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.”

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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.