

# Chapter 1

Mariam Reynolds laughed and talked with her daughters over dinner. They planned to attend the Independence Day celebration on the National Mall.

“I love the parade,” Kimi, the youngest hugged herself in excitement.

“My favorite is the folk festival,” ten-year-old Mary smiled

“I love the Army Rock Band,” Lindsey laughed. “They are so cute.”

Mariam smiled at her twelve-year old who was just beginning to notice boys. She watched her daughters as they laughed and teased one another.

She longed to raise them in Texas. She wanted to teach them to ride horses and give them the responsibility of raising animals. She wanted them to connect with the land and God. She and Tom often argued over where the children should be raised. Their most heated argument had taken place that morning. She had threatened to take the girls and go to Texas.

She hadn't realized until after Kimi was born that Tom's driving goal in life was to be President of the United States. Her only goal was her children's happiness. She knew she was almost paranoid about their safety.

Although the FBI handled them, she knew there were threats against Tom and her family. She wasn't as much aware of the threats since she retired from the House of Representatives, to raise their girls.

“No, he ran like this.” Kimi moved her hands, accidentally hitting her sister’s fork and knocking the food on it all over Lindsey’s blouse.

“Kimi, look what you have done,” Lindsey squealed. “Mom, my blouse is ruined.”

“You can clean it,” Kimi scoffed.

“Mom, I am going to the ladies’ room to clean up this mess Kimi made.”

Mariam suppressed a smile. Lindsey could be overly dramatic sometimes.

“I will help you,” Mary volunteered.

“Me too,” Kimi slid from her chair.

“We will all go,” Mariam folded her napkin. She didn’t want her daughters out of her sight.

“Mo-o-o-m,” all three of them chorused.

“We’re not babies,” Lindsey huffed. “We can go to the bathroom by ourselves. There is safety in numbers, and there are three of us.”

Mariam hesitated. She had a direct view of the door leading into the ladies’ room. *I guess they will be safe*; she told herself as she acquiesced to their pleas to be treated as grown-ups.

She smiled as she watched her beautiful daughters disappear into the bathroom.

A large waiter hovered over her. “Are you through dining,” he smiled, as he began to pick up the girls’ plates.

“Not quite,” Mariam said. He obstructed her view of the ladies’ room.

“May I bring you dessert,” he asked, still blocking her view.

“No, just get away from my table.” Mariam stood and walked quickly to the ladies’ room.

“Lindsey,” she called as she entered the room. Cold, gripping silence greeted her. “Mary, Kimi,” horror constricted her throat as she realized her daughters were not in the ladies’ room.

She yanked open the door and was immediately pushed back into the bathroom by the same burley waiter that had blocked her view.

“Get out of my way,” she screamed.

Moving quickly, he wrapped his arms around her and placed a rag over her face. Mariam knew it was anesthesia but couldn't break free.

##

Mariam awoke to a vicious headache. Followed by the realization that she had been abducted. She lay motionless, trying to determine where she was and how many attackers were with her.

She discovered her hands were tied, but her feet were not. Slowly opening her eyes, she ascertained she was in a dark room with no windows. Her mind went immediately to her daughters. Where were they? Where was she?

Whispers on her left told her she was not alone. She chanced a whisper. “Lindsey?”

“Mom, Mom,” Lindsey scooted against her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Mariam whispered. “Are Kimi and Mary here?”

“Yes, but they haven't awakened.” Lindsey sobbed quietly.

Mariam pushed herself into a sitting position. She strained to see, but there was nothing but total darkness. “Are you all tied?”

“Yes. Our hands are. Mom, what is happening?”

Mariam tried to control the terror that racked her body. They were some place cold and damp. A movement in the room told her they were not alone.

“Mommy,” Kimi's cries gripped Mariam's heart. She scooted toward the sound. Mary began to stir.

“Kimi, Mary, Lindsey and I are here.” Mariam huddled the girls around her. Her mind raced in a hundred different directions. *Damn Tom and his political ambitions!*

They still wore their clothes, but their watches and all jewelry had been removed. All they had was the clothes on their backs. Even their shoes were gone.

A scraping sound warned Mariam a door was unlocking. Light suddenly filled the room, blinding the captives. The four women huddled closer together.

“Get them to their feet,” a guttural voice commanded in Arabic.

Rough hands yanked the four women to their feet. “Beautiful. Very beautiful,” the voice leered. “They will bring a good price.”

“Blonde,” another voice laughed. “We will get top price for them. Three virgins!” All the men laughed.

“I may keep their mother for myself,” the first voice threatened. “She won’t bring as much as the virgins, but I will enjoy her. Ahmadi keep them fed well. No one wants a skinny woman.”

While the men talked, Mariam frantically looked over their prison. There was nothing but four walls and a single commode in the corner. It was impenetrable.

The men laughed then closed the door. A little while later, the door was opened again. Four plates of food slid across the floor. The door closed and locked.

When the man returned to pick up the empty plates, he found they were still full. The four women remained huddled in the corner.

“You must eat,” he said in English. “You must eat!”

“We can’t see,” Mariam said softly. “We can’t see to eat. We have no forks or spoons. Our hands are tied. How do you expect us to eat?”

“Pitiful, soft Americans,” the man hissed as he closed the door.

Hours later, he returned with a candle and spoons. He produced a knife and cut their bonds.

“God, Mom, what is this?” Lindsey made a face as she sniffed the mush on her plate.

“I don’t know, darling,” Mariam inhaled deeply. “We need to eat it. We need to keep up our strength and be strong if an opportunity to escape presents itself.”

The girls gagged and coughed as they downed the putrid garbage on their plates. They stacked their plates with a spoon between each plate. Mariam hid her spoon in her bra.

The guard returned to get the plates. “Please may we keep the candle,” Mariam pleaded. “We are freezing.”

He snorted and picked up the candle.

The women huddled closely for warmth. They slept fitfully. Mariam wondered how long they had been in the cell. She wondered how long it would be before they would be moved.

The next meal came hours later. The guard slid the plates, spoons, and candle into the room. When he came to collect the empty plates, the women begged for the candle. He picked up the plates but left the candle. He knew their days were numbered.

Mariam immediately began to heat the handle of the metal spoon over the candle flame. Heat it, grind it on the rock floor then start over again. The candle had almost burned down by the time she had honed the spoon handle to a sharp point.

Mariam huddled the girls close together in the far corner of the cell, so the light wouldn’t fall on them when the door opened. She sat in the corner next to the door, holding her makeshift knife, and waited.

Mariam had no problem staying awake. The awful knowledge that she was about to take the life of another human sent adrenaline surging through her system. She knew there were two choices: do nothing and be sold into white slavery or fight for their lives. Either way they might all end up dead.

She dozed off. Mariam sprang into action when she heard the key turning in the door. Standing, she held her

breath as the guard pulled open the heavy door and bent over to place the plates on the floor of the cell.

Mariam knew she had one chance to kill him. Ram the makeshift knife into his carotid artery. She lunged, putting all her strength into the downswing of her arm. The spurt of blood across the room told her she had hit her mark.

The guard made a gurgling sound, as he fell face down on the floor. Mariam checked his pockets. She confiscated his Glock, wallet and keys. She also tore off his wristwatch.

She motioned her daughters to follow her. Stepping into the hallway, she closed and locked the door. She signaled her daughters to wait while she checked the door at the end of the hall. To her surprise, it opened onto a boat dock. Seeing no one around, she whispered, "Come quickly."

The girls followed their mother without question. Mariam led them to the end of the dock, and they slipped into the cold, dark water.

They followed the shoreline for miles, careful to stay in the water so no one could follow their tracks. They took turns carrying Kimi, who had tired quickly.

Mariam had never been so proud of her daughters. For the first time, she realized they were all survivors. They walked for miles, staying in the shadows and hiding when a car passed.

As the sun greeted another day, they spotted a Wal-Mart. Mariam had never been so happy to see a discount store in her life. The nice thing about Wal-Mart was that no one paid them any attention.

Mariam hid the girls in the handicapped stall of the women's bathroom and quickly purchased jeans, underwear and sweatshirts for all of them. A backpack, package of ponytail ties, and a brush completed her purchases. She swiped the terrorist's card and held her breath. Her mind was swirling in a hundred different directions. She didn't hear what the clerk said.

"Lady, you want any cash back?"

“Cash back?” Mariam almost broke into hysterical laughing. “Yes! Yes!”

“Then push the amount you want,” the clerk huffed.

Mariam was amazed. She could get as much as \$100. She pushed the cash-back button.

“Put in your four-digit code,” the clerk scowled. “Jesus, lady, is this your first time to use a debit card?”

“No, I...”

“Here,” the clerk pushed a button. “I’ll just run it as a credit card. You’re backing up my line.”

Mariam gathered the clothes and took the cash from the clerk. “Thank you,” she mumbled as she walked away from the register.

The four looked presentable, dressed in clean clothes, their hair brushed and in ponytails. They spotted a restaurant and ate breakfast.

“Mommy, I am scared,” Kimi whispered as they left the diner.

“It’ll be okay, baby.” Mariam sounded much more confident than she felt. “We just need to contact Daddy. He will come for us.”

They took a cab across town, stopping at another Wal-Mart along the way. Mariam purchased bread, sandwich meat, a pair of scissors, and picked up another \$100.

She paid the taxi driver in cash and checked into a non-descript, three-story Holiday Inn Express. They turned on the TV. Mariam was amazed that there was no mention of their disappearance.

*Didn’t Tom notify the authorities? She thought. Isn’t someone looking for us?*

“Girls we need to change our appearance,” Mariam said. “I’m going to give us short haircuts.”

Mariam was proud of her daughters. They did whatever she asked without arguing. She cut her own hair first. Cutting it very short so the blonde highlights disappeared leaving her with short brown hair.

She called Stacy Crawford, her former college roommate in Texas, and told her what was going on.

“I’ll be on the next flight out,” Stacy said. “You sit tight. Don’t leave the motel. Don’t let anyone see you.”

“Okay,” Mariam relaxed for the first time in days. “Stacy, what day is it?”

“July tenth,” Stacy said. “Mariam, why didn’t you call Tom?”

“I don’t know who to trust,” Mariam spoke softly into the phone. “Stacy, promise me you will get my girls to safety if anything happens to me.”

##

Stacy Crawford arrived on the nine pm flight from Dallas. She rented a car and drove to the address Mariam had given her. She thought of the slender blonde as she surveyed the hotel looking for anything unusual. Mariam was her closest friend. They had experimented with each other during college then decided their friendship was more important than a bed partner. Mariam had gone into politics and Stacy had decided to manage the family ranch, but they kept in touch.

As Stacy waited for the elevator, the Arab desk clerk was whispering to two other men. For the first time in her life, Stacy Crawford felt true fear grip her.

She wedged her shoe in the elevator door to keep it from closing and ran to the room Mariam had given her. She knocked frantically on the door.

“Stacy,” Mariam beamed as she opened the door.

“They’re in the lobby,” Stacy whispered loudly. “We need to get out of here. I wedged my shoe in the elevator to slow them down.”

“Girls follow Stacy down the stairs,” Mariam commanded. “I will remove the shoe and follow you.”

As the girls ran past her toward the stairs, Mariam shoved the Glock into Stacy’s hand and whispered, “Don’t

wait for me. Just go! I'll meet you in Texas. Keep my babies safe. Don't tell anyone where they are. Trust no one." She pushed her friend after her daughters then ran to remove the shoe from the elevator doors.

Mariam stepped into the elevator and pushed the button that would take her to the lobby and the waiting arms of her kidnappers.

The two men stepped back as the elevator door opened and the woman they were after stepped out. Mariam fought them like a cornered grizzly. The longer she could fight; the farther away Stacy could get with her children.

She bit, scratched and kicked all over the lobby until a solid blow from a big fist rendered her unconscious.

##

Mariam knew she was back in the cell before she opened her eyes. She touched her fingers to her face. She was certain her jaw was broken.

The cell door opened. "You killed my brother, infidel pig," the leader growled in English. He hit her hard with his fist, breaking her other jaw. Unconsciousness was a blessing.

Much later Mariam awoke in a puddle of her own blood. Her face was killing her. She tried to move her mouth and cried out in agony. *At least, my teeth are intact*, she thought inanely.

She closed her eyes as the door swung open.

"Is she dead?" A new, more educated, voice asked.

"No, but she should be. She killed my brother."

"Walid, this little thing killed your brother," the man scoffed. "Where are her daughters?"

"She has hidden them. We can't find them."

"When she comes to, interrogate her until she tells you or dies," the man commanded.

"Perhaps we will water board her." The men laughed as if they had made a hilarious joke. "Stupid Americans."

Mariam had no idea how long she had lain on the cold, hard floor. Her face was swollen and in excruciating pain. She made her peace with God. She knew she would die soon.

“She’s dead,” the leader growled as he jabbed the cattle prod into Mariam's stomach. “She doesn’t even respond to this.” He kicked her hard, the cracking of her ribs echoed in the cell.

“What do you want me to do with her body?”

“Throw her into the river. She will float downstream. No one will trace her back to us.”

# Chapter 2

Stacy Crawford surveyed the three children for which she was now responsible. They had driven all night. The girls had slept most of the way.

In West Virginia, Stacy pulled into a used car lot and looked over the selection. A two-year old Toyota Camry looked in good shape. She asked the price then told the salesman she would be back in an hour to pick it up. She drove to the local branch of her bank and withdrew cash from her savings account.

She gave the salesman a phony name for the car title and drove around the block where the girls were waiting in the rental car. She called the car rental company and told them the rent car had been stolen. She would deal with the problem when she was safe in Texas.

Over lunch, the girls related their harrowing experience. They were still awed by their mother's strength and bravery. So was Stacy.

"Where is Mommy," Kimi asked softly.

"She's fine," Stacy smiled. "She'll come for you when it is safe."

"Where are we going," Lindsey asked.

"Texas," Stacy smiled. "Your mom is from Texas."

"Oh, yes," Lindsey nodded. "She has taken us to visit Grandad Daniel. He lives in Texas."

Stacy grinned. "Trust no one!" Mariam's words echoed in her head.

"What do you do for a living?" Mary asked.

“I’m a rancher,” Stacy smiled. “I raise cattle and horses, a few goats and chickens.” She didn’t add that the oil and gas on her land were what made her very wealthy.

Kimi clapped her hands. “Do you have any baby goats?”

“I do,” Stacy grinned. “They are just like puppies. You can pet them.”

They spent the night in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Stacy picked up I-20 in Birmingham. *Roll Tide*, she thought as she cruised through Alabama. Interstate twenty took her all the way to Benbrook, TX and her ranch that wrapped around Benbrook Lake.

Stacy’s Lazy S Ranch was two-thousand acres of coastal grass and oak trees. It was situated between the lake and the vast acreage owned by the Devon estate.

“We’re lucky. School’s out,” Mary said. “We can spend the summer with you.”

“Um, hum,” Stacy nodded. She wondered what she would do with three little girls all summer. She had a sinking feeling Mariam Reynolds wasn’t coming for them any time soon, if at all.

##

Walid Farouk ground out his cigarette on the floor of the coffee shop and glared at the counter girl daring her to reprimand him. “Coffee black,” he growled.

Steam floated up from the hot beverage as he poured sugar and cream into it. He wanted to kill something or someone. His mind raged over the loss of his youngest brother. How had he let it happen? How did a woman who weighed less than a hundred pounds overpower him and take his life?

Although he had personally dragged her lifeless body to the river and tossed it in guaranteeing her death, he was certain that the body bay patrol had dragged from the river was Mariam Reynolds. He would not let her live. He would make her pay for his brother’s death.

He had been hesitant to participate in the fanatic scheme to kidnap Tom Reynolds' wife and daughters. The idea was to frame Reynolds for the death of his family ruining his chances of being elected President. It was imperative that Reynolds lose his bid for the presidency in order for the Islamic State to survive. Reynolds had made it clear his first item of action would be to destroy the ISIS caliphate.

Walid feared Reynolds' retaliation. He knew if Reynolds were elected President, he would hunt down the members of Walid's terrorist cell and imprison them for the death of his family.

Walid considered killing Darwin Davis the US Representative who had deemed Walid's cell the People's Socialist Party to attract America's uninformed snowflake generation. Davis had cooked up the insane idea of kidnapping the wife and daughters of a US Senator who was running for President. Walid knew better than to trust the stupid infidels whose only concern was maintaining their power base and hiding their own illegal activities that would come to light if Reynolds became President.

They had coincided their abduction with the Congress Independence Day period of adjournment thinking Reynolds would be home alone. The stunt had briefly cast a bad light on Reynolds, but his iron-clad alibi had sealed the fate of their failed plan to discredit the man. If anything, their plan could result in Reynolds garnering the pity vote of soft-hearted Americans.

Like the surviving mad dog from a ravaged pack of hounds Walid licked his wounds and made up his mind to go deep underground and regroup. He now had a better grasp of the shadow personnel protecting the President. General Abigail Carson would be his first target when his cell resurfaced.

# Chapter 3

Dr. Mecca Storm took the familiar white envelope from her patient, a handsome, muscular man in his mid-forties.

She removed the card from the envelope and glanced at it. She knew, without looking, what the card said. "Please take care of this gentleman for me," was neatly printed in black ink on the stark white card.

"I truly appreciate you seeing me after hours," the man said.

"Who recommended me to you?" she asked.

"A friend of a friend," the man flashed a smile and lowered himself into the chair across the desk from her. "I was told you are the best in the business." His easy manner and relaxed demeanor told her he was a man confident of his place in the world. A place she knew he might not occupy for long.

"Mr. Reynolds, how may I help you?"

"Please, call me Tom," he flashed his easy smile again.

A heavy silence weighed on the room as she waited for him to begin talking.

"Tom, how may I help you?" She prodded.

"If you read the papers, you already know who I am and why I'm here." For the first time, he seemed uneasy.

"You're a United States Senator and a person of interest in the disappearance of your wife and three children." Mecca spoke softly, watching his face for any emotions her words might elicit. "You're the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. You're a very powerful man and

are considered the top contender in the next election for President.”

“I see you have done your homework.” The easy smile was back.

“Did you kill your wife and children?”

His head snapped back as if she had hit him with a hard uppercut. The smile disappeared from his face. “No! God, No.”

“Well, now that we have that out of the way, how may I help you, Tom?”

After Tom Reynolds left, Mecca looked at the stark white card with its perfect lettering. She called patients bearing the card her “special patients” and she had received more special patients than usual this year.

##

Mecca was still replaying her visit with Tom Reynolds in her mind when the cab stopped in front of her Upper West Side apartment. She paid the driver as the doorman opened the cab door greeting her warmly. “You’re home late tonight, Ms. Storm.”

“It has been a long and interesting day, Paul,” She smiled.

Alone in her apartment, she ordered Chinese food, poured a glass of wine and walked out onto her terrace. She never tired of her view of the Hudson River. She collapsed onto the lounge, leaned her head back and reveled in the unseasonably cool breeze.

Tom Reynolds. The man’s face flashed before her as she recalled the distress in his eyes as he discussed the disappearance of his family. She wasn’t sure whether the distress was caused by the disappearance of his family or the investigation of him as a suspect.

Reynolds’ wife and three daughters had disappeared during a shopping trip in New York; just vanished. Their driver had dropped them at Macy’s Herald Square before

noon. When they failed to call him at the appointed time, he began calling Mrs. Reynolds' cell phone. After several calls, Mrs. Reynolds answered and told him they had taken a cab back to the hotel. She would call him tomorrow. On closer questioning, he couldn't swear it had been Mrs. Reynolds' voice.

Authorities traced the family's movements through credit card purchases, which stopped at the restaurant where they had dinner. No one recalled seeing them after that. A check of the cab companies showed no pickup of four women from Macy's. It was as if they had eaten, paid the bill, and vanished.

Reynolds had been in his office in Washington. Although most of his colleagues had deserted the "Hill" early for their Independence Day Period of adjournment—politician speak for vacation—he had stayed late to finish work on several matters he needed his office staff to handle while he was gone. His Chief of Staff had reported that he had left her office a little after nine. Both his Administrative Assistants had reported he had not left his office, as they could hear him recording information using the voice activated software to make notes then transcribe them into a word document. A check of his computer showed the data had been entered during that period.

The doorman rang that the deliveryman was on his way up. As Mecca sat down to dinner, she turned on her laptop. A quick check of her Swiss bank account verified that the usual quarter-million dollars had transferred into it. It was time to go to work on Tom Reynolds.

# Chapter 4

Jericho Parker pulled Mecca Storm's file from the double locked drawer in the heavy metal desk. Jericho had been protecting Mecca for over five years. An honor student, graduating at the top of her class, Mecca had received numerous scholarships from medical schools that recognized her genius and wanted to add her name to their list of distinguished alumni.

Her work in the field of therapeutic hypnosis had received rave reviews from the psychiatric community. She had finished her bachelor's degree in two years and a medical degree at Harvard in four years. She was editor of the Harvard Law Review. Graduating Summa Cum Laude, the top psychiatric hospitals had vied for her to do her residency in their facilities. After her residency, she devoted seven more years to research, honing her knowledge and absorbing everything she could from those considered the elite in her field. Wherever Mecca went, lucrative government grants followed to fund her research. The psychiatric community was surprised and disappointed when she suddenly left research and opened a private practice.

Fluent in five languages, Mecca worked with wealthy, influential patients from all over the U.S. and other countries. Her client load was heavy, and she often worked fifteen to eighteen hours a day.

Jericho flipped through the photos of Mecca Storm. At 5'8", she was an imposing figure, tall and slender. A true

natural beauty with long dark hair, she looked more like a movie star than a doctor.

Both of Mecca's parents were doctors with a successful practice in Albany, NY. Mecca and her older sister Teagan were highly regarded in their chosen medical fields. She adored her parents and her sister and visited them as often as possible. She commented that the Hudson River tied them together.

Jericho's job was to keep her safe and make certain no one interfered with her work. Her file gave no indication why she was so important to the United States Government. Although Jericho knew all there was to know about her routine, they had never met.

##

Mecca never took anything for granted. When patients told her their stories, she listened attentively, watching for the telltale signs of half-truths or outright lies. After one session, she could tell if a patient was being open and honest with her, or guarded and secretive. She was never wrong. As her second session with Tom Reynolds began, she knew he was hiding something.

"Tom, I feel you are holding back information I need to know in order to help you," Mecca spoke softly but firmly, carefully articulating each word as if he were a child that might not understand what she was saying. "I can't make a recommendation to the authorities unless you're completely honest with me. We are all working hard to get your name removed from the suspect list, so you can get on with your life."

"Dr. Storm, I believe I am being framed and I don't even know how to stop it. Miriam and I have certainly had arguments over living in Washington. She wants to raise the girls in Texas, but she would never leave me without an explanation. She's not that kind of woman. She would confront me and tell me she was leaving.

“Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to make it look like Miriam took the girls and left me or worse,” Tom cocked his head to one side and glared at Mecca. “Supposedly she cleaned out our savings account and the girls’ college fund; almost a million dollars. Why would she do that?”

“Did you give this information to the police?” Mecca asked.

“Of course! They interviewed the bank officer who handled the transactions. Miriam withdrew the cash over a three-month period. The bank official called me a couple of times to alert me to the withdrawals, but I was too busy to be bothered with our personal household issues. I was sure it wasn’t important. I never returned her calls.

I looked at the security tapes of Miriam’s transactions and honestly, the woman on the tapes is not my wife. She resembles Miriam, and everyone keeps insisting it is, but it isn’t.”

Mecca made a note to obtain a copy of the police report and the tapes. She didn’t like being fed bits and pieces of information whenever Reynolds deemed it necessary for her to know something.

“What do you think is happening, Tom?”

“Dr. Storm my wife is an heiress. She didn’t need the piddling amount of money in our savings account, but I do. I barely have enough money to retain a lawyer. Most people think I married her for the money, but that’s not true. I love my wife and I love my daughters. I would never hurt them. I’m worried sick about them.

“You’ve seen what a media circus this has become. It has eclipsed the Presidential election and I believe that is the intent of whoever is behind this. I think my family has been murdered and I’m being framed for it in order to give the other party an excuse to drag my name through the mud and cost us the election. These people are ruthless, and nothing will stop them. They wouldn’t think twice about killing my family. Yes, I’m hiding something; sheer terror!”

Mecca closed her eyes. “Your family has been missing almost a month. Has there been a ransom demand?”

“No.”

“Who inherits your wife’s estate in the event of her death?” Mecca asked.

“It is to be divided evenly among the girls,” Reynolds said, “If all of them preceded me in death, I would inherit everything, billions; a great motive for murder, right?”

“As long as Daniel Devon is alive, he will be the sole administrator of the estate,” Tom added.

The intercom on her desk buzzed reminding her of her next appointment. “Same time next week,” she smiled.

Tom Reynolds left by the private entrance to her office. An entrance used only by clients who presented the white referral card. She usually handled two such patients a year. Their names never appeared on her calendar or in her accounting. As far as the records of Dr. Mecca Storm showed, such patients never existed.

##

Jericho loved it when Mecca went to Broadway plays or musicals. She wasn’t so fond of the opera, but it was beginning to grow on her. She was even beginning to recognize songs from the various operas they had attended over the years. Of course, only Jericho knew they were a couple. Mecca was completely oblivious to her existence. If she ordered tickets, Jericho automatically received a ticket for the seat directly behind her. For the more popular theaters, she had standing box seats and so did Jericho. Her apartment was right below Mecca’s, so she was aware of those times the doctor paced the floor. On occasion, Jericho silently removed threats to her: a friendly drunk, a not so friendly mugger, and a stalker that had become obsessed with her. The drunk and mugger had simply faded into the crowd when Jericho shoved the Ruger into their back, but she had been forced to kill the stalker.

Mecca was in great demand both professionally and socially. She attended many benefits and political black-tie events, moving easily among senators, governors and visiting royalty. She had many suitors who escorted her around town, but she never took any of them home with her. For that, Jericho was thankful. Dr. Mecca Storm was the epitome of what a proper, chaste woman should be.

Five years ago, when Jericho was assigned the job as Mecca Storm's invisible bodyguard, she was upset. Life as she knew it ceased. Mecca's life became Jericho's life. Where she went, Jericho went. Where she dined, Jericho dined. Jericho was thankful Mecca disliked sushi. Although Jericho hated to admit it, she knew she now looked forward to every moment she spent watching Mecca. Sometimes during a play or musical, she had to suppress the urge to reach out and touch her hair. She couldn't imagine life without Mecca Storm and she didn't even know Jericho existed.

A former member of the Navy's Special Operations Team, Jericho had escaped the war with only a small metal plate in her head. She was tall, beautiful and deadly. Extremely intelligent, fluent in seven languages, and an expert in all forms of combat, she had never failed a mission. Her transition from special ops to secret service agent had been an easy one. She was considered one of the nation's top agents when it came to protecting government assets. She did whatever it took to keep her charge safe. Although she preferred intimidation, killing came easily to her when all else failed.

Jericho had no idea why Mecca was so important. She did know not to ask questions. It was a sweet assignment for her. She was so important the government wanted to keep Jericho as happy as possible in her assignment. The government paid all her expenses. Everything she did charged to a limitless credit card, and she had received a clear deed to her five-million-dollar apartment. Of course,

she knew the only reason her apartment was so grand was that she had to be below Mecca's. Funds were automatically deposited into accounts for her homeowner's association, utilities, etc. Every two years a new black vehicle appeared in her parking place with the title and insurance card in the console. The vehicle title and insurance were always in her name. She banked her annual income of \$200,000 in a savings account. In exchange for being a kept woman, she gave up all semblance of a personal life. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, she belonged to Mecca Storm.

##

Mecca dialed the phone number she had always called when she needed information on her special clients. The same voice she had heard for the past five years answered. "I need a copy of the police files on Tom Reynolds," she said.

"You will have it tomorrow," the voice replied.

"Please, don't hang up," Mecca pleaded, but Jericho knew the dangers of engaging in conversation with her. The line went dead.

Mecca watched a sailboat on the Hudson and slowly lowered the phone from her ear. She had made every search imaginable to find the owner of the number she called when she needed information. As far as the phone company knew, the number did not exist. More than anything she wished the voice would talk to her. She needed someone to talk to when she was sent these patients. She recorded every brief conversation she had with her unknown contact. She couldn't tell if the whispered voice was male or female, but she knew that if she ever heard that voice—even in a crowd—she would recognize it. It had a definite cadence—a rhythm all its own.

The information on Tom Reynolds arrived at her office before noon. The courier had strict instructions to release the

manila envelope containing a flash drive to Dr. Storm and no one else.

Mecca instructed her secretary to hold her calls for an hour and spent her lunchtime reading the Reynolds file and viewing the bank's videos.

##

Miriam Devon Reynolds was a beautiful woman. Her daughters were equally beautiful. They looked like money; the right clothes, the right haircuts, the same bright, wide smiles and long blonde hair. Miriam Devon was the sole heir of one of the wealthiest oil families in Texas. Like so many who grow up with great wealth, she had no idea what it meant to earn a living but was certain she could help run America. Armed with a law degree and Daddy's money she had easily won the race for U.S. Representative in her state. She spoke Arabic, Spanish and French. Her second year in Washington she had met and married Senator Tom Reynolds, a rising star in the political world. With Miriam's money behind him, the party soon began grooming the charismatic senator for the presidency.

Miriam gave up her political aspirations to raise a family. She and Tom had three daughters: 8, 10, and 12. When Tom wasn't working, he was with his family. He doted on his wife and daughters. It was no secret, Miriam desperately wanted to get her family out of Washington politics and return to Texas to raise her daughters. "Washington is no place to raise children," she said often.

It was also no secret; Tom Reynolds wanted to be President.

While a massive manhunt was underway, the police were scrutinizing Tom and his whereabouts when his family had disappeared. His alibi was solid, and the police had no leads at all on Miriam and her daughters.

Everyone connected with the case wanted to know why Tom had waited so long to report his family missing. He

insisted he thought Mariam and the girls were sleeping in their home.

He had gone to his home office to finish reading the briefing documents his aids had provided him on a complicated piece of legislation and fallen asleep at his desk. When he awoke late the next morning, he had discovered his wife and daughters had never made it home the night before.

He had called the chauffer and learned his family had spent the night in the city. He called the hotel where Mariam always stayed. After a check of her room and a thorough search of the hotel, the manager reported that the Reynolds women had not returned the night before.

Tom then called the police and reported them missing. Tom told the police he and his wife had been arguing for months over their lives in Washington, but it was nothing they couldn't work out. He hoped that Miriam had simply packed up the girls and gone to Texas but calls to Miriam's family turned up no trace of Miriam or the girls.

There was no evidence of foul play, and there was no trace of the Reynolds women. Daniel Devon, the administrator of Miriam's family trust, had arrived in Washington within six hours of learning of his daughter's disappearance. He had immediately demanded the arrest of Reynolds. According to Devon, a divorce was imminent. Miriam had told Reynolds she was leaving him and taking the children. The shopping trip had been to purchase items for the trip to Texas. Devon had drafted the prenuptial himself, so Reynolds would never get a cent of the family fortune if Miriam divorced him.

Prior to his family's disappearance, Reynolds had been the top contender for President. Wildly popular with most Americans, the charismatic senator had won his own senate re-election by a landslide. He consistently polled as the most popular member of congress.

Reynolds had swept the primary, winning 1580 delegates. The National Convention was just a fanfare to solidify national support for the candidate.

The party Committee Chairman Mark Thornton had scheduled a press conference following the national convention to celebrate the party's nomination of Reynolds.

Mecca closed the file. She wondered why Reynolds had been sent to her. Certainly, he had a motive, but there was no evidence of foul play. Reynolds had agreed to take a polygraph. By the time of their next appointment, she would know the results of the test.

# Chapter 5

Mecca stayed an hour after her secretary left. She meticulously filed her cases of the day and cleared the top of her desk. She jumped when her phone rang. A quick glance at the caller ID told her it was Teagan. “I was about to give up on you,” she smiled as she looked at her sister’s beautiful smile.

“What a day,” sighed Teagan. “I can’t wait to sit down and have some handsome young waiter pour me a glass of wine. Can we go to that Italian restaurant? You know the one that opens the sliding glass doors, and it feels as if we’re sitting right on the sidewalk.”

“Of course,” laughed Mecca. “I can be there in thirty minutes.”

“Great, we can people watch, while we catch up,” Teagan said.

##

Jericho took an obscure table next to the wall, so she could observe the sisters. They laughed and giggled like two schoolgirls. No one would ever think them two of the best medical minds in the country. Teagan was a top neurosurgeon and Mecca a groundbreaking psychiatrist. Both were graduates of the Harvard Medical School, Mecca had been awarded the DuPont-Warren Fellowship for advanced study and research in psychiatry and had proven her theories that had been previously shunned by the psychiatric community. Both chose Johns Hopkins in

Baltimore, MD for their residency because the hospital was ranked number one in the U.S. in both their fields. Teagan had settled at New York's Presbyterian Hospital and Mecca opted for research then private practice.

"I need your help with a patient," Teagan finally moved their conversation toward work. "She was brought into the hospital last week with TBI and is in a coma. Poor thing she was suffering from malnutrition and dehydration. No telling how long she has been in that condition. She was literally starving to death. She's coming around, but still has serious trauma."

"Traumatic Brain Injury," Mecca shook her head. "That's really more your specialty, Sis."

"The injury part is going to be okay," Teagan nodded, "but she was badly beaten, and I had to remove some bone fragments from her skull. Dr. Davis had to work on her cheekbones and nose, so she could breathe comfortably. She is regaining consciousness but doesn't know her name or where she is. Her trauma is now more mental."

"Oh, one of your famous penniless patients," Mecca tried to lift the somber mood that had fallen over them.

Teagan laughed. "No, her perfect teeth and manicured everything tells me she isn't destitute. The hospital reported her to the police, but she doesn't match any missing person's reports. I'm just hoping we can get her to remember something—anything."

"You know I'll be happy to help in any way I can," Mecca patted her sister's hand.

"She is going to require more facial surgery." Nikki said. "Someone really did a number on her face, but that must wait until she heals more. In the meantime, I need your magic." Teagan tipped her wine glass as if toasting Mecca.

Dr. Nikki Davis was one of the best facial reconstruction surgeons Mecca had ever encountered.

She was excited about working with two doctors she highly respected. “Just tell me where and what time. I’ll clear my calendar and be there,” Mecca reassured her sister.

##

Back in her apartment, Mecca called the number. The phone was picked up, but no one answered. “I need the results of the polygraph Reynolds takes tomorrow,” she said.

“You’ll have them tomorrow evening.” The dial tone signaled the end to the conversation.

Mecca pushed the remote to turn on the TV. Tom Reynolds’ handsome face flashed across the screen of CNN News as the commentator rehashed the situation with his missing family. The liberal news media had opened its airwaves to Daniel Devon who was all too happy to try Reynolds on public television. He blamed his son-in-law for Mariam’s disappearance.

Mecca wondered what would happen to Miriam’s fortune if she and her daughters were dead and Tom was found guilty of their murder. Who else stood to benefit from the deaths of the Reynolds women?

Mecca’s thoughts turned to her sister. As teenagers, Teagan had teased her about her fascination with hypnosis.

Their mother had taken them to a medical conference when Mecca was 14. One of the seminars was devoted to psychiatry and hypnosis. Teagan and Mecca convinced their mother to let them go to the presentation while she attended her seminar on internal medicine.

When the girls arrived in the seminar, they were surprised to find 40 mats with pillows neatly arranged 10 to a row. The speaker had discussed various forms of hypnosis ending with mass hypnosis. Mecca and Teagan scoffed at the idea. The speaker asked everyone to ascertain the time. He then asked everyone to turn off all cell phones. He explained the dangers of a hypnotized subject hearing a loud noise or ringing. He asked everyone to lie down on the mats. “You

don't have to close your eyes," he said, "just relax and get comfortable. If you do happen to fall asleep, you will awaken when I clap my hands."

He had continued in an even, comforting tone, "When I arrived here today, I was delighted to find so many signed up for the seminar. It is always nice when one's subject is received favorably. I hope you have found my research interesting and relaxing. If your eyes are feeling heavy, it is okay to close them. Just relax and..."

Mecca and Teagan awoke at the same time. Looking around them, they had discovered that everyone in the room was just awakening from a deep, restful sleep.

The speaker told them to look at their watch to verify that they had been asleep for forty-five minutes. "What you have just experienced is mass hypnosis on a small scale," he smiled.

Mecca's passion was born.

As her fascination with hypnosis grew, so did her determination to become a psychiatrist. She devoured every book ever written about hypnosis. She found that she could hypnotize a subject very quickly with or without their cooperation.

The American Medical Association had allowed doctors to use hypnosis since the early 1950's. Mecca studied mass hypnosis and was fascinated by the thought of controlling hundreds of people with hypnosis.

She became convinced that the 1978, mass suicide of 909 members of the Peoples Temple in Jonestown, Guyana had been the result of mass hypnosis perpetrated on his followers by Jim Jones.

An avowed communist Jones had been a leader in the Democratic Party in California where he was appointed Chairman of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission as a reward for the important role he played in the mayoral election victory of George Moscone.

First Lady Rosalynn Carter personally met with Jones on multiple occasions and corresponded with him about Cuba. She spoke with him at the grand opening of the San Francisco Democratic Party Headquarters where Jones received louder applause than she did.

Jones enjoyed the protection of his Democratic Party friends in high places until the IRS began looking into his Peoples Temple. To get away from the media scrutiny and the IRS investigation he moved his followers to Guyana and established Jonestown.

His drug addiction and indulgence in sex with young girls in his congregation caused the unraveling of his self-proclaimed deity.

In November 1978, U.S. Congressman Leo Ryan butted heads with the local Democratic establishment and the Jimmy Carter administration's State Department in order to investigate allegations of human rights abuses of U.S. citizens in Jonestown. Ryan's delegation included relatives of Temple members, an NBC news crew and reporters for various newspapers.

Ryan's visit to Jonestown was cut short when a Temple member attacked Ryan with a knife. Congressman Ryan and his people quickly left taking fifteen People's Temple members, who had asked to leave, with them. Jones did not attempt to prevent their departure.

As Ryan's delegation began boarding planes to depart, they were gunned down by Temple members

The next morning the Guyanese army cut through the jungle to Jonestown. They discovered 909 inhabitants, dead from ingesting poisoned Kool-Aid. The individuals died in what was declared a "mass suicide/murder ritual"

##

At Harvard, Mecca had set the psychiatric world on fire and made history when she gave the last speech of the commencement ceremony. She hypnotized everyone in the

room: graduates, faculty, staff, parents, relatives, etc.; all 3,000 of them.

In an experiment prearranged through the research department, small cups of grape Kool-Aid were passed out to everyone in the hall. At Mecca's suggestion, everyone drank the Kool-Aid. Mecca then told her audience that when she blew a whistle, they would be fully awake. That the graduates were to leave the auditorium as practiced and then others could follow. She suggested that no one involved with her experiment would ever sue anyone associated with it. "Remember to put the cups in the trash cans on your way out and tell your friends what an awesome speaker I am." She couldn't resist the last statement just for the fun of it.

She blew the whistle and the procession proceeded as practiced, with proud parents following to find their graduates.

Every single cup was placed in the trash receptacles. Not even a scrap was dropped in the auditorium. There was never a single complaint from anyone over being hypnotized. Mecca was still plagued with phone calls from every imaginable source wanting her to give speeches.

Mecca had gotten the attention of every psychiatric research facility in the world and the unwanted attention of the United States government. Mecca had made them drink the Kool-Aid.

The phone ringing yanked Mecca back to the present. It was Teagan.

"How does your calendar look for Friday?" Teagan asked.

"Great," Mecca replied, "I have one patient, but I can reschedule her."

"Good, bring your appetite. I'll cook and the three of us can discuss our patient. Nikki has already pulled x-rays, so you can get some idea of the physical trauma the woman has experienced." Teagan added. "I want you to evaluate her,

and then you can give us some idea of the mental trauma we're battling."

##

Mecca walked her last patient out of the office. "Someone is holding for you," Julie nodded toward the phone.

Julie had been her secretary from day one and Mecca knew she was largely responsible for the smooth way her office ran.

"Were you able to reschedule Mrs. Lewis," Mecca asked over her shoulder.

"Monday at three," Julie answered as Mecca closed the door.

"Dr. Storm," she announced herself into the phone receiver.

"The information you requested is in your apartment," the familiar voice said.

"Why don't we go over it together," Mecca tried to engage her informant. "I suspect you know more about the situation than I."

"No, I am really puzzled over this one," the voice replied, "But your clients are your business."

"Please talk to me a moment," Mecca wanted a commitment to stay on the phone.

"Okay."

"Who are you?" she whispered.

To her surprise, she received an answer. "A flunky in the police department," the voice lied. "I'm just an information source for you. Good night, Dr. Storm."

The voice mystified Mecca. She didn't know if she was speaking with a man or a woman. One thing she did know, the voice always stressed the "t" in words like little or kitten. The "t" was heavily enunciated.

As promised, the results of the polygraph had been slipped under her door. Mecca came home late from the

office. Closing the door behind her, she sat down her brief case and purse on the entry hall table and bent down to pick up the envelope. The hallway light cast a shadow under her door. The shadow hesitated and then it was gone.

Mecca laid the envelope on her bed as she slipped into something more comfortable. Her sheepskin slippers felt good after wearing heels all day. She carried the envelope to the kitchen and let it sit unopened as she made a chicken salad sandwich. She curled up on her sofa eyeing the envelope as she ate her dinner.

She looked around her apartment. She knew it was spartan compared to her sister's apartment. She considered it a place to sleep and eat. She hadn't put forth much effort to decorate it.

She knew she was putting off opening the envelope because she was afraid of what she might find. She wanted Tom Reynolds to be innocent, but she was afraid he wasn't.

She studied the polygraph results. It appeared Tom was telling the truth. He had no knowledge of what had happened to his family. If Tom didn't know, then where were they?

Before going to bed, Mecca located her Presbyterian Hospital nametag and packed her white Johns Hopkins issued coat.

##

"The Storm sisters," Kadence Pride grabbed her heart feigning an attack. "It would make me the happiest woman in the world if either one of you would marry me," she laughed.

Mecca greeted her friend with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "How is the world's most gorgeous surgeon," she smiled.

"Better, now that you're here. To what do we owe the honor?"

“Collaborating,” Teagan answered. “Remember the Jane Doe that came in last week? Mecca is helping me with her.”

“Good luck,” Kadence shook her head. “She really took a beating; poor thing. Dr. Marcus had to remove her spleen, and she had multiple cracked ribs. He had to stop the internal hemorrhaging before he could turn her over to your gifted sister. Honestly, Teagan, I didn’t think she would live through the brain surgery.”

“She is coming out of her coma,” Teagan said, “but she is completely uncommunicative. I’m hoping Mecca can help her.”

“You know where I am if you need me,” Kadence grinned mischievously, “for anything at all.”

Kadence had been their self-appointed protector in college. Although the truth was, they had carried her home from many parties and put her to bed. Fortunately, she had outgrown her wild ways. She was an outstanding plastic surgeon. She jokingly referred to herself as the doctor to the stars and royalty.

The elevator stopped on the trauma floor and the two sisters picked up Jane Doe’s chart. She’d had a quiet night with no change in her condition.

Mecca watched as Teagan checked her patient. Jane Doe was bandaged from the top of her head to her hips. Both arms were incased in casts.

Dr. Nikki Davis joined them,

“Not a very pretty sight,” Dr. Davis, side-hugged Mecca and gently touched Teagan’s arm. “She will be okay. There is nothing the two of you can’t fix.”

“Who would do such a thing to another human being,” Teagan closed her eyes to block out the bloody mess Jane Doe had been in the emergency room.

Nikki caught Teagan’s hand and held it as if willing her strength. “A year from now Jane Doe will be completely

healed and we will be discussing her case over dinner for years to come.”

“Any luck with missing persons matching a name with our patient,” Mecca watched the motionless body for any sign of movement.

“Not yet,” Nikki said. “We got the news stations to run a description of her from what we have. You know brunette, close cropped hair, 5’3”, and 125 pounds—pretty general description.”

Nikki let go of Teagan’s hand, “How about a cup of coffee before we make our rounds?”

Jericho watched the three head for the doctor’s lounge and decided Mecca was safe in the hospital. She stepped inside Jane Doe’s room. The woman was sleeping peacefully. She also wondered how someone could beat a woman that badly. She was certain that whoever did it was sure she was dead.

She stepped back into the hall and saw a man at the nurses’ station. The bulge beneath the man’s jacket caught her eye immediately. Jericho walked away from the room listening to the footsteps of the man. When she was certain the man was inside Jane Doe’s room, she turned and quickly stepped inside too.

The man had placed a pillow over the helpless woman’s face. He was aware of Jericho’s presence for only a few seconds before his neck was snapped.

Jericho called her contact at the police department and within minutes, two uniformed police officers appeared to carry away the body of the assassin.

##

Mecca and Teagan were surprised at the flurry of excitement around Jane Doe’s room and the two police officers standing guard at her door.

“Someone tried to kill Jane Doe,” the head nurse rushed to Teagan. “The police took him away.”

“If he tried to kill her, he must know who she is,” Teagan spoke to one of the officers. “Where is he? I must speak with him.”

“His neck was broken when he was apprehended,” the officer replied.

“I must speak to the officer in charge,” Mecca said, “Who is handling the case?”

“Mecca, we are in the middle of something very dangerous,” Teagan cautioned her sister. “Apparently our news coverage last night caught the attention of Jane Doe’s assailant who came back to finish the job.”

“Thank goodness he was prevented from doing that,” Nikki strode toward them and put a protective arm around Teagan “Are you ok? I came as soon as I heard the news.”

“I’m going to get some water,” Mecca had a feeling the body of the assailant was probably in the hospital morgue and she wanted to see his face.

##

“I need to see the man that was just bought in,” Mecca flashed her identification as she spoke to the morgue attendant.

“Go through those double doors. He is against the far back wall; on the green gurney waiting for the ME’s office to pick him up,” the intern pointed to the back of the long room. “He’s the one right next to the double doors.”

Mecca stared at the killer’s face for a long time. She etched every detail of it into her memory, and then she took a picture with her cell phone.

Suddenly a hand went over her mouth and a strong arm encircled her holding her tightly, so she couldn’t move or make a sound. A hard body pressed against her back as she was dragged behind a row of file cabinets. She struggled in vain.

“Please, be still,” Jericho spoke softly.

She knew the cadence of that voice. She knew she was safe. She let herself collapse against her captor and moaned softly. The person was tall and muscular but smelled faintly of expensive feminine perfume.

“You’re a woman,” Mecca gasped.

Mecca breathed in the scent of her, the feel of her. She finally had someone to go with the voice. She tried to turn to face her but was held tightly from behind.

The double doors leading to the loading area flew open and three armed men rushed to the hit man’s body. One hulking brute threw the corpse over his shoulder and in less than sixty seconds they disappeared through the same doors they’d entered.

“Listen to me,” Jericho continued, “Jane Doe is a danger for you. Hide her. Don’t let anyone know you’re involved with her.

“Tell your sister to have her moved to the most secure room in the hospital. Don’t give anyone information on her. Don’t let any information get out that connects your sister or you to her. Guards will be posted at her door twenty-four, seven.”

Her lips were so close to her ear. Mecca could feel her warm breath, but her words seemed far away. She struggled to comprehend what she was saying, but her mind was caught up in the sheer strength of her. She tried again to turn to see her, but Jericho gave her a shove forward and was gone.

“Did you find what you needed,” the intern walked toward her.

“No, no” she stammered, “there’s no body here.”