

## Prologue

***The mystery of a woman has yet to unfold.***

***The mystery of a woman has not been told.***

“In here, on the bathroom floor!” Rowan Miller emphatically shouted as though the life he was attempting to save was his own. His voice bounced off the walls of the small bathroom and vibrated down the narrow hallway. In his several years of responding to emergency calls as a paramedic, he had never witnessed anything as intentionally brutal as what he saw before him. An intruder fled a violent crime scene leaving the victim for dead. The uneven and broken seams of the barely glued linoleum floor provided a trough for the blood that seeped without form from her body. Using his hands to support himself, Rowan knelt to evaluate her wounds and feel for a pulse.

She was propped against the tub where she’d seemingly collapsed. Her legs were drawn into her chest and a blood-soaked towel was draped over the lower half of her body. Bloody fingerprints covered the telephone handset that lay on the floor beside her. Her ripped blouse hung loosely from her body. It looked as if she attempted to nurse her right arm which appeared to be severely out of place. A sudden rush of adrenaline made Rowan dizzy; he stood slowly to clear his head. *My God, it will be a miracle if she survives*, he thought to himself. Speaking aloud, his more experienced partner immediately began to make a thorough assessment.

“She has taken several hard blows to the head, primarily left side.” Parker moved slowly and cautiously around the small bathroom. “Her right arm is swollen, possibly broken with excessive bruising on the legs.”

The victim heard voices, yet she couldn’t move. She mustered just enough strength to barely open her eyes, seeing a blurry vision of Rowan. As their eyes met, he saw straight into her soul and was immediately affected by the pain, violation and shame he saw in her. His heart was filled with compassion for her. Though his partner occupied most of the available space, he moved closer, attempting to offer her comfort through their brief connection.

“You’re going to be just fine, Miss,” Rowan said calmly and assuredly as he’d been trained to do, although he himself wasn’t quite convinced.

She could feel slight movement as Rowan carefully stepped over her limp body, and though she tried to focus, she was unsuccessful at preventing her eyes from closing. They began to roll to the back of her head.

“She’s going into shock; don’t move her. If we don’t get her stabilized within two to three minutes we may lose her. She needs oxygen immediately!” Parker sternly stated.

*We may lose her?* Did she hear him correctly? She wouldn’t die. She *refused* to die. Her spirit began to disconnect itself from her earth-bound physical being to help her endure the pain.

*God if you are there, please listen to me*, she prayed. She felt she was a small voice among the faithful, but she was still young and had her entire life ahead of her. *Whatever I did to deserve this, please forgive me. I want another chance.* Even in her state of near-unconsciousness she knew she wasn’t ready or willing to die, but it seemed to her as though she had no alternative. Suddenly everything was completely dark.

Rowan responded quickly, darting to the ambulance to get both the oxygen she needed and a stretcher to transport her. Hurriedly, he grabbed the equipment and returned. Two more paramedics arrived at the scene followed by a team of investigators and wasted no time getting inside to assist. Although he wanted to be near her, the limited space of the bathroom would no longer allow Rowan entrance. From the hallway where he stood, his eyes instinctively searched the area. He took note of the décor of her modest home and made several assumptions. In the bathroom, scented candles and bath oils were neatly placed around the small space. The living room walls were painted a deep gold and accented with burgundy swag tieback curtains and matching rugs. A beige couch and matching loveseat were asymmetrically arranged while the tables were askew. A picture of a mixed floral arrangement within a green frame hung above the couch. Her kitchen, highlighted in yellow, had a happy tone. A brass and glass-top table with coordinating pastel striped chairs were placed in a corner designated for eating. A vase holding fresh tulips was placed in its center. The refrigerator displayed an assortment of fruit magnets, and ceramic fruit wall hangings were positioned above the oak colored cabinets. She attempted to have her decor appear to be expensive even though it didn’t necessarily materialize. He concluded that this young lady was modest and virtuous.

As he looked again over the disarray in the living room he alleged she was attacked shortly after entering her front door, signified by the contents of her purse strewn about the doorway. Her lipstick was nearly beneath the couch. Her make-up compact had been separated and the halves lay on both sides of the room. Three text books, and a few note pads had been knocked off the coffee table, and loose sheets of papers bearing school notes were everywhere. A laptop, turned on its side, was tilted against the arm of an easy chair. Rowan watched the investigators tape off the scene and begin their work, first tracking the trail of blood between the bedroom and the bathroom where she was found. He imagined finding the culprit would be a nightmare for any forensics investigator. There was nothing left behind that Rowan could see, that would provide them with clues of a potential suspect. *If she can't identify her attacker, the police will have a difficult case to solve. It could have been anyone,* he thought.

Among the remnants of broken glass he spotted a small card on the floor. Straining to look at it, he realized that it was her faded Louisiana State driver's license identifying her as Maria A'Twanette McCory. The woman fighting for her life in the bathroom wasn't the picture-perfect woman captured in the license photo. Her strong facial features and pointed nose revealed her rich ethnic background. Her shoulder-length, wavy, black hair was parted on the right side and locks hung tenderly over her left eye. Her smile was radiant and flawless. Her prominent neckline was given proper attention by the soft pink V-neck blouse she wore. As Rowan documented her personal information, he again felt compassion for her. She was such a beautiful woman whose privacy had been violated and he knew that a crime of such magnitude normally couldn't be vindicated.

"She's stable. Let's get her on the stretcher." The announcement of her stability propelled him outdoors towards the ambulance. Rowan was somewhat relieved, but knew she still had a fight ahead of her.

"Let's get her out of here; we don't want to lose her." His colleagues said while working together giving the care necessary to ensure her life for a few more minutes, at least long enough to get her to the hospital. Rowan, ready to take the driver's seat, watched as the others cautiously stepped over shattered glass, moved down the hall,

through the living room and onto the gray slab that functioned as a front porch, transporting the victim to the ambulance.

“Ready? On three. One...two...three.” They hoisted her into the vehicle while Rowan got behind the wheel.

“We have a black female, late twenties, one hundred twenty-five pounds; several blows to the head; possible broken right arm,” Rowan spoke sharply into the radio, advising the nurses at the hospital to prepare for her arrival. As he waited for them to signal that she was secure, he made a quick assessment of the neighborhood.

It wasn't the poorest Rowan had ever seen, but wealth wasn't the common denominator either. Renovated duplexes and triplexes lined both sides of the street. There was a mixture of expensive, mid priced and more economical vehicles parked along the side of the street, indicating various incomes. Some homes featured neatly manicured lawns adorned with blooming flowers, while for some yards it seemed that the grass refused to grow.

Having heard the sharp whistle from his partners, he flipped on the siren, demanding respect from both the inquisitive adults and the undisciplined children who had gathered nearby. Collectively they moved back, heeding the siren's command. There was no time to waste; if he didn't get her to the ER soon, they would lose her and he wasn't willing to let that happen. Rowan pulled out of the driveway and hurled the flashing vehicle into the street, burning a path to Tulane University Hospital.

The last thing Maria remembered was the sound of the siren, loud, desolate and lonely. In her mind, the flashes of bright red light symbolized the blood trickling, not only from her body, but also from her wounded heart.

The emergency room's double doors nearly dismantled as the paramedics rushed through them at a startling speed. The black rubber wheels of the stretcher barely touched the floor. Rowan's heart pounded inside his chest as her vitals and condition were again communicated to no one in particular while she was quickly maneuvered down the crowded corridor. As they approached the nurses' station, his frustration peaked. The lack of concern on the faces of the nurses annoyed him. Saving her life was a priority to Rowan, even if no one else felt the same.

“Get the doctor. Now!” he barked, startling the team of nurses who seemed to be chatting casually. His actions made it extremely clear that he wouldn’t allow her to be ignored. As if by magic, a doctor swiftly appeared, assumed a steady pace beside the stretcher and began giving directives. Two nurses, ready to immediately carry out his verbal orders, followed suit and pursued his steady pace.

“Okay, listen up, this is a delicate one! Blood pressure now 60/40, heart rate steady with substantial blood loss. Jackie, I need a type and cross for two units of blood, comprehensive profile and serum pregnancy drawn STAT. Follow rape kit protocol before she’s prepped for surgery.” The nurse beside him repeated each detail as she recorded the information on the chart. Rowan grabbed both corners of the starched white sheet above Maria’s head while Parker secured the corners at her feet. In unison they lifted her body and moved her onto the awaiting gurney. Immediately she was wheeled into the operating room. The doors shut and the work began.

Standing on the outside of the room, Rowan realized his assistance was no longer required; he felt helpless. He backed out of the triage area and whispered a silent prayer. Unfortunately, his extensive training in emergency room procedures and protocols didn’t go beyond the double doors of the operating room. He made his way back to the ambulance, his mind flooded with thoughts of Maria. *She has to pull through*, he thought, as he held her picture-perfect image in his memory.