

AS
SHE
FADES

ABBI GLINES



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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For every girl who has been broken
and found her strength to fight

PART ONE

Take this kiss upon the brow!
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow—
You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;
Yet if hope has flown away
In a night, or in a day,
In a vision, or in none,
Is it therefore the less *gone*?
All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.

—Edgar Allan Poe, "A Dream Within a Dream"

SINCE I WAS a little girl, I've loved fairy tales. And I've believed in true love. It was easy for me, though, because I fell in love at six years old. Not many people find love so young. Crawford and I believed we were special. That fate shined on us and gave us each other early so we'd have a lifetime together. He was my very own Prince Charming. Not one day of my childhood was he not there with me. Making me smile and enjoying the life we were both born into. But what we didn't expect was for the sharp turns in life you don't see coming. The ones that knock you off course. The things that come along and change it all forever. We hadn't been prepared for that.

OUR STORY ISN'T an easy one. The charmed life we had grown up with was pulled away from us so quickly, we didn't have time to prepare for it. But no one ever does. That's the dark side of life.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SMELL OF summer evenings always made me feel happy. Since I was a girl, it was the reminder that school was over and adventure awaited. Swimming in the lake, playing basketball with my older brothers, and of course our annual family vacation. However, this year it meant freedom. A new life, a new beginning. For me and Crawford.

I glanced over at him driving and the warmth in my chest grew at the sight of him. We had been together since we were kids. First as friends, and then it grew into more as we got older. Today we had walked across the large stage set in the center of our high school football field and received our diplomas. We were graduates. Finally.

"Still seems hard to believe it's over. High school," I added for clarification. Although I was sure he would understand what I meant.

He cut his eyes toward me and the corner of his lips curved up just enough for his eyes to sparkle the way they did when he was amused or pleased. "It's not over. It's just beginning, V. Our life will be exactly like we planned it."

I wanted to believe that. We were going to the same college. Crawford had a scholarship for football. A full ride. It wasn't my first

choice for school but I wanted to be where he was. We had never been apart.

"Everyone seemed almost scared tonight. Like they were drinking and partying to forget the fact we're adults now. This is it."

Crawford shrugged. "I bet most of them are terrified. They don't all have plans like we do. They have to decide what's next."

He was right, of course. He always was. One of the things I loved about Crawford was his confidence. He didn't worry and back away from a problem. He faced it head-on and took control. I felt safe with him, like he would always have the answer I needed.

His hand reached over and covered mine. "Our life is going to be amazing. College is going to be just what we need. To get out of this town but not too far away. We can spread our wings and still come home to visit easily enough. You're going to love it."

And I believed him. My mind was playing through all the fun things we would see and do. Excitement for what was to come bubbled up in me and I was so ready for August to arrive.

Our favorite song came on the radio and Crawford turned it up and began to sing along with his off-key voice. He was a terrible singer, but he knew it made me laugh so he did it often. Joy swelled up in me for the life I had, so strong it was hard to contain it. I began to laugh as he hit another bad note. This was my life and I loved it.

It was then that Crawford slammed on the brakes and the world began spinning. The smell of burning rubber and the violent screeching of wheels took away all my other thoughts. Dreams vanished in that instant. Completely.



ONE MONTH. TODAY was the one-month anniversary of the car accident that turned our graduation night into a nightmare. I sat in the waiting room—now more familiar to me than my own bedroom—and stared at the white walls. The smell of stale coffee didn't overpower the sterile surroundings. Those things didn't matter, though. Nothing other than Crawford opening his eyes mattered.

It would be my turn to read to Crawford soon. I lived for this time of day. To see him and pray he would hear my voice and open his eyes. That we would be together again. That all our dreams were still there, waiting just outside the door of this lonely, cold place.

The doctor had told his parents the morning after the accident that he believed comatose patients can hear. If he hears us talking to him, he'll fight to come back. To wake up.

I shivered remembering those words. *Comatose*. I hated that. Crawford was so full of life and energy. Seeing him like this was so hard.

The doctor believed he needed to hear several voices he knew and loved. So Crawford's mother put us on a schedule in the beginning, but then let me come in as early as I wanted to read. But as the days progressed, her schedule had started to change as her health went downhill. Seeing her only child like this day in and day out was weighing on her.

"Still here?" a masculine voice asked. I didn't recognize the speaker. Normally it was one of my older brothers coming to check on me. Knox, my youngest older brother, was closest in age to Crawford and me, and he came to read, too. Not every day like

me, but when he could. I was hoping he would come today. He hadn't been in a couple of days and I knew Crawford would like to hear him.

I lifted my head to meet a pair of dark green eyes outlined by thick black lashes—pretty eyes for a guy. I'd seen those eyes before. Just as I'd seen the guy they belonged to. But we had never spoken.

"You're always here," he said. "There hasn't been a day in the past two weeks that I've not seen you."

His voice was smooth, but there was a thicker drawl to his accent than most of the guys had in Franklin. He almost sounded Alabama-ish. Was he studying me or was he waiting on me to speak? Probably the latter. I was being rude not responding.

"Nowhere else to be," I said honestly. Because without Crawford I was lost.

He lifted the corner of his full lips and it looked a lot like a smirk. Why would he be smirking at something like this?

"I can think of a lot of places I'd rather be. But Uncle D is where my loyalty lies. So here I am."

I wasn't sure if he meant to be deep and heartfelt, but it didn't sound that way. I wondered if he was even upset about his uncle being here. Not that it was my business. The guy had an air about him that rubbed me the wrong way. He liked himself. A lot. He knew he was beautiful and he liked the attention it got him. I'd seen his kind plenty. I wasn't a fan.

"Your selflessness humbles me," I replied with a heavy dash of sarcasm. The way his eyes sparked with amusement made me dislike him more than I'd already decided I did.

As he crossed his arms over his wide chest, I couldn't help but notice the way his biceps flexed and the tattoo peeking out of his

sleeve. His long dark hair was a little messy and tucked behind his ears. I imagined it would complete his pirate look if he had it pulled back in a ponytail.

“Don’t mistake me for pretending to be selfless. That was never my intention at all. I’m here to see my uncle. Nothing deeper than that. But then, I don’t sit like a martyr in this waiting room day after day and stare at that wall. Selflessness is your thing. Not mine.”

Why was he still talking to me? Where was Knox? He should have showed up with a late lunch from my mom by now. And it was his turn to go sit with Crawford before my scheduled time in three hours. Knox needed to get here and this guy needed to move on along.

“Jesus, you’re high-strung,” he muttered, and I jerked my gaze back to his. Again with that amused smile.

“Aren’t you here to see your uncle?” I asked, hoping to get rid of him.

He laughed this time. The real kind. It was pleasant. Maybe more than pleasant. Until I remembered he was laughing in that attractive way because of me. Then it annoyed me.

“I am. Just thought I’d try and give you something to do other than stare at the wall. It makes me sad when I see you here all alone. My mistake. You’re obviously alone because you like it that way.”

I would not rise to the bait. He wanted me to bite back, but I wasn’t going to do it. He wasn’t worth my anger or the energy it would take to get angry.

“Slate, what are you doing out here? Your uncle was just asking about you.” The young female nurse was seriously batting her eyelashes and sticking out her chest as she spoke to . . . *Slate*—apparently that was his name.

He turned his gaze to meet hers and I was almost positive he winked. Her cheeks began to glow and her eyes went all sultry. *Jesus*. I had seen enough of this. If I wanted to watch a soap opera, I'd turn on the television in the corner.

"Tell the old man I'm coming," he said.

She giggled like that was hilarious and gave me a brief glance before turning to walk away. The swing in her hips was exaggerated—any girl who actually walked like that would need to get her hips adjusted at the chiropractor weekly.

"You enjoy yourself, Miss . . ." he trailed off, as if waiting on me to give him my name. He would be waiting forever.

"Your fan club needs you," I replied with a disgusted tone, and went back to staring at the wall. Just like I did every day. Thinking. About life and my future, our future. Mine and Crawford's.

"Yeah, it does," He chuckled. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shake his head before turning and walking away. It wasn't a walk, really. More of a saunter. If guys actually sauntered. Maybe a swagger?

Oh, who cared? He was gone.

I reached into my canvas tote bag and pulled out my phone. There were five texts and two calls from my mother, a text from each of my four brothers, two from my oldest brother's wife, and the last three from my dad. They did this every day. Checking on me, asking me to come to dinner, a movie, shopping, to play basketball . . . anything to try to get me out of this hospital.

None of them understood. Crawford was in a coma.

That was all that mattered. I couldn't just continue to live as if he weren't lying in that bed, unmoving. I had to be here when he woke up. Because he would. He *had* to. We had a future we'd been planning since childhood.

I opened my text messages and did what any good girl would do: I began replying to them. My mother's offer to take me shopping for a new bathing suit—as if I were going to the beach any-time soon. Then her attempt to guilt me into a family dinner. My nieces missed me. I did feel slightly guilty about Maddy and Malyn, my oldest brother's twin girls. They were only two, and Aunt Vale not being around probably confused them.

Before the accident, I babysat them every Tuesday and Thursday night while Catherine, my sister-in-law, worked late shifts at the nursing home. My mom kept them now. I wouldn't leave the hospital each day until I had to. When Crawford's mother came back at seven every evening, I told him good-night, kissed his cheek, then cried the whole way home. When I woke up at seven every morning, I got dressed, packed my bag with books and snacks, and headed to the hospital. It was my routine. It was all I had left.

My brothers were getting together tonight after family dinner to play basketball at the house. Jonah was in the military and currently on assignment. So I was the even number four. They didn't really need me. My dad would be there to fill in. But each of them acted like they couldn't play without me.

I was the baby of the five and the only girl. That being said, I was also overprotected and worried about too much. They all thought it was their job to make sure I was okay. Because I loved them each for it, and because Jonah texted me even while he was off serving our country, I replied to all of them that I'd be at the basketball game if they'd wait until seven thirty. It wasn't what I wanted to do when I got home. But it was what they needed me to do.

So I'd do it.

CHAPTER TWO

KNOX ARRIVED, FINALLY. He held a blue polka-dot lunchbox that I knew would be filled with a hot meal. This was how my mother kept her sanity with my staying up here all day—she kept me fed.

“Here you go, Princess.” Knox handed over the lunchbox and sank down into the chair next to me. “How’s it going?”

He usually stayed and talked to me while I ate. It was something I looked forward to. Knox was only two years older than me and we were the closest out of the five of us.

He had my dark hair and blue eyes. Everyone said we could have been twins.

“Same. Just waiting,” I replied. “How’s the home front?”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Dad’s fighting with the plumber over the price of the new tub Momma wants, Momma is making your favorite cake in hopes she can lure you home for dinner, and Maddy refuses to use the big-girl potty because Aunt Vale isn’t there to sing the potty song to her.”

He wasn’t trying to make me feel guilty. That wasn’t Knox’s style. He was just being honest.

“Can’t Mom sing the song to her? She’s the one who taught it

to me." I pulled out a container of broccoli casserole. It was still nice and warm.

He shrugged. "She tried. Maddy said it wasn't like yours."

I had to find time to see my nieces. "I wish Mom would bring them here to see me."

Knox turned his head to look at me. "Why? You're not in a hospital bed. You can walk out any time you want and do other things. Crawford would want you to."

Again, he wasn't being cruel. But Knox's honesty was sometimes brutal.

"When he opens his eyes I want to be here," I said for the hundredth time. It was something they all knew, but I kept having to repeat it.

"He could wake up in the middle of the night. You're not here then."

I knew that. I hated it. But I wasn't allowed to sleep in the waiting room. When visiting hours were over I had to leave. Hospital rules. I'd tried it already. They'd kicked me out.

"Just let me do this my way," I said, then took a bite of my lunch. I was hungry. My breakfast of dry cereal and goldfish crackers was long gone and I needed something other than stale coffee.

"Knox McKinley," a now-familiar male voice said, and I almost choked on my casserole, which made me want to cuss. Did that asshole have to know my brother?

"Slate," Knox replied with a smile in his voice that was real. He liked this guy. Go figure. "What are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same. I see you made more headway with that one than I did. She would rather stare at the wall than speak to me."

I felt Knox turn to look at me, but I ignored them both and took a bite of my food. This was not how I'd hoped to enjoy my meal.

"Yeah, well, I bring her food and share the same parents, so she has to speak to me," Knox replied.

"She's your sister. That helps my ego somewhat."

I pulled out the yeast roll I knew my momma made fresh and took a large bite. One too big to be expected to speak. I heard Knox muffle a laugh. Maybe he'd get the hint and send Mr. Annoying on his way.

"I thought you lived in Huntsville with your uncle? What brings you this far out?"

Knox was changing the subject. I owed him one for that.

"Uncle D has stage four cancer. It's in his liver. This is the closest hospital equipped to handle that."

Oh. The uncle he lived with was dying. Now I felt a little bad. Okay, maybe a lot bad.

"I'm sorry—I hadn't heard anything about it before summer break." Knox was sincere. He had a big heart.

"He didn't tell me about it until I got home. Then he had his first surgery two weeks ago. Once he's recovered he'll start chemo. All they're promising is that it'll prolong his life. Not save it."

"Damn," Knox whispered, and shook his head. "Well, if there's anything I can do, let me know. I bring my sister lunch daily. I can do the same for you if you need it." Knox again meant every word. He'd have our momma making this guy meals starting tomorrow.

"Nah, I don't camp out up here. Uncle D would be pissed if I tried. I stop by once or twice a day. I've got a friend in town and I'm crashing at her place."

That was more like it. Crashing at a girl's place. No wonder he didn't stay with his uncle. He had a female to get to.

“Okay, well, if you need something you got my number.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Brothers,” Knox said, then did that hand thing I recognized as Kappa Sigma. They were fraternity brothers.

“See you around. Keep that friendly sister of yours under control.” Slate’s voice was teasing, and I swallowed my roll before glancing up at him. He winked and I turned my attention back to my food.

“I’ll do my best.”

Once he was gone Knox looked at me. “Smart girl.”

I frowned and turned my gaze to his. I was expecting to get scolded for dissing his frat brother. “What?”

Knox nodded at Slate’s retreating form. “Blowing him off. He’s my brother and he’s a great guy, but he’s a slut. I’d wager he’s slept with every hot nurse on this floor already. The guy gets around. He’s a legend in Kappa Sigma.”

That, I did not have to be told. “I already had him figured out.”

Knox patted my knee. “I should have known.”

Yeah, he should’ve.

CHAPTER THREE

CRAWFORD'S MOTHER, JULIET, had been like a second mother to me most of my life. She was younger than my mom and Crawford was her only child. She had married his father right out of high school and completely believed in young love being strong enough to last the test of time.

However, over the past month she had changed. The vibrant, smiling woman was no more. She had wrinkles now I hadn't noticed before. Her once-gorgeous blond hair was thin and brittle. Her shoulders slumped forward all the time where once she had stood tall with excellent posture and poise.

Crawford was her world, too. She was falling apart without him and I understood. I accepted her sharp words and strict rules about visitation. I didn't let my feelings get hurt when she complained about my always sitting in the waiting room. She was hurting and she needed to lash out. I was here to take it. Crawford would do the same for me.

I recognized the click of her heels just as the hands on the clock I'd been watching for over an hour moved into the four o'clock position. She was leaving to go home to eat, bathe, and rest before

coming back to stay the night. She refused to let her husband or me stay. She had to be here. In case.

In case he opened his eyes. Or . . . he didn't.

I waited until she appeared in the doorway to wave me over. It was our routine and I followed it. She needed that control. I picked up my bag and stood. It was my turn with Crawford, finally.

"He's had a bit more brain activity today. Knox coming in and reading to him the short time he did was good for him, I think. If anything changes call me immediately," Juliet said. Normally that would be good news, but it was what she had been saying every day for the past month.

"I will," I assured her.

She nodded and glanced back at his door one more time before squeezing my shoulder and walking away.

This was the only part of my day I looked forward to, yet dreaded just the same. Seeing Crawford hooked up to those machines with his eyes closed never got easier. The pain was always there. Just as strong as it was the night he ran the new stop sign on County Road 14 and a truck T-boned us on Crawford's side going fifty miles an hour. I hadn't even lost consciousness. I remembered every moment of it. Screaming his name as his lifeless body lay there. Unable to free him or even open my door. Blood from the gash in my head dripped into my eyes, blurring my vision, but I had witnessed it all. Every terrifying second.

The only mark I had left from that night was the scar from the stitches just under my hairline. My bruises had long since healed. The concussion was also gone. It wasn't fair that he was the one lying there. I'd been laughing as he sang off-key to a song and he'd glanced over to smile at me. That had been the last thing I saw

before we flipped several times and metal screeched and the stench of burning rubber filled the air.

Stepping into the room, I let my gaze go directly to Crawford. He was thinner than I'd ever seen him, but the bruises and gashes on his face had healed. He didn't seem so beaten and broken anymore. Just peacefully sleeping and in need of a double cheeseburger.

He loved double cheeseburgers with extra pickles and mustard. I couldn't even bring myself to look at one now. Not without him.

"I'm here. I've got a new book. One that is light on the romance and heavy on the action. Your mom seemed positive about your progress today. I like seeing her happy."

That was a lie. She was far from happy, but if he could hear me I didn't want him worrying about his mom. He always did.

"Knox brought me broccoli casserole and fried chicken. Momma's specialty. I think she's trying to make me fat. He said he read to you from the college sports website you love so much. I'm sure he had a lot of opinions he threw in."

I talked about everything that happened during the day, hoping he could hear me. I liked to think he'd open his eyes to ask me questions if he was curious enough. Several nights a week I'd dream he opened his eyes as I read to him or held his hand. Then when I finally woke up, I'd cry because dreaming didn't make it real. My heart was empty with him not smiling back at me. I was lost, and I would stay that way until he opened his eyes.

For a moment, I thought about telling him about Slate. That had been the only unusual thing that happened today. Except that another patient, Mr. Wagoner, got to go home. I was going to miss him cruising the halls in his wheelchair. But I knew his kids and grandkids were ready to have him back.

"When I leave tonight I've got a game of basketball with the McKinley boys waiting on me. I need you there to help me take them down. You know how cocky they are."

It had once been me, Crawford, and Knox against Jonah, Michea, and Dylan. The youth against the older ones. It wasn't until Dylan married and moved off that we started having some success. Crawford growing five inches in one summer helped, too. He had gotten as tall as Jonah then, six foot three.

"I have an extra slice of chocolate cream pie from lunch. I think Mom is trying to bribe you to open your eyes with her treats. I know she didn't send it for me."

I had lost weight, too. About seven pounds, and on my five-foot-five frame it looked like a lot. Mom was definitely trying to put weight on me.

My phone dinged and I glanced down at it.

Don't forget the game tonight. The text was from Dylan. He wanted me home for several reasons. Maddy's potty training was just one of them.

I won't. I texted back, then looked back at Crawford.

"I'm ready to have you back. I miss you."

He didn't respond. Not even a flicker.

Tears stung my eyes, and I wiped them away before setting my bag down and settling in the chair beside him. I'd read soon, but for now I just wanted to hold his hand and watch him breathe. Reassure myself that Crawford was in there and he'd come back to me. Soon.

CHAPTER FOUR

“THAT COFFEE IS shit. Here, take this. It’s yours.”

I had been reading when a cup of coffee that smelled like heaven—definitely not stale hospital coffee—was placed under my nose.

I knew that voice. He was back. The slut. But he had coffee. Good coffee. And I’d been awake since four this morning staring at the ceiling fan in my room. I wanted good coffee.

I took the cup before looking up at him. “Thanks,” I all but choked out. That was hard to say to him. But I had been taught good manners. He was being nice because I was Knox’s sister. I could accept that.

“You get here early. I’m never here this early. Couldn’t sleep last night, so I figured I’d get my day started.”

Did him buying me good coffee mean I had to converse with him? Probably so. Besides, his uncle was sick. Where was my compassion?

“How’s your uncle?” I asked, since that was the only part of his life I was concerned about. I didn’t like to see people lose a loved one.

He shrugged. "Stubborn, mouth of a sailor, mean as fuck, and pretty damn lovable all the same."

That wasn't the answer I had been expecting. But I wondered if anyone ever got a real answer out of this guy.

"So," he continued, "we've had coffee, we share a brother, and we both spend time at this place daily. I think this makes us friends."

"We do not share a brother" was my very quick response.

He chuckled and took a sip of his coffee. "Kappa Sigma would disagree. Brothers for life."

I wanted to roll my eyes but the coffee was delicious, so I didn't.

"Why are you here all the time, Vale?" he asked, surprising me with my name. I had not given him that information.

"How do you know my name?" I snapped.

"We share a brother. Now, what keeps you here staring at this wall?" he asked as he pointed to the wall in front of me that held nothing but a single clock.

"If we share a brother, you should already know that."

"Touché," he replied, then took another sip. "Okay. For argument's sake, we don't share an *actual* brother. I know Knox's taste in beer, cards, and women. I don't know much else. Like I didn't know until yesterday he had a sister. So, can I please know what my new friend does up here all day long?"

I was being difficult. *Why?* This guy was just being nice. So he was a flirt and a man-whore. Did this matter to me? Was I just that judgmental? God, I hoped not.

"My boyfriend is in a coma." Saying it out loud hurt. Like slice-through-your-chest-and-make-it-hard-to-breathe kind of hurt.

"Ouch," he said, as if he felt the pain that was currently shooting through me. "How did it happen?"

I needed to talk about this. It was good for me to tell someone. To try to accept it. "A car accident the night of graduation. I was in the car, too."

"Fuck," he muttered, and dropped his hand to rest his wrist on his thigh while holding his cup with the same hand. "What's it been—a month now?"

I nodded. It had been a month and a day.

"Why can't you sit in his room? Being out here alone every day seems . . . lonely."

He sure was full of a lot of questions.

"I go in for three hours while his parents take a break. It's my time to read to him."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and looking at me so that I had to either meet his gaze or stare straight ahead rudely.

"So you just sit here all day doing what?"

I appreciated the good coffee. I really did. It was the best coffee I'd had in a while, but this guy was nosy and I wasn't in the mood to defend myself. If I wanted to sit here all day I could. Not him, not my parents, not my brothers, no one had to understand it. I was doing what I had to do to get by each day. My life was in Crawford's room and I wasn't leaving him.

"Yes," I replied.

He nodded and took another sip of his coffee, then turned his attention to the wall in front of us. "You must really love him."

"I have since I was six years old and he brought me my favorite brownie to school and snuck it into my lunchbox." That was more than I'd said about him and our past to anyone since the accident. But it had come out easily.

Slate didn't make fun of me. Instead he smiled. A small smile that made his lips curl up only a little. "That's a nice memory."

Yes, it was. I had millions of those memories.

"Never been in love myself. Don't believe in it. But it's nice to hear someone talk about it who does." He took another long sip of his coffee, then stood.

"I hope your boy opens his eyes soon," he said. "I've got to go see the old man and let him beat me in a game of poker. Makes him feel like he's done something."

I didn't imagine Slate let many people win in this world. He seemed to expect to win it all. Knowing he was letting his uncle beat him made him seem a little more human. That, and the coffee. The coffee was nice.

"Thanks. I needed this," I said, raising the cup a bit.

He winked. "Don't we all." Then he turned and walked down the hall.

I may have watched until he turned left and out of sight. Not that I liked him, but he had a nice walk.

"Someone said Slate Allen was in here." A nurse interrupted my thoughts, which needed interrupting.

So his last name was Allen.

"He just went that way. To his uncle's room," I said, pointing down the hallway.

She grinned brightly. "Thank you!" Then she hurried after him.

That was a different one from the one yesterday. Slate Allen really did get around. The nurses here had to be a couple years older than him, but they didn't seem to care. No wonder he was so full of himself.

Slate was attractive. I'd give him that. He had the startling good

looks that could stop traffic. But I didn't care about that. My heart wasn't moved by a handsome face and a chiseled body. It belonged to a guy in a hospital room and it always would. One day I'd tell Crawford about all the things that happened while he was asleep and we'd smile. Not because he had been in a coma, but because he woke up.

He was a fighter and he had a lot to fight for.

My phone vibrated in my bag and I knew the text messages had started up again. Last night I'd played basketball and eaten homemade strawberry cake with cream cheese icing while talking to Maddy about using the potty. Everyone had gotten a piece of me. They needed to give me a break today and just let me be.

I would be fine. When Crawford woke up.

CHAPTER FIVE

"AUNTIE VALE!" MADDY'S and Malyn's little voices rang down the halls of the hospital, drawing more than just my attention. Identical brown eyes like their mother's and long brown hair in pigtails swinging back and forth, they came running toward me with their arms open wide.

More than anything, I missed these two by being here all day long. I put my book down and stood up just in time to catch both of them. Little arms wrapped around me. Tears stung my eyes and I held them tightly.

"My favorite girls are here," I said, kissing them both on the forehead then on their tiny noses.

"I figure if I can't get Maddy to potty at home I'd bring her to you," Dylan said, looking like the exasperated father of twin toddlers should look.

I felt real joy as I laughed with him. It was a fleeting feeling, but my big brother had brought it to me.

Pulling back enough so I could see their faces, I looked at Maddy. "You have to use the potty like a big girl even when I'm not there. Do you want Malyn to get to start big-girl school without you?" "Big-girl school" was preschool and they didn't start until

the fall, but it was something both girls were excited about. I was supposed to go to college in the fall. Me and Crawford. Now that wasn't a sure thing anymore.

Maddy shrugged. "I want to stay with you."

What could I do with that? Worried, I glanced up at Dylan.

"She loves you and misses you," he said. "We all do."

Guilt. But I had to be here with Crawford when he opened his eyes. He'd want me here. I needed them all to understand that.

"I love and miss her, too. All of you. But you need to understand why I have to be here. What if it was Catherine?"

Dylan looked somber. "I get it. Doesn't mean I don't miss you and worry about you."

"I can do the spwits," Malyn said, pulling on my arm to get my attention back to her.

"You can?" I asked, sounding surprised even though I'd seen this trick about a thousand times already. Malyn loved to show it off. So I watched and then clapped like it was the best thing in the world.

"I can do this!" Maddy said, standing on her tiptoes and spinning in circles.

"Wow, that's amazing!" I told her, reaching out to steady her before she got dizzy and fell.

"Why don't we go show Aunt Vale how you use the big-girl potty," Dylan suggested. It must be time for a toilet break. "Malyn is in big-girl panties, but Maddy has a pull-up on," he informed me. Then he held out a diaper bag and sank down in the seat next to me. Daddy looked like he needed a break.

"Come on, you two." I led them down the hallway toward the restrooms.

We had just turned the corner when Maddy said, "Look, Aunt Vale. That boy's kissing that nurse."

I glanced over to see the nurse from this morning in a corner with Slate. His hand was on her bottom and she was pressed up against him like she needed him to breathe. A public display of “affection” in a hospital where people are ill and dying—seriously? Slate Allen was disgusting.

“Did she fix his boo-boo?” Malyn asked curiously.

I was sure he’d fixed a few boo-boos for her.

I turned their attention to the restroom door and got them focused on potty time. I even sang the song. Success with both of them. Maddy had kept her pull-up dry, and after washing hands we headed back out to find an empty corner, thank God. No more makeout fest for the twins’ curiosity.

My luck however quickly came to a halt when we turned the corner and saw Dylan talking with none other than the Nurse Romeo.

“Daddy, we went potty!” Maddy announced as she ran back toward the waiting room.

Malyn realized the guy with her dad was the same one she’d seen kissing the nurse. She slowed her step and slipped her little hand around my leg. She was the shyer of the two.

“You kissed that nurse! Did she fix your boo-boo?” Maddy got right to business.

The confusion on Dylan’s face as he looked from Maddy to me almost made me laugh. Almost.

“Here’s the bag. They’re all good,” I told him.

I felt Slate’s gaze on me, and I just couldn’t make myself be rude to him. So what if he’d been kissing a nurse. Why did I care? I didn’t.

“Thanks,” Dylan said, still looking confused.

“He kissed a nurse,” Maddy announced again, pointing at Slate.

Slate glanced at Maddy, then at me like he wasn't sure if he'd done something wrong.

"So you know Slate, too?" I asked Dylan.

He shook his head. "Not until just now. He was looking for you. I introduced myself and he said he was a Kappa Sigma with Knox."

"And he kissed a nurse," Malyn added finally because no one was acknowledging Maddy's announcement.

"Yes, he did. We weren't supposed to see that, though, and it's rude to talk about it. So let's talk about something else," I finally said.

Maddy's shoulders dropped with disappointment.

"Can Aunt Vale come home with us?" Malyn asked, quickly moving along to a subject more interesting to her.

"Aunt Vale wants to stay with Crawford. Remember? She'll be at Nonna and Poppa's tonight for dessert. We will see her then," Dylan told his daughters.

I bent down to their eye level. "And you both can tell me about how big you both were and used the potty all day. No accidents."

"Can I stay the night with you if I do?" Maddy asked.

I was always exhausted in the evenings and Maddy kicked terribly all night. But I wasn't going to tell her no. "Yes, if your momma is okay with it."

"Oh, she will be," Dylan said with a pleased tone. He didn't get his wife alone much anymore.

"YAY!" they both cheered, and clapped their hands. I hugged them both and kissed their heads before standing up.

"I'll get these two home for their naps and we'll see you tonight," Dylan said. Then he looked at Slate. "Nice to meet you. Hope your uncle gets better."

Slate nodded, and I hugged my brother good-bye before the three of them left, him holding one little hand in each of his.

"Sorry about the kissing thing," Slate said, sounding sincere. "Didn't think about kids seeing it."

I bet he didn't think about much more than the bottom he was groping. I smiled, though, and shrugged. "Isn't like they haven't seen it before. Just never with a nurse. I hope she fixed you up," I teased, thinking about the boo-boo comment from Maddy.

He smirked. "Funny."

"That was the girls' main concern."

He laughed this time. "She came on to me."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, it looked like you were fighting her off."

"Never claimed to fight it off. Just that she started it."

I walked over to my seat and picked up my book. "Not my business, Slate Allen," I said, smiling to myself that I knew his last name.

"Sounds like someone is doing some research," he said, sounding pleased.

I laughed. "Not hardly. The nurse who attacked you came looking for you this morning and asked if Slate Allen had been in here. I found out completely by accident." I opened the book and then glanced up at him. "Looks like I gave good directions. You're welcome."

He studied me as if he was seeing me for the first time. It was a bit unsettling, so I turned back to my book.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Vale McKinley," he said, and I nodded but didn't look up.

With a soft chuckle he was gone.

One more hour before I could see Crawford.