

Chapter 1

Skylar Kendall darted into St. Francis Hospital's revolving door, made one complete revolution, and burst out the entrance again. Still clutching her overnight bag and a shiny Mylar balloon, she kept her gaze lowered to the walkway as if it contained the most fascinating brickwork she'd ever seen.

Coward. Skye forced herself to relax her grip on the bag strap and balloon ribbons and swiped at the sweat moistening her forehead.

You can do this. Skye took a deep breath, thrust her shoulders back, and headed toward the entrance again. Pausing before the revolving doorway, her resolve faltered as a gaunt woman with ashen skin and a navy turban covering her head plodded through the circular door as though in a trance.

Skye moved to the side, punched the silver handicapped disk, and waited for the door to slowly glide inward, then marched into the quiet lobby. Emotionally handicapped counted, she decided.

Skye gave the elderly volunteers manning the reception booth what she hoped was a casual nod and friendly smile before entering the elevator and gliding up to the pediatric floor. She paused outside her niece's room, took a deep breath, and peeked through the cracked doorway.

Niki lay, small and pale, propped up in bed with a nasal cannula to pump vital air to her oxygen-starved heart. Dark smudges bruised the underside of her eyes, and her little bony chest rose and fell with visible effort. Her light blond hair seemed darker than usual against the pastiness of her face, and a faint roadmap of veins revealed themselves through her transparent, closed eyelids. With heart deterioration this advanced, just breathing proved an exhausting chore necessitating lots of sleep.

Faith sat in a chair next to the bed gently stroking her daughter's hand, avoiding the clear IV tubing and its tape. Worried blue eyes stared at Niki's chest as if she could ease her heart's burden through will alone. Faith's respirations mimicked Niki's raspy rate. It had to be totally subconscious, an involuntary effort on a mother's part to help and to reassure herself that her child still breathed. The lines of strain on Faith's forehead vanished the instant Niki's eyes

fluttered open.

“Aunt Skye,” Niki called out. “You’re late.”

“Five minutes.” Skye smiled, pushed into the room and placed her packages on the chair. “Cut me some slack, kiddo.” She turned to her sister. “How do you put up with this tyrant?”

Faith shrugged. “She’s nice to me.”

“Is that for me?” Niki nodded at the big yellow smiley balloon.

“Nope, it’s for your mom ’cause she’s such a clown.” Skye glanced at the chair next to the door, then abandoned the idea of a quick exit strategy and settled on the end of Niki’s bed. Her hand moved across the rough blanket. A soft down comforter, a few of Niki’s teddy bears, and they might actually make this place less scary for Nik. “Of course it’s for you. How’re you feeling?”

“Okay. What else did you bring?”

Skye dragged her large bag onto her lap and unzipped it. “Let me see. I got KFC for me and Taco Bell for you.”

“You *did not*. It’s got too much sodium and processed stuff.”

“Is that so?” Skye pulled out Styrofoam containers. “Okay, how about broiled skinless chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, and chocolate-dipped bananas for dessert? And what sleepover would be complete without...” She lowered her voice. “Ta-da. Designer pajamas?”

She whipped out a brushed flannel nightie in a tiny bunny print, rimmed with cheery rainbow zigzag edging that continued past the gown to make up the ties. The back had overlapping tie closure for greater modesty. Skye held the custom hospital gown up and wiggled it back and forth before Niki. “What d’ya think?”

“How cute,” Faith said.

Niki brought it to her face and rubbed it against her cheek. “It’s so soft, but way too big for me.”

“That’s mine, silly.” Skye reached into her bag and tossed a matching gown on Niki’s lap. “This one’s for you.”

“Can I wear it now?”

“That’s the idea. And I brought my camera to commemorate the big event.” She lifted her Canon and zoomed in. “Closer, Faith. Say, ‘world’s best sleepover.’”

Faith slid onto the bed and Niki curled into her mother’s protective embrace like a small hermit crab easing into its shell. “World’s best sleepover,” they chimed.

If Nik had to spend weeks in the hospital, at least she could make it fun for her. Skye shot the picture and rested the camera on the bed.

“Did you find the movie?” Niki asked.

Skye affected an insulted look. “Of course.” She rummaged through the bag and pulled out the portable DVD player she’d bought at Walmart earlier that day, then retrieved the DVD and held it up. “*13 Going on 30*. Sure this is the one you want to see?”

Niki reached for the DVD and examined the packaging. “It reminds me of you and me. I’m the kid Jenna, and you’re the grown-up Jenna.”

Except that Jenna was a brunette, not blond, thirteen instead of nine, and had a healthy heart.

“Looks like you thought of everything except the popcorn and soda,” Faith said. “While you two are having your feast, I think I’ll go see what’s taking Daddy so long.”

“Don’t forget to say goodnight,” Niki said.

“Never.”

As Faith left the room, Skye pushed the bag aside. “So, eat first or change into our nighties?”

“Nighties. I’m not hungry.” Niki closed her eyes.

“O-kay.” Skye grabbed her nightie and located the bathroom door. Glancing at her niece, tethered by oxygen hose and IV, she paused. Niki probably never had the opportunity to change in the privacy of her bathroom. Modesty took a backseat to practicality and necessity in hospitals. Skye pushed out a deep breath of acceptance.

Metal scraped softly as Skye pulled the curtain far enough around Niki’s bed to block the door. She turned her back to Niki and, in record time, stripped and donned the custom hospital gown. She dove again into her night bag, pulled out slippers, and hid them behind her back.

“I almost forgot. What outfit would be complete without...” She whipped her hands in front of her and snapped her wrist up and down, sending the large ears bouncing. “Floppy bunny slippers.”

Niki’s eyes fluttered open, and a slow smile spread across her pale lips. “Cute.”

Skye slid her feet into the slippers, pushed the curtain back against the wall, and scuffed backward so Niki could see. She fluffed her hair and slid a hand down her side, preening first to the right then to the left. Then she turned her back and peeked at Niki over her shoulder.

“Well? Is this not the height in hospital wear? Patients will come from all the floors, just to beg you for the name of your designer.” She sighed dramatically and batted her eyelashes.

Niki’s giggle warmed Skye’s heart. Niki clicked picture after picture of Skye mugging for the camera. She held out her own small gown and struggled to sit up. “My turn.”

Skye had just finished tying the bow on Niki’s gown when the door opened. Head bent, Niki looped her oxygen tube around her ears, as Skye took in her sister’s bright eyes, red nose, and forced smile.

“What’d I miss?”

At Faith’s overly cheerful tone, Niki frowned and leaned to the side to see around Skye. “We just put on our nighties.”

Skye settled the DVD player on Niki’s lap and plugged in the machine. “Why don’t you get the movie ready and figure out how this thing works while I talk to your mom?”

Skye whirled Faith around and pushed her toward the door before Niki could get a good look at her mother’s stricken face.

“Don’t you want a robe?” Faith asked, looking at Skye’s bare arms and legs.

Standing in the hospital hallway looking ridiculous in her bunny ensemble was the least of Skye’s concerns. She pulled the door open, shoved Faith through, and then quietly closed it behind them. With arms crossed, she faced her sister. “What’s wrong?”

Faith looked at the ground and blew out a deep breath. “The bone marrow extraction’s off.”

“Off or postponed?”

“Off.”

“Why?”

Faith bit her lip and blinked away tears before looking at her. “The anesthesiologist refused to do it. Her heart’s too weak to withstand the general anesthetic. He’s afraid that even with light sedation, Niki might never wake up.”

“Find another one.”

“It’s too dangerous. Niki’s on the organ donor list, but the latest battery of tests showed she’s worse.” Lips trembling, she wiped tears with the back of one hand. “They upgraded her to class four heart failure.”

“How many classes are there?”

“Four.”

“How is that an upgrade?” *Upgraded to what? Death?*

Faith shrugged and reached in her pocket for Kleenex. “I guess it moves her higher up the organ recipient list.”

Suddenly Skye felt a warm hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, squirt.” Her brother-in-law backed away to inspect her hospital gown and slippers. “Niiice outfit, but aren’t you a little cold?”

Skye smiled and gave Peter a brief hug. She shifted so her back was to the wall—just in case.

Peter bent to kiss his wife. “What’s wrong, honey?”

Faith moved into his arms, whispering, “They won’t do the extraction. She’s not strong enough for the anesthetic.”

Peter gathered his wife close and rubbed a comforting hand over her back. “Shh. We’ll think of something.”

“She’s so tiny. We’ll never get a heart in time. And the chances of finding compatible stem cells are—”

“Can’t she use ours?” Skye asked. “We’re blood relatives; we have to be a good match.”

“We’re not. We were checked months ago when we had our blood drawn.”

Skye couldn’t believe she’d forgotten—she hated needles about as much as hospitals. “That was just a blood test.”

“That’s all it takes.”

“So what now?”

Faith tore at her thumbnail. “The doctor’s going to call the International Cord Blood Society and the National Marrow Donor Program first thing tomorrow morning to look for a match.”

“International organization? Excellent. *Somebody’s* got to be a good match for Niki.”

Faith slowly nodded. “Except Peter’s Native American heritage makes it harder to find good matches.”

“Don’t borrow trouble. As soon as I get home tomorrow I’ll start making calls and research. I’ll find compatible stem cells for Nik. I promise.” As a journalist, Skye had become a master researcher. With the proliferation of the Internet, it was just a matter of time before she found those cells.

“Skye, don’t go making promises that are impossible to keep—especially to Niki,” Faith said. “She’s been disappointed too many times.”

I’ll keep it.

“Still want to go out to dinner?” Peter asked.

“Not really, but I need some time.” Faith took a deep breath. “Let’s say goodnight.”

The adults filed back into the room and stared at the sleeping girl. She was such a sweet thing. How could God allow Niki to suffer this way? She didn’t deserve it. And Faith and Peter for sure didn’t deserve it.

Faith had nearly died from eclampsia while pregnant with Niki. Her reaction had been so severe the doctor warned them that another pregnancy would jeopardize her life. The family had paid their price. It was time their luck changed.

Niki adjusted the oxygen tube under her nose and woke. Her blue eyes, so like her mother’s, filled with awareness and such resignation Skye had to look away. “What’s wrong?”

Peter moved forward and kissed his daughter’s pale forehead. “Hey, Pumpkin.”

“What’s wrong?”

The bed crinkled under Faith’s weight as she sat and pulled her daughter close in a careful hug. She blinked hard and cleared her throat. “They’re worried you’ll have a bad reaction to the anesthetic, so they’ve put off your bone marrow extraction until we can think of another

way.”

Niki looked at her father’s stoic face, then turned to Skye, who valiantly tried to meet her honest gaze with one of her own, but ended up focusing on the girl’s cute upturned nose. She fought the impulse to squirm under the inspection.

Niki pulled away and fixed solemn eyes on her mother. “Am I going to die?”

Faith’s eyes grew shiny with unshed tears. Her mouth dropped open, then slowly closed as she lifted her face helplessly to Peter.

“Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.” The words burst from Skye’s mouth with such force, she tried to cover them with a nervous smile. “Don’t be so dramatic, kid.”

Niki die? She was only nine. She hadn’t even made it to double digits yet. She hadn’t had a chance to play team soccer, get braces, have her first kiss, go to prom, be a bridesmaid at Skye’s wedding—not that she was even dating anyone right now, but she *might* get married some day, and she’d want Niki to be a bridesmaid. She couldn’t die.

Niki’s face creased in worry as her gaze moved from her to Peter. “Daddy?”

“Well... I know Skye’s cooking isn’t the best, but I’m pretty sure it won’t kill you.” He put a hand on Skye’s shoulder and squeezed hard. “Ya gotta give her points for trying. She didn’t make you her famous stew, did she?” He shuddered.

Niki giggled. “Nope. Chicken. Store bought.”

Peter released a deep exaggerated breath. “Well, good. Then you’re saved. Praise Jesus, it’s a miracle.”

Skye scowled and swatted his stomach. “I’m a fantabulous cook.”

“So are they sending me home? Is our sleepover cancelled?”

“Not a chance, kiddo.” Skye forced the lightness into her voice. “They can kick us out tomorrow, but tonight’s already paid for, and I’m *not* being gypped out of my movie. If your parents will ever leave, that is.”

“We can take a hint.” Peter reached for Faith and pulled her to her feet. “Brush your teeth and don’t stay up too late. You can always finish watching the movie tomorrow morning.”

“Enough already. Say goodnight and get out so we can get on with our party,” Skye ordered.

Peter and Faith kissed Niki goodnight, promising to return first thing in the morning to bring her home. Skye set the DVD player on the tray directly in front of them, then climbed onto the bed and wrapped Niki in her arms. She resisted the urge to press Niki close, as if crushing their bodies together might somehow magically recharge her damaged heart. Or maybe, if Niki were a part of her, Skye’s heart could beat for them both.

Skye sighed, forced her arms to relax, and turned her attention to the movie.

Unfortunately, the predicament of a thirteen-year-old girl magically turning into her successful thirty-year-old self overnight couldn’t come close to competing with her niece’s real-life drama. Skye couldn’t do much about finding Niki a suitable heart for transplant, but she could—and would—find compatible stem cells.

She would not let Niki die.

#

“What the hell.” Skye jabbed the delete key on her laptop to erase the close-up of Senator Edward Hastings. She scowled at the computer and slapped the lid closed with a loud click, then poked her head outside her cubby to see who might have overheard her outburst. Low-pitched murmuring came from Doug White’s lit cubical, and the janitor pushed his cart toward the bathrooms, but other than that, everybody else had gone home. Good.

Skye dropped back in her chair and crossed her arms. Her hand drifted over to the three-inch research pile. She opened the manila folder and then pushed it aside. There had to be

something she'd missed.

Skye spun away from her ugly, gray metal desk and reached for her tea. Bringing the warm cup to her lips, she savored the gingerbread aroma misting her face. She took a fortifying sip, enjoying the gentle melding of honey and ginger, anticipating the familiar wake-up call to her sedentary brain cells. After another satisfying swallow, she squared her shoulders and lifted the computer lid.

Skye started at her ringing desk phone. "Hello."

"What're you doing at the newsroom at nine-thirty at night?"

"What're you doing calling me at nine-thirty at night?" Faith went to bed early.

"You have work that can't wait until tomorrow?"

Or putting in overtime researching every dang aspect of stem cell therapy until exhaustion drove worry from her mind, allowing her to get four or five of hours sleep. "Is Niki okay?"

"She's fine. Just checking to see if you're coming for dinner tomorrow."

"I'll be there." Skye paused and took a deep breath. "I... There's something I need to tell you. I'm still looking, but—" She blew hair from her face. "I'm not having any luck."

"It's okay, Skye—"

"No, it's *not* okay." Skye scowled. She'd never failed at anything important before. Failing Niki made her furious, but it was the helplessness that ate at her soul.

"What're we going to do? The two largest organizations of stem cells in the world, the ICBS and the NMDP, don't have a match for Niki. More than ten and a half million chances and not one match. What are the odds of that?" She'd done so much research on stem cells, she now spoke in acronyms instead of words.

"Skye—"

"I've contacted over fifty stem cell companies worldwide, but I'm coming up empty."

"I know—"

"There are tons of cord blood storage companies where a person can store her child's cord blood and placental stem cells, but hardly any of them catalogue donated stem cells," she said with frustration.

"We knew it was a long shot. If the doctors couldn't find any, with all their resources, it was unlikely you'd find a match. But we love you for trying."

"The real kicker, that pisses me off more than anything is every blessed time I search stem cells, Senator Hastings's name comes up—and he's definitely not a fan." She paused, then whispered, "I failed Nik."

"You didn't fail."

"I did." She rubbed her aching forehead. "I couldn't find any matching stem cells. All I found was ridiculous politicians and righteous religious fanatics getting in the way of progress. What does it matter to him where the stem cells come from?"

"Him who?"

"Hastings. You know, our famous Michigan Senator they're saying is the next JFK."

"I like Hastings."

"Well, you shouldn't. He's done more to block the progress of stem cell research and therapy than any other person. What the hell does he know? He's led a charmed life. The closest he's probably come to a medical emergency is having a plantar wart—or a hang nail."

"You don't know that."

"What're we going to do?" Her voice lowered and wobbled. "We can't just let her die."

It'd been years since Skye turned to her big sister for help. When Dad died, newly wed Faith and Peter took Skye in and got her through those difficult teenage years. Even when she

was at her obnoxious worst, Faith had known what to do—but this was different.

“We’re not going to let her die.” Faith’s reassurance was calmly delivered, yet there was something in her voice.

Skye frowned, perking up. “What do you mean?”

“We’re taking care of it.”

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up and Skye straightened in her seat. “What? How?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, I’m not going to tell you. Just trust—”

“Geeze, Faith. You’re not doing anything illegal, are you? No scratch that, I’m in. Whatever it is, I’m in.”

“You’re already helping. Tempting Niki to eat, entertaining her, and keeping her spirits up— it’s all very important. But you’ve got to trust me. Niki just needs to hang on a few more months and everything will be fine.”