

“Dreamland”

by Mark J. Lenz

Chapter 1

The original source of an entirely unique thought is nearly impossible to establish. An individual idea seems to be birthed in the mind entirely on its own, but in reality it is seldom an autonomous inspiration. Every idea in the psyche of mankind is derived from a previous one in an unbroken chain of thoughts, plans and ideas that lead to seemingly new creations of the mind. But exactly how intricate ideas fully form is difficult to determine. Yet it is true that every thought comes from somewhere. Even wicked ones.

The amber glow of the setting sun cast brilliant golden beams on the mild summer evening in Austin. Gavin and Samantha Cruise were just setting down after a long day. Gavin, at the successful real estate firm he ran, and Samantha after taking care of their two children. They both realized that being a stay at home mom was not only a luxury they could afford, but it was also hard work. Rowan was just five and would be starting school in the fall. He loved all kinds of outdoor sports, especially baseball. He loved to play catch with his mom and he couldn't wait until next summer when his team could play real baseball and didn't have to use the tee. Samantha, who played softball in high school, had volunteered to be Rowan's tee ball coach. This, as well as her leading role in several civic organizations around Austin kept her extremely busy.

While Samantha seemed to spend a little more time with Rowan, Gavin adored and cherished their daughter Megan. Everyday and most evenings, he stayed busy at work brokering large real estate deals, but he tried to reserve most weekends to finger

paint and have tea parties with his little princess. The only thing Gavin loved more than his real estate empire was his family.

You could call Gavin and Samantha Cruise the all American success story. College sweethearts, they met at USC. Gavin studied real estate development and Samantha interior design. Three years after their wedding, they decided to begin a family which put an end to Samantha's dreams of owning an interior design company. Still, she was thrilled when they found out they were having a boy and was truly glad to put aside her career aspirations to be a mother. After all, they could afford it. Then in his mid twenties, Gavin was already making a lot of money in the real estate business, when he branched out on his own to form his own company, Cruise Real Estate & Development. He secretly hoped Samantha would one day join him in his company, but for now, her plans of being a stay at home mom overruled his. By his early thirty's, Gavin Cruise ran one of the largest real estate firms in Austin. When the economic slowdown hit and slowed the housing industry, Gavin's firm shifted its focus to commercial building projects. The Statesman newspaper even named Gavin Austin's most successful young executive.

On the day they brought baby Megan home from the hospital, Gavin surprised Samantha with the new home he was building for their expanding family. The modest two bedroom rambler they had lived in since they got married seven years ago was now far too small. It would take another three months to finish, but this lavish, 6500 square foot Queen Anne style Tudor in West Lake Hills, an upscale Austin suburb not far from Gavin's firm and close to a very good elementary school, seemed the perfect situation. As Samantha adjusted to being a mother of two, she could use her interior design

talents to decorate this mansion, although she was a bit uncomfortable using the word mansion to describe their new home, even though everyone else called it one.

The home sat on a wooded lot accented by a well manicured lawn. The exterior boasted a brick red front with large arched windows and a huge entryway. The five bedrooms seemed a few too many but Gavin had claimed one and turned it into a home office which he rarely used. He spent most of his time a few miles away at his firm's office building. Each of the children had their own room. Rowan loved his baseball themed room, and now that Megan was two, she moved out of the nursery into her own room. The Cruise's seemed like the perfect family, but things are rarely as they appear.

Samantha had tucked both the children into bed and began to unwind in front of the TV with Gavin. After their favorite reality show, Gavin and Samantha decided to turn in for the night and shortly after closing their eyes they were both sound asleep. But about 11:30, Samantha awoke to the sounds of Rowan sobbing. He had been having bad dreams lately so she walked into his room and flipped on the light. "Did you have another bad dream sweetheart?" His answer surprised her.

"No, I just don't want to go to sleep."

"You mean you've been awake for the last three hours?" she asked.

"I guess so. I don't want to go to sleep because I don't know what's happening when I'm asleep. It's scary," he said wiping away tears from his eyes. Sitting down on the bed next to him, Samantha put her hands on her son's shoulders and said, "Listen to me Row. Sleep is nothing to be afraid of. As soon as you shut your eyes and fall asleep, you wake up. It's kind of funny. You sort of know that some time has past but you don't really know how much. It's like you're in a dream land."

“Dreamland?” asked Rowan.

“Yes, in Dreamland, you can’t tell if you’ve been sleeping thirty minutes or thirty years. It’s actually kind of a fun adventure. Now, here’s what we’ll do. It’s 11:30 right now. You do your best to go to sleep and as soon as you wake up, try to guess how long you were in Dreamland. Does that sound like a fun game?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’ll try. And mommy...I love you.” Samantha gave Rowan a big bear hug and said, “I love you too. Now close your eyes and we’ll start the game.”

As she left Rowan’s room and climbed back into her own bed she thought about how long Rowan would sleep tonight and wondered if she’d get a good night’s sleep as well.

As Gavin’s alarm clock rang at 6:00, Samantha decided to skip her usual workout. Typically she got up when Gavin did and worked out on a treadmill and the weight machine Gavin had set up in the basement. But since she was up with Rowan during the night, she decided to sleep in and thought she would try to fit in a workout later in the day, if you don’t count running after a five and two year old a workout. She lay in bed for a while dozing in and out of a light sleep. But as she gradually started shaking the cobwebs from her head, she started thinking about her conversation with Rowan and just how much sleep he actually got last night. Hearing the TV turn on, she figured it was Rowan, as Gavin typically never watches TV in the morning. Samantha flopped out of bed and greeted her husband, who was already dressed and ready for work, with a kiss and her son with a hug.

“So Rowan, did you remember our game? When you woke up this morning, how long do you think you were in Dreamland?” Yawning, Rowan said, “Yes mommy. I

played our game. I thought I was there just an hour, but it's 6:30 now so that means I slept seven hours." Both Gavin and Samantha prided themselves that Rowan was already learning math.

As Gavin was leaving for the office he asked what that was about.

"What? The thing about Dreamland?" Samantha asked.

"Yes."

"You know Rowan was up late last night, don't you?" she said with a hint of frustration that her husband slept through the whole thing.

"I thought I heard you get up, but I was a bit groggy."

"Well, we just talked about how interesting it is that when you fall asleep, you don't know how much time passes before you wake up again. It could be just a short time or it could be a very long time. You really don't know until you see a clock. We both just thought it was kind of funny so we turned it into a little game." With that, Gavin didn't think anything more about it. He gave his wife a kiss goodbye and headed off to work. But the intriguing thought stayed with Samantha.

Chapter 2

There are two kinds of news. Good news and bad news. We all hope for the former and try to avoid the latter. But, to those who believe in fate, it would seem the universe has a way of handing out equal amounts of both. Good news can bring joy and delight. But bad news can ravage plans and demolish destinies. It can turn a world upside down and rearrange a life's trajectory. Indeed, bad news can devastate, especially when it is sudden.

The Cruise Real Estate and Development Company was one of four tenants in a midsize downtown office complex. The glass exterior reflected the Austin sun so brightly that employees in neighboring buildings often complained about the heat from the reflection. But Gavin's office on the top floor was always cool as he kept the air conditioning at a comfortable 72 degrees. Samantha had her hand in decorating the office in modern, Eastern motif. *Zen – chic*, she called it. But Gavin considered the whole building to be his own. And why not? He ran his own successful real estate and development company and was now focusing more and more on building new or buying and renovating existing commercial properties. This new remodel and renovation department was really taking off. So, he entertained thoughts of someday buying the whole office building for his own use as his company was quickly expanding. Upsizing to a new and larger home worked out well, he thought, so why not for his business?

As Gavin sat in his office and enjoyed the view of the downtown Austin skyline, he sipped a fresh cup of cappuccino and thought how good his life was. He ran a great company, had a lovely young wife and two adorable kids, and he was in good health.

He worked out in the small gym in the basement of the building. It was shared by the other tenants, but Gavin was a regular. Gavin exercised five days a week, and took care of his body by trying to eat a healthy diet. He cut out most carbs and upped his vegetable intake. He didn't go so far as to become a Vegan, but he certainly was watching what he ate. His apparent good health was why he wasn't too worried about Samantha's phone call reminding him of his annual physical.

"Hello, Lisa? Could you connect me with my husband? This is Samantha Cruise."

"Certainly, Mrs. Cruise. I'd be happy to. Just one moment," replied the receptionist.

Seeing his wife's name on the phone display panel, Gavin picked up the receiver.

"Hi honey. What's up?"

"Hey hon. I just wanted to remind you of your physical with Dr. Krocak this afternoon at 3:30. You won't be late, will you?"

"Sam, I'm the boss. I can make my own schedule and leave the office when I want," Gavin laughed.

"Yes, I know" she said, "but I just want to make sure you're ok. I know you said you've been tired lately and I want to make sure it's nothing...serious."

"You worry way too much. I'm in great shape. I've probably just been working too hard. Maybe I should relax a bit on my workouts here at the office. But, I'll meet with Dr. Krocak at his office later this afternoon and I'll let you know how I'm doing. I feel great so there's nothing to worry about."

"That's what I worry about. I can't help it. I'm a mom. I major in worry. I'll see you tonight. Love you."

“Love you too.”

As Gavin left his office at about 3:00 that afternoon, instead of taking the elevator to the lower level parking garage, he decided to walk down the eight flights instead, just to test his cardio abilities before the meeting with his doctor. If he was being honest, he'd have to admit he was a bit worried since he seemed to tire more easily than usual. At age 32, he thought he should be in prime physical condition, but over the past few weeks he seemed to tire more quickly. “No worries”, he thought. “It’s nothing. Besides, Noah Krocak has been our family doctor for years. If there’s anything wrong with me, he’s the guy that can fix it.”

Gavin arrived at the Goodview Medical Center just before 3:30, walked into the waiting area and checked in with the receptionist. He filled out the required paperwork but wondered if it really made any difference since the nurse always seems to ask all the same questions on the form anyway. After waiting the usual 10 minutes, the receptionist said, “Gavin Cruise, the nurse will see you now.” The nurse, Shannon, led him to examination room #4 where she proceeded to ask him the same questions that were on the form he had just turned in to the receptionist. After taking his the blood pressure and other procedures that nurses typically do, she reminded Gavin that he'd have to visit the lab for blood work following Dr. Krocak's examination.

Two minutes later, Dr. Krocak entered the room and the two men shook hands. “Gavin, it's good to see you again. How are you?” Gavin wasn't sure if the question referred to his physical condition or his social life, but he answered “I'm great. My wife and kids are doing well. And you?”

“I'm good as well. Thank you.”

The check up was pretty typical, until Dr. Krocak asked him about shortness of breath. “Well, sometimes I get a bit winded after I exercise, but I don’t think it’s anything.”

“Well, it looks like you’ve got blood work scheduled after your physical. We’ll take a look at that and see if anything shows up.”

The rest of the physical was rather routine. The typical, “Does this hurt?” “How long has that spot been there?” and “Turn your head and cough.” Once the exam was complete Gavin thanked Noah for his time and headed to the lab for his blood work. He never liked needles much but got through it just fine. The lab tech told him the tests would be done in about 4-5 days and one of the nurses would call him early next week with the results.

“Ok, thanks” Gavin said. “I’ll see you next year.” Gavin made his appointment for his next physical with the receptionist at the front desk because he knew it made Samantha happy when his next annual checkup was set. As Gavin left the clinic he wondering what Samantha had prepared for supper.

Two days later, Gavin’s office phone rang. “Mr. Cruise. It’s Noah Krocak on line one.”

“Thanks, Lisa, I’ve got it.” “Dr. Krocak. To what do I owe the honor?”

“Gavin,” he hesitated, “we’ve known each other a long time, so I’ll get right to the point.” Gavin could feel his heart begin to beat faster. Was this news about his physical?

Was he sick? “Gavin, I’ve been examining your blood work from the lab and I need to be honest with you. It seems something is very wrong.”

“What’s wrong?” Gavin asked. “And what do you mean, ‘It seems’?”

“To be perfectly honest with you, I’m not sure what’s wrong. I just know that I’m not an expert in rare diseases. I’m just your average family practitioner.”

“Did you say ‘rare diseases’? What do you mean by that?” Gavin was getting nervous.

“What I’m saying is that I’ve checked and rechecked your blood work. I even had other doctors here at the clinic look at it. But one thing I *do* know. We’re going to need to seek the advice from an expert. What I want to do is schedule an appointment with you and me to meet with Dr. Dirk Remington. He’s the head of the Rare Diseases Department at the University of Texas Medical Center, here in Austin. I think your wife should come along. Gavin, this could be serious so I want get on this very soon. Will tomorrow afternoon work?”

Gavin was in a daze. Was something *really* seriously wrong with him? He thought about his wife and kids. He thought about his company. “Gavin? Did you hear me? I’ve cleared my schedule to come with you to meet Dr. Remington. I suggest you do the same.”

“Uhh...yeah, ok. Tomorrow afternoon then?”

“Yes, I’ve already set it up for 2:00. I’ll meet you at his office on campus. You can find the address and directions online. Gavin, if there’s anyone who can help you, it’s Dirk. He’s a brilliant physician and runs a world renowned research lab. I’ll see you tomorrow. Give my regards to your family. Good bye, Gavin.”

Gavin didn't reply. He just slowly hung up the phone and wondered how he would tell Samantha, and more importantly, *what* he would tell her since he himself didn't know what was going on. He had no plan to ease the shock this would bring. He was just going to have to come out and tell her.

Chapter 3

Bad news, by nature, is something no one wants to hear. There is no easy way to give it. The bearer must summon the courage to “break” the news to the unlucky soul who receives the damaging report and tries to comprehend its ruinous extent. Fittingly, the news itself can break the recipient.

Gavin pulled into his long driveway at about 5:30. He parked in the garage and entered the house through the door leading into the mud room. He almost hoped to avoid Samantha, not knowing how to bring up the subject of his visit with Dr. Krocak. But there she was. Right there in the kitchen preparing supper. “Hi honey. How was your day?”

He wouldn’t be able to avoid it. But just how would he ease into the news? “Fine”, he lied. “Well, I guess I better be honest with you.”

Samantha immediately stopped what she was doing. “What? Did something happen at work?”

“No, nothing happened. It’s just that Noah Krocak called the office today and said he got my blood work back from the lab. He said it looked like there was some sort of problem.”

“Problem?” The worry in Samantha’s voice was clear. “What kind of problem?”

“They don’t know. He’s had some other doctors at the clinic look at it and they can’t figure out what’s going on. It sounds serious. So serious that he’s set up an appointment with a specialist at the University for tomorrow afternoon. Noah’s going to come along and he and I both think that you should be there as well. Apparently this

doctor, Dirk Remington is some sort of expert in dealing with rare diseases.”

By this time Samantha was sitting down. “What do you mean ‘rare diseases’? What’s going...?”

“I don’t know anything, Sam. But Noah assured me that Dr. Remington is the guy who can diagnose and deal with whatever’s going on.” They made plans for Courtney Barton, one of Samantha’s friends from one of her civic organizations, to watch the kids during the appointment. Somehow Samantha finished preparing dinner and they ate but didn’t talk much. Both of them were becoming more and more worried. Did Gavin have some rare disease? Would Dr. Remington be able to diagnose it? Was there a cure? Fortunately for them, money was not an issue, but maybe Gavin would have to take a leave of absence from his company, or worse. Neither of them wanted to think about it and both turned in shortly after they tucked the kids into bed.

As the alarm clock rang the next morning, both Gavin and Samantha realized that neither of them slept much the previous night. Samantha was almost upset at Gavin for deciding to spend half the day at the office, but he convinced her that having him sit around home waiting for the appointment wouldn’t help and would probably only make her more nervous. They decided to meet at Dr. Remington’s office at a little before 2:00 so it surprised Gavin when he saw Samantha’s car already parked in the parking lot of the medical department at the University. He found the Rare Diseases and Research department and the receptionist welcomed Gavin and showed him to Dr. Remington’s third floor office. Samantha and Noah Krocak were already there, sitting in chairs in front of Dr. Remington’s desk.

“Dr. Remington?” Gavin asked as he entered the office.

“Yes. And you are Gavin Cruise. I know a few people who have purchased some of your properties. Thanks for coming.” Gavin shook hands with Dr. Remington, kissed his wife and exchanged pleasantries with Dr. Krocak. “Gavin, I want to be up front with you. I’m going to get to the bottom of this and find out what’s causing your blood work to come back with the anomalies it has. I work with a team of experts and we’re going to find out what’s wrong with you.”

“Yes, honey. Dirk is the leading researcher in his field. I’m confident you’re going to be in good hands,” Samantha said.

“Do you two know each other?” Gavin asked.

Dr. Remington spoke up, “Actually yes. We were talking before you arrived and found out we were at the same fund raiser about six months ago. That’s where I first met your wife. I’d love it if you both would call me Dirk.”

“Ok...Dirk. What do we need to do?”

Dr. Remington led Gavin away for several hours for a battery of complex tests, including a complete blood and urine analysis, an EKG, a xenon-enhancing full body CT scan, a brain scan and several other neurological tests, while Samantha and Noah Krocak stayed in Dr. Remington’s office.

Four hours later, Gavin returned and told Samantha and Dr. Krocak that Dirk and a few others on his team were busy examining the results of the tests and they should grab something to eat and stick around, or they could head home and wait for any news. Since they had made arrangements for their kids to stay over night at Courtney Barton’s home, they thought it best to stay and wait to hear anything.

The three of them grabbed a quick supper at a nearby fast food place. Gavin felt the irony. After taking such good care of himself and focusing on eating a healthy diet, there he was eating junk food waiting to hear about his presumably serious health condition. Gavin, Samantha and Noah returned to Dirk's office about 7:30 and waited another two hours, paging through office magazines and doing newspaper crossword puzzles, before Dr. Remington returned. As he opened the door, they all stood up and noticed the file in his hand and the grave look on his face.

"Gavin, Samantha. We've found the problem. Why don't you all have a seat?"

Gavin sat next to Samantha on the couch holding her hand. He anticipated it was something bad. Dr. Krocak sat down and Dr. Remington pulled up another chair close to the couch so he could look the Cruises in the eye. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid it's very bad news."

Samantha started to cry.

"My team and I have diagnosed the problem. Gavin, the tests show that you've contracted Reye's syndrome." He opened the file and pulled out some papers. "Reye's syndrome is a debilitating disease that attacks your vital organs. It quickly progresses through five stages. Right now, you're experiencing the first stage, which is why you don't feel that bad, just a bit tired. In our exam, you mentioned you recently have had a few headaches. That's another symptom, along with fever, persistent vomiting and developing a rash."

"But none of those things have happened," Gavin protested squeezing Samantha's hand harder in a vain attempt to comfort her.

“No, not yet, but they will. Probably within a week or two. But the stages quickly increase in severity. You’ll start to hyperventilate and get confused easily. Then the confusion will progress into falling into and out of a coma-like state. Your vital organs, your liver, kidneys and brain will soon start to malfunction. It’s very painful. You’ll literally be rotting away from the inside out. This multiple organ failure will lead undoubtedly to death. No one knows what causes Reye’s syndrome and presently there’s no cure. Gavin, you’ve got about two months to live. But as I said, this disease progresses rapidly. The symptoms will begin getting worse in two to three weeks. I’m sorry.”

By now Samantha was sobbing uncontrollably, Gavin was shaking and Noah Krocak had one arm around each of them somehow trying to offer comfort.

“Are you sure?” The words barely came through Gavin’s shaking voice.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“So there’s no hope then?” Samantha sobbed.

“Well, I didn’t say *that*.”

Chapter 4

Hope starts with but a glimmer. Like the first rays of light at daybreak, its initial appearance is so subtle it's almost undetectable. But as the seconds pass, brilliant beams flood the landscape until pathways are illuminated, obstacles become apparent, and a new dawn full of optimism and expectancy begins.

"I said 'presently' there's no cure," Dr. Remington continued. "But my colleagues and I have been carefully researching Reye's syndrome for the past eight years. We've made a great deal of progress. Through recent breakthroughs in stem cell technology and regenerative stem cell research, we believe a cure is roughly five years away," Dr. Remington said with a gleam of hope in his voice.

"But what good is that to me? You said I've only got two months to live and that the effects of this Reye's syndrome would hit hard in a couple of weeks!"

"Gavin. Samantha. What I'm about to suggest may seem far fetched, but as I see it, it's really the only hope we have. It's probably going to take five years to develop a cure, test it, and get FDA approval. We are racing against time. But, we have an advantage...if you're willing to walk down that path."

Both Gavin and Samantha wondered what he was talking about.

"I work closely with a brilliant man I'm sure neither of you have heard of. His name is Dr. Karl Mueller and he deals with extreme alternative therapies. He's the chief Doctor of Cryogenics at the Life Center in Houston, and a member of both the Life Extension Society and the Society for Cryobiology."

“Wait a minute. Did you say cryogenics? Like, freezing people?” asked Gavin in disbelief.

“Yes, but it’s much more than freezing people. From what I understand, and I get most of my information from my friend Dr. Mueller, the science of cryogenics has come a long way in the past twenty years, mainly through Dr. Mueller’s work. He explains it this way. If you left an orange out in the Texas sun, in two to three days it would be rotten. Probably all dried up due to evaporation. But you could leave that orange in the freezer for months, then slowly thaw it out and it would be as good as new. I’m sure he can explain it much better, but that’s the basic concept. Gavin, I truly believe that if you undergo this cryopreservation procedure, we will find a cure for you and you can pick up where you left off.”

“Pick up where I left off?” Gavin could hardly believe what he was hearing. “What do you mean pick up where I left off? While my family and everyone else on earth ages normally, I’m in suspended animation like some frozen guinea pig? Like a Popsicle?”

“You may be a Popsicle, but at least you’re not dead.”

Samantha stood up, grabbed Gavin by the shoulders and looked deep into his eyes. “Honey. I think Dirk might be right. This disease you have, this Reye’s syndrome, would be frozen as well. Think about it. If it works, in five years you’ll be 37. I’ll be 35. The kids will be 10 and 7. It’s better than the alternative.”

“Yes Gavin, technically you’d be 37, but your body would basically still be 32. Your organs won’t age. Once you’re reanimated, we would immediately start the treatment for your Reye’s syndrome, and you’d be on your way to recovery. There are no guarantees, but this seems like your only hope,” said Dr. Remington.

Finally, Dr. Krocak spoke up. “Gavin, I think I agree with Dirk. If you don’t do this, you’ve got about eight weeks to live. You can’t do that to your wife and kids. They love you. The finances shouldn’t be a problem. Think about your future. As I see it, this is your only option.”

“I’ll call Karl later this evening and tell him you’ll be in Houston by tomorrow afternoon,” Dr. Remington said.

Gavin looked into his wife’s eyes and then at Dr. Remington. “Alright. Let’s at least meet with Dr. Mueller and see what he has to say.”

It felt so unnatural to return to their home in two separate cars. Gavin *had* wished he had taken the day off and rode to Remington’s office with his wife. But how was he to know that he would be given that kind of news? The news no one ever wants to hear and is never prepared for. The news that you’ve only got weeks to live. And how was he to know that getting the news would turn his life in a drastically new direction? Tomorrow, he would have to make the decision of putting his life in the hands of some doctor he’d never heard of, and into a “science” that is at best, suspect.

Without giving too much detail, Samantha arranged for the children to stay another day or two with Courtney Barton. She told her it was some kind of medical emergency and asked her not to ask any questions or say anything to anyone about it. She had learned she could trust Courtney to keep a secret.

The drive to Houston the next day was surreal. Neither Gavin nor Samantha could quite remember how much they talked about their options, and how much they just sat in stunned silence. Their main conclusion was that they needed to talk with Dr. Mueller and explore this extreme proposal. As they approached Houston, it felt as if

they were driving into a date with destiny. It felt so out of control. They both sensed that by the time they left Houston later that day, their lives would be forever changed.

The Life Center seemed like a strange place. It wasn't in a nice part of downtown like Gavin's office and the Goodview Medical Center were back in Austin. This was different. Mysterious. It sat in a dark warehouse district, out of the way of major traffic and off the beaten path. If it wasn't for GPS, it would be difficult to find. As they entered the building, the first thing they noticed was the music. It wasn't typical relaxing music piped in to most lobbies in medical buildings. Rhythmically, it was complex and dissonant. The artwork on the walls was not typical either. It was eerie. Just close up portraits of people's faces. Blank stares. Everything about the Life Center seemed odd.

Gavin and Samantha were escorted to Dr. Mueller's office by a quiet, young receptionist. As they entered, an older gentleman approached with his hand extended. In a strong German accent he said, "Gavin. Samantha. It's so good to meet you. Please come in. Let me introduce myself. My name is Dr. Mueller, the Chief of Cryonics here at the Life Center. Please call me Karl."

They all sat down and spent a few minutes making small talk yet they were anxious to discuss the real reason they were there. "So, tell us about the Life Center. What do you do here? And what was Dr. Remington talking about yesterday? Are you in the business of freezing people?" Gavin asked hoping to read Dr. Mueller better from his response.

Dr. Mueller laughed. "I hope my old friend Dirk didn't make it sound like I'm some sort of a mad scientist. No, no. The field of cryonics has come a long way since the early days when we struggled to gain credibility." It sounded like he was speaking from

experience. “Let me try to help you understand what we do here at the Life Center. Simply put, cryogenics is the branch of physics and engineering that involve the study of very low temperatures. We find the best ways to produce them and study how materials behave in these extremely cold environments. And cryonics is the emerging medical technology of cryopreserving people with the intention of future revival, repair, rejuvenation or even improvement! My mentor, Robert Ettinger laid the groundwork for the field with his revolutionary book, *The Prospect of Immortality*.” Dr. Mueller pulled a well worn book off his shelf and handed it to Samantha. “It was a privilege to work with Bob.”

“You said ‘was’? Is Mr. Ettinger no longer with you?” Samantha asked.

“Oh, he’s still with us...so to speak. His recent respiratory condition allowed him to be our latest and most prominent patient. Yes, Bob is right here in our Cryo Lab. Perfectly suspended until the time is right.”

Gavin and Samantha sat in stunned silence. The thought of the founder of cryogenics actually being frozen in the building they were standing in gave both of them the creeps.

“Bob was first scientist to propose the Cryonics Paradigm,” Dr. Mueller continued. “He challenged the contemporary medical and legal definitions of death and argued that they are relative, not absolute. They depend on the sophistication of the medical technology available at the present time. As an example, let’s say we’re in the Amazon jungle in a small village. The tribal chief of that village suddenly dies of a heart attack. Everyone in that village will soon become absolutely convinced their chief is actually dead, right? Well what happens if that same chief has the same condition in the

emergency room of a hospital here in Houston? He might well be resuscitated and continue a long and healthy life. You see, Bob saw that the criteria for death will vary not just from place to place, but from time to time, and so today's corpse could be tomorrow's patient."

It seemed to begin making sense to both Samantha and Gavin, but at the same time still seemed far fetched.

"You might say I have spent my life perfecting the miracle that Bob started. He pioneered a worldwide movement that gives hope to hundreds every year. I hope to help thousands during my lifetime. And I am told that's why you are here today."

"Yes", Gavin replied. "Just yesterday, your friend Dr. Remington diagnosed me with Reye's syndrome, a terrible debilitating disease that's going to kill me within two months." It was odd that those words coming from his lips didn't sound strange to Gavin anymore. "He said my only real hope is that you can freeze me until they find a cure. Probably within five years."

"We don't use the term 'freeze' anymore," said Dr. Mueller with a forced smile. "It brings me back to those early days. We call it cryopreservation. Through using extremely low temperatures, we put patients into a state of suspended animation where they are perfectly safe from whatever is ailing them. Then, when the time is right, we gradually reanimate them. It's very much like taking a long nap. But when you wake up, an extended period of time has past, not just a few hours."

"Like Dreamland," Samantha interrupted.

"Dreamland?"

"Oh, it's just a little game we play with our son. I'm sorry, go on."

“Yes, as I was saying, our patients claim they aren’t even aware any time has past,” Dr. Mueller continued.

“Your patients? You mean you’re doing this right now? You’ve brought people back? Why haven’t I heard more about it?” asked Gavin.

“Yes, we have several patients. And you haven’t heard more about it because frankly, we try to keep our work out of the spotlight, if you catch my meaning. You probably haven’t heard of the F.D.C.R.M. The Federal Department of Cryonic Regulation and Management. They are a newly appointed, highly controversial federal agency designed to regulate our practice, but they actually constrict and slow down progress. They are in charge of enacting laws to regulate our industry. But what they see as an industry in need of regulation, my friends and I at the Life Extension Society see as an art that should be encouraged. We and the F.D.C.R.M. don’t see eye to eye on many things. But that’s probably more than you need to know right now.”

“Dr. Mueller?” the receptionist’s voice interrupted over the intercom. “Dr. VanAndel is here.”

“Wonderful, Sophia. Send him in,” he said. “I’m so excited for you to meet my friend and colleague, Dr. Frederic VanAndel.”

A tall, bearded man in his late 50’s walked into the office. “Frederic,” Dr. Mueller called out. The two men shook hands and then embraced. They were obviously close. “Gavin, Samantha, let me introduce you to Dr. Frederic VanAndel,” Dr. Mueller said. “Frederic is the CEO of *LifeSpan Technologies*. We rely heavily on the scientific breakthroughs *LifeSpan* has brought us in all we do here. You might say Frederic is the brains behind what I do.”

They all shook hands and returned to their seats. “Gavin. Samantha. I want you to know that Karl and I have been close associates for many years. We’re both on the board of directors for the Society for Cryobiology and are also long time members of the Life Extension Society. Our partnership has given hope to scores of terminally ill patients. We hope we can help you Gavin,” Dr. VanAndel said.

“Well, that’s what we’re here to talk about,” Gavin replied.

“Gentlemen, if I may interrupt?” Samantha interjected. “To you, this may be an everyday occurrence. But it’s all new to me...to us. Dr. Mueller, can you explain to me what this cryopreservation process would look like?”

“I’d be happy to, Samantha. From the sounds of things, your husband’s Reye’s syndrome is advancing rapidly which leaves us little time to waste. I’d suggest that within three or four days we begin the cryopreservation procedure. You will come back to Houston, here to the Life Center. After a preparation procedure where your husband will be sedated, his body will be placed in a cryonic capsule of liquid nitrogen and frozen at minus 371 degrees Fahrenheit. We use a slow programmable freezing technique which controls the rate of cooling. At these low temperatures, all biological activity including the biochemical reactions that would lead to cell death, is effectively stopped. His body will be stored here in our cryo storage unit, in an HSSV-6 cylindrical cryostat, while our friend, Dr. Remington continues his research on Reye’s syndrome. It sounds like he is just a few years from a cure.”

“He said it would be about five,” Gavin explained.

“There is some risk of cell damage, dehydration and intracellular ice formation during the initial cooling process. But these risks can be minimized through the careful

use of cryoprotectants. The same kind of antifreezing proteins found in the skin of Arctic amphibians and reptiles. But I assure you, the benefits far outweigh the risks. Suffering a little tissue damage is well worth the risk of the alternative. Then, after just a few years we will slowly reanimate Gavin. Once the process is complete, he can carry on his life.”

“What about the price?” Gavin inquired.

“In a case like yours, the initial cryopreservation process is \$160,000, with an additional annual storage fee of \$12,000 per year.” Gavin and Samantha knew the cost was no issue, in light of the dire situation.

“I think we understand, but we’re going to have to think about it and talk to some people,” Gavin said.

“We totally understand,” said Dr. Mueller. “But I don’t need to remind you that you haven’t got much time. If the symptoms of the Reye’s syndrome advance much farther, the damage would be irreversible. And at that point, cryopreservation would be useless. On your way out, please ask Sophia for the paperwork. You might as well start on that because as I see it, your options are very limited. I’d consult your lawyer and your life insurance agent and talk about the implications. There are a few legal hurdles to jump through, but nothing your people can’t handle, I’m sure.”

They all stood and even though they had just met, both Dr. Mueller and Dr. VanAndel hugged Samantha and Gavin. Given the grave situation they faced, it didn’t seem inappropriate. Gavin and Samantha Cruise had a lot to discuss and a huge decision to make. And they were fully aware the clock was ticking.

Chapter 5

Precious time. Often casually overlooked, its value isn't fully appreciated until it is gone. When hour glass sands fall quickly and longevity is cruelly ripped away and replaced by hasty decisions, pressure to make wise judgments causes emotional angst and often leads to misguided conclusions. In fast paced, pressure filled moments, hurry is the enemy of reason.

The drive back to Austin seemed to go quickly. The entire way back Gavin and Samantha discussed their options. Actually, they discussed the only option they seemed to have. Both were emotional. "Honey, this whole thing seems so bizarre. I mean freezing my body? Or...what do they call it, cryopreservation? It seems like something from The Twilight Zone," Gavin said.

"I know dear but it seems like our only viable option. I still can't believe that you've got this Reye's syndrome. But I trust Dr. Remington and his staff's diagnosis. If these horrible symptoms are going to begin taking effect within the next few weeks, we need to make a decision right away."

Gavin and Samantha continued to discuss their options and the decision they needed to make. Yet within that one huge decision lie many other smaller, but still important decisions. What would they tell people? What would they tell their children? How would Samantha manage raising the children without Gavin's help and support? What about their financial picture? And what would become of the company? Is all this legal? Is it safe? What happens if Dr. Remington doesn't find a cure in five years? As they continued to discuss the many implications they realized some of the questions

would remain unanswered. No one can see the future so you can't really tell what's going to happen. You can only guess. But there were some questions they *could* get answered. As they arrived back in Austin, Samantha continued to push Gavin towards the only option she felt they had. Gavin, with still a good deal of hesitation, consented. He would go ahead with the cryopreservation procedure within the next 3-5 days. But they agreed that the decision was contingent upon more input from their lawyer, their life insurance agent and their priest.

The next morning, Gavin called his board of directors and staff and told them he was taking a leave of absence from the day to day operations of *Cruise Real Estate & Development*, for undisclosed reasons and for an undetermined amount of time. It was not surprising that his colleagues were shocked and very concerned about him. They repeatedly questioned his reasons but he skillfully avoided giving details as he brushed their inquiries aside. He reassured them it was nothing serious. In reality, Gavin was simply buying time until he met with his lawyer and devised a plan of action.

Thomas Stonebridge had been the Cruises' lawyer for over ten years. He helped Gavin with the legal hurdles of setting up his own company, and the two men and their wives had become close friends. Because of their friendship and Gavin's clout as a successful businessman, it didn't seem strange for Gavin to request to meet Stonebridge at their home. He figured it was to discuss some legal aspect of Gavin's expanding real estate business. As Samantha brought the men coffee, they sat in the Cruises' living room. Gavin got right to the point. "Tom, what do you know about cryogenics?"

“You mean freezing people?”

“Uh...yeah, freezing people. They like to call it cryopreserving people but, yeah.”

“Well, I guess I know a little about it from reading some news reports about the legal aspects of it. But I’m by no means an expert. Why?” Thomas replied still a little confused.

For the next half hour, Gavin and Samantha explained the unbelievable events of the last 72 hours. They told him about their conversations and meeting with Dr. Krocak and Dr. Remington. They explained the devastating effects of Reye’s syndrome and made certain Stonebridge was aware of the immense time crunch they were under. Then things got even stranger. They told Tom about meeting Dr. Remington’s friend, Karl Mueller at The Life Center, and about Frederic VanAndel, the founder of LifeSpan Technologies. They gave him a brief but limited overview of cryogenics and spelled out the cryopreservation procedure, and that they felt strongly that this was their only option. They explained that in a few years the cure for Reye’s syndrome would be found and Gavin would return to his life. It took a while for Stonebridge to grasp it all.

“What I really want to know is,” Gavin inquired, “when I’m in this state of cryonic suspension, am I still legally alive?” It seemed like a very strange question. It was. Together, they went online and did some research. The information was far too deep for Gavin or Samantha to grasp but Stonebridge seemed to understand the legal jargon contained in the articles and documents. He phoned a few of the lawyers who authored some of the research documents and discussed the legal definition of death. He found it was not as cut and dry as one would think. Gavin remembered Dr. Mueller saying the same thing. They concluded that it was feasible to draw up a legally binding document

stipulating that Gavin would indeed not be declared dead during the cryopreservation. He would simply have to sign the document.

They also discussed the implications of Gavin's business and corporate assets considering the fact that he would be technically alive, but not involved in the operational side of the business at all. Stonebridge said he could draft documents giving Samantha legal jurisdiction during Gavin's absence to maintain control of the company but he encouraged her to appoint a new director of operations who would actually run the company and would report directly to her. Gavin told her he had the perfect person in mind.

"Dan Jacobson is your guy," said Gavin. He's been my right hand man for four years now. If anyone can run my company how I would want it run, it's Dan."

Stonebridge also found it ethically necessary to try to explain to both Gavin and Samantha a few of the legal ramifications if the cryonic procedure *did* tragically end in Gavin's death. He told them he would draw up legal documents giving limited power of attorney over their estate to Samantha while Gavin was in cryopreservation. The legal ownership of his company and all business assets would still remain with Gavin, but Samantha would have authority to act on his behalf. Only in the event of Gavin's unfortunate death would total power of attorney be transferred to Samantha. By this time the legal talk was making both Gavin and Samantha's heads swim, so they told Stonebridge to just draft the documents and they would sign them.

"I'll have them to you to sign by Friday. But I also think you should talk to your life insurance agent. Things could get sticky, depending on...how all this turns out," warned Stonebridge.

“Yes, we’ve got an appointment with our insurance guy, Jack Greenway later this evening,” said Gavin.

“Why don’t you give me his contact info and I’ll also be in touch with him to coordinate all the necessary details,” Stonebridge said. Samantha gave him Jack’s information as he was heading out. “I’ll be in touch with you tomorrow. I still can’t believe this is happening. I’m so sorry for you Gavin. And for you Sam. I promise to do my part to make sure everything remains legal. Goodbye,” Stonebridge said as he left the Cruises’ home.

Their next critical meeting was just a few hours away. Like Thomas Stonebridge, Jack Greenway had known Gavin and Samantha several years. This meeting however focused more on what would happen in the event that Gavin died during the cryopreservation process, or during reanimation. They spent two hours discussing the implications of his possible death while in cryopreservation. They reviewed Gavin’s current life insurance policy and, from his lap top, Greenway drew up addendums to the policy that dealt with Gavin’s assets going to his closest living relative in the case of his death while in cryopreservation.

With all the legal matters seemingly in order, the next morning brought the Cruises their final, critical conversation about Gavin’s future. Father Andrew O’Reilly had been Gavin and Samantha’s priest since they moved to Austin. Like Stonebridge and Greenway, the Cruise’s felt Father O’Reilly was family. But he alone could answer their spiritual questions. This time, instead of meeting at the home, Gavin and Samantha drove to St. Vincent’s Catholic Church just a few miles from their home. They thought it wouldn’t hurt to say a few extra prayers in the sanctuary while they were

there. As they entered the tall, oak doors of St. Vincent's, they were reminded of just how long it had been since they had attended mass. And confession, for that matter. The Austin sun shined through the old stained glass windows and they headed to the altar in front and knelt for prayer. They both prayed silently. Gavin, for wisdom. Samantha, for strength.

When they finished they headed to Father O'Reilly's office and knocked on the door. "Father Andrew?" Samantha whispered as she gently pushed the door open, peeking in.

"Well Samantha Cruise! It's so good to see you," Father O'Reilly bellowed. "And you too Gavin." He gave them both a hug. In many ways Father Andrew seemed like a typical Irish Catholic priest. He had grey hair and always wore a black short sleeved shirt with a traditional clerical collar. But in other ways he was untraditional. In his early 60's he still had the energy as someone in his mid 30's. And he always wore tennis shoes. Even during mass. He had a wicked sense of humor, something no one expected from a priest. Gavin and Samantha sat for over an hour explaining their situation. Having never heard anything like it, he couldn't offer much counsel from the Holy Scriptures, but Gavin and Samantha were more so looking for a prayer of blessing from Father Andrew. When they asked, he quickly and wholeheartedly obliged.

"Holy Father, I pray you would keep your precious child, Gavin Cruise in your tender care during these upcoming years. Hold him close to your side, and bring healing to his body. Bless Samantha and their children with the ever present knowledge that their beloved Gavin is safe in your loving care. Bring him back to us soon and reunite

this family to continue to live their lives for you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

“Amen,” Samantha and Gavin said in unison.

The last obstacle the Cruise’s needed to address was to decide who they were going to tell. Obviously their attention turned towards their children. As heartbreaking as it was, they decided to tell their son that daddy had to go away for a long, long time because of business. They knew he could not begin to grasp Gavin’s illness and the drastic and risky measures they were undertaking in an effort for their family to be reunited one day. And obviously Megan was too young to understand anything. Gavin didn’t have any siblings and his mother had died of a stroke two years ago. His father lived in New York City and was retired. They decided a phone call would have to suffice. Samantha had more relatives but they decided she would tell as many of them as she could in person, but they would wait until the procedure was over. Gavin had already told his employees that he would be taking a long leave of absence, but he knew that explanation could only last for a short time. Again, they decided a phone call to Dan Jacobson and the board members would have to be sufficient.

It seemed all the loose ends were being tied up. And now the harsh reality was hitting both Samantha and Gavin. This was actually going to happen. The next day was filled with difficult phone calls and examining legal documents. Neither Samantha nor Gavin fully understood the papers they were signing but they realized that the time needed to carefully read and digest the detailed manuscripts was a luxury they could not afford. Having crossed all the T’s and dotted all the I’s, and having prepared their loved ones as best they could, they both finally fully committed to the idea. Gavin would

enter a cryopreserved state until a cure for his Reye's syndrome could be found. Dr. Mueller would administer the treatment at the Life Center where Gavin's still alive body would be stored until everything was ready. They called Dr. Mueller and told him of their decision.

Samantha summoned her strength. "Dr. Mueller. It's Samantha Cruise. We just want to let you know that we've made arrangements on our end. Everything is ready." She began to weep. "I'm putting my husband into your hands. I need you to promise me that he will be ok, and that things will work out."

"Samantha, I know Dr. Remington is working as hard as he can on a cure. I can't promise anything for him, but I know this man. He is a brilliant researcher and you can put your confidence in him. But I *can* promise you that we, here at the Life Center, will do our part to preserve your husband. I can assure you of that," Dr. Mueller said in a reassuring tone. "I know time is of the essence, but we can have everything ready the day after tomorrow. I will see both of you in two days. Goodbye Samantha."

Chapter 6

Trust can be defined as the firm belief in the ability, reliability, or strength of someone or something. But inherent in the concept of trust is the basic need for that trust. And that need is usually birthed from a seed of doubt. The tension is amplified by the seriousness of the circumstances surrounding the need. And dire circumstances typically call for drastic measures.

After the most difficult night of the Cruise's life, and having completed the heart wrenching task of saying goodbye to his children, Gavin and Samantha began the reluctant drive to Houston. The two barely spoke. It was just too difficult. The three hour trip seemed to take eight. Both felt sick as they approached The Life Center at 11:00 am. They were escorted to a large meeting room where everyone who had been a part of this monumental decision was waiting. Dr. Krocak and Dr. Remington were seated next to each other at the long, oak conference table. Thomas Stonebridge and Jack Greenway were also there. Even Father O'Reilly made the trip. They all exchanged pleasantries but thick tension filled the air. The weight of what was about to happen was palpable.

Dr. Mueller and Dr. VanAndel entered the conference room. "Gavin. Samantha. I'm so glad you are here. And the rest of you too. I know you all play an important part in Gavin's life, and through your influence he has agreed to come to us for his solution. So thank you all for being here," Dr. Mueller said.

"As you all know by now, Gavin will begin preparation for the procedure within a few hours. Since we are up against the clock, Dr. VanAndel and I have consulted and

have agreed to speed up the preparation process. We think, due to the rapid onset of Gavin's symptoms and in an attempt to head off any irreparable damage from his Reye's syndrome, we feel a quicker preparation is in order. In this instance, the benefits far outweigh the risks."

"Catherine," Dr. Mueller called out. "Would you please lead Gavin to the preparation room?"

A young nurse entered the room. "Certainly doctor. Gavin, would you please come with me?"

Everyone in the room stood. Samantha, trembling, held Gavin tight. "Gavin, I'm so scared. I love you so much and I don't want you to go. But, I think it's for the best."

Gavin didn't know where he summoned the strength but he tried to assure her. "I know Honey. I'm just going in for the preparation right now. The final procedure isn't until tomorrow morning. I think this is just a simple treatment to get me ready for the procedure." Breaking free from his wife's grip, he left the room.

Nurse Catherine led Gavin down a long hallway at the Life Center. The strange music that continually played throughout the building was now haunting him. He thought, what if this is the last music I hear? They came to a large room with a sign hanging over the door showing it to be the preparation room. She asked Gavin to put on the hospital gown that was on the examination table and left the room. As he changed he looked around. This didn't seem like any kind of medical room he had been in before. The room held only the examination table and a couch. Just like everything at the Life Center, it seemed somehow very different.

Nurse Catherine reentered the room a few minutes later and asked Gavin to lie down on the examination table. “Don’t worry. I’ll begin by hooking you up to this machine that will monitor your vital signs. Then, all you’re going to get is an IV of some medicine that will calm your nerves. After about a half an hour, I’ll start another IV of cryoprotectants that prepares your organs and tissue for the procedure. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Gavin thought it was strange that she said there was nothing to worry about. It was almost as if she’s done this hundreds of times. Was this so routine that there was actually nothing to worry about, he thought. He doubted it, but tried to relax. After hooking him up to the machine with some electrodes, the nurse administered the first IV which did as she had promised. It calmed his nerves. He couldn’t tell what the next IV actually did, but according to her and Dr. Mueller, it was getting his body ready for the procedure.

After about three hours of sitting still on the couch in the preparation room, he asked the nurse if it was necessary to stay in the room or if he could go out and talk to his wife.

“Most of our patients remain here, but I don’t see why not. It seems the medicine is taking affect, but let me check your vitals just to make sure.” After reading the display on the machine and unhooking the IV that remained in his arm, she gave him the permission he was looking for. “Wait here while I go see where she is.” A few minutes later she returned and said, “Your wife is in the meditation room, right down the hall.” Gavin assumed this was some kind of chapel where family members could go to pray.

As Gavin, still in his hospital gown, slowly opened the door to the meditation room, he saw Samantha sitting on a couch facing Dr. Remington, engaged in what seemed like a deep conversation. He assumed they were talking about progress in finding a cure for Reye's syndrome. As Gavin entered, they both jumped up. "Gavin, what are you doing here?" Samantha ran to him and hugged him.

"The nurse let me out for a few minutes."

"Dr. Mueller told me about the preparation process."

"Yes, basically it has just been a couple of IV's of medicine."

"Dirk. Any more progress on finding my cure?" Gavin asked.

"Oh...yes. Gavin, my research team and I are making considerable strides. As I said, I think within five years we will be very close," Dr. Remington tried to reassure him.

"A lot can happen in five years," said Gavin reflectively.

"Yes it can," Remington replied quickly glancing at Samantha.

The next morning came quickly. It felt almost like a death row criminal's last day on earth. No one slept much. After a private and painful goodbye between Gavin and Samantha, Nurse Catherine wheeled Gavin into the procedure room at the Life Center. This, unlike the preparation room, looked more like a typical operating room. There were several machines and devices that Gavin did not recognize. He was no expert in cryopreservation, but Dr. Mueller was.

Even though he'd only met Dr. Mueller a few days ago, he realized he would have to trust him. Trust him with his life. Gavin came to the uneasy conclusion that he

was about to put his life in the hands of Dr. Mueller and trust Dr. Remington to find a cure for his Reye's syndrome. And once that cure was found, he'd have to again trust Dr. Mueller to reanimate his body safely. The night before, Gavin had remembered a quote by Ernest Hemmingway from an English class back at USC. "The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." Trust, he concluded, is a difficult proposition. Gavin knew he would have to evaluate the wisdom of that trust from the other side. And that would probably be five years from now.

But lying on the table, being prepared for the procedure, Gavin still had doubts. Unsettling questions continued to haunt him. What if he never woke up? What if he woke up in five years but something went wrong with the reanimation process and he suffered tissue or organ damage? What would the world look like in five years? What would his family be like? And what if it took longer, much longer for Dr. Remington to find a cure for Reye's syndrome? How would things change if he remained in cryopreservation for ten years? Twenty years?

"Mr. Cruise?" The words jolted him from his thoughts. "We're about to begin the procedure. My nurse is going to start an IV which will put you to sleep. Once you're unconscious, we will place you in the cooling box. Then, one of our cryonic engineers will begin controlling your cooling rate and bring you down slowly until you reach optimum temperature. All you need to do is go to sleep. We'll take care of everything else," said Dr. Mueller.

Gavin took a deep breath and saw the nurse administer the IV that would, within moments, put him to sleep for years. "Good night, Mr. Cruise. Have a good rest. And we will see you soon."

Chapter 7

Late Lament

*Breathe deep the gathering gloom
Watch lights fade from every room
Bedsitter people look back and lament
Another day's useless, energy spent...*

*Impassioned lovers wrestle as one
Lonely man cries for love and has none
New mother picks up and suckles her son
Senior citizens wish they were young...*

*Cold hearted orb that rules the night
Removes the colours from our sight
Red is gray and yellow white
But we decide which is right
And which is an Illusion*

- Graeme Edge

“Mr. Cruise?” Gavin Cruise?” Gavin took a deep breath and tried to open his eyes. “Relax Mr. Cruise. Don’t try to speak. Don’t try to open your eyes. They’re not ready yet. The eyes always take a bit longer to readjust,” a quiet female voice said reflectively.

Gavin didn't recognize the voice. The accent seemed foreign. In fact Gavin wasn't sure about anything that was going on. He could feel his eyes were bandaged. He knew he was lying down but he felt constrained, like he was tied down to a bed. He began to try to move but his muscles were weak. "Lay still Mr. Cruise. This will take time. Fortunately, time is a gift you've been granted," the voice whispered. Another voice seemed to be present, but the sounds quickly faded away as Gavin lost consciousness.

"Mr. Cruise? It looks like you're waking up. Glad to have you back with us," a male voice said. "Relax, Mr. Cruise. Annabella, hand me the scissors to remove the bandages. I think they're ready."

"Yes Doctor," said the same female voice Gavin had heard earlier.

Gavin could feel the cold steel blades cutting material away from his eyes. As the bandages were peeled back, Gavin slowly opened his eyes. Everything was very bright, like suddenly someone turned the lights on in a very dark room. His eyes hurt for a few seconds but slowly began to adjust. He saw a young woman, but didn't recognize her. He assumed from the voices he had heard, this was Annabella. There was also a man who appeared to be in his late 40's or early 50's. As Gavin had guessed, he was strapped to what appeared to be a hospital bed and was hooked up to one machine that he presumed was monitoring his vital signs. Gavin, still quite groggy, looked around. Everything seemed strange. He was in a small, white room. There was nothing on the walls. No pictures, no windows, no clocks. Nothing. He didn't recognize these people and wondered what was going on.

“Annabella, I am very pleased with his response,” the male voice said.

“Yes, Dr. Binoche. He seems to be responding quite well,” Annabella replied.

“I need to tend to other important matters, but now that Mr. Cruise is back with us, I’ll leave him in your care.”

“Thank you Dr. Binoche. I’ll tend to him,” Annabella said as Dr. Binoche left the room.

“Where am I?” Gavin asked. “Who are you?”

“My name is Annabella Duvernay. And you’re at the International Center for Cryonics, in Chateauroux.”

“*Where* am I? Who was that man? What’s going on?” Gavin demanded.

“Please try to relax,” Annabella said softly.

“I’m tired of people telling me to relax. And why am I tied down to this bed?” Gavin asked.

“It’s for your own safety, and it’s natural to have many questions, Mr. Cruise. You’re at the International Center for Cryonics in France. And that man was Dr. Cesar Binoche, the head of the ICC.”

“Mr. Cruise, you’ve been asleep for a long time,” Annabella said as she sat down in a chair beside him. “You’ve been with us for many years and Dr. Binoche has studied your fascinating case for a long time. He agreed that the time was right for your reanimation.”

It was all coming back to him. Dirk Remington diagnosing him with Reye’s syndrome. The Life Center and Dr. Mueller. Gavin remembered being prepared for cryopreservation. He remembered it all. But where was his wife, Samantha? Where was

Dr. Mueller? And who was this Annabella? Who was Dr. Binoche and what was the International Center for Cryonics? He was determined to get answers, but since he felt weak and was in an unknown environment, he decided a calm approach would be best.

“Annabella?”

“Yes, Mr. Cruise?”

“First of all, you can call me Gavin.” He didn’t trust her but he wanted to seem as though he did. “Can you please untie me? I’m not going to hurt anyone. I just want to know what is happening to me. Can you please tell me what’s going on,” Gavin begged.

“Tell me what you remember,” she said as she began to loosen his arm and leg restraints.

“I remember my wife and I being told I had a terrible disease, Reye’s syndrome. But our doctor, Dirk Remington was a few years away from finding a cure. But since the disease was going to kill me in a few weeks, he sent me to the Life Center in Houston, where Dr. Karl Mueller put me into cryonic suspension. But what’s going on? Why am I in France? Where are my wife and children?” Gavin sat up on the bed and began to weep.

Annabella reached out and hugged Gavin, trying to comfort him. “Gavin, I’ve been taking care of you for some time now as you’ve been in the process of coming back to us. But I need to warn you that what I’m about to tell you will be difficult to hear.”

Chapter 8

The nature of reality seems perpetually constant. Stable. Secure. But when, like a sky-divers freefall, the seemingly solid foundation of reality is ripped away, humanity searches, even grasps for any stability it can find. When certainty gets turned upside down, the mind struggles to even survive.

“Gavin. There are many things that will take some getting used to. But I think it would be best if you heard it from Dr. Binoche,” Annabella insisted.

She took Gavin by the hand and led him out of the room. Gavin noticed the sterile nature of his surroundings. Not in a germ-free sense, but in every sense. There were no external clues to help determine anything about this place. As they walked down the hallway, he noticed the whole complex was exactly like the room he just left. There were no windows, no clocks. Just white walls, white floors and white ceilings. He noticed armed guards also dressed in white standing in front of every exit. It seemed he was being held prisoner. But he didn't know why. Perhaps Dr. Binoche could provide some answers.

“Mr. Cruise...I mean, Gavin. Here is Dr. Binoche's office. I think he should be the one to tell you.” Annabella opened the office door and led Gavin in. The office, like the rest of the ICC was sterile. Plain. Void of any color. Dr. Binoche rose from behind his desk holding a file.

“Gavin Cruise. My name is Dr. Cesar Binoche, and I run the International Center for Cryonics. Tell me, how do you feel?”

“Listen, I don’t know who you people are, but I need some answers,” Gavin said, nearly shouting. Suddenly the room began to spin as Gavin tried to maintain his balance.

“Please Mr. Cruise, sit down,” Dr. Binoche instructed. Annabella took Gavin by the hand and led him to a chair in the office. “I know you’re very confused. That is to be expected. But I need to know how you are feeling physically. Then I will begin answering all your questions. You deserve that,” Dr. Binoche reassured Gavin.

“I feel weak. Dizzy. I can’t quite shake the cob webs from my head. But mostly, I’m confused. Your nurse, Annabella, told me you would be the one to let me know what’s happening. What in the world is going on Dr. Binoche? I’m begging you.”

“Yes, well Mr. Cruise, I’ve been studying your file for a long time.” He raised the folder he was holding in his hand. “You are a fascinating case, Mr. Cruise. It seems, long ago, you were put into cryopreservation at the Life Center in Houston, Texas by a Dr. Karl Mueller.”

“Yes, I remember. I agreed to let Dr. Mueller put me into suspended animation until my doctor, Dirk Remington found a cure for the Reye’s syndrome that I have. He said it would be five years.” Dr. Binoche quickly glanced at Annabella, then back at Gavin’s file.

“Gavin, listen to me. What I’m about to tell you will be difficult to hear but it’s the truth,” said Dr. Binoche. “Your memory has served you well. You *have* been in cryonic suspension. And, yes you *were* at the Life Center in Houston and under the care of Dr. Mueller. But that was a long time ago. You see, when the World Department of Cryonic Regulation and Management took over all worldwide cryonic activities 35 years ago,

everything changed. They enacted new regulations to reign in the explosive growth of cryonics. And that's how you ended up in our care here at the ICC," said Dr. Binoche.

"Did...you say 35 years ago?"

"Yes. You were told that you'd be reanimated in about five years, when a cure for Reye's syndrome was found. But Gavin, according to these records from the Life Center and our records at the ICC, you've been in cryonic suspension for about 80 years."

Gavin felt ill. The room was now spinning and he couldn't believe his ears.

"No, wait. That can't be true. It's only been five years from the time I went to the Life Center. My wife and children are in Austin, waiting for me. Dr. Remington must have found a cure by now," Gavin said trying to convince himself.

"No Gavin. According to these records, your wife Samantha was killed about ten years after you were stored at the Life Center. Everyone you knew and worked with are a distant memory. They are all long gone, Gavin. I'm sorry. I know it's hard to believe, but this is your new reality."

"No!" Gavin shouted. He stood up and tried to run for the door. "Security," Dr. Binoche shouted as two armed guards rushed through the door and easily subdued Gavin. Annabella grabbed a syringe from her hospital coat and injected Gavin with its contents. Within 30 seconds, Gavin was barely conscious and was easily led away by the security guards. "Take him back to his holding room," said Dr. Binoche. "And Annabella, make sure he stays medicated. He is still an important part of the plan."

Chapter 9

No one likes change. Because we are creatures of habit, sudden change is unnatural. It irritates our sensibilities and grates against our very souls. And when change is catastrophic and entire paradigms shift, the human psyche is shocked into an altered state of reality that the mind is ill-equipped to handle.

The two armed guards led Gavin back to his holding room, although Annabella could have handled him herself as the drugs had now taken full effect. As soon as Gavin's body hit the bed he passed out. Annabella sat by Gavin for the next four hours, monitoring his vital signs and contemplating his fate. Were they doing the right thing, she wondered. Would Gavin discover their secret? Could she really trust Dr. Binoche?

Annabella continued to keep Gavin sedated but allowed the drugs to subside just enough for him to regain consciousness for his scheduled visit with Claude Gorlios. Mr. Gorlios was a local lawyer from Chateauroux who specialized in estate law. He had worked at the ICC with Dr. Binoche several times so Annabella knew him, but wasn't completely sure she trusted him.

Soon the ICC guards entered Gavin's holding room and led him to a small conference room where Mr. Gorlios was waiting. Annabella insisted on accompanying Gavin, assuring the guards it was to monitor his health. "Mr. Cruise. My name is Claude Gorlios and I have some paperwork for you to sign," he said.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gorlios?" Gavin struggled to pronounce his name correctly. "I'm not signing anything. I don't even know what's going on here. I was just told that everyone I knew, everything I knew, is gone." Gavin's head seemed still foggy. "I...I

can't seem to get a grip on what's happening. I'm very confused. *Who* are you?" Gavin demanded.

"As I said, my name is Claude Gorlios and I'm a lawyer here in Chateauroux. I work with Dr. Binoche here at the ICC taking care of legal issues for patients."

"Exactly what kind of legal issues are you talking about?"

"I'm sure that in your present state, it will be difficult for you to understand. I know, long ago when you entered into cryonic suspension in Houston, at the Life Center, those procedures were overseen by what was then known as the Federal Department of Cryonic Regulation and Management. But as time went on and the Life Extension Society gained greater influence to enact laws regulating our field, that federal department dissolved. This development allowed other scientists and lawmakers who were more sympathetic to our cause to begin regulating our industry. Time went on and the World Department of Cryonic Regulation and Management was formed. And so was the International Center for Cryonics here in France. Pioneers like Dr. Mueller at the Life Center and Dr. VanAndel of *LifeSpan* are no longer with us...so to speak. But now, there are other brilliant scientists like Dr. Binoche who are carrying on their work."

Gavin just listened in stunned silence.

"The papers I need you to sign are just a formality, but they're necessary for the next part of your journey," Gorlios continued. "I need you to sign these papers Mr. Cruise."

"I'm not signing anything," Gavin protested.

Gorlios looked at Annabella. "Nurse, I think our friend needs a little persuasion." Annabella took another syringe from her coat and injected its contents into Gavin's arm.

Gavin was already so weak he couldn't struggle. After about ten minutes, the drugs were obviously taking affect. Now, it was easy for Gorlios to convince Gavin to sign the papers. Normally, in Gavin's old world, he would have read over the legal document and examined every detail, but nothing about his new life was normal. Because of the drugs taking effect, Gavin was now much more open to the power of suggestion.

"Let's try this again, Mr. Cruise. The documents. I need your signature," Gorlios reiterated.

This time, in a semi-conscious state, Gavin complied and signed his name at the bottom of the document. Drifting in and out, Gavin could hear Gorlios talking with Dr. Binoche. He thought he heard something about the papers releasing company and personal assets to his closest living relative, but that didn't seem to make any sense. He struggled to understand and to stay awake. Could it be that one or both of his children were still alive? Nothing made sense. Again, Gavin could make out only limited parts of a conversation, this time between Dr. Binoche and Annabella.

"Annabella, do you have the vile?" Dr. Binoche asked quietly.

"Oh, Cesar. Are you sure this is necessary? He just came back to us. And now to end his life seems...I don't know. It just doesn't seem right," Annabella protested.

"Now don't get cold feet. This has always been part of the plan. Now that we have his signature, we can forward the papers on. We'll receive our payment, and Gavin Cruise will be no more. And don't forget, this money will go a long way to advancing our work here at the ICC."

Annabella thought back to her childhood in southern France where she longed to one day become a nurse and help people. She remembered her dreams of taking care

of the old and young alike, and the joy it would bring her. Annabella had always gone out of her way to make sure people were comfortable. It's just who she was. But now she was being asked to do something that went against everything she once loved.

“We need to stick to the plan. You need to do this, Annabella.” The words jolted her back to the present. “Can I count on you?”

Annabella looked at Dr. Binoche and nodded her head.

Chapter 10

Loyalty is a powerful bond. Like hardened cement, it joins two parties in a seemingly unbreakable union. But when new insight sheds light on the truth and lies begin to be revealed, loyalties can shift and the line between right and wrong, good and evil can be blurred beyond recognition. Loyalty, in some cases, is not loyal at all.

Once Annabella reached Gavin's holding room, she entered it and saw him strapped to the bed. She slowly entered the room and with the syringe of lethal drugs in her coat pocket walked towards the bed. But she was torn. Should she follow through with the plan Dr. Binoche was perpetrating, or should she somehow try to help him? She knelt down beside Gavin's unconscious body.

Annabella suddenly grabbed his arm. "Mr. Cruise," she whispered urgently. "Mr. Cruise, wake up."

Gavin awoke from his drug induced state.

"I can't do it, Gavin. I...I'm going to help you. But you must trust me."

"Annabella? What are you talking about?"

"Dr. Binoche wants to kill you. He's sent me to inject you with this drug that will stop your heart. But I just can't do it. You are an innocent pawn in this charade," she said as she held up the syringe.

"Wait. I don't understand. Dr. Binoche is trying to kill me? What charade are you talking about?"

"Those papers Mr. Gorlios had you sign. They're not what you think. Nothing is as you think. But I don't have time to explain. Quickly, come with me." She grabbed his

hand, squeezed it tight and helped him to his feet. Cracking open the door, Annabella looked down the hallway to see if it was safe. "It's clear," she said. "Let's go."

She led Gavin down a back hallway at the ICC and down through a dark, damp tunnel that looked like it had been barely used. They came to a door at the end of the tunnel and she told Gavin to close his eyes. "Your eyes won't be used to the bright sun."

Gavin squinted and slowly let the light in. It had been some time since Gavin Cruise had been outside. He could tell he was not in Texas. Annabella led Gavin away from the ICC and into her car waiting in the parking lot. It was a quick drive on a dirt road out of town.

"Where are you taking me?" Gavin insisted.

"Don't worry. I'm taking you to my apartment in Ardent, for now. Gavin, what they are trying to do to you... it's just not right. I'm taking a great risk in helping you, but I know it is the right thing to do."

It took just ten minutes to arrive at Annabella's apartment. She led him to the small corner apartment in the old, stone four-plex that lay on a quiet, cobblestone street. Checking to make sure no one saw them, she unlocked the door and let him in.

"Ok. Sit down and try to relax," she said pointing to the couch. "I'm going to have to leave you for a bit and get back to the ICC. But don't worry. I don't think anyone saw us leave. Here..." She pulled out a laptop computer. "Use this and I think you'll get the answers you are looking for. The password is written right here." She pointed to a note taped to the computer. "I wish I could stay with you to make sure you're going to be ok, but I need to get back." She grabbed him by the shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks. "I'll be back in a few hours," she said as she rushed out of the apartment.

Gavin didn't know what to think. This whole thing was unbelievable, but he figured the only way to find out what was going on was to do some research. He was thankful that Annabella had left him the computer, although he wondered how much technology had changed over the years. He decided to first try to find out what had happened to his family. Were his children still alive? They would be very old by now. He searched for their names but found nothing. Then he decided to research the death of his wife Samantha. He searched 'Samantha Cruise' and found a listing for several charity events in Austin. One was being hosted by Samantha Cruise! Could this be his wife, or merely some coincidence? He opened the web page and what he saw cut him to the core. It was a picture of his wife standing next to Dr. Remington. The headline read, 'Cruise, Remington to host local fundraiser.' The date was from two years after he went to the Life Center.

But looking further into the internet searches, he realized something else was not right. The dates on the latest articles. He pushed himself away from the computer and started to shake. The shocking realization hit him hard. It was not 80 years since his cryopreservation. It had been just two. Dr. Binoche and Mr. Gorlios had lied to him. But why? How did he get to the ICC in France? His family must still be alive, he thought. But how much did Samantha know about his whereabouts? He still had many unanswered questions.

Gavin spent the next three hours researching events from Austin from the last two years as well as world events, all the while trying to make sense of this insanity. He looked into his company. It was still going strong under Dan Jacobson's leadership.

Unlike everything he'd been told recently, everything was much like it had been before his time at the Life Center. Yet, he sensed he was in some kind of danger but didn't know what kind or who he could trust. His only hope for answers lay with Annabella.

Chapter 11

For years, running a sub four-minute mile was thought to be impossible. The four minute barrier stood firm like a giant, impenetrable force holding would-be record breakers in its unyielding grasp. But what seemed impossible years ago is now an everyday occurrence. Its grip now loosened, what was formerly beyond reach is currently commonplace. Long held convictions and strong beliefs can sometimes be entirely inaccurate. Authorities can be mistaken and so-called experts can be wrong. And sometimes even reality is not at all what it seems.

As Gavin continued searching the web for clues to what had happened to him over the past two years, he suddenly heard a car screech to a halt outside the apartment. He raced to the window. Gavin saw Annabella enter the building and it was just seconds until he heard the door behind him unlock. She quickly entered the apartment.

“Gavin, are you ok?” Annabella asked as she quickly sat down by his side.

“Yes, I’m fine but I’ve discovered the truth. I’ve been lied to. Your colleagues at the ICC have been lying to me. They told me it had been 80 years since I was at the Life Center in Houston. But that’s not true, is it?” Gavin asked accusingly. “I just don’t understand any of this? Why was I reanimated? Where are my wife and children? They’re alive, aren’t they? I saw it on your computer. You’ve got to help me. Or were you part of this scheme too?”

“Oh no, Gavin. I mean, I knew some things Dr. Binoche was doing, but when I found out all that they had planned, and when I saw you for the first time, I just couldn’t

go through with it.” They both sat down on the living room couch. “Gavin, I did some investigating back at the ICC and found a few things that will definitely interest you. Remember those papers you signed for Mr. Gorlios? Dr. Binoche kept you heavily sedated when you signed them. He sent them to someone in Austin, Texas. They have something to do with releasing your personal and company assets to your closest living relative.”

“Samantha? Why would she...?” Gavin didn’t finish his sentence. He didn’t want to think about it although he knew he eventually needed to face the possibility that Samantha might be involved in what was happening.

“I don’t know, Gavin. But I also overheard Dr. Binoche talking to another man, also from Austin. But I couldn’t tell what they were talking about. Only that it sounded urgent,” Annabella continued.

At this point Gavin was feeling nauseated. Numerous questions raced through his mind. What was really happening? Who could he trust? He didn’t know but he was determined to find out, and it appeared the only one who could help him was Annabella.

“We need to get out of here,” Gavin said.

“Yes, I couldn’t agree more. When they find out that you’re not dead, they’re going to come looking for you. For us. We don’t have much time,” Annabella said.

“I need you to get me back to Austin, so I can get my life back,” Gavin pleaded.

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been thinking. We will need to get you some clothes and a passport. You’ll also need to get some rest and eat something to begin to regain your strength.”

“A passport? How are we...?”

“I’ve already thought of that,” Annabella interrupted. “I have a friend in Paris and I’ve already called him. He can set us up with the documentation you will need to travel internationally. I’ve already given him your physical description. He’s very good, or so I’m told,” Annabella smiled. Gavin was beginning to like her approach. Even though she had worked at the ICC for Dr. Binoche, she was helping him. It seemed like she would do whatever it took to help him.

“My brother sometimes stays over and he has some clothes you can have.” He followed her into the spare bedroom as she put some clothes into a small suitcase.

“Annabella. I want to thank you for helping me,” he said as he looked into her eyes. She smiled and said, “Well of course. I’ve been taking care of you for some time now and have grown...” she hesitated. “I guess I’ve grown attached to you Mr. Cruise.”

The moment seemed like it wanted to linger, but was suddenly interrupted by the shouts of men’s voices. “Oh no! They’ve found us,” Annabella cried. “Quickly. Come with me.” She grabbed him by the hand and led him down the back stairway of the apartment. They hid by the side of the building as the guards from the ICC entered the front entrance.

“Ok. Let’s go.” Gavin and Annabella ran towards her car, flung open the door and jumped in. As soon as she started the car a gun shot rang out from her apartment window and narrowly missed her car. She floored the accelerator and tore through the city to a remote dirt road leading out of Ardentes. They were safe, for now.

Chapter 12

When Judas Iscariot entered the Garden of Gethsemane and embraced Christ, history's greatest betrayal was quickly and cruelly completed with a single gesture – a kiss. Handed over to the Roman guards, Jesus was only hours away from a brutal death at Golgotha. But betrayal is not just a scourge from ancient history. Deception is enduring and treachery timeless. Secret schemers connive and sinister plots are perpetrated even today. And when two or more are involved, it becomes a conspiracy.

Dr. Binoche walked into his office at the ICC, sat down at his desk and picked up the phone. He dialed the international number and waited for the connection to be made.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Dr. Remington? It's Dr. Binoche, from the International Center for Cryonics here in Chateauroux. I know we are dealing with a time difference in Austin, so I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time.”

“Ah, Dr. Binoche, I've been expecting to hear from you. No, this is as good a time as any,” said Dirk Remington eagerly.

“I just wanted you to know that the reanimation of your patient, Gavin Cruise, was successful. He came through the process just as we expected and everything is going according to plan.”

“And the papers?”

“Yes. Rest assured, Dr. Remington. Mr. Cruise signed the papers and my associate, Claude Gorlios is sending them to your friend, Thomas Stonebridge.”

“I don’t need to remind you that those papers are the key to this whole operation. By signing those papers, our friend Mr. Cruise just signed over the legal rights to his fortune to Samantha, and we have very specific plans for that money. Our lawyer assures me that once those papers are in my possession, we’ll be in control of the money we need,” said Remington.

“And Mr. Cruise?” Remington continued.

Dr. Binoche walked across the room and closed his office door. “Yes. He’s dead. We’ve taken care of him. He was only awake long enough to sign the papers, just as you had planned. Now, about the payment?”

“Don’t worry Dr. Binoche. I fully realize that, just as I need Mr. Cruise’s money to fund my plans, you are looking for your payment to continue your work in France. And you will be paid. Just follow my previous instructions and the money will be wired to your account. And don’t worry. It’s untraceable. I’ve had Mr. Stonebridge take care of all that. I hope the payment will fully meet your desires, Dr. Binoche. It was indeed a pleasure doing business with you. Good bye,” Remington said as he hung up the phone.

He drew a deep breath and looked up. “It’s all been taken care of. The papers are on the way and soon the money will be in our possession,” Remington said as he smiled at Samantha Cruise.

Chapter 13

History records mankind's inability to adequately care for himself. King Solomon's wisdom proclaimed that two are better than one. If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pitied is the man who falls and has no one to help him. Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. And cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

In reality, everyone needs help once in a while. But pride needs to be swallowed before aid is asked for. Humility must unseat arrogance in any request for assistance. And when it is, the support rendered can be the crucial difference between life and death.

Annabella's car raced through the streets of Paris. "Whoever shot at us didn't follow us. I made sure of that," Annabella said, trying to reassure Gavin of her pure intentions. "Now we'll head to my friend Pierre's apartment to get the passport and some money."

They soon arrived at a tall apartment building in downtown Paris. Annabella parked her car on the street and walked with Gavin to the front of the building. She rang Pierre's apartment buzzer.

"Pierre? It's me. Annabella. I'm here with Mr. Cruise."

"Come right up," the reply came over the speaker as the buzzer rang unlocking the front door.

They took the elevator to the 9th floor and walked down the hall towards Pierre's apartment. As they approached it, the door was cracked open ever so slightly. Gavin and Annabella walked right in.

"Pierre. It is so good to see you," Annabella rushed to him and kissed him on the cheek. "This is the friend I was telling you about over the phone. Gavin, meet Pierre du'Monceaux."

"Mr. Cruise, It is good to meet you. I hope they haven't hurt you," said Pierre.

"It's nice to meet you as well and let me first of all thank you for helping me," replied Gavin.

"Any friend of Bella's is a friend of mine," he smiled.

Annabella and Gavin sat down as Pierre brought them some sandwiches he had prepared and opened a bottle of wine." As they started to eat dinner Annabella began asking Pierre some questions.

"Did you get the passport?"

"Yes. From the description you gave me, I think I did a pretty good job." Pierre tossed the passport on the table for them to examine. Gavin picked it up and opened it.

"Henri Moreau?" I'm Henri Moreau?" Gavin asked.

"I think it sounds handsome," Annabella said as she felt herself start to blush.

"I guess it will have to do. But how am I going to board the plane and get through security and immigration? I don't speak French," Gavin wondered.

"That's why I'm going with you." Annabella exclaimed.

"You're doing what?"

“You need my help to get out of the country, Gavin. And right now, it appears I’m the only friend you’ve got.”

Annabella was very convincing. After all, she was the one who helped Gavin escape the ICC and got him to Paris. She arranged for him to get set up with food, clothes, a passport and money. She had even booked him a flight from Paris to Austin that was scheduled to leave the next day. But Gavin hadn’t realized Annabella had also bought a ticket for herself. And now, as she was volunteering to come along and help him, he began to realize just what a kind person Annabella was. She had risked her very life to save his.

Chapter 14

When you boil it down to its most simple form, every journey consists merely of steps. One after another, after another. But the passage from one state of affairs to another is divided by a transition. A pause. A breath. A brief break to gaze back and reminisce, to look around and evaluate, to look forward and plan. Yet each step in every journey takes faith. Faith to trust the dark unknown path on which the foot treads. Faith, placed in the hands of someone you hope you can trust.

Morning seemed to come early for Gavin and Annabella. Pierre had fixed breakfast for the three of them and they enjoyed it although they felt the rush to get to the airport on time and the tension of heading into a situation they knew little about.

Annabella had purchased two, first class, one way tickets on Air France from Paris to New York City, with a connecting flight to Austin, that left at 8:45 a.m. Pierre used Annabella's car to drive them to Charles de Gaulle Airport and got them there in enough time to drop them off at Terminal Two, say goodbye, get through security and board the plane. To Gavin's surprise, it went very smoothly. Annabella did most of the talking. The two passengers found their seats and both felt the awkwardness of traveling with someone of the opposite sex that they barely knew. But as the flight took off, they found themselves feeling more comfortable by the minute. The discussion naturally turned to making plans for when they arrived in Austin.

After some general discussion of what Austin was like, Annabella finally brought up the subject neither felt comfortable discussing, but both knew they must. "Gavin, I

know this is very difficult for you, but we need to talk about your wife. From the little I know about your situation, it seems...I mean, I'm not sure if we can trust her."

"Yes. I've been thinking a lot about that since yesterday when I saw the picture of Dirk Remington and her together. I remember she said she had met him once before; before my cryopreservation. But it seems there is some connection between the two of them. It kills me to say this it but I'm not sure if I can trust her either. And I definitely don't think I can trust him."

"I think we need to be very careful before we approach her. If she had anything to do with this whole plan, we definitely can't trust her. Someone wants you dead. And someone wants your money. I think the answer lies in Austin," Annabella continued. "Is there anyone there you can trust?"

"I'm not sure. Of the people who were involved in this decision, I'm not sure I can trust any of them. I know I can't trust anyone at the Life Center, Dr. Mueller or that other doctor, VanAndel. The more I think about them, the more creeped out I get. Our family practice doctor, Noah Krocak told me I was sick. Should I believe him? Or were he and Remington in this together?" Gavin wondered aloud.

"And what about Samantha?" Annabella added. "How much did she know? How involved was she? How involved *is* she?" Neither of them could bring themselves to speculate further.

The eight hour flight to New York seemed to go by fast. Between lunch, an on board movie, some small talk and a few short naps, Gavin and Annabella arrived at their one hour layover in New York. Thanks to Pierre's convincing fake passport, they had just enough time to go through immigration, customs and security, before finding

their connecting flight to Austin. The American Airlines 737 was soon in the air, headed south. This leg of the flight took about three and a half hours and both Annabella and Gavin napped most of the way.

As the flight neared its final destination, Annabella felt she needed to come up with a more concrete plan of action. At least the first steps of a plan. She figured they'd have to make a few things up as they went along.

“Is there *anyone* you can trust in Austin?” Annabella asked one more time.

“If there’s one person I know I can trust, it’s Father O’Reilly. I wonder if he’s still at St. Vincent’s.”

“Why don’t we start with him? Perhaps he can help us. I assume he knows Samantha?” Annabella inquired.

“Yes. Father Andrew had been our priest for several years. The only danger is that St. Vincent’s is very near our home. We will have to be especially careful to stay out of sight until we can figure out what is going on...and who we can trust.”

The aircraft soon landed and both Annabella and Gavin deplaned. Even though it was dark outside, Gavin put on a pair of sunglasses from his carry on. He wanted to make sure he wasn’t recognized at the airport by any old friends or acquaintances. The two got their luggage and hailed a cab outside of the terminal.

Gavin opened the cab door for Annabella and both climbed in. “St. Vincent’s church on Cherry Lane in Austin,” Gavin instructed the driver.

By this time, it was after 11:00 pm and Gavin wasn’t sure if anyone would be at the church. But he seemed to remember that Father O’Reilly frequently kept late hours.

Often people would come to pray or just talk to this man of God. Gavin also realized that the cover of darkness would help him stay out of sight, at least until morning.

Annabella paid the driver with US currency Pierre had supplied her with, but Gavin hesitated in the cab, contemplating the danger of what they were about to do. She grabbed his hand. "This is it. We've come this far, but we've really only begun. We can't stop now. We need to figure out what's going on, and you said Father O'Reilly is the only person you can trust."

Gavin consented, realizing she was right. They walked up the sidewalk and entered through the large oak doors. There was no one in the sanctuary, only a few lit candles. Gavin led Annabella to the church offices where a light shown from beneath the office door.

"I haven't seen this man in over two years and for all he knows, I'm dead. I think it would be best if I stay out of sight and you go in first...and try to explain." Gavin knew the idea of explaining his situation seemed impossible for anyone to believe, but Annabella just smiled and nodded.

She knocked and opened the door. "Father O'Reilly?" She didn't wait for an answer and walked right in.

"Yes, can I help you, lassie?"

"I'm a friend of a friend of yours, Gavin Cruise. Do you know where he is these days?" Annabella decided to ask the questions to put her in control of the conversation.

"No, Mr. Cruise has been gone for a few years now. Is there something I can help you with? And I'm sorry; I didn't catch your name."

“It’s Annabella; and it’s Mr. Cruise’s whereabouts that I wish to discuss with you,” she replied. “What if I told you that Gavin Cruise is closer than you think? What if I told you he was standing right outside your door?” Annabella asked.

“I’d think you’d probably had one too many pints of Guinness,” O’Reilly laughed. Yet he could sense the seriousness in her voice and she appeared to have her wits about her. “Just what are you trying to tell me?” he asked.

Annabella opened the door and Gavin slowly walked into the office. “Father Andrew?”

Father O’Reilly jumped up and ran to hug Gavin. “Oh, for the love of St. Christopher,” he shouted. “What have you been up to for the past few years? I seem to remember leaving you in Houston, at the Life Center.”

“Father Andrew, sit down. We need to talk,” Gavin said as Annabella closed the door.

For the next two hours, Gavin and Annabella explained the extraordinary events of the last few days. Since it had been such a long time, Gavin noticed it felt good to talk to an old friend. It didn’t seem at all like confession. Just one friend confiding in another, seeking strength and answers. Gavin acknowledged his fear and his growing distrust for his wife. He didn’t know whether to feel ashamed of his growing doubt or just accept it. Gavin just couldn’t be sure of Samantha’s loyalty or her love.

“I’ve seen your wife a few times over the past few months,” said Father O’Reilly. “It seems she’s always with that doctor friend of yours. Dr. Remington. I’m not sure what they’re up to, but I could certainly help you find out.”

“That’s exactly what we had hoped,” said Gavin.

Chapter 15

Sometimes the most brilliantly devised plan is subtly discreet. Military strategists know that before you can pursue an aggressive attack, you must first know the enemy. To quietly observe your adversary is to gain essential information that can be used to achieve a tactical advantage. It has been said you can learn a lot just by watching. This simple statement, while basic at its core, nonetheless is generally found to be true.

After staying overnight in the guest rooms at St. Vincent's, Gavin and Annabella got to work early the next morning. The long flight from the day before had not seemed to affect either of them. They didn't notice any signs of jet lag and seemed to be running on adrenaline. They both realized they had a couple of factors working for their advantage. First, no one in Austin, other than Father O'Reilly, knew they were there. Everyone still thought Gavin was out of the picture. They also realized that no one knew Annabella, a fact they planned to capitalize on.

They devised an initial plan where Annabella would simply follow Samantha from a distance and see if she could discover anything that could be used to their advantage. Father O'Reilly supplied Gavin and Annabella each with a cell phone, and let Annabella use his Chevy Blazer. After receiving directions to the Cruise household, Annabella set out to see what she could find out about Samantha.

Annabella parked the truck down the street outside the Cruise house. It didn't take long for Samantha to appear. Both women watched as Rowan boarded the school bus at the end of the Cruise's driveway. Then Samantha loaded Megan into her BMW and backed out of the driveway. Annabella followed at a safe distance trying not to be

noticed. After Samantha dropped her daughter off at preschool, she headed downtown where she did several mundane errands. Annabella wondered what she could possibly discover from this passive plan of action.

But around 11:30, her suspicions were about to be confirmed. Samantha stopped at a restaurant downtown and Annabella quietly followed her in. Each of the women took a table. Annabella was seated just two tables away from Samantha. Annabella remembered that Samantha had no idea who she was so she felt somewhat safe, although still a bit uneasy. She never once thought she would be spying on a woman who may have been behind a plot to get rid of her husband. Annabella was jolted from her thoughts when a few minutes later, a young, professional looking man joined Samantha at her table.

“Hey Dirk. How are you?” Samantha stood up to hug him before they both sat down. Annabella noticed that she addressed him with great deal of familiarity and continued to listen in. Between ordering lunch and eating, Annabella listened intently and watched the conversation a few tables away. The couple talked about many things Annabella didn’t know anything about; charity events, some of Dirk’s patients, friends of theirs. He also told her something about soon receiving the funds needed to expand his medical practice. He didn’t give details but they both seemed to know what he was talking about.

Annabella could tell by the way they were talking that they were in some kind of a relationship. Several times Samantha reached across the table and held Dirk’s hand. As they finished their meal and paid the bill, Samantha stood up and gave Dirk a kiss on the cheek and the two walked out of the restaurant holding hands.

As Annabella watched them both drive away separately, she now had the evidence she needed to tell Gavin that his wife was in a relationship with another man. But could they no longer trust her at all? Did she know of the recent events that had happened to Gavin, or was she an innocent pawn in this game? As she headed back to St. Vincent's to report to Gavin what she had discovered, Annabella knew she needed to get even closer to Samantha Cruise.

Back at St. Vincent's, Annabella, Gavin and Father O'Reilly discussed what Annabella saw that afternoon. She told Gavin about the lunch encounter between Samantha and a doctor named Dirk. Immediately Gavin knew this to be Dirk Remington, the very man who had diagnosed him with Reye's syndrome and recommended that he see Dr. Mueller at the Life Center two years ago. Things were beginning to make sense, yet several critical questions still remained unanswered. How, and to what extent was Samantha involved? Whose idea was it to have Gavin cryogenically preserved to save him from the effects of his Reye's syndrome? Was it Dr. Remington's or was it Samantha's? Was Gavin even sick at all, or had it *all* been a lie? And what about those papers he signed in France? If those documents indeed gave control of all his assets to Samantha, why did she need them? The three agreed they still needed more answers but also knew that it was just too dangerous for them to stay at St. Vincent's. People at the church knew Gavin and he needed to keep out of sight. They decided to move their base of operation to the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Austin about 10 miles from St. Vincent's and the Cruise household. They could use the church if they needed to get close to Gavin's home, but this change of venue would provide a safe distance where Gavin would not easily be recognized.

Gavin and Annabella decided to get two separate rooms on the same floor of the Sheraton, and after they had checked in, they agreed to meet back in the lounge for dinner and to plan their next move.

As they sat down and ordered their meal the conversation naturally turned to the next step in their plan. “Gavin, just one more thing that I forgot to mention earlier. After your wife and Dr. Remington left the restaurant, I followed Samantha for a while. She made another stop and I followed her into a building in Rollingwood. She went into a conference room at the Primrose building so I followed her in and asked the receptionist what was going on. She told me it was the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.”

“AA? Samantha doesn’t go to AA,” Gavin stated emphatically.

“There seem to be many things you don’t know about your wife, Gavin. But the receptionist asked me if I wanted to attend the meeting. She said that the group meets at 2:30 on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and anyone is welcome.”

Without saying another word, they both now knew how Annabella was going to get closer to Samantha Cruise.

Chapter 16

A first meeting between strangers can be awkward or endearing. Uncomfortable or engaging. One can never fully tell what an initial introduction may hold. But depending on the motive, the encounter can lead to the start of a new friendship or the beginnings of a bond marked by distrust, doubt and suspicion. When deceit is the secret weapon of choice, great care must be given to conceal its presence.

Gavin and Annabella decided to wait until the following Monday to set the next stage of their plan into action. Gavin stayed at the Sheraton, as this next step was solely on Annabella's shoulders. He would have to trust her.

Annabella arrived at the Primrose building in Rollingwood at 2:15. She approached the receptionist who recognized her from a few days earlier. "Hello. My name is Annabella and I was here last week. You told me about the AA meeting. I'd like to sit in, if that's ok," Annabella said.

"Yes, that's certainly fine," the receptionist said. "It's down the hall in room 115. The leader's name is Steven. He's the tall gentleman, in his 40's. Just go on in and introduce yourself. And remember, the group meets every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 2:30."

As Annabella walked down the hall she tried to remember everything she'd ever heard about AA meetings. She wanted to be familiar with the process so she didn't appear too nervous. But then she realized that most people who attend an AA meeting for the first time are probably a bit nervous anyway. It seemed odd that being nervous actually made her more comfortable.

As she opened the door, she realized she didn't catch Steven's last name, but then remembered that it didn't seem like people in AA really used their last names. It was always, *"Hi, I'm Annabella and I'm an alcoholic."* *"Hi, Annabella..."* That type of thing.

"Hello? Are you Steven?" She caught the gentleman's eye. "The receptionist told me I could talk to you about sitting in on one of your meetings," Annabella said quietly.

"Yes. Glad to meet you. You are very welcome to sit in, and the group is always open to adding new members, as long as they are serious about recovery. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"It's Annabella," she said as she extended her hand. Steven had her fill out some preliminary paperwork and assured her that it was completely fine to just sit and observe, although she could join in the conversation if she felt comfortable. He said that it is customary for her to introduce herself as the group begins, and that the members would introduce themselves to her as well. She was beginning to see how this could be the opportunity to begin to befriend Samantha Cruise.

At 2:25, the members of the group began entering the room and the meeting started promptly at 2:30. And as Steven said, he led the group in introductions. Steven addressed the group. "Hey guys. It's great to see you all again. We've got a visitor with us today." Steven looked at Annabella.

"Hi everyone. My name is Annabella."

"Hi Annabella," rang out on cue.

"It's so nice of you to let me sit in and observe. I'm sort of new to this, so if it's ok with you, I'll probably just listen today."

Everyone in the group, the six women and four men, all agreed that would be fine. Each introduced themselves to Annabella and gave their brief story. She pretended to listen intently, but actually only did when it was Samantha's turn.

"My name is Samantha Cruise and I'm an alcoholic. My problem started about two years ago, just after my husband died. It was a very difficult time for me, being alone and raising our two children all by myself. I guess the stress just got to me and I started drinking...heavily," Samantha said.

This time, Annabella spoke up. "I'm so sorry to hear that," she empathized. "Go on." Samantha continued for a while about when she realized she had a problem, but Annabella knew that she had successfully planted a seed. She didn't want to push too hard to arouse any kind of suspicion, but she felt she now had an inroad to talk to Samantha on a more personal level.

Towards the end of the meeting, Annabella spoke up again and asked if it was ok with the group if she came again on Wednesday. She told them she was seriously considering joining the group, if they would have her. As expected, they wholeheartedly agreed. Annabella felt a little guilty about lying to the group. She had never had a drinking problem and wondered how she could keep her story sounding believable. But there was time to figure that out. She reminded herself why she was there and thought she had made a great deal of progress. She had successfully gotten into the same AA group as Samantha Cruise and was in a great position to watch her. But she felt she needed to go even farther.

After the meeting, as people were leaving, Annabella pulled Samantha aside. "Samantha, isn't it?"

“Yes, Annabella, right?”

“Yes, it’s Annabella. Hey, I just wanted to tell you how much your story moved me. It must have been terrible to lose your husband,” Annabella said as her heart began to race.

“Yes, it was,” Samantha said.

Her short answer was hard to read, but Annabella pressed on. “Say, I was wondering, if you’re willing, could we sit down and have coffee sometime. Your story really affected me and, I don’t know, I think it would be great to have a friend, you know, to bounce things off of.”

Samantha thought this might be the beginning of a relationship that might turn into her being Annabella’s sponsor at some point. “Yes, certainly,” she replied. “You said you were going to attend our meeting on Wednesday, right? Why don’t we grab coffee right after that. I’ve got time before I need to pick up my kids.”

“Yes, that sounds great,” Annabella replied. Samantha had taken the bait, but she didn’t realize just how close she would actually get to Samantha Cruise over the next week.

Chapter 17

It is impossible to accurately predict the future. Upcoming expectations can, at best, be only hoped for. As the poet Robert Burns so eloquently penned, but little mouse, you are not alone, in proving foresight may be vain. The best laid schemes of mice and men, go often awry, and leave us nothing but grief and pain, for promised joy.

Indeed schemes, ploys and plans of men are always well thought out, but the intended outcomes are never assured. And when adversaries come face to face and sinister sparring begins, danger rises and plots intertwine in a treacherous web of deceit.

The AA meeting on Wednesday went pretty much as Annabella anticipated. Again, she mostly listened, adding only a few comments to give the illusion that she was beginning to feel more comfortable with the group. She intentionally responded a little more to Samantha than to the others.

After the session, Samantha approached her. “Are we still on for coffee? Why don’t we meet at Frullati’s Café, just down the road? It’s got coffee, sandwiches, everything. Why don’t you just follow me?” Samantha suggested.

“That sounds great. But I’m sort of new in town. I wonder if I could have your cell number...in case I get lost.”

“Sure.” The two women exchanged numbers as they headed towards the parking lot of the Primrose building. Samantha’s phone number would perhaps come in handy, but Annabella didn’t exactly know how. She was making a lot of this up as she went.

Annabella jumped into Father O'Reilly's Blazer which she was beginning to consider her own, and followed Samantha's BMW as it pulled out of the lot.

Frullati's was a typical American coffee shop, unlike the Cafés of Paris. They ordered coffee, sat down by a window and started telling their life stories. Samantha began by telling about her childhood and then how she had met Gavin at USC, and how they had fallen in love. She told her of the Reye's syndrome that killed Gavin two years ago and about how hard it had been until recently. Annabella wished she was somehow recording Samantha's story to replay to Gavin, but realized that would be quite risky. She would just have to remember the details.

Samantha's story made Annabella cringe because she wondered how someone who claimed she loved a man could be responsible for all that happened to Gavin over the past two years. Hiding her growing anger towards Samantha, she said "That must have been very hard for you."

"Oh yes, it was. It's only been within the last six months that I've started to heal. The AA meetings and the group have been wonderful. But, there's something else. I've recently begun dating an old friend of mine. His name is Dirk and he's a wonderful man. A surgeon. He's a brilliant, loving man. I'd love to introduce you to him sometime," she said not realizing how this was working into Annabella's plans.

"Yes, maybe sometime." Annabella didn't want to seem too eager.

"Well enough about me. What about you? I've noticed your accent. Are you from France?"

"Yes, I am." Annabella continued and told Samantha about her childhood. She added in a few fabrications that seemed to be logical beginnings to her fictional drinking

problem, but didn't give too much information not wanting to have to recall specific details and be in jeopardy of being caught in a lie.

As they finished their coffee and their conversation seemed to be nearing its natural conclusion, Annabella again decided to gently push closer to Samantha.

"You know," Annabella said, "It's great to have met a friend like you. I'm pretty new to this country and I think we've hit it off pretty well. I'd love to reconnect with you sometime soon. You said something about your friend, Dirk?"

"Oh, yes. It would be great for us to double date. Do you have a boyfriend?" Immediately her thoughts went to Gavin, but she knew how absurd that was. Gavin was Samantha's husband, but she was obviously in love with Dirk. "No, no one. But that's ok. I don't mind being, how do you say it? A third wheel. Maybe your friend Dirk has a friend for me." They both laughed but Annabella knew she was not interested in starting a relationship with anyone. Anyone, but Gavin. She knew how crazy the feelings she had been hiding were. Gavin was still technically married to Samantha, who was obviously cheating on him. And worse, was quite possibly behind this whole plan to get him out of the way. But she still had to figure out why. And she had to keep her feelings for Gavin under control. It just wasn't right.

"Why don't we tentatively plan on Friday night? After group, we can both head home and get ready for a night out on the town. We'll show you around Austin. We can have dinner at the Mansion at Judge's Hill. It's an old hotel with a great restaurant. You'll love it. And it's on me. I'll just double check with Dirk, but let's plan on it."

As they walked out of Frullati's, they reconfirmed their plans for Friday evening. Annabella could not believe how her plan for getting close to Samantha and Dirk was

working, and Samantha had no idea she was falling into Annabella's and Gavin's trap. Things seemed to be going almost too smoothly.

But as Annabella began the drive back to the Sheraton to fill Gavin in on the events of the day, she suddenly noticed a plain, black Nissan Maxima with dark tinted windows following her. She made several inconspicuous turns in downtown traffic to see if the sedan would continue to tail her. It did. She was now convinced someone was following her but wasn't sure why. The menacing vehicle got close enough to her that, as she looked in her rear view mirror, she could see two men in the front seat. One of the men looked like Dr. Binoche from the ICC. But could it be? Could he have followed her all the way to Austin? As she pulled on to the freeway and tried to speed away, suddenly a loud shot rang out, ricocheting off the side of the Blazer. If it wasn't Dr. Binoche, it definitely was someone who wanted her out of the way. She realized she had to do something drastic to get away so she floored the accelerator. Reaching speeds of over 90 mph, she suddenly swung in front of a slower moving semi truck. This seemed to throw the Maxima off her trail and as soon as there was a bit of distance between her car and the men chasing her, she subtly exited the freeway on to an off ramp. She took a deep breath as she saw the Maxima pass by.

Still looking over her shoulder, she took back roads back to the Sheraton and spent the evening with Gavin and Father O'Reilly talking about the car chase and the events of the day. They agreed that it was indeed possible that Dr. Binoche had followed her to Austin, and discussed plans to be very careful to try to avoid running into him again. They also talked about the success of their plan to get close to Samantha

Cruise. Annabella was sure she was gaining Samantha's confidence. The dinner this coming Friday was sure to be another step closer to Samantha and Dirk Remington.

Chapter 18

Our world is filled with danger. Naïve youth and wise sages daily walk perilous paths of uncertainty. Hidden hazards and unseen threats can lurk around any of life's corners. If one could guard against such dangers so as to surely avoid them, one would certainly pursue this protection. Even if the insurance policy is in the form of a Smith & Wesson.

The next few days were spent between the Sheraton and St. Andrew's planning and waiting. Gavin and Annabella tried to make plans for how she would get even closer to Dirk Remington and to find out more of what was going on, yet they both realized they would simply have to take things as they came. Patience was not their strong suit, so by Friday they were ready for something to happen.

Annabella reviewed her plans with Gavin and Father O'Reilly. After the AA meeting, she would meet Samantha and Dirk at The Mansion at Judge's Hill at 5:30 pm. Samantha had already made the reservations. They would have dinner and through the natural course of conversation she hoped to discover some weakness she could exploit. Somehow, she needed to get close enough to both Samantha and Dirk to find the truth. But in the back of her mind she worried about her safety. Just a few days ago she was chased through the freeways of Austin and narrowly escaped a bullet intended to end her life! She still didn't know the identity of her assailant but she suspected her former employer at the ICC, Dr. Cesar Binoche.

"Annabella, I want you to remember that you need to be careful most of all," said Gavin. "It's important to get close to Sam and Dirk..." He hated thinking of them as a

couple. "...but you need to watch your back. There's no telling what they're up to and just how deep this deception goes."

"Yes. I'll be careful, but I'm determined to get to the bottom of this. What they've done to you, it's just not right," Annabella said.

Father O'Reilly spoke up. "Now listen to me, lassie. I want to make sure you're safe. Like I've always said, 'there's no need to fear the wind if your haystacks are tied down.' It's best to be prepared." Father O'Reilly opened his desk drawer and pulled out a *Smith & Wesson* Bodyguard .38 semi automatic pistol. He handed the small, black handgun to Annabella. As he placed the gun in her hand, she could feel the solid steel against her palm. Both she and Gavin just stared at the weapon and then at Father O'Reilly. "I wasn't always a priest you know," he said with a wink.

"Oh, no. I could never use this. It's just not me," Annabella objected, stepping away from the weapon.

"This Dirk Remington fellow seems dangerous. And what would you expect from a cow but a kick! He's a bad man, Annabella." Father O'Reilly replied. "Have you ever shot a gun?"

"No, but I've watched my father. He was a policeman in the small town where I grew up. I'd go with him to the countryside as he practiced shooting. So, I guess I know a little." Her response didn't instill much confidence in either of the men.

Father O'Reilly showed her the basics of the gun. How the safety worked, how to aim and shoot. But mostly he talked to her about how to be careful with the weapon and that it was only for use in an emergency. They all seemed to realize they could trust neither Samantha nor Remington.

The AA meeting at 2:30 went about as Annabella expected. Again, she mostly listened, and after the session concluded, she and Samantha discussed their plans for the evening. Samantha seemed eager to introduce her to Dirk. She hinted she thought it might be fun to fix Annabella up on a date with one of Dirk's friends at some point. Annabella just played along. Anything to get closer to these two, she thought. Samantha told Annabella she was going home to get ready and Annabella said the same thing, even though she had no plans to return to the Sheraton until later that evening. She had a change of clothes with her in her truck and she hoped to drive past Dr. Remington's office at the University of Texas Medical Center, just to scout it out.

Annabella followed the directions Father O'Reilly gave her from the internet search they did the evening before. She had never met Dirk Remington and didn't know what he looked like, but she realized that she needed to keep out of sight. She didn't want to accidentally bump into him. It would be too much of a coincidence if she ran into him during the day and then had dinner with him and Samantha that same evening.

So Annabella just drove around the building a few times before she parked across the street from the Medical Center. Then she simply watched people go in and out of the building for about 45 minutes. Mainly medical students and some patients, she assumed. She desperately wanted to go inside but didn't feel she could risk it. She'd have to wait and find some other opportunity to get close to Dr. Remington's work.

After changing clothes in a gas station restroom across the street, she was ready to head downtown. She wondered how it might have looked to the gas station attendant when he saw a woman enter the restroom in blue jeans, a short sleeved blouse and

running shoes, and exit in a black chiffon, knee length evening dress and four inch spiked high heels.

The Mansion at Judge's Hill was a very classy place. Old money and high roller types frequented this upscale establishment. As she drove downtown Annabella felt as prepared as she could under the circumstances, but felt a bit safer with Father O'Reilly's cold, black insurance policy in her handbag.

The Mansion was not far from the University of Texas, so it wasn't a long drive. As she approached the hotel, she could feel the elegance in the air. The building was actually 120 year old colonial home that had been converted into a fine hotel. The valet opened her door and took her key. Immediately she saw Samantha and Dirk waiting for her by the glass door entrance. This was the first time she had laid eyes on Dirk Remington, having previously only heard about him. Annabella was surprised how tall and good looking he was. He looked like a doctor, and she, in some way, could see how a woman like Samantha would be attracted to a man like Dirk. Dark hair. Six feet, two. And obviously wealthy. But then again, Gavin Cruise was also good looking and wealthy. As she approached him and Samantha she silently reaffirmed her resolve to find out what was going on.

"Annabella. So glad you could make it. This is my fiancé, Dirk Remington," she said proudly.

Annabella was stunned. Fiancé? She had never noticed a ring on Samantha's finger, but there it was. The diamond was huge and sparkled in the lights of the hotel's entryway. Annabella tried to play it cool. "Dirk." She extended her hand. "It's very nice to

meet you. The two shook hands and then, as he released her hand, he reached over to hold Samantha's.

The three exchanged polite conversation as the hostess checked their reservation and their server showed them to their table. The view was spectacular. It overlooked an old part of downtown Austin. They could even see the brilliant State Capital building from the bay window to their left.

The menus came and after reviewing them for a few minutes they ordered. Annabella, having grown up in rural France in a family with a meager income, had never been to such a fancy restaurant. The prices were not even listed on the menu. While she was tempted to simply enjoy the evening with her two new acquaintances, she realized she needed to focus. She had traveled half way across the world to meet these two, and now she was having dinner with them. She had a job to do and she was determined to get information that would explain what happened to Gavin. She thought she'd better take control of the conversation.

"So Dirk, tell me about your work. You're a doctor, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm in the field of rare diseases. My colleagues and I also do research to discover cures for these diseases. It's very rewarding," Remington said.

"That sounds fascinating," Annabella said in a receptive tone. She knew most men love to talk about themselves, so she didn't have to ask him to tell her more. She just remained silent.

"Yes and the University of Texas has funded my projects, and until recently things have been going well. But about a year ago our funding began to get cut. The bureaucrats here in Austin don't seem to think my research is as important as it used to

be. But I've recently secured some private funding that should let us continue our work," Gavin said glancing at Samantha.

"That's so interesting. I've actually got a background in medicine myself. Well, I used to work at a clinic, I mean. You know, paperwork, filing and managing medical records. Things like that."

"Honey, what about the clerical position that's open in your department?" Samantha interrupted. "Annabella just arrived here in Austin and is still looking for work, right?" She looked at Annabella, and then back at Dirk.

This might be the break I've been looking for, thought Annabella. She realized if she could actually work in the same building as Dirk, she might be able to gain access to his records. There'd be no telling what she could discover, given the right circumstances. Annabella decided to go for it. She hoped Father O'Reilly could be as resourceful in providing documents and a cover story as her friend, Pierre had been back in Paris. She'd have to secure documents that made it legal for her to work in the US, and there were probably many other issues that needed to be handled, but she couldn't let those details derail her now. She just couldn't let this opportunity pass by. Annabella took a deep breath. "Yes. I know I could handle whatever you give me to do in your office. I've got a resume if you need to see one."

"Well, I guess so. I mean, it's a good possibility. We'd have to go through the proper HR channels, but with my recommendation, I don't think you'd have any trouble."

"I think it's a wonderful idea," Samantha replied. Annabella just smiled and decided not to press it further, but could not believe her good fortune.

As the food came, the conversation about the job subsided and the focus shifted to the meal before them. The food was amazing. Annabella enjoyed a half a rock of Braised Short Ribs while Dirk and Samantha both had fresh lobster. The conversation then bounced back and forth between Dirk's work, Samantha's kids and Annabella adjusting to life in Austin. As the three finished eating, Samantha suggested they do some sightseeing, but Annabella declined. Secretly, she'd have liked to have seen more of Austin since she had tried to keep a low profile since arriving a week ago, but she thought she'd best decline the invitation. This evening had already accomplished more than she'd ever anticipated so she decided to not risk anything. Annabella didn't want to get too comfortable and let something slip that would indicate her true objective. To get close enough to Samantha Cruise and Dirk Remington to find out who was responsible for what happened to Gavin.

Chapter 19

Proximity breeds familiarity. The genius of nearness is that it exposes harsh truth and reveals previously hidden attributes, both good and bad. It has been said that it's wise to keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. Like Daniel marching into the lion's den, one can never tell just what dangers lay close at hand.

The next week was spent in preparation for the next phase of their plan. Just as Annabella had hoped, Father O'Reilly indeed had friends who provided her with a phony work Visa. Gavin then filled Annabella in with as much background information that he had on Dirk Remington. He had only met him a few times, and that was two years ago. But they figured they needed to try to gain every advantage they could. They researched him, his medical practice, and his hobbies; everything they could about him. They also spent time getting ready for the job interview at Dirk's department. Even with his recommendation, they wanted to ensure that Annabella would get the job.

The day of the interview came and Annabella passed with flying colors. Her experience working at the ICC for Dr. Binoche gave her enough background that she easily handled all their questions and showed that she was a qualified applicant. Obviously, she couldn't reveal that she had worked at the ICC, or in the field of cryogenics. That information would tip Dirk off immediately. So she made up a French medical company and pretended to have worked for it for the past 6 years. The phone number of the supposed boss was an international number that Father O'Reilly cleverly had routed to his private line. With Father O'Reilly and his convincing French accent acting as her boss, his glowing recommendation of Annabella was enough to convince

the HR department that she would be the perfect fit in Dr. Remington's department. Landing the job with the clerical team of the rare disease department of the University of Texas in Austin would give her direct access to Dirk Remington.

Her first day on the job was filled with orientations, introductions and the usual first day on the job activities. But most importantly, her supervisor Butch Thompson gave her an access card to the building. He showed her how to use it and explained that the card opened all the doors in their department. Annabella's heart began to pound as she realized she now literally held in her hands the key to Dirk Remington's office.

After her first day of work, Annabella headed back to the Sheraton and reported to Gavin and Father O'Reilly everything that had happened, and that she could now gain access to the building and to Dirk's office. "That's incredible! Now we can look into his personal files to see if we can figure out what's going on," Gavin said with excitement.

"Well, we're off to a great start, but it isn't a trout until it's on the bank! We've got more work to do," said Father O'Reilly.

"Yes, how exactly are we going to access his files?" Annabella asked.

"Marshall," said Father O'Reilly.

"Who?" Gavin asked.

"My friend, Marshall Hogan. Well, he's not so much of a friend. You might call him an acquaintance. He's a genius. A computer hacker. We've done some business together in the past. Things I like to keep on the down low."

Annabella and Gavin knew by this time it was better off not asking Father O'Reilly too many questions. Not knowing many details was fine with them. "I'll call Marshall later tonight and arrange a time for you to get him into the building. Late at night, after everything is closed up. He owes me a favor anyway."

"There's one other thing that's really been bothering me," Gavin said.

"What is it?" Annabella replied.

"My Reye's syndrome. I know I was told that it would have devastating effects on me within weeks. But I've been out of cryogenic preservation for over a week now and basically I feel fine. I just don't understand," said Gavin shaking his head.

"There's a lot we don't know Gavin," Annabella said taking his hand. "But I feel we are in the brink of finding out the answers to all your questions."

The three decided that Friday of that week would be the night. Most of the employees seemed eager to get started with weekend plans so no one stayed late most Fridays.

Marshall Hogan, a skinny tech-geek in his late 20's, arrived at the Sheraton at 10:00 pm that Friday night. Father O'Reilly introduced him to Gavin and Samantha but didn't bother to go into the details of why they needed to get information from Dr. Remington. They spent the next few hours finalizing their plan. Annabella was very nervous, but remembering that hiding in her purse was the .38 pistol Father O'Reilly had given her somehow made her feel a bit safer. She certainly didn't want to have to use it but realized they could be in significant danger, considering what they were about to do.

About 1:30 in the morning, Marshall, Gavin and Annabella climbed into the Chevy Blazer and drove to the offices of the University of Texas rare disease building. The parking lot was dark and empty except for one Honda Accord parked in the far corner. They drove to a secluded spot in the lot that was not illuminated by the after hours parking lot lights; and the three, all dressed in black, climbed out of the truck. They walked towards the front doors in silence. Annabella got her key card from her purse and opened the door. They entered the building, walked past the reception area down the hall, past the first floor elevator to the stairs. They weren't sure if the building was completely empty, so any little sound, even a bell on the elevator door might reveal their presence. Annabella had never seen any security guards at the office building but she wasn't sure if any other security measures were in place. They had to be careful.

Annabella led the men up the stairs to Dr. Remington's third floor office. As soon as they entered the office Gavin remembered the last time he was there. It was in that office that he first heard of Reye's syndrome. His good friend, Dr. Noah Krocak had accompanied him and Samantha into that same office two years ago where Dr. Remington ran several tests on Gavin and determined that he was experiencing the early stages of Reye's syndrome. He then remembered the look on Remington's face as he gave Gavin the dire news. A smirk. No real compassion. And he remembered something else. The medical file he was holding. It seemed to contain his test results but also held information on Reye's syndrome. And it was in that very office where he first heard of the Life Center and Dr. Mueller. The last time he left that office, his life changed dramatically. He hoped this time, he'd have some answers. Maybe the answers were in his medical file.

Marshall sat down at Remington's desk, flipped on the desk light and began hacking into his computer. Even though it only took about four minutes to gain access, it seemed like a long time to Gavin and Annabella. They just paced silently in the office, occasionally checking the windows and peeking out the office door.

Marshall's words broke the silence. "I'm in." Gavin and Annabella rushed to the desk to look over Marshall's shoulder at the screen. "Here we go. Medical files...Gavin Cruise...Jack pot!" He opened the electronic file as Annabella pulled a chair up to Marshall's side to gain a better view of the screen. Taking the mouse, Annabella scrolled down through the documents, scanning page after page and then pausing to think for a moment.

"What is it? Are you finding anything?" Gavin asked.

"Gavin, I guess I've got both good and bad news," Annabella said. "It appears you never had Reye's syndrome. According to this report, it looks like the symptoms you were experiencing a few years ago were simply from a mild case of stress related fatigue. Blood count is normal. No abnormal EKG or CT scan results. Neurological tests...normal," she said as she looked up at Gavin.

"Just what are you saying?"

"The good news is you're healthy. The bad news is you've been tricked. Lied to. And even worse. You've been the victim of a vicious plot to get rid of you. And Dirk Remington was definitely in on it."

As Gavin listened, he stood motionless in disbelief. Over the past week, he'd been wondering why he'd been feeling fine since he woke up at the ICC in Chateauroux. He couldn't figure out why the effects of his Reye's syndrome were

virtually non-existent. He'd been told the symptoms would set in rapidly and quickly debilitate him. But it was Dirk Remington who gave him the news and the prognosis. It was Dirk Remington who suggested he meet with Dr. Mueller at the Life Center. It was all beginning to make sense. But to what extent the deception went, he did not know. One thing he *did* know - the news that he was never really ill, ironically, made him sick.

Marshall continued to scan the computer screen. "Let me copy these files and do some more looking." He pulled out a flash drive, made a copy of Gavin's medical records and then began searching other areas of Dirk's computer. "Hmmm. This is interesting. I've got access to your friend, Dr. Remington's financial records."

"Just copy the files and let's get out of here," Gavin said. "I'm beginning to get a bad feeling about this." No sooner had the words left his lips when the quiet of the night was interrupted by the slamming of a car door. Gavin rushed to the window. Walking under the parking lot lights were two men he recognized.

"We've got to get out of here, now. It's Dirk Remington and Noah Krocak," he whispered urgently.

"What are they doing here?" Annabella asked.

"I don't know, but I'm beginning to think they are *both* in on this. Maybe *everyone* was in on it. Samantha. Dr. Mueller. Dr. VanAndel. Maybe even Tom Stonebridge and Jack Greenway. Who knows how deep this goes. Be we can't waste time now. We'll have to figure this out later," Gavin said.

By this time Remington and Krocak had entered the building. They knew that if they were going up to Dr. Remington's office, the elevator would take only about a minute. "Hurry up," Gavin whispered to Marshall.

“I’m trying. But we may have something here. From the looks of these financial records, I don’t know, it just seems fishy. Ok, I’ve got it.” Marshall pulled the flash drive from the USB port on Remington’s computer as they heard the elevator door open down the hall.

“They’re coming,” Gavin said.

“Here, this way.” Annabella led them through a back door out of Dirk’s office, down a back hallway. They could hear Remington and Krocak talking as they entered the office. As Gavin, Annabella and Marshall crept down the hallway away from the office, they wondered if they had left things exactly the way they had found them. Annabella remembered the chair she pulled up next to Dirk’s desk. Had she returned it to its original spot in the office? She couldn’t remember. But there was no turning back now.

The three took the back stairway to the first floor. “There’s only one entrance to this building. No back way out,” Annabella said. “And if we could see the parking lot from the office, they can certainly see us.”

“Try to stay in the shadows,” Gavin instructed as they moved around the outside perimeter of the parking lot. There was no escaping the fact that starting up the Blazer would make some noise, but once they were in the truck, they finally felt safe.

“We’ve got to get these files back and take a look at them,” said Marshall. “I can’t help but think that we’ll discover something shady in the good doctor’s finances. It might be the answer all of your questions,” Marshall said as the three sped back to the Sheraton.

Chapter 20

There are no simple lies. Falsehoods and fabrications are multifaceted, intricate tales of pretense designed to misinform and mislead. Lies, by nature are complex, and deception runs deep. Like an onion, the more one peels back the cloudy layers of fiction, the more one reveals the truth. The painful truth.

When they arrived back at the Sheraton, Gavin, Annabella and Marshall met up with Father O'Reilly in Gavin's.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're alright. What did you find out?" Father O'Reilly asked as the three entered the room.

"Well we had a bit of a scare. We got into the building just fine and accessed a lot of Dr. Remington's files. But as Marshall was downloading them, Dirk and Dr. Krocak entered the building and headed up to the office. We got out of there, but not before we got what we needed. Right Marshall?" Annabella said.

"Yes, I think we've got a lot of information on our friend, Dr. Remington. We got a hold of Gavin's medical records from two years ago, and guess what? He was never sick. All that stuff about Reye's syndrome was simply a lie. He never had it."

"Well blessed St. Margaret! You mean you're not dying? That's fantastic. But then again, it does bring up a grave question, doesn't it?" Father O'Reilly said.

"It sure does," said Annabella.

"Just why would Dr. Remington trick you into thinking you were sick? And what does Samantha have to do with this?"

“I think I may be finding the answers to your questions. Here, look at these financial transactions.” Marshall already had his laptop open and was examining the stolen files. “Something isn’t right here. Look at this. Here are payments from the University, from Dirk’s department, to something called the Life Extension Society.”

“Dr. Mueller belongs to that organization,” Gavin said.

“Here’s some more to LifeSpan Technologies.”

“That’s Dr. VanAndel’s company. He provides the technology used in Mueller’s cryogenic activities.”

Marshall kept searching. “Hmmm. This is interesting. Here’s a record that shows your wife, Samantha Cruise, paid a Thomas Stonebridge \$150,000 about two years ago. Why would her financial records be in Dirk Remington’s files?”

Gavin was beginning to come to grips with what Annabella already knew. “My wife and Dirk Remington have set me up. It’s clear to me now that they wanted me out of the way for something. But I still can’t figure out why,” Gavin said softly as he sunk into the suite’s high back chair.

Marshall continued to scan the files. “It looks like there are several transactions with all sorts of, what shall I say...interesting organizations. It seems Dr. Remington has a lot of money quietly coming into his personal accounts. Money that seems...suspect, at best. What’s the International Center for Cryogenics? It’s in France,” Marshall asked.

“Let me see that.” Annabella leaned in to see the computer screen. “The ICC is where I’ve worked for the past three years,” said Annabella.

“It looks like your boss, a Dr. Cesar Binoche authorized a payment from Claude Gorlios...”

“Yes, that’s Dr. Binoche’s lawyer,” Annabella interrupted.

“Well, it looks like once Gavin signed a release of legal holdings document, it cleared the way for this Claude Gorlios fellow to pay a very large payment from Gavin’s accounts to a lawyer here in Austin, Jack Greenway.”

Gavin sat up, put his clinched fist to his mouth and took a deep breath, as if to try to understand it all. “Jack is our lawyer. Or maybe I should say he’s Samantha’s lawyer.”

“And this Greenway forwarded the fortune to Dr. Remington,” Marshall continued as he pushed his chair away from the computer.

“It’s all making sense. Samantha and Dirk planned this whole thing. They faked a diagnosis and told me I was dying. They convinced me to undergo a cryopreservation procedure until a cure for my supposed Reye’s syndrome was found. Then they sent me to some creepy doctor in Houston who literally froze me to get me out of the way. How could I have been so stupid?” Gavin said, shaking his head. “Then, after a couple of years, supposedly because of new regulations from something called the World Department of Cryonic Regulation and Management, I get moved to Chateauroux where I’m literally held on ice. Then Remington needed money, maybe to fund his clinic, or who knows what for. So he pays Dr. Binoche and his colleagues at the ICC to thaw me out, keep me drugged and get me to sign over my financial assets to Samantha.”

Annabella began to tear up.

“I just can’t believe this has happened,” Gavin said as he noticed Annabella’s tears. “On no, ‘Bella. Don’t cry. I know you didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“I didn’t trust Dr. Binoche, but I just went along with things,” Annabella said through her tears. “I was too afraid to ask questions. I knew he was up to something. I’m so sorry, Gavin.”

“Listen, you have nothing to be sorry for. You literally saved my life. You are the one who got me out of there. And it’s because you...really all of you...” Gavin shifted his focus to the rest of them, “...that I’ve discovered the truth.”

“And you know what we have here, don’t you?” Marshall asked. “It’s evidence.”

“Yes, it’s evidence. But we’re going to need something more. We need to hear it from them,” Father O’Reilly said. “Annabella, you’re going to have to set up another dinner date with your friends. But this time, we’ll be listening.”

Father O’Reilly convinced Gavin and Annabella to wait a week before she pursued asking Samantha and Dirk out for another get together. “There’s no need to rush this, lassie. If you listen to the sound of the river, you’ll get a trout,” Father O’Reilly said with a wink as Annabella marveled at the old man’s wisdom. “Patience, dear one, will pay off in the long run,” he continued. “But this time, why don’t *you* suggest the meeting place. That way, we’ll be ready.”

At Father O’Reilly’s recommendation, Annabella waited until the following Wednesday at their AA meeting to suggest another date. This time, it would be a double date.

“Sam. I had so much fun last Friday night, and I’m sorry I wasn’t up to doing any sight seeing,” Annabella said during a break at their meeting.

“Yes, we did too. Maybe next time we can show you around Austin.”

“That sounds wonderful. But I wonder if I could bring a friend. His name is Reveille....an old friend who’s visiting from Paris.”

“Oh, of course. So, is there anything between you and this, Reveille?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe,” Annabella said, blushing slightly. “I’ll set it all up and call you tomorrow with the details,” she said heading back into their meeting. Annabella realized the trap was set.

Chapter 21

A mouse trap is only deadly when it is set. As the silver spring loads tension on the steal hammer, the lethal machine is loaded, poised, ready to perform its fatal function. Intoxicating aromas lure and entice until the tempting morsel is in sight. And as the vermin devours the bait, it trips the trigger and is suddenly confronted with a harsh, life ending reality.

The following Friday evening would be the most surreal experience Gavin had encountered since waking up at the ICC. Adrenaline pounded through his heart as Gavin knew this evening would bring him face to face with Samantha and Dirk Remington. After gathering all that they needed, Gavin opened to door to the Blazer as Annabella got in. He couldn't help but notice how beautiful she looked. With the revelation that his wife had lied and betrayed him and with Annabella's encouragement and support, he was beginning to have feelings for her. He knew it was wrong because he was still technically married, but he found the feelings difficult to ignore. Yet Gavin realized he needed to put those thoughts on hold for the time being and stay focused on the plan for the evening.

At the suggestion of Annabella, this dinner date took them to Manuel's, a nice Mexican restaurant downtown, close to the river. It was no Mansion at Judge's Hill, but it was still nice. "Now remember, I've told them that I'll be with my boyfriend, Reveille," Annabella said.

"Reveille?"

“It means awake. I thought it fit you. I’ll go in ahead of you and get our table. Then I’ll tell them that you...I mean Reveille will join us momentarily. Give us a few minutes and then just walk up and sit down. Our plan is to stun them. Remember, they think Dr. Binoche killed you in Chateauroux. I think if we can shock them, they’ll slip up and reveal everything.”

“Is your wire working?” asked Gavin.

“Well, let’s see. Father O’Reilly, can you hear me?”

“Yes, we read you loud and clear,” Father O’Reilly replied from the undercover, police surveillance van parked across the street from Manuel’s. “If you can get enough evidence on tape, detective Saunders and I will make our entrance.”

The trip from the Sheraton to downtown didn’t take long and as they approached Manuel’s, Annabella leaned over and kissed Gavin on the cheek. “For luck,” Annabella said.

They arrived as planned, 15 minutes later than Annabella had scheduled, to ensure Dirk and Samantha were already there. Gavin opened Annabella’s car door. It wasn’t hard to pretend they were on a date, even though this evening was far more nerve wracking than an ordinary date. Gavin grabbed Annabella’s hand as they approached the entrance. She tried to breathe. In both hands Annabella clutched something that made her heart race. In her right was Gavin’s hand, giving her physical strength and romantic butterflies. In her left, her purse, which held the Smith & Wesson .38. She sincerely hoped the one would lead to something further and the other would not be necessary.

As agreed, Gavin waited just outside the door as Annabella entered. She walked to the hostess station and indicated her guests were already seated. She immediately saw them and headed for their table by the window.

“Oh, I’m sorry I’m late.”

“That’s quite alright,” Dirk said as he politely stood and pulled out her chair. Annabella sat down hanging her purse on the corner of the chair, well within reach.

“Is your friend here?” Samantha asked.

“Oh yes, he just called and said he would just be a few minutes.”

Gavin decided he had waited long enough and slowly entered the restaurant, lingering in the waiting area, when a familiar silhouette caught his eye. He stopped dead in his tracks. He hadn’t seen Samantha since their visit to the Life Center two years ago. And suddenly, there she was, with Dirk Remington. His rage began to boil but he soon regained control. He knew he would have to keep his composure if their plan was going to work. In his hand, Gavin clutched the manila envelope containing copies of the incriminating documents taken from Dirk’s office. He took a deep breath and, wanting to fully capitalize on the element of surprise, quickly approached the table.

“Hello Samantha,” Gavin said as he tossed the envelope onto the table. “How have you been these past two years, or has it been 80?”

Their reaction was what Annabella and Gavin had hoped. Samantha looked at Gavin and started shaking. Her blank stare shifted back and forth from Gavin to Dirk to Annabella.

“Gavin...you’re alive!”

Gavin sat down at the table. “Save it, Samantha.”

“Uh, uh...what’s going on?” Dirk said.

“Maybe *you* could tell us what’s going on, Dr. Remington,” Annabella replied.

“I thought you were dead,” Dirk blurted.

“That’s interesting. Samantha, you’re surprised I’m alive, and Dirk, you’re surprised I’m not dead.”

“I, I just can’t believe it,” Samantha said.

“Well, maybe you can believe this,” Annabella said. “We know about you two and your charade. We know Gavin was never sick. That whole thing about him having Reye’s syndrome was a lie. Convincing him to go to the Life Center was a cruel ploy to get him out of the way. And you both stood there and watched Dr. Mueller put Gavin into cryonic preservation. I guess you were just too in love with him to kill him, weren’t you Samantha?”

“What are you talking about? And how do you know my husband?”

Annabella ignored the question. “And then when your new boyfriend, or should I say fiancé, needed money for his business, you conveniently tracked Gavin down at the International Center for Cryonics in Chateauroux. You arranged for him to be thawed out and tricked into signing over his fortune so you could carry on a happy life here in Austin. Then you tried to have him killed.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. How would you know all this anyway?”

“I worked for Dr. Binoche. I helped your husband recover from the reanimation process. And after I realized he was a helpless pawn in your wicked game, I helped him escape the ICC and get back to Austin. And we’ve been following you for the past several weeks, gathering evidence.”

“What evidence are you talking about?” Dirk asked.

“It’s all right here.” Gavin pushed the envelope towards Dirk. “These are just copies. The originals are in a safe place.” Dirk began to scan the documents. “I just want to hear your side of things. Sam, how could you do this?”

“Gavin, first of all, I want you to know that things aren’t as they appear. I was told by Dr. Krocak that you were sick. And I honestly believed Dirk’s diagnosis of Reye’s syndrome. We both agreed that cryonic preservation was the only answer.” She reached for Gavin’s hand, but he refused the offer.

“Go on. I want to hear the rest,” Gavin said.

“Well, then things got out of hand. When the government lost control of the Federal Department of Cryonic Regulation and Management, we...I mean, I...lost control of your body. They changed all the rules and moved you to France. I no longer had legal rights to you, honey. I felt so out of control. You have to believe me.”

“I believe the truth,” said Gavin. “The truth is you met Dr. Remington through your charity work in Austin a few years ago. And you fell in love with him. And the two of you concocted this whole thing, this plan to get rid of me. Annabella is right. You really pulled the wool over my eyes. But I’m awake now, dear. I can clearly see what you’ve done. Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Sam. I wouldn’t say anything without our lawyer present,” Dirk said glancing up from the documents he’d been studying.

“I thought Tom Stonebridge was *our* lawyer,” Gavin said looking at Samantha.

Samantha turned towards Dirk. "Listen, I've got things under control. Just stick to the plan. Everything that's been done has been legal. Stonebridge assured me no one can touch us."

"The plan? What's the plan, Samantha?" demanded Gavin.

"Yes, I'd like to know too," Annabella added.

"Sam, they've figured it out. If these documents get out, they'll ruin me. All my work at the clinic will amount to nothing. I needed that money, and now, these two are threatening all we've worked for."

"We're still going to be ok, dear. Stonebridge has got our backs on this," Samantha said as she looked at Dirk. "Ok, you want the truth? I'll give you the truth."

Chapter 22

When caught in a lie, options become limited, and choices, few. Poet Maya Angelou wrote, but a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams, his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream. His wings are clipped and his feet are tied, so he opens his throat to sing.

Yes, when confronted with uncontested truth, a caged bird's musical tune, it would seem, is the very melody that condemns.

“The truth is you’re right...about most of it anyway. Yes, I did meet Dirk a few years ago at a charity event here in Austin. I found him to be a remarkable and loving man, and we became friends. Just friends.” Samantha paused. “But as time went on and we reconnected at other community events, our friendship grew. We started confiding in each other and I guess I started developing feelings for him. Romantic feelings. And those feelings were mutual. Our relationship grew, but honestly, I felt horribly guilty about it. The stress was unbearable.”

“Is that when you started drinking?” asked Gavin. “You managed to keep that one hidden from me. What else have you been hiding?”

“As a matter of fact, it was about that time. But my life was spinning out of control. As my feelings for Dirk grew, I wanted to help him any way I could. He needed money for special projects at the clinic, but his government funding dried up. I wanted to help.”

“And your plan was to freeze me, get me out of the way, and then two years later steal my money?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. The money issue didn’t come up until later. But about two years ago I began to realize that I loved Dirk, and I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to divorce you. That would be too hard on the kids. And I didn’t have the heart to permanently get rid of you.”

“How incredibly thoughtful of you,” Annabella interrupted.

“So when Dirk told me about Dr. Mueller’s work in Houston, it grabbed my attention. This was a solution that would take care of things. And when I found out that Dirk was good friends with Noah Krocak, it wasn’t hard for him to go along with our plan of making you think you were sick. Noah referred you to Dirk’s clinic and he recommended we see Dr. Mueller. It was actually quite easy.”

“Sam. I think you’ve said enough,” Dirk said.

“We’ve come this far. I guess he deserves to know the truth. And don’t worry. Tom Stonebridge has assured me we’ve done nothing wrong, legally.”

“Yes, go on. I want to hear the rest of this,” Gavin said as he thought about Father O’Reilly and detective Saunders in the van outside recording the whole conversation.

“Gavin, you’re so gullible. You fell for the whole thing. You believed Tom and Jack Greenway. Once we drove to Houston, I knew our plan was working. You walked right into it, and Dr. Mueller did his thing. After I left you in Houston, we all celebrated. Things were going great until Dirk lost his funding and needed your money. That’s when I remembered something. It was a bedtime conversation with Rowan about Dreamland. When you fall asleep, you don’t really know how much time has passed until you see some kind of indicator. A clock or something. So I thought, why not pay Dr. Binoche to

wake you up but keep all visual clues hidden. They agreed to deceive you into thinking decades had gone by and we were all long gone. From that point, it wasn't too hard to get you to sign those papers Cesar's lawyer, Mr. Gorlios, drew up and get you to turn over your money."

"So, this betrayal is ultimately about money?"

"We needed that money. Dirk was doing some fantastic research and working to help people."

"He may have been doing *some* good things, but the documents we recovered tell a bit of a different story," Gavin said.

"That's what I'm trying to say, Sam. You don't know the whole story," Dirk explained.

"What do you mean?"

"What he means is, your boyfriend has been dealing with some shady characters and has several suspect business dealings the federal authorities in your country will be interested in," said Annabella.

"Speaking of the authorities, I think it's a good time to get them involved, wouldn't you say, Annabella?" said Gavin.

"You'll do no such thing," Dirk said slowly, looking Gavin directly in the eyes. Annabella was certain that the tone of his voice and the look in his eye meant he meant business and figured that since he had orchestrated this incredible charade and paid Dr. Binoche to kill Gavin, there was no telling what he would do. For the third time in recent weeks, Annabella felt her life was in danger. She'd been shot at twice. Once escaping from the ICC, and once on the freeway in Austin. But this felt different. She had the

unmistakable feeling that Dirk Remington might do something dangerous right there in the restaurant, so she slowly moved her hand to the corner of her chair for her purse.

Chapter 23

Human emotions are soul piercing sentiments that dramatically sway the psyche. Yet emotions can often be mixed. Love and hate can blur. Joy and sorrow can mingle into a new, unknown emotion. And in the unending cycle of life's events, the death of one wretched reality can lead to the rebirth of a new, hopeful one.

Annabella's fear soon subsided as she saw Father O'Reilly and detective Saunders quickly approach their table. They were accompanied by another uniformed police officer. She was relieved to see he had a revolver in his gun belt.

"Dirk Remington. Samantha Cruise. You are both under arrest for fraud, conspiracy to commit fraud, money laundering, and conspiracy to commit murder," said detective Saunders, in a slow and calm voice.

"What's going on? What's this about?" asked Dirk as he stood up from his chair. "Father O'Reilly. What are you doing here?" asked Samantha. The customers at Manuel's couldn't help but notice the commotion. "Please place your hands behind your back. You both have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?" asked the officer as he handcuffed Dirk and then Samantha.

Gavin took no joy in what was happening, but he felt justice was being served and he would let the authorities deal with Samantha and Dirk.

"Yes, I understand." said Dirk.

"And Samantha?"

"Yes, I understand. But what evidence do you have?"

“Well, for starters there are these documents that Gavin supplied us with. I see you’ve seen copies,” detective Saunders said as he motioned towards the contents of the manila envelop on the table. “And the audio record of your conversation tonight will go a long way in convicting you of many crimes,” detective Saunders continued. Annabella showed Samantha and Dirk the small microphone hidden in her blouse.

“Oh Samantha. I remember when you and Gavin began attending St. Vincent’s. You were such a lovely family. How could you have gotten mixed up in this, child?” Father O’Reilly asked.

Samantha remained silent. She couldn’t look him or Gavin in the eye.

“Please wait just one minute before you take these two away. I have something to say,” Gavin said. “Samantha, I want you to know how much your betrayal hurt me. Not only did you betray our marriage, but you conspired to get rid of me. And then when you needed cash, you used me and then arranged to have me killed. You took me away from my children for two years. I want you to know that I fully intend to see this matter through to the end and I hope you get what you deserve. I am going to reestablish my relationship with our children. I’ve missed them so much. I assume they still think I’m away on business?”

“Yes.”

“Then I think it’s best to keep the truth of your betrayal from them, for the time being anyway. I anticipate they are expecting me to return at some point. It will be so wonderful to see them again,” Gavin said smiling as he thought about his kids.

“And as for you, Dr. Remington. You sure pulled one over on me. But you also used Samantha to fund you illegal activities. When the authorities are done investigating

your business dealings, I imagine they'll have enough evidence to put you away for a long time. Maybe 80 years. You can take them away," Gavin said to detective Saunders.

"And I think you'll be pleased to know that your cooperation will go a long way in holding Thomas Stonebridge and Jack Greenway accountable for their actions," said detective Saunders. "We've also launched an investigation into the Life Center and Dr. Mueller, as well as Dr. VanAndel and LifeSpan Technologies. And we've arrested Dr. Cesar Binoche, who happens to be in Austin, and some of his associates in France." Hearing that Dr. Binoche was indeed in Austin convinced Annabella that he was the one who fired a shot at her and Gavin a few days ago.

As the police led Samantha and Dirk away and the restaurant began to settle down again, Annabella asked Father O'Reilly if he wanted to join them. "There's no point in wasting a perfectly good evening out with my two favorite people in Austin."

"Well I don't mind if I do, lassie," laughed Father O'Reilly as he sat down.

While Gavin was extremely anxious to be reunited with Rowan and Megan, he realized it would need to be planned appropriately. A father reentering the lives of two young children could be traumatic and Gavin wanted to make sure the reunion was a happy one.

The rest of the evening was spent talking more about the future than the unbelievable past few weeks. Was Gavin's and Samantha's marriage salvageable? Gavin doubted it. Was Samantha's betrayal justifiable cause for a divorce? Father O'Reilly offered his opinion that under these extreme circumstances, it was.

And then there was the matter of Annabella. “I want you both to know that I’ve been thinking of staying here in Austin. There’s nothing left for me back in France. I feel you two have become more to me than family. I know I will have to apply for permanent resident status here, and find a place to live,” she said.

“I can help you with that, my dear,” assured Father O’Reilly.

Gavin, Annabella and Father O’Reilly finished their meal and talked late into the evening. But Gavin couldn’t help but wonder if there was some sort of future relationship beyond friendship for him and Annabella. He didn’t know if his feelings for her were that of extreme gratefulness or love. But he knew she had feeling for him. He had been picking up her signals over the past weeks. Now, with the events of the evening still fresh, he knew at the very least, he had gained a new friend in Annabella. He was certain that he would be forever indebted to her for saving his life and helping to unmask the cloud of deceit that had covered him for the past two years.

Fate, it seems, has a way of bringing all of life’s events into alignment. Evil gets punished and good gets rewarded. Deceit is disclosed and truth eventually gets revealed; and love overflows to bless others. For Samantha Cruise and Dirk Remington, justice would surely be served. And for Gavin Cruise and Annabella Duvernay, only time would tell what might become of their relationship.