

"DAMN IT CYNTHIA," Gareth barked, "slow down or none of us will get there alive." Cynthia had as much trouble hearing her husband as she did seeing through the tears that pooled in her eyes.

Gareth turned his attention back to three-month-old Amanda whose limp body lay couched in his arm. He pressed two fingers against her tiny chest. *One, one thousand. Two, one thousand. Three, one thousand. Four, one thousand. Five, one thousand.* Then he took in a deep breath and immediately pushed it out again, remembering that more than a puff could burst her tiny lungs. He filled his cheeks with air, giving him the look of a chipmunk. It could have been comical at another time, in another setting but not here, not now. He pressed his lips against Amanda's, almost recoiling from her coldness. Even in the dim light of the occasional streetlamp, he could see the deep blue of her lips contrasted against her colorless face. He emptied his cheeks of their cargo and returned to the compressions. *One, one thousand. Two, one thousand. Three...*

"Is she breathing?" Cynthia asked.

"No," he snapped. "She's not breathing. She wasn't breathing a minute ago when you asked and if you don't stop interrupting she won't be breathing a minute from now."

For thirteen minutes more, Cynthia prayed silently until she slammed on the breaks in front of the emergency entrance to the Hudson Valley Medical Center. She bolted from the car and ran inside. "Please, please, somebody help us!" She ignored the other people sitting in the waiting room. "Our baby isn't breathing. Please someone, do something." The medical staff rushed to the door as Gareth entered with Amanda.

"I've been doing CPR, but she hasn't responded." The nurse took Amanda from his arms and Cynthia started to follow but turned to look at Gareth. "Go," he ordered. "I'll do the paperwork and meet you inside." He found her sobbing on the bench outside of the examining room and sat down next to her. She clutched his arm and dug her head into his shoulder but Gareth remained rigid and stared across the hall at the clock. The time was eleven forty-two. A foil banner next to the clock read "Merry Christmas" and another one under it, "Happy New Year - 1991." After a few minutes, Gareth muttered, "I hate the smell of hospitals."

The doctor arrived a half hour later, removing his hat and mask as he came through the double doors. His face was flush and his hair glistened with sweat. Gareth remained seated. Cynthia jumped to her feet as the doctor approached, trying to read his face as he introduced himself, "Mister and Mrs. Reynolds, I'm Doctor Miller."

Cynthia recoiled at the somber tone in his voice. "She's going to be all right, isn't she?" It was more of a plea than a question.

The long pause and Doctor Miller's expression answered even before he spoke, "I'm very sorry. We did everything we could, but she didn't respond."

He continued talking but Cynthia couldn't hear the words. People and things moved about, but everything outside of her fell silent. Inside she could hear herself screaming, see herself kicking and clawing at the skin that confined her, but she made no sound and her body remained perfectly still. Then, from somewhere deep down, the rumbling began. Fragments of conversations rippled through her consciousness and

attached themselves to feelings. Images combined with emotions and with each merge, the rumbling grew larger and angrier until at last it erupted through the surface.

"Damn him! I told him, argued, pleaded with him to listen. I said she was deathly ill. A mother knows these things, but he wouldn't listen." Doctor Miller looked at Gareth. Cynthia caught his glance, "No, not my husband. Doctor Grey, our pediatrician." Her voice broke and her lower lip quivered, "He said that all Amanda had was the croup and that it was nothing to worry about, just run the humidifier and keep her comfortable. I told him it was more serious than that but he ignored me, that arrogant bastard! I told him... I told him."

Doctor Miller looked perplexed. "That's odd. I did my residency with Doctor Grey. He's usually very cautious. It doesn't seem like him to ignore signs of a serious condition."

"Are you calling me a liar," Cynthia's grief escalated into rage, "or is this just the good old boys looking out for one another?"

Miller's face went pale. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Reynolds, that was very insensitive of me."

"Where's my daughter?" Cynthia demanded. "I need to see my baby."

Doctor Miller led the couple to the infant's hospital room. Amanda lay in a tiny bed, bathed in the soft glow of a single light above her head. Thankfully, the hospital staff had already removed the web of wires and tubes. Cynthia crossed over to Amanda and sat against the bed. She lovingly stroked her daughter's hair and kissed the baby's cheeks. She took Amanda's hand and wrapped it gently around her index finger. "Mommy's here sweetheart, mommy's here." Amanda lay perfectly still. "You can go ahead and cough, sweetie. Mommy won't mind, I promise." Reality pried its way into Cynthia's consciousness and opened the floodgates to the tears behind them. She lightly touched her cheek to Amanda's, breathed in her daughter's aroma and cried, "My sweet, sweet little baby."

Gareth exited the room and returned later with a newspaper, a magazine and a diet coke. For the next several hours, he digested his soda, the Wall Street Journal and the Sport's Illustrated swimsuit edition. He paused briefly when the police arrived to answer some questions. Cynthia would not leave Amanda's side. He returned with some snacks from a vending machine but she refused to eat. It was almost four a.m. before Doctor Miller returned. "You both look exhausted," he said. "If you would like to go home and get some rest, I promise you, we will treat Amanda with the utmost care." Gareth tossed his reading materials onto the chair, "He's right. We should go." Cynthia didn't want to leave but she was too exhausted to protest. She leaned over and kissed her daughter's forehead, "I'll see you later, sweetie."

On the way back, the blackness was absolute. Thick clouds blanketed the Catskill sky as Gareth and Cynthia continued the longest night of their lives. The car's headlights illuminated tiny stretches of the winding mountain road until a single lamppost appeared in the distance. At the light, Gareth turned the new 1990 Bentley off

Sunset Terrace, passed the open wrought iron gates, and up the long driveway to number 34. Cynthia roused from her sleep and sat up in the back seat as the car rounded the circular driveway. The house was dark except for the Christmas tree illuminating the large center window on the second floor. The stately mansion was always imposing to Cynthia with its three-tiered fountain and columned entry, but now it felt terrifying. Saint Michael, locked in battle with Satan atop the fountain, looked impotent; this time, the demon had won. Off to the side of the house, a greenish-yellow glow emanated from inside the greenhouse, silhouetting the plants within. To Cynthia, they looked like hands desperately groping for escape. Even the Christmas tree appeared mocking and grotesque. Gareth exited the car but Cynthia remained frozen in her seat and wouldn't move.

"I can't," she insisted, "I can't go back into that house. I can't stand the thought of seeing the room, the bed. I just can't."

Gareth leaned over and placed his hands on the hood of the car. He closed his eyes, lowered his head, and shook it from side to side. Then he gritted his teeth and responded, "All right. Enough! We'll get a room for the night and come back for our things later."

"No, damn you! I said I can't, I won't go back into that house, not later, not ever."

Gareth didn't say a word. He looked away toward the house and for the first and only time that night, he smiled. He returned to his seat, adjusted the rearview mirror, calmly buckled his seat belt and then slammed the door shut. As the car made its way down the long driveway to the street, Cynthia looked up to the second floor of the house and focused on the right corner window. Gareth turned onto the street and the car moved off into the night. Cynthia's gaze remained fixed on the window until the house was consumed by the darkness. What she did not see was that beyond the glass, Amanda's room lay peaceful and still and bathed in a perfect pink glow. What she could not see was that inside that darkened window, someone or something was looking back.