April’s

Book One

MARLO

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CHAPTER 1

Something to Be Reckoned With

The cathedral was packed to capacity, and the napkins were flowing heavy.

Every pew was full. People stood three deep along the back wall and down both side aisles under the tall windows, shoulder to shoulder, fanning themselves with the folded programs. Grown men held napkins over their faces like they were trying to keep something in. Women passed them down the rows from purse to purse, and nobody asked for one twice.

Somewhere near the front a voice broke loose and rose over all of it.

"Why, Lord? Please, Lord. Give her back."

Then another voice took it up, and another, until the whole room was asking the same thing in different keys. *Why. Please. Give her back.* The sound climbed into that high ceiling and stayed there, the way sound does in a church, like it was waiting on somebody to answer.

The pastor stood. He didn't hurry. He set one hand flat on the pulpit and waited until the room had cried itself down to a hum, and then he spoke into the quiet he'd made.

"We need not ask why," he said. "But thank You, Lord, for carrying our sister this far. Thank You for allowing us to be part of this journey."

Part of this journey.

I sat with my hands folded in my lap and let that settle on me. I have been part of this journey longer than anybody in that building. I was there at the very start of it. I was there for everything.

I was there for this, too.



Fifteen years earlier.

"You need to make sure they want to be in my wedding first," April said. "Then we'll pick a date. The following year."

That was April all over. Most brides pick the date, then the dress, then the hall, and then go around collecting bridesmaids like party favors. Not her. April went to her people first, one at a time, and she asked, and she waited until every one of them had said yes and meant it. Only then did she open a calendar. A wedding, to April, was never a day. It was the people who'd agreed to stand in it with her.

So the year went by exactly the way she said it would, and then it was the day.

The cathedral was packed to capacity that day too. The napkins were out then as well, but they were pressed to the corners of smiling eyes, and every now and then somebody laughed into one. The light came down colored through the windows and lay across the aisle in long stripes, and the whole place smelled like flowers and good perfume and old wood that had heard a lot of promises.

Daniel stood at the altar. You could tell what he was from the back of the church. Some men wear a suit; a football player only borrows one, and the shoulders give him away every time. His

family was in hotels. His father had always believed that once Daniel was finished with football he would come home to the family business, and Daniel hadn't, and you could read that on the old man's face from the front pew, even at a wedding. A father still waiting.

Beside Daniel stood his dearest and closest friend. A rookie, a lucky one, who had made a name for himself on the field, grinning at the crowd like the crowd had come for him. I'll tell you plainly: remember him. I wish I didn't have to ask you to.

Then the doors at the back opened, and every head in that cathedral turned.

April's father brought her down the aisle with his hand on her arm. Her hair was flawless. It always had been. She didn't look at the guests and she didn't look at the floor. She looked straight ahead at the life she had planned, the way she'd planned everything, a year out and every person accounted for.

And me? I was standing where I had always stood. Right next to her.

⁂

The reception was being held in Dubai.

You read that right. The vows were said in the cathedral, and then the whole wedding got up and flew halfway around the world to eat cake.

I'm Tonya, by the way. I should have said so sooner. I've been here for everything. Every scraped knee and every slammed door, every breakup and every get-together, every time we fell out and every time we found our way back. If this story belongs to

anybody besides April, it belongs to me, because I'm the one who saw it. I'm the one telling it.

April and I met in the third grade, and I will never forget the day.

⁂

It was the first day of school.

I saw April before she ever saw me. She and her dad came in together, or they started out together. She was trying to lose him. She walked fast and then faster, the way a little girl does when she has decided she is grown, and she almost made it, too, before he caught up with her and took hold of her arm. He didn't yank it. He just squeezed it, slightly, and bent down to say something close to her ear. I couldn't hear a word of it. I can only imagine what was being said.

And I knew right then that we were going to be besties. I didn't know a single thing about her. I just knew.

Lord, she was put together. Her hair was flawless. It was pulled up in that carnival way, in sections with little parts between them, the way the Mickey Mouse kids used to wear it with their bows and things. She had on a yellow crop top and yellow shorts to match, and a lovely little Louis Vuitton backpack sitting right in the center of her back like it had been placed there by hand. Her sandals were to die for. They were a brown, creamy color that flowed right into the yellow socks she had on, so the whole outfit ran from her head to her feet without a single break in it.

Then I saw her stop at the desks and look down at the name place, and to my surprise, she was sitting right next to me.

Me, on the other hand. My clothes were not spectacular. I had on my tomboy jeans and a nice little T-shirt that said *Rebel Dead*, my favorite, favorite rock band, and I remember looking down at that shirt and back up at all that yellow and thinking, why would this pretty girl want to be friends with me?

The moment I sat down in my seat, April turned around.

"My name is April," she said. "And your name is Tonii."

I was floored. I hadn't given her my name. Nobody had introduced us. I just sat there with my mouth open, puzzled clear down to my shoes.

"How did you get that?" I said.

She leaned in like we were already in on something together.

"Do you remember last week," she said, "when you were in Walgreens with your mother? You stormed out, and she came after you, and she said, 'We don't do things like that.' And you turned around and said, 'I do things like that all the time, young lady. Don't try it.'"

I did remember. I just hadn't known anybody else in Walgreens was paying attention.

"My mother was appalled when she heard that," April said. "I, on the other hand, giggled." She looked at me the way you look at something you've already decided to keep. "You are something to be reckoned with. We are going to have wonderful years together. I know it."

⁂

And from that day on, you could not tear us apart.

All the way through grade school. All the way through high school. All the way through college. Through the breakups and through the get-togethers, through the fallings-out, and there were fallings-out between her and me, believe that. However far apart we got, we always managed to come back together.

And here we were again, the two of us, on our way to her wedding reception in Dubai.

It is sickening, really. As you can see, we apparently have a little bit of money. Well. April does, at least.

The plane we were on was bigger than the President's plane. I am not exaggerating to make a point; I'm telling you what it was. It was humongous. It had five full bedrooms, each with its own bath. Do you hear me? Five bedrooms, with baths, flying through the air on the way to Dubai, and behind us came two more planes full of guests. Those two they rented. Of course they only own this one.

I was settled in up front, as comfortable as a girl in tomboy jeans has ever been on a plane like that, when April came back to where I was sitting. She wasn't smiling. April had smiled through her entire wedding day, through every picture and every hug and every napkin, and now she wasn't.

"I need to talk to you," she said. "And it's not a joke."

I knew that voice. I had known it since we were eight years old.

"Okay," I said, and I got up.

We went toward the back. Past the guests and the glasses and the noise, all the way to one of the rooms in the back of the plane, and April stepped in after me and closed the door. It shut out everything. The laughing, the music, the whole wedding. All of a

sudden it was just the hum of the engines and the two of us, the way it had always been, ever since that desk in the third grade.

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she said it.

“I’m late.”

“Late,” I said. “Late for what? We’re on the—”

And then I heard it. I really heard it. I looked at her face, and then at her hand, which had already gone to her stomach without her even telling it to.

“Oh, no,” I said. “Oh, no.”

April didn’t blink.

“Oh, yes.”

CHAPTER 2

Yes, But No

“First of all,” I said, “we are not going to tell anyone.”

I said it out loud before I had even finished thinking it. That’s how it is with April and me. My mouth makes the plan, and my brain catches up later and signs off on it.

Then I looked at her. Really looked at her, standing there in the back bedroom of that ridiculous plane with one hand on her stomach, and the anger came up in me so fast it surprised me.

“How could you?” I said. “You told me you were getting him out of your system.”

“That,” April said, “makes it very hard to do at times.”

I didn’t have to ask who. I knew exactly who. He’s a lucky football player, a rookie who has made a name for himself, and he happens to be her husband’s dearest and closest friend. The same one I had watched grinning at the crowd that day in the cathedral like the crowd had come for him.

“So I’m still blaming you, April,” I said. “For this whole affair. I’m blaming you.”

“Don’t you dare come at me.” Her chin came up. “Have you forgotten about Daniel’s twins in Dubai? The two girls?”

I opened my mouth and shut it again. I didn’t know what the twins had to do with anything.

“Thank God they’re not boys,” she said, mostly to herself. “This week, of all weeks. Thank God they’re not boys.”

I didn't understand that then. I would.

"This is a big mess," I said, "that we've gotten ourselves into."

"No." April shook her head. "I did this. And I will fix it."

"Fix it how? Getting an abortion?"

"It's out of the question."

I had turned away from her, toward the little window and all that dark sky, and now I turned back around and faced her square.

"So you are going to allow Daniel to believe the child is his."

She held my eyes. April never could stand to look away first.

"I slept with them both that week."

"*What?*"

"You know me," she said, and she almost smiled, the way she used to smile before she jumped off something high. "I'm always doing crazy things. I wanted to see if I could get pregnant by the both of them."

For a second the engines were the only sound in the world.

"You're sick," I said. "Sick. You are *late*, April. You are playing with these lives like they're cards in your hand, and the whole time you're thinking you've done nothing wrong. That's what gets me. It's really frightening."

"Don't say that." Her voice cracked a little at the edge. "I know this isn't right. But this is the hand that I have been dealt."

"No, ma'am." I shook my head. "This is a hand you had up your sleeve, and you swapped it in for the one you were dealt. Big difference."

She was quiet. Then she let her breath out, and her shoulders came down maybe half an inch.

"Okay," April said. "You're right. So what, you're going to tell me you're walking away from me now?"

“Do you really think I’d do something like that?” I said. “That doesn’t mean I can’t stay on your ass about this. The first thing we need to do when we get to Dubai—”

“No.” She cut me off flat. “We are not taking any test in Dubai. Nothing gets done in Dubai. Nothing. His family is too well connected over there. Those people are practically royalty.” She ticked it off like a list she’d already written. “We are going to have this reception. We are going to fly back to Dallas. And we are going to take care of it there.”

“And Daniel?”

“Daniel is staying back three weeks.” She waved a hand at the whole sky. “Getting some things off the ground. Hotels, or something his father is working on. They really thought once he finished playing football he’d come home to the business, and he hasn’t, and his dad is not taking it well. So he’s staying to smooth some things over.”

Three weeks. Her new husband half a world away building hotels for his daddy, and his best friend loose in Dallas.

“Two football players,” I said. “Two jocks. April. How do you even—”

“All through high school,” she said, “and all through college, I had one man. One. You know that.”

I did know that.

“Okay, then,” April said, and she turned it right around on me, the way she always does. “But you really can’t say too much. You were getting more than any of the guys at school. At college the girls were just falling at your feet.”

Oh. Yeah.

I'm a lesbian, by the way. I forgot to tell you. And yes, I did try with April, one time. She shot me down very, very swiftly, and we never brought it up again.

Well. Swiftly is the short version. Here is the long one.

⁂

It was sophomore year of college, and it was one of those nights.

The kind where the music was too loud downstairs and the party had stopped being any fun about an hour before anybody admitted it, so we'd climbed the stairs to April's room with a bottle of cheap wine and two plastic cups, and shut the door, and let the bass come up through the floor like a heartbeat that belonged to somebody else.

Up there it was quiet. Just us, and the wine, and the whole history between us, stretching all the way back to a desk in the third grade.

April was on her bed with her legs crossed, laughing about something stupid one of the football boys had said at the party. Her hair was down. She never wore it down unless she was trying to get somebody's attention, and I remember wondering, with that wine in me, whose.

I sat on the edge of the bed. Closer than I needed to. She didn't move over.

"You remember Walgreens?" I said.

She smirked. "You storming out, your mama yelling, me telling my mama you were something to be reckoned with? Girl, I remember."

"I meant it," I said. "What I said back. I meant everything."

“I know you did.”

“I meant it about you, too.”

The room went still. April set her cup down on the nightstand, slowly, like it might spill something besides wine. For a second I saw something move across her face. Surprise, maybe. Curiosity. Something that wasn’t no.

I leaned in. Close enough to see the gold flecks in her eyes, close enough to smell the wine on her and the perfume she’d put on for somebody downstairs. My heart was going so hard I could feel it in my teeth.

“What if we tried it?” I said. “Us. Not just best friends. More.”

She didn’t pull back. She didn’t laugh. She looked at my mouth for a long moment, and then she looked back up into my eyes, and her lips parted, and she said it.

“Yes.”

My whole body heard that word. My heart hit my ribs. I reached for her hand.

And April took her hand away.

Not hard. Not mean. Just enough.

“Yes,” she said again, softer this time. “But no.”

I froze right there, leaned in, half of me already gone across the space between us.

“I love you, Tonii,” she said. “You know I do. You’re my person. But not like that. I can’t.”

And that was it. The word landed between us and didn’t move. April didn’t cry. I didn’t either. We finished the wine, and we talked about finals, and somebody downstairs turned the music up even louder, and we never, ever brought it up again.

Not once. Not through the rest of college. Not through Daniel. Not through any of it.

Until that plane.



“I need you to lie for me,” April said.

She had hold of my wrist. I don’t think she knew she’d grabbed it. She held it the way her daddy had held her arm on the first day of third grade, tight, like she was afraid I would get away from her.

“Let me think,” I said.

But letting me think was just stalling, and we both knew it. I always knew the answer when it came to April. I had known it since we were eight.

“Okay,” I said finally. “Okay. But we do this my way.”

“What’s your way?”

“First. No tests in Dubai, like you said. We land, we smile, we throw your sickeningly expensive reception, and we get back on this plane to Dallas.”

She nodded.

“Daniel stays his three weeks. Hotels. His daddy. Whatever. And you don’t touch the rookie. Not once while Daniel’s gone. Not a text, not a call, nothing. You want this to be Daniel’s baby, then you act like it.”

April opened her mouth. Closed it. Nodded again.

“Second. When we get back to Dallas, you tell me the truth. All of it. Who you think it is, and when, and how many times. I’m not walking into this blind. You know I can’t fix what I can’t see.”

“And third?” she whispered.

I pulled my wrist out of her hand.

“Third, you stop acting like this is something that happened *to* you. You said it yourself. This is the hand you had up your sleeve. Own it. Because if this blows up, April, it is not just your life. It’s Daniel’s. It’s those twins in Dubai. It’s me.”

The intercom crackled over our heads. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be beginning our descent into Dubai in about twenty minutes.”

April reached out and fixed my collar. She didn’t even think about it. She has done that before every room we have ever walked into together, since the third grade. Old habit.

“We’ve always managed to come back together,” she said.

“Yeah.” I let her finish fixing it. “But this time, April, you’re going to have to tell me *why* you did it. And it had better be a damn good reason.”

Her hand stayed on my collar a second too long. I let it. Then I moved it.

“You remember college?” I said. Not angry. Just remembering.

Her face changed. “Tonii...”

“Yes, but no,” I said. “That’s what you told me that night. Yes, but no.”

April looked away, toward the window. The lights of the city were starting to come up through the dark below us, gold on gold. “I meant it then, too.”

“I know you did,” I said. “And I never brought it up again. Not once. Not through college, not through Daniel, not through any of it. Because I respected the no.”

She turned back to me. Her eyes were wet. It was the first time all day.

“But you need to respect something now,” I said. “That yes-but-no you just did with these two men? You can’t do that with a baby. You can’t do that with Daniel’s life.”

The pilot came on again. “Ten minutes to landing. Please return to your seats.”

April grabbed my hand. Tight again, but different this time. Not control. Fear.

“When we land,” she whispered, “you’re standing next to me. I don’t care what he says. I don’t care what that rookie does. You’re next to me.”

“Always next to you,” I said, and I squeezed back. “But after Dubai, we’re done lying. You hear me?”

She nodded.

“After Dubai.”

We opened the door and walked back up the aisle to the main cabin, past the glasses and the laughing and the guests who didn’t know a thing, two best friends since the third grade heading into a reception that was already a lie, on a plane bigger than the President’s.

Below us, Dubai was blinding.

CHAPTER 3

Three Hours

The wheels touched the runway at Al Maktoum so softly you barely felt it. Of course April's plane would land like that.

The doors opened, the stairs came down, and the heat came up them to meet us. It was midnight, and it didn't matter. Dubai doesn't care what time it is. It is just hot, and gold, and watching.

The other two planes had landed ahead of us. Their passengers were already spilling across the tarmac in their wedding clothes: guests, family, people who were somebody and people who wanted to be seen standing next to somebody. There were cameras. Of course there were cameras.

Daniel was waiting at the bottom of the stairs with his arm already out. Football player posture, even in a suit. He was smiling for the cameras, because there were cameras, and his smile was the kind that has been photographed so many times it knows exactly where to stop.

And behind him stood his best friend. The rookie.

He was tall. He had that new-money shine on him, the kind that hasn't worn in yet. And his eyes were on April before her foot ever touched the last step.

I saw it. I saw it instantly.

April took Daniel's hand first. She kissed him on the cheek, and it was perfect, the way everything she does in front of a camera is perfect. Then she turned to the rookie and gave him a

hug. A quick one. Too quick. Anybody who knew her could see she was trying.

I stayed half a step behind her, the way I'd promised.



The reception was not a reception. It was a palace that somebody had put inside a hotel, and the hotel was one that Daniel's father was building.

Five stories of glass. Fountains running right there inside the lobby, like water was nothing, like water grew on trees. Waiters in white jackets went by with silver trays of things I couldn't pronounce and wasn't about to try. The whole place smelled like money and jasmine and somebody's very expensive cologne.

Two little girls came tearing through the middle of all of it in matching white dresses, screaming, "April! April!" at the top of their lungs. Twins. *Daniel's twins in Dubai*, April had called them on the plane, and I had pictured babies. They weren't babies. They were his father's girls. Daniel's little sisters.

Thank God they're not boys, she'd said. *This week, of all weeks.*

Watching those two little girls in white run circles around her, I was starting to understand what she meant. I didn't like it.

Daniel pulled April to the center of the room. Speech time. He thanked everybody for flying private. He thanked his father. He thanked his best friend, the rookie, for "being a brother."

The rookie raised his glass toward April.

"To the most beautiful bride," he said.

April froze. Half a second, no more. Nobody in that room saw it but me.

Daniel laughed and threw his arm around his friend's shoulders. "My girl takes all the credit."

April's eyes went looking for me across the room. They found me.

That's when the rookie's phone buzzed. He looked down at it. He typed something. Then he looked up, straight at April.

April's phone buzzed inside her clutch.

I didn't need to see the screen. I knew.

I walked across all that marble, took April by the elbow, gently, the same place her daddy had taken her arm on the first day of third grade, and I leaned in close.

"Bathroom," I said. "Now."

Daniel was still talking. The twins were still screaming. The gold was still shining.

But for a second it was just the third grade again. April trying to lose her daddy, and me watching from the desk.

⁂

A bathroom in Dubai is not a bathroom. It's a suite.

Marble floor. Gold faucets. A couch, an actual couch, for whoever needs to sit down in a bathroom. A full-length mirror that made you look taller than you are. April locked the door behind us. Two locks. Like she needed both.

She threw her clutch on the counter. Her phone lit up again inside it.

I didn't touch it. "Read it out loud."

April stared down at the screen. “I can’t.”

“Read it out loud, April.”

She swiped it open. Her voice was shaking.

“‘You looked good coming down those stairs. You still thinking about last week?’”

I felt my jaw lock. “That’s him?”

She nodded, and she was already typing back, with thumbs that wouldn’t hold still.

Please don’t do this here.

The three dots came up. Instantly.

Daniel’s in the next room talking about brotherhood. You didn’t think that last week, did you?

I took the phone out of her hand before she could answer him. I held the button down until the screen went black, and I laid it face down on the marble.

“Tonii—”

“No.” I didn’t say it loud. I said it flat. The voice I use when I am done playing. “You said after Dubai. Well, this is Dubai. You said you weren’t going to touch him. Not a text, not a call.”

“I didn’t text him first! *He* texted *me!*”

“And you were going to text back!”

I stepped over to the mirror, so that we were both in it. Two best friends since the third grade. The girl in all that yellow, and the girl in the tomboy jeans, grown all the way up and standing in a gold bathroom on the other side of the world.

“Look at us,” I said.

April looked.

“You are late, April. You are maybe pregnant with a baby that might not be your husband’s, and you are standing in a bathroom

your father-in-law's money built, while your husband's best friend texts you about last week from the reception hall."

Her hand went to her stomach again. She didn't even tell it to.

"He said if Daniel finds out—" she started.

"I don't care what he said." I reached past her and turned off the faucet she had left running without knowing it. "I care what you are going to do. Right now. Are you going to walk back out there and be Daniel's wife for three hours? Or are you going to let that rookie blow up everything before we even get to the cake?"

April wiped under her eyes with the side of one finger. Her mascara smudged anyway. The hair, the flawless hair, was starting to come loose.

"I can do three hours," she whispered.

"Three hours," I said. "Then we get back on that plane bigger than the President's, and we go home to Dallas, and we fix this. No test here. No drama here. You understand me?"

She nodded.

I turned her phone back on. I deleted the whole thread without reading another word of it, and I put the phone back in her clutch, and I snapped the clutch shut.

"Fix your face," I said, softer now. "You're flawless, remember?"

April laughed. It came out wet and broken. "My hair was flawless in the third grade."

"And it still is."

We undid both locks and opened the door.

Daniel was right there outside it, leaning against the wall, holding two glasses of champagne.

“Everything okay, ladies?” He was smiling at April. But he was looking at me.

I smiled right back at him. “Bride needed a touch-up. You know how it is.”

⁂

The reception had gotten louder while we were gone.

Somebody had turned the music up. Somebody had turned the lights down. The twins had been taken off to bed, and the grown folks were on their second bottle of everything.

The rookie was at the bar by himself, spinning his phone around and around on the counter. He saw April first. Then me. His smile didn’t drop, but his shoulders did. He knew that thread was gone.

Daniel handed one glass of champagne to April and the other to me.

“To my girls,” he said. “Third grade to Dubai. Who would have thought?”

I clinked. April clinked. Neither one of us drank.

“Brother!” Daniel called over his shoulder. “Come here. Picture.”

The rookie came over. He had on a yellow tie. Yellow. I thought about a little girl in a yellow crop top and yellow shorts, and I thought he had no idea what he was matching.

A photographer appeared out of nowhere. “Closer! Closer! Family!”

April ended up in the middle. Daniel on her right, his hand on her waist. The rookie on her left, his hand hovering just above her

waist, not touching. Close enough, though. Close enough that I could see the heat coming off of it from where I stood.

Flash.

I watched from two feet away. I'm the one telling this, so I'm the one who sees. I saw what that photographer never would.

The rookie's thumb brushed April's back. Half a second. April didn't flinch. But her fingers tightened around the stem of that champagne glass until her knuckles went white.

Flash.

Daniel was laughing, not noticing a thing, talking about hotels. "My dad wants to name one of them after April. Can you believe that? The April Tower. My wife, a building."

The rookie said, "She deserves more than a building."

April's eyes found mine over the flash.

Help me, they said. The same look she'd had in the third grade, when her daddy squeezed her arm too tight.

So I stepped in between them. Smooth, the way I'd been doing it since we were eight.

"April," I said, loud enough for Daniel to hear, "you promised the twins you'd say goodnight. They're waiting on you upstairs."

Daniel frowned. "They went to bed an hour ago."

"They're waiting for April," I said, and I didn't look at him. I looked at her. "Right?"

April caught it. "Right. The girls. I promised."

She set her champagne down on a passing tray, untouched, and walked away with me, and left both of those men standing under the flash.

Behind us I heard Daniel say to his best friend, "She's been weird since the plane. You think she's okay?"

And the rookie, after a pause: “Yeah, man. She’s fine.”

We didn’t go to the twins. We went out to the terrace. Dubai air. Dubai lights. Dubai lies, spread out below us as far as you could see, all of it glittering like it had never told one.

April leaned on the rail.

“He touched me,” she whispered.

“I saw.”

“What do I do?”

I stood next to her, the same way I’d been standing next to her since the day she sat down at the desk beside mine.

“You do three hours,” I said. “Then Dallas.”

She nodded. She was breathing hard, like she’d been running.

“After Dubai,” she said.

After Dubai.

CHAPTER 4

Complete Privacy

Dallas. Seventy-two hours later.

No gold. No fountains. No twins. Just my apartment, with the blinds pulled shut against the afternoon like the afternoon had been asking questions.

There were two tests lying on my bathroom counter. Both of them positive.

April was sitting on the edge of my tub in a pair of my sweatpants. She was not flawless now. Her hair was pulled up any kind of way, no bows, nothing, and the Louis Vuitton was nowhere in sight. She looked like what she was: a girl who had flown halfway around the world and back in one week and gotten married somewhere in the middle of it.

"I'm keeping it," she said, before I could say a word.

I was standing in the doorway. "Okay."

"Don't 'okay' me." Her eyes came up hard. "I need you to say it's the right thing."

"It's your body, April. It's your call. But we still don't know __"

"I know." She cut me right off. "I slept with them both that week. I know exactly what I did. I've known since the plane."

I came in and crouched down in front of her, so we were eye to eye. The same height we'd been at those little desks.

“Then we need to know what you’re going to say in Dubai,” I said. “Because Daniel is still over there. Three weeks. And his daddy already thinks you’re hiding something.”

April reached into the pocket of my sweatpants and pulled out a piece of paper, folded in half, then in half again. She opened it on her knee.

A plane ticket. Dallas to Dubai. One way. Tomorrow.

“I’m going to tell him,” she said. “In the tower suite, in the same room where we stayed the night of the reception. I’m going to tell him the baby may not be his.”

I stared at her. “April, that’s suicide. In Dubai? With his family right there? With people who are practically royalty in the building? You cannot walk in there with a maybe-it’s-yours speech. They will bury you.”

“That’s why I need you to come.” She folded the ticket back up, small. “You sit outside the door. If he yells, you hear it. If he __”

“If he what?”

April didn’t finish.

⁂

Dubai. Twenty-four hours later. The same hotel.

Daniel had stayed up in the tower suite the whole time we were gone. When April walked in, he smiled at her like nothing had ever happened. Like the reception had never ended, and she’d only stepped out to powder her nose.

“Baby,” he said. “You came back.”

I'd checked the hallway on the way up. It was clear. No rookie. Nobody. I sat down on the bench outside the suite door with my knees pulled up, the way I used to sit outside the principal's office in middle school, waiting on April to come out of whatever she'd gotten herself into.

She went inside. She closed the door. It was a heavy door. It didn't slam. It sealed.

Right before it shut, I heard her voice through the crack.

"I have to tell you something," April said. "I'm pregnant. And it may not be yours."

Silence.

Then Daniel's voice, low. "What did you say?"

"I said—"

And then the door clicked. Not just closed. *Locked.*

I stood up. I tried the handle. Locked from the inside.

I knocked. "April?"

Nothing.

I pressed my ear flat against the door, and there was nothing to hear, because there was nothing to hear. That was the whole point of that suite. I'd read it in the brochure on the nightstand the night of the reception, and I remembered it word for word now: *Five full bedrooms with baths. Soundproof walls. Complete privacy.*

There was a little slit of glass set in the door, narrow as a mail slot. I put my eye to it.

Daniel wasn't yelling. That was what scared me most. He was just standing there in the middle of the room, staring at April, holding the folded ticket she'd brought in with her.

And April was backing toward the far wall, one hand on her stomach.

I banged on the door. “April!”

The hallway stayed empty. Gold, and quiet, and Dubai watching again.

Inside the suite, the lights went out.

⁂

I started running.

Not down the hall. Through it. I was shouting her name, but the walls just swallowed it. Soundproof. Complete privacy.

The hotel staff got to me first. Two men in black suits, polite the way Dubai is polite, and confused.

“Ma’am, you cannot make this noise. The guests are—”

“My best friend is in there,” I said, “and the door just locked behind her. Open it.”

The taller one tried his key card. The little light on the lock turned red.

“It is locked from the inside with the deadbolt,” he said. “Only the guest can—”

“Then break it.”

He looked at the other one. “We need the manager’s approval. And the owner’s family—”

“I don’t care whose family it is.” I was not crying. I was in that flat voice again, the one from the bathroom, the one from college. “This is the April Tower. Daniel’s wife is in there. You want that on the news?”

That word moved them.

It still took ten minutes. It felt like a whole afternoon of detention. I paced that hallway. I pressed my ear to every seam in

that door. I called April's phone and it went straight to voicemail. I called Daniel's phone and it went straight to voicemail.

Finally they came: security, a manager in a gray suit, a master key, and a hydraulic tool somebody wheeled off the service elevator like it was room service.

They broke the door.

The suite was dark. Every curtain drawn. The gold lamps all off. It smelled like champagne and perfume and something else, something metallic, that I didn't want to put a name to.

"April?" My voice cracked for the first time.

No answer.

The living room was empty. The kitchen was empty. The first bedroom was empty. In the second bedroom, Daniel's suit jacket hung over the back of a chair. In the third bedroom, April's clutch lay on the bed. Her phone was inside it, powered off.

The fourth door was a bathroom. Locked.

My heart hit my ribs, the same as that night in college.

"April, if you can hear me, I'm right here. Open the door."

Silence.

They broke that one too.

An empty tub. Wet towels all over the floor. A window cracked open a hand's width, the hot night air coming in through it. It only opened that far. Nobody was going out that way.

And on the mirror, written in lipstick:

TONII — I HAD TO. DON'T LOOK FOR ME.

And under that, smaller:

I'm sorry.

I stared at it until the letters swam.

“She’s gone,” the manager said quietly behind me. “The service elevator. There is footage. She left eight minutes ago.” He paused. “Alone.”

I turned around and looked at him. “Alone? With a deadbolt on the door? With Daniel in here?”

The manager didn’t answer me.

At the back of the suite, past the kitchen, there was a second door I hadn’t noticed going in, plain and narrow, the kind the staff use. It was standing open.

I grabbed April’s clutch off the bed and shoved her phone down in my bag, and I went for the hallway.

I wasn’t going to the police. Not yet. Not with Daniel’s name on the building. I was going to find my best friend, the same way I’d found her the first day of third grade, when she was trying her hardest to lose her daddy.

“Pull the cameras,” I told security. “Every exit. The parking. The airport. All of it. Now.”



But I didn’t go to the airport.

I went back into that dark suite and sat down on the floor right where April’s clutch had been, and I made the manager bring his tablet to me, and I made him play it again. All of it. Not the part he wanted me to see.

“Look,” he said finally, and he rewound it.

Camera one. Hallway outside the service door. 9:41 p.m.

Daniel came out of the back of the suite. Calm. He was straightening his shirt cuffs. And April was with him, a step ahead

of him, her head down. His hand was on her arm.

Just above the elbow. Not yanking. Just holding.

I had seen that hand on that arm before. I had seen it when I was eight years old.

Camera two. Service elevator. 9:42 p.m.

The two of them inside. Daniel held up a key card and pressed a button. Not the lobby.

P4.

“What is P4?” I said.

The manager didn’t want to say it. “It is not guest parking. It is private. The owner’s level. When Mr. Daniel’s father is in Dubai, he lives there. It is not in the directory.”

Five full bedrooms with baths. Soundproof walls. Complete privacy. The same as the suite upstairs, only underneath it, where nobody looks.

I stood up.

“Open P4,” I said.

“Ma’am, I cannot. That is the owner’s private residence. It is locked from—”

“Open it.”

We rode the service elevator down. When the doors opened, it was a different hotel. No gold down there. Bare concrete. Quiet, except for the air conditioning humming loud enough to cover just about anything.

There was one door at the end of the hall. Heavy. No handle on the outside, only a keypad. A little window in it, blacked out.

I knocked. Nothing.

Then a sound. Faint. Not a scream. A chair, moving across a floor.

I hit that door with both fists. “April! April, if you’re in there, make a noise!”

Nothing came back. Soundproof.

I turned to the manager. “That’s her. That’s where she is.”

He shook his head. “We cannot open it without Mr. Daniel or his father. This is—”

“The twins stay down here when they visit, don’t they?” I said.

He hesitated, and the hesitation told me yes.

“Then open it for the twins,” I said, low. “Get on your radio and tell him the twins are crying.”

It worked. The manager got on his radio. Two minutes later the door buzzed, and it opened from the inside.

Daniel. He was sweating now. His shirt had come untucked.

“Tonya.” He tried to smile. “You shouldn’t be down here.”

Behind him I could see a slice of the room. A bedroom, bigger than the ones upstairs. The bed made. The curtains closed over a window that didn’t need curtains, because there was nothing on the other side of it but more building. A tray of food on a table, untouched. A bottle of prenatal vitamins on the nightstand.

And April, sitting up on the bed with her hair down and her hands in her lap. Looking at me.

She wasn’t crying. She wasn’t bruised. She was just... contained. Like something put away on a shelf. And it was all over her face, without her saying one word: nine months.

“Daniel,” I said. “Move.”

He didn’t move. “She’s safe here. Until we know whose it is. My father agreed. It’s for the family. It’s for her. She can’t be out there, with the cameras and the questions.”

Over his shoulder, April’s lips moved. One word, no sound.

Go.

Not *help me*. *Go.* Go, before he sees what you're about to do.

And I understood. This wasn't one night. This was a plan. Private doctors. A private floor. No exit, no phone, no police report with his father's name on it. Nine months, hidden down here, until the baby was born and could answer the question for everybody.

I took one step back. I looked at Daniel. I looked at April.

"Okay," I said quietly. "Okay, Daniel. You keep her safe."

I turned around and walked back to the elevator, and I didn't look back, because April had told me not to.

But as soon as those doors closed, I reached into my bag and pulled out April's phone. The one Daniel thought was switched off for good. Back in Dallas, before we got on the plane to come here, I had made her set up the emergency SOS on it, just in case. She'd rolled her eyes at me.

I held the buttons down.

I was not leaving Dubai.

I was going to get her out. Even if it took nine months.

CHAPTER 5

Three Heartbeats

Nine months later. The same floor. P4.

It didn't look like a prison anymore. It looked like a hospital that somebody had tried very hard to make look like a home.

There were private doctors and private nurses. There were no windows that opened. There were three cribs, brought in two weeks early and lined up against one wall, because April had gotten bigger than anybody expected for twins, and the doctors had started looking at each other in a way that I didn't like and didn't understand.

I'd been there every day for six months.

I will never know for sure what got me back through that door. Maybe it was the SOS. Maybe it was every call I made after it, or the fact that I would not leave that lobby, morning or night, no matter how many polite men in black suits asked me to. Whatever it was, at the end of the third month Daniel's father's people came down to the lobby with a piece of paper.

I could come in. No phone. No recording. No leaving the floor without his father signing off on it.

I read it once. I signed it.

I'd been on P4 every day since.

Those months had a sound, and the sound was the air conditioning. It never stopped. It hummed under everything we said and everything we didn't, and after a while I stopped hearing

it, the way you stop hearing your own heartbeat. Down there, there was no morning and no night. There was the tray coming in, and the tray going out, and the nurse with the blood pressure cuff, and the vitamins on the nightstand, one a day, like a calendar you could swallow.

We talked about everything except the one thing.

Some days April didn't talk at all. She just lay there on her side with her hand on her stomach and looked at the wall, and I sat in the chair next to the bed and let her. Other days she wanted the old stories. She wanted the third grade. She wanted Walgreens, and the yellow socks, and the *Rebel Dead* T-shirt, and the first time she fixed my collar, and she'd laugh in the right places like she was hearing them for the first time.

"You're making that up," she'd say.

"I was there," I'd tell her. "I was there for everything."

And every so often, she would grab my hand without a word and press it flat against her stomach, and we would wait, the two of us, not breathing, until something in there moved.

We stopped counting days down there. We counted weeks. Then we just counted.

⁂

April went into labor at 2:17 in the morning.

There were no cameras. That was the one thing she got to decide down there, and she decided it: no cameras, no family, and no Daniel in the room. Just the doctors, and the nurses, and me holding her hand, the way I used to hold it in the third grade before a spelling test.

The doctor had steady hands and a calm face. She looked at the monitor, and then she looked at April.

“Three heartbeats,” she said. “We always saw three. We thought one of them was a shadow.”

“It’s not a shadow,” I said. I don’t know how I knew. I just knew. The same way I knew on the first day of school.

April screamed once. Loud, so loud it should have gone straight through those soundproof walls. Then she went quiet, and she held onto my hand, and she pushed.

2:43 a.m.

The first boy came out loud. Fists up, mad at the whole world already. He looked just like Daniel’s baby pictures. He had the same forehead his father has.

2:44 a.m.

The second boy came out smaller. Quieter at first, and then loud too, like he’d heard his brother and decided he wasn’t going to be outdone. He had a different face. Lighter eyes. And a chin I had seen before, across a reception hall, leaning on a bar and spinning a phone around and around on the counter.

The rookie’s chin. Exactly.

2:47 a.m.

A girl.

She didn’t cry right away.

She was the shadow. Triplet C, the doctors called her. The third one, the small one, tucked up behind her brothers where nobody could see her.

“She’s here,” the doctor said, in that calm voice good doctors use when they don’t want you to panic. “But her lungs aren’t

ready. She needs help to breathe. She's under excellent care. We have everything she needs right here."

They took her to the warmer. Her little chest was moving fast, too fast. There were tubes, and soft beeping, and a whole team around her that did not leave her side, not for one second.

April could barely lift her head off the pillow. But she was counting.

"Three?"

"Three," I whispered, and the tears came then, finally, after nine months of holding them. "You had three, April."

⁂

Daniel was standing in the doorway.

He hadn't been allowed in for any of it. That was April's rule. But he had heard the crying through the door, and now he stood there in the frame with his hands hanging down at his sides like they didn't belong to him.

"Two boys?" he said.

The doctor nodded. And then she did the thing April and I had been begging for, for months.

She swabbed all three babies. She swabbed Daniel.

And she swabbed the rookie.

I had called him in the seventh month. Don't ask me how I got the number. It was in April's phone, and April's phone was in my bag. He'd flown in, and he had been sitting downstairs in that lobby for two weeks straight, waiting, not leaving Dubai. I'll give him that. He didn't leave.

The results came back forty-eight hours later, in the same room. A private lab. No press.

The first boy: 99.99 percent Daniel.

The second boy: 99.99 percent the rookie.

Twins, with two different fathers. The doctor had a word for it. *Heteropaternal.* Rare, she said, but real. It happens when a woman sleeps with two men in the same week and her body decides not to choose.

The baby girl: 99.99 percent Daniel.

Daniel's daughter. And the sickest of the three. Her lungs still weren't all the way there, and the little hospital on P4 that Daniel's father was paying for now, without a single word about towers, or names, or what the family would think, was the only reason she was breathing at all.

Daniel sat down on the floor.

Daniel. A football player who had never, as long as I'd known him, sat down on a floor in his life.

He looked at the two boys asleep side by side in their cribs. His twins, but not his twins. Then he looked at the clear plastic box where his daughter was fighting for every breath she took.

He didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say.

April was pale. She was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. But she reached out, and she reached for me first. Then she slid her hand through the little round porthole in the side of that box and touched her daughter's hand with one finger.

"Her name is Toni," she whispered. "After Tonii."

And I broke.

I had held it together through the plane, and the bathroom, and the lipstick on the mirror, and nine months of a basement with no

windows. And I broke right there on P4, over a baby girl no bigger than my two hands, who had my name.

Outside the door, somebody knocked.

Little knocks. Two sets of them. Daniel's sisters, the twins, the girls in white from the reception, nine months older now and standing in that concrete hallway, asking through the door if they could please meet their new baby sister and their new baby brothers.

I got up off that floor.

And for the first time in nine months, I unlocked the door from the inside.

CHAPTER 6

Two Envelopes

We flew home commercial.

Not private. Commercial. That's how you knew Daniel's father was done with us.

Three car seats, and not one of them would fit in the back of the Bentley, so we stood out there at the curb at DFW in the heat, April and me and a nurse I'd hired myself, while a driver tried every way God ever made to get three car seats into a car built for two people and their luggage.

Two loud boys and one quiet girl.

The first boy, Daniel's boy, April named DJ. Daniel Jr. The second boy she named Jai, after the rookie, whose real name, it turned out, was Jaison. I'd been calling him the rookie in my head for so long that it took me a week to get used to him having a name, like he was a whole person.

And Toni. Still on a little oxygen, a thin clear tube under her nose that she kept trying to pull off with fingers no bigger than matchsticks. But she was breathing on her own now. Mostly. The excellent care had followed us right onto that plane.

April's house in Dallas was not Daniel's house anymore. It was April's. She had the locks changed the day we landed. My key still worked. Daniel's didn't.

The thirty days had been Daniel's idea. Or his lawyer's. *Come back to Dallas. Try to co-parent. Show some stability before*

anything hits the news. That was how he put it. Thirty days of everybody acting reasonable.

What Daniel didn't know was that there was already something to hit the news.

The morning after we landed, while he was off somewhere doing whatever Daniel does when he's trying to look reasonable, I drove April down to the courthouse in my car, with three car seats crammed across the back, and she filed. Dallas County. Petition for divorce. She came down those courthouse steps with the copy in her hand and got right back in the car like she'd just been to the bank.

"Don't say anything," she told me.

I didn't.

Then came the thirty days.

Three babies is not three times one baby. It's more like weather. Somebody was always crying, somebody was always hungry, and somebody was always just about to be. April and I split the nights in shifts, the way we used to split the homework, her on the evens and me on the odds, and the nurse took whatever was left over. Toni's oxygen made a soft hiss all night long, like the house was breathing for her. By the third week the doctors were turning it down a little at a time, and every time they did, April stood over that bassinet and counted breaths under her own breath until she was sure.

Daniel tried. I will say that for him. He called, and April let it ring. He texted, long ones, and she read every single one of them, and she didn't answer a single one. He asked through his lawyer if he could come by, and his lawyer asked through hers, and the answer that went back through all those people was *not yet*.

Not yet. Thirty days of not yet.

He thought he was waiting for her to come around. He didn't know the papers were already sitting in a file at the Dallas County courthouse, waiting on him.

⁂

It all came apart on the thirtieth day.

In Dubai, the family had wanted April's hair covered whenever she went out. In Dallas, April walked out of that house with her hair down and her shoulders out and a pair of shorts on, for the first time in a year. She went to the grocery store with three carts, one for each baby and one for the groceries, and a local reporter found her there. I did not call that reporter. I want that on the record. The reporter found her all on her own.

And April talked.

"Yes, I'm back," she said into the camera, holding Toni's carrier on her hip in the cereal aisle. "Yes, I had triplets with two fathers. Yes, I was held on P4 for nine months. And no, my husband didn't like me talking to you without him."

The clip was all over Dubai within the hour.

Daniel's phone blew up. The family group chat. The uncles. His father. *What is she doing? Who does she think she is?* When one of Daniel's cousins called the house to tell April how a decent wife conducts herself, April listened to every word of it, politely, and then told her the tower ought to be named after Tonya, not her, because at least Tonya had earned it.

She said it. She really said it. I was standing right there.

⁂

Daniel drove over that evening.

No suit. A T-shirt. He looked tired. He looked like a man who had been losing an argument with his own phone all afternoon.

April opened the door with the chain still on.

Inside, Toni was asleep in her bassinet, her monitor blinking its soft little green light. I was in the back room with DJ and Jai, one in each arm, both of them fussing and neither one of them willing to let the other one fuss alone.

“You can’t do this here,” Daniel said quietly through the crack. “This isn’t Dubai. But Dallas still watches. My father—”

“Your father kept me on P4,” April said. She didn’t yell. She was calm. That was worse. “Your father knows exactly what he did.”

Daniel looked down at the welcome mat. “I came to try and talk. For the kids. For us.”

April slid an envelope out through the crack in the door. Not a big one. Standard. Business size.

The divorce petition. Filed. Stamped. With a date on it from the morning after we landed.

Daniel stared at it. He didn’t open it. He didn’t have to.

“You didn’t,” he said.

“I did,” April said. “And Tonya printed the other one too.”

She slid out a second envelope.

Photographs. Not of her. Of him.

Daniel in Dubai. The same hotel. P4, even, the same floor where he’d kept her, just a different room. A woman, older than April, laughing with him in the lobby bar at one in the morning.

Married. A government badge hanging on a lanyard around her neck. The mistress that everybody in Dubai seemed to know about, and nobody had bothered to tell April, because April was the American wife, and the American wife's job was to stay quiet.

Daniel's face went white. "Where did you get these?"

And April smiled. The first real smile I had seen on her since that bathroom in Dubai. That flawless third-grade smile, the one she gave me the first day of school before she'd even told me her name.

"From your best friend," she said. "Jaison. He sent them to Tonya in the seventh month, while you were keeping me downstairs." She tilted her head, just slightly. "He said, *If Daniel can have a mistress who works in the government and is married, April can give a press interview without her husband.*"

Behind her, Toni made a small sound in her sleep. Not a cry. Just air. Just a baby breathing on her own.

April turned toward it instantly. That's all it took. She was done with the door. She was done with Daniel.

"Your thirty days are up, Daniel," she said over her shoulder. "You can see your daughter and your son. Jai is not yours. Don't touch his crib."

And she closed the door. Not slammed. Sealed.

I was standing in the hallway with DJ in one arm and Jai in the other, and I watched her pick Toni up out of that bassinet like she was lifting the whole world off her own chest. Like she could finally breathe without a machine, too.

Through the front window I could see Daniel still standing on the porch, under the light, holding two envelopes.

He was just now figuring it out. His wife hadn’t simply left Dubai.

She had brought Dubai back with her, and she had burned it down in Dallas.

CHAPTER 7

To My Girls

The house was quiet. For the first time in almost a year, it was quiet.

No gold. No hydraulic doors. No hum of air conditioning under a floor that wasn't on any directory. Just a Dallas afternoon coming in slantwise through April's blinds, laying stripes of light across the carpet, and three cribs lined up against the wall where Daniel's trophy case used to be.

I'd helped her carry that trophy case out to the garage myself. Every one of those little gold men with a football over his head. We didn't break anything. We just moved it.

DJ was asleep on his back, both arms flung up over his head like he'd surrendered to something.

Jai was asleep on his side with his chin pushed out, exactly like his father.

And Toni, in the middle crib, was asleep with no tube under her nose. No oxygen anymore. No hiss in the night. Just a tiny chest going up and coming down, up and down, all on its own. The excellent care had done its job, and then it had packed up its machines and gone home.

April was sitting on the floor between the cribs with her legs crossed, her hair in a messy bun, no bows, no makeup, no anything. I sat across from her the same way, on the floor, the way we used to sit in the third grade during story time, knee to knee.

We each had a juice box. Not champagne. Juice boxes. Apple. We'd bought them for ourselves on purpose, and we had laughed about it in the checkout line until the cashier looked at us funny.

"The lawyer called," April said, low, so she wouldn't wake them. "He said what you told me."

I nodded. "I know."



I had been the one to read it to her first. I'd read it off my phone for an hour, sitting at her kitchen table with all three of them finally asleep, while April stood at the sink with her back to me, washing the same bottle over and over.

The divorce she filed in Dallas County wasn't going to be the one that counted. Daniel's family had filed first, over there. And over there, it wasn't a matter of signing some papers and dividing up the furniture.

Over there, there were rules.

You have to live in the same home again, the two of you, for one year. Not separate houses. The same roof.

You have to take the marriage classes. Both of you. All of them.

After the classes, you live together for another six months.

After that, and only after that, a divorce petition can be filed.

And once it's filed, it won't be heard for another six months.

I'd done the math out loud, and then I'd done it again in my head to make sure. Two years. Two years, minimum. On paper, still married. On P4, or someplace like it, still watched.

April had turned off the water at the sink, and she'd stood there with her hands dripping, and she hadn't said a word.

⁂

Now, on the floor between the cribs, she laughed. A little laugh, wet at the edges.

"So I left for nothing," she said.

"No." I reached across over the corner of DJ's crib and took her hand. "You left so you could have this. These thirty days. And the next thirty. And the thirty after that, before you have to go back."

April looked at the three cribs. Her three.

"If I have to go live in that house for a year and do the classes," she said slowly, "then fine. I'll do it. I'll sit in every one of those classes and nod my head. But I am not doing it without you." Her hand tightened on mine. "Wherever these three go, you go. Promise me that."

"Wherever they go," I said. "Wherever you go. You know that."

She knew that. She had known it since the third grade.

Toni made a little coo in her sleep. Not a weak sound. Not a struggle. Just a baby, being a baby, the way babies are supposed to.

April got up on her knees and leaned over the middle crib and fixed Toni's blanket. Then DJ's. Then Jai's. One, two, three. The same order every time, and I realized I'd seen her do it before, a long time ago, passing out pencils down the row in the third grade, back when the teacher let her be the helper.

You, and you, and you.

For the first time since that reception, there was nobody else in the room. No rookie. No Daniel. No father, no cousins, no group chat, no press. No government mistress with a badge on a lanyard. No tower with anybody's name on it.

Just April and me. And three cribs.

And a clock that wasn't counting down anymore, nine months, three hours, ten minutes to landing. A clock that was finally counting up. One day at a time, every one of them ours, until April had to go back and finish what she started.

I lifted my juice box.

"To my girls," I whispered.

Daniel's line, from the reception. I stole it right out of his mouth. Only this time, it was true.

April laughed, and she clinked her juice box against mine, and she drank.

And behind us, all three babies breathed together.

CHAPTER 8

Stop Talking

Back to Dubai. The same tower. The same floor. Different rules.

P4 wasn't locked anymore. It was a house now. On paper.

Daniel had the master bedroom. April had the second bedroom, with the three cribs pushed together against one wall so she could reach all of them from the bed without getting up. I had the third bedroom. I never left. I packed up my whole life in Dallas, every last thing I owned, and moved it to Dubai, and I watched the children.

All the children. Not just the three.

Daniel's sisters came down to P4 every single day after school, the twin girls from the reception, a year older now and twice as loud. They'd kick their shoes off at the door and climb right up on April's bed, one of them holding DJ, the other one holding Jai, and the both of them leaning over Toni's crib to whisper to her like she was a secret they'd been trusted with.

"You are so strong, little sister," they'd tell her. "You are so strong."

Those two girls were the only ones in that family who ever came down to P4 without wanting something.

⁂

April ran her business from the kitchen table.

Laptop open. Calls at three in the morning, Dallas time, with a baby on her shoulder and a burp cloth on the other one. She had started a postpartum concierge service for American women who'd ended up stuck in Dubai: women who'd married into money and found out too late what the money cost. Nobody missed the irony. April least of all.

Money was her armor now. Every dirham she made went into an account that only I had the password to. She'd made sure of that before she ever unpacked.

On the days the rules said, she and Daniel went to the marriage classes. They sat a chair apart. They nodded when they were supposed to nod. Then they came home to the same house and went into different rooms and shut different doors.

And Daniel was still seeing her. The government one. Married, badge on a lanyard, lobby bar at one in the morning. He didn't even try to hide it anymore. He'd come home late in a cloud of cologne that wasn't April's, and he'd walk right past those three cribs on his way to his room without once turning his head to look in them.



The family was making it a living hell for us.

Daniel's mother left articles on April's pillow. Printed out, folded neatly, about dutiful wives and quiet wives and wives who know their place. April read every one of them, and then she used them to line the bottom of the diaper pail.

Daniel's father turned the air conditioning off in April's half of the house. In Dubai. "If she wants to talk to the press without her

husband," he said, to anybody who would carry it back to her, "she can sweat."

The cousins took pictures of me at the grocery store with the triplets. Three car seats in one cart and me pushing it. Somebody posted one with a caption I didn't need translated. *Who is the nanny? The American?*

I'm Tonya. I'm the one who's been here for everything. But sure. The nanny.

Then April's own mother and father flew in. They sat down at that kitchen table, right where April did her business, and they meant well. That was the hardest part. They meant every word.

Her mother was holding Toni, who was finally big enough to be held without a monitor clipped to her. "Baby," she said. "You need to stop this nonsense before it gets out of hand. You have three babies. You have a husband who can provide. Just be quiet for the year. Do the classes. Go home with him when it's over. Stop the business. Stop the interviews. Please."

Her father didn't say much. He hardly ever did. He just looked at DJ, at that forehead, Daniel's forehead, and he said it plain.

"He's going to take them, April. You know that. This is his country. It's his father's building."

April didn't cry. She was bouncing Jai on her knee, and she didn't stop bouncing him.

"Then let him try," she said.

I was standing in the doorway with my arms crossed. Somewhere along the way I had turned into the mean old dog at the gate. I didn't mind it. Somebody had to be.



That’s when the little things started.

Not big things. Just enough to make the back of your neck prickle.

A black Land Cruiser followed me and the triplets to the pediatrician. The same black Land Cruiser, two days in a row.

A note showed up under the P4 door one morning. No handwriting. Typed. Two words.

STOP TALKING.

April’s business account got reported four hundred times in one hour, and they shut it down for a day.

And the nursery camera went dark at two in the morning. Just went offline. When it came back on, the cribs had been moved.

An inch. That’s all. Just one inch.

But somebody had been in that room.

⁂

I found it first. I didn’t tell April right away. I checked every lock on that floor. I stood over Toni’s crib and counted her breaths until I was sure. Then I walked straight out to the balcony, where Daniel was on the phone with *her*, laughing about something in a voice he never once used in that house.

“Somebody may be out to harm them,” I said. Low, so the girls wouldn’t hear me from the kitchen. “Your son. Your daughter. Jai. My best friend. In your father’s house.”

Daniel looked at me with the phone still at his ear. And for just a second, all of it dropped off him. The football player, the husband, the son. Just for a second, he was only a man standing on a balcony who had heard what I said.

“I didn’t—” he started.

“I know you didn’t,” I said. “But your family did. Or she did. Or somebody who doesn’t like April going out with her head uncovered, and running a business, and talking to the press without you. I don’t know which one. But you need to pick a side, Daniel. Right now.”

He didn’t answer me.

He looked away, out over the city, and he put the phone back to his mouth and went back to his call.

I didn’t waver. And neither did April. Of course we didn’t.

That night I pushed all three cribs into one room. April’s room. I locked the door from the inside, and I wedged a chair up under the handle, and then the two of us lay down on the floor between those cribs with a blanket and two pillows, the way we used to do at sleepovers in the third grade. Only this time, there were three babies breathing above us, and a chair jammed against a soundproof door.

Neither one of us slept much.

Outside, Dubai kept watching.