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.