a muddy puddle. Barely conscious, she gasped for air. Rain now drizzled lightly to the ground and Bruce hated to get wet.

“Woman, get up!” he shouted.

Everyone who knew Bruce Tillard tried to avoid his bad side. Although he was small in stature, he projected himself as larger-than-life. His slender body took nothing away from his strength and determination to have his way about everything, and the women loved him. His skin was smooth as silk, his dark-skinned face was as creamy and flawless as melted chocolate, and he always wore expensive cologne. He was always neat as a whistle right down to his expensive shoes.

“I said get up, you stupid woman. You gonna drown out here in the mud,” he continued.

Brenda wanted so badly for him to just leave her there, but he didn't. He kicked at her shoulder with his gator skin shoe until she rolled over. Muddy water mingled with the tears that soaked her face.

Bruce cursed and started to drag her back toward the porch, but he stopped when a car pulled up in front of the house. It was his brother, Sam, driving a new green Cadillac.

Sam got out of the car when he saw Brenda lying in the thick mud. He looked down at Brenda's crumpled body, and then he turned and looked at Bruce like he was crazy.

"Man, what have you done? We got to get an ambulance right now if you want to save her. She's barely breathing!" Sam's eyes filled with tears.

"Man, tell me what to do!" Bruce begged as he held onto Brenda's limp body. "I didn't mean to hurt her! I swear! Jesus Christ, you have to help me!" Bruce cried as he looked up at the dark and misty sky.

"We have to get her to the hospital now!" Sam shouted. "It'll take the ambulance longer to get here than it would for us to take her ourselves. Get me some blankets."

Bruce did exactly what Sam said. He handed Brenda's limp, bloody body to Sam, ran into the house, and got the blankets. The ride to the hospital was short, but it seemed to take forever. Sam ran the red lights, blowing the car's horn as he sped through the intersections. Brenda was no longer panting and crying.

Bruce was falling apart while Brenda's life was slowly slipping away. "Don't say a word about the fight," Sam told Bruce. "All you know is, I stopped by and found her lying on the ground passed out in the rain."

"She's not breathing. Oh God, she needs help!" Bruce cried.

"Come on, man, pull yourself together! I'll be right back."

Sam watched as Bruce climbed in the back seat and held Brenda in his arms, rocked her, and begged her to say something. Brenda just lay there, limp and bleeding. By now, the car seat was soaked with rain and blood. Sam shook his head in disgust. His brand-new Cadillac had become an ambulance for a dying woman and a mentally ill man.

Sam walked into the emergency room waiting area and screamed for help. The rain and Brenda's blood had soaked his clothes so much that the emergency room staff thought he needed help himself. They tried to calm him down so that they could assess the extent of his injuries, but Sam was hysterical, and it was very hard to understand what he was saying. He finally pushed one of the emergency staff away from him.

Looking like a crazy man out of breath, he shouted, "Not me you idiots! It's my sister-in-law outside in the car. She's not breathing! She's bleeding! Please help her!"

He led the nurses and medical assistants out to his car. People were becoming curious about what was happening outside, so the security guards followed behind them to keep control of the situation. Some of them got up out their seats and followed the group, but security, recognizing the Tillard men, held them back and directed them back to their seats.

As the head nurse leaned into the car, she called back to the medical assistant to alert the crash team and to tell Dr. Fargo he was needed right away.

The look on the nurse's face told Sam that Brenda was not in good shape. Bruce was holding her so tight in his arms that the emergency staff could barely get her out the car.

"Sir, please let her go," the head nurse insisted. "We can't help her if you don't get out of the way."

Bruce finally released Brenda. He was now crying like a baby, and his wet clothes that were once blue were now purple with blood. After the emergency staff got Brenda out of the car, Sam slid in next to Bruce.

“Bruce, you got to suck it up,” Sam whispered. “You’re going to blow everything.”

“I killed her, man! I don’t care what happens to me! Oh, God, please let her live. Take me! I’m so sorry!” Bruce cried.

“You can’t fall apart now,” Sam continued. “You know if any of this gets out, the family name will be ruined. Now, smoke this cigarette and then get your butt in there and see what’s happening with Brenda.”

Bruce knew that if their father or mother got wind of his breakdown, the pull-yourself-together lecture would be much more painful and difficult to swallow coming from them. Bruce put the cigarette to his lips, Sam lit it for him and handed him his wet handkerchief to wipe his face. Bruce’s hand was trembling as he held the cigarette tightly between his thumb and forefinger. He took deep long puffs from the cigarette, allowing the smoke to fill his lungs and calm him down.

A medical assistant came out to the car.

“The doctor is asking for Mrs. Tillard’s husband,” she said. When Brenda and Bruce first met, it was love at first sight. Bruce swept Brenda off her feet immediately, and she was totally taken by his charisma and charm.

For women, the thrill is love; but for men, it’s conquest. Brenda ended up being Bruce’s trophy – his conquest.

Chapter Two

“**M**y wife is here,” Bruce said to a nurse behind a glass window. “Her doctor is looking for me.”

It seemed that the earlier, frantic Bruce had died and the old one was back. He seemed to have forgotten about the wet, muddy and bloody clothes that clung to his body as he talked to the nurse about his wife.

“What is your wife’s name, sir?” the young woman asked.

“Her name is Brenda Tillard,” Bruce replied evenly.

Their early years were filled with bliss, but gradually Bruce began to change.

Brenda wasn’t sure if he was changing or if she was seeing him for whom he really was. Bruce had a dangerous temper and everybody seemed to see it but Brenda. She knew he was possessive and a little spoiled, but it didn’t matter to her. He was her man, and he loved her.

He took her in and married her when no other man would have her. It was not until he revealed his violent side that the marriage began to fall apart.

Over the years, the fights and arguments escalated. Brenda started hiding her badly bruised face from her friends and family. She often had a black eye and tried to disguise it by wearing sunglasses, even when the sun wasn’t shining.

“Sir, we need for you to go in that room over there and the doctor will be in to see you,” the nurse instructed.

Reluctantly, Bruce went into the room. He knew being isolated meant the news wasn't good. As he sat there alone, he spotted the telephone sitting on the table next to him. He wanted so badly to call his mother. She could always make a bad situation good. However, he decided to wait until he knew what was going on with Brenda.

After a while, his patience wore thin and just as he was about to leave, the doctor came in the room.

"Are you Mr. Tillard?"

"I am Mr. Tillard."

"Sir, I'm Dr. Fargo, I've been taking care of your wife. I'm not going to lie to you; your wife is in critical condition. There is a very good chance she may lose the baby. We need for you to sign these papers consenting for us to care for your wife and do an immediate C-section."

Bruce struggled to keep his composure. He slumped down in the chair behind him, briefly rubbing at his head to ease the spasm of pain that descended. Then without reading the papers, he signed them. The doctor grabbed the papers and left the room in a hurry.

Again, he looked at the telephone that sat on the table.

He had to call his mother or he was not going to keep his cool about this horrible situation. He knew he would have to word it just right, or suffer the consequences. Family was the most important thing in the world to his mother, and she did whatever it took to keep the family strong.

Bruce finally got up the nerve and dialed her telephone number. After just two rings, her voice seeped across the line.

"What's wrong, Bruce?"

“Momma, I’m at the hospital with Brenda. It doesn’t look good. She might lose our baby,” he said with a slight tremble in his voice.

“I’m on my way.”

Hearing her voice strengthened Bruce. He hung up the phone and got ready to go check on Brenda when two security guards and a uniformed police officer entered. Bruce attempted to walk by them, but their stout bodies didn’t part for him to pass. They were there for him.

He stepped back and allowed them to enter the room. Each security guard stood beside the police officer as he pulled out his pen and prepared to question Bruce about his wife’s condition.

“My name is Deputy Putnam of the Akron Police Department. I have a few questions to ask you in reference to your wife. The hospital personnel contacted us and stated that they had reason to suspect her injuries appeared to be the result of some type of attack. Would you please tell me exactly what happened to your wife?”

“Are you trying to say that I had something to do with it?”

“We just want to know what happened to her, Mr. Tillard,” the officer countered. “Do you know how she got the bruises all over her body?” the police officer asked.

By this time, Mother Tillard had walked in and stood beside Bruce. The cop instructed the two security guards to leave the room. He told them he could handle everything without their assistance.

“How are you this evening, Mrs. Tillard?” Officer Putnam asked.

“You know me. I trust every day the Lord gives me to be a good day. Why are you questioning my son?” she asked with both hands on her wide hips.

“We’re just trying to find out what happened to his wife. Her body has serious bruises and lacerations, and she was near death when they brought her into the emergency room. We want to know if your son can shed some light on what happened.”

“Mom, they act like I’m some kind of a monster!” “My wife is carrying our baby. I wouldn’t risk her life or our baby’s life. She fell down the stairs. Sam found her lying on the ground outside in the rain. We got her here as soon as we could.” Bruce was shaking all over as he told the story.

Officer Putnam informed Mother Tillard and Bruce that the investigation would not be complete until they got a statement from Brenda. He smiled at Grandma, but eyed Bruce suspiciously, letting him know that he didn’t believe his story. When Bruce and his mother were finally alone, she put one hand on her hip and pointed her finger at Bruce.

“My grandchild better make it,” she said and the sound of her voice echoed through Bruce’s head like thunder. “I’m not going to ask you what happened. I know you better than you know yourself. You are going to have to work on that temper of yours. It’s going to be the death of you yet. You need to go back to church. I know you didn’t do it on purpose. Bless the Lord! Everything is going to be all right! God is my witness; this will not destroy my family.”

She sat down beside Bruce and put her arms around him.

Bruce turned toward her and allowed his head to rest on her breast. For the moment, it was the safest place for Bruce.

“Ma, I got to have Brenda and my baby. Please save my family!” Bruce said as his voice began to crack.

“Don’t worry, Brucie. We will have them both in our lives. I can promise you that. God is my witness,” proclaimed Mother Tillard as she looked up toward the ceiling.

By then, Sam had come into the room; following behind him were the rest of his brothers and sisters. Daddy Tillard was out of town, but was already informed of the happenings and on the road headed for home. Bruce's three sisters and three brothers eased their way into the small family room, which left no space for anyone else to come in. Ruth, Pam, and Beth were all overprotective of their brothers. John, Robert, Sam and Bruce were the same with their sisters.

It was getting late and Beth, the baby of the family, inquired about Brenda's family. Though she was close to her brothers and sisters, Beth had her own views and convictions that her family really did not like, but accepted most of the time because she simply didn't have the power to effect any change within the family structure anyway.

Beth simply loved people and always believed in honesty. Well, the Tillard family didn't make honesty its highest priority. Beth empathized with people, and right now, she empathized with Brenda's family.

"Bruce, are you going to call her mother?" Beth asked.

"No, he is not," Ruth answered for him.

"Both of you keep your mouths shut," their mother said, moving toward them. "We will call her when we know Brenda is out of the woods. In the meantime, we are enough for support. If they came out here now, we would all end up in jail. As a matter fact, you two can go home. There are enough of us filling up this room as it is. It's hot as an oven in here. We will call you if anything changes."

Ruth and Beth quickly stood up and told everyone goodnight.

Dr. Fargo returned to the family room to brief the family on Brenda's condition. He knocked on the door to the family room and Mother Tillard opened it. Surprised at first by the number of people crammed into the small room, he cleared his throat.

