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THE AUTHOR OF *MARKED IN MEXICO*

HOW FAR WILL AN ORGANIZATION GO TO CONTROL
AN INDUSTRY WORTH BILLIONS, AND CAN ANYONE STOP THEM?

**A
FOUNDATION
OF
FEAR**

A Foundation of Fear

Kim McMahill

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

A Foundation of Fear

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Dedication

To my wonderful and supportive husband, Jim. He shares my passion for adventure and exploring the world, which is where I get ideas and inspiration for my novels. Thanks to my mom for being my number one fan and the most persistent marketing advocate I could hope for.

BOOKS BY KIM MCMAHILL

Risky Research Series

A Dose of Danger (Book 1)

A Taste of Tragedy (Book 2)

A Foundation of Fear (Book 3)

A Formidable Foe (Prequel—free micro-read)

Other Novels

The Lodge

Marked in Mexico

Shrouded in Secrets

Big Horn Storm

Deadly Exodus

ONE

Sweat soaked her light pink, *I Love DC* t-shirt. Hip hop music blasted through her earbuds, helping to keep up her energy level as she pounded down the trail in Rock Creek Park. She ran nearly every night year-round, hot or cold, rain or shine, but with her boss on the road, the past couple weeks at work had been busier than usual. Now she was paying the price.

With only a mile and a half between her and her car, tension already gripped her lazy legs. No one ever said running was easy, otherwise everyone would be doing it, and the trails would be packed with people. As it was, she hadn't come across another jogger for over fifteen minutes, and the knowledge made her uncomfortable. The park was generally well-used, especially this time of year when the temperatures were pleasant. The hive of activity always gave her a sense of security, but tonight the lack of people encouraged her to run a little faster.

The thick foliage on the deciduous trees crowding the trail made the early evening seem darker than it actually was. As she rounded a bend, she spied a jogger ahead and exhaled a sigh of relief. The tall muscular man's pace was slow, so she shortened her stride to avoid catching him.

Comforted at no longer being alone in the vast park, she settled into a modest pace and let her

thoughts drift back over her work day. She had started to worry that her boss, and the owner of the company, wasn't happy with her performance, despite her hard work and long hours. Then out of the blue, her boss called with an apology and an invitation to lunch.

She loved her job with the prestigious lobbying firm and after investing several years, she possessed no desire to look for another. She had found her passion in life. Thankfully, the communication from the owner earlier in the day removed a huge burden from her mind.

The trail curved, and the jogger in front of her disappeared. When the trail straightened again, he was no longer in view. The straightaway was long enough that she doubted he could have gotten far enough ahead for her to lose sight of him, especially at the speed he was jogging. No benches lined the path, nor could she spy any side trails. He had vanished.

The vegetation was dense and a haven for biting bugs, so she couldn't imagine anyone venturing off the maintained trail, especially as the light waned. Stopping her music and pulling the bud out of her ear, she listened. Silence, except for the chirping of hidden insects, ruled the early evening.

She looked around and located nothing unusual. An uncomfortable sensation of being watched made her shoulders shudder. Picking up her pace, she struggled to visualize where she was on the path, trying to determine if it would be a shorter distance to her car if she turned around or kept going on the loop trail. Deciding she was somewhere near the halfway point, she forged on.

Just as she decided her paranoia had gotten the best of her, the sound of running shoes hitting the

hard-paved surface caught her ear. She glanced over her shoulder but saw no one. She tried not to let her imagination run wild, but the man couldn't disappear. If he wasn't ahead of her, he had to be behind her. Close enough for her to hear him. This time the thought of company on the trail didn't bring any comfort.

Fishing her cell phone out of the small pocket in her running shorts, she clenched the device in her fist, making her feel less vulnerable. *Should I call someone and let them know where I am?*

She dismissed the thought and kept running. Another half mile passed with no incident. She began to relax, chastising herself for her moment of weakness. She had lived in large cities her entire life and knew dangers existed, but seldom let those possibilities influence her activities.

Focused on her fumbling attempt to reinsert the earbud to get the music flowing, she almost collided with the person who stepped out of the brush hugging the trail. She tried to dodge the man, whom she was certain by his attire was the same one she had been following earlier, but he grabbed her upper arm and yanked her toward him. She dropped her earbud and cell phone as pain shot toward her wrist. She struggled to think clearly, knowing she needed a plan, but the fear of dying pushed all ideas from her mind.

He spun her around so her back was pressed tight against his hard chest. With one of his arms firmly across her neck, she couldn't see his face. The increasing pressure on her windpipe made it difficult to breathe or to scream out for help.

She tried to kick backward at his shin, but he was too close for her to inflict much damage, and the futile

attempts only made her lose her balance. Squirming and struggling, she tried to pry his arm away from her throat with her free hand, but his grip was like a vise.

His stranglehold tightened. Desperation and lack of oxygen clouded her thoughts. A vision flashed through her mind of all the things she had yet to do and all the people who would miss her, encouraging her to keep fighting to free herself from the man. She didn't want to die. Not this way. Not in the prime of her life.

She scratched frantically at his bare skin, but doubted her stubby fingernails were doing any damage to his thick-muscled bicep. The attack didn't seem like an opportunistic random act of violence. Her assailant clearly knew what he was doing. He held her in a position that limited her options at self-defense, and his arm across her throat made it impossible to scream for help or plead for her life. If she did manage to get away, she had yet to see his face, so would be unable to identify him.

The more she fought, the more her strength waned. As darkness threatened to overtake her, the sensation of being dragged off of the paved pathway pushed its way into her barely conscious mind. She vaguely registered the need for a weapon. Her vision blurred. She reached for a low hanging tree branch. Her hand missed its target, and all went black.

TWO

One week later

Margaret Blair was exhausted. In an attempt to save the weight loss company she had built from nothing, she'd existed on only a few hours of sleep a night for the past week. The manufacturer for the prepackaged, nutritionally-balanced meals to support the Maggie Blair Diet Program had shut down without notice, leaving her scrambling to come up with a new supplier, and her legal team working overtime on damage control.

She could think of a million other ways she'd rather be spending her Friday night than reading the latest status report. The news was grim. The company's survival was precarious at best.

The in-house medical advisory board and registered dietitians, along with outside independent consultants and scientists had spent the past week poring over the data on the sweetener in order to advise her on how bad the situation could become. The company's legal team focused on assessing the potential lawsuits likely to arise from current clients who consumed products which might contain a dangerous sweetener.

Margaret and the rest of upper management had been searching for a manufacturer that possessed the ability and capacity to step in and get the flow of meals

back on track as quickly as possible. Her public relations team was working on damage control. She'd have to give them all a healthy bonus if the company survived.

She removed her reading glasses, clicked the mouse to close the report which had been e-mailed to her, and rubbed the bridge of her nose. It seemed they were making progress on mitigating damages, but whether or not they could recover was yet to be seen.

"You look like you could use a break."

The sound of her husband's voice split through the churning of ideas surging through her mind. She looked up and smiled. Urban was not only her husband of twenty years and business partner of nearly as many, but he had been her rock during the past week's turmoil. He had put in nearly as many hours, yet he looked as handsome, confident, and as in control as ever.

"Yes. I probably should eat something, and a glass of wine would definitely help ease the tension."

Margaret stood and moved from behind her massive mahogany desk, rotating her neck in an attempt to work out the kinks.

"We'll get through this. We've lost nearly thirty-five percent of our clients with the Giant Cactus Foods recall, but we'll get them back. I have faith the products A & C Foods will be producing for us by next week will be comparable in taste and effectiveness

"Oh, Urban, I hope you're right. You know how much this company means to me. When I opened my first gym nearly two decades ago I dreamed about expanding to provide complete health and nutritional services for women and men. I never imagined we'd create an empire. The thought of losing it is almost too

much to bear.”

Urban reached for his wife and pulled her into his arms.

“I know, and I hope you realize I would do anything to save this company. I’ve always done whatever it takes to make it successful. My priority hasn’t changed since the day we met. All I want to do is make you happy. If that greedy fool who cut corners to pad his pockets wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him myself.” His grip tightened until Margaret squirmed.

“I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t hurt you. It just makes me so angry that we could lose so much because of someone else’s actions.”

Margaret stepped out of his embrace and retrieved her purse and coat. She paused while he helped her into her jacket. She turned and smiled. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she placed a warm kiss on her husband’s lips.

“I feel betrayed. We put a lot of faith and money into that company and look where it got us. We must put the anger aside for now and deal with the consequences, though I would love to make someone pay for this disaster. If I ever find out that anyone else has contributed in any way to this debacle, he or she will regret crossing my path.”

“I have no doubt, darling. Let’s go enjoy a nice relaxing dinner and try to put this all behind us for a few hours.” Urban flipped out the lights and escorted his wife to the elevator.

THREE

Devyn Nash's ribs still ached and pain shot up from the soles of her feet with every step she took. Only a little over a week had passed since she had chased a killer through cactus-covered desert at night in her bare feet. If that wasn't enough, she had leapt off a rock ledge and tackled the fugitive, which in hindsight probably wasn't a smart move. She had desperately wanted answers, not another corpse. Unfortunately, things seldom turned out as planned.

She struggled to mask the pain as she made her way across the bustling room crowded with the desks of her fellow FBI agents in the Salt Lake Field Office. Halfway across the room she spied her partner, Nick Melonis, concentrating on his computer screen.

Stylishly dressed as usual, and not a wisp of his dark slicked-backed hair out of place, Nick was her complete opposite. Devyn ran her fingers through her long blonde strands, still damp from her morning shower, and tried to coax some order to the tangled tresses.

They had been partners for a little over two years, longer than she had been able to keep any other partner—which surprised everyone in the bureau, including herself. Nick wasn't only her partner, but he had become a good friend.

Contrary to many of their fellow agents' beliefs there was nothing romantic between them. In fact,

Nick was about to remarry his ex-wife, which couldn't make Devyn happier. She absolutely adored Morgan Hunter, and they had become quick friends, much to Nick's displeasure, which only added to Devyn's happiness.

Spotting Agent Joe Gardner approaching, she wished she was closer to Nick and the support he often provided. Nick had taken on the role of big brother, and she appreciated that he always had her back at work, and more recently, in her personal life. Agent Gardner, on the other hand, went out of his way to push her buttons. She feared one day she would snap and take a swing at him which would likely get her suspended. Slugging a fellow agent was seriously frowned upon by her boss and the bureau.

"Hey, Nash, heard you crashed Nick's party in Arizona."

She looked toward her partner, shooting daggers with her eyes at the back of his head.

"Whoa, not from Nick. I had an interesting talk with your buddy in Phoenix, Agent Bob Tanner, on Friday. I couldn't wait until you got into the office this morning."

Devyn groaned. In a weak, overly-medicated moment she had let a tidbit about her personal life escape to Agent Tanner of the Phoenix FBI Field Office while they were wrapping up a case together.

"He seems to think you have a man in your life."

Devyn ignored Gardner and kept walking. She doubted he'd take the hint and get lost, but Nick had been encouraging her to walk away and count to ten before responding to any comment she deemed to be stupid.

"Come on. You can tell us. I mean it's almost too

farfetched to believe since you hate men.”

She was only on eight but couldn't resist the bait. She stopped and slowly turned. “I like Nick, Fitz, Gordo, my dad, our boss, and until he gossiped like a thirteen-year-old girl, I had even considered forgiving Tanner for ditching me on a remote country road during the Cocaine Canyon Operation. It's just you I don't like.”

“Ouch, but that doesn't answer my question. Who's the lucky guy? Anyone here? Anyone we know?”

“Save it, Gardner. We've got work to do.”

Nick's calm, yet stern statement sent Gardner back to his desk. Nick's good timing was one more asset she appreciated about her partner.

“I hope you uncovered something new on the Risky Research case or have identified any of Coterie's members and didn't just say that to get rid of Gardner,” Devyn replied. “I won't get a decent night's sleep until we catch those creeps and put them behind bars where they belong.”

“I agree, and actually I do have some information. Tanner got the autopsies and toxicology reports on both victims in Arizona. No surprises. He confirmed one froze to death and the other was poisoned. And after talking to Stan Jacobson's neighbors again and going through more camera footage and the original investigation reports, Tanner's pretty convinced Stan was murdered. The case has been reopened with the Phoenix FBI in the lead. Unfortunately, the prime suspect is dead.”

“Aren't you full of cheery news this lovely Monday morning? None of that gets us anywhere. It only confirms what we already suspected. I'm getting

tired of reacting and cleaning up bodies. We hit brick walls everywhere we turn, and it seems like we're just waiting for the next victim to show up. We've got to figure out who's behind Coterie and stop them."

Devyn winced as she lowered herself into her chair. She wasn't a morning person and not overly fond of Mondays. She hated being less than one-hundred percent physically and wasn't a patient person.

The doctor confirmed her ribs were cracked and the only cure was time. Her feet weren't in much better shape. The medics in Arizona had pulled out as many of the cactus spines and slivers as they could, but the rest would have to work their way out over time. To top it off, her second weekend back home in Salt Lake had not turned out at all like she had hoped.

"I figured you'd be in a little better mood this morning since Sheriff Gage Harris dropped in from Wyoming to pay you a visit," Nick whispered.

"I tried to convince him to postpone, but he showed up anyway. He made me soup, took me for a drive up into the mountains, refilled my prescriptions, pulled newly exposed slivers out of my feet and rubbed numbing antibiotic ointment on my soles, tucked me in at night, and made himself comfortable on the couch. It definitely wasn't how I pictured our first weekend together, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was our last."

"You two just can't catch a break."

Devyn had first met Gage Harris when they worked together on a counterfeiting case half a decade ago. The attraction was immediate, but they'd never gotten together. Then, a few months back, the spark got rekindled when they were reunited during the

Uinta Vitamin case in Wyoming. But again, they hadn't had the chance to move forward. She'd thought this weekend would be the opportunity they needed.

"Now you're so banged up you can't enjoy the romance. Hopefully, you weren't as bad of a patient as I would expect."

"Tell me about it." A man moved toward them, and Devyn signed. "Oh, not now. I'm not in the mood to be nice."

Nick looked over his shoulder. "Be gentle," he urged. "For reasons unknown to any of us, he continues to be your biggest admirer."

Devyn tried to smile as she watched Gordo, the FBI's young technology guru make his way toward their adjacent desks with a plate in hand.

"Hi, Devyn, I heard about what happened in Arizona, so I asked mom to bake a batch of your favorite brownies," Gordo said as he set the plate on her desk.

Devyn peeled back the plastic wrap and grabbed a square slathered with peanut butter frosting and sunk her teeth into the decadent treat. As she savored the flavors and registered the compassionate look in Gordo's puppy-dog eyes, her earlier anger faded.

"Delicious. Thanks, and tell your mom thanks. These are so good it almost makes me forget about all my aches and pains."

"Glad you like them. If you need anything else, let me know. I can drive you places, help you with groceries, you just name it."

"Appreciate the offer, but I'm good. I'm moving around a lot easier every day."

"You know where to find me, in the lab, which is where I need to be heading or Fitz will be mad." Gordo

hustled off.

Devyn looked over at Nick. "I know. I've got a problem, but I don't want to crush the kid."

"Don't tell me Gordo's your man," Gardener stated as he walked up and grabbed a brownie off the plate. "Poor kid has no idea what he's wishing for. You've brought stronger men than him to tears."

"You flatter me. Now get out of here. If you touch these again, you'll lose a finger." Devyn snatched the plate out of his reach.

"That's the charm all the men love," Gardner mumbled as he walked away licking the frosting off his fingers.

Devyn poked another brownie in her mouth, leaned back, and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she realized Nick was watching her. She pushed the plate toward him. "You can help yourself."

"Don't let Gardner get under your skin."

"I can't help it. When a woman reaches my age and has never been in a serious relationship, she can't help but question herself. It can't be the entire male population, so it must be me, right? To have Gardner reminding me nearly every day that I'm the agency pariah and a man repellent doesn't do a lot for my self-esteem. I can hold my own in the field against any guy, and I've effectively put in his place every lecherous pig who thought I should just jump into bed with him. Apparently, that makes me an evil shrew."

"No, that makes you good at your job and an even better judge of character. There's nothing wrong with having morals. Gardner's a jerk."

Devyn's phone rang. She took the short call and returned the receiver. "Our boss summoned us to his office. I guess that means I have to stand up now."