

Chapter 1

"And now, I'd like to present Romantek's Chairman of the Board, Sergio Corvino. Sergio, why don't you tell us why you're volunteering?"

From the back of the room, blending in with the shadows, Amber watched the press conference with growing professional interest. As the Assistant Chief of Cyber-security for Romantek, high profile situations were in her bailiwick and she took her job very seriously. George Jackson, Romantek's CEO, founder, and all around head honcho made Corvino's introduction seem like a casual thing, but in reality, it brought a hush over the room as the press corps strained to hear every word from the famous entrepreneur's mouth.

"Thanks, George." He put his hands on the podium and made eye contact with the members of the press. Corvino oozed confidence, but didn't appear unapproachable. Just your average multi-zillionaire tech mogul. Amber almost scoffed aloud at that understatement. But he began speaking so she focused her attention again. "Hello, everyone. As you know, I've been Romantek's Chairman of the Board for about two years now. George brought me onboard when he learned of my interest in Romantek's innovative technologies. During discussions, we discovered our interests overlapped and we'd be a good fit working together. Since then, I've tried to be one of the faces of Romantek, building relationships with the people who matter, the customers and proponents of the amazing Romantek process. This is not my first press conference—I recognize many faces among you—but this is my first chance to announce a new turn in my life. I'm going to become a living experiment."

The journalists whispered and stirred.

Corvino held up his hand and waited for the room to calm. "You know Romantek's technology exercises the body while the dreamer dreams, purges the body of toxins, and can adjust weight by controlling nutrient flow, but now Romantek's scientists have perfected the Soma-gen process. They've been working on it for a number of years. Trials indicate it's both effective and safe. But we want to prove it, and prove it in a big way. With that in mind, I'll be undergoing Soma-gen on Romantek's ship, *Sleeping Beauty*."

Amber cringed. It seemed like a bad idea to give out the name of the ship. Corvino would already be a target for cyber terrorists, which was why Amber had been in on the program. She was being tasked to keep an eye on him in the dream, just in case something went south. She'd been in a dream vacation once before, but only to familiarize herself with the process and it had been three years ago. This would be the first time she'd be going in as an undercover specialist. Her boss, Rex Boyd, had done it before, with modest success, but his wife, Charlotte, was about to give birth, so he had to stay out of the dream state until the happy occasion occurred. That left the delicate operation to Amber. Corvino wasn't to know he was being protected. He was to be treated like a VIP customer, but nothing more. While she could understand the need for security, especially in light of recent events, she was puzzled by the need for non-disclosure of her presence as bodyguard. Corvino impressed her as an honest guy who didn't want to be treated with kid gloves. He wanted to be just another customer. But that wouldn't be the case—*couldn't be the case*—because of his notoriety.

He went on speaking after the crowd quieted. "I know you're all asking yourselves, 'Why is this guy with such stunning good looks undergoing a regeneration process?'" He grinned as everyone chuckled. "But the fact is, I'm thirty-eight years old and time waits for no man. My body isn't the same as it was when I was twenty. My hairline is beginning to recede," he said, pointing toward the front of his short, black, curly hair. He looked perfectly normal to Amber, but then, she didn't know what he'd looked like as a younger man. "And, I've got a bad back due to a soccer injury ten years ago. It's something surgery can't fix, and over time will become arthritic, so without a successful Soma-gen, I'd be stuck with it for life."

Soccer? Cool. Amber was a huge soccer fan, even playing on a women's casual league in the past.

"Soma-gen is going to fix all of that. You'll see from the before and after pictures—there's even a Z-scan of my back in the file you can download—the Soma-gen process is going to be revolutionary."

Reporters were busy typing into their data tablets while the computers recorded the speech.

"This is a new era for medical technology. While Soma-gen cannot cure some diseases, it can manipulate cells and DNA to a great degree, eliminating many chronic ailments and annoying genetic and age-related effects, like my hair loss. I congratulate George and his team

for all the great work they've done to advance science with Soma-gen. And, now it's time for me to get to *Sleeping Beauty* to have my beauty sleep. I'll take a few questions before I depart."

Nearly every reporter stuck his or her hand up.

"Lisa, in the back."

A young woman with blonde hair stood up. "Why were you chosen as the guinea pig?"

Corvino gave her a pleasant smile, not too familiar, but natural. "There have actually been a number of tests on volunteers along the way, with more or less success. George assures me, as the face of the corporation, I'm the best candidate to prove, once and for all, the team's hard work paid off and the process is ready to be made available to the public at large. Oh, and since I'm single, there is no wife to worry or feel left out." While the journalists chuckled, he pointed to another reporter as the first sat down. "Trent."

"Is there any chance Soma-gen is going to be leased or donated to hospitals and medical facilities to help patients all around the world, not just people with the money to pay for it?"

George Jackson stepped forward to answer that one. "Romantek is in contact with the World Health Organization. We're discussing how the Soma-gen process can be modified to be used in field conditions and in regional hospitals. So far, the technology for large-scale production is too formidable, but we're working on it."

He moved back to his place on Corvino's right side.

"Dahlia, go ahead," Corvino said, pointing to a woman with pink hair and a very short skirt.

"What dangers do you anticipate? Are there any side-effects?"

Nodding, the Chairman answered. "Those are good questions. As a matter of fact, I don't anticipate any 'dangers' as you put it. It's a safe process. As for side-effects, I think there might be some nausea upon waking from the dream, and some disorientation. Other than that, I don't know of any." He looked over at George and George shook his head. Satisfied, Corvino turned back and pointed to another reporter. This one, Amber recognized: Wallace Barnes from CNN.

"What dream will you be experiencing, Mr. Corvino?"

With a big, happy grin, Corvino answered, "Vacation in Rio! I've been to Carnival twice, but those were modern experiences. This time, I'll be taken back to the year 2000—one hundred and forty-five years ago—to experience what previous generations did. It's going to be a big party. I'm really looking forward to it."

Amber rolled her eyes. Could he make her job any harder? Telling potential threats exactly where to look for him was a gigantic security problem. Hadn't anyone told him there was a cyber-terrorist still lurking out there, one who had had successfully infiltrated the Romantek computers in the past? The criminal had barely escaped Romantek's search for him, but they knew he was at large and remained a threat. Hopefully, recent pings from a variety of suspicious locations weren't the same guy. But if it was, he now had enough data to go after a high profile target.

Indicating another reporter, Corvino glanced away, looking briefly at a person standing a few feet away from him in the front. The man—dressed in business casual attire, but big, burly, and looking like no nonsense would be tolerated—was pointing at the computer on his wrist. "This will be the last question," the Chairman told them as he turned back to the waiting reporters.

"I'm Mindy Deets, Berlin Daily News," the reporter said, having gotten Corvino's attention again. "How long will your dream last? When will the results be announced?"

"The dream lasts five dream days, which amounts to three real-time days. I think the results will be announced about two days after I wake, once I've been evaluated by professionals."

Oh, great. More hints and clues for the terrorists.

Corvino stepped away from the podium, nodding and waving. "Thanks for your attention today. I'm off to sleep. If you have any more questions, address them to the Romantek media relations office. Good afternoon."

He turned and sauntered out of the room, through the exit on one side of the platform. Several assistants and George Jackson followed him out. Amber took a deep breath and hurried through the departing reporters. She had to get to the *Sleeping Beauty*, into the dream. With a modicum of luck, it would be routine. She'd been out of action, sitting vigil with her dying father for the past three months, and she knew she was rusty as a security specialist. But, like riding a bicycle, it ought to come back naturally if the situation called for intervention. Well, she hoped so anyway. And, hey, it was only three days. Surely that wasn't long enough for a terrorist to find his way in to create problems. These things took time and skill, and Romantek's security team was top notch. They were on it. Amber would be backed up all the way. Why did she have such a sick feeling in her stomach?