



Short Story from the Vault

Just a Phone Call Away

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The rules were simple.

No one was allowed to have two men. Not even when one was my lover and one my friend. Love comes in many sizes and many shapes and the two kinds of love I feel when I think of Daniel and Geoff, they run side by side if not on the same rail.

Sitting on the beach a few hours after sunrise, the sky still pink and orange, I rested my elbows on my knees and thought for the umpteenth time how it could have been different. What I could have said or done to make a difference to any of them.

Making a different choice than I had put me in a different time and a different place right now with one man by my side while the other was left hung out to dry in circumstances that may have gotten him killed.

It didn't mean making the choice didn't hurt. It only meant sometimes, life sucked.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my cell phone and used my thumb to hit the first person programmed into speed dial.

The phone had barely rung before a cool, feminine voice said, "Hello."

"Can I talk to Daniel?" I asked.

"Who is this?"

"Who are you and why should I care?"

"This is Crystal."

"Okay Crystal, can you please tell Daniel I need to talk to him?"

"Daniel can't come to the phone. He's in the shower."

I looked at my watch. It was only a little past seven. That hurt when I knew it shouldn't.

"I can wait," I said.

The phone line went dead.

Closing my eyes, I sighed hard and stuck the phone in the pocket of my jacket. I held my cup of coffee with both hands. Maybe I would try him later. Maybe I wouldn't. I honestly couldn't say right now. I had no clue what my plans were or how I would feel about calling later in the day. Before I could take another sip of the coffee, my phone vibrated.

A quick glance at the caller ID told me he had taken the fastest shower I had ever heard of.

"Hey," I said into the phone.

"Hey back."

I could hear his smile even from twelve hundred miles away. He had the kind of smile that lit up a room. Good days, bad days, he always managed to find it. When he gave it to me, like he was now, it made me feel good in ways I hadn't felt in a long, long time.

"I heard you called," he said.

"How old is she?" I asked with a sigh. "Twenty-two?"

"Admits to twenty-six."

“Possessive, too. Early morning meeting?”

His smile gave way to a sigh. “What did you want, Abby?”

I had always liked the way he said my name. Liked how it flowed right off his lips. Like it belonged there.

“I just wanted to say hi.”

“It’s the crack of dawn after four months.”

“I know.”

“What’s up?”

“Where is Crystal?”

“Glaring at me from the bedroom.”

“You’re on the balcony?”

“Only privacy right now.”

I nodded as if he could see me. He was just out of the shower, probably in a white hotel robe with nothing on underneath. Judging by how fast he called me back, his hair would still be wet, maybe some moisture still stuck to his lashes.

“So you called to find out about Crystal?” he asked. “I’m not sure jealousy is still allowed under the circumstances.”

“No,” I said. “You’re right.”

I could hear my own tired voice. I wasn’t green-eyed, I told myself. I couldn’t be. Not after what I had done to him. “I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Miami.”

“On the beach?”

“Ah huh,” I mumbled.

“Barefoot?” he asked.

“Ah huh.”

“Vanilla or white-mocha latte?”

I had to laugh. I wasn’t quite sure there was anyone on the planet who knew me better than Daniel. We had been together off and on for going on three years now. The time we spent together was always a blast. When I talked, he listened. When he called, I was there for him.

Until one time I had had to make a choice: one or the other. This one or that. A lover or a friend.

“White mocha,” I said.

“Wow. Must be pretty serious if you aren’t worried about the calories. Are you there with Geoff?”

“Not at the moment.”

“But you went when he called.”

“To work with. Not to sleep with.”

It was his turn to sigh. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything to that,” I said. “I left you. I didn’t think you would sit around waiting for me.”

“Abby,” he said. “Why are you calling?”

I let the phone drop below my chin and thought about that. I didn’t know why I was calling. I only knew hearing his voice, he sounded closer than ever. I missed him. Every day and yet not once had I ever picked up the phone and let him know. I saw him in the papers. Saw a new deal he was closing. Saw a photo of him at a high society event where I should have been on his arm instead of the super model of choice.

He had asked me to stay. I had gone anyway. Now he had Crystal in his bed.

I took a deep breath to see if I could find some courage. "He called. He needed my help. I had to go," I said.

"You could have said no."

I closed her eyes. "No," I said. "I couldn't. You know that. I owed him more than that."

"You don't work in the field anymore."

"Still have the skills. Still know what the hell I am doing and he needed me."

"And me?" he said. "I didn't need you?"

"Not like he did. Not right then."

He paused. I heard his intake of breath. I heard the slow way he let it out.

"Why the hell couldn't I fall in love with a secretary or a dental hygienist?"

“Because you’re a drop dead gorgeous, filthy rich guy with more choices than anyone? I’m willing to bet Crystal has appeared on more than one issue cover.”

“Abby--” he sighed.

“I guess I just wanted to say I was sorry,” I said.

He didn’t say anything. All I could hear was his breathing.

“I had to make a choice, Daniel. It probably wasn’t the best one I could have made, but it is one I had to make. I wasn’t choosing him over you, just one situation over the other.”

“What? Did he tell you he won’t marry you?”

“I never wanted him to. There’s only one man I ever considered to have and to hold, ‘till death do us part.”

“And then you walked away.”

I closed my eyes, remembering the look on his face when I told him I had to go, that I would be back soon. Four months and I had never even called to say hi. I had been too afraid and I was never afraid of anything.

“You sound good,” I said. I pulled in a deep breath and closed my eyes, picturing him on that New York balcony. He would be in the

penthouse with the best view, the skyline stretched out in front of him. I loved the ocean, but right now, that grey, smog-filled sky sounded so much better than the blue one I was looking at now.

“I don’t have a clue what I am supposed to say to you,” he said.

I smiled, thinking of the board meetings, the public appearances. All the times he knew exactly what to say and do.

“I screwed up, Daniel. I want you to know that. I wouldn’t change it and I know that if I had to choose again, I would make the same decision, but that doesn’t mean I don’t –”

I dropped the mouthpiece again, unable to finish the sentence. I felt sad. All over sad. In a bad, bad way that made my chest hurt.

“Don’t what?”

I sighed. “I’m going to go now. I just wanted--I don’t know what I wanted Daniel. I just had to try.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I am going to sit on this beach, watch the seagulls dive for whatever the hell it they are diving for and I am going to enjoy every bit of this latte.”

“Then what?”

“Then I will go to Geoff’s house, get packed up and go to work.”

“Ah, damn--” He mumbled it more then said it.

“What?”

“It’s tonight, isn’t it? You’re going in tonight and you don’t think you guys stand a chance. What am I supposed to do? Go locate a Miami paper tomorrow and try to find out the outcome in the news?”

He wasn’t going to ask what they were doing. He knew better than to ask that. When I had been on the job, I had always had to leave and not say where I was going. When I had retired, it didn’t matter. What was in the past stayed in the past. What I did was something he would never fully know. He had been fine with that. As long as I had come back to crawl into bed beside him and wake up with him in the morning.

Daniel wasn’t a complicated man. Not like the papers made him out to be. He had the money but didn’t really care. He liked things simple and he loved me even if I had never been able to figure out why.

“No,” I said. “You’re not. You’re going to forget all about this and you are going to have some fun with Crystal. Maybe take her to a play. To the park. To someplace really, really special.”

He laughed outright. "I don't want to do that, Abby."

"But you are going to. And you are going to remember that I made a mistake and that you always meant more even if I had to be here for awhile and then, on occasion you will take out that photo you keep in your sock drawer of the two of us and think good thoughts."

"Please don't do this--"

"I got to go. "

"Abby--"

"I always loved you, Daniel. Remember that, okay?"

He sighed. She heard his defeat. "I know."

"Good. You take care, okay?"

"Will you be careful?"

"You know me. I always am."

"I guess that's all I can ask for."

I hated to hang up. I hated the fact he was in New York when I was here in Miami, even if this is where my loyalties had to be right now.

I closed the phone at the same time I closed her eyes, missing him already. Hell, I had no clue what was going to happen tonight. I trusted Geoff, trusted our team, but I also knew we were outnumbered three to one and things didn't look good.

Putting the phone in my pocket, I held the coffee with one hand while I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger.

I had made the right choice--and the wrong one. I had been screwed one way or another. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself either way. Hurt Daniel. Hurt Geoff. They both meant something to me, in different ways. The fact Geoff needed me right now didn't take one second of my love away from Daniel.

I dropped my hand to watch a jogger go by while enjoying the brew. It was sweet, if not as hot as it had been, and still tasted like the best coffee I had ever had.

I was down to my last swallow when the phone in my pocket vibrated. I pulled it out, expecting Geoff's name in the readout and seeing Daniel's instead. For a half a second, I didn't think I was going to answer. There was nothing left to say.

But then the phone was to my ear and I asked what.

“Crystal is mad.”

“Okay,” I laughed.

“She is packing up. I just asked her to leave. I thought I was pretty nice about it, but she didn’t take it too well. I think she thought there was more going on than I did.”

“Did I mention the drop dead gorgeous and filthy rich part?”

“Did I mention only two weekends with her after not seeing anyone since you left? Four dates max?”

I chuckled. “No. No. I think that would be something I might have remembered.”

“You were never after any of that, were you?”

“The drop dead gorgeous part may have had something to do with it. I am rather shallow, you know, and you’re pretty hot.”

He laughed outright. “Okay, so maybe I know why I didn’t fall in love with a secretary or a dental hygienist. Your honesty was always cool even when there was a gun under our pillow.”

“Where else was I supposed to keep it?” I asked.

“What hotel are you staying at?”

“Why?”

“You aren’t staying in his place, right?”

“I’m at the North Beach Hotel. Have been the whole time, every night alone.”

He sighed hard. “Please don’t make me regret this.”

“Regret what?”

“I have to finish up some business in the city today and tonight, but I already booked a flight for tomorrow. I can be into Miami by mid-afternoon.”

I closed my eyes and didn’t know what to say. “Why did you do that?”

“I figured if you lived through the night, I would pick you up, bring you back up here until I finished my business and then we could take a couple months and sail down to the Bahamas.”

He had wanted to marry me in the Bahamas. On his boat. And when Daniel said “boat” it wasn’t a small little fishing cruiser. It had a captain and cook and we would have plenty of time to spend doing nothing but

each other. He had bought his house in the Bahamas two years ago because he knew I loved the ocean. He had asked me to come live there with him.

And I had come to Miami when Geoff called four months ago to work a case he hadn't been able to finish on his own.

"Daniel--"

"That is why you called isn't it? To give us another chance?"

"I hate that my decision cost us ...us."

"Then finish up what you have to finish up, keep your head down, turn all your guns over to Geoff, and come home to me."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Maybe I had known what I wanted when I called this morning. I hadn't expected it was possible but maybe in the back of my mind I had hoped.

"Really? That is what you want?"

I heard a door slam faintly in the background and had to laugh. Apparently Crystal had made it out okay.

"You want me to beg?" he asked.

“No, I just want to be with you again.”

“I will see you tomorrow then. I’ll get the big suite on the top floor on one of the downtown hotels for the night and then we can come back here for a little while.”

“I am a pain in the ass, Daniel. I will never be conventional and I will always be on edge, ready for the next battle.”

“Then I guess you need a nice stabilizing element in your life to keep you out of trouble.”

“You going to let me sign that pre-nup?”

“No,” he said. “You have turned down every expensive gift I ever gave you, paid your own way on almost every trip we ever took together, like to eat in and don’t exactly have the most expensive wardrobe I have ever seen.” He was laughing. “I think I will swing by Tiffany’s on my way out of town to pick up a ring.”

“You will not,” I snapped.

I don't do diamonds. I don't do flash. Maybe that was one of the reasons I had stood out to him at that party three years ago when the other women were trying to get his attention.

“Oh, come down out of the outrage,” he laughed. “I was thinking of a plain gold band. Maybe a matching one for me, too.”

I could be shot at and I wouldn't flinch. Offer me a ring and a life time of promises and fear traveled to each and every nerve in slow motion.

“Are you proposing to me over the phone?”

“I've already proposed three times in person. I think I get a pass on insensitivity.” There is was. The smile again all those miles away.

“This is what you want?” I asked again.

“Why did you call me this morning, Abby?”

“Because I miss you so much it hurts.”

“I will see you tomorrow. And you will be there. There is no way in hell you would make me come all that way and not be waiting for me when I got there.”

“I love you.”

“I know, honey. Even when you left, I knew. And Crystal—”

I didn't want to talk about Crystal anymore. I wasn't going to let a little indiscretion get in between us when he hadn't even known I was coming home. After this minute--he was all mine.

I cut him off. "I will see you tomorrow."

"Okay," he said. He wasn't going to tell me to be careful. He wasn't going to say any of that dumb stuff that wasn't going to matter. He just hung up the phone and I felt so much better it was crazy. I looked at the time. I had to get to Geoff's house. There were things to do and people to shoot. And tomorrow, a whole new life to start.

The End