

THIRTY YEARS AGO

The child sat alone quietly sobbing in the darkness, her tearstained face unseen. Huddled in the corner of the closet, she hugged her knees to her chest with both arms.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to be a bad girl, honest.”

She could still hear the echoes of her father’s angry voice. “Why can’t you do anything right? Why are you so stupid?” He’d asked. She put her hands over her ears to block out his voice but the conversation kept repeating over and over in her mind. “I wish you’d never been born,” he’d told her coldly. “I never wanted children anyway...they’re too much trouble.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she’d told him.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” he had mimicked in a high voice. “When Mommy’s at work you have to stay in your room and be quiet,” he’d said sternly. “How many times do I have to tell you that? I don’t want you asking questions and making noise.”

She sniffled. She was never really sure what he wanted. He would tell her to stay in her room, but then would yell for her to get him a beer out of the refrigerator, and if she was too slow, she invariably got slapped.

She tried to muffle her crying but her sobs became louder as she grew more upset. A loud pounding on the closet door startled her and she drew back in fear.

“Shut-up in there. I can still hear you!” he yelled.

She put her hands over her mouth, smothering her sobs. If she didn’t stop making noise, he would punish her again. She could feel the burning sting the belt left on her back. He would do worse if he opened the door now. Feeling around in the dark amongst the shoes and clutter, she located her pillow and tattered blanket. If she could fall asleep, everything would be all right in the morning when Mommy came home. She snuggled into the softness of the pillow and hugged it to her chest. Wiping her face on the blanket, she began to relax. Pushing at the shoes, she made herself more room in the cramped space.

Why can’t I be a good girl, like Daddy wants? she wondered. Why am I so clumsy and noisy? Tomorrow I’ll try harder. She had almost dozed off, when she heard a loud thump and her father’s cursing.

The door to the closet jerked open and his black silhouette stood out against the bright overhead lights. “I just tripped over your damn blocks,” he screamed in a drunken slur. He reached in and jerked her roughly up by the arm.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled sleepily.

He slapped her a stinging blow across the face. She whimpered. Her ears rang and she saw stars as he pulled her from the closet.

“Shut up! Get out here and pick up those blocks!” he ordered, flinging her down on the

bedroom floor. Scrambling up, she grabbed clumsily at the blocks. There were only three of them, but in her anxiety she dropped one. She watched fearfully as it rolled across the floor.

“Clumsy girl!” he slurred scornfully, pushing at her with his foot. She tripped and bumped her head on the floor.

She picked up the errant block and stumbled awkwardly toward the closet. When he punched her from behind, her teeth clamped down on her tongue and she cried out in pain. Tasting salty blood, she hurried forward trying to reach the safety of the closet.

“Stop your bellyaching and get back in there!” he yelled.

Hurrying too fast, she tripped over the hem of her nightgown. As she fell, the blocks slipped from her fingers and bounced across the floor. She hit the floor hard and looked up in fear, her eyes pleading. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” she whispered.

“OK, you asked for it,” he said pulling off his belt.

She scrambled to her feet and stumbled toward the closet as he lashed out with the leather belt. She screamed as it slapped across her back and shoulders.

“Shut up!” he hollered raising the belt again.

With the next lash, she fell to her knees. Cramming her fist into her mouth she tried to muffle her cries as the blows continued. They came so hard and fast that she couldn’t get up to run to the closet. When the belt buckle struck her on the side of the head it knocked her over onto the floor. Blood trickled down her temple as she curled into a ball trying to make her self smaller, protecting her face. The blows continued relentlessly. He grabbed her roughly and ripped her nightgown. The belt now struck her bare back.

She was almost unconscious when the pain suddenly began to recede. A quiet, gentle voice inside her head said, *“Don’t cry, darling. I’ll help you. You go to sleep. I’ll take the pain for you. I’m strong and it won’t hurt me as much...hush now.”*

She didn’t understand what was happening, but she welcomed the release from her terror and the horrible pain. Everything seemed to fade away. Although her father’s voice continued screaming insults she could barely hear them. She knew the belt continued striking flesh but she felt nothing.

“Everything will be all right,” whispered the voice. *“Go to sleep.”*

Gratefully, she allowed herself to slip into the darkness of oblivion.

PRESENT DAY

Boston, Massachusetts

CHAPTER 1

Joyce pushed her time card into the slot on the clock. It read 2230. She still had plenty of time to change into hospital scrubs before report started. As usual, there were a limited number of wearable scrubs in her size. She had to pick through several pieces before she found a set that didn't have holes or stains. She hurried to the unit and looked up her assignment on the board. "Adams, Lacey and Martin" were printed next to her name. One stable ventilator baby and two feed-and-grow preemies. Not a heavy load.

"Hey, Liz, was it very busy today?" she asked the tall blond nurse who was sitting at the nurses' station desk.

"We only got two admissions," answered Liz pushing a patient chart into its slot. "It wasn't bad at all. Not like Monday. We had three babies come in who all needed to be put on ventilators. One had even coded in the ambulance on the way."

"I heard about that. I hope it stays quiet tonight. This is my first night off orientation and I'm a little nervous."

"It can get pretty hectic here at times," admitted Liz. "But we always back each other up. If you need help, just ask. Are you getting used to the night shift yet?"

"Sort of. At least it seems like I'm sleeping better now."

"Well, good luck," Liz wished, turning to give report to another nurse.

Joyce sat down at the nurse's station and after a few minutes Kathy came over to give her report on the three babies she would be caring for during her night shift. Baby Adams was the one on the ventilator. His vent setting had been reduced to twenty breaths per minute as he was doing some breathing on his own now. The oxygen was only nine percent above room air at a setting of thirty percent. His latest blood gas showed he was maintaining a good level of oxygenation. Not bad for a little fellow who weighed only three pounds.

"He's a lot more alert now, too. Have you got any questions about him?" asked Kathy before she started to report on the other two babies.

"Does he have any lab work scheduled on my shift?"

"He has a CBC and bili at 0600, and his next blood gas is at midnight," she answered after consulting her notes.

Joyce jotted the information down on her worksheet. Her other assigned babies, Martin and Lacey, were both almost ready to be discharged home. Kathy told her they were eating well and gaining weight.

“Watch out for Lacey though. She ate so fast last feeding she spit up a little,” cautioned Kathy as she finished report. “Not a lot but enough to choke herself. I had to keep taking the bottle away and making her burp.”

“Thanks for the warning,” said Joyce. She gathered up her worksheets and stood at the desk for a few minutes looking around at the unit.

Kathy smiled. “First night on your own?” she asked sympathetically.

Joyce nodded. “Yeah.”

“It will get easier. I’ve been here ten years and wouldn’t work anywhere else.”

The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit or NICU was a place filled with the noise of machines. The rapid beating of tiny hearts on cardiac monitors, the whoosh and hiss of ventilators supplying life sustaining breaths, the beeps and buzzes of alarms on dozens of IV pumps, warming units and blood pressure machines mingled with each other in constant disharmony. The rooms hummed with the cacophony of sounds.

This unit had three separate bays that were connected by the central nurses' station. Each bay had eight patient areas, some with ventilators some without, but all for babies who needed expert medical care. The first bay was for the sickest babies on ventilators, by the time they graduated to the third bay they were getting ready to go home.

Joyce picked up an electronic thermometer and moved to her first baby's bedside. Adams was in a square, open bed with six-inch high glass sides called an Ohio unit. It had heating elements and lights mounted above it, but the bed was open on the sides to allow easy access to the patient. The baby looked smaller than three pounds with all of the monitors and equipment around him. He lay on his back, the endotracheal tube or ETT down his throat allowing the ventilator to breathe for him. Joyce made sure the tube was taped securely to his face as she suctioned secretions from his mouth.

The baby wiggled when Joyce placed the plastic tip of the electronic thermometer under his arm. His tiny blue eyes stared up at her, watching. It was good to see him this responsive. When he'd first been admitted, he was lethargic, barely moving at all. She touched the tips of his toes and smiled when he wiggled them. She checked all the connections on the Umbilical Artery Catheter or UAC tubing to make sure they were securely taped. The IV fluids running through this tubing were coming from a full bag.

Two weeks ago baby Adams had been her first really sick patient. As part of her orientation, she had been assigned to him with a more experienced nurse. Besides being unable to breathe, he needed antibiotics for an infection and one of his lungs had collapsed requiring the insertion of a chest tube to allow the lung to re-inflate. His doctor believed the beta strep infection had triggered his mother's premature labor, ten weeks early. His chest tube had come out four days ago and the lung was healed. Now he was taking some breaths on his own and the ventilator rate was gradually being turned down. She caressed the soft brown fuzz of hair on top of his head and smiled. “Good boy.”

When she finished her assessment of baby Adams, Joyce entered the information into the

computer terminal on the baby's bedside counter. It was almost time to feed baby Lacey and she hurried into the next bay. For eight hours she moved from one bedside to the next, following the unit's printed routines for vital signs, medications and feedings for each of her assigned babies. The night went by quickly and the day shift began coming in to work at six forty-five.

"I'll bet the doctors extubate Adams today," said Annette after Joyce finished giving her report in the morning. "He'd do well with just an oxyhood, don't you think?"

"I'm sure he would," agreed Joyce. "He's been breathing on his own all night. The vent's set at 15 now, but his respiratory rate is between 40 and 50." It only took Joyce a few minutes to give report on Martin and Lacey. "Lacey's parents have already had the CPR class and apnea monitor training and she's over five pounds now," finished Joyce. "She supposed to be discharged sometime today."

"Sounds like you had a good night," said Annette, pocketing her pen. "Do you still like the NICU? You seem to be handling the patients without any problems."

Joyce smiled, pleased with the compliment. "I had really good teachers. I couldn't have done it without you and Arcy."

"I'm glad we didn't scare you off," laughed Annette.

"No way. I've been working to get here since graduation. You have a good day," she said as she left the unit to change her clothes and go home.

On the way home, Joyce stopped at the grocery store. It was still hard for her to go straight to bed after a night shift. Her friend Nancy said it had taken four months to get her body switched over to sleeping during the day. Joyce hoped her biorhythms would cooperate faster than that. At this point, she didn't feel very rested even after eight hours of sleep. She ate breakfast and did a little cleaning before she went to bed. When she woke up at six o'clock, she felt more rested than usual. Maybe she was starting to get used to this backwards life style.

That night when she got to work she was pleased to see a whole shelf of new scrubs. She changed and was washing up at the surgical sink in the hallway when she noticed a group of nurses working with one of the resident interns around baby Adams' bed. She dried her hands quickly. Her heart started pounding when she saw the crash cart parked by the baby's bedside. Something was wrong.

She hurried into the unit. The resident was asking for epinephrine and sodium bicarb. Joyce looked at the monitors and caught her breath as the baby's heart stopped. Arcy started doing chest compressions while Jennifer continued squeezing air into the baby's lungs with an Ambu bag. The mask covered his tiny face and his chest rose and fell in rhythm with the squeezing of the bag.

When Martha handed a syringe of epinephrine to the resident, he told Arcy to stop the chest compressions. They all watched as the monitor immediately fell into the 40's. He pushed the needle into a port on the UAC line and injected the epi quickly. The heart rate came up into the 80's, then faltered and fell to 34.

"Start compressions!" he ordered.

Arcy wrapped her hands around the baby's tiny chest and started compressions again with both thumbs on his sternum. The cardiac monitor rose to 120 beats-per-minute as she worked.

The doctor injected a syringe full of sodium bicarb into the baby's UAC to counteract the acid building up in his blood. He followed with another syringe of epinephrine. This time the monitor didn't show any response at all when Arcy stopped the compressions for the doctor to see if the drug had helped.

Grabbing a stethoscope, the resident listened to the tiny chest. The monitor showed the heart rate fall from 55 to 20, then it went into a flat line. The shrill alarm screamed as the monitor recorded a zero heart rate.

Shaking his head, the doctor reached up and took the Ambu bag away from Jennifer interrupting her attempts to ventilate the dead baby.

"Nothing's working," he said shaking his head sadly.

Jennifer looked at him with wide eyes, turning away as he snapped off the cardiac monitor. When the alarm stopped, the silence was deafening in its finality.

"We did everything we could," he said soberly. "The drugs just didn't work."

"No!" yelled Martha frantically. "No! Don't stop yet. He's not supposed to die! You have to do something else!" She held out another syringe of epinephrine.

"It's no use," he said shaking his head. "He's beyond anything we can do to help. He's just didn't respond to any of medications."

"You have to keep trying," she shouted angrily. "A real doctor wouldn't give up!" Her face was distorted with anger, her nostrils flaring.

"We've given him five doses of epi and three of bicarb. It's no use. If I had been able to re-intubate him, then maybe..." He turned away from the baby's bed, a pained expression on his face.

"It's your fault!" hissed Martha, her eyes accusing. "He would have made it if you'd gotten that ET tube in!" She stepped forward, her fists clenched.

The resident took a step back as if struck by the violence of her words. His face turned white. "I tried," he said in defense. "It wouldn't go in." He backed away from Martha as she moved toward him, her face scarlet, her eyes narrowed.

"Martha, calm down!" ordered Vince loudly. "What's the matter with you? He did everything he could!"

Vince, a respiratory therapist, moved out from behind the ventilator where he had been waiting to start up the machine if the efforts at intubation had been successful. As an ex-marine medic, Vince had a commanding presence. "It wasn't his fault. No one could have intubated Adams after that laryngospasm. His throat just closed up too tight." Vince reached over and shut off the oxygen source.

"That's his excuse!" shouted Martha. "I say he messed up!" She looked at the resident menacingly, her eyes dark with anger.

Jennifer stepped between the two of them. "She's wrong," she said to the resident. "You did everything that could have been done. It's not your fault."

The resident shrugged. Sweat glistened on his forehead as he turned and walked away without a word. Martha spun around, going back to the baby's bedside.

Joyce found herself shaking so hard that she had to sit down. What had happened? Baby Adams had been doing so well when she left that morning. She wiped angrily at the tear running down her cheek. She had a whole shift ahead of her. How could she work if she fell apart now?

Vince came over to the desk and sat down beside her, his face was pale, his jaw tightly clenched. It was unnerving to see him so dejected. He put his head in his hands.

"I sure liked that little guy," he said to Joyce, his voice cracking. After a minute, he took a deep breath and walked out of the unit. Joyce sat at the desk for ten minutes trying to collect her self.

When she got report from Margaret it was hard to concentrate on what was being said. She couldn't believe baby Adams was dead. She wrote down the information Margaret gave her, grateful that she had only feed-and-grow preemies to care for tonight.

Margaret patted her arm. "This is the first baby you've seen die, isn't it? Are you going to be all right?"

"How do you handle this kind of thing?" Joyce asked quietly, blinking back tears.

"You don't very well, at first. Later you just learn to wait until you get home to cry." Margaret picked up her stethoscope and quickly left.

Joyce reviewed her notes, making sure she had the medications and feeding orders for tonight written down correctly. As she stood up, May called out across the room. "Did anyone use a vial of Anectine today? The count is coming up one short." May continued to look through the unlocked medicine cabinet over the nurse's desk, impatiently rummaging through the baggies pegged to the cork board. "I'm missing a vial," she said shaking her head.

"Let me look!" demanded Martha coming up behind her. With a glare at May, Martha began shuffling through the medicines on the shelf. "Here it is," she said sullenly. "It fell down behind those bottles of theophylline."

"Where?" asked May trying to peer around Martha's shoulder.

Martha held up the vial. "Right here!" she said sarcastically tossing the vial towards May. "Maybe you needed to look harder," she growled walking away in a huff.

May looked over at Joyce. Joyce just shrugged her shoulders.

"I could have sworn it was gone. I looked everywhere. And it's supposed to be inside the baggie." May put the vial back into its empty plastic bag, and stuck it back on to the stock medicine board. "Well, the count's correct now. Will you sign the narcotics book with me?" she asked Joyce.

Joyce glanced at the medicine board, noting that all the pegs held bags, then signed as the 'oncoming' night shift nurse.

"Hope your shift's better than ours was," said May. "That was awful." She left shaking her head. "Poor baby..."

Joyce picked up her papers and walked over to baby Adams' bed. He was now wrapped in a blue receiving blanket and had a tiny blue knit cap on his head. Arcy was wiping off his face with a tissue.

"I've cleaned him up...but that's the third time I've had to wipe his chin. Saliva keeps running out of his mouth," she told Joyce. "I've got him all washed and wrapped, but will you make sure his face is dry when his parents get here?"

Joyce nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"It was so strange," said Arcy frowning. "He was doing fine at the beginning of the evening shift. Day shift had extubated him and he was under the oxyhood on only twenty-five percent oxygen. About ten o'clock I noticed he had what looked like a small seizure and all of a sudden his respirations just stopped. While Vince was setting up the ventilator, he had a massive drop in his heart rate. Martha and Vince worked on him until Dr. Mann, that new resident, got here. Then everything just got worse! Dr. Mann did everything right but nothing seemed to work and he couldn't get the ET tube in because the baby's throat constricted. It was awful. It wasn't his fault, no matter what Martha says. No one could have gotten that tube in, and it probably wouldn't have helped anyway. He was getting plenty of oxygen when Jennifer was bagging him and it didn't seem to make a difference," she took a deep breath. "But...his parents are going to be so heartbroken."

Joyce turned away, the lump in her throat almost choking her.

"I have to go now," said Arcy. "My ride's waiting. But tell his parents I'm really sorry, will you? I've taken care of him every day I've worked since he was born." Arcy's normally olive complexion was pale and she was barely keeping her emotions in check. "I wish ..." she shrugged and left.

Joyce took a deep breath and picked up her stethoscope. Somehow, she managed to take care of her assigned babies for the next hour until Mr. and Mrs. Adams arrived. She took them across the hall to a private room where they could hold their baby and be alone. When they were ready to leave, they thanked everyone and put the baby back on his bed. Even Ronda, who had worked with intensive care babies for fifteen years, broke down after they left.

"It just shouldn't have happened," she choked, wiping tears from her cheek. "He was doing so much better."

Joyce struggled through her shift and was exhausted by the time she left in the morning. When she got home, she felt emotionally drained. After climbing into bed, she tossed and turned for hours. *Maybe I'm not cut out to be an NICU nurse after all. Not if every child's death going to tear me apart like this,* she thought. When she finally fell asleep, the pillow was wet with her tears.