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**DAY 3**

“Mommy . . .” A familiar voice called to me in my fitful dreams, but my mind was a chaotic, jumbled mess of shadows and sharp edges. I couldn’t move away from it as the little voice was swallowed away by the bramble knotting tighter around me. The shadows felt sweltering and sinister, and I began to panic, until I heard her voice again.

“*Mommy . . .*” It was fearful and more urgent this time, and finally, my mind latched onto the scared little whisper, and I stirred awake.

“Mommy—”

The prickle of dreams ebbed, and I groaned. “I’m up.” I exhaled, but even that was uncomfortable. Every part of me ached as I forced my eyes open. I blinked, my lids so heavy I could barely keep them open long enough to make out Thea’s profile beside my bed. Messy brown hair. Pink pajamas.

“I’m up,” I repeated, and pushed off the mattress. My voice was hoarse from exhaustion after hours upon hours dealing with sick kids—kids that never seemed to get better.

“What is it, Thea?” I would’ve winced at the impatience in my tone, if I had the energy.

“My tummy hurts, Mommy,” she whimpered, and swiped at the hair stuck to her forehead. “And I’m too hot.”

“You and me both, baby.” I tucked her sweat-dampened hair behind her ear and noticed something on her face. “Is that vomit?”

Her lip quivered. Using all the willpower I could muster, I flung the covers back, grimacing at the movement. “We’ll get you taken care of,” I told her, though my body protested,

urging me to get back in bed. It felt like it had been hit by a snow plow. God, it sucked getting older. “Climb back into bed, baby. I’ll get some medicine for you, and a cold rag.”

I glanced absently at my husband’s side of the bed. It was empty. I didn’t expect him to be there, not with the divorce final and him staying with Simon three floors below, but if there was ever a time when I needed his co-parenting, now was that time. And of course, he was conveniently MIA.

“My tummy doesn’t feel right.” Thea’s voice was reedy and she was on the brink of tears. “It feels . . . bad.”

“I’ll get you a bowl too. Now, go on.” I shooed her back toward her room.

“And some ginger ale?” she squeaked.

“Yes,” I breathed. “And that—if we have any left.”

Dragging her feet, the munchkin did as I asked, but with far less pep in her step than usual. A part of my heart and mind tinged with concern for her—my sweet, curious little girl who was always happy, and always chirping about one thing or another. Now she looked as horrible as I felt, and the mother in me wanted to take all her pain away. The other, more prominent part of me, which made my chest heat with shame to even think it, didn’t care. Because that darker part of me was so exhausted, it only cared about sleep.

But with sleep came sharp edges and shadowy dreams, and I didn’t want them either.

I made my way into the bathroom and rustled around for the thermometer and fever reducer, grabbed a rag from the drawer and turned for the bedroom. “Shit—Beau,” I growled, nearly running into him in the doorway.

“Is Thea okay?” Ever the older brother, he was clearly concerned, despite how much he claimed to hate her every time she used his markers or played with his toys and didn’t put them back where she found them.

“She’s fine, sweetie.” But he . . . he looked like he had a fever too. His face was bright, his eyes glittering in the overhead light. “Get back in bed,” I told him. “You need rest.”

“I can’t sleep. Besides, it’s too hot.” He licked his lips and shuffled through my bedroom ahead of me, into the hall.

“I know,” I said, registering how uncharacteristically warm it was in the apartment. My classroom had a water leak that was apparently impossible to repair. The furnace was out for a month and we were all taking cold showers. Now the heater was broken? What the hell did our monthly dues go toward if not to fix the damn thing? “This whole damn building is falling apart,” I muttered, and thought to tell Tessa that very thing next time I saw her.

Thea gasped as I stepped into her room. “I know, I know,” I grumbled. “I’m not supposed to curse.” I shook my head. “I’ll put a quarter in the jar later.”

Thea looked at the stuff in my hand. “What about my Ginger Ale for my tummy—”

“Give me a minute,” I hissed, and as her brow furrowed, I sighed. “Mommy’s moving slow tonight. I’ll get you some bubbles in a minute.” Bones aching, I sat down on her mattress, fumbling with the dripping rag I didn’t wring out well enough, the thermometer, and the bottle of Tylenol.

“Mom,” Beau whined from the doorway. “Where’s dad? How come he isn’t here?”

“Because he’s a useless pieces of shit,” I bit out, startling them as much as myself. I sighed. “Thea, lay back—”

“But—why isn’t he here? Where is he—”

“Beau—go to bed,” I snapped. “I’m dealing with your sister.” The bite in my tone didn’t escape me, but I was too busy staring at my hands as they shook, followed by a sharp pain lancing through my head. I grimaced and exhaled slowly. There was no denying it. I was sick—we were *all* sick.

Beau lowered his head, wringing his hands in front of him. “Please, Beau,” I pleaded. “Get into bed. I’ll be right there, okay? I can only do so much at once.” I tossed the thermometer to the side. I didn’t need it. Two days of this, first a sniffle then the temperature. Now the tummy. I already knew Thea had a fever.

“Lay back,” I said as softly as I could manage.

Thea did, her face glowing in the dimness of her nightlight.

“Leave this on for a bit, okay?” I folded the rag on her forehead, and set the Tylenol on the side table. “I’ll get you some water to take these, and some Ginger Ale.”

I rose to my feet, my head throbbing as I glanced at the pill bottle. “Mommy’s going to take some too.”

I shuffled to the door and everything after that was a blur. The more I moved, the more my head ached, and the more I could barely stand the sound of my own voice. All I could think about was sleep.

When Beau and Thea were tucked back into bed, and I couldn’t stand it any longer, I crawled back under the covers, ignoring the feeling of thorns and sharp edges that filled my mind as I sighed into my pillow. I didn’t care about the strange dreams or the fever or the fact that a part of me was screaming *something is very, very wrong* . . . I just needed sleep, and as long as I could shut my eyes, everything else would fade away.

#

## DAY 4

*I heard them in my dreams—the bad men. Indistinct whispers as they plotted. They schemed with evil smiles, waiting. Watching. Planning.*

*“Disease.”*

*“Quarantine.”*

*The rasp of words in my mind made me flinch.*

*“Lockdown.”*

*“Emergency.”*

*Their voices grew louder and more devious.*

*“Death.”*

*Their words were angry and foreboding, piercing through the shadows of my mind. And the pain—the anguish of the heat, it burned, consuming what cold parts of me were left.*

*“Lockdown.”*

*The men flashed in the darkness, and my mind churned with a sudden rage and fearful blur. Protect, it told me. Protect them. I was an inferno of writhing sickness, of fetid rot and chaos, and my mind sharpened with spikes of desperation too.*

*Little Thea, tears in her eyes and chin trembling with fear. Her whines, her pleas.*

*“Mom. . . ” A small whisper of a word was lost amidst the sinister boom that continued to echo around me. “Mommy?”*

*“National Guard.”*

*“Apartment checks.”*

*They were coming—the bad men . . . were coming. I won’t let them hurt my babies.*

*I twitched awake.*

“There is a mandatory quarantine.” *The voices.* “Everyone is to remain in their own apartment.”

I glanced around as the voices continued to boom through my mind.

“No,” I breathed, shaking my head. They were coming. The room filled with encroaching shadows, and I could barely inhale through the desperation. My mind screamed danger, danger, danger! “We can’t be here—” Panic swallowed my words and I flung the covers off. “We have to pack. We have to go.”

The bathroom was dark and nothing was where it should’ve been as I pulled out the drawers . . . I was looking for something. But what? My stomach heaved and I doubled over. Bile and burn. The stench of vomit.

Flicking the light on, I cringed. Pain lanced through my head, and things crashed to the floor as I grasped onto the counter. I gripped my head, tears burning the backs of my eyes. My heart beat so fast, I couldn’t breathe. The fear and utter desperation was too close to the surface. It was lapping at my skin, sending chills over every inch of me.

*The children. You have to save the children.*

My eyes flew open and a woman stared back at me. Her eyes were bloodshot, her skin ashen, and darkness inched its way across her face. “The children.” Her mouth moved and her eyes bored into mine, and with a scream, I smashed the mirror, unable to look at her horrifying face.

“There is a mandatory quarantine,” the bad man said, his voice booming around me. “No. No. No . . .” Not the children. I have to save the children. I ran out of the bathroom. There was no time to pack.

“Beau—Thea!” Lights flashed in the living room, and the air was too hot. Everything was too loud and too hot.

“Everyone is to remain in their own apart—”

“Shut up!” I shouted to the voices in my head. Beau’s room was empty, and when I flung Thea’s bedroom door open, Beau was cowered on her bed, protecting her as she slept.

“Mom—”

“I’ll protect you.” I hurled myself in and tugged at him. “We have to go—now.”

“Mom, what’s—”

“I said now!” I shouted, yanking Thea’s covers back, though she barely stirred awake.

“Before they come—we have to leave before they come.”

Beau followed me out the door. “But the intercom said we have to stay here.”

“Now, Beau.” I handed him his jacket.

“But—you’re bleeding—”

“Thea—” I glanced around. “Where’s your sister? Get your sister!” I shouted. “They’re coming.” I winced in the flashing lights of the television and stared up at the ceiling, waiting for the voices to boom again. “They’re coming,” I whispered. “I know they’re coming.” I could feel it—the evil. The darkness. I could feel it all. It was so close. Beau tugged Thea from her room and I flung open the apartment door. When I stepped out and neither of them were behind me, I spun around. Thea was fumbling with her jacket.

“There’s no time!” I said, grabbing hold of her hand, her jacket dragging on the floor behind her as she whimpered.

“I don’t feel good.” She tugged against me, but I ignored her. I had to. I had to save them.

“There is a mandatory quarantine—”

“No!” I shouted, squeezing my eyes shut, and when Beau stopped at the elevator and zipped up his sister’s jacket, I practically screamed. “No! Keep moving. We have to keep moving.” I grabbed the hood of his jacket, and he yelped, pulling Thea in tow. She cried, they both did, but didn’t they understand? Tugging and crying and pleading wouldn’t save them. Only *I* could. “I’m saving you,” I breathed.

“Mommy—”

I whirled around and grabbed Beau’s shoulders, squeezing. “Do you want to die?” I shouted. “Do you? Do you want your *sister* to die? Because they will kill you. Both of you. Only I can protect you.”

His chin trembled and he began to sob, but there was no time for that. I grabbed them both and yanked them into the stairwell. Down and down we went. The concrete was cold against my bare feet, but I welcomed it. The heat—the suffocating heat was so stifling, I yearned for reprieve. I needed to breathe.

The instant we exited the side door, I sighed with relief. The midnight cold. It dampened the fire burning in my blood. It quieted the noise in my head. “Yes,” I told them, tugging the kids along. “Yes, I will protect us.” I pulled them behind me, allowing the cold wind to kiss my face. I knew exactly where we would go, where they would be hidden and safe.

“Where are we going?” Beau cried as they slogged through the snow.

“Somewhere safe,” I told them. “Where they will *never* find us.”

“Who?” Thea cried. “Who will find us?”

“The bad men. I’m saving you from the bad men—hurry.”

“Mommy,” they both cried. “We’re scared.” But I ignored them.

More wind and cold. More relief.

Safety was so close. It was right there, dark and forgotten. As we approached the abandoned building, I peered up at the pitch-black windows. No one would look for us there. No one would find us.

“Mama, what’s wrong with you?” Beau whined. “Where are we going?”

“Shut up and hurry.” I tugged on them as we stepped through a broken doorway. “We have to hurry . . . They won’t find us here.”

Their cries and pleas echoed around us, and I whirled around again. “Shut up! Do you want them to hear us?” They shook their heads. “We have to get higher. We have to be able to see them coming.”

The wind howled through the abandoned hallway, and the darkness enveloped us, keeping us hidden—keeping us safe. “Up here—”

A siren pierced through the air and I froze in place. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “No. No. No. They’re coming. “The bad men—they’ve found us. Hurry!” But the more I tugged, the more they fought against me.

“You’re hurting her,” Beau shouted at me. “Momma, you’re hurting Thea!”

“Stop being a little brat!” I snarled and dragged her up the stairs, feeling her stumble but I didn’t stop or slow down. The siren sounded again, piercing through the howling wind. “We’re almost there,” I cooed. And just as I realized hiding wouldn’t be enough, not when I knew they were searching for us, I knew what I had to do. Complete darkness is all that would save us. “It’s the only way,” I said, smiling. “It will be like flying,” I promised, and peered back at them, at the horror on their faces. I would take it all away. I would save them. My babies. My children.

“Come, Beau,” I said, reaching for him, but he recoiled from me.

“No!” he shouted, and reached for his sister. “Come on, Thea.” I barely heard his voice above the wind, but as he started to take her away, a rage unlike any I’d ever felt before consumed me, and I lurched for him, a snarl ripping through me.

“Stop it!” Thea’s voice was the last thing I heard before the world went completely black.