

## Chapter 1

The East Texas sun was hotter than usual for September, the few clouds high above providing no relief. A half-hour earlier, overcome by heat and exhaustion, Crystal had let her sign reading “Save Kwami” slip to the ground. Standing near the front of the crowd, Crystal pushed up the visor on her baseball cap to get a better look at her surroundings. She was pleased with the impressive turnout which she estimated to be close to one thousand people. It was the largest they’d ever had. Most of the other protestors continue to hold their placards high, displaying myriad slogans such as “Justice for Kwami,” “Let Kwami Live,” “Impeach Gov. Percy,” and the most popular, “STOP.” She took a deep breath and lifted her sign again, fighting the pain in her fingers as she held it as high as she could.

The crowd of protestors was comprised of a cross-section of the community— young, old, couples, families, Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian. A colorful array of baseball caps, bucket hats, visors, straw hats, and cowboy hats protected most of the heads from the constant flood of the sun’s rays.

The makeshift podium and public address system were rudimentary, and there was the usual milling around often seen in large gatherings, but the audience, for the most part, was paying attention to the pudgy young man with a man bun speaking to them. At times, the crowd burst out in synchronous claps and hoots of approval. The assembly was peaceful, with only a few skirmishes breaking out at the edges where police stood watch.

Still thirsty after having finished her bottle of water, Crystal let her mind wander as the speaker droned on about the immorality of what was about to take place. Her clothes clung to her sweaty body, and despite wearing sunglasses with polarized lenses, the bright sun hurt her eyes. Looking down, she swatted away a bug that landed on her arm. Uncomfortable and impatient, she was eagerly awaiting the next speaker.

Finally, the man at the podium looked up and announced, “And now, the man you’ve all been waiting to hear, the leader of our organization, Mr. Derek Rigler.”

The mood of the crowd changed, and participants started chanting “STOP” in unison as they raised and lowered their signs. A tall, muscular man with tan skin and wavy blond hair, took to the stage next to the previous speaker and scanned the crowd with his magnetic blue eyes. Crystal looked up and smiled. His handsome, chiseled features gave him the look of a confident leader. Although he was nearly fifty years old, he looked at least ten years younger. *He hasn’t lost the ability to attract attention whenever he enters a room.*

Derek took his place on the podium and held out his arms as if to give a benediction. After almost a full minute of roaring applause, he raised and lowered his hands several times to quiet the crowd.

Crystal looked around, energized by the enthusiasm bubbling over. She noted more press vans set up around the perimeter than in the previous protest. Their organization, STOP, was gaining traction.

She wondered if Derek had picked her out of the crowd. If she were taller, he’d probably see her—she wasn’t far from the front—but she imagined her five-foot two-inch frame made her visage difficult to identify in the sea of people. From what she

could glean, Derek hadn't spotted her. After all, she was just another brunette under a baseball cap, surrounded by many others. Even so, Crystal smiled widely, wondering if anyone nearby recognized her. After all, she was notable as Derek's wife and the mother of his child, Cordelia.

As Derek started his familiar diatribe against the Texas death penalty laws, Crystal tried to lock eyes with him, but his eyes never found her. Instead, he focused on members of the audience near and far, concentrating his gaze on one person for several seconds before moving on to the next pair of waiting eyes.

Crystal recognized the usual arguments against the event that was scheduled to take place momentarily—the uneven death penalty sentencing, the ugliness of exacting revenge, and the irreversibility of the punishment once meted out. The speech was powerful, and she agreed with everything Derek said. She could recite the words by heart, not only because she had heard them during Derek's practice sessions, but because she had written them herself. Every time the crowd reacted with hollers and claps, she felt taller, each breath a bit more satisfying. She'd been to over six of these rallies in the past year, each protesting the execution of a prisoner found guilty of a crime deemed fitting for capital punishment.

The death penalty had never sat well with Crystal, but over the past two years, the practice had escalated, with four more executions scheduled over the next six months in Texas alone. Not only was the ultimate punishment meted out more often, but the evidence leading to convictions was frequently less convincing. She'd made up her mind to do something to stop the injustice and had established STOP almost a year earlier. A small, grass-roots collection of like-minded people, it was taking hold, thanks

to her speech writing, community outreach, and organizational skills, bolstered by her husband's charisma. He was the face of the organization.

Derek's address was interrupted by a loud commotion as the officers stationed around the perimeter began to forcefully clear a path through the protestors to the entryway of the large building looming behind the speaker. Despite shouting and resistance from the crowd, with the most passionate demonstrators being handcuffed and dragged away, the police were able to open a wide berth.

"We are nearing the time," Derek shouted above the commotion, "the time when our brother Kwami will be taken from us in an act that can only be described as state-sponsored murder. Let all those who have participated in this mockery of justice one day pay for their crimes, and let all those who directly benefit from this violent act realize the wrong they have participated in."

A police transport moved through the clearing in the crowd as demonstrators chanted "Kwami, Kwami" in unison. Although the windows of the vehicle were covered, all knew who was inside—Kwami McKinney, sentenced to be executed that day. The van didn't stop until it was a mere five feet from the door to the building. A massive construction of cement and glass six stories high, the structure dwarfed the trees and other buildings nearby. Derek was silent as he turned to watch the Black prisoner, his head shaved, exit the van's side door.

Dressed in an orange jumpsuit accessorized with ankle and wrist shackles, Kwami was escorted by two armed guards, each holding onto one of his arms. Two more prison officers took up the rear. As the party of five walked towards the glass doors of the building, a Black woman around fifty years old ran towards them screaming. She

was forcibly stopped by police, who grabbed onto her arms long before she could interfere.

Everyone there knew the woman was Sally McKinney, Kwami's mother. She yelled and cried hysterically, flailing against those restraining her as her son was led through the automated doors that opened before him and the guards. They disappeared inside the structure as the glass doors shut.

People in the crowd yelled and cried, drowning out Ms. McKinney's wails. Frustrated tears filled Crystal's eyes; their protest had done nothing to dissuade the authorities from carrying out their sentence. She hadn't expected the proceedings to be halted, but held onto a glimmer of hope until now, irrational as it was.

She looked to Derek for comfort, hoping they might finally lock gazes and convey their sadness to each other, but Crystal's thoughts were interrupted by a female acquaintance. "Fantastic speech," the woman said.

"I can't disagree," Crystal answered, buoyed momentarily by the woman's words.

"You must be very proud, being his wife. He's so handsome, and brilliant to boot. You two are the perfect couple. I'd sure like to be a fly on the wall at your dinner table to hear about all his great ideas."

The words stung slightly, as Crystal chuckled politely. She was accustomed to being thought of as a mere appendage of her charismatic husband, but, she'd tried to convince herself that a successful protest, with Derek delivering a resounding speech, was all that was important. She didn't need the admiration of others like he did. "Our dinners aren't as interesting as you might think. Mostly, we talk about how we're going to pay our bills."

Members of the press, who until now had been scattered amongst the protestors while taking notes and silently recording videos, were now talking and interviewing people on camera. The crowd thinned, but Crystal didn't want to leave. She'd have liked to remain until she knew Kwami had taken his last breath, but that moment was hours away.

She listened as a nearby male telecaster spoke into a camera. "Emotions are again high as another execution is about to take place. While many people feel that the crimes Kwami McKinney was convicted of, armed robbery and hostage-taking, justify the death sentence, some feel the punishment is too severe for the crimes the prisoner was convicted of. Still others believe he is innocent of the charges against him."

The reporter turned to a middle-aged female bystander and asked, "What do you think of today's events? Do you think justice is being carried out today?" After posing the question, he shoved the microphone close to the woman's mouth.

"This is a travesty of justice," she answered. "The real criminal was wearing a ski mask during the robbery, and escaped capture immediately following the crime. That was made clear during the trial. We also learned that Mr. McKinney was picked out in a lineup by two unreliable witnesses days later. There was a boatload of evidence that the so-called witnesses had drug charges against them dropped shortly after identifying Mr. McKinney. What kind of justice is that?"

The telecaster quickly turned to the camera and continued his reporting. "Despite the controversy, Kwami McKinney is still scheduled to be executed here and now at New Lake Hospital. While we are happy for the families of the six unnamed individuals who will be the recipients of much-needed organs, many are questioning the legality

and morality of what is now becoming a common method of organ procurement. The objections are being led by the organization STOP, which stands for Stop Transplants of Organs from Prisoners.”