

A Brief Moment in Time

JEANE WATIER

Prologue

SHE'D FOUND Gavin just as Kathryn had wanted her to. Now, as Adele listened to him speak, she could feel the depth of emotion he had for her friend. A powerful bond connected the two of them; that was obvious. Still, Adele found it hard to believe. Kathryn and Gavin were strangers; they'd never met—at least not in a way her mind could readily comprehend.

But whether she understood it or not, she couldn't disregard the facts. Kathryn was calling to Gavin McDermott from another realm, wanting, possibly even needing his help and leaving clues so that Adele could assist her in her quest.

Other realms, parallel realities, paranormal activity—those were topics Adele knew little about, but she'd consulted a friend from college who specialized in such things. He assured her that other realms existed and that comas, hallucinations, sleep, even daydreaming, drew people into those realms temporarily, although much of it remained in the subconscious. He explained that the shift in focus could be powerful enough to impress itself in a person's conscious memory, as in Gavin's experience. And in Kathryn's case, he believed that what she was experiencing was so “real” it had the power to hold her in the other realm. Furthermore, he'd confirmed Adele's belief that a visit from Gavin could be the impetus needed to draw Kathryn from the comatose state she was in.

Now Adele had to get him there, but it wasn't going to be easy; plenty of obstacles stood in the way. And time, as she knew it, was running out.

Part 1
~Gavin~

There is a fine line between dreams and reality; it's up to you to draw it.

—B. QUILLIAM

Chapter 1

“IT’S A SYSTEM, Kid. You learn the system and you’ll do just fine.” Gavin remembered the words as if they’d been spoken yesterday. In reality, it was seventeen years ago.

As he watched the new inmate, Gavin felt sorry for him. The boy had to be eighteen, although he didn’t look it. He’d no doubt have it hard for the first while, but he’d get used to it; he really didn’t have a choice. He had some sense to him, however, staring straight ahead, not looking at anyone, his face not portraying the emotions he must be feeling.

He continued that way until nearly across the big yard, then for some reason turned to look at Gavin. The boy was a hundred feet away, but Gavin could see into his eyes and for a moment into his very soul. It was like looking at himself seventeen years earlier: a scared kid, tall but scrawny, feeling that his life was over—or wishing it was—all because of one regrettable night, one very stupid decision.

The brief eye contact and sudden onslaught of memories that accompanied it left Gavin unsettled. *Why did he look at me like that? It almost seemed like he did it on purpose...like he knew me or something.* Gavin was curious now. He wondered what the kid was in for. It had to be serious; Swenton was a maximum-security prison.

Gavin had been the topic of conversation himself, so young and naive all those years ago. The nickname he’d received, Babyface McDermott, reflected that. Anyone who knew him now, however, called him Gavin to his face.

Nearly everybody had nicknames in the joint, and Gavin didn’t really mind his. Somehow he’d gained a tough reputation despite or maybe because of the nickname; he wasn’t sure. At six foot four, two hundred thirty pounds, nobody messed with him anymore.

Anyone who’d been in prison awhile knew how to present himself to a first timer, or fish, as they were called. It was a game they played—forming allies, choosing friends carefully, spreading rumors. Gavin just shook his head at some of those rumors. They were ridiculous at best, but the fish didn’t know that. He’d supposedly killed two fellow convicts. His hands, it was said, were lethal weapons, and a blow to the head in just the right spot would kill a man instantly.

Gavin played their game; it was a game of survival, but he wasn’t that person. In the first year of his prison term, he’d made the decision to take advantage of the programs offered and become all that he could be. He couldn’t change that unfortunate night; he couldn’t go back and undo what he’d done, but he could move forward. He could change himself.

And he *had* changed—inwardly. But on the outside, he played his role. The only time he let his defenses down was at night when alone in his cell. There he would retreat into the world he had created, a world that had kept him sane all those years. In his own private domain he could be the person he wanted to be, the person he was underneath. He could dream and imagine. He could escape.

The dinner bell sounded, jarring Gavin from his uncharacteristic daydream. He looked around quickly to ensure that no one had caught him staring into space. Despite his tough reputation, he still kept himself guarded around the other convicts. The men didn’t take kindly to change, and strange behavior simply wasn’t tolerated.

He saw what had happened to Arthur Talon. Dubbed “Mr. T,” the guy was well respected by most of the men, but things changed. Arthur found religion, which wasn’t that uncommon in the joint, but in his zeal for the Lord, he made some enemies. What started as a mealtime joke turned into a campaign to put a stop to his “holier than thou” behavior. He took it all piously, believing it was his cross to bear, but it became so bad that he was beaten to within an inch of his life, and after that he was transferred out.

The prisoners filed mindlessly to the dining hall. There was a system in place there too, an unwritten code dictating who sat where and with whom. It was dutifully followed day in and day out, nobody thinking to question a system that had been in place from the start.

As Gavin waited in line, he watched the new kid. He was six or seven men ahead of him, and Gavin could observe him without drawing attention to himself. As he filled his tray, he noticed the kid sitting alone. Everybody was avoiding him. It was typical treatment of a first timer.

Then Gavin did something that surprised even himself. He turned to Stubby, in line behind him, and explained, “I’m gonna see what I can find out.” He walked over to the new kid and without a word, sat across the table from him. Gavin was aware that the whole room had turned to watch, but it was too late to change his mind. He would have to deal with the consequences, whatever they might be.

The two ate in silence for a moment, not looking at anything but the food in front of them. Gavin was deciding what to say to the kid, how to question him while still playing the game. He was surprised when the boy was the first to speak.

“I’m Ryan.”

“Gavin.” As he mumbled his reply, he met the boy’s eyes and again saw something familiar. He was quick to dismiss it, but he couldn’t disregard the look on the boy’s face; it didn’t match his circumstances. The kid didn’t seem afraid, and it unnerved Gavin.

“I know who you are.”

A silent alarm went off in Gavin’s head as he heard the calm declaration. Outwardly, he showed no evidence of it; he had trained himself well. Even so, his mind was scrambling. *What did the kid mean by that? Has he heard things about me in the few short days he’s been here, or did he hear about me on the outside?*

Those questions brought up an issue Gavin had been grappling with in recent months. With his prison term nearing an end, he’d begun speculating what it would be like when he got out and what others would know and say about him. He’d asked his parents more than once, his sister too, but they were biased. They’d continued to love and support him all those years. His family didn’t see him as a murderer or even a criminal for that matter, but that didn’t change the facts, and it didn’t determine how others would see him.

He let the comment go by without as much as a raised eyebrow. He had to play the kid. He had to stay in control of the conversation and defend his reputation. That, he knew for sure.

Ryan didn’t seem intimidated by him. He was very composed for someone so young and, Gavin could only assume, out of his element.

“You’re Gavin McDermott. I know who you are,” he repeated. “I’m from Redding.”

Redding was just twenty miles from Gavin’s home. It was also where he’d gone to high school and where he’d been on that ill-fated night. Now the kid had the upper hand, and Gavin had to ask, “What’s your last name?”

“Terley.”

Gavin’s blood went cold. He knew the name all too well. More questions begged to be asked, but Gavin managed to keep his composure. He wanted to know who the kid’s parents were, what crime he’d committed to get himself incarcerated at Swenton, and most of all, what he knew about him.

At one time, Redding had been a thriving town with a population of about ten thousand. A lumber mill employed many of the town’s residents, but when the mill shut down, hard times followed and crime increased. Gangs were common in Gavin’s school, and it was a run-in with a gang that changed his life forever.

And the name, Terley—it was the same last name as the kid Gavin had been charged with killing. He wondered if Ryan was related and how much he knew of the details of that night.

“So, what did you do to get in here?” Gavin asked as dispassionately as he could.

The kid looked at him for a moment before he answered evenly, “I killed my stepfather.” It was a blunt admission of guilt, and Gavin grimaced inwardly, knowing there was much more to the story. He nodded and continued eating, as if hearing that kind of statement was commonplace. The truth was, he had never gotten used to it. Hearing about a murder only served to remind him of his own experience and fill him with the sickening dread he’d felt when it happened.

They were nearly done eating, and very few words had passed between them, but Gavin had a plan in mind. He needed to know what the kid knew about him, and for that information, he was willing to make a deal.

“Listen, I don’t know what it is you’ve heard about me, kid.” Gavin kept his voice low and even, making it sound as threatening as he could. “But in here I decide what people say about me and what they don’t. Is that understood?”

Ryan nodded, still no fear in his eyes. The boy wasn’t more than a hundred and forty pounds; he even had a kind of frailty about him, yet he wasn’t afraid. It didn’t seem right to Gavin.

“I’m going to do something for you,” he informed the kid. “In exchange for you keeping your mouth shut, I’m gonna save you some pain.”

The boy frowned slightly, obviously not understanding but not betraying his calm facade to the others watching.

“I’m going to spread a story about you to the other men,” Gavin stated. “It’ll keep a few of the troublemakers away. Your job is to dummy up. People question you, you don’t admit anything; you don’t deny anything. Agreed?”

The kid nodded a second time as Gavin got up from the table, took his tray to the counter, and then walked out of the dining hall, aware again that all eyes were on him.

Stubby caught up to him as he walked down the hallway. As the name implied, the man was short and stocky; nevertheless, he was a force to be reckoned with if he got angry. Stubby had been in Swenton nearly as long as Gavin, and the two had become friends early on.

“So?”

Gavin hadn’t completely settled on just how he would weave the story about Ryan, but he had some ideas and knew he had to go with them. Friend or not, Stubby had to be an unwitting accomplice in order for his little scheme to work.

“The kid’s psycho.” Gavin threw out some bait.

“Really? What did he say?” Stubby liked a good bit of gossip as well as the next guy, and Gavin knew he had him.

“It wasn’t so much what he said,” Gavin explained, “as what he didn’t say. The kid was cool as a cucumber, and when I looked him in the eye...” Gavin stopped and shuddered, adding conviction to his words. “I could have been looking at a young Hannibal Lecter.”

“You don’t say,” Stubby replied, transfixed. “What did he do?”

“Killed his father.” Gavin altered the truth slightly to provide more drama. For the clincher he added, “Mother died mysteriously awhile back, too. And when he told me it...his eyes...I couldn’t even look straight at him. There’s something really disturbing about him.”

That was all Gavin needed to say. The story was good. Stubby had bought it without question and would take it from there. By noon the next day, the whole place would know that the new fish was a cross between Damien Thorn, Hannibal Lecter, and the devil himself. Nevertheless, it left Gavin with a dilemma. He wanted to talk to the kid more and find out what he knew about him.

The men played basketball in the big yard after dinner, and Stubby was the first to notice that the kid was watching them. “Why’s he looking at us like that? It’s kind of creepy, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, it is,” Gavin played along. “I hope I didn’t piss him off before. Maybe I should try to do something to get on his good side. Why don’t I ask him if he wants to join us for a game?”

Stubby shook his head adamantly. “Don’t rope me into this. I don’t want to have anything to do with the little shit.”

“Well, I gotta try something.” With that, Gavin walked over to where the boy was standing.

“It’s done,” he announced simply. “All kinds of stories will be circulating about you by tomorrow. You up for your end of the deal?”

“Yeah.”

The two men stood silently for a few minutes, hands in their pockets, kicking at the gravel beneath their feet. Finally Gavin had to ask, “So what did you hear about me?”

The kid continued looking down for a moment longer and then replied without emotion, “You killed my father.”

Chapter 2

A BLADE OF cold, piercing steel thrust itself into Gavin's chest as he heard the boy's words. A chill ran through him, and for a moment he was almost tempted to believe the dark rumors he'd started about the kid. Knife still twisting inside, Gavin continued looking down, rearranging the pebbles beneath him with the toe of his shoe.

"I never knew him, of course, but my mom talked about him," Ryan explained.

Gavin couldn't see any other course of action than to stand and listen to the boy talk. He wanted to walk away—run away, make the kid stop—but he'd been the one to ask the question, and now he sincerely regretted it.

"She hated him."

The words caused Gavin's head to jerk upward, his eyes focusing in on the boy's face.

"He used her until she got pregnant with me. She was only fifteen at the time.

"Mom raised me on her own," Ryan continued, his face devoid of emotion. "A few years ago, she got married. The guy started beating her. I warned him to stop, but he just laughed at me." The kid's face held no remorse as he summed up the story. "So I had to make him stop."

Inwardly, Gavin reacted to the kid's blunt declaration. *No remorse, no regret, no fear; how can he not show any emotion? From the sounds of it, he committed a premeditated, cold-blooded murder. And now he's undoubtedly facing life in prison. How can he be so calm about it?*

He couldn't even come up with an appropriate response. The kid had obviously had a rough life. He'd undoubtedly learned to shut off his emotions as a survival mechanism. Yet somehow Gavin sensed it was more than that, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what it might be or why he felt drawn to the mysterious young man.

As he looked around them, he noticed others glance in their direction and then turn away just as quickly, but nobody came near.

"Look," Gavin said finally. "About our deal. This'll work if you keep quiet. But if you do run into any trouble..."

"It's okay. I can take care of myself." The kid's words sounded convincing, not like some smart ass with more brawn than brains, but rather like someone who'd been taking care of himself for a long time, someone who knew what he was talking about.

Gavin started to leave, then turned back to Ryan with what he hoped sounded like a threat. "It helps to know who your friends are in here."

The kid nodded.

Gavin walked away maintaining an outward calm, yet silently imploding. He gave Stubby a look that said, "The kid's even more messed than I thought," and then continued past him, leaving his friend to draw his own conclusions.

Alone in his cell, Gavin sought refuge in the private world he had created. It was a world he could usually escape to with ease; he'd been doing it for so many years. But that evening, Ryan's words haunted his familiar place.

The demons of his own past haunted him, too. Though he'd worked hard to bury them, he'd obviously been unsuccessful. He fell into a fitful sleep. He was eighteen again, filled with hope

for the future. Yet when he looked in a mirror, it was Ryan's image, not his own, that stared back at him. And when he looked down, there was blood on his hands.

Strict routine ruled the lives of the prisoners at Swenton. The morning bell sounded, bringing them back to the harsh reality of their incarcerated world. For once, Gavin was glad to re-enter that world. The one he'd just experienced in his dreams was a greater hell by far. He'd awoken in a sweat, having run from something much too frightening to remember.

At breakfast, announcements were made for the day. A rehabilitation program was being initiated at Swenton. Prisoners within two years of their parole were being "encouraged" to attend. Incentives were being offered to those willing to participate in the program. What it boiled down to in Gavin's mind was that those who didn't attend would have to work longer hours. It didn't sound like incentive to him, just another form of coercion.

The program began that morning with nearly forty in attendance in the prison auditorium. The men around Gavin were whispering about the so-called rehabilitation being offered. He heard the usual scoffing, some obviously against the idea, others asking questions. The room went silent, however, as a woman walked onto the stage.

She was fortyish, Gavin guessed, and not unattractive—just somewhat plain looking with her hair pulled back a little too severely in a bun. She might have had a decent figure as well, but it was covered in a coat-style dress that gave very little indication of what was underneath. Nevertheless, judging by the men's response, she may as well have been Madonna. Gavin noticed her blush slightly as she cleared her throat to begin.

Speaking loudly over the still-audible whistle, jeer, or muffled comment, the woman introduced herself as Kathryn Harding. She then listed her qualifications, to which Gavin didn't really listen; he was much more interested in the conversations going on around him.

She'll have her work cut out, he mused. No one's taking her seriously.

As she continued, a few words and phrases caught Gavin's interest. Others around him must have heard too, because the room became quiet.

"This is an innovative approach," she was saying, "developed by some of the leading psychologists in the country. With this methodology we don't use labels, except to say that we're all teachers and all students. There is no therapist or patient. No murderer, no criminal, no victim. We are all equal—human beings who have chosen different experiences in life.

"Our goal will be to help you see yourself free of those labels. And once free of them, you can begin to see yourself as anything you want to be."

Gavin was riveted to her words. They were completely different from what he'd been expecting, and they affected him deeply. He felt torn. He wanted to dismiss them as outlandish, impossible even, yet part of him wanted to believe they were true. Commonsense argued that it wouldn't matter how he saw himself; people would always look at what he had done and label him as a murderer. He could hide from it. He could pretend otherwise, but he couldn't change what was.

She went on to describe the program, which consisted of group sessions and individual counseling. In addition, she would be choosing four to six men to work with for an extended period, those particular men being chosen according to the proximity of their parole, their record of behavior, and their participation in the group and individual sessions. Her plan was to continue to work with those men once they were fully released.

Gavin wasn't sure why, when he had serious doubts about the validity of the woman's claims, but for some reason he wanted to be a part of her little experimental group. Moreover, he sensed he would be.

The woman introduced her colleagues, two men and another woman who would be working with her in the program. Sessions would be starting the following week, and groups and times would be posted in the dining hall.

The prisoners, glad to have missed an hour of work, were dismissed to go to their jobs. Gavin listened to the chatter as the men made their way to the industry area. Some were still making crude jokes about the women they had just seen, while others challenged the effectiveness of the rehabilitation program.

Gavin was caught up in his own introspection—a mixture of thoughts and feelings composed of Ryan's words, his own unsettling dream, and the strange, enticing things the woman had just shared.

"The only thing I need to rehabilitate me," Stubby interjected, "is a good woman and a place to call home when I get out of this shit hole."

Several others agreed by nodding or grunting. Although somewhat primal, Gavin couldn't disagree with the sentiment. Stubby, along with many of the other inmates Gavin had gotten to know, had learned their lesson. They wouldn't be repeating their crime. In a sense, they were already rehabilitated. They were not the same men they'd been ten or twenty years before.

Gavin wasn't either. He hardly knew the foolish kid he'd been seventeen years earlier. That kid was long gone—or at least he'd thought so—until he'd met Ryan, until that dream had made it all seem so real again.

As he entered the millwork shop where he worked as a supervisor, the first face to greet him was none other than Ryan's. The kid half smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "They told me to report here. What do you want me to do?"

Gavin quickly assessed the situation. Jobs were assigned according to seniority. He pretty much ran the place now and had men he trusted working the big machines. Fish were usually a pain in the ass, and more often than not they liked to complain rather than work. The work wasn't complicated, but a stupid or careless move could cost someone a finger or an arm.

He sighed. With little choice in the matter, he gave Ryan some simple instructions and had him work with Rocco. Then he went over to the other side of the room where one of the planers was acting up. He knew it so well, he could repair it with his eyes closed.

As he worked, his thoughts fixated on the woman they'd just heard. *Does she really believe that we're all the same? Does she honestly see herself as equal to the men she just addressed?* He questioned again what the benefit of that kind of reasoning would be. *Is it for real or just some new psychological trickery, a way to mess with our minds?*

Gavin believed the mind was a complicated thing, capable of more than most people believed. He'd proved it over the years. He could escape in his mind when he was alone at night. He'd honed it well, but he'd never spoken of it to anyone, not even his family who visited him regularly.

He wondered what this woman's view might be on subjects like that. He doubted it was something he'd ever be comfortable sharing, but still he was curious.

Gavin looked up to see Rocco walking toward him with a scowl on his face.

“I can’t work with the kid, Gavin. I don’t know if you’ve heard the rumors, but I’ve heard some pretty wild stuff about him. I believe it, too. You just have to look at his eyes—something about him is really disturbing.”

Gavin coughed to keep from laughing as he listened to the older man’s concerns. Rocco was a friend of Stubby’s and as superstitious as they come. Gavin’s plan was going smoothly.

“All right, send him over here.”

Ryan appeared minutes later, and Gavin put him to work tightening some bolts on the planer. After a few minutes of silence, he hoped the kid would be content with the lack of communication, but it didn’t last.

“How long till you get out?”

“A year, maybe longer.” Gavin was eligible for parole within the year, but most were denied the first time, and he didn’t want to get his hopes up.

“What are you gonna do?”

“Don’t know yet,” Gavin shrugged.

“What’s that rehab program all about?”

“I guess they want to try and make respectable citizens out of us.”

“We’re no different than they are.”

Gavin stared at the kid. The statement came out of nowhere, yet it was oddly similar to the one the psychologist woman had made earlier. Again it wasn’t so much from a place of defiance as a place of knowing. He wondered what made the kid tick, how his mind worked.

“Why do you say that?” Gavin asked.

“It’s who we all are, deep down. You, me, that guard.” Ryan motioned ever so slightly with his head. “We’re all the same.”

“In what way?”

“What we’re made of, what we’re capable of...None of this is real, you know.”