prologue

Beth Groves glanced at the small clock as it chimed 10:00 p.m. It was one of the few things she'd brought this humid July night before they'd rushed to University of Philadelphia hospital from her father's home in Wynnewood, twenty minutes from center city Philadelphia. She had never heard of Type One Spinal Muscular Atrophy when she gave birth to Michele on Valentine's Day five months ago. Now, she'd read more on the subject than she'd ever dreamed, and it all told her the same thing. Her daughter was going to die.

She kissed and rubbed her daughter's pale forehead as she sat by Michele's bedside, trying not to disturb the ugly BiPap breathing apparatus that covered her daughter's face. It was the machine she hated the most because her daughter's smile disappeared each time she'd have to wear it. Her smile had been the last thing Beth had to keep her going as Michele's body shut down from the disease, and now it was gone too.

"Please God," Beth said, listening to the heart monitor's rhythmic beep as she prayed. "Please make this terrible disease go away."

The door swung open as Beth's father entered. He placed his jacket on the table and walked over to her. "How is she, sweetheart?"

Beth looked up at him and shook her head as she continued to stroke her daughter's hair and face. "I'm losing her, Daddy," she said, "I just wish Steve—"

"I know, Beth. I know."

Beth's dad placed his large hands on Beth's shoulders and leaned over and kissed his granddaughter. Beth buried her head into her father's chest as he embraced her.

"Is Melissa here yet?" she asked, her voice muffled as she spoke into his gray turtleneck.

"She's on her way." The room phone rang, and he said, "That must be her. You answer it and tell her I'm coming downstairs to sign her in." Her father kissed the top of her head as he headed for the door. Getting visitors up to the room was a frustrating exercise since it required one of them to leave Michele for up to ten minutes just to retrieve anyone.

He headed out of the room as she picked up the phone on the third ring.

"Hey sis, Dad will be right down," she said.

"Excuse me?" the unfamiliar voice asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I thought it was my sister arriving."

"Ah, I see," he said. "No Mrs. Groves, my name is Dr. Thomas Schad, and I'm calling to speak to you about your daughter. Her name is Michele, correct?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"And she has Type One Spinal Muscular Atrophy?"

"Who is this again?" she asked.

"Like I said Mrs. Groves, my name is Dr. Schad. Dr. Thomas Schad."

"Have we met before, Dr. Schad?"

"No, Mrs. Groves, we haven't. I was only recently contacted by someone who felt I could help Michele."

She tried to think who could have called him, maybe the hospital administrator, a doctor on call, or a nurse.

"I'm not quite sure I understand, doctor," she said. "I've seen or talked to just about every SMA specialist in the country, and I've never heard your name mentioned during our conversations."

"Well, I don't specialize in SMA. I'm more of a 'jack of all trades'."

"Look, I'm sorry, Dr. Schad, I don't know who contacted you, but my father and I—"

"Beth, I can cure your daughter."

She covered her mouth. "But, but how. They said—"

"They're wrong. I promise you."

She didn't respond. Instead she glanced at her daughter's breathing apparatus.

"Mrs. Groves, we need to continue the rest of this conversation in person if you're interested in what I have to say. There's a small office just a short walk from the hospital."

"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 everything has already been set up at the office. Perhaps your father could remain with Michele while we go over the details here."

The doctor on-call had assured her Michele would sleep for the next few hours because of the intravenous pain medication she was receiving. However, Michele's condition was grave, and leaving her daughter's side, even for a moment, seemed crazy to

her. But if there was any hope, any chance that what this guy said was true, didn't she owe it to Michele to at least check it out?

"How did you know my father—"

"Everything will be explained once you arrive," he said. "The address is 1425 Spruce Street, Office 4B. It's just up the elevator to the second floor and down the hall on your right. I'll make sure the lobby doors are unlocked by the time you get here at say, 10:30? That should give you plenty of time."

She glanced at the clock—it was 10:10 p.m.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Groves, everything is going to be just fine."

With that, the line went dead. She set the phone down and stood for a moment, staring at her daughter.

Her father opened the door, cleaning the lid of a Diet Sprite as he attempted to close the door behind him with his leg.

"Your sister wasn't there," he said. "Figured I wouldn't waste the trip and got you something to drink. Here you go."

He pushed the soda towards her, but she didn't move or take her eyes off Michele.

"Beth? What is it?"

"Some guy named Dr. Schad just called," she said.

"Dr. Schad? Who's Dr. Schad?"

"I, I'm not sure . . ."

"Here, tell me what happened."

Her father pulled the other chair over in front of Michele's bed and faced her. He opened the soda can and handed it to her again. She took a long sip before she returned it to him.

"Okay, so what exactly did this guy say?"

"He said his name was Dr. Thomas Schad, and he's some sort of specialist who can cure Michele."

"Cure her? Oh, c'mon."

"Yes, he claimed he could cure her. He wants me to meet him at some office just down the street while you stay with Michele."

"Absolutely not," her father said, standing up from his chair and waving her off as he walked over to the window. "He's obviously a fraud."

"But Dad—"

"No, I'm not letting my daughter go off in the middle of the night to speak with some snake oil salesman who's preying on her emotions."

She walked over to her father and looked out the window with him.

"What would Mom have done?"

He half-chuckled and looked down. "She'd already have told me to stuff it and be out the door."

"I was praying for a miracle, Daddy," she said. "Maybe this Dr. Schad is the answer to my prayers."

"But he's not, Beth," he said, shaking his head. "I see people like this all the time—"

She fought back tears and placed her head on her father's chest. "Please, Daddy. I don't care. I have to try."

He wrapped his arms around her, and he stroked her hair. "Beth, you know I'd do anything for you and Michele, but—"

She sighed, remembering when her father used to hold her, whether it was when she'd had a fever or gotten scared by a thunderstorm. "What if it was me, Daddy?" she asked. "What would you do if it was me?"

He rubbed his daughter's back. "I'd do anything, sweetheart. You know that."

She wiped her eyes as she pulled back from him. "Then you know I have to do this for Michele," she said.

"Alright, sweetheart, alright," he said. "But at least let me go and see what his story is."

"No, Daddy," she said. "I'm her mother. It's my job, not yours, and I'm going."

She grabbed her purse and checked her appearance in the mirror on the door. He brushed the lint from the sleeve of her shirt.

"Be careful, Beth," he said. "You call me the minute you're done."

"I will," she said. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you, too." They embraced for a moment before she walked to Michele's bedside. The breathing machine hummed in her ear as she leaned over to kiss her daughter's tiny hand, which Michele couldn't move on her own any longer. She kissed and cradled it in her own.

"I won't let you down, sweetie," she whispered. "I promise." She squeezed Michele's hand and headed out the door.

Beth arrived at 1425 Spruce Street just fifteen minutes after she'd hung up with 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 passed it before when they'd had to park in the adjacent private lot during her daughter's previous visits. The white building numerals above the outer doors had faded, and few lights in the lobby were on. Taking a deep breath, she headed towards the front entrance.

She pushed open the lobby door and hurried inside. The small lobby wasn't decorated, and an inactive fountain covered most of it, flanked by a pair of benches that formed a virtual "V". She walked across the empty lobby to the bank of elevators, unnerved by the sound of the occasional drip of water from the fountain head splashing into the murky blue pool below.

She stepped out of the elevator as the doors opened to the second floor. Unlike the lobby, there were no lights on in the hallway at all; the only light came from the open doorway on the

right side of the hall. No nameplate hung noting the room number or Dr. Schad. She peered inside the office and saw an older man sitting at a single desk in the middle of the room working on a laptop. The desk also had a phone, small printer and green lamp on it that provided the light for the room. Another door was to the left of the desk, with a sign on it that said 'Warning—Not A Fire Exit'. There was a single folding chair on her side of the desk.

"Hello? Dr. Schad?" she asked as she knocked on the open door.

He lifted his head and looked her over before returning to his work. "Please have a seat, Mrs. Groves," he said as he directed her to the open chair. "I'll be with you momentarily." He was white and in his late fifties, his hair and thick beard and moustache mostly white, save for some flecks of black. His vintage grey pinstripe suit was buttoned and tailored, and his thin-rimmed glasses pressed against his nose and face.

She unzipped her jacket and tucked her long skirt under her as she sat down on the uncomfortable metal chair. Dr. Schad ignored her presence as he tapped away on the keyboard for another minute before the printer came to life and spit out multiple sheets of paper. He drummed his hand on the desk and glanced at his watch while she shifted in her seat as the machine droned on.

"I apologize for the delay. I know you must be eager to get started," he said. The printer stopped, and he flipped through the stack of papers for a few moments. He nodded and placed the papers on the desk facing her.

"There we go," he said. "Shall we begin, Mrs. Groves?"

She nodded and pulled her chair up. "Please, call me Beth," she said.

"Very well, Beth, as I told you during our phone call, my name is Dr. Thomas Schad. Here's my card."

He handed her a faded business card that almost slipped through her fingers as she took it from him. It simply read—

Dr. Thomas Schad
(888) 667-3981

"I'm not a specialist in this area," he said, "but this particular treatment has proven to be effective with a wide variety of patients and their various diseases, including Michele's. However, I'd like to review her official records online before I get into specifics about the procedure. Would that be okay with you?"

"Yes, please, whatever you need," she said.

"Alright, I'll just need you to sign at the bottom of the top page where I've indicated with an X." Dr. Schad took a gold pen from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She scribbled her signature in the bottom box and handed the page to him. "Don't you even want to read it?" he asked.

"I've read that same HIPAA form a hundred times," she said. "I could recite it by heart."

"I know," he said. "But I want you to trust me about everything I have you sign. Here, just take a moment and make sure you're comfortable with it." He handed the paper back to her, and she read the generic HIPAA release form giving him access to Michele's records.

"This is fine," she said and slid it back to him. "I appreciate the thought, though."

He nodded and placed the paper in an empty manila folder he pulled out of the desk drawer and typed in some information on his laptop. He lifted his glasses and squinted at the output on the screen and returned to the paper to jot down some notes. It took about three minutes to finish writing down everything he needed off the screen. *What is taking so long*, she thought, checking her

cell phone and sighing when she saw the "No Service" message on her phone.

"Well this is good news," he said. "It appears I can have your daughter completely cured and fully recovered within three days."

"Three days?" she asked, pushing the hair out of her face. "That's, that's not possible."

"Of course it is," he said. "Here, take a look for yourself." He spun the laptop screen towards her and enlarged the window with Michele's information. There were several complex mathematical equations on the screen and her vital statistics. Directly above this information spun a 3-D image of Michele, including the birthmark on the back of her right thigh. Blinking in the bottom right hand corner was the following information: "Predicted Death Rate—Zero percent. Prognosis—Full Recovery."

She tapped her teeth with her thumbnail as she stared at the information. "This is certainly impressive," she said. "But I'm not—"

"Convinced?" he asked. "I wouldn't expect you to be. It's only a computer simulation, after all, and I know how every doctor Michele's seen has been telling you that your daughter's condition is both incurable and fatal. But I wouldn't have pulled you away from her side if I couldn't do exactly what I just told you."

Beth rubbed her earlobe as he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Schad," she said, shaking her head. "I want to believe you, I really do, it's just—"

"Part of you thinks I'm nuts, right?" he asked as he leaned closer and smirked.

"Well . . ." she said, looking at the floor.

He chuckled. "Alright, maybe all of you think I'm nuts. That's okay, you're not the first, and you certainly won't be the last. But I'm not about to lie to you in any way. It would not only be a

breach of our contract, but I'd be costing myself a considerable amount of money, since with this procedure I don't get paid unless the treatment is successful."

"I'd pay any price to save Michele," she said.

"Of course, Beth," he said. "That's why I'm here. So let's get down to business."

Dr. Schad got up from his chair and came around the desk. He smiled as he walked past her and looked in the hallway before continuing. She read through the remaining paperwork as he settled back into his chair.

He said, "So, what we need to do—"

She put up her hand to cut him off. "What's this part here about some person called the host?" she asked as she pointed at the paperwork.

"That section refers to the obligations of the two involved parties besides me, who are identified in the contract as the patient and the host," he said.

"Who is the host?"

"That's what I wanted to explain. Before you commit to anything, it's important I go over the details of the procedure and the financial options you'll have. This information is also covered in the documents in front of you, and you're under no obligation to do anything until you sign. But this agreement cannot be changed, altered, or re-structured for any reason. You either accept all the terms and conditions or you don't. Do you understand?"

The room was silent as he waited for her response. She nodded and set the paperwork back down in front of her.

"Very well," he said. "This procedure is straightforward, but it's more complicated for certain children under the age of one. The host has to meet certain criteria and that can vary greatly based on the patient's age and vital statistics."

"Alright . . ?" she said.

"So, getting back to your question, the host is someone who is the approximate age, sex, ethnic background, and weight of the patient. It's also very important the new host is free from any sort of major medical issues of his or her own, things like deformities, birth defects, etc. What I always tell people is the host basically can't have anything that can't be treated at one of those drugstore clinics. That's the easiest way to think of it. Hosts are carefully screened before the procedure begins anyway, but letting people know that upfront saves a lot of time and aggravation later on."

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure I'm following you. Are you saying another little girl needs to be a part of this procedure?"

He nodded and opened the bottom desk drawer, removing a bottle of water and two plastic cups. He set the two cups on the desk in front of her, pouring part of the bottle into the cup on the left.

"I used to try and just explain this part," he said. "But I've found it's easier for people to follow if I use these props. Now, this cup with the water is Michele, and this other cup is the host I've been speaking of."

Taking an Alka-Seltzer packet from his coat pocket, he ripped open the package and dropped the tablets into the Michele cup. "The chemical compound I've developed is injected into Michele's body, causing a similar reaction with her SMA to what you see happening with the water in this cup," he said. "As you can see, this reaction is immediate and rather violent, and needs to be out of her system as quickly as possible. So it's moved." He poured the fizzing water into the empty cup. "To the host, thus leaving Michele free of both her disease and the chemicals I've used. A day or two of bed rest, and she'll be as good as new."

"But, but what about this cup?" Beth asked as she pointed at it on the desk. "What happens to the other little girl, the host?"

Dr. Schad dropped his head and took a long breath. He wiped his nose and replaced his glasses before he continued. "The host dies, Beth," he explained. "There's simply no other way the procedure will work."

"You can't mean . . ." She avoided his eyes as the impact of what he'd said sunk in. Her face turned white and she sat in stunned silence for several moments before she covered her mouth.

"Here, please, have something to drink," he said as he slid the half-empty water bottle across the desk to her.

She ignored the offer and shook her head. "How could you?" she asked.

"How could I what?" he asked. "All I did was explain how the procedure worked."

"You said you've done this with children before!"

"Well I have, but—"

The chair almost tipped over as she bolted up out of it. "Then you're a monster. An inhuman monster who murders children for your own profit!"

"I resent that!" he said. "I'm a doctor who—"

She waved him off and swung her purse over her shoulder. "You're no doctor," she said. "You're the devil."

Dr. Schad searched his pockets and pulled out a crumpled Post-It note. "On the contrary, Mrs. Groves," he said, grabbing the phone off his desk and dialing. "I'll think you'll find I'm the answer to your prayers."

He paused for a moment as he held the phone to his ear. "Go ahead," he said and slammed the phone down, glaring at her as she gathered her coat.

"I'd like to show you something before you storm out of here." He whipped the laptop around towards her and hit the enter key to bring up a new web browser. Nothing happened on the screen. He held up one finger as she moved towards the door.

"I've got nothing more to—" She froze as the video of Michele came up on the computer screen. The camera must have been directly over her daughter's bed at the hospital. Michele was awake. Her blue eyes looked into the camera.

"Michele," Beth whispered. She retook her seat and pulled the laptop closer. Dr. Schad walked around the desk and folded his arms as he stood beside her. Without warning, Michele's back arched and her mouth opened wide. Since there was no sound, it was impossible to tell if she was screaming or simply gasping for breath.

"Oh god, what did you do to her?" she asked.

"Give it a moment," he said.

Michele was joined in frame by Beth's father and then a nurse, who was attempting to adjust some of the attached machines that were wrenched loose by her daughter's sudden movement. They pushed on Michele's chest to bring her back to the bed. Her head turned from side to side as they held her down and then, nothing. There was no movement of any kind as her eyes closed.

"You killed her!" Beth screamed as she jumped up and lunged towards him. He grabbed her hands as she attempted to strike him and turned her back towards the monitor.

"Mrs. Groves, please, just watch the screen!" he said as he struggled to control her.

As she tried to break free from Dr. Schad's grip, the video feed showed Michele's eyes open. She smiled. Her arms and legs, which hadn't moved in weeks, now kicked and swung without restriction. She turned her head and continued to kick about as she saw her grandfather, who kissed and hugged her while she grabbed at his nose and fingers. The nurse scurried off camera and brought the doctor back with her to examine Michele.

As Beth watched, she stopped fighting Dr. Schad and now embraced him. To his shoulder she kept saying, "Thank you, thank you."

"I'm very happy you're pleased with these results, but I must caution you," he said as he pulled her away and looked her in the eyes, "this was only a temporary solution to stabilize her for the full treatment. Without a signed agreement in place in the next two hours, this will wear off, and she'll be back on life support and die shortly thereafter, just as she would have if I hadn't intervened."

Beth turned back towards the screen, which showed her daughter with more spirit and energy than at any other time in her short life. She bowed her head towards the floor and pulled at her left arm with her right hand.

"I, I just don't think I can just grab someone's child and—"

"You're not grabbing anyone," he said. "I told you children this young are more complicated and that's because unlike adults or even older children, they're too young to consent to this procedure on their own. For children under the age of one to be used as a host, a child's biological parent must give their consent. Siblings and children who have been adopted or orphaned are not eligible, and a DNA test is done to verify the identity."

"A parent has to consent?"

He nodded.

"What sort of person would ever agree to such a thing?" she asked.

"Not everyone is as loving and devoted as you are, Mrs. Groves," he said. "I've seen all types of parents in the world, raising their children any number of ways. Why do people give their children up for adoption? Or beat them? Or sell them? Parents are tested by their children every day, and sadly many of them fail to do what's best. I wish every parent was like you, Beth, but I'd be naïve if I believed that would happen."

She sat back in her chair and looked at the floor. She fiddled with her earlobe, looking once again at Dr. Schad.

"And you've seen people agree to this before?" she asked.

"In Michele's case, it isn't an issue. A host has already been identified and the paperwork drawn up."

"It has?"

"That's correct," he said.

"Well who is it?"

"I can't reveal that until you've signed the agreement, but rest assured, the baby doesn't have a parent like you." He looked at his watch and gathered the paperwork, placing it in the manila folder. "I don't mean to rush you, Beth. But I'm sure your father has been trying to contact you about the happy news with Michele, and the cell reception in this building is awful. You have a couple hours to make up your mind, and I want you to enjoy this time with your daughter and make the right decision."

She nodded and took the folder from him. Michele's face was still visible on the computer screen, and Beth watched every gesture with a growing smile that disappeared when she looked back at the cup of milky water on the desk.

"Is this even legal?" she asked as she rose from her chair.

"That's all covered in the paperwork," he said. "While it's crafted to protect all parties, you shouldn't be concerned with breaking the law. You just worry about the cost of the procedure and doing what's best for your daughter."

"Of course, doctor." She took her purse and pointed at the closed door in the room. "Can I get out that way?"

He glanced over at the warning sign and pointed at the door she used when she arrived. "You can," he said, "But you'd be better off going back the way you came."

"Alright," she said, and headed back towards the hallway. "Goodbye, Dr. Schad. I'll call you soon with my decision."

"Goodbye, Beth," he said. "I'm sure you'll do the right thing for Michele."

She headed back to the elevator, and attempted to dial Michele's room, but the call wouldn't go through until she exited the building. A lone car startled her as it streaked past on the quiet street, and she dropped the phone and folder of information. Picking up the scattered pages, she saw phrases like "chemical burning" and "carcass disposal". Her phone beeped at her feet. It read—

You have 3 Missed Calls.
You have 1 Voicemail.

She picked up the phone to dial her voicemail and pressed the phone to her ear as she dashed across the street.

"Press One 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."

1

Three months later

"Another damn upward dog? What's next, Sarah, waterboarding?" Jim asked.

The workout DVD had just started, and Sarah Knox was already tired of her husband's incessant whining. He'd promised her that they'd start working out together every morning at the beginning of October, but he had found one excuse after another not to do so. Now that she'd finally forced him to follow through on the promise at 7:30 a.m. on Saturday, he'd done nothing but complain from the moment she pulled him out of bed.

"Yes Jim, I'm sure most terrorists are subject to basic yoga moves to make them talk," she said. "We only have to do this part for two minutes, you big baby."

"Easy for you to say, girls are supposed to be good at stuff like this."

"You realize the instructor's a guy, don't you?"

"He's the exception that proves the rule?"

"Nice try," she said.

"Maybe they're using CGI?" he asked.

"For an exercise video?"

Jim collapsed on the floor, losing his balance again. "Is there any answer here that gets me out of this?"

"No."

"Then sure, what the hell."

Sarah pulled him to his feet and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek as they started the next section. "Try to keep up," she said, smiling as they began jogging in place.

"You know," he said, gasping for breath like he'd been at it four hours instead of four minutes, "I would have been happy to just go biking again."

"Oh really?" she asked. She nodded at a picture of him on the mantle above the fireplace with full cycling gear on, standing next to an expensive looking bike.

"C'mon, that was over three years ago and was an accident."

"You smashed it in the garage with your softball bat!"

"I was off my meds."

"Flintstone Vitamins don't count as meds."

"I respectfully disagree."

"Fine," she said and smoothly transitioned into the next exercise. "Can you cite any other incidents of Flintstone Vitamins causing their users to lash out violently against a birthday present from their wife?"

"I believe some government studies are ongoing."

"Really? Which government would that be? Bedrock's?"

Her question went unanswered as the speaker on Jim's work phone crackled to life in the kitchen.

"Hey, Knox, you there?" asked the voice on Jim's push-to-talk phone.

Jim knocked Sarah from her mat and into the couch as he scrambled to the kitchen counter and grabbed it. The gravelly voice was Jim's supervisor, Derek Sands. He'd been Jim's supervisor at CRC Cable ever since he'd hired Jim as an installer over a year ago, and from what she'd observed from their few short

exchanges, beneath Derek's gruff exterior lay yet another gruff exterior.

"Yeah, Derek, hey I'm here," he said. "What's up?"

"That jackass Damon called out sick again. Can you take his service appointments this morning?" Derek asked. "He's only got two, and then Zulowhatever his name is coming on."

Jim glanced over at Sarah, who paused the workout and dabbed at beads of sweat on her face with a towel. She shook her head and mouthed, "No."

"Hey, yeah, sure no problem," he said and ducked to avoid the towel flying by. "What time?"

"Not till 9:30, but I need you to stop at dispatch and get the work orders for each around nine."

"Alright, no problem," he said. "I'll be there."

"Yeah, fine," Derek said. "But don't think this means I owe you one."

Jim set the phone down and snapped his fingers in mock disappointment. "Sorry, Sarah. But you heard Derek," he said. "Duty calls."

"Nice try, honeybunch, but there's no way you're getting out of this that easily. I'll just save this till tonight."

She clicked off the DVD player and flipped to the beginning of the *TODAY* show being recorded with their Tivo. She tossed the remote onto the couch, walked into the kitchen and grabbed a water bottle from the fridge. He shambled over and tried to kiss her, but she pushed him aside as she went back to the family room.

"What are you so mad about?" he asked. "Don't you have that stupid bake sale today anyway?"

"That's not the point, Jim," she said. "We were supposed to work out together today, and you promised me you'd go to the store as well. I'd really, really like you to get to that soon, please."

"Yeah, I saw the color-coded and categorized list you put together. I'll do it later."

"That's what you said yesterday. And the day before that."

"Well I didn't know I was going to have to go into work."

"Oh, I know," she said. "You just had to go in."

"Hey, if you want me around on weekends, I can always take that job in Texas," he said, settling into the recliner in front of the TV. Jim's brother Cam had a sales position open at his company in Austin, but it would mean living down there during the week and flying home to Pennsylvania each weekend. "I have to give him an answer by Friday about that."

"The answer is still no," she said, frowning at the mere mention of the word Texas. "We already decided you're not taking that job."

"Well as long as WE'VE decided," he said. "I think it merits further discussion."

"You really want to be an account executive who sells sporting goods to stores in Texas?"

"Maybe," he said. "Don't forget, my territory would include the entire southwest region. Besides, I'd be making twice the money for half the work."

"Except I'd never get to see you," she said, folding her arms. "I hate it when you bring this up. You know it upsets me."

"Bring what up?" he asked. "The fact that I want to make more money? Or that I want to get back into sales?"

"We don't need the money. We're doing just fine. Just stop talking about it, okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, because we could never use more money. I still want—" He stopped when he saw a commercial for Nolan Realty appear on screen.

"Oh, yes!" he said. "Let's see what Cal's got cooked up for this one." Jim was a huge fan of Cal Nolan, the owner of Nolan Realty who'd inherited the company from his father eighteen months

ago. Cal gave Nolan Realty a sexy new image when he took over and fired every realtor the company had and began a nationwide recruiting effort for the "hottest" realtors in the country to come to Philadelphia. He offered a starting base salary of $75,000 plus a tiny commission, which was unheard of in an industry where realtors depended on commission almost exclusively. There was a lot of snickering and outrage about "Hooters Realty," but it worked and was now one of the most successful companies in the Philadelphia area. Much of the company s newfound success was attributed to the accompanying risqué commercials that bordered on soft core porn.

Sarah grabbed the remote and fast-forwarded quickly through the commercial.

"Oh, c'mon," he said. "I wanted to see if that was a new one with Nolan's Knockouts."

"Nolan's Knockouts?"

"Yeah, that's what he's calling them now. This one ad I just saw starts off with this shot of a forest and then—"

"I don't want to know," she said. "Those commercials are all the same anyway. Cal always wears that same cheesy tuxedo while a bunch of his realtors—"

"Knockouts," he corrected her.

"Whatever. I didn't record this show to watch him or his Knockouts in some smutty commercial. I recorded it to watch this." She pointed at the screen and stopped fast-forwarding as a video montage began of a baby girl.

"Coming up next on *TODAY*, we check in on Michele Groves, the remarkable little girl who just three months ago appeared to be hours from death with what's known as SMA, or Spinal Muscular Atrophy, a rare genetic disorder in children. Her sudden and complete recovery from this previously thought to be incurable disease stunned doctors and provided inspiration to millions of Americans. After months of silence, Michele and her mother

Beth are back for another exclusive interview here on the *TODAY* show, live, in studio, right after this."

The camera cut to show both mother and daughter sitting on the couch, mom smiling nervously into the camera with her daughter happily playing beside her. The screen faded into another commercial for Nolan Realty. Sarah sighed and hit fast-forward on the remote.

"Wait—who was that again?" he asked. "She looks awfully familiar."

"I already told you, I'm not watching—"

"Not the commercial," he said as he took the remote and rewound to the shot of the mother and daughter. "Her."

Sarah turned and gave him a funny look. "You're kidding, right? That's that little girl I was watching all those stories about a while back."

Jim stared at her blankly.

"Terminal illness suddenly cured? Brings joy to millions? Lives in the area? Any of this ring a bell?"

"I guess," he said. "I remember you crying about some kid on TV. I meant her mom. What was her name?"

"Beth."

"Beth what?"

"Beth Groves, but her maiden name is Snyder. She's been a widow for over a year now, and I read somewhere she might change it, but she apparently never did."

"So she only does interviews for the *TODAY* show or something?"

"Yeah, pretty much. She's had book offers, movie offers, a reality show, you name it, and she's been offered it. So far Beth turned everything down except these two interviews, and she supposedly only agreed to do these as a favor for her sister Melissa who's a producer at the NBC station in town."

Jim snapped his fingers at the screen. "Melissa Snyder!" he shouted. "Yes! That's how I know who that is. Melissa Snyder was two years above me in high school. She had a younger sister Beth who went to an all-girls school, so she could ride horses or something."

"Ride horses?"

"I dunno, something like that. Melissa was the one I cared about. Now there was a girl who would've been perfect as one of Nolan's Knockouts."

"Did you date her or something?"

"Well, if by date you mean masturbated to her picture in '*Teen Magazine* about a thousand times then sure, I dated her."

"OK, first of all—gross," she said. "Second, '*Teen Magazine*? Really?"

"What, I was fifteen. I liked looking at girls my own age."

Sarah raised an eyebrow and folded her arms as she stared at him.

"Oh, whatever Sarah. That was twenty years ago."

"It's still weird."

"ANYWAY," he said, redirecting the conversation, "Melissa used to model for them in high school. Did some other stuff too, but that was her big thing. She was the reason I never missed Latin class."

"Were you even friends with her?"

"Hardly. I sometimes ended up being partnered with her for worksheets we had to do, though. She seemed pretty nice. I never really said that much. I was too busy making sure my erection wasn't showing."

"Some things never change," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"I mean like on Halloween when Carol came around with Marianne wearing that ridiculous French maid costume." Carol was a young, single mother living with her daughter Marianne

two houses up in their townhouse community in Springfield. She'd explained her outfit by saying she was going to a party later, but Sarah hadn't bought it then or now.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "That was nothing but a Kit Kat bar in my jacket pocket and some bad lighting."

"You weren't wearing a jacket."

"I wasn't?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, you weren't. And besides, she wasn't even wearing it right."

"Could have fooled me," he muttered.

She glanced at him and hopped off the couch, walking over to the hutch in the corner of the family room. Opening the bottom doors, she pulled out a light blue photo album and flipped through the photos. "Now this is how you wear a French maid costume," she said, closing the door with her foot and handing him the album as she sat on the arm of his chair. "Notice the feather duster matches the outfit."

He took it from her and coughed when he saw her picture. "When the hell was this taken?"

"It was junior year during my sorority Halloween party. I'm sure you've seen it before."

"Yeah, I think I'd remember that if I had. Can I keep this?" he asked as he pointed to the picture.

"You have the real thing, Jimmy," she said, taking the photo album back from him. He whimpered as she closed it. "How on earth did you ever get me to marry you?" she asked, shaking her head.

"I think I got you drunk on Southern Comfort and Mr. Pibb."

"No, that's just why I first went out with you," she said and smiled. "Why else would I have agreed to a date with someone sporting those ridiculous muttonchops?"

"Oh, that's right," he said, "but they were not muttonchops, they were sideburns, and they were hip."

"Of course they were. Now, are we done? I'd like to watch this interview."

"Yeah, sure, here you go," he said, handing her the remote and heading towards the stairs. "I gotta get ready for work anyway."

The house phone rang as Sarah settled into the couch. *Naturally*, she thought.

"Jim? Can you get that?" she asked.

The phone rang again as she waited for his acknowledgement. When none came, she dropped the remote and grabbed the phone from the counter. Charlotte's number appeared on the caller ID.

"Hey Char," she said. "You all set for—"

"Did you watch?" Charlotte asked. Charlotte Charles had been Sarah's best friend since college and even dated and eventually married one of Jim's close friends, Eric Dawkins.

"Not yet, I was just about to," she said. "But listen to this. Jim tells me this morning he went to high school with Beth's older sister."

"And he's never mentioned this before?"

"You know Jim. He couldn't even remember who Michele Groves was until I reminded him."

"I went through the same thing with Eric last night. We were—Sammy, put them down! Eric, would you get down here and get your son dressed, please?"

Sarah patted her neck and smirked as she listened to Charlotte's pleas for help. Sammy was Charlotte and Eric's eight-year-old son and had a horrible sweet tooth, even worse than Jim's.

"He's already driving me nuts," Charlotte said. "What time can you meet me over there?"

"Why don't I just get ready now and meet you there around 8:45. It's at Tyler Elementary, just off Shields Lane, right?"

"Exactly, just behind the high school. You can park—"

Sarah jerked her head away from the phone as a loud crashing sound came over the line.

"I'm sorry, Sarah, I gotta go. Sammy is running around knocking stuff everywhere. I'll see you soon, okay? Bye."

Charlotte hung up before Sarah could even say goodbye. When people wondered why she and Jim were thirty-five and still childless, she'd point to conversations like the one she just had. *Why would anyone want to deal with all that aggravation?* She shook her head and sighed as she downed the last few drops of her water bottle and placed it in the recycling bin before she went to turn off the TV. The image of Beth and Michele was still frozen on the set as she picked up the remote. Now free from Jim's vulgar distractions, she took in the picture and smiled. They were every bit as photogenic a pair as she'd remembered, and the story still touched her like few ever had.

"Oh, that's why," she whispered, turning it off and hurrying up the stairs.