

Ch. 1

Why was it so cold?

This thought crossed Julia's mind each time she had put on her coat in one of these hospital rooms during their numerous visits. My daughter is dying, and they can't turn up the heat? She knew what they'd told her before, which was the cooler air helped Michele breathe more effectively, but machines were doing that all for her now. Just make her comfortable, she kept telling the nurses. There probably weren't going to be anymore visits to the hospital after this one according to the medical team they were working with. She'd refused to believe them, cursing that hadn't been able to help her daughter ever since she'd been diagnosed with this horrible disease just six months ago. That was the first time she'd even heard of Spinal Muscular Atrophy – the first time she'd been told her daughter was going to die before she'd even turned a year old.

Ever since that day in July, the day her seemingly idyllic life had been shattered by this horrible news, her days had turned into a non-stop parade of doctor's visits, medical devices and medicines that would help Michele do everything that her now rapidly weakening body couldn't do. It was the most cruel disease she could ever have dreamed up for her daughter – her baby girl, so happy and healthy for the first four months of her life, was now going to have it all destroyed. When she was first told by the doctors about Michele's diagnosis, she'd never heard of it before. They laid out what the next several months would include – ventilators, tests, physical therapy, multiple hospital visits and a daily cocktail of powerful drugs. But they had made clear to her that the odds against her daughter living past her first birthday were very remote.

She read all the research online she could, hoping that'd she come across something – anything – to prove the doctors and their fatal predictions wrong. But everything she'd read had just made her despair deeper and heartbreak cut ever more painfully. When she'd read more about how this was a genetic disease, that Michele got it somehow from her and her husband, she said for days. *It's all my fault*, she thought. Only the support of her family and friends had even gotten her to this point, as she spent many times thinking how she didn't want to live if she couldn't have Michele with her. She'd taken their strength and support and used it to fuel her anger, and the fight she was going to wage for the both of them. She was going to do whatever it took to help her daughter, whatever treatment, whatever medicine, whatever it cost. The doctors would eat their words and she'd have her daughter back, healthy and smiling, just as she remembered from those many months ago.

Sadly, the battle she had waged so vigorously now seemed. They had built a virtual hospital room in Michele's room at their large house in the Philadelphia suburbs, filled with the latest medical equipment that money could buy. But she'd barely used much of it – Michele had needed hospitalization on and off for almost the entire time of her illness. When they brought her home last weekend from the previous stay, it became painfully clear that she had advanced far beyond the point that her home health care could be effective. Her husband, Steve, had convinced her to take her back to the hospital just three days later, hoping that if they could extend her life even by one more day it would be worth it. Julia had

resisted, remembering her grandfather's refusal to go back to the hospice ward at the hospital as he died from lung cancer. He wanted to die with his wife and his family with him, in his house, in his bed, on his terms. But Steve convinced her that there was always a chance, always hope and Michele was too young to just give up hope on until her last breath. So she'd gathered Michele into her arms and returned to the hospital, refusing to place her in her special car seat, and instead kept her close and wrapped in her favorite blanket in her lap during the painful journey back.

She wasn't sure about their decision to return now, she thought, stroking her daughter's forehead. It was tough to do that now, since she didn't want to disturb the various monitors and tubes that had now been attached to Michele. They had her in a private room at Julia's demand, which the hospital claimed was unavailable when they first returned. So Steve met privately with the hospital administrator behind closed doors and was able to work out an arrangement which apparently had not come cheaply. To Julia it was worth it to have this time alone, undisturbed by various other families coming in and out and dealing with their own grief. This was the last time they'd get to spend as family, and having just her, Steve and Michele together alone was worth paying whatever amount that corrupt administrator requested. So they sat in that room, together, one of them always by Michele's side as she struggled to stay alive.

"She's so strong," Julia said, removing her hand from Michele's forehead and placing it gently in her husband's.

"I know, sweetheart. She gets that from you."

Steve leaned over and kissed her as they both started to cry once again. Thinking this was she could imagine.

"Did you call my family?" she asked softly, dabbing away tears and trying to keep it together for Michele and her own sanity.

"Yes, I called them when I was making arrangements for Michele. They're on their way." The room phone rang just as Steve finished his sentence.

"Wow – that's weird," he said, "That must be them. You answer it – I'll head downstairs to sign them in."

Steve kissed her again as he gathered his coat and headed out of the room. Hospital security for this ward had tightened following an incident just two weeks earlier. An angry father stormed up to this wing of the Intensive Care Unit, demanding they release his son to him because his ex-wife was a "damn whore". There was a scuffle with security, and eventually Philadelphia police had been called. So now just to get up here, you had to go through an extra security checkpoint in addition to the normal one at the Intensive Care Unit entrance, which meant your family or friends now needed to be signed in by a parent or guardian upon entering downstairs. It was an extremely frustrating exercise, since it required one of them to leave their daughter for up to 10 minutes just to go retrieve any visitors.

She picked up the phone on the third ring, trying to compose herself for her family's arrival.

"Hey Melissa, Steve will be right down," she said, assuming her sister was the one who would be calling up. Her mother and father were usually too distraught whenever they reached the hospital doors to try speaking right way.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Groves, but this isn't your sister. My name is Dr. Schad. Dr. Thomas Schad."

She was confused – no one knew she had returned to the hospital except for her family and a couple friends. And she couldn't remember dealing with someone named Dr. Schad before. But she'd seen so many doctors here over these past several months, she assumed he was the ICU physician on call that evening. In the past others would sometimes call on their way into the hospital, checking in to see what Michele's status to make plans accordingly their shift started.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought it was my family arriving – what can I do for you, Dr. Schad, is it? Are you on call this evening? "

"No, I'm afraid not, Mrs. Groves. I'm not affiliated with the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. In any "official" capacity, anyway."

"You aren't?"

"No, Mrs. Groves, I'm not. But I do have many friends and associates there who keep me informed of situations that might require my particular area of expertise."

She was starting to get a little nervous and she tried to figure out who might have called him. Was he contacted by the hospital administrator? The ICU doctor? Maybe one of the nurses?

"I'm not quite sure I understand, doctor. What exactly IS your area of expertise?" she asked.

"Oh, let's just say I have a very unique skill set. One that can be extremely valuable in situations such as the one your daughter is in."

This didn't sit well with her at all.

"Her situation?" she asked incredulously. "My daughter is dying, doctor. She isn't in a "situation"!"

"My apologies, Mrs. Groves. That was a poor choice of words – I meant to say I have had great success in treating patients with your daughter's illness before, "he said calmly.

Now she was really confused. Who was this guy?

"Dr. Schad, I don't mean any disrespect, but my husband and I have seen or talked to just about every SMA specialist in the country, and not once have I ever seen your name or heard it mentioned during our conversations."

“Well, I don’t generally enter the process until the patient has reached a certain point in the disease’s progression. And I don’t specialize in your daughter’s particular disease; I’m more of a “jack of all trades”, shall we say? But I’ve never had a patient complain with the results I’ve achieved.”

“Look, I’m sorry, Dr. Schad, I don’t know who contacted you, but my husband and I . . .”

“Julia, I can cure your daughter.”

She stopped, stunned that someone with the title of doctor attached to their name uttered those words. But as much as she wanted to believe him, how her heart ached to believe him, she knew he must be mistaken.

“No, it’s too late. They said –“

“They’re wrong. I promise you,” he said, exuding a forceful confidence that felt very convincing to her.

“But how?”

“Mrs. Groves, I’d prefer to continue the rest of this conversation in person if you’re interested in what I have to say. I have a small office just down the street from the hospital - perhaps we could spend some time together this evening to discuss everything.”

She glanced at her daughter, who was sleeping quietly. The nurse said she’d be out for the next few hours thanks to the pain medication she was receiving intravenously, but that her condition was still very grave. Leaving her daughter’s side, even for a moment, seemed crazy to her. But if there was any hope, any chance what this guy said was true, didn’t she owe it to Michele to at least check it out?

“Well, yes, of course I’m interested. But my daughter – I’m afraid to leave her side in case something happens. I’d really prefer to do the meeting here.”

“I understand your reluctance to leave her, Mrs. Groves, but this initial meeting really does need to be at my office. It doesn’t need to be you and Steve, so perhaps he could remain with Michele and we can go over everything. It’s my understanding your daughter is resting right now anyway, and based on her current readings, she should be stable for the next two hours at a minimum.”

“Her current readings? How could you know . . .”

“Everything will be said once you get here, Mrs. Groves,” once again cutting her off politely. “My address is 1425 Spruce St, Office 4B. I’m just up the stairs in the first door on your left. Shall we say in 20 minutes, at 11 o’clock?”

She didn’t respond, still looking at her daughter resting and wrestling with the entire idea. She glanced at her watch – it was 10:40 pm on the nose. Dr. Schad said as if she has already committed to the meeting.

“Your husband is coming back in the room momentarily. That will give you plenty of time to get here. And don’t worry, Mrs. Groves, everything is going to be just fine.”

With that, Dr. Schad hung up the phone and ended their conversation. Her head was spinning, trying desperately to figure out what she should do. She set the phone down and just stood for a moment, staring at the phone as if it were going to provide the answer.

Steve startled her as he opened the door, fiddling with a soda can as he attempted to close the door behind him with his leg.

“Your parents weren’t here, sweetie. I guess you already knew that – figured I wouldn’t waste the trip and got you a Sprite. Here you go.”

She turned and just stared at him as finally looked up to hand her the soda. She didn’t hear a word he just said.

“Julia? What is it, sweetie? Is it Michele?”

“How did he know?” she said, agitated. Was Dr. Schad watching them, she thought? The very idea felt extremely unsettling.

“Who? How did who know?”

“Dr. Schad. He called. How did he know?” Her voice was shaking but getting louder.

“Know what? What on earth are you talking about?”

“He called. He knew you were coming back in the room just as I hung up. He knew Michele was sleeping right now. HOW DID HE KNOW?”

“Julia, what are you talking about? Who’s Dr. Schad? Just calm down – tell me what happened.”

“No, I can’t – I have to go, I have to go now.” Her mind was made up. She grabbed her purse and headed quickly towards the doorway.”

“Wait – where are you going? Julia! Dammit, talk to me.”

It was too late – she was halfway down the hall, racing to catch the elevator. She was tired of not having control over anything anymore. Dr. Schad certainly seemed to know something, she told herself. Perhaps she WAS a little scared by her conversation with Dr. Schad. Was that worth throwing away her last chance to save her daughter? The elevator doors opened just as Julia exited the ICU. Getting on, she kept replaying the one part of their conversation she cared about most – “Julia, I can cure your daughter.”

Ch. 2

She arrived at 1425 Spruce St just 15 minutes after she'd hung up with the mysterious Dr. Schad. The building was a non-descript office complex, one of a dozen similar structures that dotted the area around the sprawling hospital grounds. She'd probably passed it any number of times when she'd had to park in the adjacent private lot during her daughter's numerous visits. The building number sat just above the outer doors, faded by weather but still in relatively good shape and easy to make out its large white numerals. The smaller windows that dotted the front wall were all dark, save for the single window in the second row from the street, which she assumed was the doctor's office. Taking a deep breath, she said a quiet prayer and headed towards the front entrance.

Her cellphone started vibrating furiously in her coat pocket, the third time during her trip from the hospital to the office building. No doubt it was her husband each time, wondering what had just happened back in Michele's room between them. The walk had helped calm her a bit, but she decided it was best and wait until she knew exactly what Dr. Schad was up to before she tried to explain anything to Steve. Fumbling in her pocket to shut it off, she entered the outer doors and stood just inside the doorway as she started reading the office directory on the left side wall. The intercom under the listings crackled to life with Dr. Schad's voice –

"Thank you for coming Mrs. Groves. Please use the stairs across the lobby once you enter and you'll find my office on the second floor in 4B, first door on your left."

The intercom fell silent as the lights in the lobby kicked on, drowning the dimly lit fire exit lights in a flash of fluorescent bulbs. They filled the lobby and outer hallway with a bright glow that punctuated the eerie quiet and darkness that had been there just moments before. At the same time, the inner doors started buzzing loudly, cueing her to enter as she grabbed the door handle and hurried inside. The lobby was sparsely decorated – a currently inactive fountain took up most of it, flanked by a pair of benches that formed a virtual "V" in front of it. A bank of elevators was just beyond it and next to the stairway door she was to use. Confused as to why he wouldn't have her take the elevator, she none the less entered the stairway and proceeded upstairs.

She stepped out of the stairwell upon reaching the landing and into the second floor. Unlike the lobby, there were no lights on in the hallway – the only light at all, in fact, was coming from open doorway ahead on the left side of the hall, which she assumed was 4B. The door had already been opened for her, but there was no nameplate hanging above the door that mentioned the room number or Dr. Schad, so she couldn't quite be sure. She peered inside the office and saw a fairly empty room that had a single desk in the middle with a phone and a laptop opened on it. Another door was just to the left of the desk, which was labeled as a restroom. There were two folding chairs on either side; the chair facing the desk had a clipboard with a pen gently resting on top.

"Hello? Dr. Schad?" she asked, moving toward the restroom door.

"Ah, Mrs. Groves, welcome. I'm Thomas Schad. Thank you so much for coming."

Her heart jumped as Dr. Schad's voice came from the doorway behind her. Trying desperately not to appear as frightened as she felt, she turned and faced Dr. Thomas Schad for the first time. He was white, probably in his late fifties, and his grey suit was snugly buttoned and tailored to hide his slowly advancing waist line. His hair, along with his thick beard and moustache had turned mostly grey, save for some specks of black throughout each. His glasses were a perfect match for his face, with thin rims and slightly thicker frames placed neatly in front of his hazel eyes. His appearance struck her more of a history professor than a doctor, but his knowing grin seemed re-assuring as he extended his hand.

"Yes, uh, hello, Dr. Schad, I'm Julia Groves. You startled me – I wasn't sure if I was in the right place," she said, her hand trembling slightly as he shook it.

"Oh, I do apologize for that – I had to grab something from my colleague's office just down the hall. It didn't even occur to me to turn on the hallway lights. Overriding the timer they're on for this floor is such a hassle. I just grabbed my flashlight and dashed off. You do understand, don't you?"

"Of course, no, it's fine. I just thought with the lobby lights coming on when you buzzed me in that you'd . . ."

He chuckled, grinning even more widely than he had before.

"Ah, that – that was nothing more than a coincidence, Mrs. Groves. They come on each night at around 11 pm. It coincides with the guard schedule, I believe. Quite a show, isn't it?"

She wasn't sure she believed him, but his grin and confidence at least gave her the impression he was being sincere.

"I suppose it is," she said, suddenly feeling more relaxed in Dr. Schad's presence. There was something different about how she felt after they shook hands. It was hard to put her finger on, but she just felt "off". The relaxation she was feeling felt artificial somehow, like the after-effects of a pain pill.

"Please - have a seat, Mrs. Groves. We have much to cover in a limited amount of time." He gestured to the chair with the clipboard as he took his seat behind the desk and began bringing up something on his laptop screen. She placed the clipboard on the desk so she could sit down – she noticed several forms that were attached to it, the top sheet having the words "LIABILITY WAIVER AND RELEASE" in bold lettering across the header.

"Thank you," she said, tucking her long skirt under as she sat down. Whatever had been affecting her seemed to be subsiding, but she was still having difficulty concentrating in her "relaxed" state.

"Alright. Just give me one moment here to complete pulling up your daughter's file. Ah – perfect. Shall we begin?"

She started to nod and quickly caught herself, giving him a puzzled look.

"Wait – my daughter's file?"

“Why of course. I have detailed records on all of my potential clients. It’s important I know as much about them as possible before they’re selected.”

“You have my daughter’s medical records?” she asked incredulously.

“Well, yes, but that’s only part of the file – there’s also family history, insurance information, financial records, that sort of thing. I try to be as thorough as possible.”

Whatever relaxed feeling she had, artificial or not, was now gone. She leapt from her chair and leaned towards him.

“How the – who the hell do you think you are? You can’t just go around getting my daughter’s medical records, my financial records, whatever else is in your “file”. It’s against the law!”

“Yes, that’s quite true. It’s a felony in fact, if I were to access this information without you or your husband’s authorization.”

“Your damn right it is!”

“But Mrs. Groves, I have your written authorization right here.”

He cheerfully pulled a green document from his desk drawer and slid it across the desk to where she now stood. She picked up the piece of paper and started to read, slowly sitting back down to absorb the latest shock Dr. Schad had given her. It was undated and simply had the following typed on it –

“I authorize the custodian of the records of Michele Groves, daughter of Steven and Julia Groves, to be released to the following medical personnel (type all names in area below)–

Dr. Thomas Schad

These records may include all medical, insurance, and financial records unless directed otherwise by the authorizing party. If patient is a minor, this request also covers those records of the parents and/or guardian of the patient identified above.

I further understand that this authorization is voluntary and that I may refuse to sign this authorization. By signing below I represent and warrant that I have authority to sign this document and authorize the use of protected information listed.

Signature of Patient (If patient is under 18, Signature of patient’s legal parent/guardian)”

Just below that was the required signature. It was definitely hers.

“I, I don’t remember signing this,” she told him as she said to stare, still dumbfounded that she’d ever sign such a document.

“Oh, it’s understandable you might not remember, Mrs. Groves. I know how hospitals and doctor’s offices can be with their countless forms.”

“I want to know how you got this,” she demanded. “Who gave this to you?”

“Mrs. Groves, please, we don’t have time for this. If you aren’t interested in my help, you are free to go back to your daughter’s hospital room to spend her final moments with her. Otherwise, I’ll ask that you please let me proceed with my offer to you.”

The sudden sternness in his voice caught her by surprise, as did his seeming indifference to Michele’s plight. She sat back in her chair, suddenly said back into the reality of why she was at this meeting with Dr. Schad in the first place. The thought of her baby girl in that hospital bed flashed in front of her, reinforcing just how urgent it was to proceed quickly. She decided to drop it and nodded quietly for him to continue. His visage brightened once again.

“Excellent! Now, as I mentioned to you on the phone, while I’m not a specialist in the SPECIFIC disease your daughter has, my training and methods allow my treatment to be effective with a wide variety of patients and their various ailments. And after receiving and reviewing your daughter’s file, I’m happy to inform you that my methodology can have your daughter completely cured after just one treatment. She’ll be fully recovered, and have no signs or symptoms of, what is it called again? Ah, yes, Spinal Muscular Atrophy.”

Julia started to tear up as he spoke, saying everything she had long wished to hear. But she wondered how someone could possibly cure her daughter of a supposedly incurable disease in a single session. And it didn’t even sound like he’d heard of SMA before he’d just read it in the file.

He said, “As you can imagine, this type of procedure is quite costly – because of its unique nature, I am only able to schedule one session each week. Since I can only see a maximum of 52 patients each year, I’m unfortunately limited in my ability to offer it to anyone other than those who can afford its rather exorbitant cost. I wish it weren’t the case, but it’s not as if I could suddenly start accepting Medicare for this sort of thing, you see.”

He chuckled slightly, apparently amused at the very idea of that happening.

“I don’t care what it costs to save Michele. I’ll pay anything,” she said, knowing how desperate she must have sounded. She didn’t care.

“Of course you would, Mrs. Groves. You are a good mother. Michele is very lucky to have you.”

“Thank you,” she said softly, tears beginning to well in her eyes.

He took a tissue box from one of the desk drawers and placed it in front of her as he proceeded.

“In addition to the financial considerations, Mrs. Groves, there’s something else you’ll need to provide in order for the procedure to be successful. I’m going to need a new carrier for the disease. Someplace where this can be housed once it’s been removed from her body.”

She’d heard any number of requests from doctors throughout her daughter’s treatment. This immediately struck as being one of the strangest.

“I’m sorry, doctor, let me stop you there. I don’t understand what you’re saying. Are you performing some sort of surgery on Michele?” she asked, dabbing at tears with a tissue.

He just said.

“No, nothing THAT primitive, I can assure you. I leave that to those amateurs you’ve dealt with at the hospital these past few months. They’re very nice people, but their methods are quite limited in their effectiveness. You’ve seen that for yourself. Let me ask you – have you ever heard of a “faith healer?”

Her heart sunk and tone turned very skeptical.

“Sure, I’ve heard of them. They pretend to heal people by touching their head or something like that. They’re all con men, right?”

“Oh, most assuredly – those you’ve heard about or seen in the papers are nothing but frauds and charlatans. They’re looking for attention, money, any number of things. It’s disgraceful, really.”

He paused and shook his head in disgust before continuing.

“They took what was once a perfectly accepted form of healing and turned into some sort of sideshow. They drove anyone with a legitimate gift so deep underground that no one except myself even bothers to offer their services, lest they be lumped in with those sideshow acts that roam various street corners.”

She wasn’t happy with where this was seemingly headed.

“Oh come on- you’re the lone legitimate faith healer? That’s ridiculous, just how stupid do you think I am?”

“No, like I told you before, faith healers are frauds. I’m someone who can actually help Michele, but most people don’t know what else to call someone who lays their hands on a patient to heal them. Although some folks might call them Michael Clarke Duncan,” he said.

“You going to cure my Michele just by touching her?” she asked, ignoring his Green Mile joke.

“It’s not quite that simple, unfortunately. I do use what some people call “Reiki”, but that’s just a small part of my overall treatment procedure, combined with things like medication, and . . . well, I don’t want to go into all the details. I guess you’d say it was like my Calgon. You know, *ancient Chinese secret*,” he said in a terrible fake accent, trying again to defuse her growing skepticism with humor.

She was thoroughly unamused at his said quips and did little to hide this fact.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Schad, but I’m not buying any of this. And I don’t appreciate you wasting my last few hours with Michele telling me these ridiculous fairy tales.”

He stopped laughing and sighed deeply before pulling himself forward in his chair.

“It’s interesting, really. How people with no other hope for their dying child can so quickly dismiss an offer of help just because they’ve not read about it in the New York Times or some nonsense. They act as if I owe them definitive proof before they’ll have me save their child’s life.”

“That’s not fair!” she yelled, barely staying in her seat as she gestured furiously at him.

“I’d do anything to save my Michele, but you call me up at the hospital out of the blue, tell me you can save my daughter, and somehow see my daughter’s vital signs and my husband coming back to our room. So I race over here, half out my mind, and you show me some document I’ve never seen before with my signature on it and tell me you’ll cure my daughter with your bare hands or some shit. As far as I can tell you’re nothing more than a crazy old man who’s trying to get me to pay him for something out of the goddamn TWILIGHT ZONE.”

She just sat there; glaring at him as he calmly leaned back, bringing his hands to his mouth as if he was considering exactly how to respond to her outburst. At this point, however, she could care less what he said. This was obviously a mistake, and she needed to get back to her daughter. She bent down to grab her purse when he picked up the phone from his desk and started dialing. Whomever he called seemed to answer almost immediately after he punched in the final numbers and placed the phone to his ear.

“Go ahead,” he told the party on the other end. And with that, he placed the phone back down in the cradle and ended the conversation. The entire episode took no more than 10 to 15 seconds. She was afraid to even ask who he’d called.

“There you go, Mrs. Groves. Perhaps that will convince you,” he said.

“Look, I know you seem to enjoy being cryptic, but I’m not staying because of some two word conversation you just had on the phone,” she said, slinging her purse over her shoulder as she stood in preparation of exiting.

He turned the phone on his desk towards her.

“Call your husband before you go,” he gently prodded.

“I’d rather – “

He cut her off.

“Please,” he pushed once more.

“Fine, whatever.” She snatched the receiver and dialed her daughter’s room phone at the hospital, turning her back on him once it started ringing. Steve said before the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi Steve – it’s me.”

“Julia, Jesus, where are you? Why’d you run out like that? Why the hell didn’t you answer my calls? You never turn off your cellphone. What if something had happened to Michele while you were gone?”

“I’m sorry, Steve, I just needed to check on something. He said she’d be ok.”

“Who said that? That Dr. Schad guy you were ranting about?”

She decided it was best not to try justifying her reckless behavior or explaining who the hell Dr. Schad was at this point.

“No, just forget about him – he’s nobody. I’m sorry about earlier – I just wasn’t thinking straight. I just want to be back with you and Michele.”

His smile seemingly radiated through the phone.

“Of course, baby. We all have our moments. These last few days have been so hard. I just want you back here, too.”

Her smile reappeared for the first time in days.

“Hey, your family is here now,” he said, “We just got back to the room, in fact. Do you want to -” Steve stopped abruptly, suddenly distracted by some loud commotion she heard in the background. It sounded like her sister, but she wasn’t quite sure. Then he started yelling excitedly towards someone else in the room.

“Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?”

“Steve? Steve, what is it? What’s going on?” she asked anxiously.

He didn’t respond, apparently abandoning the phone altogether. She strained to make out anything through the growing cacophony as the background was now filled with several increasingly excited voices.

“Dammit, Steve, what’s happening?”

Her sister came on the line and started shouting excitedly.

“Julia! Julia, it’s Melissa – Michele is grabbing dad’s nose. She did it with both her hands – and her legs are kicking. Mom is yelling for the nurse. She’s grabbing his nose, sis!”

She felt completely numb as listened to her sister relay this news. Michele had been barely able to move her arms or legs for months now, and recently stopped moving them altogether. She'd always felt that was one of the cruelest parts of the disease, forced to watch her baby girl have to lie there almost motionless and unable to interact with anyone or anything. The very idea of her ever being strong enough to actually grab onto something had faded from her hopes, worrying instead about just keeping her alive until the next day.

"It . . . how . . .but," she could barely form a thought.

"Look at her go! Oh god Jules, you have to see her – she's just kicking away, and look at her smiling. She's so beautiful – I can't believe it," her sister said, the elation growing with each word.

Julia couldn't even bring the words to respond. She was now crying into the phone, every emotion pouring out in joyful tears. Her mind pictured her daughter just as Melissa described, finally able to smile and move about as her baby girl was always supposed to. She even felt like hugging Dr. Schad, just to thank him for whomever he must have called to help her daughter. Pushing the hair out of her face and wiping her eyes, she turned and saw he'd resumed his earlier position of leaning back in his chair, hands pressed closely to his mouth. He watched her without staring, taking in the entire conversation as it unfolded. She smiled at him, mouthing the words "Thank you." He didn't budge – no acknowledgement, no smile, and no movement in his chair.

"Jules? Jules, the nurse just came in. She's checking Michele." Melissa's mention of the nurse got her attention.

"Is she saying anything?" she asked, trying to force herself to stop crying so she could focus.

"Not yet, she looks really confused, though."

"What about Michele?"

"She's smiling at the nurse now. Oh Jules, you should see her. When are you –?" her sister stopped, listening to the nurse's voice she now heard in the background. Steve was apparently getting upset with whatever was being discussed.

"What is it, Mel?"

"The nurse is saying none of her readings have changed – her blood pressure, her O2 levels, her breathing readouts – everything is still reading exactly the same."

"How is that possible? You said she's moving around and kicking?"

"She is – she moving like crazy, in fact. The nurse doesn't know what to do – she called the ICU doctor before she came in but he's with someone. That's what Steve's yelling about – he wants someone in here NOW."

As Melissa spoke, Dr. Schad finally broke from his stony vigilance and pulled the clipboard across the desk, picking up the pen and beginning to mark up the included documents. He moved swiftly but deliberately, reviewing each page he worked on before moving onto the next. It seemed apparent he had reviewed this paperwork many times before.

“Alright, tell everyone I’m going to head back now. It’ll take me about 30 mins to get back there,” she said, anxious about Michele but now ready to let Dr. Schad make the rest of his pitch. “Call me on my cell if something happens before I get there.”

“Just hurry – Michele needs you here. Everyone does.”

“I know – tell her Mommy’s coming. Love you sis.”

“You too.”

She went to hang up the phone and hesitated, pulling it back to her head for a final question.

“Wait – Melissa?”

“Yeah Jules?”

“When did you guys get back to the room with Steve? He came down to sign you in, right?”

“Actually, no. He just had to come to the front desk of the ICU – he didn’t want to leave Michele when you weren’t here.”

Her assumption had been whomever Dr. Schad called had come in the room and done something to help Michele while Steve was down getting her folks. This would have given them plenty of time to get in and out before he returned. With the front desk of the ICU just down the hall from where Michele was, it would have been much harder for someone to get in and out undetected.

“Then how’d you get up to the ICU?” she asked, already guessing what the answer likely was.

“Oh you know dad – he bribed some security guard to let us come up unescorted. I guess we looked harmless enough.”

She’d grown used to her father bribing people to get what he wanted – she guessed at one point her father spent more money in Disneyworld greasing the ride attendants than he had for the rest of the vacation. It used to drive Steve nuts, but he must have figured it was just easier to let him do his thing tonight than leave Michele alone with her gone.

“How long was Steve out of the room then? Two minutes?”

“I guess – we saw him leave the room and come running down the hall just after dad hung up the entry phone. He signed us in and we went straight back with him. Might have been less, I guess. It certainly wasn’t longer.”

“Ask Steve if anyone was in the room after I left.”

“What are you getting at, Julia? You think someone came in and did something to Michele?”

“Melissa, please – just ask him.”

Melissa relayed the question to Steve, who was still audible in the background arguing with the nurse. She heard Melissa finally get his attention and relay her question.

“He’s saying no. He says he never left the room except to get us.”

“And you didn’t see anyone go in or out of the room while you all were signing in?”

“No. Wait – well . . .”

“What? You saw someone?”

“Well, no, but Steve thought he closed the door fully when he left the room – when we got back, it was still partially open.”

“Is he sure he closed it?”

“He didn’t remember – he didn’t seem think anything of it, I just remember him saying something like he guessed he hadn’t closed the door hard enough as we got back. “

She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

“Alright, thanks Melissa – I’ll be back shortly. Bye”

She hung up the phone before Melissa could even respond, placing her purse on the desk. He now had her full attention.

“Dr. Schad, please, who did you call? Who helped my daughter?”

He finished marking the last part of the paperwork and slid the clipboard and pen back to her. His grin appeared once again as he looked up and spoke.

“Why you did, Mrs. Groves. I sometimes forget how unnerving my methods can be to those in your position. I’m USED to being this way, you see. Your outburst just reminded me of that. So I thought I’d help start the process with Michele along a little sooner than planned. A good faith gesture, to show my sincerity and assure you I can be trusted to indeed do what I’m telling you.”

“Start the process? So you mean . . .”

He shook his head and frowned.

“I’m afraid so. It’s just the first step. She must complete the treatment or her condition will revert back to where she was previously after 48 hours. But as long as you consent to the procedure, you have my word your daughter will be completely healed and rid of that horrible disease.”

He gestured towards her chair that she take her seat again.

“Shall I continue, then?”

She thought for only a moment before she nodded quietly and sat back in her chair.

“Wonderful! Now then Mrs. Groves, as I mentioned before, I’m going to need a new carrier for everything I must remove from Michele for the procedure to work. Did you have someone in mind?”

“Someone in mind? What do you mean?”

“Ah – we got sidetracked before I fully said, didn’t we? This procedure has evolved throughout the years I’ve been doing it, and I’ve found the process only works properly with someone of Michele’s approximate age, sex, and weight. It’s also very important the new host is free from any sort of disease or illness of their own, things like deformities, birth defects, etc. I can’t stress this enough – failure to comply with each of these criteria will mean the procedure won’t be effective and would end up killing both Michele and the new host. This is all spelled out on page 2 of the documents you have in front of you.”

Julia now understood what Dr. Schad meant and felt sick to her stomach.

“You mean, Michele’s disease, her SMA. You’re telling me you can’t cure her without giving it to someone else’s daughter?”

“Well, not exactly. The procedure ends up killing the host altogether, I’m afraid.”

She looked at him, horrified.

“How could you?”

“How could I what, Mrs. Groves? The decision is entirely up to you – I’m merely providing you an option and telling you what’s required for it to succeed. I have no personal stake in this.”

“A decision to kill someone else’s baby? What kind of doctor are you?”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, don’t you think? It isn’t as if I’m sneaking around snatching the homeless and killing them like in that Hugh Grant film.”

“What?”

“You know, that movie where some doctor was having homeless people kidnapped to try and cure paralysis. I think it had Gene Hackman as the doctor? Anyway, Hugh Grant gave some speech at the

end, lecturing this doctor how he'd broken his Hippocratic oath or some nonsense. How ironic, Hugh Grant preaching morality."

She couldn't believe he was going on about some movie.

"And what, if I go along with this, someone then steals and kills Michele to save their child?"

He chuckled. She was glad he found this so amusing.

"Despite your earlier assertions, I'm not Rod Serling, Mrs. Groves. This isn't some twist ending waiting to happen. No trap doors, no retribution, no man with a box showing up at your door, and no flies coming out of my mouth. Nothing like that, I can assure you. In fact, I never understood why someone would bother going through all that trouble. I mean, unless you're the Devil, do you really care if you're teaching them a lesson about themselves? No, my interest is strictly financial, and to serve my clients needs to the best of my ability. And who said anything about stealing a baby?"

"You did – I have to kidnap a baby to serve as some sort of host," she said.

"That's not what I said at all," he said. "In fact, the parent or legal guardian of the host must give their consent. They're required to fill out the same forms I included in the packet for you to sign. Everything is by the book."

"The parents have to consent? What parents would ever agree to such a thing?"

"My, aren't you naïve? Why do they give their children up for adoption? Or beat them? Or abandon them? Or sell them? You see parents refusing to give their children medical care, which would assuredly allow their child to live a long and healthy life, just because of their religious beliefs, don't you? Some parents used to have their children sterilized if they thought were going to grow up to be stupid. There are all different types of parents in the world, raising their children any number of ways. Not everyone is as loving and devoted a mother as you are, Mrs. Groves."

From his tone, he clearly didn't consider himself one of those awful people. But as he spoke, and as she could picture her daughter growing up and getting the chance to live, her mind started racing. She didn't want to admit it, but she felt some part of herself agree with the points Dr. Schad was making.

"And you've seen people find parents to agree to this before?"

"I've been doing this a long time now. No one who's decided to have their child treated has ever failed to find a host."

She was still struggling with her conscience.

"This can't be legal."

"There's a reason I have you fill out all these documents, Mrs. Groves. Both parties in the agreement are completely insulated from prosecution because of how they are structured, but it's hardly like this is

the type of thing someone could honestly take to the police with a straight-face. The entire procedure is completely confidential, and the participants certainly have a mutual interest in keeping it as such. Who's going to believe such a tale anyway? Once my work is done, I go back home, and am not going to break privilege to corroborate what will sound like a completely outlandish claim."

His grin accompanied each of his answers to her objections, and his overwhelming confidence convinced her more and more that doing this for Michele was legal and justified. Why should Michele have to die if someone else was willing to have their child save her?

"Do, do you know someone?" she asked, her voice now barely above a whisper.

"I don't know someone specifically as that's not really my area of expertise. But I'm sure it wouldn't be too hard for you to find someone who might be able to point you in the right direction."

No it wouldn't, she thought.

"I just don't know. I don't know if I could go through with it," she said, her emotions still being pulled in multiple directions.

Dr. Schad rose, shutting his laptop lid as he did so. He walked around the desk and sat on the edge directly next to her, putting his hand on her shoulder like an understanding father.

"No, I understand, Mrs. Groves. Perhaps you'd like to talk it over with your husband, and call me with your decision. Here's my direct number." He pulled a business card from his pocket and handed it to her. It simply read –

(484)555-7682

"If you decide to proceed, I can have the materials delivered to you personally within 1 hour of your call for your signature."

"Yes, but I just can't imagine . . ."

"It's fine, Mrs. Groves. Go back to the hospital and take some time – I know it is an important decision. But remember, 48 hours until . . ."

She put up her hand to cut him off, not wanting to think about that just now.

"I remember."

She gathered her things and he escorted her to the door.

"Alright, take care, Mrs. Groves. I look forward to hearing from you. Oh, and one more thing,"

Of course, she thought.

“I forgot to mention, the law only requires you OR Steve to consent for Michele to undergo this procedure, not both. Just something to keep in mind as you are discussing Michele’s options.”

“No, no – Steve and I are a team. We decide what’s best for Michele together. I’m not doing anything without his total support.”

He smiled.

“Of course you do. I apologize for even bringing it up.”

He pulled a small flashlight out of his coat pocket and shined it into the still darkened hallway.

“There you go, Mrs. Groves. Sorry these damn lights are still off, but that’s the staircase door right there. Just head back down to the lobby, and you can find your way out from there, I assume.”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. Goodbye, Dr. Schad.”

He smiled and gave a small wave as she left his office and headed into the staircase, his flashlight clicking off as the door closed in the landing behind her. She raced down the stairs and out into the lobby, still lit up like it was when she first arrived. Folding and sliding the documents Dr. Schad had given her into her purse while moving, she reached the outer lobby and pushed it open towards the sidewalk. The cool air hitting her face from the outside world was a refreshing change. Being close to midnight now, she wasn’t surprised to find the street still empty, save a lone car that raced past and quickly disappeared from her view. Breathing deeply, she turned and started to head back toward the hospital, trying to decide exactly how and what she was going to tell Steve and her family about all this.

Dammit, my phone’s still off, she thought.

She retrieved her phone and turned it on, a message appearing on the screen as she did so.

You have 4 Missed Calls.

You have 1 VM.

Annoyed she hadn’t turned it back on sooner, she dialed her voicemail and pressed the phone to her ear as she dashed across the street.

“Press 1 to hear new messages, Press –“

Hurry up, she thought, quickly bypassing the rest of the menu.

The message began, her face turning ashen as she listened. She stopped and replayed the message from the beginning, hand trembling as she pushed each key. But there was no mistaking Dr. Schad’s voice in the message she heard. It consisted of just two words -

“Go ahead.”