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."

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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.