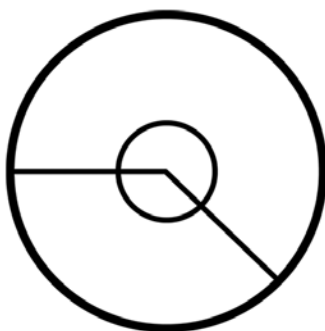


THE TURNING



Christophe Dillinger

Book one of the Imms series

Chris Beaumont, CHU Limoges

“I don’t feel well,” H el ene Beaumont tells her husband Chris. He’s in the bathroom, fresh out of the shower. She is standing by the door, looking fragile and afraid, but determined too. Her tone is matter-of-fact, but she’s looking at her husband intently, a stare where he can read her tension and concern. He freezes, his breath caught in his throat, his body suddenly both ice-cold and feverish, tingling. He wants to speak, but she forestalls him.

“I have a headache. It just started ten minutes ago.” Chris shoves down a sudden impulse to scream and clamps his teeth together. “It doesn’t feel like a normal headache.” He forces himself to ignore the wave of apprehension and fear that’s menacing to overwhelm him and instead takes H el ene’s hands in his. “I think it could be this thing you’ve been working on,” she continues. “Or maybe it’s just a normal headache and I’m just a drama queen”, she adds with a tight smile. “You need to take me to hospital. Now”.

Chris blinks furiously, still staring at her. He’s been discussing his work with his wife every night, in a bid to get rid of some stress, and H el ene now knows all there is to know about it. She knows his team hasn’t managed to study the way it sets in. They’re always too late, the test sub-

jects already gripped by the debilitating melancholia.

“Yes, I want you to take me in and run your tests,” she carries on, as if reading his mind.

Chris nods, blinded by tears. Silent, shocked, he walks to the bedroom with her and starts dressing as she packs a light suitcase. He quickly puts his shoes on and grabs his keys. He hates it, but time is of the essence, as H el ene has straight away understood. Half of him wants to take her into bed, press his body against her, the duvet over their heads, like a den, a cave where nothing bad can happen. The other half, the researcher half, recognises that H el ene is right. If he can examine her before, during and after, maybe they’ll learn how the disease operates, how it evolves. Maybe gain some insight that could ultimately save her, if indeed it’s that type of a headache at all because it won’t be, obviously. It can’t be.

H el ene is already walking towards the door. Their fifteen year old daughter is standing in the doorway, carrying her schoolbag. “Marie, I’m taking mum to hospital,” Chris tells her, his voice tense. She doesn’t move and her eyes go from her dad to H el ene. “It’s probably nothing,” H el ene says, embracing her.

“It’s this zombie thing, isn’t it?” Marie blurts, her body rigid, her fists clenched. She glances at her dad accusingly but says nothing. He reads the unspoken denunciation, the broken trust. He casts his eyes downwards, half-dragging H el ene past his daughter. They don’t have time for hugs, they don’t have time for lengthy farewells. *They don’t have time.*

A thousand thoughts are firing in Chris’ brain. He infected her, somehow. They had sex the previous night, did that contribute to her condition today? He reviews what

they had for dinner, he's infected her and maybe Marie too. He should have quarantined himself, it's his fault, he brought this scourge into his home. He's uttered the words and the monster got real. He opened the door.

The drive to the hospital is silent and mercifully quick. He's called Martha, the head lab engineer and her boss, and the second he crosses the threshold of the hospital reception area, Hélène is sat into a wheelchair and rushed to the neurology ward. She doesn't talk much, but she seems both amused and awed by the effectiveness and professionalism of the various nurses who hover around her. She does grimace as she's being shaved, and keeps rubbing a lock of hair between thumb and index finger.

She's lowered into a gurney, a saline drip taped to her left arm and various sensors hooked onto her body, connected to strange machines that beep and hum. A helmet is fitted to her head, the cold metal making her wince. She asks for her phone and takes a selfie. Chris' mood oscillates wildly between the hope that whatever she has is but a normal, benign headache, and black despair at the very real possibility that she will soon be brain dead. Martha, after a glance at him, takes charge of the proceedings and tells him to remain beside his wife.

It takes roughly two hours. At the beginning, Hélène is chatty, holding the fear at bay, joking with the nurses and then, gradually, the light in her eyes starts to fade. Martha swears she can physically feel waves of anguish coming from Chris, who's still sitting next to her as her consciousness gently ebbs away. She could measure them if the proper machine existed.

In the end, Chris is slumped forward in his chair, vainly patting his wife's hand, staring at nothing, just like

her. From a medical point of view, these three hours have provided a unique insight into the development of the disease. On a more personal point of view however, Martha doubts Chris will be emotionally functioning like a normal human being ever again.