



# Hidden Desire

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Spoiled-brat Stassi sails through life on striking looks and Daddy's wealth.

Until her world falls apart.

Daddy's financial luck runs out, and the glam life drifts out of reach.

Stassi, at 25, needs a real job, stat.

From the catwalk to a hospital's receptionist desk: broken nails will be the least of the platinum blonde's problems.

Enters Sage, 38, hospital manager, a green-eyed butch goddess of practicality and social justice. The chemistry between them is hellfire: addictive and infuriatingly irresistible.

As Stassi is swept into Sage's world of budgets and unfairly compensated personnel, she finds new meaning and purpose in a job that could make a difference.

Except for a secret or two...

Stassi got the job because Daddy owns the hospital...What if Sage found out that Stassi is a fraud? And Daddy sure won't approve of Stassi's efforts to unionize the hospital...

**Total Pages (Source):** 73

# Page 1

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Stassi

Stassi Hewitt's heart rapidly started beating as she stared at the pony before her. He shifted his head and turned to look at her, and she would have sworn that he gave her a wink. "Mine?" she asked.

Her father laughed and nodded. "All yours."

She rushed over and hugged him. "Thank you, Daddy. I love him!"

"And that's what matters, my child." His soothing tone hung close to her ear. "I love you!"

"Love you, too, Daddy." She broke from the hug and turned to him before throwing her arms around his neck, holding him tight.

"You're spoiling her, Martin." Her mother's scold cut through but then was followed by a light chuckle. "She's going to think that every birthday will be just like this."

Stassi turned and saw him shrug. "It's not every day that your little girl turns five." Her mom threw her arms around his neck, and they kissed each other. Stassi giggled as she turned and looked at her pony.

"What should I call you?" She rubbed the back of his ear, and he tilted his head into her palm. "How about Applejack?"

He didn't respond to her, but there was a hint of a smile. Five-year-old Stassi was

sure of it. “Are you excited?” her mom asked as she touched Stassi’s shoulder and watched the pony beside them.

“I love it,” Stassi replied exuberantly. “This is the best birthday ever.” Her mother laughed and picked her up, placing her on the back of the pony.

“Hold on tight,” she said. Stassi held on and laughed as her mother helped to lead the pony around the circle. Her father appeared on the other side of her. Stassi’s grin couldn’t have gotten any wider that day. A life that was filled with so much love and happiness.

Stassi stretched out in bed, the smile still playing on her lips as the dream slowly ended. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. She would never have dreamed that just two years later, her life would be shattered when her mother was killed by a drunk driver, leaving her and her father alone. A piece of her died on that fateful day, taking years for her to allow herself to heal. Part of her questioned if she had even gotten through the healing. While her father was her rock and her support, always there to provide help to ease her through all situations, there were times when Stassi just wanted to hear her mother’s voice.

She turned to the nightstand and saw her mother’s picture, the same picture she woke up to every morning, bringing a smile to her face. The dreams often brought smiles after the initial realization once again returned. Her mother was gone at such a vital part of Stassi’s childhood, and while her father did date a time or two, business seemed to continue taking control of his life. After all, how else could one be successful? That was a question her father always asked Stassi. Yet, to her, he was really just asking himself.

Stassi tossed the covers back and slipped out of bed. Another day, another dollar. Another phrase her father often spoke. Although, for Stassi, she didn’t have to fret over that. It wasn’t that Stassi never worked. But she could have the luxury of

working out of fun, not a necessity. Stassi could choose her next gig without needing to keep up the daily grind of a nine-to-five job.

After showering, she sat down behind her vanity, a mirror lavishly hugged the wall clear up to the ceiling. She sifted through the makeup and finally settled on something modest. She didn't have to get to her next modeling job until later in the day, and they would have their own makeup artists there to assist her in getting herself magazine-ready, as the professionals would call it. A framed photo from her first cover page was proudly displayed beside her vanity. She modeled for Cirque, a luxury perfume based out of LA. She was only eighteen but felt proud that she had made it. With a strong passion, it led her to the lifestyle she longed to treasure.

She reached for her perfume and splashed just a hint of it on her neck, then smiled. And since they were her first big break, she would proudly wear it and be certain to tell everyone how it was the best stuff she owned. Besides, they remained one of the biggest companies she modeled for.

Stassi grabbed her change purse with her money and credit cards and slipped it into her pocket, along with her apartment keys and phone, and hurried out the door. It was the same morning routine, but if she was even off one day, she was running behind schedule. She started jogging away from her LA apartment, leaving it in her dust. She took a whiff of the corner bakery and nodded enthusiastically. Sure, there were things about her life she would change, starting with her mother's death eighteen years earlier, but that was one thing she knew for certain. You couldn't change the path and had to allow yourself to grow. So, while a person's past could define them, it shouldn't break 'em. Stassi was determined to make the best, and her life was near perfection despite the obstacles.

Stassi rounded the corner and kept her jogging steadily, the bakery scent fading further. She stopped at the corner and leaned against the pole, stretching her legs as she waited for the walk sign to pop up. It was a quiet morning. Just the way she liked

it. The walk sign came onto the screen across from her, and she continued her jog. She turned another corner and stopped just outside Roma's Coffeehouse. She reached into her pocket and felt for her money, then headed towards the door when she heard the muffled whimpering.

She hesitated, glancing up and down the street, then shrugged. Perhaps she only heard things that weren't there. She approached the door but heard the whimpering again. She frowned and looked up one way and down the other, then her eyes landed on the alleyway where the sound appeared to grow. She moved towards it, and that's when she spotted the little puppy. He couldn't have been any more than a year old. His foot was stuck in a wire grate from the ground. She hurried to the puppy and knelt in front of him.

"Are you stuck, boy?" she asked. "Or girl," she mumbled. She reached in and gave a slight tug until his foot released, and he shook it off and looked up at her. She gave him a pat on his head, then frowned again. "Are you alone?"

She picked him up, and he nuzzled his head against her chin. She snickered, continuing to hold him as she exited the alley. She, again, looked up and down the road. She shrugged and put him down on the sidewalk.

"You should be fine here. I'm sure your owner will come find you." A car whizzed past them, and she scooped the dog back into her arms. Or perhaps not.

"Maizey, there you are, girl." Stassi turned to the sound of the voice. A woman came running up to her, and she gave Stassi a sheepish grin. She held the leash up and smirked. "Sometimes, she can flee from her leash. I'm glad you found her."

"She was stuck in the alley. Maybe next time you'll better be more careful," Stassi snapped.

The woman's eyes widened. "I'll do that," she mumbled, taking her dog back from Stassi. Stassi spun on her heel and stomped towards the door. She hesitated and looked over her shoulder. The woman was walking away from her, and Stassi shook her head. Sometimes people didn't know that caring for a pet was a privilege and stupid neglect was hard to get past.

"I'll take a lite mocha cappuccino without the whipped cream." She tossed her money down and thought back to the puppy. He was back with his owner, but she hoped that was a good thing and he wouldn't be neglected. "Keep the change." She grabbed her cup and moved to the corner booth. She had just sat down when her phone started ringing. Ariel's name flashed on the screen. "Hey, Chica." She sighed as she took a sip.

"What are your plans for the day?"

Ariel wasn't just Stassi's best friend. She was an ex. They went way back, all the way to first grade. They didn't try the dating scene until high school, which was scary. Stassi feared that if they dated and it didn't work out, then their friendship would end. But they had ultimately been through a lot. Ariel was there when Stassi's mom died, so nothing would break that bond, even a breakup. Their relationship ended, but their friendship could never waver.

"Have a photoshoot at three. Besides that? Not much. Yours?"

## Page 2

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“Not a damn thing. Work has been light.” She groaned. “But hey, what are you gonna do? That’s why God invented shopping, right?” Ariel laughed from the other end of the line. “Wanna meet up with me and splurge on stuff we don’t need?”

If work was light, then Ariel should have been home conserving, but that wasn’t either of their style. “Honestly?” Stassi took another sip. “Couldn’t think of a better way to spend my day.”

“Fantastic!” Ariel’s excitement came through the phone. “Pick you up in ten?”

“Works for me, but I’m at Roma’s. Pick me up there.” She disconnected the call and took another sip, this one longer. She heaved a sigh and leaned back. Her eyes made their way to a table just a few over. A woman had a magazine in her hand, and Stassi smirked. Page twenty-two is a four-page layout where she proudly wears an outfit from a new fashion line. The woman could look up and spot her at any moment, recognizing her from the few pictures. She wouldn’t call herself vain, but she appreciated when people admired her work and wouldn’t have objected if this was one of those times. Before too much time had passed, though, the door swung open, and Ariel entered. The moment had gone. But there’d be other moments.

Sage

The woman in front of her stared aimlessly, to the point where Sage wondered if she had fallen asleep with her eyes open. Sage cleared her throat, looked down at her half-eaten food, and then back up at the woman. Greta curved her lips slightly before looking down and rifling through her salad again. Well, there went the idea that she had fallen asleep. But if the date didn’t end soon, Sage Pembroke was likely to.

“So, Greta,” she began. “We’ve been here an hour, and I don’t feel like I hardly know you.” Sage attempted her best shot at a smile. “Tell me a little about yourself. Your goals? Aspirations?” Sage gave a slight shrug. “Whatever you desire to share...” She hoped she could encourage her to say anything.

Greta looked up, and Sage swore she saw her face turn from a cheery red to ghost white. “Not much to tell. Haven’t really given thoughts and stuff a...” She shrugged, “thought.” She giggled lightly. From the moment they met on Wednesday evening, Sage could say that it was the first time that Greta even cracked a smile. Sage wondered if Greta even had one ounce of personality. For that, she was able to appreciate it. However, Greta was thirty-eight, or so she was told if you’re thirty-eight and have no plan or vision for your life, that causes questions.

“I hear you work at The Golden Eye Boutique,” Sage continued. “You must have a flare or passion for clothing. Tell me about that.”

Greta shrugged. “Not much to say. It pays the bills, at least most of them.” She laughed, then snapped her mouth shut. “Just kidding. Um yeah, it makes up for the bills.” If that was Greta’s attempt at a joke, it flopped. Sage stared at it, practically dumbfounded. Greta continued. “The hours aren’t bad, but I have to work most weekends. Guess it’s just what is laid out for me.”

And she had no drive to find her purpose. That was painfully clear.

Greta then offered, “You’re an Occupational Therapist, Marcus said. Is that right?”

“Um yeah, going on twelve years.” Sage continued to stare at Greta. Greta’s eyes widened, and she shook her head. “It’s a passion of mine,” Sage continued.

“I just can’t imagine doing anything for that long and still enjoying it.” Greta released a huff. “You enjoy it?”



“Enjoy the job? Absolutely. Enjoy the patients? Wouldn’t have it any other way. Working with them gives me great joy.” Sage frowned. “It’s a true passion of mine. Don’t you wish you had something you held dear to your heart? I mean workwise, of course.”

Greta shrugged again. “Guess it just never really been something I felt the urge to go out and seek. I’m happy with where I am.” Then a slight smirk appeared on her lips. “Would be happier if I had a woman to share it with. Hence, why I’m out on this blind date, but I assume you feel the same.”

At that moment, Sage wasn’t quite sure why she had agreed to the blind date. Did she wish she had someone to share her life with? Of course. Anyone would be lying if they said they didn’t want to have a companion in their life. But Sage had tried that in the past. Found someone that she thought she could spend the rest of her life with. Ultimately, it ended poorly, shattering Sage’s beliefs and desires that she needed a woman in her life. That was six years earlier. Eventually, it was necessary to get back out on the horse, and when her co-worker Marcus said he knew someone she needed to get to know, Sage went for it. Now, foolishly, she saw exactly why she had decided to remain single. And blind dates? She wasn’t cut out for them.

“And how do you think this blind date is going?” Sage wondered out loud.

Greta’s eyes widened, and there was a hint of a sparkle. For an hour, she hadn’t seen any excitement or joy in Greta’s appearance or movements. She had been seated before a woman that appeared boring and uninterested. Now, there was a light in her eyes, a smile on her lips, and confusion in Sage.

“I would say that Marcus knows my type.” Greta was the sister of Marcus’ boyfriend. Sage thought it was important to agree to the date, so it kept harmony in Marcus’ relationship, but if she was Greta’s type, then Sage wasn’t sure about many things. Sage didn’t know if she had a type herself, but she wouldn’t have said Greta was that.

Sage wanted to find someone with a passion or drive to stand up for something they wanted. That felt like the complete opposite of what Sage thought she wanted. Not to mention, Greta's looks weren't the drop-dead gorgeous type. She had potential, but Greta was more of a Plain Jane type. Sage wanted the type of woman to stand out in a crowd and have other people talking. Greta blushed. "You're staring." She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and looked down.

Sage looked down at her food, her stomach clenching, her appetite completely gone. "Look, Greta. I need to be really honest here. You seem nice enough. I'm just not sure that we're really the right for each other."

Greta arched an eyebrow. "One date can't tell a person that. I'm an introvert by nature and can open up once we get to know each other."

"That's just it," Sage continued. "You're an introvert, and I'm just not. It would never work out."

Sage reached into her purse, fumbling for her wallet.

"But you'll give it another try to see. Right?" More enthusiasm seemed to well up inside Greta. Where this was during the whole date was beyond Sage, but it was a little too late.

"I'm sorry." Sage grabbed her wallet and pulled out some money, then tossed it on the table. It was plenty to cover their meals, and Sage was ready to bolt. "I don't think I'm ready to date or anything. And this just wouldn't work out. I wish you all the best." She stood up and waited, but Greta just shook her head and stared back at her salad. "Goodbye," Sage mumbled. She hurried towards the front door. She hesitated at a table, feeling slightly regretful about being rude. She turned around and found Greta was busy eating her salad. If she had shrugged it off, Sage didn't feel so bad. She turned and bumped straight into a woman coming through the front door. "My

apologies,” Sage began.

Sage hesitated and stared at the woman. She had shoulder-length bleach-blonde hair in waves and curved around her face. Her brown eyes were wide and had gold specks that accentuated them. She would never want to leave the table if she had been sitting in front of this woman. Her beauty was breathtaking and captivated her senses, especially how the younger woman smirked.

“No worries,” she said, then brushed past Sage and rushed off to a table. Sage stood there, staring off in the direction the woman had gone. The woman sat down at a table with another woman, and they immediately started laughing. Sage shook her head. Most likely a girlfriend. The good ones were always taken. She turned and left the club, digging for her keys.

She unlocked her car and slid into the driver’s seat, instantly pushing the call button on her car’s Bluetooth. “Call Lena!”

“Calling Lena,” the phone chimed in. It rang two times before Lena answered.

## Page 3

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“Hey! I was just thinking about you,” Lena replied in greeting.

Sage backed out of the parking spot. “Wondering if I had jumped off a building to escape my blind date?” Sage asked. She laughed lightly.

“That good, huh?”

“If I ever agree to go out on another blind date as long as I live, just shoot me. You have my permission. I want to be put out of my misery.” She gave a two-minute synopsis, with Lena silently listening. “That about sums it up.”

“Sounds thrilling,” Lena added sarcastically.

“Don’t I know it,” Sage grumbled.

“Well, if you ever change your mind, I do know this great woman. She would be perfect for you. Just say the word.”

Sage groaned, and Lena laughed on the other end. Sage meant it. This was the last blind date she ever went on. If she had to remain single for the rest of her life, then so be it. At least, it would be on her terms.

Stassi

“So?” Ariel asked. “How was the photoshoot?” Ariel sipped her beer and looked at Stassi with wandering eyes.

“Great! They asked me back for another gig in two weeks, which should last a month or so. Getting work but loving what I do.” Stassi took a sip and looked around the club. “It’s busy for a Wednesday.”

“Yeah, there’s a local band that’s debuting tonight. When I got here, the waitress mentioned it. They’re supposed to be good, though. At least that’s what I hear.” Ariel laughed.

Stassi gave a slight nod. “When are they starting? Might not be here to hear them. It’s been a long day.”

“Is my old friend getting tuckered out?” Ariel teased.

Stassi rolled her eyes, then laughed. “A morning jog, day of shopping, modeling gig that lasted four hours longer than it was supposed to, and now winding down with a cold brew, it can do that to a person.” Stassi gave Ariel a wink. “You can’t complain because you had the day off after shopping. How’d your day go?”

“Went to the spa for a mani and pedi.” Ariel held out her hand. “What do you think?” Her fingernails were painted midnight blue with gold stars shimmering on them.

Stassi laughed. “A mani and pedi, how exhausting.” Ariel’s jaw dropped, then she giggled. “Fingers look great, though. I’m jealous.” Stassi took another drink. One reason they might not have worked in a relationship was they were both high-maintenance models and seemed to clash heads when it came to who needed more attention. “This weekend, I have a massage scheduled. You should join me.”

“Helping my brother move,” Ariel scowled. “He offered to pay me.” She laughed and shrugged. “I guess that’s something. After all, I don’t have a dad to fluff my bank account.” She offered Stassi a wink.

Stassi shook her head. She wasn't sure why Ariel went on a shopping spree, then got a mani and pedi right before helping her brother move, but she supposed she would do the same thing. It would be something to take her mind off of not working.

Stassi smirked as she took a drink. She couldn't help that her father was rich. A constant investor and the CEO of several local hospitals in the area, she could get assistance when her modeling jobs weren't enough to pay for the necessities. Or what Stassi felt was necessary. She was lucky in that aspect of her life, often taking her plush lifestyle for granted but appreciating that she didn't need to suffer.

"Ladies and Gentlemen." A woman's voice came on the speaker, and Stassi reached into her pocket and pulled out her card. "We are pleased to announce a debut group. They are from here in LA and looking for everyone to have a great time. Are you ready to party?" The crowd cheered.

"I'm going to head out of here. I'll cover the tab for tonight." She waved for the waitress to come to their table. Stassi raised her voice over the cheering crowd, and the band started stringing their chords on the stage. "Put the beers and fried pickles on my card, please."

"Are you sure?" Ariel asked, raising her voice louder as the band rocked on the stage.

"Yeah, it's my treat. You got lunch today."

Ariel rolled her eyes. "I meant, do you have to leave? Just stay for a few songs." Stassi turned to the stage. It was true that the crowd loved them, and the music had a nice beat. She nodded and started clapping in tune with the melody. The waitress came back with her receipt, and she checked it over. It was more expensive than she thought, and with the shopping earlier in the day, the funds on her card were most likely running low. She signed her name, then grabbed her phone, still nodding to the music.

Stassi

Please transfer some funds to the bank. Love you!

She pocketed her phone and turned back to the stage. “They’re really good!” Stassi yelled over to Ariel. Ariel grinned, then looked past Stassi. She leaned in and nodded her head toward where she had looked.

“You have an admirer over there. She hasn’t stopped staring.”

Stassi turned her head and looked. This woman winked, then nodded in her direction. Stassi turned away and met Ariel’s gaze. “I’m not the least bit interested,” she casually stated. She clapped her hands in the air in rhythm to the music and tried to ignore Ariel’s laughter. The woman could look all she wanted. Stassi was used to female and male admirers and quickly rolled her eyes at them. She didn’t have time to get preoccupied with things like dating. She kept dancing to the music and played oblivious to the attention. When one song ended, another began. After a while, the admiration of the woman was completely forgotten by Stassi. When the second song ended; however, they were no longer alone.

## Page 4

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“Excuse me,” the woman stated, approaching their table. “Don’t I know you?” She tilted her head, and Stassi heaved a sigh. It was the same line that people liked to approach her with. It was a great opener, but Stassi wouldn’t fall for it.

“You probably saw her in a magazine,” Ariel blurted up. Stassi tossed a look in her direction. She couldn’t believe how sometimes Ariel could be so gullible. It wasn’t anyone’s business, especially this strange woman.

“That’s probably it. You modeled for Cirque, didn’t you?”

Stassi gave a sheepish nod. “Wow! I feel like I’m in the presence of a real-life celebrity.” Stassi wanted to roll her eyes, but that would be blatantly rude. Another song played up front, and she considered turning to it, but not without first getting this woman to leave the table. “I love your work,” she said.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Stassi began. “But I really was just getting ready to leave. Busy day tomorrow and all.” She checked her pocket for her phone and wallet, then turned to the woman. “Sorry,” she said again.

The woman frowned. “I see. I was hoping I could get just one dance.” She tilted her head. “It can be a quick one.”

Stassi glanced in Ariel’s direction, but Ariel looked down at her phone like she wasn’t really gawking at them moments earlier. Stassi turned back to the woman. “Can’t hardly dance with you when I don’t know your name.”

“Talia,” the woman said, sticking her hand out in Stassi’s direction. Stassi shook it



and nodded her head. “And yours?”

“Stassi,” Stassi mumbled before following Talia onto the floor. The up-tempo song played just a few feet away from them. They danced, and Stassi was careful not to look in the woman’s direction. She was beautiful, curves, and all-natural. But Stassi didn’t want this kind of distraction. When the song ended, she nodded. “Thanks for the dance.” As she attempted to leave, Talia grabbed her arm and pulled her to her.

Stassi protested, “You said a quick one.”

The woman shrugged. “One more won’t hurt anything.” Stassi turned to her table, and Ariel had a grin on her lips. Stassi shook her head, then smiled and nodded, falling into the slow dance with the stranger.

She didn’t make eye contact as they danced. Talia didn’t seem to mind as she coozied closer to Stassi, getting into her personal space. When the dance ended, Stassi was ready to exit the dance floor.

“Thank you for the dance, but tomorrow will be busy, and frankly, I’m beat.”

Talia hurried after her. “Can I at least get your number?” she asked.

Stassi turned and gave a slight smile. “It was nice and all, but the truth is, I’m kind of seeing someone, and they wouldn’t appreciate me giving out my number.”

Talia frowned. “Fair enough. It was fun anyhow.” She shrugged and walked away. Stassi turned on her heel and saw Ariel with an arched eyebrow.

“Why’d you lie to her?”

Stassi shrugged. “Maybe because I’m not interested. Besides, you know I don’t mix

business with pleasure. She was only interested because I'm a model. That's all."

Ariel snickered. "You two could make a hot couple."

Stassi rolled her eyes. She knew what she wanted, and a one-night stand wasn't that. It might work if someone were interested because of who she was on the inside, but she was just fine on her own. They left the club and headed to their cars. Stassi pulled out her phone to see if her dad had ever responded. When there was no message, she pocketed her phone and reached for her car door. In time he would get her that money. He was probably just in the middle of something and couldn't respond. She would try him again later.

Sage

Sage paced back and forth for what felt like hours. Perhaps, more like minutes, but the agony had slowly sunk into her gut. The sound of voices pierced through his office door. She hesitated and glanced over at the oversized desk. "Is his meeting nearly finished? I was supposed to be here at ten. It's fifteen after, and there hasn't been one break in the conversation that's going on behind that door." She waved her finger towards Noah Benton's office. He was LA County Hospital's CFO and ignored the staff like they were some deadly disease.

"He'll be with you in a minute," Gina stated. It'd been the same thing the receptionist had repeatedly replied with when Sage asked the question.

Sage sighed and began pacing once more. Back and forth. Back and forth. She had started counting the squares on the carpet until they slowly gave her a headache. She groaned as another minute passed, then another, then ten minutes. She had to be clocked in, and if it weren't for the fact that he had promised her a meeting, she would have rolled her eyes and gotten over it. It was now down to the principle of the matter.

Sage looked over her notes. The employees' demands were displayed one by one. More pay. More benefits. More time off. Better supplies. Getting paid for Overtime. The list went on, and the staff signed every demand. They wanted action, and Sage was there to ensure they got it. She closed her eyes, kept pacing, then hesitated and turned to Gina.

"They will be finished at any moment," Gina interrupted.

Sage nodded and plopped down in a chair that sat against the wall. She checked her watch, cringing. At this rate, she would have five minutes to state her case. If even that. As time ticked by, she continuously checked her watch until she shook her head and stood up. It was at the point of sickening. He was putting her off, and this would have to wait another day.

"Will you check his schedule and let me know when I can meet with him again?"

Gina shrugged. "I don't know. He's pretty busy."

"Clearly," Sage mumbled. She folded the list and slipped it into her pocket, waiting for Gina to peruse his schedule. The door clicked open, and Sage grabbed the list. Noah and another man exited the office.

## Page 5

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“Good to see you this morning, Chris. We’ll make sure to set up that meeting sooner than later.” They shook hands, and Chris turned and left the office. “Gina, cancel my appointments for the rest of the day. An emergency has come up.”

“But Mr. Benton,” Sage started. He looked up and gave a slight nod. “We had a ten o’clock appointment, but I imagine you forgot because it’s ten forty-five, and you haven’t once even looked in my direction.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Hello, Sage. I apologize for the delay, but time got away from me. And clearly, I’m in a hurry so that Gina can set you up for another day.”

He started to turn. “Mr. Benton!” Sage hollered. “You can’t get away just like that. The staff want answers. I have many requests, and they won’t be pleased to hear that you’re brushing us off...again.” He turned and stared at Sage. “If you don’t want your staff jumping ship, I suggest you listen.”

He sighed and glanced over at Gina. “Set up a meeting for next month.”

“Next month!” Sage objected.

He shrugged. “It’s truly the best I can do. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He turned and headed back to his office, shutting his door, and leaving Sage staring in his direction.

“Shall I set up that appointment?” Gina asked.

Sage shook her head in disbelief but nodded. If that was all they could get, she would have to accept it, but she could already hear the disgruntled sounds coming from her

co-workers when she brought the word back to them.

Gina handed Sage an appointment card, unmoved by Sage's frustrations. "He better not cancel this one. He's been putting us off for months, and it's time he really takes note and listens." Gina shrugged as her phone rang, and she answered, barely making eye contact as Sage turned and left the office.

Three employees stood outside the door. With his ear against the wall, Marcus cleared his throat and jumped back. "So?" he asked. "How'd it go?"

Sage rolled her eyes. "Didn't you hear? It didn't."

"What'd he say?" Rose asked, moving in closer to them.

"Not much," Sage shifted her gaze. "He was in a meeting and never came out of it until he had to rush to something else. He said an emergency, and I call BS. He's ignoring us."

"Again," Drake grumbled.

"Precisely," Sage replied.

"I just don't get it," Rose replied. "It's like they don't give a damn about any of us." She crossed her arms. "I'm fed up and know I'm not the only one."

"It's number ten on my list," Sage remarked. She glanced at her watch. "I have to get to my floor. Duty calls." She held up the appointment card. "I'll try again next month." She shrugged. "Sooner or later, he'll have to listen, right?"

She gave them each an encouraging smile but mentally groaned as she rushed to the elevator. She wasn't sure of anything, especially how little the hospital truly

respected them. She fell back against the elevator as the doors closed her in.

Sage had been an Occupational Therapist at LA County Hospital for over eight years. It had become a never-ending cycle as things had gradually become worse. Everyone felt like overtime was necessary because the work couldn't get done without it, yet overtime was never approved. Therefore, they didn't get paid for it. Was it disheartening? Absolutely because a body can only take so much. Sage wanted to help her co-workers and friends have a better working experience, but it couldn't all be held on her shoulders even though Sage wanted to help them. She had to find a way to do it. Somehow someday.

Stassi

“Hey, Dad, it's me. I texted you a couple of nights ago and haven't heard back. Just wanted to make sure everything was alright. Call me.” Stassi dropped her phone in her pocket. It wasn't like her dad to ignore her pleas for money. He was usually quick to load the funds, so when two days passed, she worried that something might have gone awry.

She stepped onto the curb of the small diner. Now, this was heaven. It was a hole-in-the-wall place that was a few miles outside of LA, but a place that offered some of the finer bakery delights. When she wanted the best, she would make her way there. Yet, just one whiff made her feel like she was gaining ten pounds. She usually shrugged it off and dug right in. She spotted a dog hooked up to the bike rack as she approached the door. The leash was dangling, barely holding the dog in place. And the dog seemed oblivious to the fact that one run and he'd be loose.

She snickered as she approached. In just a week, this would be her second dog encounter. It was like the universe was trying to tell her something. She knelt at the dog and tied him tighter to the rack.

“That way, you won’t get free. If you were human, you’d thank me.” He wagged his tail, and she laughed. Maybe dogs were smart enough to speak human tongue. “Your owner should be back out here shortly.” She turned and headed into the diner. A line was formed at the counter, and Stassi waited patiently until it was her turn. She looked over her shoulder and saw that a man, whom she hoped was the owner, untied the dog, and they walked off. The dog didn’t appear to be in distress, so it had to be fine.

“Stassi? Stassi?” Stassi whirled on her heel and hurried up to the counter. They all knew her by name. That happens when you frequent a diner as if you were the primary investor.

“Sorry, Clay. I was admiring the puppy out there.”

He snickered. “Didn’t know you were a dog lover.”

She shrugged. She didn’t know either. “I’ll take a cold brew and a scone, please. Oh, to go.”

“Coming right up.” Clay, the barista, turned and did his work as Stassi opened her wallet and glanced at her cards. She grabbed her debit card and placed it on the counter. She still had a little tucked away in her bank until her dad would finally get her loaded once more.

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“Eight-thirty,” he replied, pushing the coffee and bag towards her. He grabbed her card and ran it, then frowned and tried again. Even the third time wasn’t the charm. He gave a weak smile. “Sorry, Stassi, but it’s declined. I can try again, but I must warn you that if it’s declined a fourth time, it will make me contact the bank for fraud.” He looked down at her card and shrugged. “Clearly, this is you, but I don’t think you’d want me to take the chance. Your call.”

A line of customers had formed behind her. She could feel her cheeks burning as she pulled out a credit card and pushed it in his direction. He tried that, only getting the same result.

“That’s not possible,” Stassi mumbled. “Try this, but something has to be wrong with your register.” He shrugged and tried the card, getting the same outcome. “This makes no sense. These cards can’t all be having the same problem.” People started chatting behind her, and she could practically feel their eyes on her.

“Consider it covered,” Clay whispered.

She looked up, and he gave a sweet smile. She mouthed thank you, then turned and hurried out of the diner. The embarrassment still followed after her. She didn’t stop walking until she reached her car and was in the driver’s seat, safely away from the eyes that were on her.

She fished her phone from her purse and redialed her father’s number. This time, he answered on the first ring.

“I got your message,” he replied, a hesitancy in his voice. “Expected you to call



sooner.”

“Explain to me, Dad, how my debit card and all my credit cards were declined. My accounts were low, but there was something in there, especially enough for a coffee and scone. So, what happened? Tell me it’s a simple mistake.”

“I wish I could. The truth is, I’ve made some bad investments. I lost everything, from my fortune to your trust fund.” He hesitated as the blood drained from Stassi’s face. “Mostly in Cryptocurrency. But once you’re headed down a dark road, it’s hard to overcome obstacles.”

“I...I...I don’t understand. How is this even possible? You own several hospitals. You have to have money come in the door. So, you’re just blowing all of it.”

“Hospitals that are not-for-profit,” he argued. And these hospitals aren’t doing the greatest. It’s a tough world, but things happen.”

“Things happen?” Her heart pounded furiously in her chest. “What does that mean? What am I supposed to do? I can’t make a living on just my modeling income,” Stassi huffed.

“That is true, but the solution is simple. You can always get a job. You’re twenty-five years old, Stassi. It would be best if you always weren’t relying on my income. Maybe this is all for the best in the grand scheme.” His calm response to Stassi’s minor panic attack wasn’t helping matters.

She stared straight ahead. Her father had always been the smart one, making investments that mattered. When she was younger, he was quick to lay out the floor plans of everything he needed to do to be successful, and he had the diagrams to prove that there was always a clear path. But now she saw him in a different light. She didn’t recognize him in this phone call.

“As mentioned, I’m a model, and while it might not always pay the bills, it is a job,” she argued.

“It’s not substantial enough. It would help if you had something more. I could get you situated with a job at one of my hospitals.”

Stassi scoffed. They weren’t doing all that well, but she wouldn’t be saddled into a place just to have a job. “I don’t think so.” She took a long sip of her coffee, then broke off a piece of her scone and popped it into her mouth. She tossed the bag onto the passenger seat and put her cup of coffee in one of the cupholders.

“If you have an attitude like that, you can expect to fail.”

She backed out of her parking spot and headed towards her apartment, talking to her father over the speakers in her car. “I’ll consider it,” she mumbled.

“That’s my girl. I’m sure I can pull some strings. I’ll get with you later.”

“Alright. Goodbye.” She disconnected the call, and her thoughts quickly returned to the days when she was younger and naïve to how the world worked. But she always believed her dad would have her back and be able to support her. But now, she wasn’t sure of anything.

Stassi sat in front of the computer, staring aimlessly at the website. The single heading at the top of the screen read ‘Jobs.’ She shuddered. She never thought she’d be in a position to have to search for a nine-to-five gig when her heart always led her back to modeling, but now she was here. There wasn’t anything she could do about it if she wanted to eat.

Unfortunately, as she pulled up the website, no job jumped out at her as acceptable. Who wanted to work maintenance? Or waitress for tips? She pushed her computer

away and scowled. If there were something that enticed her, then maybe she would gladly submit her application. But why go to work for a dead-end job? Because you'll have rent to pay. You like to eat. Stassi pulled her laptop back to her and glanced through the other options.

Her phone pinged, and she grabbed it to find a message from her father.

Dad

Submit your application here on this website. LA County Hospital has a few opportunities, and once they get your application, you can start next week. I'll send you enough money to help with food until you get your first paycheck.

Anyone could face bad investments. Maybe Stassi was harsh in her disappointment with her father. He could pull out of this, and in the end, Stassi could quit her job and not have to face the daily grind of a work schedule.

Stassi

I've been looking at work opportunities since we had the call. Hopefully, the hospital will have better choices. Thank you, Dad.

At least this way, she could show her father that she was taking his news seriously and not completely against the idea. Although, the initial thought was overwhelming, at best. Taking the plunge into menial work was as bad as jumping out of an airplane. She clicked on the link and then entered it on her computer. LA County Hospital instantly pulled up and read 'Career Opportunities' at the top.

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“Here we go,” she mumbled, clicking on the icon.

Five jobs instantly popped up. She took a moment to consider each one. She didn’t qualify for a physician’s assistant and didn’t have any medical schooling or background. She didn’t want to clean toilets for the hospital. If she had her way, she would hire a maid to clean her own. She definitely couldn’t apply to be an HVAC technician, as she didn’t even know what that was. So that left only two choices.

“Cafeteria cashier? Medical receptionist?” She could throw a dart at either one and let that choose the outcome, but then she read through the medical receptionist criteria and ultimately decided that was the best one. She didn’t want to transition to a traditional career, but there were worst things out there. She could apply but still keep her modeling career on the side. She looked over to her Cirque magazine and frowned. One day she would get back to that. This was only a temporary situation. Things would soon turn the corner and head back in the right direction. It just had to.

Sage

“You’re doing great, Tyler. That’s right, just a little bit longer.” She held onto her patient’s leg as he bent it. She could see the tension on his face. Once, something so trivial that it took little effort was now something that put pain in this young man’s face. When he had the stroke at just twenty years old, the doctor said he’d most likely never walk again. She was there to prove to him that the doctors weren’t God.

“I can’t!” he groaned, even though Sage had his leg in her hand. She was pushing him to his limit, but it was exactly what Tyler needed at the moment. He didn’t realize it now, but he would eventually understand.

“1... 2... and 3,” she counted, finally releasing his leg, and allowing it to extend out straight. He let out a few puffs of air, and she smiled. “I’m sorry, Tyler, but I knew you could make it.”

He chuckled. “Even when I think I’m at my last straw, you know how to push me.” Sage tilted her head and helped him to a seated position. “And in the end, I feel better for it.”

Sage grinned. “Just doing my job.” Sage helped him into a wheelchair, and he was still smiling, which was a great sign. “Same time next week?”

“I’ll be here, kicking and screaming if I have to.” He laughed.

Sage put her hand on his shoulder and gave a slight squeeze. “You’re improving. I’m very happy with your progress.”

“All because of you.” He offered her a wink, and Sage motioned for Genevieve to come over and help him out of the room. “See ya next week.” He waved, and Sage stayed there watching him. It was patients like him that allowed Sage to see the difference she made in their lives and never took that for granted. She loved the happiness she could bring to their lives when they always thought all hope was lost.

Sage grabbed his chart, documented his progress, and left the therapy room to check on her next patient. She had just refiled his chart when she caught Lena headed her way. Sage glanced at her watch and frowned.

“What are you doing up here? Lunch isn’t for another two hours.”

Lena shrugged. “I was just in the neighborhood.” Sage rolled her eyes when Lena started cackling at her joke. Lena shrugged as her laughter died. “Just wanted to tell you about this gorgeous woman and how I think you two would make a hot couple.”

Sage shook her head. “Do you ever stop? Do you recall how I told you last week I would never do another blind date? Or has that minute conversation been swept from your brain in such a short time?”

“Au contraire,” Lena began. “You said blind date, which this is not. This person is right under your nose.” Lena shrugged. “The truth is, I’m surprised you aren’t already gaga over her. She’s in your department.” She leaned in closer. “And headed our way,” she whispered.

Sage rolled her eyes and looked over her shoulder. No one was there, and Lena started laughing. “You’re nuts,” Sage muttered.

“Hey, you must be interested enough that it made you look.” Lena had a mischievous grin on her face. She was obviously proud of herself, which added to the fact that Lena didn’t know what the blind date from hell had done to Sage. She wasn’t ready to get with anyone, and Lena would just have to accept that. “Anyway, I really think you’d like this chick. I would say she’s your type, based on the few minutes I’ve seen her.”

“And you know my type?” Sage crossed her arms in front of her and arched her brow.

“I’m your BFF,” Lena argued. “I know you better than you know you.” She laughed. “Mark my words. This woman is for you. She’s a new receptionist that’s training with Darlene.”

Sage frowned. “Where’s Darlene going?”

Lena shook her head. “Don’t you get any of the gossip? Darlene is getting married, and they’re moving to Tennessee. Her last day is Friday.”

“I’m wondering how you know all this. This isn’t even your floor.”

Lena laughed. She was a pediatric nurse that was two floors down. Yet, she always seemed to be able to have an eye on everything. There were times when Sage was jealous of that, but other times, Sage wanted to shake her head and tell Lena she needed to be more invested in her own life and instead of others’.

“I heard it from Marcus, who heard it from Seth, who heard it from....” She shrugged. “You get the gist.”

“I sure do.”

“She is clearly leaving if she’s training someone, so I would say some of it’s probably true.” Sage frowned. Darlene was a great receptionist, and Sage just hoped that whoever they got to replace her would be half as dedicated to the patients.

“Well, I have to get back to work. Duty calls.”

“For me, too,” Lena replied. “See you in a couple of hours?”

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“Yep, see ya.” Lena waved and grabbed her next chart. She glanced over to the front desk but could only see the back of the other woman. She shrugged and hurried off to the room. Her patients were waiting, and she could worry about the new employee later.

“Hello Margaret, my name is Sage, and I’ll be your Occupational Therapist from here on out.” Sage put out her hand, and the woman’s eyes were dark and held a glazed appearance to them. Sage touched her hand and gave it a slight pat.

Sage turned to the younger woman beside her, and Sage reached out her hand. The woman appeared to have been crying. She allowed the handshake, but there was some apprehension on her face. Sage grabbed the wheeled stool and pulled it over, so she could sit near them. A new patient was one of the hardest things to experience. They were typically scared and unsure of the process.

“What’s your name?” Sage asked, addressing the woman beside her patient.

“Monica,” the woman replied. “I’m her daughter.”

“Well, Monica, I want to assure you I’m here to assist you and your mom. Tell me what brings you in here today.”

“My mom had a stroke. She’s having trouble speaking and acknowledging when she’s being spoken to. This is all new to us and...” Monica took a deep breath. Sage gave her a genuine smile and patted her leg. “They say this is her last step to recovery. If she can recover, that is.”



“You’re both in good hands. I promise you.” Monica nodded and appeared relieved. “While I care for your mom, why don’t you go to the cafeteria and get some coffee or something? Or better yet, tea. The coffee isn’t the greatest.” Sage laughed, helping Monica to her feet. “Give me an hour. Today will just be an initial consultation to see what level your mom is at. Once we’re done, I’ll be here for any questions from you. Does that sound alright with you?”

Monica eagerly nodded, and Sage could feel a weight being lifted off Monica’s shoulders. Sage was going to be the one that gave a break to this family member, and sometimes that was all they needed. The Occupational Therapists that worked with her grandpa when he was going through his stroke were always so pleasant and sincere, and Sage vowed that’s who she wanted to be when she grew up. She turned to her patient, and the woman’s eyes remained dark. It wasn’t always an easy job, but in the end, it was rewarding, and that’s what Sage held on to.

Sage checked her watch. Just fifteen minutes before lunch, she was through with her last patient from the morning. She grabbed some papers to copy and headed to the reception area. With any luck, she could officially meet the woman that Lena was referring to, but if anyone asked, she was merely going to speak with Darlene and ask how it was possible that she hadn’t heard of her marrying news.

When she got to the desk, though, no one was there. She glanced around until she spotted the woman standing at the copier. She was hitting the sides and mumbling something under her breath. Sage approached her with caution.

“You stupid thing,” Stassi mumbled before hitting the copier again.

“Not sure what the copier has ever done to you but beating it like that rarely fixes the issue.” The woman turned around and gawked at Sage. Lena wasn’t wrong. This woman was good-looking. With her eyes wide and pouting, she even had a certain glow. But as Sage stared at her, she was hit by a sense of familiarity. She knew this

woman or had at least seen her somewhere. And it wasn't too long ago, but she just couldn't place it.

"I was given a simple task," the woman said, huffing along the way. "Darlene went to lunch, and she ordered me to do one small thing, and I can't even do that right." The woman diverted her gaze away from Sage. There was definitely some pouting going on. Darlene was always so helpful and never left the desk without her smile. The impression that Sage now had of the new one left her knowing that this woman wouldn't be another Darlene.

"I can see if I can give it a whirl," Sage offered. "I mean, if you don't mind."

"Couldn't hurt," Stassi grumbles. "But you'd think there'd be proper equipment here."

Sage gave a light chuckle as she moved in and began opening up trays and doors until she found an area where some paper had wedged itself. She knelt and tugged on the paper until it was all taken out of the copier. She closed the door, and the copier sprung back to life, paper shooting out properly.

"There we go," Sage said.

The woman nodded, then eventually made eye contact. "Thank you so much. I could have been stuck here the whole time that Darlene was gone."

"Glad I could assist." Sage shrugged off Stassi's thanks.

"The name is Stassi Hewitt. I'm the new receptionist here."

"Sage Pembroke." Sage put out her hand to offer a shake, which Stassi accepted. "I'm an Occupational Therapist on this floor."

“Nice to meet you,” Stassi replied.

Sage nodded. “Likewise.” As their hands had touched, a slight spark coursed through Sage’s veins. Sage had to quickly pull back, so she couldn’t admit that Lena might actually have a valid point. She tilted her head. She definitely recognized this woman. She wouldn’t have been able to miss those eyes anywhere. Stassi returned to her print job and placed the papers into an orderly pile before picking them up in her arms. Sage shook her head to get that thought out of her mind. “Now that the copier is back up and running, I need to copy some things. Do you mind?”

“That’s my job,” Stassi said in a weirdly sing-song yet decidedly disappointed tone. For someone that was just starting in a position, she didn’t seem too interested in the work she was doing. And, this was after only one half-day of work. This woman would have a rude awakening if she wasn’t satisfied with her first day on the job.

“Thank you! You can put it at the nurse’s station once you’re through. Headed to lunch.” Sage tossed a wave over her shoulder, but as she walked away, she glanced over her shoulder, staring at the blonde that was back working the copier. She nodded and smirked. It now hit her exactly where they had once crossed paths. It was brief but caught Sage off guard. As she started thinking about bumping into the woman at the club the other night, Stassi turned around and headed back her way.

She gave Sage a curious look, and Sage cleared her throat and stood up straight. “Checking up on me?” Stassi asked, then her face fell into a genuine smile. Before Sage could respond, she gave a meek shrug. “I’m sorry about earlier. I was a bit gruff. It’s been a rough few days in my life, and I guess it’s kind of soured my expression. But I’ll get better.” She held out the papers. “Let me know if you need anything else.” She turned and walked away from Sage. Sage continued to watch her, curious about her life and interested in learning more.

“Sage?” Sage jerked and spun on her heel. Lena tilted her head. “Everything alright?”

“Um yeah, why wouldn’t it be?” Sage shrugged and hurried towards the nurse’s station. She slipped the papers onto a tray and glanced at Lena. “Ready for lunch?”

“Are you kidding me? I’m born ready.” Lena laughed and headed to the elevator, but Stassi hadn’t left Sage’s mind. Everyone had a story, and Sage was intrigued by the idea of learning Stassi’s.

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Stassi

Stassi groaned. “Not again?” She leaned into the copier and started doing exactly what she had watched Sage do earlier in the week. She opened up trays and peered in every crevice. But she couldn’t find one ounce of paper that had gotten stuck. She tapped with some force along the side of the machine, but nothing. Finally, she turned it off and waited thirty seconds before turning it back on. It couldn’t hurt. When the copier had sprung back to life, the jam seemed to have fixed itself. She nodded.

She could do this. Although, it felt like the last four days had proven otherwise. This had been the longest period of her life, and she wasn’t sure how she could possibly make it to another week. She returned the copies to the desk, where Darlene was leaving. She spotted Stassi.

“Do you think you could handle it here for a couple of hours? There are only two patients scheduled to check in during that time, but I have to run to a meeting. It’s something all employees have to do before they have their last day. They want to know how I liked it here, things like that. It could take two hours, but I’ll try to hurry back.

“I should be fine,” Stassi confidently spoke, but silently she wondered where that confidence came from. Darlene would be having her last day the following day and Stassi wasn’t confident of anything. How could she do this alone? She still felt like a fish out of water.

“Great! If you could please take care of the tasks I put by the phone. Most of them are a cinch and you shouldn’t have anything to worry about. I’ll hurry back.” She gave a

wave and was off, leaving Stassi to fend for herself.

“You can do this,” Stassi mumbled. She picked up the list and read through the first one. “Check eligibility on these three patients.” The patients were listed and that was easy enough. She sat behind the computer and typed in the patient’s information. The circle continued to go around and round. She leaned back in her seat and watched it. Easy enough if the network was working. But it was constantly going out and they needed network connection to access the billing system and insurance websites. The screen popped up, telling her to try again later and Stassi rolled her eyes. How was it possible a company could function like this?

“Stassi?”

Stassi swirled in her chair as Missy Daniels approached the desk. Missy was her main supervisor and while she was just a year or two older than Stassi, she had an all-business outlook on her job.

“Hey, Ms. Daniels,” Stassi stammered. “Network is down. I’m waiting for it to reboot back up.”

“Should be short,” Missy stated. “So, I wanted to bring you another copy of the dress attire. You received it on your first day, but something must have been lost in translation.” Stassi frowned and looked down at her scrubs. She didn’t like the drab apparel but attempted to dress accordingly, no matter how hard it was. She looked back up and took the sheet from her. “I think you’ll find it most helpful to read at the bottom. Large and gawdy jewelry is not to be worn.”

Stassi nodded and removed her earrings. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Missy turned and walked away from her, and Stassi scowled at her backside. Why did it matter what accessories she wore? The patients wouldn’t mind or shouldn’t. It gave

a certain style to her and surely accentuated the attire she was forced to wear. She dropped her earrings in her purse and attempted her best to shrug it off. If she had to abide by the rules, then she would, if only for her dad's sake.

She moved closer to her computer and refreshed her screen, attempting to pull up the system again. A box popped up on the screen. Restart your computer. An error has been detected. "Sure, it has." She restarted her computer and looked down over her list. There wasn't one task she could fulfill that didn't rely on the computer. When her computer was back up, she attempted to get back into billing system.

She couldn't imagine that her father was aware of all of these issues and not doing anything about them. The hospital machines were falling apart, with little that anyone could do about them. She could only imagine that the copier had been in the hospital from day one. It was always dragging in the few times it worked right away. This was something that her dad needed to be involved in, or nothing would ever change. The management clearly wasn't using the budget correctly or none of this would be happening.

She pulled up the first patient when the system was finally loaded. She checked the insurance, then got on the portal to locate the patient's eligibility. She did that for all three patients; it was a breeze once the internet was working. Task one was fully accomplished. Task two was calling an insurance company and trying to find out why they denied the patient's claim. This was her first time dealing with the insurance companies, without Darlene by her side. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't a tad reluctant, but she put on her best confidence and placed the call.

Stassi was on hold for twenty minutes before the representative came on the line. "Hi, I'm trying to find out why a claim wasn't paid." So far, so good.

The rep went through a line of questions, having Stassi stutter through where to find some of the needed information. However, after several minutes, she was able to get

everything answered. A patient walked up while she was in the middle of it. The patient wasn't due for another twenty minutes, so Stassi pressed her hand against the mouthpiece to hush her voice.

"Take a seat and I'll call you up in a minute." Surprisingly, she began to feel like a pro. Why was she so worried about this in the first place?

"Are you there?" The woman asked, her sarcasm thick.

"Um yeah, sorry. You were saying?" Stassi poised her pen to take notes.

"This patient ran out of benefits a month ago. That was three days before this appointment."

"Huh?" Stassi asked. "I don't understand. We show that we called in the benefits before this appointment, and we were told that the patient would be seen and 100% would be covered. Instead, nothing was covered and now this patient is left owing five thousand dollars."

"Well, benefits were called in prior to the appointment where benefits were exhausted, so it would have been covered at that time. However, another claim got to us before yours, so none of it's covered."

"I don't understand," Stassi groaned. She frantically looked between the computer and her notes. "This patient can't owe this much. They're low in funds, which is liable to bankrupt them. Isn't there something that you can do?"

"Ma'am, it doesn't work that way. No benefits, no coverage. Do you have any other questions?"

The nonchalant response from the rep had Stassi's blood boiling. She wouldn't stop



at that because the one insurance rep was giving her unfortunate information.

“No,” she mumbled. “Can I have the reference number?”

The rep rattled the reference number off, made her ‘goodbye,’ and disconnected the call. Stassi stared at the computer where she needed to put her correspondence, but it was crappy information that she was given. How could she return to the patient and explain that nothing could be done? A rock fell into the pit of her stomach.

The woman cleared her throat from the patient waiting area. Stassi turned her gaze to her and motioned for her to approach the desk. She would get her checked in and then get back to the other patient.

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“Have a seat and the therapist will be with you shortly.” Stassi forced through a smile and waited for the woman to go back to her seat. Stassi put that she was waiting and turned back to her previous patient. She scrunched her nose in thought, then a possible solution hit her. She didn’t know much about it, but she recalled that Darlene had called on an assistance program that could help a patient with their bills. It was at least worth a shot.

She looked at the counter, where all the important phone numbers were listed and finally found the number she was looking for. She quickly dialed it and waited for someone to answer. After only a couple of rings, a man picked up.

“Hi, John, my name is Stassi. I work at LA County, and I have a patient who needs some assistance in paying a bill and hoping you could take a look.”

“I’d be happy to. Provide the patient’s details, name, date of birth, when the date of service will be, and their income.”

Stassi gave the name and date of birth and then gave the date of service. “I don’t have the income, but I’m sure I can get that from the patient and give you a call back.”

“This service has already happened?” he asked.

“Yes. The insurance won’t cover it and the patient isn’t able to pay her bills.”

“I’m sorry, but we can do nothing about that. We only take care of payment before a service.”

Stassi's jaw dropped. "That doesn't make sense. Some patients wouldn't know if their service would be covered, so what do they do? Have to suffer?"

"That's not really our concern," he began.

"What?" Stassi couldn't believe the way he was responding. Every patient deserved to have compassion and care given to them. "You're not doing your job, if you're saying you don't care." Her voice raised a few more notches. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and she looked up to find Sage staring at her. She tilted her head and gave a sympathetic look before turning to the waiting room and calling the patient.

"Hey Sage," the woman said, approaching her. "I'm used to the nurse grabbing me."

"She had an appointment, so you're stuck with me. How ya feeling?" Sage glanced over at Stassi before Stassi turned back to her call.

"I'm just trying to offer our patient some peace. Please tell me there is something you can do."

"My hands are tied. If the request had been made before the patient came into your office, then there's a chance we could help, but we have nothing available now." Stassi sighed and sank into her chair.

"Alright. Goodbye." She disconnected the call and stared at the cursor that hung in the middle of her screen. She went to the correspondence and typed out her information, from the call with the insurance company to the call with the assistance rep, then glanced down at the amount that was read in the patient's balance. Her father would certainly assist if he had the funds, but since he personally doesn't, then maybe there was something he knew that could assist the patient. Patients had to have better options than what they were given. It wasn't fair. She grabbed the list and looked over her tasks, feeling like a failure that she couldn't complete them all

satisfactorily. She tossed the list to the side and shook her head. The system was broken, and she didn't know how to fix it.

Sage

Sage refiled the chart and walked back to the receptionist's desk. She heard the frustration in Stassi's tone, and she knew that Stassi was struggling. Starting a new job was difficult, but when you're frustrated right out of the gate, you're left believing everything is against you. Sage totally understood the pain. But Stassi had to learn to chill, or she'd be out of there before she had gotten her first paycheck.

Stassi sat at her desk, unaware that Sage was watching her. Her eyes were zoned in on the computer, and the waiting room was bare. Sage cleared her throat so as not to frighten the young woman. Stassi looked up, and her eyes were red. She quickly looked away, her face flushed.

"I must look awful," she muttered.

Sage shook her head. She still looked beautiful, a startling revelation. "Just thought I'd come out here and see how you're doing." Sage leaned against the counter and turned to Stassi. She eventually looked up, but there was obvious reluctance. She gave a slight shrug. "I can assure you that we all have rough days. Heck, we all have rough weeks. Is there anything I can assist you with?"

"I just feel like the system is broken. Patients need money, and there is none. Insurance companies don't want to pay because they're cheap. There's nothing truly out there to benefit the patient." She groaned. "And I'm rambling. Just please don't tell my boss. She'll probably get snippy with me about that, too." Sage arched an eyebrow. "She was upset that I wore, in her words, gawdy jewelry." She shook her head. "That's a whole other issue. I'm just frustrated all around." She dropped her gaze to the computer.

“Believe me; I’ve been there.” Sage wasn’t quite sure, but something about Stassi caused her to want to console her. “It was my first week, and I had this patient that had a massive stroke. They came in wanting my help, and because they didn’t have insurance, the hospital said that I couldn’t do anything for them.”

Stassi frowned. “What’d you do?”

“I was ready to throw in the towel. I thought it was crazy that anyone would want to let this patient suffer just because they didn’t have insurance to prove that they would somehow get paid. So, I fought through a lot of red tape and eventually found a program that assisted the patient in getting the help they needed. The patient came under my care, and a year later, they were succeeding. It was a great accomplishment, I felt.”

Stassi nodded. “I imagine it was.” She furrowed her brows. “I shouldn’t give up.” Sage smiled at her as the elevator door opened. “Hello, I can get you checked in,” she said. She was in better spirits as Sage walked away from the desk. She grabbed a chart and checked it over as the other elevator opened, and Lena stepped off onto the floor.

“You’re smiling,” Lena replied in greeting.

Sage snickered. “You’re delusional.”

Lena shrugged. “Looks like a smile. Ready for lunch?”

“I can’t. I have a full load this afternoon. Shayla is off for an appointment and is unsure if she’ll be back, and I’m the only OT this afternoon. I have a protein bar in my bag; I’ll grab it when I’m starving. You go on without me.”

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Lena made a face. “Won’t be nearly as much fun. Just don’t get burnt out like others have.”

Sage smiled. “Don’t worry. I won’t. Enjoy your lunch.” Lena walked away, and Sage yawned. She covered her mouth to stifle it. She was tired, but she had to push through it. She had too many patients that relied on her.

“Hello, Fran. How are you doing today?” She entered the room to one of her familiar faces. Fran, a forty-eight-year-old, sat in a chair. Her nod was a bit jagged, but she had come far since they began therapy two months earlier. “How’s the weakness in your arm.”

“Getting less,” she said, holding up her arm. She could only hold it up briefly, but it was longer than when she first began. She was back to driving herself, so that was a plus that you didn’t find in many patients. There was a knock on the door, and Sage turned to the door. She opened it ajar and found Stassi fidgeting in the hall.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but Mitch Grey just walked in. He thought he had an appointment. It’s supposed to be tomorrow, and he is going out of town tomorrow.”

Sage sighed. “Put him in after Betty. I’ll make the schedule work.”

“Thank you, Sage.” Stassi rushed off, and Sage watched her for a minute. This job was liable to be Stassi’s demise. Working at the hospital wasn’t something everyone could thrive in. She just hoped it wouldn’t break the young woman. She closed the

door and turned back to her patient. With another patient on the books of an already busy day, she would be forced to work unpaid overtime, and she wasn't looking forward to that, but it was all a part of her responsibility, and she would make the best of it. It wasn't as nearly as bad as others were facing. That was what she had to hold onto. Hopefully, she would have that appointment the following month, and they could finally get some resolution to everyone's problems.

Stassi

Stassi typed out the correspondence for her last patient and then scrolled down to the next one that would be there at any minute. Another two days passed, and while there were things that didn't go quite as smoothly as she would have liked, she felt like she was getting into the job.

"Hey, Stassi." Stassi looked up and smiled. Sage approached the desk, another smile on her lips. She had a beautiful smile. When Stassi wasn't stressing, she could actually enjoy it. However, it seemed to be not as often as she would have liked, but she would appreciate what she could take. "I have to run to a lunch meeting. Joellen from ER is going to come to grab this chart. It's imperative that she gets it ASAP. She'll be up in about ten minutes. Also, if Lena shows up, tell her I have a lunch meeting and won't be able to hit the cafeteria with her."

"Sounds good. This goes to Joellen, and I'll pass the message off to Lena. You can count on that."

"Great!" Sage smiled and gave a generous nod. "Catch ya later." She disappeared around a corner, and Stassi focused her eyes back on her computer. She released a yawn and shook her head, hoping to clear it before her next patient came in. Stassi grabbed some papers that needed filing and copied and headed off to do the jobs. Now that Darlene was gone, she had to manage everything independently. She did the copying and went to the filing room. She was just finishing her filing when she

heard a bell at the reception desk. Stassi hurried back to the desk and saw a woman dressed in scrubs.

“Joellen, right?” Stassi asked.

“Yep. Just here to grab a chart. Sage said she had it. Is she around?”

“Just left, but she gave me...” Stassi’s words trailed off as she looked at her desk. The desk was empty. She had put the chart right there. She was confident about that. “Um, it was right here,” she mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Joellen asked.

“I mean...” Stassi cleared her throat. “Sage had to run off for a second, and she said that she would run it down to the ER when she gets back. Shouldn’t be any more than five minutes.”

Joellen frowned. “That’s weird. She knows that this is extremely important. And she knew that I would come up and get it.” Joellen frowned.

“I know, but I think she had a hundred things that had to be done. I’ll make sure it gets to you ASAP. I promise.” Joellen shrugged and accepted Stassi’s half-hazard reply. “If she can’t bring it to you, I’ll make sure someone else does. No worries.”

“Alright then. Hopefully, it’s no more than five minutes.” Joellen skirted away, and Stassi turned back to her desk. Stassi took a seat and frantically looked around her workstation, including the trash, just in case it accidentally fell into the trash.

“This can’t be happening,” she groaned, rifling through the HIPAA box that sat underneath her counter. She spun around, spotting Lena heading her way. She had only had a brief encounter with her, where Darlene introduced them, but she would



have taken any assistance at this point.

“Have you seen Sage?” Lena asked. Lena, a pediatric nurse, had scrubs with little puppies on them. Stassi envied that Lena could wear something other than drab colors, but that was a situation that she could argue about later.

“She’s at a lunch meeting. She asked me to let you know that she couldn’t do lunch, but I need your help.” Stassi felt awkward making this their first attempt at a bonding moment, but it would definitely be her job on the line if she didn’t find the chart.

“What’s up?”

Stassi told her everything about the missing chart. “I have looked all over my desk, and it’s just gone. I’m going to lose my job, and I really need this job.”

“Just calm down. Retrace your steps. Where were you after you had possession of the chart?”

“I went to the copier and the filing room.” Stassi took a breath, trying to calm her nerves.

“You go to the copier, and I’ll go to the file room. It couldn’t have just vanished.”

Stassi swallowed. “I also threw some things away in the compactor.”

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Lena reached out and touched Stassi's arm. "Don't worry about that just yet. We won't know until we've looked everywhere. Got that?" Stassi nodded and rushed off to the copier. She reached there and looked all around the counter, in the trash, along the ledge, but nothing. She turned and went to the filing room just as Lena came out. She had a chart in her hand and was holding it up.

"Is this it?" she asked.

Stassi grabbed it and recognized the name right away. She nodded and clutched it to her chest. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." She then paused and frowned. "I suppose you'll have to tell Sage I goofed up."

Lena shrugged. "Not sure it really does any good. It was found, so no harm."

Stassi appreciated that Lena felt that way, but she was just grateful that her job was saved, and she could get this chart to Joellen. "I have to get this back to Joellen in ER."

"Headed that way to the cafeteria. Want me to pass it along?"

"Thanks again." She handed the chart back to Lena, and Lena went to the elevator. Stassi slumped into the chair, sighing with relief for what could have been a catastrophe she couldn't have avoided.

The breakroom was quiet, with Stassi the only one in there at two 'o'clock in the morning. She took a seat and let out a yawn. This was her first really late night, and she wasn't sure how many of them she'd be able to adjust to. She leaned forward, her

head resting against her arm as she closed her eyes. She felt herself nodding off, but she jerked herself awake. She was liable to fall asleep and miss going back at the fifteen-minute mark. She rubbed her face and looked around the empty room. She could get up and get a cup of coffee, but that would require moving, and the counter seemed too far.

The door opened, and a man entered. He gave her a nod, then smirked. “You’re a new receptionist on the therapy floor, right?”

She nodded, yawning again. “Stassi,” she mumbled as she shook out of a yawn.

“Marcus, I work in Pediatrics.” He headed over to the coffee maker, and you could really use one of these. It’s nothing to write home about, but it will keep you awake.

“That’d be great. Thank you!” Marcus worked on making the two cups, then brought one over to her. “Working thirds is a rite of passage. Not everyone is cut out for me. I’ve been doing it for five years, and I’d say I’ve gotten used to it.”

The door opened, and Sage walked into the breakroom. She glanced over at their table and gave a nod, then smirked when Stassi lifted the cup to her lips. “Marcus, are you trying to kill her?”

Marcus shook his head. “Trying to keep her alive to get through the rest of her shift. It’s brutal out there.”

“And he doesn’t think I’ll make it,” Stassi added.

Sage went over to the drawer and rifled through it until she had some sugar packets in her hand. She walked them over and tossed them down in front of Stassi. “The coffee is the worse, but it will get you through a few more hours.”

“I have six,” Stassi replied, dumping the sugar into the coffee and stirring it around with the offered spoon. Sage made a face.

“You might have to come back for another coffee. Just remember where the packets are.” Sage offered her a wink which brought a smile out of Stassi. She took a sip and winced. They weren’t joking. The coffee wasn’t the best.

“Besides the cafeteria, there’s only one machine. It’s in here,” Marcus continued. “Let me rephrase that. This is the only one working. Managers don’t much care to fix the broken ones.” He shrugged.

“Or making sure the coffee isn’t awful,” Sage added before offering a sweet laugh. “Guess they don’t much care for what the staff thinks.” She groaned. “Not that that’s anything new. We all know that’s right.”

As Sage talked, there was a gentleness about her. Stassi watched her, wondering what she would say next. Not really focusing on what she’s saying rather than the sincerity of her words. There was a lot of heart behind them, and Stassi appreciated that. And Sage looked beautiful as she spoke to them. Stassi had to look away from her, or else she would get too wrapped in the moment. The good thing was that Stassi never caught herself wanting to doze off. Was it the company or the coffee? She’d rather believe the company.

She took a sip of her coffee and took it in. The coffee didn’t even suck as bad. “I should get back to work,” she quickly stated, standing up and taking another sip. She held up the coffee. “Thanks for the suggestion. Anything to keep me awake.

“I’ll head out with you. Have to head to the same floor anyway,” Sage replied. “When does Lena work?” Sage asked Marcus.

“She comes in at six. Just in time for me to get out of here. Okay, I’ll stop by on my

way out.” Sage waved, and both Stassi and Sage left the breakroom.

“How’s the coffee for your tastebuds?” Sage asked.

Stassi shrugged. “I’ve had worse.” The truth was, it wasn’t what she was used to, but complaining in the company of Sage wasn’t exactly how she wanted to get them out on the right foot. They stepped into the elevator, and the doors closed behind them. Sage pressed the bottom, and they took the long ride up to their floor.

They stood there in silence, the memory of the error still trying to creep its way back in. Lena had said she wouldn’t say anything to Sage, but it wasn’t right to let the truth be out there. She wouldn’t want something so drastic to be hidden from her if the roles were reversed.

“I have a confession,” she began.

“I’m listening.” Sage turned to her, waiting.

“Remember when you brought me that chart, and Joellen was going to come and get it?” Sage gave a slight nod. “The truth is that I was rushing around and doing things. I guess you could say I was consumed by exhaustion, too. Anyway, there’s no excuse to be had, but I had misplaced the chart.”

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“I see.” Sage nodded. “Did you find it?” The elevator doors opened, and they both left the elevator and stopped right outside the door.

“Yes. Lena showed up, and she helped me search for it. I got it to Joellen and everything, but I should have mentioned it to you. I’m sorry I didn’t, but I was afraid that I would be fired, and I really need this job.”

“Well, there’s really no harm because you found the chart, and all is well,” Sage began. “But I have a confession, as well. Joellen cornered me and asked why I didn’t leave it at the desk since she was going to pick it up. I figured something must’ve happened and just said that I was running behind schedule, but I was a bit confused. This clears up that matter.”

“You covered me?” Stassi asked.

Sage shrugged. “It’s what co-workers do. Thanks for being honest. I have to go get some things taken care of, but I appreciate your honesty.” She left Stassi standing there. Stassi had never had anyone that went to great lengths to protect her like that. At least no one that wasn’t family. It was a nice feeling. She returned to her desk, finished her coffee, tossed the cup, and returned to work. Maybe she was making her own path. It felt good.

Sage

Sage grabbed a salad and water and paid the cashier. It was a beautiful day out, so she left through the back doors and headed into the courtyard. Lena was off, and she didn’t see anyone else in the cafeteria that she necessarily wanted to eat with. It was

the perfect opportunity to get a breath of fresh air.

She entered the courtyard and glanced around to find only one person in the courtyard eating their lunch. For such a nice day, that was hard to believe. Sage sat on the other side, her eyes off, looking in the distance as she ate her sandwich. There weren't too many people that would have fessed up to their mistake, especially when everything was fixed. However, Stassi seemed to have a knack for ensuring that she did the right thing. That was a commendable trait to acquire.

It'd been a week and a half since Stassi started working at the hospital, but Sage wasn't quite sure she could state that Stassi was past the worry that she would up and quit on them. In fact, she was only just beginning the journey to her career and learning things every day. Anything could happen to push Stassi out the door, but for now, she would hold out on the hope that maybe Stassi would stick around.

Sage approached her, and Stassi gave her a smile. "I was surprised more people aren't out here," Stassi replied.

Sage nodded. "That was my first thought when I first got out here." She nervously looked around. This whole courtyard and she was going to just barge into Stassi's lunch. That hardly seemed practical. "I hope you're enjoying the beauty of the weather."

"It's great." Stassi glanced around, then turned back to Sage. "You're welcome to join me."

"I don't want to interrupt you."

Sage shrugged. "Only have twenty minutes, but lunch is always better when you're not alone. It's like people may think you don't have friends." Stassi laughed. "So, by all means, have a seat."

Sage took a seat and opened her salad. “I know what you mean. I rarely go to a restaurant alone and when I do, I’m constantly looking down at my phone, wondering if people are gawking at me, or that’s just my imagination.” Stassi laughed and continued to bite on her sandwich. Sage looked at her, loving the sweet sound of her laughter. It was refreshing and when she laughed, it made everything feel better. She had to look down at her salad, for enjoying it a little too much would only cause confusion. “How’s work been going?”

“Actually, not bad. I’m looking forward to getting my first check on Friday. It’s been an incredible journey.” She was way more enthusiastic than most people would be, another trait that was quite intriguing. Stassi took a long swig of her water. “I tend to talk too much.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” Sage gave a shrug and took a bite of her salad. Especially when you’re comfortable around someone and Sage caught herself being exceptionally comfortable around Stassi. The one woman that would elicit that reaction from Sage was Lena; she had known her for years. “What did you do prior to applying to this job and what made you apply here?”

Stassi’s cheeks turned a bright red. She looked down at her one bite of sandwich and quickly popped it into her mouth, before downing it with a taste of water. Sage waited, wondering if there was some big secret that Stassi had, and she didn’t want to get too much drama out there.

“I mean, you don’t have to tell me if it’s a bit top secret or something.”

Stassi laughed. “Not exactly top secret. But before, I was a model. Well, I still model. Just wanted some extra income.”

“Anything I would know?” Sage inquired. She didn’t stay too engrossed in modeling news, but she would read a magazine here or there. So, it was possible she had caught



her somewhere. Although, Sage knew the only place she recalled her from was the club. She still figured Stassi didn't recall that.

"Modeled with Cirque. Did some fashion modeling. Just sort of all over the board. Not too interesting."

"I doubt that," Sage replied. "I imagine you are quite the interesting one." She blushed when Stassi's eyes went wide. "I just mean that you seem to have an interesting lifestyle. Never met a model before." She shrugged and continued to eat her salad. It was a save, but not sure how good of one. "So, now I'm really interested in what brought you to LA County Hospital?"

"Well, you hear horror stories about waitresses, not getting the tips they deserve, so I didn't want to go that route. And frankly, I'm not too much of a maintenance man." Stassi laughed. "That was pretty much everything that was out there. When I saw this opening, I couldn't resist. And looking forward to what the future will bring here." She took a drink of water. "How long have you worked here?"

"Eight years," Sage started. Stassi tilted her head and Sage laughed. "You're surprised that anyone would choose to work here for that long?"

"No, it's not that," Stassi began. "I guess I'm impressed. You don't look old enough."

Sage laughed. "I think you're either blind or lying."

She settled into the banter back and forth between them. Partly it felt like some flirtation was even intermixed and Sage liked that. There was nothing wrong with harmless flirtation as long as you both knew where things were headed. In this case, nowhere.

It was obvious that Stassi was younger than she was. If Stassi had to guess, she'd say

nearly fifteen years. Thinking it like that, it seemed way too impossible to fathom that there was any kind of flirtation.

“I mean it, though. I would have never guessed that you’d be out of college and working eight years.”

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“Well, thank you. If you want to feel even younger, I will add that this wasn’t my first job.” Both of them laughed and it was easy between them. Way too soon though, it was all cut short. Stassi stood up and grabbed her trash.

“I’m going to have to head back to work. It was nice having lunch with you, though.”

“Likewise.” Sage tipped her water bottle in Stassi’s direction and watched her head back inside. She was glad that she had opted to head out into the courtyard for lunch. Thinking about Stassi brought a smile to Sage’s lips, surprising her. “Get over it, Sage. She’s too young and probably has a boyfriend or something. She dropped her gaze to the ground, disappointment falling to her chest. It wasn’t meant to be, but it didn’t mean they couldn’t continue their friendship. They got along and she could always use another friend.

Stassi

Still on for drinks? Have a lot to talk about. The message came through fifteen minutes before Stassi was off the clock. She released a yawn and stared at her phone. She would have dismissed Ariel’s message, but part of her wanted to check in on her friend. Ever since she had gotten the job, she had had to ignore calls and texts. She was too busy. Working too much overtime, and by the time she was done, she was exhausted. But now, putting her off would only continue to delay the inevitable.

Stassi

Yep. See ya in 30 minutes. Can’t wait.

It was a little white lie. It wasn't like anyone would have to find out. She checked her watch, another yawn escaping. She sat down in her chair and shook her head. If she continued to yawn, she was likely to text back and tell Ariel another night would be better.

The elevator door opened, and a patient stepped out. "Hello, are you checking in?"

The patient rattled off her info, and Sassi quickly got her checked in. The time it took was ten minutes less than when she first started. She wondered if she would ever get there. Turned out, she had picked it up relatively quickly.

"Have a seat, and the nurse will be with you shortly." She checked the box stating the patient was ready and pushed the chart off to the side. She leaned back in her seat and began strumming her fingers on her desk. As she continued to strum, she saw Sage headed her way. She stopped and sat up straighter in her chair.

Sage smiled and grabbed the chart. "Getting ready to leave?" she asked.

"Yep. It's been a long day." Stassi nodded.

"Yeah, that can happen." Sage snickered.

"Do you leave after this patient?" Stassi asked. The conversation seemed to flow well between them. Whether Sage saw that, too, she wasn't certain. However, after their impromptu lunch together, things seemed even brighter.

"I'm here until midnight." Sage made a face. "Four more hours. Can I make it? We shall see." Sage winked and then pushed past the desk to grab her patient. Sage was the one therapist that tended to be stuck without a nurse. She frequently grabbed her own patients, but Stassi found that endearing. Another part she found endearing was the way Sage would wink, giving an air of flirtation. Yet, she acted that way around

everyone, so it could confuse a person.

They passed the desk, and Stassi looked back at her computer. Just one more minute. Just as the thought escaped her, she spotted Lucile from the ER. She didn't miss a stride as she crashed into the empty chair at the desk.

"I'm your relief," she said.

"Thank April was coming in overnight."

Lucile shrugged. "Guess she has food poisoning or something. So, instead of replacing it, they did some shifting. This desk is stuck with me. Anything I need to know?"

"Nope. I think only three patients are scheduled, so it should be pretty quiet." Stassi stood up and grabbed her purse from the desk. "Thanks for covering. I'm beat."

"Anytime." Lucile tossed a wave to her. "See you later." She moved in and signed into the computer. Stassi went to the elevator and dug her phone out of her pocket. Ariel had replied to her message. Hope built inside that maybe Ariel was the one that was going to cancel on her, but no such luck.

Ariel

Drinks ordered. Hope you don't have to be to work too early in the morning. ;)

Stassi laughed. She wasn't the free spirit that she used to be, making her own schedule and having the time that her friendship circle required. She left the message unanswered and got in the elevator. She knew her limits, and Ariel wouldn't push her to go past those.

The drive to the club was only five minutes away. She pulled into the parking lot, and it was dead, securing her a spot right next to the front door. She entered the club and spotted Ariel at a usual table of theirs. She went over to join her, and a beer was sitting in Stassi's place.

"You weren't kidding," Stassi laughed, sitting down and taking a sip. She sighed. "I needed that."

"Rough day?" Ariel asked.

Stassi snickered. "Define rough." She then shook her head. "I don't want to bore you with shop talk, though. How are you doing? Any modeling jobs that you just can't resist?"

"Too many to count." Ariel winked, a smirk raising the corner of her lips. "I am working on a fashion magazine spread for LA Now."

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“Wow, that’s huge, a far cry from where you were two weeks ago, and this is the first I’m hearing about it?”

Ariel gave a nonchalant shrug. “It was sort of one of those things that happened unexpectedly. Just got the call yesterday. It’s pretty cool, actually. I met with the exec this morning and will model four different covers for each season. If they like what I have to offer, then they’ll come back for more. What’s even cooler, I get to choose the outfits and keep them when it’s all over. Getting a pretty nice sign-on bonus, as well.”

Stassi’s face fell. It was hard not to be jealous. There were times when they would both be gushing over their modeling gigs. She bit her lower lip, trying not to show her jealousy. Ariel continued to ramble on.

“I’m thinking something cute and flirty would be the ideal shoot for summer. What do you think?”

“Um yeah, I would say so.” Stassi sipped on her beer.

“Oh, and you know what? There’s a total Goddess that is modeling with me. I got to meet her, as well.” She smiled. “Maybe I’ll meet my happily ever after through this job. Oh, and my nails...” she squealed. “They’re going to give me a complete manicure.”

“Well, you would deserve it. You’re going to do great, Ariel. I’m happy for you.” Ariel was so excited, and Stassi didn’t have the heart to put a damper on her parade. Ariel needed this boost in her life, and Stassi would do what she could to make sure

she wasn't the rain in the scenario.

"I shouldn't be gushing like this." Ariel took a swig of her beer. "You can slap me at any time."

"Nonsense." It was only a matter of time before her father was able to get back to the position he was in. Stassi could do what she had to get by, but as soon as possible, she would get out there and get back to the life she had left behind.

"Well, I'll cool it anyhow. You don't need to hear me babbling on. What about you? How is it slumming with the common folk?"

"Common folk? That's harsh, don't you think? You're talking about real people here."

Ariel arched an eyebrow, and Stassi closed her mouth. "Gosh, Stassi, I was only kidding."

"I know," Stassi mumbled. She couldn't believe how quickly she was to be angered by a simple comment, but it was true. Ariel didn't even know these people. And while Stassi wasn't extremely close to anyone, she had started to see bonds forming. She didn't want anything to get in her way. "I just don't want it to get back to these people that I think I'm better than any of them. Ya know?"

Ariel shrugged. "Not sure that I do. I mean, who would I tell?" She smirked, and Stassi looked around, shrugging. Anything could happen. She would rather play it safe. "But I'm glad that you felt compelled to defend them; that shows a lot, actually. You're not struggling as much as I thought you might."

"Gee, thanks." Stassi took a swig of her beer. "I'll take that as a compliment."



“As you should. It was a drastic change for you. Totally get it. Have you made any work friends yet?”

She sipped on her beer as Stassi considered that one question. It'd been less than ten days; could friendships be formed in such a short time?”

“I would say there's some potential there. The first few days, I was eating my lunch at my desk, but then I realized that wouldn't show anyone that I was open to talking to them, so I would say that's a first step. Friendships will come, but just take it slow.” Her mind went to Sage, and she felt her cheeks getting warmer. She looked down at her beer and downed the rest of it.

“What's that look for?” Ariel laughed. She then opened her mouth. “Is that because there might be someone that could be more than a friend?” She practically squealed as the words came out.

“No way!” Stassi snapped. “And lower your voice. It's way too soon to even consider that. Besides, I'm not going to be here that long. Why get too close to anyone just to abandon the job and the relationships?”

Ariel frowned. “You certainly can't think that way. Be open to it. You just never know what could happen.”

Stassi thought about those words, but she shrugged them off. A friendship was one thing. If something happened there, she would gladly accept it. As for anything more, there wasn't any reason to consider someone along those lines.

Sage

“What about her?” Lena asked, holding up her phone.

Sage rolled her eyes and laughed. “Do you ever give up? Why do you always feel like I need to be in a relationship?”

Lena snickered. “Because I want you to be happy.”

Sage grabbed a French fry and tossed it in her mouth. “And still I wonder if I’ve ever given off the impression that I’m not happy. I’ve always prided myself in looking with the glass half-full mantra. So, if I am showing you something else, do tell.”

Lena shrugged. “Not as far as relationships go.”

Sage rolled her eyes and turned to look off at the cafeteria entrance. Stassi walked in and Sage caught herself staring. There was something about her. When she started, she gave this persona that she was rather high-maintenance, with her earrings and makeup. But she got the feeling that something had shifted because suddenly she was toning down the look. Still beautiful, most would say, but just not trying to act like she was above everyone else. Perhaps it was Stassi who was finally coming into her own. Starting a job somewhere was always difficult, especially when you didn’t know anyone. When they had the impromptu lunch in the courtyard, Sage saw that she could have misjudged her first impressions. And it was possible that maybe Stassi would make it in the end. Stranger things had happened. With just a little coaxing, anyone could succeed.

“Don’t even think about it,” Lena mumbled.

“Excuse me?”

Lena shook her head. “I saw you looking at her and you can forget it. I know I said that you two would make a cute couple, but I was wrong. Nope. Not happening. Forget I even went there.”

Sage frowned. “I’m confused. What brought on this sudden change to steer clear of the new receptionist? I still recall that day that you were all for it. What’d she ever do to you?”

Lena sighed. “She didn’t do anything to me, personally. But what do you think about her? I mean really think about her?”

“Didn’t give it much mind.” Sage took a drink of her water. “I mean, at first, I’d say she was a loose cannon. I mean the way she beat the copier, it must’ve been crying.” Sage laughed. When Lena didn’t join in, she continued. “I guess maybe first impressions aren’t always the way to go, though. She’s alright, I suppose. But again, I ask, what’d she do to you? I mean you seem to be suddenly in a sour mood.”

“Not sour.” Lena looked down at her sandwich, while Sage watched with intent. “I agree she definitely is a loose cannon. Not too sure I would say that side of her is in the past.” Sage turned to where Stassi was standing at the deli, observing the options like new ones could appear. Sage was prepared to say she’d been wrong, but now Lena was leading her to think that first impressions were the sole route to look. “I think that maybe looks is all Stassi has going for her.”

“Ya think?” Sage turned to Stassi as she paid for her sandwich and then turned,

instantly locking gaze with Sage. She raised her hand slightly.

“Great,” Lena mumbled. “If you do that, then Stassi will want to come over here and sit; frankly, I’m not in the mood. I might just rudely get up and excuse myself.

“Wait a minute.” Sage turned and stared. “I’m so confused. Something is amiss here, so what is it?”

Lena sighed. “You asked for it. I heard that Stassi slept her way into this position.”

“What?” Sage squealed, then started laughing. “You’re a riot. Stassi slept her way into the position? Why? Because hospital receptionist is such an exciting job. If she was going to do that, why wouldn’t she push for something with a little more depth to it? I think you’re crazy.”

She turned and Stassi continued to look around for an empty table. At that moment, it broke Sage’s heart that she wasn’t waving her down and offering her a friendly face. Lena most likely didn’t have any proof behind the accusations that the hospital was throwing around. She tapped her fingers against the table and stared at Stassi, just waiting for someone to offer her a seat.

“Who’d you hear that from?” She turned and glared at Lena.

“Marcus heard it from Seth, who heard it from...” Before she could continue Sage waved her hand, dismissing Lena’s comments. “I’m just saying, who wants to associate with someone that could possibly have slept with the right person to get a job?”

“I highly doubt it’s true,” Sage replied. Just a slight inkling inside her said anything was possible. “If it is then it’s not really any of our business.” Sage shrugged. “But Stassi is wandering out there like a lost puppy dog, looking for someone to throw

them a bone.”

“That someone doesn’t need to be you,” Lena argued.

Sage sat back in her seat and contemplated it, but the truth was that if the rumors were true, people would lose faith in those associated with her. Sad, but true. She put her head down, questioning everything, but wishing Stassi would find one person to just wave her over and take the pressure off her.

Stassi

When Stassi first entered the cafeteria and saw Sage, she hoped Sage would welcome her to her table. After all, she had lunch with her in the courtyard, so it wouldn’t be too surprising. But things didn’t go quite as planned. She spotted her with Lena, and they looked rather cozy. She caught them laughing and talking so closely that no one would interrupt that. Perhaps there was more than just a friendship between them. And if that were true, it would be disappointing.

Why worry about it? It’s already been decided that you can’t do anything but friendship.

She allowed her eyes to stray away from them. A few times, she would make eye contact, but when she waved, she barely elicited a response. She sighed and tried to make the best of a painful situation. The sound of thunder echoed through the cafeteria walls, and she shrugged. No going outside today.

“Hey, you.” She felt a tap on her shoulder, startled; she nearly dropped her sandwich. She spun on her heel and saw Marcus. At least it was a friendly face. Not the one she wanted to come across, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. “Just got here myself. Wanna join me?” He leaned in, lowering his voice. “I hate to eat alone. Please say yes.” He offered her a wink, and she nodded with relief.

They went to a corner table just a few feet away from Sage and Lena. She had to pass the table to get to where March led the way, and she forced herself not to look in her direction. How much more awkward could it be when it was painfully obvious that Lena and Sage didn't want her sitting with them?

"Hi, Marcus," Lena said. From the corner of Stassi's eye, she saw Lena toss a look at her. It caused her to be on edge. She didn't know what she could have done to get such a response. Last she spoke with Lena, Lena was helping her locate a missing chart. She seemed nice and never gave the vibe that she needed to steer clear of her.

They sat down, with her back to their table. "So, how's work going?" Marcus asked.

"Good. Pretty good. No complaints."

"That's convincing," he laughed, digging into the soup that he had bought. He looked up as he tore into the package of crackers. "Anything else exciting going on in your job?"

Stassi laughed. He was funny, put her at ease, and helped her forget that just a few feet away was another table that she wasn't welcome at

"It's really going well. It's different from what I've been doing for the past few years."

"Oh yeah? What's that? Stripper?" She had taken a drink of water and nearly spit it out. She gawked at him, but he was laughing so hard, clearly cracking himself up. "I'm sorry. I couldn't resist." He held up his hand and shook his head. "Only joking, but then broke into laughter again. "I should have held back until you really got to know me because you probably think I'm a total ass."

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“Not a total one,” Stassi began. “Just a partial one.” His eyes widened, and she started to laugh. His mouth broke into a grin. “Just kidding, I swear.”

“Damn, you got me. I must admit.” He nodded. “That was a good one.” That broke the ice and relieved any tension that Stassi had felt minutes ago.

When they were halfway into their lunch, though, he got up and motioned with his head. “What?” Stassi asked. “Lunch is over already? I feel like we just got here.”

He laughed. “No, come with me. I noticed that there’s a table that’s been watching us, or rather, you. Thinking they want us to join them.”

Stassi frowned. “Who?” She turned and saw that Sage was looking in their direction. The tension instantly returned. “I don’t know, Marcus. Not sure they really want us to interrupt. They look awfully cozy, like maybe they want to be alone.”

He laughed. “Why would they want to be alone?”

Stassi shrugged. “I don’t know. Are they a couple or something?” His face turned red, and he started laughing, shaking his head, and sputtering out his words. “They’re not a couple?”

“No, Sage is very much single, and Lena, well, pretty sure she’s into guys.” He laughed again and grabbed her hand, pulling her towards the table. He motioned for Stassi to sit down next to Sage, who scooted away to give her enough room. Stassi sat down but instantly knew how close to one another they were. Her leg had very little room, brushing up against Sage. Sage moved just a bit more but still didn’t provide

the ample room that Stassi needed to breathe, but as Stassi settled in, she relaxed. Not minding the close proximity. “You guys are not going to believe what Stassi just said to me.”

Stassi’s eyes widened. This was going to go painfully wrong. Now Marcus was going to rat her out that she thought they were a couple, and she would never make any friends there. She shook her head when he looked in her direction, but it went unnoticed.

“What’s that?” Lena asked. Lena shot Stassi a look, and Stassi’s cheeks burned. Lena had no sense of humor. She could just sense that. She considered making an excuse that she had to leave or get back to work early, anything that could get her out of there.

“She told me that I wasn’t a total ass, just a partial one.” Marcus started laughing, and the air rushed out of Stassi.

Next to her, Sage laughed. “Well, she isn’t wrong.”

Marcus glanced at Stassi and gave her a wink, and from that moment, she knew she had made one friendship, but the woman next to her would barely look in her direction. It even felt like she had shifted a little further away. If she wasn’t in a relationship with Lena, then maybe there was another reason she would stay away from Stassi. Stassi shrugged. She’d have to accept that.

Lena glared at her from across the table, making Stassi shift in her seat. Something was clearly bothering Lena. Her cell phone vibrated in her pocket, and she retrieved it and saw a message from Ariel.

Ariel



Call me when you can. Have a few minutes to chat if you're free.

"Something more intriguing than lunch?" Lena asked.

Stassi looked up. "No but have to get back to work early." She got up from the table and glanced between the other three. "See you all around." She hurried away from the table, relieved that she could escape. She was saved by the bell with Ariel's text. She fell back against the wall and waited for her to answer.

"That was fast."

"Well, you have no idea how much I needed your message. But I don't wanna talk about it. Tell me about your day."

Lena started talking about her day on the job, and Stassi was glad to have the reprieve and put the awkward lunch behind her.

Sage

Sage stepped out of the room as Stassi whizzed past her, a pile of charts in her arms. Just when she thought she could see Stassi in a new light, she was quickly thrown a curveball. For starters, if what Lena had heard was true, then she shuddered with disgust. If someone wanted to sleep around, then fine, but why stoop as long as that? Stassi came out of the file room and went back to her desk, not even turning and looking in Sage's direction.

It was true that first impressions said that Stassi was a socialite that didn't know how to lower herself to the standards of the hospital. And then there was a change. The over-the-top jewelry and over-the-top makeup... it had all vanished. And Stassi seemed to apply herself in ways that made her a great employee. She glanced at her watch and went to the computer. She had a new patient coming in for their first

appointment. It was going to be a tough case. A stroke at the age of sixteen. It would bring all sorts of problems to Sage and her duties.

Sage headed up to the front desk and grabbed the chart. Stassi turned to her, her eyes wide. “Do you have something to ask?” Sage asked. Her words came out strained, and she clamped down on her lower lip. “You just look like you have something on your mind.”

Stassi turned to the waiting room and then motioned for Sage to follow her. It seemed important, so Sage followed her to the corner where Stassi turned around. “She’s so young,” she said.

Sage nodded. “Strokes don’t much care how old you are. It’s true that we like to think that the younger generation can be strong enough to ward off the disability, but sadly that just isn’t the case.” Sage tilted her head. “Are you alright?”

Stassi shrugged, then glanced over her shoulder. Sage saw the genuine concern in Stassi’s gaze. It was refreshing. Sage reached out and touched her shoulder. “This job can take a toll on even the strongest of people. It’s not easy for me either.”

Stassi glanced back and gave a slight nod. “I better let you get to it, then.”

“You leave shortly, don’t you?” Sage asked, following Stassi back to the front desk. Stassi gave a slight nod. “Then I’ll be seeing you around. “Journey,” she called out. That was an interesting name, especially with the journey that she was going to have to be on to her road to recovery. A woman pushed her into a wheelchair, moving slowly, and Sage just waited for them to approach. “The name is Sage,” she began. She reached out her hand, and Journey was slow to grasp onto it. She moved at her speed and took hold of her hand, squeezing it tightly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

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The woman that stood behind her had tears in her eyes, and she glanced at her. “I’m her mother, Sandi.”

Sage shook her hand before finally squeezing it. “It’s my pleasure to meet you both. Head on over to room 3A, and I’ll be with you guys momentarily. She turned to Stassi and leaned into her so Journey or Sandi didn’t hear her. “Push my next appointment back an hour. I think this is going to take longer than anticipated and we’re down another nurse.”

“I’m on it,” Stassi said. She had already grabbed the phone to make her call, before Sage turned around and headed over to the room. When she entered the room, she saw her mom leaning into Journey, as if she were consoling her. Sage almost hated to interrupt. She waited at the door until Sandi looked up. Sandi’s cheeks flushed.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s fine,” her mother commented. “Just saying a little prayer.” Sage gave a weak smile and grabbed the stool. She took a seat and wheeled in closer to them.

“Let’s start by telling me when this happened, so I can get a feel of the whole situation. Where were you? How did you respond? And so forth.” Sage looked at Journey, but Journey immediately turned to her mom.

Sandi didn’t hesitate. “She struggles to talk, so she would like me to fill in all the details. If you don’t mind.” Sage shrugged. It didn’t matter to her, as long as she got the information out there. The more she knew, the better she would be able to put together a plan. It was the same route she started with all her patients. “Seven days

ago, we were home. My husband and I just finalized our divorce. I'd say that Journey has been struggling a bit because of it." Journey dropped her gaze and her mom continued. "We were laughing, having a wonderful time and then she started to seize. It was minor, at first, but then picked up in intensity. I didn't know what to do. I called 911 and they got there fast. When the paramedics were at the house, they were able to control the seizures. We went to the hospital. I guess we all thought it'd be the worst of it, but then suddenly, it's the middle of the night and she's having a stroke."

"Were you there?"

Sandi nodded and looked longingly over at her daughter. "I haven't once left her side."

Sage smiled and reached out to touch her hand. "I need you to know right off that none of this is your fault. You understand that, right?"

She shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes. While Sage didn't see many patients that were this young, she knew the stress the families went through. When her grandfather had his stroke, it took a toll on everyone that loved him, including herself. So, seeing other families struggle wasn't something Sage would ever get used to.

"Journey is going to be okay, and she knows this isn't your fault." Journey reached out and touched her mom's arm. Sandi gave her daughter a soft smile, then nodded. That was what Sage needed to believe, that Sandi knew no one of this happened because of the divorce that the family was going through. "Are there any siblings? Cousins? Friend's children?" Sage asked.

"She has a few cousins, and my friend has a daughter that's Journey's best friend."

"Great! That's what I wanted to hear. There is going to be a support system, because I

won't lie. This is going to be a long road, but together we'll get through it. Isn't that right, Journey?" She nodded, her lips even curving into a slight smile. "Did the doctors ever say what they felt caused the stroke?" Sage asked. She stood up and went over to her stethoscope and blood pressure cuff.

"High blood pressure," Sandi mumbled.

"That can be caused by a lot of things. High sodium diet, for one. Does Journey eat a lot of greasy foods?"

Sandi snickered. "She's a teenager. They live on corn dogs and French fries."

Sage smirked. "See, doesn't always have to come from stress. Let me check her BP and see where we stand today."

The room got eerily quiet as she pumped up the cuff. She let it release slowly until the air was all out. "Well?" Sandi asked.

"A little high. 130/92. We're going to do some exercises that will help to keep the BP low and of course work on a diet regime. Again, it's not going to be easy, but she's alive. So that's what matters."

"Right!" Sandi seemed hopeful, so it was a definite start.

Journey made a scowl and Sage laughed. Typical teenager behavior. She couldn't fault her for that. She documented the BP and turned to both of them. "I'm going to grab a few things and I'll be right back in here." She opened the door and saw Stassi pacing in front of the door. She looked up and Sage frowned. "What are you still doing here? Thought you were headed out."

"I should be, but the truth is, I'm intrigued by your patient." Sage arched an eyebrow.

“And you don’t have a nurse. I thought I could be of assistance to you.”

Sage smirked and moved past her to the nurse’s station. “You shouldn’t be here if you don’t have to.” She shook her head and tossed the chart down on the counter. When she looked over to Stasi, she didn’t budge. “I think I can handle it. Go home and get some rest. That’s where I’d be, if I didn’t have to be here.”

“You could use the help. I know you could. I really don’t mind putting in a couple more hours. Let me at least take the burden off of you when it comes to administrative work. Oh, and by the way, your next patient said they needed to reschedule anyway, so I believe Journey would be your last patient.” Sage gawked at her. Who was this woman? Why did she insist on intriguing Sage every step of the way? “I’m not leaving, so you might as well put me to use.”

Sage tossed up her hands. “Do you know how to enter in vitals?” Stassi nodded. “Notes?” Again, a nod. “Okay, enter her BP and the notes I took in her chart. When you’re through with that, you can file away the chart. In the desk is information regarding stroke at a young age.” She pointed to the desk. “I believe we’re low in copies. Make about fifty copies and bring me one so I can give it to our patient.”

Stassi nodded and quickly went to work. Sage hesitated and watched her before she went to the supply closet and pulled out books that they had to help their patients relearn to read. It was a step toward getting Journey back to being a self-efficient teenager.

“Does Journey like to read?” she asked, entering the room.

Journey made a face before her mom could even respond. “Probably her least favorite subject.”

Sage laughed. “Well, it’s about to become her way of living, because if you can’t

read then it's impossible to lead a truly fulfilling life and patients that have a stroke have to teach their brain to do these things all over again.”

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“How long have you been an Occupational Therapist?” Sandi asked.

“Eight years and not a day goes by that I regret making that decision. So, today, we’re going to start with See Spot Run.”

Journey released a slight giggle, which was already a great sign. She would get Journey to a place where she was happy in less than three months. That was a goal that she was ready to achieve.

Stassi

Stassi covered her mouth, holding back a yawn. It’d been a long day, working nearly twelve hours and Stassi could feel it in her bones. Her ponytail was in disarray, and she could only imagine what her makeup looked like. Perhaps this was one reason the hospital had a code on what you should and shouldn’t have on your appearance. She grabbed a hand mirror out of her purse and winced. It’s even worse than she thought. She fought the urge to grab her blush and lipstick around her purse and had a little more color on her face.

“You look fine.” She whirled around in her chair, spotting Sage there with a raised eyebrow. Her cheeks pinked up; she dropped the mirror in her purse, then shoved it under the desk and returned to her computer.

“Not that it much mattered,” Stassi nonchalantly replied.

“I can see that.” Sage snickered. “If it makes any difference, I think the lesser the makeup, the purer the beauty.”



Stassi's cheeks flushed and she looked back at her computer. That sounded like an offhanded compliment, if Stassi wanted to take it all in.

"But as you say, it's not like it matters." Stassi looked up and Sage offered her a wink. Sage turned away, just as she yawned, shaking her head to clear herself from it. "I'm exhausted." "But, you're the one that should say that. How many hours has it been? Ten?"

"Twelve," Stassi admitted, then shrugged. "Barely feel the tiredness," she lied. She turned back to the computer, Sage's eyes falling back on her. "Just finishing up scheduling Journey's appointments and getting all the documentation and follow-up notes. Then the night should be a wrap."

"I wouldn't have been able to do it without you." Sage's tone was soft and pure. Stassi looked up, noting that Sage had turned to gawk at her. She felt the warmth in her cheeks again. "I mean it. If it weren't for you, I would still have several hours of work."

"I was happy to help," Stassi replied. She meant every word. The night brought on a sense of belonging somewhere that she had never felt in her life. She couldn't have just picked that up anywhere. She needed this moment. Sage nodded, her eyes still fixated on Stassi. "You're good with your patients, Sage." This time Sage's cheeks turned pink, and she looked away. "I mean it. The way you eased in with Journey and made her feel comfortable, it was clear how much she really felt this bond with you."

"I love my patients," Sage stated.

"Has this always been what you wanted to do?" Stassi stopped working and focused on Sage. She was intrigued to hear the response and Sage considered the question with great thought as Stassi kept zoned in on her.

“My grandpa had a stroke when I was just a young teenager. I saw out the OT’s were around him and I knew then that I wanted to do this. They were some of the best caregivers he had, healing him from the stroke and taking care of the family in the process. So, you could say that this has been in my blood, longing to help those who were the most in need. And Journey, while I don’t usually have such young patients, they are the ones that I have to care for the hardest. I want her to know that she isn’t in this alone.”

Sage was vulnerable with Stassi and Stassi couldn’t tear her eyes away. “My grandma had cancer when I was twelve. She was the sweetest person I ever knew. She wasn’t the type that would get caught up in a high-maintenance kind of life. She was down-to-earth, loved to laugh, and loved to show everyone how they should lead their lives. When she was in the hospital, I saw the love and devotion the staff gave her through her final days; it felt like they were all part of the family. So, I get what you’re saying. I find it quite admirable that you took that time in your life to decide what you wanted to do when you grew up.”

Sage smiled and then snickered and turned away. She laughed for a moment, then caught her lower lip between her teeth. Stassi smiled but wasn’t sure what they were laughing about.

“Wanna let me in on your joke?”

Sage looked up and shook her head, then snickered again. “It’s nothing. Funny, really.”

“I love to laugh.” Stassi grinned. “Come on. I mean, you kind of need to tell me because it would be rude to leave me hanging.”

“It’s kind of ridiculous. I really can’t believe I’m even saying anything.” Sage’s cheeks turned red again.

“You might as well just come out and say it,” Stassi shrugged. “Who’s going to judge anyway? We’re sort of bonding, so now is the ideal time to share.” Stassi moved in closer, engrossed in what secret Sage had stashed away inside of her.

“Just thinking about something Lena mentioned earlier.” Stassi tilted her head. “She said there was a rumor going around of how you got your job.”

Stassi’s face fell. She quickly looked away, feeling like everything had been stolen from her in one swoop. She would now have to confess that all rumors were true, and her father owned the hospital. Her stomach clenched and she looked back at the computer.

“It’s crazy that anyone would believe the rumors. I mean, getting to know you, you obviously have a big heart. You don’t seem like you’d be that sort of person.”

Stassi frowned and turned to her. “What sort of person?” Stassi asked.

Sage grimaced and shrugged. “To sleep around, just for a job.”

Stassi’s jaw dropped. “What? Those are the rumors going around? That I slept with someone, so I could get this job?” Her face flushed. She thought her secret was out, but hearing this one made her laugh from the gut. She covered her mouth, trying not to be too disrespectful. “But seriously?”

Sage nodded. “I didn’t believe it for a second, but now, it’s even clearer that there’s no way.” She hesitated and Stassi turned back to her computer. She shook her head, then released a laugh.

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“People will believe what they want to believe.” She shrugged. “Let them have their thoughts. Those that matter will know the truth.”

There was a part of her that wanted to confess everything to Sage. If she could have one friend in the hospital who knew her story, she wouldn’t feel so alone. But she had made a silent vow to herself. She wasn’t going to get her dad involved and if people knew he owned the hospital they would simply see it as her being privileged in some way. It wasn’t worth it.

But Sage could be that friend you need to talk things through.

Stassi finished up her computer and they both gathered their things and left the floor, taking the elevator to their parking lot. “Again, I really appreciate you being here,” Sage commented as they exited the hospital. “I owe you.”

Stassi shrugged. “I feel like you don’t owe me anything. I got a lot of satisfaction from being there.” She stopped at her car and glanced at Sage. “See you around, Sage.”

“See you, Stassi.” Sage waved and headed off to another row to get her car.” Stassi slid into the car and considered the evening. What harm would it have been to tell her about her father? Yet, it wasn’t something Stassi was fully prepared to involve anyone else in. In due time, perhaps. For now, she would settle on the fact that she had a friend in Sage, which was the first step in making the hospital feel like a home.

Sage

Sage took a long swig of water. Stassi hadn't left her mind since they parted ways in the parking lot. There was something interesting about her, but more importantly, there was something real about her. If she slept her way to get into that position, then that was a whole other Stassi altogether and Sage just couldn't see it. What stared her straight in the face, though, was that based on everything she saw, Stassi was someone she wanted to get to know better. Last night was a great start at that. She released a yawn and got up from the table.

She was glad Stassi was able to get some rest, as she had to have been exhausted. It was a double shift for her and when you're starting out in a position, you don't know what to expect.

Sage poured herself a coffee, when she heard the door to the breakroom swing open. She grabbed her sugar and turned to see Lena. Lena's face was held with a wide-eyed stare and a bit mischievous. She came running over, her face full of insight.

"You are not going to believe what I just heard." She grabbed Sage's hand and pulled her into the nearest seat.

"Hey, now. Coffee here." Sage laughed. "I hope this gossip is more truthful than the one about Stassi." Sage rolled her eyes and took a sip of her coffee.

Lena arched an eyebrow. "How do you know it's not true? Did you ask her?"

Sage snickered. "First of all, no, I didn't technically ask her. But Stassi and I were working late together last night." She shrugged. "You can just tell the type of person when you're working so closely with them, and I know in my heart that Stassi just isn't that type of person."

Lena arched an eyebrow. "Describe closely." She then moved in. "Give me all the juicy details."

Sage rolled her eyes. “You’re impossible.” She took another drink. Lena could believe what she wanted. She knew nothing happened, other than two people that were finally getting to know one another. “It was a patient that Stassi was just helping me out with. She stayed late because she knew that I was without a nurse and needed someone that could handle the administrative parts of the job. I was grateful for the help. She’s a sweet person.”

“That’s behind all that makeup.” Lena snickered, standing up from the table and going to the refrigerator to grab water.

“She’s toned her makeup way down,” Stassi argued. “Besides, as Stassi says, it is what it is. People are going to believe what they want to believe. She doesn’t seem too upset that small-minded people want to believe that she had an affair, all to get a job.”

As she drank her coffee, Lena turned to her, and her jaw dropped. “So, you really said something to her?”

Sage shrugged. “I wanted to set the story straight and I wanted her to know that if she heard the rumors, I didn’t once believe that she was involved in anything so, so, scandalous.”

“How noble of you.” Lena made a face and wandered back over to the table, plopping down in the spot across from Sage. She still held that mischievous grin. Sage was done trying to convince Lena of anything. If she wanted to trust that the rumors, she heard were true, then there wasn’t anything Sage could do to convince her otherwise.

“You came here with news to share...” The words trailed off as she took another sip of coffee.

“Oh. Right. Well, it’s not gossip.” She scrunched up her nose. Well, I guess it’s sort

of gossip. But based on the truth, because it's already happening."

"Just spit it out." Before Lena got out the gossip, Sage would have to dismiss herself and get back to work. So if she didn't start with it, she would never have heard this big news.

"I heard that they're cutting shifts and dropping employees, like none of them even mattered." Lena's brows furrowed. "They said they're starting from the bottom and going straight to the top. Even people that are retiring in a year or two might find themselves jobless because they won't have to pay them their full pensions." Lena downed half her water as Sage considered that piece of info.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it." Sage shook her head. "There's no way that they're letting people go. We're running on a barebones staff as it is. How much lower can we possibly go?" That was one point to add out there, but it also would mean that Stassi would be one of the first cuts. They could easily say that the therapists could check their patients in and take them back to the room. There were ways to cut staffing, but none of it left a warm fuzzy feeling for Sage. "In two weeks, I have the meeting."

"Hopefully," Lena mumbled. "I mean, what would stop him from canceling, again." She rolled her eyes. "They obviously don't care what we think, and half the staff could be on their last leg in two weeks."

Lena was always the drama queen, but she wasn't really wrong this time. It could happen, but Sage wanted to believe that nothing could transpire that quickly. She took a sip of her coffee.

"Without staff, they'll lose patients. Without patients, there's no money." Sage tried for optimism, but it had been proven frequently that the hospital didn't much care for how the employees saw things. "Have you heard anyone losing their job yet?"

“Well, no. Although, Lila in the lab has been warned and practically threatened that she could be one of them to be let go.”



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Sage snickered. “Well, Lila has come to work drunk, you know. It could be all connected. She is harming the patients in her intoxicated nature.”

“It’s only happened once.”

“And that’s okay?” Sage arched an eyebrow. “I’m just saying, let’s not get all worried about our jobs. If anything happens, we’ll both easily find something else.” Maybe even better. It was possible that it could be the one thing that was able to move them to look for something else. Sage wasn’t opposed to it. She finished off her coffee and stood up. “Have to get back to work, but I’m just saying that everything will all work out. Trust me.” She tossed her cup into the trash, grabbed her water bottle, and left the breakroom. She had to get that meeting and finally make a difference. They couldn’t keep them quiet forever, and she would be the voice of change.

Stassi

Stassi took a sip of her coffee and heaved a sigh. Now that was a fresh brew. She couldn’t go another day with the hospital coffee. She just got paid and could finally relish in the deliciousness that she had grown to expect. She leaned back in her chair and pulled up the app on her phone. She had downloaded it the minute she learned that was the most effective way to get details on her paycheck. She had been there three weeks, so it was finally time to enjoy the fruits of her labor and she was surprised by how excited she was to see what all that hard work had produced.

It was different being a model. In modeling you might get paid high dollars for a photoshoot, but it was one day. You could work, get paid, and then not have another

job for several days. Working at the hospital you had days of exhaustion because you were working over twelve hours every day, dead on your feet by the time you left and went home. Most of the time if you didn't eat at the hospital, you didn't eat. It wasn't a gig for the wary, but Stassi was working to make the best out of it. She had to admit; she was even proud of herself.

She refreshed the screen and her paystub popped up. She stared at it. Her eyes bugged out as the number attempted to process in her brain. "This isn't possible," she mumbled.

She had done the math several times and had a general idea of what she expected to get paid. And this was about a quarter less than what she anticipated. She shook her head and refreshed again. There had to be some sort of mistake. She went to the spot where it said how many hours she worked, and her jaw dropped. There was definitely a mistake. A huge one. She had been back to her schedule numerous times to gauge how many hours she should be paid for and for the two weeks, she was looking at one hundred and one hours. She was paid for eighty.

Stassi went back to her calendar where she documented all the hours she worked and calculated them once more. She hadn't made a mistake. But a mistake was made and that was with the hospital accounting department. She pocketed her phone and finished off the last of her coffee. She would have words with them, because no one was going to short her for the long hours she put into her shifts.

As she left the coffee shop, she thought about the previous night. She had worked four hours over her scheduled shift. If she wasn't going to get paid for her overtime, then why even bother? She reached the hospital, determined to walk straight into the hospital and demand answers with anyone that would listen.

When she reached her floor, she got off the elevator and saw Sage. She was immediately hit with the connection they had formed the previous night. Those four

hours she worked were well received by Sage and Stassi actually caught herself thinking that she would have gladly given another four, even if she knew that it would all be for nothing.

Sage grinned as Stassi approached her. “Hey, Stassi began.”

“Hey!” Sage had this goofy grin on her face that Stassi found quite endearing and beautiful. She was taken aback by it. She had thought maybe she would rattle off her annoyance with her paycheck, but Sage was so cool, calm, and just easy to be around. “I wanted to thank you again for your assistance last night. It was greatly appreciated.”

Stassi grinned. “I was happy to do it. If you ever need help like that again, you know who to call.” She beamed like a beacon on a lighthouse and instantly recoiled. She most likely looked like a fool, but standing this close to Sage had her ready to say all the cheesy things.

Sage wasn’t like the typical women she was attracted to. She was butch, had a single gold chain that was usually hidden by her scrubs, and didn’t thrive on makeup and material things. But she was as real of a woman as Stassi had ever encountered. The women Stassi typically gravitated towards had the same outlook on what was important in life as her: fashion, makeup, and accessories, to name just a few.

“What are you thinking?” Sage asked.

Stassi quickly brought herself out of her thoughts. Sage kept a simple smile on her lips, looking like she genuinely wanted to know. “Just how last night showed me what is truly important.”

Sage nodded. “Those are moments that one can always hold onto.”

Stassi locked eyes with Sage. She was caught in the moment and a single strand of hair was out of place at Sage's temple. Stassi reached up to brush it back, but Sage quickly jumped back.

"I'm sorry," Stassi quickly apologized. "There was a hair, and I was going to, but I should have—instead...um" She stammered, quickly looking away for her escape. There wasn't a hole she could crawl into, although that would have been pretty nice.

"That's okay. No need to apologize. If I would have seen a hair out of place, I would have done the same." Sage smirked. "But you never seem to have a hair out of place." Her tone softened and Stassi looked up at Sage. There wasn't any judging and she completely put Stassi at ease. Stassi gave a smile, glad to have that comfortability factor back.

"I got my first paycheck today," Sage began, glad to change the subject. "It wasn't quite what I expected."

"No surprise there," Sage mumbled.

"I didn't get paid for any of the overtime I had the two weeks that's on this paycheck. I had twenty-one hours and nothing. Clearly, it's a mistake, right?"

Sage shook her head. "I wish I could say it was a mistake. The hospital doesn't currently pay for OT. They don't say you can't work over, just that you can't get paid for it, if you do work over."

Stassi's jaw dropped. "How is that even legal?"

Sage shrugged. "We ask those questions, too." She then frowned. "It should have been in your manual, though. If it wasn't, then they can't enforce it. I'm fairly confident they added it last year, though. If you want, I can look at your manual with

you. You might actually have a leg to stand on, if they don't have it in there."

Stassi groaned. "You mean the manual that was like fifty pages? I thought it'd have things in there that were obvious to anyone. So, I didn't really read it. In fact, I'll have to look around for it."

Sage gave another genuine smile. "I get it. It's boring and true that most people don't pay much attention to it." She glanced at the computer and frowned. "I'm sorry, my patient is here, but if you need me to help you locate where it gives that information, I gladly will. It's the least I could do. And I can tell you're frustrated. It's quite understandable, but if you think about going to your supervisor, it won't do any good. It's just the way things are." She shrugged and rushed away to grab her patient.

Stassi didn't like that mantra; it's just the way things are. No one should get away with something so devious, as getting people to work for free. It's not cool and even if it was in the manual, that didn't change anything. She had two tasks at hand. Call her father and make sure he was aware. There wasn't any way he would stand for that. But she also needed to find the manual. There was some chance that maybe it wasn't in there and then she could fight it. That was always a possibility.

Sage

Sage finds her thoughts on Stassi for the past few days. When they stood together talking and Stassi went to brush a strand of Sage's hair out of the way, Stassi thought she was going to actually brush it behind her ear. A move that you often see in old rom-com. It startled Sage and she couldn't help but back up. But the truth was, she wouldn't have exactly minded, if she had any inkling that Stassi wanted them to pursue something outside of building their friendship.

She quickly tried to force the thought from her mind. Making extra trips to the front desk to pretend like she needed copies or taking extra glances towards Stassi when she passed by her. They were all indications that Sage was interested in the beauty, but she had to be reasonable.

"Earth to Sage. Come in Sage." Lena nudged her in the ribs as they exited the elevator.

"Huh?" Sage asked.

Lena laughed. "Am I missing something?" Marcus asked.

Lena rolled her eyes. "I think our girl has a little bit of a crush. It's hilarious because I can't count how many times, I've tried to set this woman up and never once did she seem interested. The blind dates were...."

"From Hell," Sage muttered. "But Lena is crazy. I don't have a crush."

Marcus arched an eyebrow. "Let me guess...Stassi?"

"Ding ding ding. We have a winner," Lena laughed as Sage stared at her. "There's nothing to be upset about."

"You're the woman that runs hot and cold with Stassi," Sage pointed out. "You first thought that we would be cute together, then gave me these rumors about her and acted like she's scum, and now you're teasing me and giving me a look that says Go for it, Sage." Sage rolled her eyes. "You confuse me."

"I confuse most people." Lena laughed. "I guess the bottom line is; I want you to be happy. If Stassi can make you happy, who am I to judge?" She winked, nudging Sage in the ribs once more. "And as my very best friend pointed out to me once, chances of the rumors being true are slim."

Sage snickered. "So just like that, you'd be overjoyed if we got together? Well, it doesn't matter, because I'm not crushing."

They stepped into the cafeteria and Sage instantly spotted Stassi sitting at a corner booth. She was alone and met Sage's gaze. She quickly waved her hand, beckoning them to join her.

"And just like that," Lena said. "Lunchtime improves." Lena leads the way over to Stassi's table.

"I'm thrilled you guys are here," Stassi commented. "I thought I was going to be forced to eat lunch alone and the skies are dark, so it doesn't look like going outside is an option. Grab your food and join me."

"Gladly," Lena commented. "Sage was just saying how she wished you were at lunch."

“You were?” Stassi’s eyes bugged out.

Sage stared at Lena, then turned back to Stassi. Yeah, of course. You work way too hard, and I was worried you wouldn’t get a break. We’ll be back.” She grabbed Lena’s elbow and ushered her away from the table. “What the hell was that?” Sage asked.

Lena laughed. “Just giving you the in you want. You can thank me later.” Lena winked and then wandered off. Marcus laughed behind her. She turned and arched an eyebrow. He shrugged and went to get his food. Sage groaned. She just hoped that things would run smoothly, and she wouldn’t have to kick Lena under the table too many times.

After she had her food and got back to the table, she saw Lena was already there. She mentally groaned, as she could only imagine the conversations, they could have already started between one another. They looked to be too deep in conversation that it worried Sage, but she chose not to say anything, simply sitting in the vacant spot next to Stassi. She could smell her perfume, and she was hit with an elegant whiff. She wasn’t just beautiful, but she had an exquisite scent about her. She looked down at her food, hoping that she could concentrate, but already failing miserably.

Marcus returned to the table and the four of them ate, with Sage steering clear of the conversation. Lena spoke about work and then drifted into her conversation about her girlfriend. Stassi seemed interested, too interested. Her eyes were focused on Lena as she spoke, and it caused Sage to laugh.

All eyes went to Sage. Sage felt her cheeks warm. “Just saying that if you get Lena talking about Maya, she’ll never stop.”

Lena laughed. “She isn’t wrong.”



The table turned into laughter and Sage released a breath. One more hurdle crossed. The conversation began flowing again and Sage went back to her food.

“You know, Stassi, you should come to the Hospital’s Happy Hour Friday evening, if you’re not working,” Lena continued. It would be nice to see Stassi outside of the hospital. Sage looked up, waiting to see what Stassi’s reply would be. “I know that Sage would love for you to be there.” Sage choked on her water as she felt all eyes on her. She stared at Lena. “Isn’t that right, Sage?”

“Well yeah, because everyone should experience the Hospital Happy Hour. It’s a lot of fun, so you should come.”

Stassi nodded. “I would love that.”

Sage looked at Lena and then kicked her in the shin. Lena winced and Sage looked back at her food. Lena deserved it because she felt like Lena was just instigating to get a reaction and she didn’t want to be a part of that.

They finished eating and when lunch was over, they all left the cafeteria. Marcus and Stassi were ahead of them, and Sage grabbed Lena’s arm and held her back. “What?” Lena asked.

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“What?” Sage asked. “What was that all about? I know Sage would love for you to be there.” Sage batted her eyes, in replication of how the statement came across.

Lena laughed. “I didn’t look like that.”

“You might as well have,” Sage mumbled.

“Are you ladies coming?” Sage turned to Marcus who had the elevator door open for them. Sage led the way to the door and stepped in next to Stassi. Marcus pressed the two buttons for the floors, with Lena and him getting off on their floor first. That left Stassi and Sage to take two floors alone. A situation that Sage expected to be unbearable. When the doors closed, though, Stassi started the conversation.

“Happy Hour sounds like fun. I’ll be there. That is, if you really want me to.” She gave a slight laugh and Sage met her gaze. Stassi’s face lit up and Sage nodded. “Perfect.” The doors opened and Stassi got off first. She turned around and gave Sage a grin. “Everyone that works here is so nice. I couldn’t have asked to have a better group of work friends.” She turned and walked away from Sage.

Sage shook her head. The intensity of the way Stassi stared at her, made her all hot and bothered. She couldn’t imagine that feeling ending anytime soon. She went to the nurse’s station, where Kimberly, a nurse that works with Physical Therapy was crying. Heather, one of the PTs was patting her on the shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Sage asked.

Heather looked up and grimaced. “Kim just got notified that her hours have been

slashed in half.”

Kim shook her head. “I have two kids that rely on my income. I’m not married, and I have no one. How could they do this?” She sobbed, leaning into the counter.

Sage shook her head, disgusted with how the budgets were handled. Sage looked over to the front desk, where Stassi was back to working, her back towards Sage. Something had to change. If they didn’t get answers soon, there wasn’t any guarantee of the future of them or the hospital.

Stassi

Stassi tossed another outfit to the side, then panned back through her closet. She had to have something in there that would be a mix of chic and casual. She threw another outfit out and then went back through her closet. She grabbed a navy jumpsuit that she had only worn a couple of times, before deciding she wasn’t sure it was a look she was interested in. She held it up in front of her and stared at her reflection in the mirror. It had a bow that was at her bust, allowing her to accentuate her breasts. Perhaps tonight was the night to bring it back out of the closet. Besides, time was getting away from her.

Stassi changed into the outfit and again stared at her reflection. With the right touch of makeup, it would make the outfit really pop. She hoped Sage liked it, because truthfully that was the one person she wanted to impress.

There was little to go on, in believing that maybe Sage wanted something more than a friendship between them. She went to touch her, and Sage rebuked her advances. Yet, Lena acted like Sage was interested and that was something small that Stassi could hold onto. At least it was something. When Sage looked in her direction, Stassi got the butterflies that one could feel when someone was interested. Stassi already knew she was, so now it was just trying to figure out the other party.

The hospital had rented out a small Taqueria that was located two miles from the hospital. Stassi had been there only once before, when she had a meeting set up with a potential advertising agent. It was nice because it had a pool table and darts, along with an olden jukebox that played the current mix of music. But because her new friends were going to be there, she had more of a reason to feel overjoyed.

As she took the drive, she used the opportunity to attempt to get ahold of her file. She had tried several times over the past week, but she was always greeted with the same thing, his voicemail. Tonight wasn't a different story. The message sounded and the beep echoed through the phone.

"Dad, I don't know why you're so busy, or if you're just ignoring my calls, but please...I need to speak with you. It's a matter of life or death. Call me." She disconnected the call before she could rethink the message. That was what had happened every other time she called. She got done with leaving a lengthy message, only to chicken out and delete it, ultimately leaving it as a missed call. Maybe this time it would elicit a response from her.

When Stassi pulled into the parking lot, it was already full of cars. It did appear that everyone came out to these get-togethers. Stassi was happy to see that. She entered the taqueria and a woman was standing at the entrance, speaking with someone that Stassi only briefly knew. She believed her name was Rona. The woman standing with her, though, turned and greeted Stassi with a wave. She rushed over to her.

"Are you Stassi?" she asked.

Stassi frowned. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

The woman laughed. "No, but I've heard a lot about the beautiful blonde with the radiating eyes." She smirked. "I think everyone else is here."

Stassi wasn't sure how to take the compliment. Who did she hear this from? The woman was quick to explain that too.

"Lena," she pointed. "I'm with her." Lena and Marcus stood at the bar. They were doing shots and it appeared like they were trying to see who could out beat who."

"Oh, you're Maya, Lena's girlfriend?" Maya smiled wider. "I've heard a lot about you, too."

Maya laughed. "Welcome." She threw her hands up. "I've been around to see many of these Happy Hours, and I assure you that you will not be disappointed. Just enjoy yourself." She patted Stassi on the shoulder and then walked back to Rona. She was friendly and Stassi could see why Lena would be attracted to her. They seemed to have much in common, including a bubbly persona. Stassi smirked to herself remembering how she once perceived that maybe Sage and Lena were a couple and how it was quickly realized she was wrong.

Stassi moved in closer to where Lena and Marcus were still knocking shots back. Sage stood at the edge watching them. She wore a green t-shirt and black jeans, and Stassi allowed her eyes to wander just a little too long. She latched her gaze on Sage's ass, which was hugged perfectly in those jeans. She bit down on her lip and stared. When she looked up, Sage had her gaze directed at her. Stassi's cheeks felt as if they were on fire, and she gave a smile. Sage walked over to her.

"Hey," Sage replied in greeting. "Lena and Marcus are practically drunk already. I think I'll need to be their DD." She smirked and then looked down over Stassi's outfit. "You look nice."

Stassi smiled. "As do you." She pointed to the thin chain that hung around Sage's neck. "You always have such nice chains."

Sage grinned. “And I have a story behind most. Maybe you’ll hear one or two some other time.”

“I would like that.” She wasn’t confident to say she would love that, because that would mean they were inching even closer together. Something she wouldn’t fight.

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“Would you like a drink?” Sage asked. She motioned a waitress over to them.

“I’ll take a Strawberry Margarita,” Stassi replied.

“And I’ll take a Modelo and Lime.” The waitress left them, and Stassi nervously glanced around. This was one of the few times they were alone together, where they had to carry on a conversation. And never away from the hospital setting. She couldn’t believe how nervous she actually felt.

“It’s nice the hospital does this for the staff,” Stassi commented.

Sage snickered. “They should do more.”

Stassi nodded in agreement, but if she ever got through to her dad, she could have that very serious conversation with him. The waitress came back with their drinks and Stassi reached in her purse to grab some money.

Sage shook her head. “It’s all covered.” Stassi withdrew her hand. That made sense. She wasn’t sure why she assumed she had to get some money out. Maybe for a tip anyway. She sipped on her margarita and caught Sage staring at her. It was either a lovely compliment or Sage was staring at the woman that was silly enough to think they wanted her cash. Either way, her gaze caused Stassi to blush, and she already wanted the evening to linger forever.

Two margarita’s in and Stassi was already relaxing. She started dancing with everyone, tossing an intimate look in Sage’s direction a few times, wondering if it was reciprocated. When Sage would smile, she began to believe it was. When she

was offered a third margarita, she passed, settling on water.

“Hit your limit?” Sage teased.

“Wasn’t sure if you’d have one more spot for another drunk.”

Sage laughed. “For you, I’d make room.” She then laughed and looked away. “That came off a tad flirtatious.”

“Just a tad?” Stassi teased. Sure, the alcohol was adding to the easiness between them, but if she had a third it would surely send way too much ecstasy in her mind. Before Stassi knew what was happening, though, the dance turned into a slow one and she was moving in time to the music with Sage leading the way. Sage and Stassi kept the eye contact going and Stassi felt the intimacy heating up between them, warming up her inner thighs as they danced.

“You do have beautiful eyes,” Sage whispered.

Stassi smiled. “Is that the alcohol talking?” she teased.

Stassi shook her head. “I stopped at one.” Stassi arched an eyebrow. “DD, remember? This is just water with lime. Not nearly the same effect, but worth it in the long room.”

Stassi moved in closer, relaxing in Sage’s arms. The song played drifting them off into a hypnotic haze, completely captivating Stassi in the way her body molded against Sage. The feelings seemed to be reciprocated and Stassi was fully mesmerized in the moment.

When the song ended, Sage grabbed Stassi’s hand and pulled her through the dance floor and up the stairs. Stassi wasn’t the least bit nervous as they made their way up



the long steps and down a corridor. She could have asked where they were going, but she wasn't the least bit curious because she'd go anywhere with Sage.

Sage pushed through a glass door, and they went out onto a balcony that was cascaded with floors and plants. They were on the rooftop, and everything was beautiful.

"One of my favorite places." Sage dropped Stassi's hand and went over to some plants. Stassi watched with intrigue as she lifted each leaf and told stories of what the names were. Stassi was surprised by Sage's vast knowledge of what each plant was. Sage turned and smiled, most likely seeing the shock that was written on Stassi's face. "My grandpa loved plants. He would take me to the botanical gardens for hours on a Sunday and we would just walk around, taking in the various scents and enjoying the scenery."

"He sounds like he was a great guy."

"He was the best." Sage's eyes lit up as she spoke about him. "One of my favorite people in the world."

Sage continued to walk around the garden area and point out various plants for Stassi. Stassi could have been caught up in that moment and never wanted to break from it. When Sage stopped in front of her, she turned and there was this genuine longing between them; it caught Stassi's breath.

"I have a secret," Stassi whispered. Sage's eyes widened and she even stepped in closer. "You say how the rumors started about me getting this job. Well, none of that was true."

Sage laughed. "Believe me, I never believed it."

Stassi blushed, turning away from Sage's intriguing stare. "The truth is, I'm a trust fund kid." Sage tilted her head. "Well, I came from wealth. My father's rich and he would give me money when I was running low on funds. I never needed a regular job." Sage continued to just listen. Stassi wasn't sure what all she wanted to share, but she kept it light. There would be more time to divulge everything. "Unfortunately, my dad had a few bad investments come through and so the money stopped coming in. I had no choice but to make the best of a rocky situation. That meant getting a job and frankly I didn't think maintenance work would intrigue me. I also wasn't interested in waitressing, so this seemed the obvious move. I have to admit, though, I didn't know how this job would make me a better person. But I'm already seeing the shift."

"From the first moment I met you, I thought there was something pretty cool about you." Sage's voice was barely above a whisper. "Thank you for sharing that with me."

Stassi nodded. "I want to open up to you, Sage. As much as I can." She moved in and captured Sage's lips against hers. She thought maybe Sage would pull back, but she felt the passion slowly igniting between them and Sage wrapped her arm around Stassi. Stassi opened her mouth and welcomed Sage's tongue in between her lips. Stassi smiled, growing the intensity in their affection.

"It's about damn time." Stassi jumped back and turned to find Lena staring at them. Lena fell against the wall and laughed. "I thought I was going to have to lock you two in an elevator."

"What?" Stassi asked.

Sage rolled her eyes. "Don't listen to her. She's already drunk."

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“I am not!” Lena shrieked. Her words were slurred, though, so it was hard to dispute.

“There was a time when I thought maybe you two were a couple,” Stassi replied.

Lena laughed, shaking her head, and leaning forward against her knees. “Is it really that funny?” Sage shook her head.

“You can have this one,” Lena replied. “I’ll settle as her BFF. I came up here to see if you gals wanted to join Maya and me in a game of pool. Winner buys drinks.”

Sage laughed. “Because they’re free anyway. What do you say, Stassi? Do you know how to play?”

Stassi smirked. “Guess you’ll just have to wait and see.” She winked and the three of them left the rooftop garden. Stassi was exhilarated to know that Sage and she were in a great place and ready to explore new things together. She couldn’t wait.

Sage

Sage was disappointed that they didn't exchange phone numbers when they left each other at the taqueria. It would have been an option that they could have reached out to each other. Following the kiss, Sage wanted to spend even more time with Stassi. It was disappointing that they didn’t have more intimate time together, but the kiss was something that kept hope inside of Sage that there were better things around the corner.

Stassi wasn’t at the reception desk when Sage arrived at work, yet another

disappointment. “Hey, Cami,” she replied, grabbing the chart. “No Stassi today?”

“She’s working ER desk. They said they wanted to cross-train, so you’re stuck with me.”

“I’ll manage,” Sage teased. “George.”

He came slowly with his cane; mumbling as he passed her. She couldn’t make out what he was saying entirely, but it had to do with her being a couple of minutes late, but even George wouldn’t dampen her mood. She was hopeful that if she could get through the morning, she would be able to see Stassi at lunchtime.

That feeling was dampened when she walked into the cafeteria several hours later and couldn’t find her. It was a beautiful day outside, so it was possible that she would have been in the courtyard, but she didn’t want to think that Stassi would go out there without having first found Sage. In her mind, the courtyard was their place. It was just she didn’t realize that would be the case when they sat out there during that one lunch.

“Sage!” Lena and Marcus called, waving her over to their table.

“No, Stassi?” Sage asked.

Lena smirked. “We’re no longer good enough for her. She has to have her lover nearby at all times.”

Sage rolled her eyes. “We’re hardly lovers.”

“At least not yet,” Marcus teased. “I mean they did seem rather hot on the dance floor Friday night.”

“You thought that was hot. You should have seen them making out on the rooftop garden.” Sage opened her mouth and Lena winked. “See, I told you I wasn’t drunk.”

Sage scoffed. “I’ll go grab my lunch and be right over. As she left them, she couldn’t hide her smile. She was hot just thinking about how they were making out. She grabbed a salad and water, paid, then went back to their table.

Marcus and Lena were talking in hushed tones when Sage got back to the table. “Still talking about my love life?” Sage snickered. “It’s not that entertaining, I can assure you.”

“It makes for a better conversation,” Lena mumbled. “I was just talking to Marcus about these stupid budget cuts. I heard some of the senior nurses talking about it and they plan on cutting sick time and vacation days.” Lena shook her head. “If we don’t figure this all out, I don’t know if any staff will be left behind.”

Sage’s face fell. She would have rather they continue talking to her about Stassi. At least then they wouldn’t have to get this down-in-the-dumps attitude.

“I’ve heard much of the same,” Marcus admitted.

“Last week Kimberly was saying that they slashed her hours. I know it’s getting bad, but what can we do about it? I have that meeting coming up at the end of the week.”

“If he doesn’t cancel,” Marcus muttered.

“Maybe I should go to the budget meeting on Wednesday. If I’m at the door, they can’t really toss me out, can they?” Lena looked hopeful and Sage was glad to see that her friend was stepping up to assist where she could, as well.

“Couldn’t hurt,” Sage replied. “If we’re all doing our part, they’ll take notice. I’m

certain of it.”

At least it was a plan, but Sage worried that her meeting would be derailed, and she would have her friends and co-workers upset with her, even when it wasn't her fault.

“Look who just walked in,” Lena whispered. Sage looked over her shoulder and she saw Stassi. Stassi turned and looked at her, giving her a small wave. Sage excused herself and went over to where Stassi stood.

“Follow me,” Sage whispered.

Stassi didn't hesitate to follow her into the hall. “I won't be able to stay long. They have me cross-training and I didn't think I'd even get a lunch, but...” Before she could finish, Sage pressed her against the wall and kissed her. She held onto Stassi's waist, pinning her up against the wall, both their hearts colliding as one.

“Damn,” Stassi replied, breathlessly gasping.

“You were the one to kiss me Friday, so I wanted to initiate this one. I was afraid I wouldn't see you and frankly that couldn't wait.” She brushed her thumb against Stassi's lip and Stassi stared at her. “But you were saying you couldn't stay.”

Stassi nodded. “Sadly,” Stassi whispered before grabbing hold of Sage's necklace and pulling her to her, drawing her into another kiss. Sage relaxed against her, feeling the heat heavy in her core. If things didn't continue to progress, Sage would feel this hole that only Stassi could fill. She was desperate for her touch.

Stassi

Stassi stood against the counter, her eyes locked on her phone. She was ecstatic to find the luxury coffee cart making its rounds near the ER. Since she barely had a chance to grab her sandwich and head back to the department, a quick stop at the cart would allow her the chance to partake in a latte. Something similar to what she would find in her coffee shop, but with a slight difference. She didn't have to make the drive twenty miles away.

There was one slight problem, though, the woman behind the counter seemed way overworked and the latte didn't provide a quick fix. If she stared at her phone, she could hopefully ignore the fact that she would be late getting back to the desk. As she perused through the website on her phone, she caught a glimpse of an elegant suit, one that would match the speck of gold in her eyes. She could practically feel the way she'd feel if she wore that while out with Sage. A smile peeked on her lips. And if Sage and she shared kisses as she did a few minutes earlier, she would be glad to take her suit off.

"Your coffee. That will be \$10.50." Stassi grabbed a ten and five out of her pocket and pushed it towards the barista.

"Keep the change." She took a sip and heaved a sigh. Not bad for hospital coffee. It certainly beat the regular Joe she was accustomed to getting there, and she would have to remind herself this cart was readily available. She glanced down at her phone as she headed towards the ER doors. The outfit was a bit out of her price range. Well, most glamorous attire was, now. But soon her dad would have her back on her feet, living the luxury lifestyle that she had grown familiar with. She hit the buy now button and pocketed her phone.

She had sent him an email telling him of the conditions at the hospital, only to get ghosted by her own father. She tried to convince herself that he was simply busy, but it was quickly becoming more difficult to believe. There were only so many calls that could go ignored.

As she reached the desk to return to her training, her phone started vibrating. She dug in her pocket and saw her agent, Kelly's, name flashing on the screen. She glanced around; not one person was there to see that she was taking the call. She shrugged and answered.

"Hey Kel, what's it been a month?"



“Too long,” she replied. “Just wanted to give you a call because I’ve got a job for you. Stassi arched an eyebrow. Words that she hadn’t heard or expected to hear. She had every thought that she would tell Kelly that she wasn’t able to take on any jobs until things settled down in her life. But now, her old life was thrust back in her face. Yet, there was a slight tug that crippled her. She had to be realistic. There wasn’t much chance that she could have a full-time job and model on the side. Most modeling projects took weeks, maybe even months. It would require a certain amount of dedication, and this could disrupt everything. Yet, there was a sense of excitement, and she hadn’t even heard what it all was about.

“I’m listening.” She glanced around, hoping that she would still be alone. Sure enough, the corridor was empty.

“I need you for a print campaign with Seasons Boutique. It won’t be a long project. It’s taking place next Saturday and I imagine you’ll be in and out in a few hours, but the pay is great and if it goes well, they’ll expect you to be available for more projects. Are you up for it?”

This was promising and right off, Stassi didn’t have to be set into a heavy schedule. Besides, she didn’t work Saturdays, unless there was an emergency and if she had this setup, she would be able to get out of being called in. The extra income would help to pay off the outfit she ordered, as well. Things were looking up.

“Yep. Sounds great.”

“Perfect. I’ll send you the details in the coming days. Talk soon.” She disconnected the call and Stassi couldn’t erase the grin.

“Stassi!”

Stassi spun on her heel, prepared to get yelled at about being on her phone. “Yes?”

The words came out tense, but not as tense as her racing heart.

“Just got a call and you’re needed upstairs in Therapy. You did well today and if needed, I expect we’ll give you a call in, if you’re good with that?”

“Of course. Anything to help out.” Stassi grinned and then grabbed her purse and headed to the elevator. The ER wasn’t her ideal department. She actually preferred working in Therapy. Maybe because there was always the chance that she would catch a glimpse of Sage, and nothing enticed her more. When she got off the elevator, she was hit with how quiet it was.

She headed to the front desk, where Cami was leaning back in her chair and swiveling from side to side. She caught a small yawn from her, before their eyes met. Cami laughed. “You caught me.”

Stassi gave a smile. “Did you want lunch? Is that why you called me up here?”

Cami frowned. “I hadn’t. If I had, it would have been to keep me company.” Cami released a laugh. “Two patients canceled and we’re not due for another one for at least an hour.” She scrunched up her nose. “Makes for a long and boring shift.”

Stassi frowned. “Well, if it wasn’t you, then...” Her words trailed off when she spotted Sage headed their way. Was it possible?

“Sorry to tear you away from the ER,” Sage began. “But I have some filing that’s a mess and thought you could take a look at it. Won’t take too much of your time. Possibly thirty minutes or so.”

Stassi was a tad disappointed. To be summoned by Sage was nothing short of amazing, but to be summoned for work, she was disheartened. “Of course. Show me the way.”

“Gladly.” Sage turned and escorted Stassi back down the hallway, bypassing the filing room. She pushed open one of the exam rooms and motioned for Stassi to enter.

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“There’s filing in here?” Stassi asked, turning to face Sage. Sage had a gleam in her eye, catching Stassi by surprise. “Or is there not?” Stassi teased moving in closer to Sage.

Sage shrugged. “Sometimes you have to make your own destiny.” She grabbed Stassi’s hand and pulled her to her. Stassi’s lips crashed to hers and Sage hungrily kissed her, causing Stassi’s heart to burst from her chest. “Ever since the two minutes at lunch,” Sage breathlessly began. “I wanted to kiss you.”

Stassi slipped her fingers into Stassi’s hair and pulled her closer to her. She didn’t have any argument with her. Sage trailed her hands up the back of Stassi’s top and clung to her bare back, while Stassi shifted and kept the heated kiss rolling through her body.

Stassi pulled back from the kiss and grabbed onto her shirt tossing it to the side. Sage tilted her head and laughed. “You naughty girl.” She dipped her eyes to Stassi’s breasts and moved in closer. “I’d devour you right now, but then we’d both be hungry for more.”

“What’d be wrong with that?” Stassi whispered. She reached up and unclasped her bra, letting it slowly fall to the ground. “You locked the door, right?”

Sage nodded and moved in cupping Stassi’s breasts in her hand. She looked up and grinned. “Beautiful.”

Stassi moved in and captured Sage’s lips with hers. Her tongue swept in and claimed a moan that exited Sage, while Sage greedily groped Stassi. “I need you,” Stassi

whispered between their kisses.

“I need you more,” Sage replied, grinning and pushing Stassi back up against a bed. Stassi felt the warmth inside of her practically boiling over. She grabbed onto Sage’s shirt and slipped it up and over her breasts, letting it down to the floor. When an alarm interrupted them.

“Dammit,” Sage groaned, breaking from another heated kiss.

“What’s that?” Stassi asked, gasping. The moment quickly gone. Sage grabbed Stassi’s bra and handed it back to her, then picked up her shirt.

“My next appointment will be here shortly.”

“I don’t understand. Cami said that we had an hour.” Sage quirked up an eyebrow. “I mean, that your patient wouldn’t be here for another hour.”

“That might be true, but I have to set up the room and get things prepared.” She shook her head. “But we were on the track for...” She snickered, then shrugged. “There’s always another day.”

Stassi mentally groaned what she wouldn’t give if they could go back to their heated embrace. “Oh, you didn’t hear my news.” She put on her bra and pulled over her top, as Sage stared, waiting. “So, I got a call from my agent.”

Sage snickered. “You have an agent.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure I told you. Or thought I told you.” She shrugged. “I do some modeling on the side and my agent called and said that I’m set up for a gig next Saturday. Could be an exciting one.”

“Huh...” Sage then nodded. There wasn’t anything beyond that and Stassi stared at her, waiting for her to gush over the news. Something that never came.

“So, anyway, that’s all. Just wanted to share.” Sage gave a slight nod and turned from Stassi. Stassi frowned but didn’t want the excitement of them nearly being together to be overshadowed by how the meek display of enthusiasm coming from Sage. “So, now that we’re getting closer, I think we should go on a date.”

Sage turned, obviously catching her attention. “You do, huh?”

“It’s the obvious next step, I would think.” Stassi continued to wait, wondering what was going through Sage’s mind at that very moment. “I don’t want to push or anything, but I think it’s a great idea.”

“Alright,” Sage replied. “On one condition. I get to make the arrangements.”

Stassi nodded. She wouldn’t object to that. She wanted someone that would take the initiative and if Sage was willing to go to those depths, then she would gladly accept it. She was excited about an official date and hopeful that nothing would disrupt their evening alone.

It wasn’t long for Sage to decide when the date would be and what the plans were. Huntington Botanical Gardens seemed like the perfect choice, especially when their first kiss was held surrounded by an array of flowers and plants. It seemed Sage put a lot of thought and effort into where they should go. A quality that Stassi was appreciative of.

However, as the date began, it felt like things were forced between them. In fact, it’d been a week since Stassi got up the nerve to suggest they go on a date and that week was the tensest between them. Stassi didn’t want to ruin the evening by pointing out the inevitable, but she felt like Sage was merely going through the motions.

When they got back to Sage's apartment, Stassi considered that maybe Sage would walk her to her car, and they would part ways only two hours into the night. To her surprise, though, Sage led her to her apartment door.

"Do you like pizza?" Sage asked.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Made it all vegan," Sage replied. "Just have to toss it in the oven."

"Sounds delicious." Stassi stepped into the foyer and looked around. Sage's apartment was modest, and this was the first time Stassi really had a chance to take it all in. It's small, yet cozy. A far contrast from the apartment style that was typical with Stassi.

"Do you want some wine?" Sage asked, tearing Stassi away from the gawking she was doing in the living room. Sage held up a glass of wine and Stassi took it with a smile.

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“Thank you!” She took a sip and then swallowed it slowly. “Nice place you have here.”

“Thanks. It’s home, so can’t complain.” She shrugged and the conversation stagnated again, with Stassi sipping on her wine and wondering when the next piece of conversation would ignite. She licked her lower lip, then looked over to Sage. “This evening was fun. I’ve never been there, so glad I got to experience it.”

“Yeah. One of my favorites.” Sage took a drink of wine, then looked up and met Stassi’s gaze. “So, how have things been at work?”

“Good. Great, mostly. I enjoy it.” Stassi looked down at her wine. Conversation stalled. She looked up and Sage quickly glanced down at her wine glass.

“I should check on the pizza,” she mumbled. She turned and left the living room. Stassi groaned. They had been there for no more than ten minutes and the pizza had to still be going. Was it merely an excuse to get away from her? Stassi left the living room and went down the hallway to the kitchen. Sage was up against the counter, her eyes staring aimlessly across the kitchen to the wall.

“Something on your mind?” Stassi asked. She wanted things to get back to the point where they could talk about anything, whether it was life growing up, work, or the weather. Things weren’t tense between them. That’s why she wanted the date. She knew that Sage was someone she could get along with and not have to be someone she wasn’t.

Sage nodded. “I’m sorry. Guess I haven’t really been in the mood tonight. Perhaps I



should have canceled.”

Stassi frowned and looked away from Sage. “Oh well, if you feel that way about it, then maybe you should have. Don’t want you doing something you don’t want to do.” She threw up her hands. “In fact, I could just leave now and put us both out of our misery.”

Stassi turned and it wasn’t fifteen seconds before Sage was rushing over to her and reaching for her hand. There was a slight spark that struck Stassi and she turned and met Sage’s gaze. “I don’t want you to go, Stassi. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just struggling with the hospital, and I’ve put my heart into that place and with budget cuts, I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be able to do it.”

“Budget cuts?” Stassi stared at Sage. Sage slowly nodded. Stassi knew it was bad, but she hadn’t heard hints of budget cuts.

“There was a budget meeting and well, from what I hear, it didn’t go well. Next week I have a meeting and I’m just worried that it won’t go as planned. If it doesn’t, then we might all think about looking for something else. This place is just not the place it used to be. And it’s sad.”

Stassi listened, intently. If her father didn’t answer before, she would demand he answer her now. People were going to lose their jobs over this. The patients deserved better, and her father would ensure they got better. Together they could help make it happen.

“I don’t want tonight to be brought down by my sour mood. Forgive me?”

“Forgiven.” Stassi smiled and Sage leaned in and gave her a kiss. As they kissed, the oven timer went off. Sage slipped her hands up Stassi’s shirt and hugged her to her, not breaking from the intense connection that had reunited them.

“The oven,” Stassi breathlessly stated.

“Can wait,” Sage finished. Stassi laughed. She didn’t care if they had burnt pizza. She was just glad to figure out why things had been so off with them. When the timer continued to go off, Sage groaned and pulled back. “Hold that thought.” She gave a wink and turned to the stove. Stassi bit her lower lip, grinning as the thoughts of where they could go by the end of the night danced through her mind.

Sage put together two plates and filled up their wine and they sat down to enjoy the pizza. But throughout the meal, Stassi caught herself staring at Sage, wishing they could just toss the plates into the sink and get back to the kiss.

After two pieces, Sage glanced across the table. “I’m not all that hungry. At least not for pizza.” She gave a wink and Stassi laughed.

“You read my mind.” Sage got up and walked around to take Stassi’s hand, and she escorted her back down the hallway and this time to a bedroom. When she turned back to Stassi, Stassi took charge. She grabbed hold of Sage’s shirt and pulled her to her, raising the shirt as they kissed passionately just two feet from the bed. Sage pushed Stassi down to the bed and Stassi stared up at her, watching as Sage did a striptease in front of her.

When the last piece of clothing had been shed from Sage, Stassi grabbed hold of her shirt and pulled it up and off of her, then Sage moved in and helped her remove her bra. Stassi kicked out of her pants and Sage grabbed hold of her panties and tore them slowly down Stassi’s legs.

“Damn,” Stassi whimpered, tossing back her head and trying not to quiver with need. It was impossible. Sage grabbed Stassi’s chin and raised her head to her, so they could return to the desperate kissing, Stassi’s knees trembling. Through the kiss, she spotted Sage smirking and Sage touched her hands to Stassi’s knees to steady them.

“I’ve got you,” she whispered, before breaking from the kiss and moving her lips to Stassi’s neck. Stassi released a groan and arched her back. Those words played dangerously inside Stassi’s mind. Stassi laid her head down on the pillow as the kiss deepened. Sage’s breath was hot as she wandered down Stassi’s body, her teeth latching on Stassi’s right breast. She sucked as Stassi wiggled underneath her. One hand held firmly onto Stassi’s waist as she continued to suckle her nipple. She shifted and latched onto the left one.

Stassi stretched out her arm and held onto the edge of the bed while enjoying the way Sage’s tongue swooped around her curves. “Yesssss,” she groaned, her body trembling with desire.

Sage splayed kisses along Stassi’s navel before trailing a line of kisses up her body and to her chin. She kissed, then elicited a groan before moving her lips back to Stassi’s. Stassi slid her tongue into Sage’s mouth, and they hungrily kissed, Stassi’s heart pounding steadily into her chest. Her opening wept for Sage to move down lower, but she couldn’t tear herself away from the heated kiss.

As they kissed, Sage moved her hand from Stassi’s waist and moved down between her legs. Two fingers snaked their way into Stassi’s opening, dipping in to spread her apart. Stassi bit down as her core throbbed with Stassi pumping her fingers in a steady motion.

Sage swirled her tongue around Stassi’s before exiting her mouth and shimmying down Stassi’s body. Stassi gripped tight to the bed, her body already primed for what was going to happen. She arched her back and released a breath, her eyes rolling up to the ceiling. Hurry! Before I can’t control myself. She shifted back under Sage as Sage moved in, replacing her fingers with her tongue.

Stassi bore down and closed her eyes, her mind racing as Stassi powered in and out of her. Quickly Stassi’s lower half started to tremble. Sage reached out and touched her

leg, steadying her, but Stassi couldn't hold back the cries that built inside of her. "Oh God," she groaned, bucking her hips hard against Sage's tongue. "Sage," she cried, wriggling even faster beneath her.

"Come for me, baby," Sage moaned, thrusting her tongue in harder.

Stassi groaned, her fluids gushing from her and her eyes falling back into her sockets. The room began to spin, and she came hard, crashing down to the bed, her body convulsing until the tremors slowly dulled.

Sage felt her way back to Stassi's lips and she had a huge grin on her lips. "Kiss me," Stassi breathlessly gasped.

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Sage fell into her and kissed her longingly, holding her tightly against her body. Stassi had never had such an earth-shattering experience, but it was only just their beginning.

Sage

Sage stretched out her arms, her hand slowly sliding down the woman in her bed. She grinned and hovered over her. She looked so peaceful asleep. It was just after six and Sage had to be to the office by nine. Stassi was off, but she had no problem if she stayed in her bed all day and waited for her to get home. It was a thought that quickly hit Sage. To say that about someone she'd only known for a month, was crazy. However, she wasn't sorry to think those words. The previous night was everything she wanted and more.

She moved in and kissed Stassi softly on the lips. She could rest a little more. Sage wanted to get her some breakfast. If it was in bed, all the sexier. She got up and grabbed her fluffy robe from the chair and slipped it on, taking one more long look over to where Stassi was still sound asleep.

Sage went to the kitchen and pulled out all the makings of a grand breakfast buffet. She hit the button on the radio, so it played softly in the kitchen as she hummed along to an Adele song that she barely knew. She had the waffles in the toaster oven and was scrambling her eggs when she heard the shuffling of feet. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Stassi standing there, gawking.

Stassi grinned. "Hope you don't mind that I borrowed a shirt."

“Mind? It fits you well.” Sage winked, then walked over and planted a soft kiss on her lips. “I’m disappointed, though. I was hoping to serve you breakfast in bed. Consider it your award for the hot sex last night.”

Stassi laughed. “You are the one that deserves all the praise. I’ve never had such an erotic night in my life.”

“Then something to surpass in the future.” Sage winked, then went back to the food, with Stassi laughing softly behind her.

“I woke up because I got a call from the hospital.”

“Oh?” Sage turned and arched a brow.

“Yep. Turns out I’m needed in the ER this morning. No one to run the front desk.”

“That’s what happens when they keep cutting people,” Sage mumbled. Stassi stared, but Sage quickly turned back to the food. “What time?”

“Whenever I can get there. Thought I would just go in when you do. If I could take a shower here and borrow a pair of scrubs...” Her words fell off and Sage nodded. She began to pile the eggs and bacon on a couple plates, then felt Stassi’s arms around her. “We could take a shower together.” She kissed the nape of Sage’s neck, exciting Sage with her hair standing on her arms. She turned around and tossed her arms around Stassi. “I take that as a yes.”

“Hell yes,” Sage whispered, kissing Stassi and hoping she knocked the anxious thoughts from her mind. This wasn’t the time to dwell on budget cuts and anything else that could hinder their growing connection. She had to give in to all her desires and let doubts get cast away. “Eat up. I’ve made plenty.”

“I can see that,” Stassi grinned. “All my favorites. It’s like you know me already.”

“I’m doing my best to get to know you.” Sage grinned and waited for Stassi to take her seat before Sage sat down across from her. “Oh, what do you want to drink?” She jumped up and hurried to the refrigerator.

“Whatever you have. I’m not particular.” Sage grabbed out orange juice and took two cups from the cabinet. She poured them each a glass and carried them back to the table to where Stassi had already started in on the waffles. She sighed. “Delicious.”

“Seeing that smile on your face makes slaving over the store this morning worth it.” Sage laughed, forking some eggs onto a piece of toast. They talked casually over the breakfast meal, and it did take her mind off of the hospital, a much-needed distraction. There was never a time when Sage could imagine that she would feel comfortable sitting at a kitchen table, eating breakfast with another woman. Her heart had been shattered a time or two before and this was something that she never truly desired again. Yet, with Stassi smiling and enthusiastically enjoying being there with her, it put Sage’s mind in a different mindset.

When breakfast was done and the dishes were in the dishwasher, Sage grabbed Stassi’s hand and escorted her to the bathroom. Stepping under that hot water was refreshing, but not nearly to the extent of their first kiss in the shower. Sage was quickly warped back into the place that the bedroom had taken her the previous night. She kissed Stassi with a passion that tingled her toes and Stassi fell back against the shower wall. The steam completely enveloped them as one. The heat was on a Richter scale of off the charts and Sage just wanted them to fall back into bed and forget about work for a few days.

Sadly, all great things are forced to end, and they had to get around to go to the hospital. When Stassi got dressed, Sage tilted her head and smirked. “You look good in my clothes.”

Stassi grinned. “That sounds sexy.”

Sage grabbed her hand and pulled her to her. “You look good in my bed, sounds even sexier.” Sage kissed her, and she heard Stassi produce a small laugh, a sound that left Sage wanting her even more. She groaned as she pushed her away. “And on that note, we best get going before both of us end up ‘sick.’”

Stassi laughed. “The hospital would be shocked about that one.” She then frowned, and Sage quickly stepped up to her, worried the frown had all her fears rolled up in her head. “We’re keeping this hush-hush, right?” She shrugged. “I mean, I don’t know that I want everyone in the hospital to know our business. It’s really none of theirs. Besides, it’d be nice to have you all to myself, with no one frowning down upon us.”

Sage brushed the back of her hand along Stassi’s cheek. “I agree. For now, we’ll keep this between us.” She gave her a quick peck, and the smile returned to Stassi’s face.

Sage led the way to the hospital, with Stassi close behind. She kept checking the rearview mirror to ensure that Stassi was back there, but never once did the distance get between them. When they parked in the hospital, Sage went down one row of cars, and Stassi chose the next. This way no one could say they came together. Sage would do anything to make sure Stassi was comfortable, and if that meant steering clear of any intimate encounters, then she would abide by those rules. However, it was Stassi who walked over to her car. Sage got out, and Stassi had this devilish smirk in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” Sage asked, trying to control her smile.

“There’s no one around.” Stassi moved in and kissed Sage. The heat was still there, just like when they were in the shower and the bedroom the previous night. “Something to get you through your day.” She winked. “Maybe we’ll see each other



at lunch.” She then turned and sauntered off away from Sage, with Sage gawking after her, wishing that she could run and pull her up against her. She licked her lips and snickered. That wasn’t nearly enough to make her get through the day.

Luckily, the morning started off hectic and only got crazier as it went on. Sage kept checking her watch, anticipating lunch, and hoping that Stassi would come grab her so they could possibly have a heated getaway in a room. Yet, none of that happened, and as the morning progressed, she even wondered if she would get to take lunch.

“George?” she called out. She tried not to let her disapproval show. George Ruiz tended to be one of the more difficult patients. He always had something to complain about. But at least she was on time to get him from the waiting room, and he couldn’t harp over that. He came slowly with his cane, mumbling as he reached the desk. His son was on the other side of him, holding onto his arm to guide him. Again, the mumbling. “How are you doing today?” she asked, staying cheerful, despite the grimace on the older man’s face.

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“I’m still walking with a damn cane. How do you think I’m doing?”

She shot a look at his son, and he rolled his eyes. “Dad, it’s not Sage’s fault.”

“That’s what she wants us to believe,” he grumbled. Sage escorted them into the room and closed the door. When she turned back to face him, he continued to grumble. “I should have been done with this cane weeks ago.”

“George, it really hasn’t been all that long,” Sage began.

“Don’t mind him, Sage. He woke up on the wrong side of the bed.” George Jr. tried to talk calm and collected, just as he always did when he accompanied his father. Sage appreciated it, but she knew the truth. He was just a grumpy old man who couldn’t be satisfied with anything. She even sensed that maybe he would have rather the stroke have killed him. It was a sad situation, but his emotions were intrusive wherever he was.

“I did not,” he argued. “I just don’t know what the point of coming here is. The doctors said I would be better in no time, and still, I’m struggling with this damn cane and relying on you to drive me around everywhere. I’m done. It’s clear that Occupational Therapy is a bullshit science and just something to get my money.” George collapsed dramatically into the chair and stared at Sage.

Sage slowly nodded but held up her hand when his son attempted to apologize. “It’s alright. Every patient can feel the way they feel. I know when I had to go around taking care of my grandfather, he felt the same way.” She shrugged and crossed her arms. “You can’t force the patients to want to try to get better. Besides, sometimes it

works, and sometimes it doesn't. It's been a busy day, and I could eat my lunch, if you want to cancel. Your choice."

George Jr's eyes darkened, and there was a sort of glare about them. Sage pleaded with her facial expressions for him to just give it a few more minutes, and his face softened.

Sage continued, "So, you have ten more sessions scheduled. Should I cancel them all?"

George glared at her. "So, just like that, you are dismissing me? What kind of hospital is this? I should report you."

Sage shrugged. "It's really all relative, George. If you don't feel it's working, then why waste your time? I'm just trying to help you out."

He looked away from her, catching a glimpse of his son's eyes. "What do you want, Dad? I could take you home. There was a horserace on that you wanted to see, right?"

George huffed and shook his head at the outrageousness of the situation. "I never..." He remained seated. "Fine. Since we are here. I'll give it a few more sessions," he hastily replied.

George Jr and Sage shared a look, with George Jr trying to hide his grin. It was something that could have easily gone wrong, but to her relief, she didn't have to beg him not to go to the hospital regarding her tactics. And he didn't argue another drop during the rest of his therapy. Maybe she would have to play this card for other patients who were distrusting of the methods.

As she finished documenting in his notes and left the room, she spotted Lena getting off the elevator. Sage gave her a slight wave as she approached. "Marcus is in the

cafeteria; wanna grab some lunch?"

"Your timing is impeccable." Sage glanced at her watch. "I just finished the last patient of the morning, and I have about an hour. Let's get out of here." There was a small ounce of hope inside that she would bump into Stassi in the cafeteria, but she had to remind herself that she wasn't to tell Lena or Marcus anything.

When they got on the elevator, Lena turned to her. "Spotted Stassi earlier. She's working the ER, and I had to run and check on a patient."

"Oh really?" Sage asked, keeping her eyes off the wandering nurse.

"Yep, and funny thing, I could have sworn she was wearing your scrubs." Sage turned to her, and Lena laughed. "Am I wrong?"

"I'm sure there are a ton of those scrubs out there. Seriously, you're whacko. "

Lena tilted her head. "A ton that have a slight tear on the right side? I remember the day you got hooked on that door on floor 3. Funny thing, I would have thought you would have already gotten that fixed."

Sage winced. "How close did you get to her? You can't say anything to anyone. We were together and she got called in to work. There was no time for her to get home and change."

Lena laughed. "Well, I wasn't that close, and you just confessed, so now I know it's true."

Sage rolled her eyes as the door opened. "You tricked me."

"All in fun. I won't say a word, but why are you being so secretive? You can be with

whoever you want. I was just surprised when I recognized it, but clearly, you two dig each other.”

“We just decided that keeping it between us is the right way to go. At least for now.” Lena shrugged, and they entered the cafeteria. Sage glanced around to see if she could spot Stassi, but only saw Marcus seated at a corner table. Perhaps she would get a chance to have a few minutes with her before she went back to work. She grabbed a fruit bowl and water, paid, and then went over to Marcus’ table. He looked up, but his face was somber. “What’s wrong?”

Marcus shrugged and grabbed his phone. “So, Wyatt, who is interning in HR, has sort of a crush on me.”

Sage arched an eyebrow. “He knows you’re taken and in a fully committed relationship, right?”

He shrugged. “Never came up.”

“You’re playing with fire, Marcus. Just don’t let anything go where it shouldn’t go. You have too good of a thing going, and you wouldn’t want to screw that up.”

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“I’m not interested,” Marcus said. “But that’s totally not the point. When you have an in with HR, you tend to learn things, and well, let’s just say that it isn’t always what you want to learn. Take a look.” Sage grabbed his phone and read over an email that was sent to him. “It’s just a plan of what they’re putting together. They haven’t sent out the official word, but it’s coming.”

“What’s coming?” Lena asked, grabbing the seat next to Sage.

Sage pushed the phone towards her so she could read it. “All the senior nurses are getting their 401K’s slashed? How can they do that?”

Marcus shrugged. “And I’m sure they won’t just stop at the nurses. This is getting out of hand. Again, they haven’t finalized the email, but Wyatt said it’s only a matter of time. He was ordered to get it sent out by early next week.”

“Having the middle-man do the dirty work. That’s typical.” Sage shook her head.

“This is annoying,” Lena pushed the phone back to Marcus. “This would never happen if we had a union.”

“Then go ahead and start one,” Sage grumbled. Lena’s brow furrowed in thought. She had a meeting with HR the following week, and she hoped the email would have been sent by then. That way, she could bring it up without getting anyone into trouble. She grabbed her phone and pulled up Stassi’s number.

Sage

I miss you. Doesn't look like you'll make it to lunch. Come over to my place tonight!

Stassi was a great stress reliever, and if nothing else, she could have her as a cherry on her evening, but something had to change. She just wasn't sure how to get that started.

Sage lit two candles and placed them in the center of the table. Flowers were already in the middle, which led to the perfect ambiance. There was a knock on the door, and Sage smirked. She was right on time. She loved that about Stassi.

Sage opened the door and greeted her with a smile before she lowered her gaze to the bag Stassi carried. "What's this?"

"Well, I thought I might as well bring an overnight bag. You just never know, and it's better to be prepared, right?" Stassi moved in and gave Sage a kiss, but the sight of the overnight bag did a lot to Sage's emotions. When she invited Stassi, she hadn't anticipated that Stassi would take it as an invitation to move in. Yet, here, it felt all too familiar, like her past life was colliding with her present.

Stassi tilted her head as the kiss ended. "Did I do something wrong?" she asked. "You look pissed."

"Pissed? I wouldn't say that." Sage turned away from her and wandered back to the kitchen, where the décor greeted them with a romantic hue.

"This is nice," Stassi whispered, but she didn't sound jovial, like when she first arrived.

Sage forced a smile and turned back to her. "I'll take your bag." She reached for it and carried it down the hallway to her bedroom. She felt like she was headed to the gas chamber, instead of all the intimate possibilities that would draw them in.

When she turned back around, Stassi had made her way to the bedroom. Stassi smiled but glanced over to her overnight bag. “If I read too much into the evening, I’m sorry. I don’t have to stay over. It was merely a thought. Just in case, you know?” She walked over and grabbed her bag, but Sage was quick to reach for it.

“Keep it here. It was a good thought. I guess I just have a lot of thoughts going through my head. None that should concern you, though.”

Stassi frowned. “Well, if it concerns you, then it concerns me.” There was a small smile on her lips and Sage wanted to pull her into her arms and tell her how sweet that was, but she was frozen. Was it the fear of getting too close to someone else again, so fast? She moved past her, brushing slightly against Stassi before leaving the room. “You know,” Stassi continued. “Whenever I’m stressed, I find that a game of basketball will usually relax me. And I couldn’t help but notice that there’s a court out back. Up for a game?”

Sage laughed. “In my years of living here, I’ve never played one single game of basketball.”

Stassi grinned. “Good because then maybe I’ll have a chance.”

“What about dinner? It’s already prepared and just ready to warm up on the stove. Do you really want to go outside and work up a sweat before we eat?”

Stassi shrugged. “Not all that hungry, are you?”

Sage considered that, then sighed. “Alright. Let’s go.” She blew out the candles, and they left the apartment building. “There’s extra basketballs in here.” Sage stepped into the laundry room and grabbed a ball, and they left through a back door to get to the court. She began dribbling the ball but wasn’t too far into it when Stassi reached out and grabbed the ball from her.



“She shoots. She scores. And the crowd goes wild.” She cheered for herself, and Sage laughed.

“I never knew you were so competitive.”

Stassi grinned wider. “Guess there’s a lot you don’t know about me. Ball is yours.” She bounced the ball to Sage and Stassi went back to dribbling it. She saw Stassi moving towards her to come get the ball, so Sage dodged her and moved closer to her basket. She positioned herself and shot the ball, scoring. “Not bad,” Stassi said. “Now we have a real game.”

They were only ten minutes into it when Sage realized that Stassi was right. She had considerably calmed down, to the point where she was laughing and enjoying being out there with Stassi, as if basketball was her favorite pastime.

“So, do you wanna talk about it?” Stassi asked as she dribbled the ball and stared across at Sage. Sage smiled, relaxing even more.

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“Got some unsettling news today.” She told her about the email that was getting ready to go out and Stassi listened, halting the dribbling to keep her mind focused on every word. “I’m just worried about my fellow co-workers, and I feel at a loss because I don’t know how I can help them.”

“You’re a good woman, Sage,” Stassi began. “Your heart is so big.”

Sage snickered. “And yet, there’s not a damn thing I can do.”

“There’s always something that can be done.”

Sage slowly nodded. At the meeting, she could do everything she could to pull everything in their favor, but it was a bit overwhelming to consider that she was the one that everyone now depended on. Stassi reached up and caressed Sage’s cheek and Sage’s eyes went to hers.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Sage whispered.

“There’s no place I’d rather be.” Stassi winked and wrapped her arm around Sage, pulling her into a mouth-watering kiss. As their tongues collided in unison, they just held one another. The ball dropped, jarring Sage out of her deep fantasy.

“I could warm up the food,” Sage began.

Stassi shook her head and reached for Sage’s hand. She scooped down and picked up the ball while still holding onto Sage. They went back into the building, dropped the ball back into its basket, and then headed up to Sage’s apartment. They were both

quiet, but Sage could hear her escalated heartbeat.

Sage unlocked the door and pushed it open, then followed after Stassi as they went down the hallway to the bedroom. Once inside, Stassi turned to Sage and wrapped her arms around her, kissing her with such passion and hunger that it left Sage breathless.

“Let me take away your worries,” Stassi whispered.

Sage couldn't object. The room started spinning, and somehow, they both ended up naked and back in her bed. Sage pulled the covers back around them and fell down into the bed. It was so cozy and comforting. Stassi pressed her bare body to Sage's, and they melted together, with Sage's finger quickly swiped against Stassi's folds.

Her opening was wet, and she could tell that hers was too as they kissed one another with all the fire captivating them. Sage arched her back and let Stassi's lips slowly trail down to her neck. Stassi methodically sucked, even leaving teeth indentations as Sage released a groan. Stassi grabbed onto Sage's hips and held her in place, not breaking from her neck. She kissed and sucked, sucked and kissed, undoubtedly leaving a hickey in its place.

Sage growled, her insides aching to feel the same attention. Stassi released a slight giggle, then moved her lips around to the other side of Sage's neck, applying the same appreciation. Once she had given her all, she moved down, trailing kisses along her chest. This was her attention to give, and Sage wouldn't lead her elsewhere. She grinned, fully entranced in how Stassi had her body on fire.

Stassi traced Sage's stomach with her lips, leaving kisses around her belly and then shifting her lips down to Sage's most delicate spot. Her breath was warm and inviting as Sage spread out her legs, the ache even harder to get past. Stassi slipped her tongue inside of her, causing the shock to break through Sage's core. It happened so quickly and yet didn't appear to be quick enough.

“More,” Sage gasped.

Stassi slid her tongue up one side of Sage’s opening and back down the other, eagerly tracing the spot that Sage had maintained the first time they had intercourse. Sage shot up, grabbing onto Stassi as Stassi made the lap again. She held onto Stassi’s shoulders and slowly rocked her hips back and forth, waiting as Stassi went in even deeper.

“Oh God,” Sage whimpered, her legs shook, and she grabbed onto the bed, her stomach tightening as Stassi swiftly moved in and out of her. Stassi’s sounds of pleasure left Sage panting and bearing down, ready for the orgasm to shoot through her. Stassi’s tongue slid even faster, opening Sage up even more, and Sage latched down and released a cry. Her body shook, right along with the bed, and she shattered in two, releasing her juices. She was spent, crashing down onto the bed, panting from the orgasm that had raked her body.

Stassi slithered up Sage’s body, like a cloth to its flame and moved in and kissed her, nipping down on her lips. Sage tasted her own juice coming off Stassi’s lips; it was sweet. Her mind had cleared of her worries from earlier, and she was smiling with happiness. This was her safe space, and Stassi knew how to stroke all the right parts.

Stassi

Stassi stared at Sage as she rested so peacefully. She pulled the blanket around her as a chill hit her body. It wasn’t even chilly in Sage’s bedroom, yet there was this ominous feeling. It almost felt like doom was hanging over them, before they could even continue what was happening.

Stassi didn’t want to feel this way, but there were too many things that could go wrong between them. When they were together, Stassi felt like they were meant for an eternity. They weren’t nearly in that position, though. Time was hardly on their

side. And there were too many ways they could crumble. So why did Stassi feel it was meant to be? Love wasn't a word that Stassi had never had reason to say. Outside of her parents, Stassi would avoid using the word. It was reserved for when her mom or dad would initiate it. It was too soon. Hard to even consider that Stassi would want to say it to Sage, especially someone she hardly knew. The bedroom proves otherwise. That was the problem. When they were together in an intimate setting, there was no denying their chemistry. She was comfortable with her. And that wasn't even scary to admit.

Stassi grabbed her phone and stared down at her latest text to her father.

Stassi

Are you ignoring me? I get the feeling you're ignoring me. I've texted, emailed, and called. I need to talk to you.

She fell back against the chair and stared at the sleeping woman, who was barely covered in her bed. If her father didn't return her messages shortly, she would have to go directly to his house. He couldn't ignore her if she were standing right in front of him.

"Are you staring at me?"

Stassi turned and spotted Sage on her elbows, her eyes directed to her. Stassi felt her cheeks burning. "I mean, you are hard not to stare at." Stassi stood up and moved over to the bed. She leaned in and planted a kiss on Sage's lips. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't wake me." Sage tilted her head. "Yet, I'm wondering what you're doing awake. It's just after two."

“Got a little hungry. Hope you don’t mind, I warmed the food up.”

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Sage snickered. “Don’t mind at all. Just bummed you didn’t wake me. Didn’t you hear my stomach growl?” Sage grinned and Stassi sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Do you want me to warm you something up?” Stassi asked. “It was delicious, by the way.”

“I can get it.” Sage looked Stassi up and down, then grinned. “You look good all wrapped up in that towel. Good enough to devour.” She wrapped her hand around Stassi’s neck and pulled her to her. Words like that were impossible to ignore. And she didn’t want to.

“You better get out of that bed, or you’ll never get anything to eat,” Stassi teased.

Sage groaned. “You just want to see me naked. I know how you are.”

Stassi laughed. “You caught me.” She tossed Sage’s robe to her. “But just in case...”

Sage snickered and put the robe on. “Maybe it’s the fact that you like to take clothes off of me, that you really like.”

“You’re naughty.” Stassi shook her head but couldn’t keep the laughter down. She could get wrapped up in similar moments like that and never question why she felt that Sage was her ultimate destiny.

When Sage stood to her feet and closed her robe around her, she reached for Stassi’s hand, and they left the room together. “This is nice,” Sage replied, as if to read Stassi’s mind. Stassi gave a slight nod, despite her inner voice telling her that things

were moving way too fast.

“I will do the deed. Do you want it all?” Stassi let go of Sage’s hand and moved to the refrigerator to grab the food that needed to be warmed up.

“Yes, please.” Sage took a spot at the table and Stassi moved around the kitchen, like she owned the place. When she looked over to Sage, Sage had her eyes drawn down to the table, lost in another thought. She looked up and met Stassi’s gaze. “I have a meeting with Noah Benton on Wednesday.”

Stassi arched an eyebrow. “Who?”

“Oh. Right. Noah Benton is the hospital’s CFO. I’ve had numerous appointments scheduled with him to discuss the staff’s demands. Unfortunately, every attempt I’ve made has been refuted by him. He’s either had to cancel or reschedule. This last time I was in his office, he practically dodged me like a bullet.” She shook her head. “It’s hard to be taken seriously when they won’t even listen to your pleas.”

“That’s rough,” Stassi mumbled. Watching Sage, she felt a certain amount of guilt. She couldn’t tell Stassi the truth about her father, because then she would be seen as one of those people. She didn’t want people to look down upon her because she was the daughter of the hospital’s owner. But also the longer she kept the secret, the harder it’d be to tell her. “Hopefully, you’ll get to actually talk with him this week.”

“That’s the plan.”

The microwave dinged, and Stassi was able to turn away from Sage’s wandering eyes. She grabbed the plate but didn’t anticipate how hot it would be and winced in pain. “Ouch.” It dropped from her hand, splattering the plate to the counter. Food went everywhere, and the corner of the plate broke off.



“Dammit, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” Stassi turned to Sage, holding her hand against her as her hand burned.

“Are you alright?” Sage jumped up and hurried to stand next to Stassi. She reached for Stassi’s hand, causing Stassi to pull back instinctively. Her eyes clouded over, and she quickly nodded. She wanted to tell Sage everything about her father and how he was the typical rich patriarch but had lost his fortune, which caused her to look for a job... a job that he was able to get her.

“I’m fine. Just a little sore.”

Sage scrunched up her face. “It’s red and will likely blister if we don’t do something. Here put your hand under the cold water while I get some things.” Sage guided Stassi’s hand to the sink and then rushed from the kitchen. With the cold water running on her hand, Stassi turned to the mess in the kitchen. She scowled and tried to pick up the pieces, but Sage ran back into the room. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll get it. Give me your hand.” Stassi held out her hand as Sage put cream on the burn and then bandaged it up.

“Not just an Occupational Therapist,” Stassi began.

Sage snickered and shrugged. “In school, you learn lots of skills—so I have a broad range of foundational knowledge. How does that feel?”

“Better,” Stassi said, looking at Sage’s handiwork and then at the mess. “But I’d feel even better if I could get this cleaned up and give you some food.”

Sage nodded. “Fine. We’ll clean it up together.” And that’s what they did. The truth never did get revealed that night, but as they worked in the kitchen to pick up the mess and discard the broken dish, Stassi felt even closer to Sage. Maybe everything would work out in the end and Sage didn’t have to know right at that moment who

her father was. She just hoped that Sage's meeting with the CFO went well, though, for everyone's sake.

Sage

"Have you planned on what you're going to say?" Marcus asked.

Sage held the paper up in her hand. "I've been preparing this for months. I think I have it."

Lena rolled her eyes. "Exactly what I thought when I went into the budget meeting." She shook her head. "They're ruthless, I tell ya. Couldn't even get a word in. When they were ranting and raving over their reasons, it was clear they believed they thought they were the only ones that mattered." Lena crossed her arms in a huff. "Clearly, they just don't care."

Sage shook her head. "I can't believe that. Or, rather, I don't want to believe that. We give our heart to this place and to get shucked around, we can't stand for that." Sage looked past Marcus and Lena. She had hoped that Stassi would be there. She knew that it wasn't likely since they had decided that they would keep their relationship quiet, but it would have been nice to see her face. Besides, Lena already knew, and it was likely that Marcus strongly suspected it.

Sage glanced at her watch. The minutes were inching closer. She was relieved that he hadn't up and canceled on her, but based on the last encounter, anything was still possible. "How much longer?" Marcus asked.

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“Ten minutes. I’ll head in, in about five.” She glanced down at the note, nerves starting to set in.

Her phone vibrated a notification and she reached into her pants and withdrew it to find a message from Stassi. She grinned as she read over it a second time.

Stassi

Remember that I’m there in spirit. You’ve got this. I’m sure of it. Don’t back down.

“What are you smiling about, as if I need to ask?” Lena giggled and Sage playfully nudged her in the side. She was like a giddy schoolgirl when she was around Stassi and seeing this message reminded her how much Stassi already meant to her. She quickly pocketed her phone and couldn’t break from the smile.

“That tells me everything I need to know.” Marcus chuckled.

Sage’s mouth opened, then quickly snapped shut. She had a job to do and wasn’t going to let Marcus and Lena teasing her get to her head.

“I better get in there, before they give my appointment away.”

“You’re taking one for the team, Sage.” Lena reached up and squeezed Sage’s shoulder. “I know we all appreciate it.”

Sage shrugged. If only she got some useful resolution from it. She turned and headed towards the door. Gina sat at her desk. She quickly typed on her computer and looked

up as Sage entered the office.

“I’m here for my appointment.”

Gina frowned. “I thought that was rescheduled for next week.” She looked back to her computer as Sage stood there, gawking. She nodded. “I show the appointment was canceled and a call was made to you to reschedule.”

Sage shook her head. “I never got a call.”

Gina sighed. “Well, I’m sorry. We’ve been extremely busy, and it must’ve escaped me, but Mr. Benton is completely swamped with high-priority cases and there’s no way that he can see you today.”

“You can’t be serious. I’ve been waiting outside the door for thirty minutes now. I didn’t get a call to reschedule, and I’m not leaving until I speak to him. We want answers and, until we get them, no one is going to be happy. You tell him that.” Sage glared in Gina’s direction. Gina didn’t seem the least bit phased. She shrugged, stuttered, and ultimately held her own ground. “Is he in there?” Sage asked. She stomped towards his door.

“You can’t!” Gina called, just as Sage grabbed the handle and tugged at the door. It flew open and Noah stood up at his desk. “Mr. Benton, we demand answers.”

“What’s the point of this?” he asked. “Gina? Gina?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Benton. She barged in, and there wasn’t anything I could do.”

He glared at Gina, then turned his head to Sage. “I am busy, Sage. This is going to have to be put on the back burner for another day.”

Sage sat down in the chair across from him. “I’m not leaving until you at least hear what I have to say. If that means you have to work around me, then I guess that’s what will have to happen, but I’m staying. Like it or not.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You do realize that you’re not in a position to negotiate with me, right? I am the CFO. I report directly to the CEO and have years of experience over you.”

Sage stared back at him. He could ultimately have her fired on the spot. She knew all this, but she wouldn’t be able to respect herself if she didn’t give it a try, and now she felt she had nothing to lose. “Yes, but I represent the nurses and staff who make this hospital run.” The staring contest continued.

“You may go, Gina.” He waved her on and sat down behind his desk. Gina closed the door behind her and for one split second, Sage felt she had succeeded. “Sage, you have to understand that you don’t know what all goes around the making and running of a hospital.”

“That is true,” Sage admitted. “But I do know that the hospital relies on patients. And I know that without patients, there’s no money. I also know without staff to help the patients, the hospital will fail. If that’s your ultimate goal, then just say it. However, if you would like to explore other avenues, then maybe, as a team, we could all help you out. The nurses and the rest of the staff, we want to feel like we’re still part of a team.”

He snickered. “It’s not our goal to make you believe otherwise.” He leaned back in his chair. “So, what are the major concerns?”

Sage looked down at her note. “One of the big concerns is the email that was sent out yesterday. 401ks are being slashed? Some of these nurses have been employed with this hospital for thirty or forty years. That’s a lifetime for me. And a lifetime for

many others. These nurses are going to retire and not have enough money to support themselves. I can't believe a company would be alright doing this to its loyal employees."

"Again, you don't know how business works. This is a not-for-profit hospital, and the hard truth is that we're losing money. Things have to be cut somewhere, and unfortunately, we have opted to make the cut. It will be a gradual one."

"Before it's all gone." Sage shook her head, and he didn't comment. "The employees are upset that overtime hasn't been paid for a while now."

"Again, it's all about there not being enough money."

"Yet, because you let staff go, the ones that are left behind feel they need to compensate by working off the clock. That's not ethical."

He raised his shoulders in a shrug. “Any other thoughts?”

Sage stared at her list. Everything she said was going in one ear and out the other. Not one item on her list seemed like it would go any further than coming from her mouth. If she mentioned that the staff was threatening to walk, then he would shrug it off and that would be one less employee he had to fire.

“Is there a reason you won’t get the staff more involved and allow them the courtesy of coming up with cost-based solutions?” Sage tossed the list down on his desk. “We have a great team, and I don’t think the hospital will be what it has been built into, if we lose some of this staff. Keep that in mind.” She got up from her chair and turned, leaving the office before Noah could even give a rebuttal. She had said her peace, but with someone that stubborn, it was hard to get him to hear the voice of reason.

Gina watched her as she left the office. Marcus and Lena were still out in the hallway and both of them jumped up from their chair and stared at her. She slowly shook her head.

“It was pointless,” she stated. Lena and Marcus groaned. “He tried to back out of the meeting, again. When I wouldn’t leave, he said he’d listen, but that was about as far as it went. He’s so damn bullheaded, but it is what it is.”

“No,” Lena argued. “We can’t just say it is what it is and shrug it off. Something has to be done.”

“What?” Marcus asked.

Lena shook her head. “I haven’t figured that one out but give me time.”

Sage glanced at her watch. “I have to get to work. I have a patient coming in. I’ll see you guys later.” She hurried to the elevator and rode it up to her floor. When she got off the elevator, Stassi stood at the nurse’s station, her eyes directed in that direction. She stood up straighter and hurried over to Sage.

“I was on break and hoping you’d be back. How’d it go?”

Sage shook her head. “It didn’t. He didn’t want to hear me out. He listened but didn’t seem too concerned. I just don’t know that I’ll be able to see this hospital again as the place where one cared about the employees,” she sighed. “Maybe it’s time I go to work someplace else.”

Stassi frowned. “Don’t say that. I see the way you deal with these patients and they all genuinely like you. Don’t give up on them.”

Sage gave a weak smile. She wanted to be in the same mindset, but it was hard when the place she’d worked so hard for, to succeed, was quickly crumbling in front of her.

“If I didn’t have a patient, I would pull you into a room and have mad, passionate sex.”

Stassi laughed and then looked around before she caught a quick kiss. “If you didn’t have a patient and I didn’t have to get back to work, I’d allow that. But later?”

“Definitely.” Sage watched as Stassi went back to the front desk. She had to try to be positive, but all she saw were ways to fail in the current situation. She turned and headed to the room. With her patient waiting, she had to think about that later, as now wasn’t the time.



Stassi

Sage

I miss you.

It'd only been two days, but it was nice to see the message pop up in Stassi's text. I miss you, too. Stassi stretched out in her arms and left her apartment, making the morning jog per usual. The past couple of days, they had been working opposite shifts, leaving it impossible to get to spend time together. She had to tell herself, that when they were finally together, it would make that intimacy all the better.

As she reached the corner, she heard another text message ding on her phone. She grabbed it from her pocket to find another text from Sage.

Sage

I'm off tomorrow. You are, too, right? Let's plan a day of it. I can pick you up at 6.

Stassi sighed. Now would be the time when she would have to remind Sage that she had a modeling shoot the next day. She had been steering clear of the topic because she got the idea that Sage wasn't all too pleased with Stassi's choice of side hustle.

Stassi

I'd love to spend the day with you tomorrow, but...

She stared at the phone and quickly deleted her message.

Stassi

Sounds good, unfortunately, I have plans tomorrow.

It wasn't a lie. It wasn't exactly truthful, though, because it was vague, and Stassi felt guilty the moment she typed it out. She quickly deleted it. How could she be honest and not start another potentially hazardous conversation.

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Kelly

Hey, send me your updated sizes. I want to make sure we're prepared for tomorrow.  
;)

Stassi shifted between each text message. She landed back on Sage's.

Stassi

Sounds good. Let me make sure I don't have anything that needs to be taken care of tomorrow. I come in at one. Hopefully I'll see you then. We can discuss it. Otherwise, I'll text you later.

Stassi

I'll email them to you tonight. Can't wait.

Sage

Yep, I'll be there. Come in at noon and have lunch with me. I'll make it worth your while. ;)

Stassi

I'll meet you in the cafeteria.

Stassi pocketed her phone and released a breath. It was difficult juggling everything

in the air. Made a person's conscience do all sorts of acrobatic routines. She reached the coffee shop. She hadn't intended on swinging in for a powerful cup, but she needed something to take the edge off and her usual routine was just what the doctor ordered. Once inside, another text dinged on her phone.

"Are you kidding me?" she mumbled. There was a part of me that wanted it to be Sage again. She was excited about seeing her at lunch, but fearful that things would erupt when she confided, again, about her Saturday plans.

She pulled it out. This time it wasn't from Kelly or Sage.

Dad

I'm not ignoring you. Things have been busy. How's work going?

He couldn't be serious. After the no response to emails, texts, and calls, he was going to message and act like there was nothing crazy going on?

Stassi

Work at the hospital or with my modeling? Both are going well, I suppose you could say. I have a print campaign tomorrow. Excited for the opportunity.

Stassi went up to the counter and the barista nodded. "Usual?"

"Yep. Thanks, Clay." She pulled out her card and moved it towards the center of the counter. Another text popped up.

Dad

You need to focus on your stable job. That's the one you'll be able to make a career

out of. Enough worrying about this modeling. It's a cruel and fickle world out there. Better not to be a part of it.

Stassi

You don't think I'm a good model?

Dad

It's not like that, Honey. But they don't tend to hire older models. That's just the way things work. If you were still eighteen, then maybe. You know you can't do this forever.

The man behind Stassi cleared his throat, and she noticed that the coffee was sitting there waiting for her and all eyes were on her. "Sorry," she mumbled. She grabbed the coffee and card, then hurried to a corner table.

Stassi

Have you seen my messages? I've sent you over a dozen emails, texts, and I've called you. Haven't heard anything back. Are you free to actually talk? There's some shady shit going on and we need to discuss it.

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She sipped on her coffee. Perhaps that was a bit harsh. She stared at her phone, waiting, hoping he would call, and they could square things away. Yet, she waited, and no call or text came through. Her father suddenly ghosted her, but why?

Sage was at the entrance to the cafeteria, when Stassi approached it at noon. Sage grinned and grabbed her hand, pulling her to her, welcoming her into a deep kiss. “I’ve wanted to do that since Wednesday,” she whispered.

“Even if people see us?” Stassi teased.

She shrugged. “Who cares? I’m at the point where I’ll tell anyone that wants to listen, that I’m sleeping with this beautiful woman. You just say the word.”

Stassi tilted her head. Sage wasn’t kidding. Stassi still felt that they had to keep things on the down-low, especially if it got out who her father was. Everyone would think negative thoughts about Sage. She was certain of that and if it hindered Sage’s reputation, she’d never forgive herself.

They entered the cafeteria, with the conversation dropped. Sage pointed to the booth where Lena and Marcus were seated. Stassi was a tad disappointed, considering she expected that they would be alone, but perhaps they would have that alone time once lunch was over and before she had to log in for the day.

“Grab your food and meet you over there.” Sage went over to the table, leaving Stassi to wander around, wondering what she should choose. She finally settled on a chicken Caesar salad and iced tea. She paid and took it over to the table. Sage scooted over, leaving the way for Stassi to take her seat next to her. “So, what’s this surprise

you have?” Sage began.

Lena had a clipboard in her hand and was grinning. Stassi felt like she was warped into the situation, unsure which direction she should go, but she watched Lena.

“Following your meeting, Sage, I have done a lot of research. And I won’t even lie. I quite enjoyed it. Leaving me to think that maybe I would enjoy life in politics.” She laughed, then shook her head. “Only teasing. I didn’t enjoy it that much. Anyway, through this research I discovered something very important, which I believe will be quite beneficial for all of us.”

“Geez, Lena, the suspense is killing me,” Marcus replied, groaning. “Can’t you just get on with it?”

“You know our dear friend, Lena,” Sage began. “Always the drama queen.”

Lena rolled her eyes. “You joke now. You’ll ultimately be thanking me. The other day you said I should start a union, well that’s exactly what I’m looking to do.”

Stassi glanced to Sage, who had her eyebrow raised. “And how’s that, might I ask?”

Lena turned the clipboard around and placed it in the middle of the table. “If we can get three hundred signatures from the employees, we can unionize. Look, I already have twenty. We can do this.”

“That’s amazing,” Marcus replied. He grabbed the clipboard and pen and quickly jotted down his signature.

“Great job, Lena. I must hand it to you.” Sage was the next one to jump on board.

Stassi stared at the clipboard when it sat in front of her. If she didn’t sign, it would

odd, but without having the full story from her dad, she felt it was impossible to get her name on board. Plus, if her name was there, people might start to realize the connection she had with the owner of the hospital.

“What’s wrong, Stassi?” Sage asked, nudging her in the side. “This is exactly what we need. If the staff is in a union, then they’ll be forced to listen to someone. Besides, if we don’t like how things are handled, we have more clout. I think this is perfect.”

Stassi nodded. “It is, in theory,” she began. “I’m just thinking about how it might look, though. I’m new to the group. They’re not going to much care what I have to say.”

Lena laughed. “Don’t worry about that. Heck, it doesn’t matter if you’ve been here two days or twenty-two years. All voices matter.”

Stassi felt this ache in her gut. “I just don’t want to rub anyone the wrong way. At least not yet. I mean, I’m still on probation. They can easily fire me for looking the wrong way.”

“I get what Stassi is saying,” Sage replied. “If she’s one of the first people to sign the petition, they’ll think she’s just trying to stir up trouble. If it comes down to you having two hundred and ninety-nine signatures, I’m sure that Stassi will be more than happy to help.”

“Right,” Stassi conceded.

Lena shrugged. “I suppose that makes sense. You are on probation and all. Wouldn’t want you to immediately lose your job.”

Stassi heaved an inward sigh. That could have gone horribly wrong and instead she had Sage to thank. The rest of lunch they ate in peace, with Lena getting up a few



times to grab signatures from fellow co-workers. By the time lunch was finished, forty-four names were listed on the board. Still had a ways to go, but would allow Stassi ample time to get through to her father and actually have an adult conversation with him.

When Stassi had fifteen minutes left until she was expected to be at the desk, she caught Sage's eye. Sage gave a silent motion with her head and then got up. "We should be heading. I wanted to show you a few things before you clock in," Sage began.

"Of course." Stassi jumped up and they both went to discard their trash. Once they were out in the corridor, Sage grabbed her hand and pulled her towards a room. They went inside and she slammed the door behind them and made a point to lock it before turning back to Stassi.

"Now, about tomorrow." She moved in closer to Stassi and Stassi could feel her breath hitch. She didn't want to immediately be thrust into an awkward situation, but there they were. "I was thinking we could do a picnic in the park. Then maybe go roller-skating. I've never been, but I would love to learn. A moonlight walk could also be on our agenda. But I'm open to suggestions." Sage winked before brushing a kiss on Stassi's lips.

That all sounded great. She couldn't recall the last time she went roller skating. But just spending time with Sage would hit her high-priority list.

"What do you think?" Sage whispered before capturing her lips again. She pulled Stassi's pants back and slipped her hand down it the front of them, already filling for her opening. Stassi groaned, before she shook her head and tried to come back to reality.

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“Tomorrow is when I have that photoshoot. I’m sure I mentioned to you. Perhaps you forgot?”

Sage pulled back, gawking at her. Stassi reached out for Sage’s hand, but Sage was quick to pull it back. “I guess I forgot,” she muttered. “I...I...I should get to work.” She unlocked the door and hurried out of the room. Stassi fell back against the storage shelf, her head spinning. Sage didn’t conveniently forget. Between her father dodging her questions and Sage, she didn’t know what way to look, but she knew that if she didn’t try harder, she was liable to screw everything up and that was hard to swallow.

Sage

Sage attempted to ignore Stassi when she went to the front desk after she rushed off. With Stassi, she didn’t like to dwell on the fact that Stassi had a modeling career that was outside of the hospital. She knew that everyone was and should have a life that didn’t involve LA County, but modeling wasn’t one of those jobs that Sage appreciated. She saw all models as self-absorbed. And there was a chance that she was also impulsive. Those that came from money, tended to have a lavish lifestyle that allowed them to jump whenever things got too difficult. If she continued a relationship with Stassi, perhaps she would find herself losing Stassi, the one woman she had opened up to since her previous failed relationship.

She checked the computer and saw her patient was in, she leaned against the nurse’s station and figured she’d give it some more time before she considered them a no-show. She would have normally liked to hang out the front desk, see if Stassi needed help with anything, or just be there to catch up on some deeper conversation. But not

now. She heaved a sigh and reached for a magazine that one of the nurse's had left behind. Glamour. She wasn't the type to get caught up in fashion nonsense, hence another reason why she was always dodging that with Stassi. But if she had to kill time, she might as well do it.

She absentmindedly flipped through the pages. One page stood out, as the corner was bent down, as if it was the exact place someone had stopped. It fell open, and she stared at Stassi. She was smiling coyly, a bottle of perfume in her hand. The person staring back at her wasn't the same person that Sage felt she had gotten to know. This person in the page was the typical model that Sage believed she would find in a magazine like that. It made Sage feel as though when Stassi got burned out, she would bolt.

"Just marked your last patient as a no-show." Sage jerked and turned to where Stassi stood. "Unless you wanna give them five more minutes." She shrugged. "Doesn't much matter to me. Just thought I'd let you know. After all, you could possibly get out of here a few minutes early."

"Right." Sage glanced back at the picture. "No-show works," she muttered. Stassi was beautiful. It was easy to understand that she had the skills to be a model. She flipped the magazine and showed it to Stassi. Stassi's eyes narrowed in on it, and she made a slight cringy face.

She looked up. "Maybe I can see if I can get all my magazines banned from this hospital. It might make things easier." The sarcasm was thick in her voice.

"I didn't say that," Sage argued.

Stassi shrugged. "It's clear that's how you feel, though. Every time I mention it, you grow cold." She threw up her hands. "It's who I am. I can't even defend that."

She started to turn, but Sage reached out and grabbed her arm, halting her. “But it’s not who you are. That’s why I don’t get it. The person I have gotten to know isn’t some self-centered woman that cares only about looks and what’s on the outside.”

“Oh yeah? Remember when I first started?”

Sage sighed. “But you’ve changed. I don’t think that’s the woman you are. I open up this cover, and I’m immediately tossed into think that maybe I’m wrong and I’ve been blinded. Or maybe I’m a fool.”

“A fool for what? Believing that I’m a good person?” Stassi shrugged. “Guess I can’t really try to convince you otherwise.”

“Stassi, that’s not what I’m saying. But who is the real Stassi?” When Stassi didn’t respond, Sage turned away and tossed the magazine back where she found it. “I’m struggling, here. On one hand I believe you are a good person. Then when I think about your modeling career, I question everything. I want to understand. Help me to understand. What do you love about it so much?”

Stassi hesitated, glancing off to the side, shuffling from one foot to the other. Sage simply waited. She wasn’t hypothetically asking the question. She needed answers.

Stassi glanced back and finally shrugged. “You want to know? You probably won’t understand, but I’ll tell you. Growing up, when I lost my mother, I lost sort of piece of who I was. My dad tried hard to be a great single parent. He did the best he could. Hell, he doesn’t get it either, but I took a chance. Out of high school, I went to college, did the typical business classes and I was bored by them. I needed something more. Modeling offered me that escape. Tomorrow, I’m set to do a print ad for a small boutique. It’s a mother/daughter photoshoot, and they needed some young women to portray new mothers.” She shrugged. “Sure, I’m not a mother, but I think it could be interesting. I didn’t want to pass it up.”

Stassi's eyes lit up and there were moments when Sage thought she would see a bright smile cross her face, but it appeared like Stassi was hesitant. For that, Sage was sorry. She didn't want Stassi to downplay her emotions. If she was excited about something, she wanted Stassi to feel like she could share that enthusiasm. Even if Stassi didn't understand it.

"This photoshoot, is it something that someone can come watch?"

Stassi's eyes were wide. "You'd want to?"

Sage shrugged. If she did, then maybe she would be able to get a more intimate look at Stassi's life prior to the hospital. "I would like to see what you do. If you don't want me there, then all you have to do is say that."

Stassi quickly shook her head. "I'd be happy to show you around." And with that, that was part of their date for the next day. It wasn't quite what Sage had in mind, but if she wanted to give Stassi the benefit of the doubt, it was important that she started there. Even if it meant changing her mind about everything.

Stassi

Stassi was nervous when they arrived at the photoshoot. This was the first time anyone had wanted to come to see what her job was like, so it worried her that Sage would walk away thinking that she was right to not trust models. She also noticed that ever since Sage arrived at Stassi's apartment, she was quiet. Stassi had to remind herself that Sage was most likely just apprehensive herself.

"This is the studio." Stassi waved her arms around and turned to face Sage. "This is where the magic happens, or so they say." She nervously giggled. She had no makeup on, and her hair was up in a clip. It was another thing that caused turmoil within Stassi. She didn't know how Sage would react to the barefaced look. To her surprise,

she had greeted her with a kiss and a smile, so it wasn't too awkward for their first encounter.

“And you are...” A woman with a clipboard came hurrying over to Stassi.

“Stassi.”

“Perfect. You're wanted in hair and makeup.” The woman glanced over at Sage. “You can just hang out. Do what you want to do.” She grabbed Stassi's hand, and Stassi glanced over her shoulder and stared at Sage.

Sorry, she mouthed. She should have given Sage more warning when it came to how things worked. She just hoped that she didn't fall asleep as sometimes hair and makeup could be one of the longest aspects of a photoshoot. She encountered other women and many kids. She was whisked into the excitement, quickly forgetting that Sage was left to herself.

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Two hours later, she was all dolled up and, in a robe, told which dressing room she could wait in. She grabbed the same woman that had initially pulled her to the side. “Excuse me. You know that woman that came here with me, will you ask her to come to the room?”

“I’m sorry, but I have been rushing around here all morning, and do you think I could possibly remember everyone that was here?”

Stassi sighed. “I understand, but if you have remember her. She’s probably sitting by the front door or something. She’ll look out of place. Just I really would love if you could get her for me. Since I’m dressed like this, I really don’t...well, you know.” She gave a genuine smile, hoping that the woman would budge. The woman shrugged and walked off.

“How rude,” Stassi mumbled. She checked up and down the hallway. The hallway was empty. She shrugged and hurried down the corridor until she reached the opening where people were gathered around with the cameras. She finally spotted Sage and was relieved when she looked up and met her gaze. Stassi motioned for her to come over to her and Sage did but seemed to with such reluctance.

“Thought I lost you,” Sage replied. Her words barely came out above a whisper.

“Sorry about that.” Stassi led the way back down the corridor to the dressing room. “I tried to get them to go and get you and well, it was a feat that I failed miserably.” Stassi closed her door and grinned. “How do I look?”

Sage gave a semi-smile and nodded. She then glanced around the room. “So, what

happens now?"

"Well, my agent Kelly will come in at any moment. Then wardrobe will bring in my outfits and they'll devise a plan. Could take several hours, though." Stassi leaned back against the vanity. "If you hadn't noticed, there's at least fifty other models that are going through the same thing."

"Overkill," Sage mumbled.

Stassi frowned. "What was that?"

Sage shook her head. "Didn't realize what it took to do a photoshoot."

Stassi nodded. "Yeah, it's a lot, but the end is usually worth it." When Sage didn't acknowledge that, Stassi smiled. "So, you and Lena...how long have you been friends? Where did you meet...hospital, I assume?"

"You would think," Sage began. "We actually met and became friends in Biology class at the University. Then we sort of drifted apart, until fate brought us back to the same hospital."

"Wow. Impressive. She seems like a great woman."

Sage nodded. "She is. I'm lucky to call her my friend."

The conversation died and Stassi considered another path to bring Sage out of her shell. If Sage didn't want to converse about the modeling, then she would keep the conversation on her and the hospital. It should have been an easy task, but Stassi faltered. There was a knock on the door and that thirty seconds was a beacon.

"I'm decent," Stassi hollered out.



Kelly opened the door and peered inside. She came in and gave air kisses in Stassi's direction, then heaved a sigh. "I have been roaming the halls looking for someone that could point me in your direction. It is a nuthouse out there."

"That's what I was saying. It's been a while since I've seen so many models in one place." Stassi opened her mouth again to introduce Sage, when Kelly looked in her direction.

"Hon, will you get me a green juice? I'm literally dying. And if I don't have my pick-me-up, ain't nobody happy."

Sage's jaw dropped, and Stassi took a step closer to her. "Kelly, you have it wrong. This is Sage. She's with me."

Kelly gave a nod, then looked down at her phone. "I wasn't going to pass judgment Stassi. If you hired an assistant, then kudos to you." She looked up and gave a fake smile. "My juice and all will be right with the world."

"Kelly!" Stassi hollered. "She's not my assistant. She's my girlfriend."

Kelly looked up, eyes wide. "Oh, didn't see that coming." She tossed up her hands.

Stassi glanced over at Sage, and Sage had her eyes directed on her. There wasn't one hint of a smile and that startled Stassi. She bit her tongue and turned back to Kelly.

"I'll get someone to get you your juice," she mumbled. She reached for the phone that every dressing room came equipped with. One that you use if you need anything. Pushing a button connects you to the main desk.

"This is Margot," the woman answered.

“Hello, is there someone that could bring a green juice to dressing room 32. I would appreciate it.”

“On its way, Ms. Hewitt.” She hung up the line and turned to Kelly.

“It will be here soon.” She turned to Sage, who looked down at the floor, and Stassi mentally sighed. The morning wasn’t going as she had hoped. A few short minutes later, there was a knock on the door, and Kelly’s juice had arrived. Stassi turned to Sage. “Did you want anything?”

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“No, I’m good. Thanks, though,” The door closed, and Kelly looked up from her phone and took a drink from her juice.

“They want you on the set in fifteen minutes.”

Stassi looked around the room. “I don’t have my outfits yet.”

Kelly grimaced. “Never fails. I’ll take care of that.” She called a number and took another drink from her juice. “Stassi is waiting on her outfits. How do we expect her to be ready in fifteen minutes? Do I have to do this all by myself? Fine.” She hung up the call, then turned to Stassi. “Give me a minute. There was a mess up. I’ll take care of it.” She left the room, and Stassi turned to Sage.

“She seems like a lovely woman,” Sage said, the sarcasm evident on her voice.

“She’s really not that bad. It’s just on photoshoot days, she can be a bit diva-like.” Sage nodded, and then they stood there, awkwardly. “Are you alright?”

Sage shrugged, then looked away as the door swung open, and Kelly reappeared. She had a clothing rack with outfits trailing behind her. “Five minutes.”

“It’s showtime.” Stassi glanced over at Sage. Sage looked like she was gonna be sick. Stassi frowned. Something was clearly bothering her, and Stassi would have to make sure she got down to the bottom of it.

They got through the photoshoot despite it taking the whole day—not the quick couple hours that Kelly had originally suggested. Stassi enjoyed it, though. It was

nice having Sage there, even though it was clear Sage wasn't enjoying herself. In fact, there were many times when Sage just kept to herself, barely making eye contact with Stassi, let alone talking with her.

They got sandwiches from catering provided by the studio, and Stassi was glad that Sage was allowed to partake in that, otherwise she would have been forced to go out and Stassi was already worried that Sage was going to say that she regretted coming to the photoshoot.

When they got back to Stassi's apartment, it was time to really get to the bottom of what was troubling Sage. Or so she hoped.

"I think I'll head on home," Sage replied, standing just to the side of her car.

"Huh?" Stassi asked. "I thought you were staying overnight. Or, at least, I thought that was the plan."

"It was, but..." Sage's words trailed off and Stassi heard a sigh. "Plans tend to change."

"Sage, I know something is bothering you. Can we please just talk about it? I don't want you running home, leaving us in an awkward place. Please."

Sage shifted from one foot to the other, but finally nodded and followed Stassi up to her apartment building. Stassi was relieved that she had convinced Sage to stick around because there was one thing she was certain about and going away upset about anything would be the first nail in their coffin.

"I can put on some coffee. We can order in Chinese. Does that sound okay?"

Sage shrugged. "I suppose." She dropped her gaze to the foyer floor and Stassi had

the urge to pull her into her arms and just say she wanted to have everything out there. Instead, she went to the kitchen and grabbed the Chinese menu for delivery. She handed it over to Sage and turned to make the coffee. As Sage looked in the menu, Stassi kept her back to her. Her coffee wasn't anything fancy, but it would do the trick, something to keep them occupied as they were waiting on their food.

"I was out of my element," Sage replied, softly. Stassi turned to face her, and Sage had taken a seat on one of the bar stools. "That was part of my problem. I felt uneasy all day. I was mistaken for an assistant. You were rushing around like you grew up on this."

"Well, I kind of did," Stassi stated.

"I know, but it was all new to me and I just didn't expect it to be like that." She pushed the menu away and looked up. "I didn't expect today to go like this. I had plans and none of it worked out, so I guess I just felt on edge."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

Sage nodded. "And that's sort of the problem." Stassi's mouth dropped. "That came out wrong. I wanted to come today to see your world and there's part of me that is glad that I did, because I got to see something that was far more intense than I expected. And, I must admit, you were great. You totally seemed to be in your element and if that makes you happy, then I'm happy."

"Are you?" Stassi asked, frowning.

"Yes." Sage quickly nodded. "I just know that putting myself in that situation isn't going to work for me." Sage put a smile on. "And that's okay. We can have different lives, as far as that goes." Stassi considered that, still frustrated by how the wording was coming across. "Now, I'm famished. Go ahead and order what you want and just

make it two. I'm going to go use the restroom." She got up from the stool and glanced over her shoulder. "Which is..."

"Down the hall and to the right. Third door. Sage left the kitchen, with Stassi staring at the menu. Maybe it was alright that they had two different lives when it came to certain likes and dislikes. They always say opposites attract. She pulled up the phone number for Chinese Paradise and waited for the phone to be answered.

"Chinese Paradise, what can I get for you?"

Stassi rattled off her order, followed by the address and waited for the man to come back with her total. She disconnected the call as she heard the footsteps coming down the hall. A message dinged on her phone, and she saw Ariel's name.

Ariel

How was the photoshoot?

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Stassi

Not sure. I thought great, but I think Sage just really doesn't know how to fit into this world. That makes me sad.

Ariel

Give her time. It's new to her, right? But I'm starting to see this great girl, Natalia, and we wanted to invite you two to brunch tomorrow. I would love to meet Sage and really want you to meet Natalia.

Stassi looked up as Sage reclaimed her seat at the counter. "So, my friend Ariel has a new girlfriend, and she would like us to go to brunch tomorrow. No pressure, but if you're up for it, I thought it could be fun. I haven't responded, so it's truly your decision."

Sage considered it and there was a moment when Stassi felt like maybe Sage would disregard Stassi and say it wasn't happening. However, Sage finally nodded. "If you want to, sounds like fun."

Stassi

Yep, sounds good. Text me place and time and we'll be there.

"The food has been ordered and should be here in twenty minutes. Want to go find us a movie to watch?"

“Sure.” Stassi and Sage headed into the living room and had just reached the cabinet of movies, when Sage cleared her throat. “Girlfriend, huh?”

Stassi turned and her cheeks felt warm as she stared at Sage. “I, well I really wasn’t sure what to say and didn’t think Kelly believing you were my assistant was really going to work for me. Or you.” She shrugged. “I guess I should have come up with something better to say.”

“It’s fine.” Sage knelt at the cabinet and Stassi stood back and watched her. There wasn’t one sign that secured Stassi’s feelings on the remark, but at least it wasn’t something that started another fight. Maybe brunch with friends was just what they needed.

Sage

From the corner of her eye, Sage caught Stassi repeatedly looking in her direction. She had agreed to the brunch, but then spent the rest of the night trying to convince herself it wasn’t the worst idea in the world. What if she clashed with Stassi’s friends? That would be just another reason why Stassi and her weren’t meant to be. It was disheartening, but at the time same it was good to know before they put any more effort into it.

“Are you excited?” Stassi asked when they reached the café.

Sage sighed. “Excited isn’t quite the expression I would use.” Stassi opened her mouth and turned to look straight ahead. Her eyes narrowed in, and Sage feared she would start crying. “It’s not that I’m not looking forward to meeting your friends. But...” She shrugged. “I don’t know. Let’s just hope for a good day.” She quirked up her lips into a faint smile and reached for the door. “We’re a few minutes late, I don’t want to keep them waiting.”



They got out of the car and headed up to the café. A woman waved from an outdoor table, before they could even reach the door. “That’s Ariel,” Stassi replied.

Ariel was beautiful. Sage stared, suddenly feeling that sensation in her mind again. Maybe Sage wasn’t the woman for Stassi. She had a different lifestyle than Sage was used to, and Sage didn’t want to muck that up for her just because it wasn’t her thing.

Stassi reached for Sage’s hand and Sage knew her hands were clammy. Yet, Stassi didn’t jerk to get away. She released a slow breath. She just needed to take it one minute at a time and do her best to breathe.

“Hey, Girly.” Ariel jumped up and wrapped her arms around Stassi, greeting her with a more than generous embrace. Sage stood back and watched the encounter. Was this really someone that had moved on and no longer had feelings for Stassi? Stassi had mentioned they were once a couple, but this didn’t seem like that was too far away. Ariel pulled back from Stassi. “This is Natalia the love of my life,” Ariel quickly introduced her.

Natalia laughed and shook Stassi’s hand. “She used to say that about me. Don’t get too comfortable.” Stassi made the comment with an easy laugh, but Sage quickly looked away. Stassi shot a look to Sage. “I’m absolutely kidding. We lasted about two seconds.”

Ariel continued to laugh. “Yeah, I couldn’t deal with her drama.” She shot a look at Sage. “Good luck to you.”

Sage wanted to bolt, but she was stuck standing there, gawking aimlessly, and wondering when they could get out of there. “Well, as I’m sure you figured,” Stassi cleared her throat. “This is Sage.”

“Is it?” Ariel asked. “I thought you just picked up some random Jane on the street.”

She laughed. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Natalia nudged Ariel in the side and glared in her direction. Stassi shook her head. “And on that note...” She motioned to the table. “Let’s have a seat and get this brunch going.”

“Works for me,” Natalia commented. She shot a knowing look to Sage, a look that seemed to say her apologies for the way Ariel behaved.

Sage grabbed a menu and looked at it but saw that there weren’t any prices listed next to the food items. She checked the other side of the menu, but nothing. How did you know what you wanted to order if you couldn’t see how much it cost? Another sign that she was way out of her comfort zone. When the waitress arrived to take their orders, Sage was worried she would say the wrong thing. When Stassi ordered, she smiled and nodded.

“I’ll take the same.” It was easier that way, and she could just hope that she had enough money to take care of their orders.

“So, Sage,” Ariel started. She glanced over Sage, and then looked up and met her gaze. “What makes you think that you’re good enough for my BFF here? Ouch!” Ariel shot Stassi a look when Stassi kicked her. The whole table saw it, especially Sage. Deep down she was relieved that someone had done it, so she wouldn’t be the one that was expected to defend her honor. “I’m only teasing,” Ariel commented. “Some people can be so touchy.” Ariel rolled her eyes and smirked as she turned to Sage. “Do you enjoy your job?”

“Love it,” Sage replied. Her words came just above a whisper, and she hoped she didn’t sound unsure.

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“You’re an Occupational Therapist, right?” Natalia asked.

“That’s correct.” Sage nodded. “It’s a rewarding career, and I wouldn’t do anything else.”

“That’s exciting. It’s great to find something that you love and enjoy doing. That’s what I’m working towards. Just two more semesters and I’ll be graduating. Thank heavens!”

“What are you going for?” Sage asked. Natalia seemed genuinely interested, and having a conversation with her was easy, as long as she didn’t have Ariel interrupting with her holier-than-thou attitude. She was possibly just trying to be the protective friend, but she was overly protective and didn’t need to be quite that aggressive.

“Anthropology.”

“That’s awesome. I took a course in college, and it was interesting stuff. I wish you the best in your endeavors.”

“Thank you!” Natalia grinned brightly, and the mood at the table eased slightly.

The waitress came back to the table with their food, and they all started to eat the omelets and French toast they had ordered. “How’s your eggs?” Stassi whispered.

“Delicious.” And Sage wasn’t lying. The food was great, but in the back of her mind, she still questioned how much it would all cost her. The conversation stayed light and airy throughout the meal, with Sage talking briefly when someone asked her a

question but not fully appreciating the social atmosphere.

Towards the end, when dishes were being cleared, Ariel broke the mood. “Nothing will ever surprise me as much as it did when Stassi told me she was getting a job at the hospital.” She laughed loudly, loud enough that everyone within two tables turned to see what was so funny.

“Is something wrong with the hospital?” Sage asked.

“Not wrong, per se. I just didn’t think Stassi would ever want to stoop to getting a real job. The Stassi I know, would never.”

“Well, Ariel, maybe I’m not the Stassi I used to be.” Sage turned to Stassi when she made that remark. “Ever think of that? People have been known to change.”

“Not that much,” Ariel mumbled.

Sage looked down at the last couple bites of her food and tossed her napkin in its place. Stassi glared at Ariel, a silent remark to tell her to cool it. Stassi reached into the center of the table for the receipt, but Ariel quickly grabbed it.

“Money is tight, so I’ll get the tab. Besides, I invited you both out to brunch. My treat.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Sage argued. “I’m more than capable of paying.” She reached for the receipt, but Ariel pulled it back. Sage raised her hand to say she accepted defeat. “Thank you!”

Ariel nodded. “I’m happy to do it.” She then looked down at her coffee and back up, a smug grin on her face. “I know I might have come off strong, but I only want the best for my friend.”

Sage glanced at Stassi, who had her hand covering her face. “You and me both.”

Stassi dropped her hand, and they got up from the table. “It was nice meeting you both. Maybe we’ll do it again sometime.” She shook Natalia’s hand, then turned to Ariel. Ariel shook it.

“I’ll give you a call later,” Stassi said to Ariel.

Sage felt awkward as they left the table. When they reached Stassi’s car, Sage grimaced.

“Not sure that went so great.”

“It was good. I appreciate you coming. Ariel can just sometimes be forward. Too forward.” She looked down at her clenched hands. “Want to go for a hike? I know the perfect place.”

Sage agreed, and they got into the car, and Stassi drove away. Maybe it was time to decide if what they were doing was worth it, because Sage wasn’t quite sure.

As they started the hike at the park observatory, it gave Sage the opportunity to take a deep breath and try to hone in on her thoughts, without saying anything that she would regret later. She wasn’t the type to discuss feelings, and this was no exception, but as they walked, she started to relax and remind herself that it was Stassi who was beside her. When she was with Stassi, she always felt like she could be herself. There was no reason this should be anything different.

“It’s a beautiful day out,” Stassi replied.

“That it is.” Sage continued to walk, the silence catching up to her again. When they reached a clearing, Sage stopped and turned to Stassi. “This is totally out of my

comfort zone, but that's nothing new this weekend." She snickered, hoping the lightheartedness attempt was received. "I didn't know how to respond this weekend as everything we did was out of my comfort zone." Stassi opened her mouth, but Sage reached up and touched her fingers to her mouth. "It's made me wonder if we're meant to be together."

"Sage," Stassi began, Sage's fingers dropping as Stassi's eyes narrowed in. "Please don't think that way. I want to be with you. We get along, and to me, we make absolute sense."

"But," Sage began. This time, it was Stassi's fingers that touched Sage's lips. "Let me finish. I know that you didn't feel like you belong... first at the photoshoot and then today at brunch. And I'm sorry that you feel that way, but here's why I think you're wrong. Ariel and I have been friends for a long time. We have a history." Sage opened her mouth, and Stassi held up her hand to stall her. "Just like you and Lena have history."

“I was never intimate with Lena,” Sage argued.

Stassi shrugged. “Okay, maybe the relationships haven’t been the same, but you are best friends with Lena, and I am best friends with Ariel. She knows me better than anyone else. She was there for me when I lost my mom, and it’s sometimes hard for her to have boundaries. It’s something she’s going to have to learn. But the bottom line is that is the life I used to know.” Stassi smiled. “I won’t deny that I enjoyed the photoshoot this weekend, but I am more than that now.”

“And I don’t want you to have to change that. If you enjoy it, then you should do it.”

“But, babe,” Stassi continued. “What I’ve learned about myself is that while I do enjoy that, I enjoy new parts of my life much more. If I wouldn’t have come to the hospital, I would have never met you. And I can’t imagine how drab my life would have continued to be. We’re going on two months of knowing each other, and I believe we can only continue to get stronger. You’ve encouraged me to be down-to-earth. You’ve encouraged me to be a better person.”

Sage enjoyed hearing that, but it didn’t change certain things. “You still buy expensive coffees. While, yes, you have toned down the accessorizing at the office, when you’re out, you still glam it up. I’m the jeans and t-shirt kind of person.”

“And that’s okay. You look great in that, but just because I got a regular job and not doing the modeling regularly, does that mean I can’t look good while I’m doing it? Besides, I like those coffees, and I’m working to have less go into getting ready for the day. Doesn’t that account for something?”

Sage rolled her eyes and dropped her gaze. It was better to say nothing at all than to argue about why she disagreed with those comments.

“You say you’re out of your comfort zone this weekend, but I can assure you that I’m out of my comfort zone at the hospital nearly every day.”

Sage frowned. “You look like you’re making your place there, though. I haven’t noticed you struggling recently.”

Stassi smirked. “Well, that’s because you’ve been there. And things have improved greatly from when I first started, but it hasn’t been easy. I’m not certain that Lena and Marcus like me, other than they know that you and I are close. They probably feel like they’re forced to have lunch with me.”

“That’s not true,” Sage quickly denied, yet Stassi shrugged.

“It’s how I feel, though. So maybe my thoughts are just as unfounded as yours are.” Stassi quirked up her lips. “Do you think?”

Sage laughed, shaking her head. Stassi worked to reassure Sage, and for that, she was grateful. Everything wouldn’t be resolved overnight, but Sage believed they were one step closer.

Stassi

Stassi could understand Sage’s worries, but she had to calm her down. She didn’t want Sage to bolt from a relationship just when things were heating up. They both had problems to overcome. She needed to feel more confident in her abilities at the hospital and her ability to make new friends. Different worries, but one not less than the other.



As the next workday arrived, Stassi decided to make it her best yet. She always felt it was cumbersome to work solely off the computer system for appointments and grabbing the chart. If she could work on one patient on the system while prepping the other with the medical record chart, she could get double the work done in the same amount of time. That way, she wouldn't feel forced to work extra time off the clock.

By the time lunchtime arrived, she had it working with ease, keeping up with the patients she was currently checking in and still getting all the charts prepped for the upcoming patients. What was even better was that the system was working like an assembly line, and she didn't feel pressure to get to the next patient.

Sage was busy during the morning. First, she had a meeting, and then patients one after another, but Stassi couldn't wait to tell her about her new system. When she spotted Sage coming out of a room, looking ragged, she waved her down.

"Able to take lunch?"

Sage smiled, "Best invitation I've had all day. Let's go." They went downstairs to the cafeteria and Lena and Marcus were already there. They looked like they were already done with lunch and just killing time, when Sage and Stassi joined them at their table.

"Hey, you two," Sage said.

Stassi waved, still wanting to feel like she was in their friend group, and not just there because of Sage. "How are you both doing?" Marcus asked, chewing on a piece of celery.

"Been doing well. It's been a busy day, but Stassi can vouch for that as well. Isn't that right, Stassi?" There was Stassi's opening, and she was happy to take it.

“Yeah, it’s been a killer. We’re down an OT and two nurses.” Lena groaned as Stassi talked. “But I think I’ve finally got it down to a system. I have worked it out so that I have all the charts prepped before the patient comes in. I can check them in and still get the next patient’s chart worked. It’s saved so much time, and I feel like I’m ahead of the game.”

“Great job!” Sage beamed with pride.

“Does rich girl want a gold star for doing her job?” Lena snidely asked.

“Lena!” Sage scolded.

Stassi widened her eyes. It was so out of character for Lena. Although she thought she could be a bit abrasive at times, she seemed to warm up to Stassi and never came across as rude or condescending.

“Don’t mind, Lena,” Marcus stated. “She’s just in a mood. And not a good one.” He rolled his eyes.

Lena winced. “He’s right. It’s just frustrating. I haven’t gotten all the signatures, and I have to pull all this paperwork together. It’s a lot harder than I expected to start a union.”

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“I’ll help you tonight,” Sage replied.

Stassi could understand frustrations and being overwhelmed. “It’s alright. If there’s anything I can do to assist, I’ll be happy to.” Outside of signing it, because I’m just not ready. She sipped on her milk, hoping no one would bring that to everyone’s attention.

“Thanks. I have to get back to work.” Both Marcus and Lena stood up and said their goodbyes, then hurried away from the table. Stassi glanced back at Sage.

“I apologize for Lena.”

Sage shrugged. “No need to. After all, Ariel wasn’t exactly warm and friendly with you. Guess it’s my turn.”

Sage shrugged. “Still...”

They sat there in silence, Stassi picking at her sandwich. “Remember how you said that we should get together and have a date? Well, Saturday didn’t exactly go as either of us planned, so I think it’d be nice to do that. It’s been years since I roller skated last, but I think I could remember how and would love to teach you.”

Sage smiled. “Well, I’d like that, as well. But I think maybe we should wait until things calm down with the union. I should put some focus on that.”

Stassi understood. She wasn’t pleased, but it had to be done. She would accept it, even when she felt like once again their relationship was set to the side.

Stassi got into her apartment and reached for her cell phone. On the drive home, she contemplated what she could do to assist with the union. The one thing she came back to was talking to her dad and getting him to straighten things out. He was the owner and had to know something was going on. Yet, with him not answering her calls, it was hard to get a message through to him.

She pulled up his number and tried. This time, though, he answered right away.

“Hey, honey. What’s up?”

It was so nonchalant, yet she couldn’t believe he had actually picked up the phone, that it took her a moment to get her words together. “Wow. I’m stunned you actually answered.”

“Well, I’m a busy man.” He chuckled, lightheartedly. “But can I do something for you. How’s work?”

“Can you do something for me? Dad, I’ve been trying to reach you, but when we finally started talking, you stopped texting. So, yeah, there’s something you can do for me. You can start by giving me answers, and I swear you better have some good ones.” She took a breath, but he didn’t interrupt, so she carried on. “What’s going on with the hospital? The machines are falling apart. There’s one coffee maker which makes lousy coffee. The staff are overworked and underpaid. And they’re talking about cutting bonuses and 401K benefits.” She hesitated. “But you know all that, right? You have an explanation that I’m just missing. I’m sure of it because no one is getting paid overtime, and people are getting burned out.” A pause, and still no response. “Just tell me that you didn’t realize they were handling the money and budget poorly.”

“Stassi,” he started.

“Dad, I’m running out of patience. Just tell me that you had no idea any of this was happening, and you’ll go down tomorrow and straighten it out. I have friends that this is really affecting. Not to mention me, I’m exhausted and getting paid pennies to work double shifts.”

“Stassi,” he started again.

Stassi heaved a sigh. She did not like where this was going. She felt tears stinging the backs of her eyes, and she willed them to dry.

“If you had continued your education, you would realize that business requires sacrifices.”

“Sacrifices? You can’t be serious right now. Who needs to make these sacrifices? The hospital? The employees? Dad, people’s lives are at stake here. You knew all this?”

“Again, it’s all about what ultimately serves its purpose, and without sacrifices, no one would benefit.”

Stassi shook her head. Right before her eyes, her dad’s strong business sense was being washed down the drain. She idolized him as a child, but he was a businessman first and said screw the little people. It was wrong, and she couldn’t just stand and watch it happen.

“I worked nearly a hundred hours in two weeks, and the amount I got paid was next to nothing. So, I’m just supposed to accept that?”

“I’m sorry that you got caught in the crossfire, but it wouldn’t be fair if I changed things for my daughter.”

Stassi groaned. “I’m not asking you to change it because of me. I’m asking you to

change things because of everyone at the hospital that deserves better. People are sick and don't have the benefits. Single parents are being forced to get two jobs. There's so much more than just me not getting paid fairly for what I work. This isn't about me."

He huffed. "Well, I don't know what it's about, because my daughter would have once understood that you have to do what you have to do. You have to take the good with the bad."

"And there are a million other clichés out there. I get that, but nothing is going to stop the employees from trying to get their voices heard."

He laughed. "Good luck with that because there are a ton of other people out there who would love to be employed. People are replaceable, friends or otherwise."

Stassi sunk down on the couch. It was so cold and heartless. If she ever had that kind of mentality, she would hope that someone would come forward and tell her to snap out of it.

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“They’re going to put together a union. You should realize that.”

He laughed. “It will never happen. There’s too much red tape to get through to unionize. They can try what they want, but I’m telling you that they will need a lot of backing, and I just don’t see it happening.”

Was he always this ruthless? Stassi wanted to believe that the business world had just found a way to corrupt him. But she would have to fight if her father wasn’t there to help her out. It wouldn’t be easy, but they would make the difference that they all longed for.

Sage

Sage yawned as she turned into her building's parking lot. She leaned back in her seat and stared ahead. She could actually stay there and sleep a few hours, but then she was liable to wake up and forget why she was there. She had spent the previous few hours working with Lena on the Union paperwork, and now all she wanted to do was crash. It’d been a long day.

She walked up the stairs to her apartment and spotted Stassi. She was pacing in front of her apartment door and stopped just as Sage reached the top of the stairs.

“Stassi?”

“I know it’s late,” Stassi began. “I’ve been out here for a couple of hours now. I considered leaving. In fact, I would have in about ten minutes if you hadn’t showed up. I know it’s late.”

Sage glanced at her watch. "It's after midnight, but..."

"If you want me to go, I will," Stassi stepped in, closing the gap. "I just really need to talk to you. Things have been so tense between us. I can't even tell you the last time we slept with each other."

"Eight days," Sage commented.

Stassi nodded. "Seemed longer."

Sage agreed with that statement. "Do you want to come in?" Sage asked. "Or, we could take a walk. Whatever you want."

"A moonlight stroll would be nice," Stassi softly replied. Sage unlocked her door and tossed her purse inside, then closed it and reached for Stassi's hand. It was true, and it'd been too long since they had slept with one another.

"I know this path," Sage replied as they turned the corner and the clutter of buildings faded away. "So, you were pacing outside my door for a couple of hours?" Sage asked, intrigued. "Must be something pretty important you want to discuss."

"I guess it's a culmination of things," Stassi admitted. "I've been thinking a lot, and what we have could be so special."

"Could be?" Sage asked.

Stassi laughed, softly. "Well, it is special, but you and I have different stories that led us to this point. There's a lot that divides us. Our age is only one of those things."

"Age is merely a number," Sage added.



“Which is true. But when you take those things into consideration, you could always say, this,” she gestured between them, “isn’t that big of a deal. Or isn’t that much of a problem. Everything I come back to is something trivial, you know?”

“I think I understand. It’s whether we want to make it a big deal. So maybe we should discuss everything that could divide us and give it a scale. Then decide if it’s something major or something minor?” Sage paused and looked up at the moon. Stassi nodded. “I’ll start. On a scale of one to ten, where would you put our age.”

“Three?”

Sage laughed. “I was going with a one, but okay, a three I can work with. You go.”

“On a scale of one to ten, where would you put my modeling career?” Stassi arched an eyebrow. Under the moonlight, she looked so beautiful. Sage had nearly forgotten how beautiful she was. Her hair glistened in the moonlight. Her eyes sparkled in the dark.

“I appreciate that you’re beautiful enough to be a model. What’s even better, I can see that you have a great heart. You’re not the selfish and conceited person that I originally assumed models were.”

“That’s promising.” When Stassi smiled, her eyes got brighter.

“I’d give it a two. I can work with it.” Sage reached up and brushed a strand of hair away from Stassi’s eyes. “You’re beautiful. You should be a model.” She moved in and kissed her softly, as the moment called for it. When she parted, she tilted her head. “On a scale of one to ten, how much do you think our friend circles should affect our relationship.”

“One.” There wasn’t any hesitation, and Sage nodded, glad to hear that they both

agreed on that. “I believe that Ariel and Lena both just have our best interests in their mind and don’t mean any ill-will towards either of us.”

“I agree.” Sage grinned. The talk was going better than she could have asked for. “On a scale of one to ten, how much heat do you think we have together?”

“Fifteen, at least,” Stassi smirked.

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Sage snaked her hand around Stassi's neck and drew her into a kiss. "Let's make it higher," She whispered before passionately kissing Stassi, slowly dipping her tongue in to taste the sound of Stassi's groan. With the moon casting a shadow down over them, they remained in that spot, ready to reunite.

"Sage?" Stassi whispered.

"Yeah?" Sage continued to plant sensual kisses on Stassi as she waited for Stassi to continue.

"Let's vow that the budget cuts or anything that happens in the hospital stays in the hospital and does nothing to break us. Deal?"

Sage smiled between kisses. That was a vow she could keep because right there, at that moment, she wouldn't let anything break them, especially something that was out of their hands.

Stassi

Stassi

What sounds good to eat tonight?

Sage

Anything. I'm famished. Your choice.

Stassi

I'll figure something out. What time should I expect you?

Sage

10. I know, so late. I'm sorry. I'll be home ASAP. I can warm up anything.

Stassi wasn't surprised. Two weeks into the budget cuts, her hours had already been drastically slashed. Sage's, however, they had no choice but to keep her. They had laid off two of the Occupational Therapists, and there weren't any other employees to treat the patients. The patient count hadn't decreased despite the budget cuts, so the workload increased. Ten o'clock was actually early for Sage.

Over those two weeks, Sage and Stassi had gotten closer. It was nice to be the one who was there to help Sage whenever she needed it, fixing her food or whatever. And with not working as many hours, she was able to stay at Sage's apartment and handle those certain tasks. Plus, Sage appreciated it. Her last girlfriend was more into the money Stassi could spend on her, so it was a nice change to have Sage appreciative.

Stassi also made sure that whenever she came home from work late, she had the apartment spotless; she didn't want Sage to feel like she had to come home and pick everything up, as well. It was a unique experience for her, but Stassi had no problems taking care of Sage and being the woman of the house, even when they weren't living together.

Stassi's phone rang, and she grabbed it before it reached ring number two. "Hey there. Long time no talk."

"That's because you've been stuck with Sage every night." Ariel's tone was one of disgust. Stassi knew that Ariel felt she was neglecting their friendship, but while Sage

needed her, she had to make her the priority. This is something Ariel should understand, especially when she had been spending most of her nights with Natalia. Life should be about the people who are important in your life, and Sage was that for Stassi.

“So, what you up to?” Stassi asked, hoping that the obvious switch of the subject would tell Ariel what she wanted to hear.

“Headed out to the club. Thought you might want to join me. If you can tear yourself away from Sage for two minutes.”

Stassi rolled her eyes. “I can,” she began. “But I already promised Sage that I would have supper waiting for her, and I haven’t even started. I’ll have to take a rain check.”

“Again?” Ariel muttered. She heaved a sigh. “You know, we haven’t even gotten together to celebrate your spread in the magazine. I just saw it this morning. It looks great.”

“Oh? Is that out? Completely slipped my mind.”

It wasn’t entirely the case, but she didn’t want to rub it in Sage’s nose when it was clear that was one thing that they were still separated by. “I got something from Kelly yesterday but haven’t even opened it.”

The phone went silent. She checked it to make sure that Ariel hadn’t hung up on her, then brought it back to her ear. “You certainly aren’t the same Stassi. You would have been in line the night before to grab all the copies you could.”

“You aren’t wrong,” Stassi mumbled. She leaned back on the couch. But in all fairness, what kind of woman is that? If someone can’t show some humility in their life, then all they are is a beautiful cover, and I want to be more than that. Ariel didn’t

immediately reply. “But I’m the same person you knew, Ariel. I just have grown up a bit.” Again, Ariel didn’t reply. “Are you there?”

“I’m here. Just wondering if your new lifestyle has room for me.” Her voice was so low that Stassi had to hold her breath while pressing her phone into her ear. “Guess I’m a bit worried that we’ll drift apart. If we haven’t already.”

“Ariel don’t say that,” Stassi argued. “Changing and growing isn’t a bad thing. I just wish that you could see that Sage is a good woman, and we work well together. If you weren’t worried that I would move on and forget our friendship, I think you would see that.”

“Maybe.”

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Stassi cleared her throat, the silence deafening. She opened her mouth, but Ariel was already speaking.

“I have to go. I’ll chat with you later.” She disconnected the call, leaving Stassi staring at the phone. She groaned and fell back against the couch. She shouldn’t have to favor one over the other. Ariel and Sage were both important to her. And she had to believe that Ariel would eventually accept that Sage wasn’t trying to replace her. She would make sure Ariel believed that.

She got up from the couch and went to the kitchen to look up something good for supper. She was perusing through her phone for a recipe when her phone rang. She was a tad apprehensive about answering it until she saw Sage’s name.

“Hey, Babe. This is a pleasant surprise. How does chicken mozzarella sound for tonight? I just saw a great recipe, and I believe you have all the ingredients. I can whip it up in no time.”

“Sure.” Sage was quiet, and she stated her response. Stassi leaned back against the counter.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just found out two more nurses were laid off in the ER and another one in Peds. That means Marcus and Lena are the only ones in that department. I don’t know how much longer this can go on. This weekend, I’m going to have to spend time with Lena finishing up the paperwork. There’s so little time, and I’m exhausted, but it has to be done.”

“Babe, I’m sorry to hear that.” Stassi’s heart cried out for her. It was hard to see everyone suffering, especially Sage. She wanted to do something but felt her hands were tied, and it was frustrating.

“I just really needed to hear your voice. I can’t wait to get home to see you.” Stassi smiled at those warm words from Sage. They were moving in the right direction, and Stassi only saw them going forward from there. “I have to get to a patient. I’ll see you soon. Love you.”

The call disconnected as Stassi’s jaw dropped. Was that out of habit, something a person just said to disconnect the line? It came out so easily for Sage, but Stassi wasn’t sure Sage even meant the words like that. The words tugged at her heart, though. They felt nice, as if she was wrapped into a nice warm towel when she was a child.

She pulled up her father’s number and let it ring. After three rings went by, the call was answered.

“I was just thinking about you,” he said.

“You were?” Maybe this was his redeeming grace, and he was going to assure her that all would be alright.

“I was flipping through channels and a movie came on that you used to watch all the time when you were a kid. Don’t remember the title.” He snickered on the end of the line. “Guess it doesn’t really matter. Just a fleeting thought.”

He had his chance to redeem himself and help her figure everything out, but he only had a fleeting thought of who she was when she was little. Maybe it was too far gone for redemption.



“Why are unions so bad?”

“Huh?”

“The other day when we talked, and I mentioned a union. You got all huffy, but the way I see it, it might be the only way the hospital is saved. At this rate, more people are losing their jobs and frankly I can’t stomach it. So maybe a union is exactly what they should form.”

“It’s not that simple,” he argued.

“Well, it never is, is it? The employees left are exhausted, and my hours were cut.”

“That shouldn’t have happened. I’ll go to them and demand that you get your full-time hours reinstated. You’re my daughter, after all, and if I can’t do that much then there’s no hope.”

“No!” The words came out loud, and she clamped down on her tongue. “I don’t want you doing anything that will show favoritism to me. That wouldn’t help anyone, and certainly not me.”

From the other end, he snickered. “Stassi, I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” she retorted. Her stomach clenched, and she shook her head. “I can’t talk with you right now.” Without even saying goodbye, she hung up the call, tears threatening to roll down her cheeks. He didn’t get it, and that alone crushed her.

“Stassi, are you awake?” She felt Sage softly move her shoulder, seeing if she would make a sound. Stassi opened her eyes, and Sage looked down upon her. “You should get to bed. This looks like you tried to wait up for me.”

Sage stretched out and shifted on the couch, before pulling herself up. “What time is it?” she asked, rubbing her eyes.

“Midnight.”

“I thought,” Stassi began. Sage quieted her by placing her finger along Stassi’s lips. Stassi sighed. “Should have known. I have supper and can warm it up for you.”

“You don’t need to do that, Stassi. You’re exhausted. Go to bed, and I’ll eat and then join you.”

“I’m not even tired now.” Stassi shrugged and reached for Sage’s hand. They walked to the kitchen, and she grabbed the plate from the fridge, then covered it and put it in the microwave. She turned to Sage, and Sage looked even more tired than Stassi expected. “You should go get in bed, and I’ll bring supper to you.”

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“I’m fine.” Sage released a yawn, and Stassi shook her head. “Let’s focus on you. What’d you do this evening?”

Oh, let’s see, besides argue with my father? She turned away. She wanted to tell Sage everything, especially with them getting so close, but the more she considered it, the harder she’d believe it would be. “Spoke with Ariel a bit.”

“Oh yeah? Did she try to talk you out of being with me again?”

Stassi snickered, but then shook her head. “I wish you guys could get along.”

Sage held out her hands. “I have no beef with her, but I did get the distinct impression that she really didn’t like me and really didn’t want to put in any effort to like me. Maybe she was jealous because she still has the hots for you. I mean, who could blame her?”

The microwave dinged, and Sage turned to grab it. She carefully pulled it out and placed it on the kitchen table, with Sage’s eyes following her. “I can assure you that this has nothing to do with her having the hots for me. I’ve spoken with her, and it seems like Natalia and her are heating up quite nicely.” Sage shrugged, and Stassi continued. “Maybe she’s a bit intimidated by you, thinking that she’ll lose me as a friend.”

Sage arched an eyebrow and then took a bite of her food. She nodded, grinning. “Delicious,” but then contemplated that. “I mean, it’s possible. But she should know that I have no intention of keeping you away from her. I’m not a bully.”

Stassi reached out and trailed her finger over Sage's. "Maybe someday we could all get together again, and you could tell her that." Stassi tilted her head. "Ya think?"

Sage nodded. "If that's what you would like, then that's what will happen." She continued to eat as she spoke about Lena and how she was worried that the union would not even make a difference. "We still need so many names, and I just think that maybe Lena is in a little over her head with this project. I don't think she even knew what she was getting into."

"I definitely don't think she should give up; that's truly the only way to fail." Stassi's mind went to her dad and the conversation. If he knew that she was pushing Lena to continue, he would really be surprised, but she didn't care. She had to take a side, and right now, she wasn't going to be able to accept his take on it. The way the hospital was treating the employees was wrong, and she wasn't going to allow that to continue without knowing she had done something to assist the cause.

"You're right. Maybe you should tell her that, so she doesn't think that I'm the only one giving her a hard time and trying to push her to continue this."

Stassi nodded and grinned. "The next time I see her."

Sage held her stomach and stared at the food. "I'm stuffed, but that was amazing. You are such a wonderful cook, and I can't thank you enough for being here and taking care of me while I'm off working the extra shifts. It means the world to me."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else." Stassi leaned in and kissed Sage. The three-letter word came fluttering back into her mind, but she had to press it back down. She stood up and grabbed the dishes, then put them in the sink to soak overnight.

"I may need help to bed," Sage teased, holding out her hand. "My legs might not carry me all that way."

“Lean on me,” Stassi beamed as she grabbed Sage’s hand and pulled her closer to her. They walked down the hallway and reached Sage’s bedroom. Sage went to the dresser, while Stassi grabbed her clothes from her suitcase. When she turned around, Sage had her eyes on her. Stassi grinned. “You’re staring,” Stassi whispered.

Sage snickered. “Sue me. I can’t help it.” Sage walked over and cupped Stassi’s chin in her palm. She lifted her head and brought her into a kiss. Stassi relaxed in her arms and stayed in that position, relishing the way Sage enveloped her.

“Sage?” Stassi whispered, breaking from the kiss. Sage’s eyes narrowed in on her. “Never mind.” She fell back against Sage and kissed her again, until her arms snaked around Sage, holding her to her. “We should get you to bed,” Stassi mumbled, wishing the night didn’t have to end like that, but Sage had to be back at the hospital in just a few hours, and she’d be no use for the patients if she didn’t have her strength. She pressed her hands against Sage’s chest to push herself away, not realizing how hard that’d be.

“I meant those words, you know.”

Stassi turned, and Sage’s lips quirked up into a small smile. “They came out quickly, I know. Perhaps you didn’t even hear them.”

“I heard them, at least I think I did,” Stassi smirked. “You meant that?”

“With all my heart. I love you, Stassi. There’s no denying that.” She nibbled on her lower lip. “You don’t have to say them, just because I was the first. I can wait, and I certainly don’t want you to say anything to them if you don’t believe them. I just couldn’t stop myself.”

Stassi moved in and placed her hand on Sage’s lips. “Will you let me get a word in? I love you, Sage. And I’m not saying that because you said it first. I’m saying it

because it's the truth. I have been falling in love with you every single day we've spent together, and I would shout it from the roof if I could.

Sage snaked her hand around Stassi's neck and pulled her to her. Stassi was overjoyed that Sage meant the words, and she didn't have to go on wondering, questioning, or hoping. It was out in the open, and every day after this would be their next adventure together.

Sage

Sage looked over the papers, reading line by line to ensure that nothing had been missed. She nodded as she shifted to the next page and then the next.

"It all looks good to me, Lena. Now we just need the lawyer to look it over. We want to make sure nothing is missed because that will only prolong the finalization of the papers. But I would say that we're just one step closer."

Lena clapped her hands together. "I feel like this is really going to happen." She then grabbed the papers and looked them over, before looking up to meet Sage's stare. "So, had an interesting conversation with Stassi yesterday?"

"Oh yeah? What about?"

"She just wanted to tell me how impressed she was about me going through with doing the union." She frowned. "She hasn't quite committed to signing the petition. And I know I'm not fully there until we get that signed with all the signatures, but I thought it was nice that she said something." Sage nodded, then looked down at the petition in front of her. "Did you have something to do with that?"

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Sage smirked. “I’ll be truthful. Stassi told me that she thought it was a great thing you were doing. I was fearful that maybe you would ultimately get scared that it wouldn’t work and back down. So, I might have casually said to her that she should really mention it to you, in passing.” Sage shrugged. “I’m pleased that she took me up on it.”

Lena nodded. “Well, I would say that you two make a cute couple.” She then looked around the cafeteria. “I probably shouldn’t say that too loud. The walls, they have ears.”

Sage didn’t care who knew. The fact remained that she loved Stassi, and if anyone wanted to balk at that, they could shove it. She didn’t care what they thought because she knew that how Stassi and she felt about one another was truly all that mattered.

“So, where’s Stassi today?”

Sage smirked. The way she asked the question insinuated a lot, her voice shifting in a curious way. “She is off. Probably at my place deciding on another delicious meal to make.” She grinned. She almost felt like a user, but Stassi enjoyed being there, so it didn’t quite feel so bad.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time together, haven’t you?”

Sage nodded. She opened her mouth when she spotted Linda walking in their direction. Her eyes appeared red, and the closer she got she realized they were bloodshot. She caught Sage staring and quickly looked away.

“Linda!” Sage jumped up, blocking her way. “Is everything alright?”

Linda sighed and shook her head. “I wanted to avoid people. At least for a little bit.” She shook her head. “Just got done talking to HR. I had some vacation that I planned on taking for a couple of days. But she said that she ran my benefits, and my days are gone. I know I have at least two days. I’m sure they trashed them. There’s no other explanation.

“That’s crazy.” Lena glared. “How can they do this?”

“They just don’t care,” Sage mumbled.

“Exactly!” Linda shook her head. “They know that the senior employees won’t do anything about it because we’re nearing retirement, but I’m not the only one who’s noticed my vacation time is missing.” She sniffed and looked down at her clenched hands. “I heard there’s talk about a union, giving the employees a voice. Where can I sign up?”

“Actually...” Lena grabbed the clipboard and pen and pushed them towards Linda. “We aren’t quite there with the signatures, but we’re getting there. With word of mouth, we’ll get there faster.”

“I can assure you that I will let everyone know.” She gave a slight wave, and Sage turned to Lena.

“That should make you feel better. This is all worth it. Everyone knows that.”

Lena grinned and looked over the names. Sage sipped on her water and thought about how she was ready to get out of there and get home to see Stassi. Just a few more hours and she would be free.



When Sage entered the apartment, she took in a whiff of marinara. It was some kind of pasta cooking, and it tingled her senses. She made her way to the kitchen, and Stassi looked over her shoulder.

“I didn’t hear you come in.” She walked over and kissed Sage. “How was work?”

“Exhausting,” Sage said.

Stassi helped her to a seat, and Sage sat down and propped her legs up onto the chair across from her. “Just relax until supper is served. I have a surprise for you, and I need you all rested up.”

Sage laughed. “What is it?”

Stassi shrugged. “If I tell you now, there will be no need to hold onto the anticipation.”

Sage stared at her, curiously. If she continued to pry, it wouldn’t give her any more clarity. Stassi wasn’t the type to break. “Food smells delicious, as always.”

“Thank you, Babe.” Stassi picked up Sage’s feet and took a seat, then rested them in her lap. She massaged them as Sage groaned, leaning back in her chair, deliriously exuberant over the touch of Stassi’s hand on her feet. She expertly kneaded at them. “Tell me about your day.”

Sage sighed. “Not much to tell. There is more work than bodies to complete the tasks.” She released a groan. “I wish you were there at registration, though. They brought a temp up from medical records, and she was all fingers, fumbling around like she didn’t know where anything was.”

Stassi rolled her eyes. “Technically, I’m sure she didn’t. That’s what they get for

cutting back labor. And I barely make any money, so I'm not sure what they thought they were gaining by taking my hours away."

Sage scoffed. "Perhaps they are just grasping at straws, thinking that cutting back the hours of those who work the hardest will somehow save them money in the end. If anything, it's liable to work in the opposite direction."

"Well, I guess we'll see how it works out for them. Maybe they'll find a way to better manage the finances."

Sage closed her eyes and allowed Stassi's fingers to dig into her feet. "I don't want to talk about work. It stresses me out."

The timer on the stove began to beep, and Stassi slowly dropped Sage's feet from her lap and jumped up. Sage groaned, eliciting a laugh from Stassi.

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“Don’t want the food to burn,” she said. Sage straightened up and waited for Stassi to grab their plates of food, two glasses, and a bottle of wine, and bring it all to the table. She poured each of them a glass, then raised her glass as she took a seat. “I want to raise a toast.” Sage raised her glass and continued to wait. “I never knew what I needed in my life until I met you. And here’s to hoping that we continue to experience everything we need.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Sage tapped her glass, and they each took a sip. Over the top of her glass, Sage watched Stassi. Her heart yearned for the woman across from her. Even when stress attempted to drag her down a long and narrow winding road, she was reminded that Stassi was by her side.

They ate the meal, avoiding topics of the hospital and work, focusing more on their relationship and small talk like any other couple—the weather, TV shows, and movies that they had never seen but wished they had.

“Favorite food?” Stassi asked.

“Anything pasta,” Sage replied, taking a bite of her noodles with marinara. “Or rather anything that you make.”

Stassi blushed. “You know how to make a woman feel special.”

Sage grinned. “What about you, Stassi? Favorite food?”

Stassi scrunched up her nose in thought. “I’m not really all that picky of an eater and I like to try new things, so I guess I would say Chili. You’d be surprised how many

spices you can add to chili, in order to change things up.”

“Chili is great on a cold fall night, out under the stars, cuddled up in front of a fire.”

Stassi arched an eyebrow. “You mean like camping? You like to camp?”

Sage nodded. “It’s a favorite pastime of mine. As a kid, I would go with my parents often. We would tent camp, and there was nothing but us and the wilderness. Do you camp?”

“I can’t say that I’ve ever been.” Stassi laughed. “My parents weren’t exactly the camping type as they would choose a five-star hotel over a campground any day.”

Sage considered that. She should have guessed that would be the response that came from Stassi, but just because it was yet another thing, they didn’t have in common didn’t mean it would drive a wedge between them. There was still too much pushing them together.

“It’s a shame, though. Camping can be a lot of fun, especially when you’re with the ones you’re closest to. You should try it sometime.”

Stassi smirked. “Well, maybe you’ll take me some time.”

Sage finished off the wine in her glass. There would be nothing more romantic than camping under the stars with Stassi there in a tent with her. She would gladly accept that challenge.

“Do you want seconds?” Stassi asked.

“I’m stuffed.” Sage stood up and reached for both plates. “The least I can do is take care of the dishes since you did all the cooking.” She put the dishes in the sink, just as

Stassi reached for her hand. “The dishes won’t wash themselves,” Sage teased.

Stassi motioned with her head and pulled Sage along, out of the kitchen and to the living room. “First, I want to show you your surprise.”

Sage was giddy at the mention of it. She had nearly forgotten a surprise was mentioned, but now, it was the only thing she could think about. Stassi placed her hands on Sage’s shoulder and pushed her down to the couch.

“Are you giving me a lap dance?” Sage asked, wide-eyed and grinning.

Stassi laughed. “You wish!” She tossed her a wink, then turned away and reached behind the chair, pulling out a box that had a single bow wrapped around it.

“It’s not my birthday. It’s not Christmas. What holiday am I missing?”

Stassi snickered. “Do I have to give you gifts only on a special holiday? I personally think when you love someone you should be free to gift them something any time you want. Or am I wrong?” Stassi shrugged. “If I am, I don’t want to be right.” She laughed. “Open it, will ya?”

Sage grinned and tore into the box. She ripped off the bow, breaking it in the process. “Oops, doesn’t that mean we’re going to have a baby or something like that?”

Stassi laughed. “I think that’s only during a bridal shower. I don’t see any brides around here.”

Yet. Sage considered the word and nearly choked on it. Never did she think she would want to consider that, but many things made her want to plunge into something serious with Stassi. Heck, they were practically living together, as it was. Sure, Stassi would go home and check on her plants and apartment, but after a day or two away at

her apartment, she would find her way back to Sage's.

Sage lifted the lid off the box and pulled back the tissue paper. She stared at the pair of roller skates that were packed away in the box. She looked up and gawked at Stassi. Stassi clapped her hands together, gleefully squealing.

“What do you think?”

“I’m speechless.” Sage pulled them out and looked at the size. “And just my size.”

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Stassi laughed. “When you’re home alone with your closet full of shoes, you can get to know a person. But I bought myself a pair, as well. You want to skate, and I want to teach you. I thought we could start tonight.”

“Tonight?” Sage exclaimed. “But where?”

“The basketball court out back seems like a great place to start.” Sage opened her mouth, but Stassi held up her hand. “I already spoke with the manager, and he said that he’s cool with it, so there’s no arguing. Let’s get these skates on and go.”

Sage knew that no one had ever done something as sweet for her as Stassi had done with the skates. And to go through the trouble of getting the manager’s blessing for them to use the basketball court seemed even more special.

Sage put on her skates, with Stassi taking care of hers and they rolled through the apartment and to the front door. Stassi grabbed hold of Sage’s arm to guide her. It wasn’t too difficult, since Sage could also hold onto the wall. However, once they reached the back, it began to get a bit sketchier.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Sage argued.

Stassi turned so that Sage was directly in front of her. “Do you trust me?” she asked.

Sage nodded and Stassi took both of her hands. She rolled backward with Sage slowly following her, their eyes interlocked. “Just don’t let go,” Sage replied between clenched teeth.

“I’ll never.” Stassi continued to skate backward, as Sage continued to go forward. When Stassi turned, Sage did, as well. They were in-sync with one another. Stassi dropped her one hand and turned so that they were going side by side. “Just follow my lead.” Sage watched her, mimicking the steps that Stassi maneuvered. Sage felt more at ease, letting her body relax. She focused on Stassi’s cool and calm words and never once feared that she would fall flat on her face. “That’s it,” Stassi called. “You’ve got this.”

Sage grinned, believing she truly did, until her skate hit a rock and she felt that the world was shifting. Stassi reached for her to help steady her, but it was too late. Her skate went out from under her, and she skidded to a halt, lying flat on her back.

“Are you alright?” Stassi knelt down over her, staring into Sage’s eyes.

Sage laughed and nodded. “That was a rough fall.” Stassi reached for her hands and helped her to a seated position. Sage began laughing harder, until her stomach ached from laughing so hard. “Let’s do it again.”

Stassi laughed, helping Sage back to her feet. Sage moved in, and they briefly kissed one another. Stassi’s heart rapidly beat across her chest. From the corner of her eyes, Sage spotted Stassi watching her, and Sage grinned.

“This is amazing,” Sage said. “Now you’ll just have to let me take you camping. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Stassi’s grin widened and they rolled back to the apartment building and up to Sage’s apartment. Once inside, Sage collapsed in a chair and took the skates off. She had been exhausted at the start of the evening, but now she had reached her second wind.

“This was a wonderful surprise,” Sage began.



Stassi leaned in and kissed her, her tongue gliding along Sage's. "I'm glad you liked it," Stassi whispered. Sage stood up and snaked her arm around Stassi's waist. They walked to her bedroom, both so close that you couldn't slip a paper between them. "I love you so much, Sage." Stassi stopped in the bedroom and wrapped her arm around Sage's neck.

"I love you!" Sage pulled Stassi to her. One hand grasped the back of her neck, the other rapidly tugged at her clothes to remove what covered her.

Sage pulled back and dropped her gaze to Stassi's jeans, she quickly tugged on them until they were lying on the floor, then turned her attention to her own clothes. The only thing left was Stassi's lingerie and Sage reached her hand around Stassi's back to work the zipper. It slowly slipped off of her, leaving Stassi naked.

Sage reached around for the clasp of her bra, but Stassi reached out and touched Sage's hand. In a silent plea Stassi said her peace. Sage stopped attempting to get her bra off and watched. Stassi touched the clasp of Sage's bra and flicked her wrist. The bra dropped. She then grabbed hold of Sage's panties and helped her remove them.

Stassi crashed her lips against Sage's, and they stayed in that position, their two naked bodies crushed against each other, with growing admiration. Their love had never been stronger.

Stassi

"There's something I need to tell you. I've been going around and around about how I should put this out there, but there's really no easy way. The truth is my father—he's Martin Hewitt."

Stassi waited for Sage to respond. Her brows furrowed, but she didn't remark, good or bad. Stassi took a deep breath, waiting. Finally, Sage's lips twitched. "Martin

Hewitt? Am I supposed to know him?"

Stassi wanted to laugh. She was surprised, almost ready to laugh it off and say, nah, you wouldn't run in the same circles. But she had gotten this far and needed to be completely honest. "He's the owner of the hospital. Martin Hewitt. He owns a few hospitals in the area. And when I needed the job, he was there to make sure I had one." She couldn't even stop spewing out the words. Once the truth cascaded out of her, it was over. "I needed to tell you because I don't want some false pretense that I got this job just because I'm the owner's boss."

Sage's eyes narrowed. "False pretense? That's exactly what you just said. You needed a job, and he got you one." She shook her head. "So, your father is the reason our hospital is struggling. You said he had hit some bad investments, right?" Sage got up from the couch and began pacing. "What am I supposed to do with this information, Stassi? Am I supposed to be happy that the woman I love is the daughter of the man that doesn't care about the workers?"

"What? No! And that's not true." Stassi jumped up from the couch. "He cares and will ultimately do something to save the hospital. I just felt guilty."

Sage scoffed. "You felt guilty sleeping with me because you knew you were harboring this huge secret? Well, I'm damn sure you did feel guilty. But this isn't going to ease your conscience, Stassi, because you just ruined everything. And you tore my heart into pieces. Congratulations. Are you happy and relieved that all the truth is out there? I need some air." Sage turned on her heel and stormed out of her living room. Stassi held her breath, hearing the sound of the slamming door.

"Don't go! Don't go!" she called, but it was too late, Sage was probably halfway to the car by now, leaving Stassi unsure why she had felt the need to tell her everything. It didn't make her feel better. It only tore them apart, and she wanted Sage to come back, so they could mend things.

The sound of a ringing bell echoed in the living room and Stassi glanced around. It almost sounded like a timer was about to go off, but she didn't know where the sound was coming from. She just wanted Sage back in her arms.

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“Stassi, your phone is ringing.” Sage shook her arm, gently. “Stassi!”

Stassi quickly sat up. She was back in Sage’s bedroom, the sun seeping through the window, and her phone rang from the nightstand. She looked over, and Sage stared at her expectantly. Stassi turned and checked the caller ID.

“It’s the hospital,” she mumbled. “Hello?”

“Hello, Stassi? It’s Missy. I’m sorry to bother you. I know you’re off today, but we have a bit of an emergency. There’s no one to work the reception desk. In a hurry, I must have forgot to schedule someone, but we’re booked with patients, and Olivia is the only therapist scheduled today. There’s no way she can check in with the patients and see them without getting totally stressed. Is there any way you could come in?”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thank you! I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. See you soon!” Stassi disconnected the call and turned to Sage.

Sage groaned. “Do you have to?”

Stassi smirked. “They’re kind of running out of options; they have things spread so thin. But it’s alright, I could use the extra shift.” She tossed the covers back.

“I was hoping since we were both off today that we could just spend it together. I feel like we don’t get much time together, and it’s bumming me out.” Stassi stared

forward, the dream intruding into her mind. She quickly went about grabbing her clothes while Sage continued, “I could take you to work, and then when I pick you up, we could go out to dinner or something.”

“You could, but I don’t know how long I’ll be there. I’ll just drive, and when I get off, we can figure out something.” She went to get off the bed when Sage grabbed her arm and pulled her down to greet her with a kiss.

“We could take a shower together.” Sage winked.

“I don’t think so. I’ll never get out of here. You just wait in bed, so I’m not tempted.” She jumped out of bed, grabbing the clothes she had just dropped. At that moment, she felt a tad awkward that she was standing naked in the bedroom and most likely being gawked at by Sage, but she didn’t dare turn around. If she did, she would be thrust back into the nightmare of Sage walking out on her. True, it was only a dream, but it felt so real.

She stepped into the warm shower and let it drown her for a minute as she closed her eyes and was forced to relive those short moments when she told her the truth and found out how it would feel if that was how Sage truly responded to it. She couldn’t go through that for real, even though she knew she had to eventually.

Sage stayed in the bedroom while Stassi took her shower. When Stassi got dressed and was about to head back to the bedroom to say goodbye, she heard movement in the kitchen. She peeked her head in and saw that Sage stood at the counter, likely whipping her up some breakfast.

“I really should get out of here.” Stassi shifted from one foot to the other.

Sage turned and frowned. “You can’t wait for me to fix you up something. You’re doing them a favor, and I just feel like you might as well take your sweet time.” Sage

looked so sweet and sexy standing there and it took every ounce of Stassi's strength not to run to her, tell her about the horrible dream, and beg her to forgive her for keeping it from her. She swallowed and just stayed where she was. Her feet glued to the floor.

"I'll grab something from the cafeteria. They sounded like they were in a bind." Stassi winced, realizing how stupid that sounded. They put themselves there. She understood that and this wasn't like her, but the guilt slowly was eating away from the inside out.

"If that's the way you feel." Sage walked towards her and cupped Stassi's chin in her palm. "I'll be waiting for you when you get home." She brushed her lips against Stassi. Home, it sounded so permanent and while the one word sounded simple, there wasn't anything simple in that very second. "I love you."

"Love you, too." Stassi quickly turned away, hurried from the kitchen, and grabbed her purse next to the front door. She escaped. She took in a deep breath and fell back against the apartment door. She wanted to stay there forever, just being lost in Sage's eyes, where nothing could harm them. But life wasn't always able to give you what you wanted. She pushed away from the apartment door and hurried down the stairs. It was much harder than that.

"Olivia will be with you one moment," she said to one patient as she turned to work on the next. Missy was right, the floor was heavy with traffic. And Olivia was exhausted. It was evident with every patient she brought back into a room. "Your name and date of birth, please." She typed in the information as fast as her fingers could take her. Since she didn't start out the day, she had no charts pulled and felt like she was getting further and further behind schedule. "Take a seat and Olivia will be with you shortly."

"Are you sure about that?" The man huffed. Stassi glanced out into the waiting room

and cringed. Four patients were waiting on Olivia, and it was ridiculous that the hospital expected any department to work like this. She forced a smile and gave a slight nod, then jumped up and hurried to the record room.

She grabbed the charts for the next few patients and carried them out to the front desk, when she spotted Olivia. She was hidden in a hallway, her back against the wall. Her head was down, and the closer Stassi got, she swore she heard crying.

“Olivia?”

Olivia looked up. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes were definitely red. “I didn’t want anyone to see me like this.” She heaved a sigh. “I’m exhausted and feeling nauseous.” She covered her mouth and shook her head. “I don’t know how much more I can take of this.”

Stassi grimaced. “There’s a waiting room full of patients,” she began.

Olivia nodded. “I’m well aware.” Again, she covered her mouth. “I just found out I’m pregnant.”

Stassi’s eyes widened. She wanted to wrap her up in a hug, congratulate her, or tell her what a great mom she would make. But that didn’t change that time was ticking away from them and the patients would start leaving if someone didn’t check in on them.

“What can I do to help?” Stassi asked.

Olivia shrugged. “If I could go home, that’d be a start.” Stassi opened her mouth. There was only one chance of that happening. She pulled her phone out of her pocket as Olivia stared. It was the only thing that she could do. “Who are you calling?” She held up her finger.

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“Hey, babe. When are you getting off?”

“If I only knew,” Stassi replied. “But I’m calling because Olivia isn’t feeling well, and we have a waiting room full of patients. Is there...”

“I’m on my way.” Sage hung up before Stassi could even thank her.

“Sage will come to relieve you. Do you think you could take care of the patients until she gets here, though?”

“Yes!” Olivia wrapped her arms around her. “Thank you so much, Stassi.”

Stassi shrugged. “Congrats on your pregnancy.” They both turned and hurried to the front desk, where another patient had come in to get checked in. “Name and date of birth,” she asked in greeting.

She thought being at the hospital, she would be able to keep some distance between her and Sage. The guilt from the fact that her father was Martin Hewitt had totally taken over her movements and she wasn’t sure how much longer she’d be able to hide in this fragile bubble of privacy.

Sage arrived at the hospital just a half an hour later and she greeted Stassi at the reception desk. “That was fast,” Stassi replied.

Sage shrugged. “I was happy to help. I just ran into Olivia, and she looked practically green, the poor girl.”



“She’s pregnant,” Stassi whispered.

Sage’s eyes lit up. “Then I guess she isn’t so poor after all.” She laughed. “Great reason to be sick, I’d say.” She grabbed a chart and called out her first patient. As she turned, she gave Stassi a wink before disappearing with the patient. Stassi sighed, her head a mess. Was that an insinuation about Sage wanting a family, full of love, a child, and a dog, perhaps? You’re getting way ahead of yourself. First you have to get through the omissions and lies. And that was a work in progress.

Sage

Sage glanced over at the reception desk, where another two patients stood. Whenever she went to grab a patient, Sage was swamped. She wanted to speak with her, tell her that maybe they could grab a quick bite during patients, but it didn’t seem like they were going to ever get that chance. She had to accept it because she liked the fact that Stassi had a great work ethic. It was one of the things that continued to draw her closer to her. That and the fact that she had a killer body.

She smirked, the thought resting in her mind. “What are you laughing about?” She glanced at the sound of Lena’s voice. She had just stepped off the elevator and was staring at Sage.

“Nothing,” she lied.

Lena shook her head. “I highly doubt that. Is it because of this woman?” She held open a magazine, and Sage glanced at it. She tore it from Lena’s hand and stared at the pages where Stassi was beaming. She recognized the outfits. Sage had spent the whole day watching her as people fell all over her. It felt so long ago that Sage had practically forgotten that day had occurred.

“Where’d you find this?”

Lena laughed. “It’s called a grocery store. They have a whole slew of magazines and look.” Lena closed the magazine and held it up. “She made the front cover. Have to admit, she looks good.” She shrugged. “Don’t tell her I said that, though.” Lena laughed. “Wouldn’t want her thinking I was checking her out or something.”

Sage rolled her eyes. “Nah, wouldn’t want that.” She grabbed the magazine back and flipped through it again. She shook her head. Was she totally in her element? She looked happy, her piercing smile lighting up the cover. She glanced up and started to hand the magazine back. “You’re right, though, she does look good.”

Lena held up her hand. “That’s your copy. I figured you hadn’t seen it, since you didn’t mention it. I got a few copies just in case anyone wanted to see Stassi in a whole new light.” She laughed, and Sage rolled her eyes at that comment. “Anyway, I want to grab something to eat.”

“Can’t. I wasn’t even supposed to work today. The waiting room hasn’t once let up. I could really use the help to room some patients if you want to work on your lunch hour.” Sage laughed.

“Gee, it’s such a wonderful idea.” Lena frowned, then shrugged. “Then again, anything to help my friend out.”

Sage arched an eyebrow, and Lena motioned for them to go to the front desk. She was partly teasing, but if Lena wanted to assist, then she would gladly take the reinforcements. When they reached the front desk, and Lena grabbed a chart, Stassi turned and stared.

Sage held the magazine behind her and shrugged. “Guess Lena was bored in peds.”

“Not hardly,” Lena mumbled, before calling out another patient.

Sage grabbed a chart, hiding the magazine underneath it. If Stassi didn't want Sage to see it, then she wouldn't rub it in her face. She called out the patient, then turned and hurried to room them. It was how the rest of the day went. It wasn't until five, when they had their first lull in patients. Sage collapsed against the counter.

"When does your replacement come in?" she asked.

"I saw Geneva listed on the schedule for eight. You?"

"Not until midnight," Sage scowled. Glancing at her watch, she tilted her head. "The next patient doesn't come in for thirty minutes." She grabbed Stassi's hand and pulled her to her feet.

"And?" There was a slight grin on Stassi's face, but she still looked confused.

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“Well, I was thinking that you and I could slip into a room and make ourselves comfortable. If you know what I mean.”

Stassi laughed as Sage pulled her behind her, but then Stassi caught herself, digging her heels into the floor. “Actually, it’s a divine thought, but I really should be prepping the charts.”

Sage groaned. “Is it all about work?”

Stassi sighed. “When we’re at the hospital, it should be.” She shrugged. “I’m sorry.” She turned on her heel and walked to the chart room. Sage frowned. She didn’t expect to be dissed in that way. She started to head to the triage room, when the elevator doors opened, and Lena stepped off.

“I’m glad you’re still here.” Lena hurried over to Sage. “Did you check your emails?”

“Are you kidding me? I did say I’ve been swamped, didn’t I?”

Lena waved her hand with her phone and then looked down and fiddled with it before handing it to Sage. Sage looked down at what appeared to be an invitation.

“You’re invited to the 1st Annual Fundraising Gala. Employees get a discounted ticket for \$70.” She looked up and shook her head. “What’s this?”

“That’s what I would like to know. Looks like the head honchos think that charging us to go to a gala to raise money for the hospital is exactly what we need. They make us work unpaid OT. They cut the hours for the other half of the staff. They take away

benefits for the senior employees, and they expect that we'll just gladly shell out some money to pad their pockets? Well, no thank you." Lena huffed, shaking her head.

"Hey, Lena," Stassi stepped out of the records room, a pile of charts in her arms.

"Hey, Stassi." Lena didn't even bother looking up. Sage saw the disappointment still etched on her face.

"Everything alright?" Stassi asked, stopping just shy of them.

Sage held the phone up for Stassi to read. "They're holding a fundraising gala, and they expect us to pay to go," she said, shaking her head.

"Could be fun," Stassi replied. "I mean, I've been to a few in my time and never left disappointed." She hesitated. "You don't want to go?"

Sage frowned. She had to continue to remind herself of the different lifestyles they were brought up in. It was nothing for Stassi to jet off to a gala in another state, whereas Sage wasn't used to those high-maintenance issues. "I guess it is frustrating to think that they want us to go when the pay is crap. You know?"

Stassi gave a soft smile. "I get that, but maybe it will actually help. I better get these charts back to the desk. I'm just saying that I wouldn't mind going, if I were going with someone who I enjoyed spending time with..." With that, she turned and headed to the desk.

"Wow!" Lena muttered. "You're hooked."

Sage turned and stared, then released a laugh. "I mean, she kind of has a point."

Lena grabbed the phone and took another look, then shrugged. “I guess if you’re going, I might consider it. Guess we’ll see if we’re off that night. I’m headed out. When do you get off?”

“Not until Midnight.”

Lena playfully tapped her shoulder. “I’ll be thinking of you while I’m lounging in bed and watching Netflix.” She laughed and waved, then headed back for the elevator.

Sage considered the email and turned to the front desk, where the patient was already being checked in. It would be nice to go out with Stassi in public, where everyone at the hospital would see them together, and if Stassi was up for it, she wouldn’t argue.

Sage entered the apartment at one o’clock. An ominous feeling hit her. She was sure that Stassi was in bed since it was so late. But part of her had hoped Stassi would have stayed awake so they could talk, discussing their busy day working. But she couldn’t expect Stassi to stay up just because it was what Sage wanted.

She released a yawn. Perhaps it was even a good thing that they couldn’t talk because that would have wound them up in bed, and she needed to get a few hours of sleep before she had to get back up and start her day.

When Sage entered the bedroom, though, there was a huge difference from other times she arrived home so late. Stassi wasn’t in the bedroom. She turned and headed out of the room, curious as to where she could be at such a late hour.

Sage

Just got home, and you’re not here. A tad worried. Please respond ASAP.

Sage began pacing. It was so late. Perhaps Stassi had gone back to her apartment? With no word, though, it was hard to decipher if that's where she could be.

Stassi

I'm fine. I just needed to get some things done at my apartment. I'll see you later. Have a great day at work tomorrow.

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Her words were so unemotional. It was a text message. You're reading too much into them. But Sage couldn't let that rest. She dialed Stassi's number, and Stassi answered after the first ring.

"You should be getting some rest. I'm sure you're exhausted."

"I'm confused. I thought you'd be here. You didn't mention anything about not coming back to my apartment, and I guess I sort of got used to you being here." Sage laughed. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, everything is fine. But my apartment was feeling neglected." Stassi giggled, lightheartedly. "We'll see each other soon. I'm certain of that."

Sage looked down at the magazine in her hand, Stassi's picture staring back at her. She tossed it down on the coffee table and tried to relax on the couch. "So? What are you wearing?"

Stassi laughed loudly. "Are you trying to talk dirty? I'm not letting it happen. It's after one, and you really should be getting your rest. Six o'clock will come around awfully soon, you know."

Sage groaned. "You're killing me. I could really go for some phone sex since you're not here. It will be just the thing to relax me." Sage quirked up her lips. If only Stassi was truly there, though.

"A t-shirt," Stassi replied.



“Nice. Wearing anything under it?”

“A thong,” Stassi giggled. “But that’s not fair. You can mentally picture me, while I’m clueless about what you’re wearing.” Sage stood up and went down the hallway to her bedroom. “Are you there?”

“Baby, I’m here. Just wanted to get comfortable.” With one hand she shed herself of her scrubs, so they were lying in a pile. Just my bra and panties.” She fell back into the bed and waited. “I want to tear your thong off with my teeth.”

“Damn, you’re good at this.” Stassi laughed. “And then what?” Her voice turned sensual.

“Are they off?” Sage asked, clenching her teeth as her core throbbed.

“They are,” Stassi replied, her tone just as clenched. Sage stretched out in bed, closing her eyes to picture Stassi on top of her. She wanted Stassi to always be by her side, but she didn’t know how physically attached she had become, and it was a part of her that she craved.

Stassi

Saturday morning, Stassi woke up to her phone ringing. She stretched out in bed and grimaced. She wished Sage had been in her bed, but the past couple of nights, she settled for phone sex. One would wonder why she avoided going to her house, but the truth was the closer they got, the more the guilt started to crowd her.

She reached across and grabbed her cell phone, spotting Dad Immediately. Maybe this was a good sign. “Hello?”

“So, did you hear about the gala?” he asked.

“We got emails at work. You know me, always up for a good party. That hasn’t changed.” She stayed quiet for a few minutes, thinking about the fundraiser. While she was excited, the other employees didn’t quite seem to have the same appeal of the idea. “Was it your idea?”

“Yep,” he proudly stated. “I took your advice and decided we needed to do something. This could really get the cash flow back to the hospital. It’s what the hospital needs.”

“True. And I’m glad that you’re trying, but Dad, you have to realize the staff had their hours cut. Overtime isn’t paid. And now the hospital wants us to pay \$70 for a ticket?” She laughed. “Talk about irony.”

He huffed. “You know, Stassi. It takes money to make money, and I’m doing the best I can. The staff should be grateful for that. They’re getting a discounted ticket. If they were someone on the street, they would have to pay more than double that. And I can assure you the tickets are already going fast, so people are willing to pay. Can’t you be thankful?”

Stassi frowned. He seemed to get defensive immediately. This wasn’t something she ever had to fear with him. “I’m thankful, Dad. And I hope it works, but I’m speaking from my heart about the rest of the staff. They are good people, and many don’t have the money to feed their families, let alone spend money on a gala.

“I’ll take that into consideration. Maybe I can get vouchers out there for those that are less fortunate and would like to still come and show their support.”

“You mean it?”

This would at least show that he hadn’t lost all compassion. Hope had filled her up inside. “I’ll put some things together and see what we can do. I have to run. I’ll talk

to you soon.”

“Bye, Dad. And thank you!”

She heaved a sigh. At least he was trying. Once this was resolved, she could talk to Sage and explain why she didn’t tell her about her dad sooner. Sage would understand—she’d just have to. They would possibly even laugh about how scared Stassi was to tell her. All because her father had a hand in what was happening at the hospital, and she didn’t want Sage to know that she was one of those Hewitts.

She pulled up Sage’s contact info and called her. The phone rang three times before Sage answered. “Good morning, Beautiful.”

“Good morning! Are you off today? You are, right?”

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“Yep. After I got my morning coffee I was going to give you a call. I thought maybe we could hang out or something. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too. So, how about if I get around and head your way? We could go shopping and get a new outfit for the gala. And then just, you know, be together.”

“Actually, that sounds great. I’ll see you soon.” Sage and Stassi disconnected the call and Stassi jumped out of bed. She was finally at peace with the guilt. Everything would be alright.

Stassi didn’t take long to take her shower and grab a piece of toast. She didn’t bother with the coffee, as she was going to splurge and show Sage what a good cup of coffee really tasted like. She left the house and drove to Sage’s. There was a different skip in her step. Giving her hope and vigor. She pulled into Sage’s parking lot and parked right next to her car.

When she knocked on Sage’s door, it immediately flew open. Sage pulled her into the apartment and wrapped her arms around her. She gave her a passionate kiss that knocked the wind from Stassi. Sage groaned. “God, I’ve missed that,” Sage whispered, breaking from the kiss.

Stassi grinned. “Just a few more minutes.” Stassi moved back in and hungrily kissed Sage, adding to the passion built between them.

“If we don’t stop, we’ll never get out of here.” Sage playfully pushed Stassi away, and Stassi pretended like she was falling back, dejected. She frowned like a lost puppy, and Sage laughed. “Don’t pout, Stassi Hewitt; it’s not very becoming,” she

teased. Stassi grinned and turned away. There would be plenty more hours like that in their lifetime. “I’ll finish getting ready. Hang out for a minute.” Sage winked and then disappeared down the hall. Stassi glanced around the living room. Sage’s apartment was homie and inviting. She had come to feel like she belonged there.

She sat down on the couch and reached forward to grab a magazine. She briefly flipped through it and then reached forward to grab another. She quickly grabbed it and stared at the cover, her picture smiling back at her.

“What the hell?” she mumbled. She opened it up, and there was her spread. She had yet to actually go out and buy it because every time she considered it, she realized that she didn’t need to be sucked back into that life. She appreciated the opportunity, but if they called again, she wasn’t sure she would take it. It paid well, so that was nice, but at some point, she needed to realize her future needed more.

“Are you ready?” Sage popped into the living room and her eyes narrowed in on the magazine. “Um, yeah, so there’s that...”

“You bought a copy?” Stassi asked.

“Actually, Lena bought a copy.”

“When?” Stassi asked. Sage shrugged, but her eyes diverted to the magazine. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want to make it such a big thing. I was trying to keep it from blowing into something.” Sage then walked over and took a seat next to Stassi. “Besides, the past few days we haven’t done much talking. I feared you were ghosting me, or whatever the kids call it nowadays.”

Stassi snickered. To be considered a kid was laughable, but she understood the gist.

“I wasn’t ghosting you. But I guess I was getting worried. When I get close to people, they tend to abandon me. We were getting closer, and while I was glad about that, and I do love you, it brings back the fear that maybe it’s too good. And maybe...”

“I would never just abandon you, Stassi.” Sage reached out for her hand. “I’m not that type of person.” She ran her fingers through Stassi’s. “Communication is important, though. And if you don’t communicate, then that’s where problems start.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I should have talked to you.” Sage smiled and continued to hold Stassi’s hand.

“The fact is that we all have hurdles to overcome when it comes to relationships. When I first met you, I might have judged you. When I went to the modeling gig, preconceived ideas had already been made. I was wrong. You aren’t that sort of person, and I should have never believed my misinformed thoughts. I was burned in a past relationship. I trusted her with all my heart. She took advantage of that and thought she could do whatever she wanted in the relationship, including sleeping around whomever she wanted. I was afraid to lose her. And that was my problem. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that I was better off alone than with someone who didn’t appreciate being with me.”

Stassi shook her head. “She was a damn fool because she lost you. But I’m glad she did.” Stassi moved in and brushed a kiss against Sage’s lips. Getting things out in the open with communication was the smart thing to do. In a matter of time, she would have everything divulged, and they would slowly work through things. All about the small steps to reach a happier place.

Stassi watched as Sage licked her lips. She waited for her determination, hanging onto it like she was hanging for dear life. “Well?” she finally asked, when no words came.

Sage nodded. "It's not bad."

Stassi fell back into the seat and gawked. "Not bad? That's all you're giving me? You can't be serious. Don't you taste the freshness of the coffee beans? The uniqueness of the way the creamer blends into the coffee. It's like they complete each other. You don't taste any of that?"

Sage held up her finger and took another sip, then eagerly nodded. "You're right. That explains it to a tee. How could I have missed that."

Stassi laughed, playfully tossing a napkin in Sage's direction. "You're teasing me."

Sage smirked. "It's quite easy to do." She gave a wink, then looked down at the coffee. "Now, if I'm being honest, while initially I didn't taste all that imagery going on in this one cup, it's easily my favorite cup of coffee I've ever had."

"Yes!" Stassi pumped her fists into the air. "Now, that, is what I wanted to hear." She wiggled in her chair, sipping on her own cup.

Sage shook her head. "You do put a lot of thought into what makes a good coffee, though."

Stassi looked around the coffee shop and then met Sage's stare. "I have spent many days in this shop. This isn't the only one. This just happens to be the one in Pasadena."

When they decided to go shopping at the store, Stassi figured Sage wouldn't be comfortable at the stores where Stassi typically would make her appearance. They were way too glamorous for Sage, but the vintage shops in Pasadena would be perfect. Making a quick stop at Noel's Coffee House was the right place to start their adventure. And what an adventure it was. Stassi found that spending a casual day

with Sage gave her the added reflection she needed. Sage and she could have easy moments together, ones that Stassi couldn't experience with her friends who came on the other side of the tracks. She liked having the best of both worlds.

"The blueberry muffins are also delicious," Sage took a bite and sighed. "Melt in your mouth."



“See, my world isn’t all bad,” Stassi teased.

Sage snickered and nodded. “Like I said before, I had preconceived notions. I’m learning.” She took another sip of her coffee, and Stassi noticed how her eyes glowed. She was confident that Sage was working her way into loving everything Stassi loved.

When they were done with their muffins and coffees, they stood up and headed outside. “I thought we would head down this strip. There are some cool shops down here and I believe we could find the perfect outfits.”

“Works for me.” They settled into a stroll with Stassi seeking out Sage’s hand. They held hands and stopped at some of the shops, just checking out the window displays and seeing the various items the store sold. “Do you like to read?” Sage asked, stopping outside a bookstore.

“Magazines,” Stassi replied, laughing. “What about you?”

“I love to read classic novels.” Sage turned to the window and scanned her eyes through it. Her eyes lit up, and she pulled Stassi into the small bookstore. Stassi would have followed her anywhere and laughed as it was clear Sage had seen something that excited her. She rushed over to a table, dragging Stassi behind her. “My favorite story of all time.” She held up the book.

“Anne of Green Gables,” Stassi read.

“Do you know what this book is about?” Sage asked, inquisitively.

Stassi scrunched up her nose. “A girl named Anne?”

Sage laughed. “Geesh, you’re so smart.” She playfully rolled her eyes and turned to the display. The display was set up with a whole slew of books related to the series. “I would go, as a child, to the library and just sit in the section that had classic stories. Anne of Green Gables was the first book I read, and I loved it. Of course, I had to read every story in the series.” She tilted her head. “You really should get the book and read it.”

Stassi scoffed. “I’ll take your word for it.” She looked around and pointed to the magazines. “Now, that, that is a section.” She pulled Sage after her, and they went to the magazines.”

“You can take the girl out of the glamor but can’t take the glamor out of the girl.” Sage shook her head. “Fashion, fashion, and more fashion. Which is your favorite.” She motioned with her head towards the magazine. “That one has your picture on it, so I would say you’d start there.”

Stassi snickered. “You would think, but you’d be wrong.” She grabbed one of the other magazines and looked through it. I would lean toward this one. If I was the one buying it, that is.”

“I don’t know.” Sage reached out and took the magazine that had a picture of Stassi. “I would be more inclined to choose this one.” She quirked up her lips in a grin. “In fact, I haven’t seen this one. I think I’ll purchase it.”

Stassi leaned forward. “The thing about magazines is they’re small. You could literally peruse through it and not have to waste the money.” Stassi put the magazine she had back on the rack.”

Sage laughed. “True, you could, but then that loses the appeal when you want to read

it again.” She grinned. “I think I’m definitely getting it.” Stassi considered that then turned and went back to the table with the Anne of Green Gables display. “You don’t have to,” Sage argued.

“I know I don’t, but I do need some culture in my life.” She shrugged. “Might as well start here.”

Sage held her fist to her mouth, pretending it was a microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, that’s where it all started. A woman fell in love with classical reading at a little bookstore in Pasadena. It can happen to anyone.”

Stassi shook her head and laughed. “We’ll just see if I truly fall in love with it.” She winked, and they went to the counter to pay for their purchases. They left the bookstore and continued down the walkway, checking out each store as they passed it. Sage had her hand back in Stassi’s, and the morning felt perfect.

As they walked across the street and went to the other side, they saw a vintage shop that looked like it had just what they were looking for. At least from the outside. They stepped inside and were hit with the air conditioning.

Sage grinned. “I could stay in here all day.”

Stassi had to agree. “The sun is getting hot.” Yet, she still enjoyed the peacefulness of being together and enjoying their day. There was no drama, no work, nothing but two people loving their time together.

They wandered around the small store, checking out rack after rack, not seeing anything that jumped out at them until Stassi saw a pantsuit that she believed would look perfect on Sage.

“What do you think?” Stassi asked. “Holding it up.”

“Is it my size?” Sage asked, peering at the tag and nodding. “Do you like it?”

“I think it would look great on you, but the question is, do you like it?” Stassi held it up and allowed Sage time to take it all in. “You could try it on and see what you think.”

“Let’s give it a whirl.” Sage grabbed it, and Stassi led the way to the back of the store, where the dressing room was hidden. She stood outside and waited, pacing some because she was nervous that Sage would think Stassi was trying to change her. Stassi truly didn’t care if Sage came dressed in a garbage bag, but Sage would look nice in the suit, if she wanted to add some flare, making it something new.

The door opened, and Sage stepped out and twirled around. “What do you think?” she asked.

Stassi smiled. “I think you look great. You could add a chain to it, if you’d want.” That would be something that would keep Sage’s own look. “Or...” Her words trailed off and she held up her hand and disappeared from the fitting room. She found the rack of ties and leafed through them, until she found a bolo tie that would look perfect to it. She hurried back and held it up in front of Sage. Sage turned to the mirror, and a smile deepened across her face. “Sexy,” Stassi commented.

Sage turned and leaned in for a kiss, causing Stassi’s toes to curl. “I love it,” Sage replied.

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“Perfect.” She gave one more look to the mirror and nodded in agreement. “Now, I just need to find something that will go with it. You get dressed, and I’ll be right back.”

As they had been looking, she spotted a lavender dress that she had her eye on. She wanted to get something that would complement Sage’s outfit, so everyone knew they belonged to one another. The dress would be ideal. She came back with it just as Sage exited the dressing room.

“Don’t look,” she said, rushing into another stall. She quickly shed her clothes and dressed, then checked out her reflection. She stepped out of the room and did her own turn in front of Sage. “And?” she asked.

“You look breathtaking,” Sage commented. She cupped her hand around Stassi’s neck and pulled her into a kiss. “Beautiful. Sexy. Perfect.” She spoke between soft kisses, and Stassi glowed. They had their outfits and were set for the big gala.

Stassi paid for both outfits despite Sage arguing with her. “I got paid for the modeling gig, and this is how I want to spend my money. Just say thank you and smile.” Stassi gave her a quick kiss and slid her card to the woman behind the counter.

Once they were paid, they left the store, two garment bags in hand. They continued their walk, still looking in the shops, despite they had everything they needed. When they reached the beach, Sage turned to Stassi. “Are you hungry?”

“Famished,” Stassi remarked.

Sage led the way to the food cart on the beach. “My treat,” she replied, arching an eyebrow so Stassi didn’t dare complain. Sage ordered them each two tacos and they walked along the beach, eating tacos and keeping their date going. It was a highlight to them just spending the day together, but it was obvious they were their happiest with each other.

Sage

“We should be waking up,” Stassi whispered as Sage continued to kiss her.

Sage groaned. “Why? We both have the morning off.”

Stassi laughed as Sage flipped herself over so that Sage could be on top of her. “You make a very valid point,” Stassi replied just before Sage’s lips touched hers. Sage’s tongue dove into Stassi’s mouth, capturing her sigh. Stassi stretched out underneath her and they were right back in the heat of it.

Ever since Sage and Stassi had gotten it out in the open about communication, their relationship had only gotten stronger. Every night they spent together and every day they woke up together, it didn’t matter if it was a day they had to work, or a day that they both were off. For two weeks, things had only progressed.

Sage moved down, so she was between Stassi’s legs and spread her opening with her fingers. She moved in, dipping her fingers in and feeling Stassi’s legs shiver as she propped her knees back with her elbows. Sage replaced her fingers with her tongue, slipping in as Stassi groaned.

She was so beautiful and sexy. Sage was hit by that every single encounter. She slid her tongue in and out as Stassi smoothly rode against her mouth. Stassi stopped, exhaled, and whimpered, but Sage didn’t stop.

Sage continued to lick her way around Stassi's opening and relished in every taste. Sage had never been this comfortable with another woman before, filling the excitement driving from Stassi. She explored every inch, spreading Stassi apart as Stassi's groans amplified.

Stassi's legs shook harder and became uncontrollable and a cry was quickly released. Sage lapped up her juices with Stassi frantically bouncing under her. Indeed, she was desperate for Stassi every time they crashed together and couldn't wait for the next time. She ran her hands up Stassi's body until she was able to kiss her. Stassi swooped her tongue in, claiming her own juices they kept the morning slowly smoldering. Sage fell next to Stassi and cradled her and for two hours they slept the morning off, feeling relaxed and overcome with love.

Stassi was the first one to pull out of a deep sleep. Sage felt her spreading kisses along her chin. It was an exciting way to wake up and Sage grinned, not wanting to open her eyes. If she did, it would end. She was enjoying the enticing moment a little too much.

Stassi shifted to Sage's neck and Sage growled. "You're going to leave a hickey," she groaned.

"Display of love," Stassi corrected.

Sage laughed and opened her eyes. Stassi moved from her neck to her lips and kissed her. "And I love you so much," Sage whispered, drawing Stassi into another kiss.

"Are you hungry?" Stassi asked.

Sage shook her head. "Unless it's for you," she replied with a teasing grin, slipping her tongue in between Stassi's lips. Stassi laughed into the kiss but didn't hesitate or pull away. Time ticked on, though. Sage did have to get to work, and it only meant

that the heated hours in the bedroom were forced to end.

Sage pulled back and pouted. "I'm going to have to be to work before you know it. How about we get up and have some breakfast." She gave her a quick kiss and rolled off of her.

"You said you weren't hungry," Stassi added.

Sage shrugged. "That was hours ago, wasn't it?"

Stassi shrugged. "Sort of lost track of time."

"Well, I can't fault ya there." Sage snickered and reached for two robes. She tossed one to Stassi and put the other one on.

Sage and Stassi went into the kitchen, as they did most mornings, and started a routine that had become so natural. Stassi fried the bacon, and Sage started working on the waffles.

"Did I tell you that I'm almost done with Anne of Green Gables?" Stassi asked.



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Sage arched an eyebrow. “It’s been what, two weeks?”

“Must admit that I should have read it years ago. I’m really enjoying it.”

Sage knew that Stassi would, if just given the chance, but she was pleased to see to what extent Stassi enjoy it. It was just something else that they could discuss, broadening their relationship.

“I finished the magazine days ago,” Sage teased. “I couldn’t put it down.”

Stassi laughed and shook her head. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Crazy for you.” Sage winked.

Stassi laughed and broke apart a piece of bacon and held it up to Sage’s lips. Sage grabbed it in her teeth before moving in and kissing Stassi.

“The waffles are burning,” Stassi replied.

Sage looked over at the waffles, and they were perfectly fine, but Stassi laughed, the sound ringing through the kitchen. Things were better than she could have hoped for, and the future was never brighter.

Stassi

Stassi ran the vacuum in Sage’s living room. She believed if she was living there, for the most part, she should do her part of the house chores. So she vowed that when

Sage was working, she would do any dusting and sweeping that needed to be done. She wiped her brow as sweat dripped. It was a sweltering day outside, and the AC wasn't doing its job of keeping things cool.

She turned the vacuum off and went over to the window. Stassi unlocked the window and let in a fresh breeze. As she went back to the vacuuming, her phone rang. She grabbed it from her pocket and spotted Sage's name. She grinned.

"Hello. How's work going?"

"Work is dragging. Mainly because you're not here." There was a light and airy laugh echoing through the phone. "But I have some fabulous news."

"Oh yeah?" Stassi sunk down in the couch. "What's that?"

"Just spoke with Lena, and we have two hundred and seventy-five signatures. Only twenty -five to go. I personally think that we might get those signatures at the gala on Saturday." She hesitated. "Unfortunately, I don't think there are going to be as many people able to attend."

Stassi frowned. She hadn't heard from her dad since he mentioned that there might be vouchers that people could claim, in order to get into the gala.

"People just can't afford it. Most of the staff don't have emergency funds they can switch to or a savings account to rely on. And even then, spending that money on a gala seems wasteful. So, they'll be left out in the cold."

"Yeah, that's too bad," Stassi muttered. Mentally preparing her next phone call. "But, that's good to hear about the signatures Lena does have. Perhaps you can look at putting up a table in the cafeteria. Or sending out mass emails. I'm sure not everyone realizes that a union is even a possibility. There's word of mouth, but people are

easily able to miss it.”

“That’s not such a bad idea. I’ll have Lena talk to the cafeteria staff and see if they’ll support it. It can easily go undetected. I better get back to work. My next patient is in, but I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Stassi disconnected the call and dialed her dad. At first, given the number of times it rang, she thought it would ultimately go to voicemail. However, just before that happened, it was answered.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Dad. How are you?”

“Been good. No complaints here. I have to run into a meeting soon, but I thought I would grab your call. So here I am. What’s going on?”

“I was kind of wondering the same thing for you.” Stassi didn’t know how to broach the subject. He tended to get defensive, and she didn’t want him to think that she was coming at him, when she just wanted answers to questions that she deserved to ask. “When we talked last, I mentioned that people aren’t able to afford the gala, and you said that you would work on getting vouchers for those that didn’t feel they could make it for financial reasons. I hear the representation for the hospital is down, and it’s because there are staff members that can’t afford it. Did you get the vouchers put together?”

“No, but there’s a very good reason for that.” Stassi sighed. She was sure that she was ready to hear a plethora of statements that never truly explained the situation in full. “Over a thousand tickets have sold already, and there could possibly be double that by the time the gala takes place. We’re averaging three hundred purchases a day. The support is there for the people that are able to spend the money. I think that \$70.00 is

very generous, and frankly, it would be a shame for this to sell out just because we provided vouchers to those who aren't able to dig in their purses. If we sell out, then I would say we achieved greatness, and we're looking at that distinct possibility."

Stassi cringed. So it all came down to the all-mighty dollar once again. "Dad, I think you're making a mistake. The people that aren't wealthy should deserve the opportunity."

He snickered. "It's the unwealthy that we really don't want there. We want to show that we can get the heavy hitters, and it's those people that are going to spend the big bucks in donations. Trust me, I'm a businessman, and this is what I do."

You're also an investor, and you can lose just as easily as you can make money. "But, Dad," she argued.

"I don't have time to debate this with you. Trust me when I say that I know what I am doing, and we will get through this. Just be patient, and it all will work out. I have to go." The call was disconnected, and Stassi stared at the blank screen of her phone.

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How could she trust him when he refused to try to make a difference? She felt like her trust was fading slowly and there wasn't much possibility that she would be able to trust him again after this situation had gone from bad to worse.

Stassi flicked a tear from her eye and tossed her phone to the side. If the hospital could be saved, then that was fantastic, but shouldn't everyone have equal opportunity when it came to going to the gala? Stassi went back to work, her dad's conversation still heavy in her mind. If there were anything she could do to just to allow everyone in for celebration, she would. Sadly, she had to let the thought go and hope that the employees who couldn't afford it wouldn't have gone anyway. At least that would make her feel better.

Sage

Stassi looked breathtaking as she walked down the hall and straight for her. When Stassi first tried on the dress, she was beautiful, but now, with her hair and makeup, it seemed to add to the exquisiteness that Stassi brought.

"How do I look?" Stassi asked, giving a twirl in front of Sage. Sage nodded, speechless. "Cat got your tongue?" she teased.

"Something like that," Sage whispered. She moved in and Stassi kissed her, despite her makeup being freshly applied.

"You look beautiful," Stassi said, parting.

Sage snickered. "I look like a dog, compared to you."

Stassi quickly shook her head. “That’s not true. I am lucky to have you on my arm.” Stassi offered up her arm, and Sage willingly grabbed it.

She had been dreading the gala. She knew how excited Stassi would be, but they would be whisked in their two different worlds again and Sage wasn’t even sure how she was supposed to act. What food and drinks would be offered? Should they dance or would that not be proper etiquette? This was such a different place than what Sage was used to, and it was hard not to be intimidated.

They arrived at the hotel, where the gala was in a large ballroom. The parking lot was already packed full of people. Crowds were milling into the hotel from the parking lot, in large groups, making it easy to stand within the group.

Stassi and Sage’s arms never once swayed away from each other as they walked into the ballroom with the others. Sage produced their tickets to get in, and they were scanned right at the door and discarded into a box.

“Where do you want to sit?” Sage asked. The tables were already starting to fill, and Sage couldn’t see Lena or Marcus anywhere. At least not yet. She knew Lena’s date had to work late, and they would be arriving later, but Marcus said he couldn’t wait to get there and planned on picking up his boyfriend an hour earlier. Sage was confused because Marcus didn’t seem like the person who would be too engrossed in galas and black-tie affairs. But people could handle situations differently. But neither of them seemed to be around.

“At this table’s fine.” Sage held out the chair so Stassi could take her seat and then joined her in the seat beside her. “Do you see anyone we know?” Stassi asked, reflecting Sage’s thoughts. An orchestra played on the stage in the background as guests milled around and greeted one another.

“I see a few I know, but none that I am that close with. I know Lena and Marcus will

want to sit with us. They mentioned it last week.”

Stassi nodded and looked around the ballroom. Then she pointed. “There’s Marcus.” She waved him over. He was dressed in a black suit with a white pinstripe, but he was alone.

Sage arched an eyebrow. “Where’s Trent?” she asked.

He rolled his eyes. “You mean the traitor? We won’t talk about him.” He slumped down in his chair. His cheeks were rosy, and when Sage stared at him, he eventually made eye contact. “He said he ‘wasn’t really in the mood for coming to this party.’” He did quotation marks and shrugged. “His sister is in town or some shit like that. I said, ‘whatever if that’s how he feels.’ I’ll just have a good time.”

“But you two are okay, right?” Sage asked. Marcus’ eyes diverted to the table, and he shrugged. “You can’t end things on a silly argument like that. There’s way too much importance to let something like that break you.”

He sighed. “It’s not even just that. We’re drifting apart. Our lives are too separate.” He sighed and looked between Stassi and Sage. “You two spend way more time together than I spend with Trent.”

Sage looked over to Stassi, and her cheeks were bright red. Sage reached across and took her hand, squeezing it lightly.

“It’s what you want to do when you’re in love,” Stassi commented.

He smirked and nodded. “At least you finally said it. Not that it’s a surprise to any one of us.” He motioned with his hand between the two of them. “But you both clearly want to be together, whereas I got the feeling that a relationship with Trent was more like a burden. It’s not worth it, in my opinion.” He put on a smile. “So, we

ended things.” He shrugged. “But it is what it is. Life goes on.” Sage looked over to Stassi, who seemed to share the same questioning look. Marcus continued as he scanned the room, “I need a drink. Anything for you?”

“I’ll get something later,” Sage said.

“Same,” Stassi replied.

When Marcus walked away, Sage turned to Stassi. “So, what do you think?”

Stassi scrunched up her face. “I think he’s on a dangerous road full of bumps and curves. Ending things is one thing, but acting like it’s no big deal right after it happened is something else completely. I just hope he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Sage had to agree. That was her biggest fear. Sage ran her fingers over Stassi’s. “On a brighter side, I was glad to hear you say ‘love.’ Out loud. In public.”

Stassi grinned. “I think tonight it would be impossible to hide it.”

As they continued to sit there, waiting for the rest of the group to arrive, the stage grew quiet, and there was a tap on the microphone. A woman in an evening gown and white fur draped over her shoulders stood at the microphone with some speech cards. “I want to welcome everyone to the first-ever fundraising gala for LA County Hospital.” There was a spattering of applause as people continued to come into the ballroom. “This turnout far exceeds what we considered possible. We sold a total of two thousand and twenty-two tickets, which sold us out, and for that, we are all grateful.” The woman paused. “And it just hit me that I didn’t introduce myself. My name is Bethany Gleason. I work at the headquarters for the four different hospitals. So, on behalf of myself and Martin Hewitt owner and CEO, we welcome you. The food will be out soon, and the open bar is available for all.”



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Another round of applause sounded, and Sage glanced over to Stassi. “Mr. Hewitt couldn’t have come himself? Typical.” She rolled her eyes, and Stassi just simply nodded. Sage stood up, pushing herself away from the table. “I guess we should have gotten our drinks when Marcus took off. I can imagine the line is long. “What would you like?”

“I’ll take a champagne.” Sage took off and went to get in line. She was there for only ten minutes when she spotted Marcus headed in the opposite direction, drink in hand. He walked over and leaned in.

“Expect to give a tip for the bartender.” He smirked. “There isn’t one person leaving without tossing something in the cup up there.” He rolled his eyes. “So much for the free open bar.” He walked past her, and Sage reached for her wallet in her pocket. She opened it and found a one-dollar bill and then a few twenties.” She sighed and pulled out a twenty. Maybe that would be enough for the night.

It took her nearly thirty minutes to get to the front of the line, where she ordered two champagnes. She tossed in the twenty and waited for their drinks to be handed to them. She thanked him and turned away, heading back to the table. When she got back there, the food had already arrived.

“You better eat up,” Sage replied. “Your food will get cold.”

The situation was awkward to start with, and Sage wanted to think that things would ease themselves out throughout the night. Little did she know, it could only get worse.

Lena and Maya came rushing in an hour later after Sage and Stassi had just finished their meals. “It's good of you both to show up,” Sage teased.

Maya rolled her eyes. “If you knew the day I had, you would never tease. I worked late, then was just about to get here when we got a flat tire.” Maya made a face. “I thought we might have to walk so we could get some use out of our \$70 tickets.”

“That’s stinks,” Sage remarked.

“I’ll go grab us a couple of drinks,” Maya said, looking to Lena. “I know we could both use them.”

Lena sat down and stared aimlessly across the table. “Exhausted,” she said. “I had to work this morning, and then the outfit I planned on wearing had a hole in it, so I had to find something else, and then, like Maya said, the rest of the day didn’t go quite as planned.

“But you’re here now,” Sage replied. “That’s what matters.”

Lena looked over to Marcus and frowned. “Where’s Trent.”

Marcus groaned. “Don’t ask. I’ve been through the story at least half a dozen times. I’m over it.”

Lena looked across the table. I’ll tell you later, Sage mouthed. Lena nodded and closed her eyes. “I could have slept the day away.”

Stassi slowly pulled her hand away from Sage’s. “I’m going to run and do a few things, talk to a few people, just mingle some. I’ll see you all in a bit.”

Sage watched as Stassi went out onto the floor and walked straight up to a man. She

shook his hand, then started talking to him, laughing and exuberantly stating something. Sage couldn't hear her, but there was either a connection there, or Stassi was just back in her element.

“What was that about?” Lena asked, turning her attention to Stassi.

Sage shrugged. She expected that the two of them would just spend the evening together, not allowing space to get between them. But when Stassi took off, it took Sage to a dark place. What was it that excited Stassi so much about socializing with people she barely knew? Sage recognized a couple of faces in the crowd as board members, but Stassi wouldn't have known them. Or had any reason to converse with them.

Maya came back to the table, and both Lena and Maya quickly drank from their glasses of wine. “Hold up,” Marcus replied. “You're going to get drunk before you've had the food.”

Lena laughed. “Wouldn't be such a bad idea. Drown out this day, anyway.”

Sage smiled before turning back to watch Stassi. Stassi had wandered up to two more people. Sage frowned. Where was this coming from, and why was Stassi so eager to talk to everyone? She leaned back in her seat and just watched her. Maybe she didn't know Stassi as well as she thought she did.

“Hey, Marcus.” Sage turned to the sound of the voice. Wyatt from HR was grinning from ear to ear as he looked at Marcus. As Marcus mentioned, he clearly had a crush. Now that Marcus had broken up with Trent, it seemed like Marcus was open to it.

“Hey, Wyatt. You look nice.” Wyatt's cheeks flushed as he looked over Marcus and gave him an approving smile.

“Wanna dance?” Wyatt asked.

Sage stared between the two of them as Marcus got up and was escorted out to the floor by Wyatt. They began slow dancing, and Sage turned to Lena. “So, what the hell?” Lena asked.

Sage shook her head. “A minor disagreement, from what I can tell. Marcus says it’s over that they’ve drifted apart. Trent didn’t really want to be here. Blah blah blah.” Sage shrugged. “Who knows? It just seems like Marcus is jumping. He’s probably hurt, but he shouldn’t be doing something as drastic as dancing with another guy. Makes no sense.”

Sage turned to Stassi as those words looped around her mind. Nothing really made any sense, though. If Stassi preferred to socialize with the people that the union would fight against, then she wasn’t certain she knew who Stassi was. She sipped on her champagne, until the glass was empty, then pushed it to the side and continued to watch.

Two hours passed, and Stassi continued to mingle on the floor, like she was escaping Sage. Lena and Maya joined the dancers, and Wyatt showed Marcus his moves. Sage got up from the table and went over to the bar when the line had dwindled. “I’ll take a champagne,” she said.

“Coming right up.” The bartender turned and poured her a glass, then slid it in her direction. “Tips are always welcome,” he said, before moving on to the next customer.

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Sage rolled her eyes and turned from him. She'd already given a tip and wasn't going to give in to that peer pressure. She got back to the table and continued drinking her champagne. Stassi turned to her and gave a slight wave, then glanced back at the man Sage didn't even know. She shook her head. If this was the real Stassi, then maybe she'd been fooled. After another thirty minutes of spending time alone, she got up from the table and stomped over to her. Stassi had just finished talking to a man, and it looked like she was on a quest to speak with someone else.

"Excuse me." Sage tapped her on the shoulder, and Stassi twirled around and grinned. "So, thinking that maybe it'd be nice to get a dance or two in. Before this place is closed down, and you've spent the night with everybody else."

Stassi stared. "I'm merely trying to help. The more networking, the more donations."

Sage sighed. "Stassi, I know that's what you're used to, but this is all new to me and I was kind of hoping that we would get a chance to be a couple together, if you know what I mean."

"I do, but the night will end before we know it, and we every chance to get the money into the hospital system that it so desperately needs."

Sage shook her head and threw up her hands. "As you wish." She turned and stomped back to her table. She sunk down in her chair and stared at the table. So much for a romantic evening. When she was stuck at a table in the middle of a crowded room, where no one much cared that she was alone, she couldn't expect that it would go well.

“Would you care to dance?” She looked up, and Stassi held out her hand.

Sage quirked up an eyebrow. “Are you sure? Wouldn’t want to ruin your night of socializing.”

“I’m sorry,” Stassi replied. “I should have been more mindful, but I’m here now. Please, will you dance with me?”

Sage grinned and reached for Stassi’s hand. “I thought you’d never ask.”

They went out into the middle of the floor and began to sway to the slow song. The night quickly faded away, and Sage felt like nothing would hinder her present mood.

“I really do want to help the cause. I don’t feel like I can do nearly enough, and this is something that I can do.”

Sage nodded. “Let’s not talk.” She moved in and kissed Stassi. The world stopped, and they were the only two left in the room. The kiss deepened and a shadow fell over the two of them. Sage could forget, as long as there was a greater purpose and they were there together, in love, and not allowing the rest of the world to interfere.

“What’s the meaning of this?” The words came out and Sage quickly pulled from the kiss. Every eye in the ballroom went to Marcus and Wyatt. Sage’s jaw dropped as Trent stood there in front of the other two men in a full tuxedo. “Why are you dancing with my boyfriend?” Trent bellowed.

“Well, I thought so, too. But when you chose something over going out with me, I realized that maybe I was only kidding myself.” Marcus shrugged.

“Oh really? So you’re choosing someone else? I hope you two are very happy.” Trent spun on his heel and started to stomp off the dance floor.

“Trent!” Marcus called. He ran to him. It was practically in slow motion, as you would see in the movies. “This meant nothing.” He hesitated and looked over at Wyatt, all dressed up in his black suit and tie. “What are you doing here?”

Trent shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “I suppose I felt bad not coming. Thought I’d surprise you. Turns out, it’s me that got the surprise.” Trent scoffed.

“This meant nothing,” Marcus insisted for the second time. “I was missing you and wishing that you were here. It was only a dance. You have to believe that.”

Trent nodded and looked past him. Wyatt had already removed himself from the situation, grabbing a seat in a far corner. Trent turned back to Marcus, “I love you, Marcus. I don’t want us to fight.”

“Neither do I.” Marcus quickly shook his head. “I love you, too.”

They embraced, kissing one another in front of everyone in that room. When they parted, Trent’s eyes narrowed. He then got down on one knee. “I can’t spend another day without you, Marcus. Will you marry me?” He surprised everyone by pulling out a ring and producing it. Marcus’ eyes widened, and he eagerly nodded.

“I’ll marry you, Trent. Yes!”

Trent slipped the ring on his finger, and the crowd erupted. Marcus turned, his face absolutely glowing. He then turned back to Trent, and they embraced. While everyone cheered them on, they kissed passionately, nothing able to tear them apart.

Sage touched her chest, tears stinging the backs of her eyes. That was what love was all about, and she loved that they all got to witness it.

Stassi

Stassi stretched out, a smile on her face as she nuzzled up against Sage in bed. “Good morning,” she mumbled. Her head was a little sore from the amount of Champagne she drank, but a lot was going on the previous night. When someone would offer her a glass, she couldn’t refuse. Luckily, Sage didn’t have as much and could make the drive back home.

“Good morning!” Sage whispered, kissing Stassi on the top of the head. “How’d you sleep?”

“Well, great, in fact.” Stassi heaved a sigh. “I can’t stop thinking about Trent and Marcus. That was such a beautiful display of love, don’t you think?”

“I would say so,” Sage softly agreed. “But...” Her words trailed off as she pulled herself up, the blanket falling down a bit, but still covering her. “Is that what you’d imagine?”



Stassi propped herself up on her elbow and frowned. “Imagined?”

“I just mean, if you were to get proposed to, would you want a public spectacle like that?” Sage tilted her head. “Don’t get me wrong, it was a sweet gesture, and it was romantic, but there were over a thousand pairs of eyes gawking at them.” She laughed. “I guess I wouldn’t think many people would want such an extravagant display.”

Stassi nodded. “I see what you mean. Now that I think about it, I suppose I would say that something a bit more intimate would be nice. After all, the only ones that would matter would be the two of us.” Stassi’s cheeks burned. “Well, you know what I mean. Myself and whoever I would be getting proposed to.” She added the last bit quickly, rambling.

Sage smiled and nodded. “I know what you mean.” She tossed her covers back and jumped out of bed. Stassi stared at her as she grabbed a pair of sweats and a sweatshirt and threw them on.

“What are you doing?”

“Thought I would run out and get us something to eat for breakfast. My treat. I’m starving.” She kissed Stassi before turning and heading to the door. She tossed a wave over her shoulder and Stassi fell back in the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Sage had way too much energy for so early in the morning. She rolled onto her side and considered Trent and Marcus. In a perfect world, she would accept either proposal. There wasn’t anything wrong with grand gestures like that, but she would

also enjoy something light and intimate, just the two of them. And when she thought of someone proposing, her mind immediately went to Sage. That was the best feeling. And a little scary.

As she stayed in that position, her mind was on Sage and her heart, and her phone began ringing. She glanced at her watch and groaned. It was just before eight o'clock. Who needed to bother her that early in the morning? She reached for her phone and saw it was her dad. She was hesitant. It felt like every time she talked to him, something else shady came up in the conversation.

“Hey, Dad.”

“I’m glad I reached you,” he began. That was a first. Most of the time, when she tried to reach him, she never got through. This was one time, in what felt like forever, that he wanted to speak with her. Maybe something had changed. “Heard you spoke with my friend Michael last night.” The truth was, upon socializing, she quickly realized that she recognized several of the hospital board members from either seeing articles that included her dad or encountering them at her father’s building. So, she used the opportunity. And believed that it went excessively well for her.

“I did,” she began. “Got to have plenty of conversations last night at the gala. After all, you taught me well. Galas are used for networking, and if you don’t network, there’s no point in going. Isn’t that your motto?”

“Something like that,” he replied with a mumble.

“Michael was nice. As were several of the others. You can typically get a vibe from people one way or another, in just a few minutes of conversation. And I feel it worked well to my advantage.”

“What advantage is that?” he asked.

Stassi shook her head. “I care a great deal for many of the hospital’s employees. The union that they’re looking to form is important for their future. And they’re really close to making that dream happen. What little bit of help I can do is imperative.”

“You have a kind heart,” he began. “But I’ve given it much thought; I think you should stay away from the union nonsense.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you like the finer things. You care about looking your best and doing that all takes money. The gala was only a glimpse of what your old lifestyle has in store for you. You miss that. I know that, and you know that. I’m working to get my fortune back so I can go back to supporting you. With the union, it could possibly derail that from happening, and I know you don’t want that.”

“Dad, what are you truly saying?”

“I’m saying that these cuts that are being made will assist in us getting our lifestyle back, honey. Give it some time and you’ll certainly see. Take a step back from supporting this union business and everything you’ve ever dreamed of will be back in your grasp.”

“I’m back,” Sage called.

“I gotta go,” Stassi quickly disconnected the call as Sage rounded the corner of the bedroom.

“I have four different kinds of muffins and, of course, some of the richest brewed coffee.” Sage held out one of the cups. She then frowned. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is great.” Stassi forced a smile, but her father’s words were quick

to cast a cloud over her. If given the chance, would she bolt from all of this for the chance at her old life?

Sage

Lena came running up to Sage's table in the cafeteria. "There you are," Sage replied, taking a bite of her banana. "I was beginning to think you were skipping lunch."

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "But look. I just got the last signature we need. With the paperwork signed, we are officially a union, and we can decide what we're going to do to make a difference in this hospital. I can hardly believe that it's finally happening."

Sage grabbed the clipboard and looked at it. She shook her head. "You did it."

Lena shook her head. "We did it. In fact, I would say Stassi had a part in this. Perhaps even a bigger part."

Sage frowned. "How do you mean?"

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“Well, I noticed that she was socializing with everyone at the gala. And many of these names came from that night. So, I can’t deny the fact that there’s a pretty good chance it came from her influence.” She shrugged. “But, however it happened, I’m relieved. I was beginning to think we would never see this day.”

Sage set the list down. “And I would say it’s none too soon because I’m hearing more talks about more benefits being pulled.” Sage groaned. “I’m ready to really kick this into high gear, so we can truly make a difference here.”

“Do you mean that?” Sage looked up as Linda approached their table. Her cheeks were splotchy, and her eyes were red. She had a balled-up tissue in her hand and dabbed her eyes, just before another tear released. “My daughter is having a baby. She’s having this baby alone and she lives in Texas, and I thought I could take FMLA and get away for a little while once the baby is born.” She sniffed, then continued. “I was just informed that I’m no longer eligible for FMLA. I have no vacation time, so that’s out of the question. And beginning next month, my 401K is losing some more money because the greedy SOBs can’t find anyone else to pester, I guess.” She slumped down in the seat next to Sage. Sage put her hand on her shoulder and looked across to Lena.

Lena shook her head. “It’s not right and if we don’t do something now, then I think this whole place is going to crumble, and we’ll all be left under the rubble.

“Well, we could send out a mass email that says starting tomorrow morning, we’re going on strike.”

Linda’s eyes widened. “Could we really?”

Sage swallowed the lump in her throat, from just saying the words. It wasn't going to be easy but change rarely was. "Lena, meet me at my place tonight. We'll make signs and tell all those who are ready to make a difference to be here tomorrow morning at six."

Lena grinned and turned to Linda. "Sage is right. Nothing is going to work if they don't see that we're serious about this. We'll get everyone involved, and together we will make a difference."

Sage felt hopeful walking back to work, knowing it'd be a while until she was back helping the patients. They might suffer, but there were other facilities that could give them the care they needed. And if things went according to plan, this wouldn't be forever. She caught Stassi coming out of the records room, and she walked up to her.

"So, be at my place when you get off work."

Stassi nodded. "I usually am." She released a soft laugh.

Sage grinned. "True, but tonight is a bit different. Lena just got all the signatures we need, and we're putting together a picket line. As of tomorrow morning, we're going on strike."

Stassi stared at her. Sage couldn't read her expression, but it didn't feel like it was filled with excitement. Mostly uncertainty. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Sage laughed. "Of course. It's what we've been working our asses off for."

"I know, but the patients. Won't they suffer?" Stassi fidgeted from one foot to the other. Sage would have some consoling to do when it came to Stassi and her fears, but she would make her see that no one would suffer from this. They would all benefit, and the greater good would reign victorious.

“It’s all going to work out,” Sage replied. “You’ll see.”

Sage turned around and held up the sign that she had spent forty-five minutes on. “We demand results,” she said. “What do you think?”

Lena nodded. “I mean, nothing comes across as straight as that. It should get their attention.” Lena held up a sign, and Sage read it out loud.

“What are you hiding?” Sage grinned. “That’s our exact point. They’re hiding something if they haven’t taken two seconds even to consider our side of things.” She slid down to the floor and reached for another sign. She grabbed the gold sparkling glitter and began to outline another poster.

To the right of her, Stassi sat there. She had the same sign in front of her, which she had when they first started. She glanced over Stassi’s shoulder and heaved a sigh. Not one word had been spread across it. Perhaps she was just in thought over the perfect sign. Not everyone could have the words pouring out of them.

Sage glanced at Lena, who was back to making another poster. “The email blast was out there, right?” Sage asked.

“Yep. Sent it to all departments, leaving out the head honchos, of course. We better have a hundred of these babies ready to go.” She giggled and shrugged. “Of course, we could just have lots of megaphones so those that don’t have a sign are chanting, or something.”

“I wonder how many will show up? We have to be realistic and realize that it’s possible that some people may be more comfortable to come on day three or day four.”

Lena shrugged, looked down at her cardboard sign, then looked back up and frowned.

“I wonder how long we’ll have to picket.”

“As long as it takes,” Sage commented. She glanced around at the floor filled with blank poster board and the colors that were close by to grab and decorate. “We’re making a difference, and, for that, we should be very proud.”

Sage glanced at Stassi’s still-empty sign. She opened her mouth to inquire if maybe Stassi was just stuck. They could use the same slogan on several signs. No one would care, but Stassi turned and stared at her. Sage closed her mouth and waited.

“Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?”

“Hell yeah, we are,” Lena shot back. Sage turned and glared at her, but Lena wasn’t finished. “How could you say otherwise? Don’t you believe in fighting for a cause, goodwill, and all that shit?”

“Well, yeah, but...” Stassi shrugged and looked down at her blank board. “Guess it’s not for me to say. After all, I have no say. I haven’t even signed the list.” Stassi grabbed a marker and leaned forward, while Sage stared at her.

“That’s another thing...” Lena began.



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“Drop it!” Sage mouthed, glaring in Lena’s direction. Lena closed her mouth and nothing more was said. They only stopped a few times to proudly show off their signs. Even Stassi had finished off two before the boards were completely done. It was two in the morning, and Sage felt like she could go all night. She was on her second wind and not ready for it to fall back down.

“Morning is going to get here pretty soon,” Lena commented, standing up. She looked over the piles that were scattered across the floor. “What should we do with these?”

“I can hold onto them. I’ll load them up in my vehicle and meet you at the front doors.” Lena nodded, trying to hold back a yawn, but it broke through. Sage laughed. “I was just thinking that I could go a few more hours, and here you are yawning.”

Lena shrugged. “Guess I worked harder than you.” She gave a wink and glanced over to Stassi. When Stassi didn’t acknowledge her, she shrugged and turned back to Sage. “I’ll see you in a few hours.” She raised her hand over her shoulder to wave and then left the living room.

“I should be going, too,” Stassi mumbled.

Sage spun on her heel. “Huh? You typically stay. It’s two. Why would you go now? You have plenty of clothes for tomorrow.”

“Just feel like it’s best if I go, that’s all.” She pushed past Sage, but Sage reached out and grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“What gives? You’ve been in sort of a funk all evening, and now you’re not staying? Clearly, something has pissed you off, and I would rather we just talk about it.”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I just don’t think tonight is a good idea, and I should just go home.”

Sage stared, but then reluctantly nodded. If that’s what Stassi wanted, then how could arguing change the result?

Sage quietly walked Stassi out of the apartment and to her car. Once they reached her car, Stassi turned and leaned back against it. “I think it’s best if we take a break,” she said.

Sage frowned. “A break?”

“Yeah, a break. We’re just so different, and maybe once the strike is over, we can look at resuming where we left off, but until then...I think it’s for the best.”

“Why?” Sage argued. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Stassi threw up her hands. “I’m doing my best to support this union business, I truly am. I just can’t support a strike. It goes against everything I believe. You want to throw a tantrum and strike, then go for it, but I don’t want any part of it.” Stassi crossed her arms in front of her and turned her head away.

“Look me in the eye and tell me that’s all it is,” Sage quietly rebuked.

Stassi turned to her, and her eyes had darkened. She flicked a tear away and shook her head. “I spoke with my father. He doesn’t think it’s a good idea. He thinks it will destroy everything, and I’m beginning to think that he’s right. Why risk it?”

Sage held up her hand. “Your father? What does your father have to do with anything? I don’t even know your father.”

“You may not know him, but I’m sure you know of him. Martin Hewitt, CEO LA County.” She shrunk back against the car. “Need I go on?”

“What the...” Sage took in the news and eventually looked down at the ground. “So, you’re the daughter of Martin Hewitt? Why didn’t you tell me?” She then held up her hand. “Forget that question. I know why you didn’t tell me. You didn’t tell me because you didn’t want me to know that he’s the one who had bad investments. You didn’t want me to know that he’s the reason you got the job?”

“It’s not like that,” Stassi argued. But it was hard denying the truth. She looked down at her feet. “He was only trying to help.”

“You had plenty of opportunity to tell me, and yet you chose not to. God! Even after us talking about trust and communication!” Sage turned around and took several steps away from her before slowly turning back around. “I fell in love with you, Stassi. That means something. But I think you’re right. We should take a break.” She turned back around and hurried away from her. She didn’t know how temporary it would be, but she knew that she needed to gain some distance. At least for a moment to catch her breath.

Stassi

Stassi sat in her car. She stared up front and dreaded crossing the line even one more time. The strike had been going on for a week, and it never got easier. But now, more staff members had joined the fight, and it was just one more time she’d have to barrel through the line, and hope no one tried to trip her. She felt like a traitor, but someone had to do it.

As she approached the line, she saw Sage standing in the front. She held her sign up the highest, and Stassi was quick not to look in her direction. On the other side, stood Lena. Lena glared at her, and she could only imagine the things that Sage told her. She missed Sage and longed to go to her, apologize, and even join the line, but it was impossible to make that leap. As devastating as that was. And the guilty feeling of crossing that line would never end, only go deeper into her gut.

She got inside and released a sigh. “Never easy, right?” Charlotte, who worked the front desk in the lobby, grimaced. She shook her head and stared outside the glass doors. “It’s not easy sitting here and being forced to watch it, then walking back out and doing it all over again. But when you have a family to support, you don’t have much choice. But I envy them. I do, indeed.” Charlotte looked down at her computer, and Stassi stared over her shoulder. In a way, she did, too. But it was tough knowing that with her dad as the main person behind the strike, she didn’t have much choice.

Stassi entered the elevator and took it the long way up several flights. When the doors opened, she was whisked into an even more chaotic mess. Just like the previous week, this week wasn’t starting out any better. People were running around, calling to try to find bodies who could assist wherever they could. Stassi sighed and dropped her purse in the drawer, then sat down at the computer. A line had already formed to be checked in.

“I’ll take the next one here,” she called, quickly attempting to get signed in on the computer. The phone rang. Blake, who is just an intern, was trying to man the phones and check patients in. She looked disheveled, her eyes bugging out as she tried to keep everything straight. Stassi gave a soft smile to the man in front of her. “Name and date of birth?”

“Ugh!” Blake moaned next to her, tossing the phone back into its cradle. “I can’t do this anymore,” she said. “This job is not for me. I quit.”

“You can’t quit,” Stassi gasped.

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Blake turned to her, her cheeks red and her eyes not far behind. “Try me. Those picketers have the right idea. There’s too much chaos going on here.” She threw up her hands and stormed away. The phone started ringing, and Stassi turned to her patient. She was ready to start crying herself, not sure which direction she should go.

“Excuse me,” she mumbled. She moved over to the phone and answered it. “Please hold.” It rang again; in fact, it rang five times, with Stassi putting it on a different line each time. She quickly got back to the patient and checked in the line that had formed. But what would she do with all these patients who expected to see a therapist or nurse? She had no one to give them to. She took a deep breath and released it, the shakiness appearing. She reached for the phone and stared at all the flashing lights in front of her. She pushed the button to connect with the ER.

“Hello, this is Brooke.”

In a calm and quiet voice, Stassi said, “Brooke, it’s Stassi on Therapy. Do you have anyone? Doctor, nurse, MA, I really don’t care. I just need a body up here, to where they can at least pretend they know what they’re doing. I have a waiting room of patients and no idea where to put them and what to do with them.”

“I don’t know much. I work reception, but we’re doing okay down here, so I can come up. I can pretend with the best of them.”

“Great! I’ll take it.” Stassi thanked her and hung up, then turned back to the phone and began answering the calls. It wouldn’t be ideal, but it would have to do because there was nothing she could do differently. The elevator door opened while she continued to schedule patients, patients who expected to see someone qualified and

would be sorely mistaken. Brooke came rushing in and immediately took the first patient. She had obviously been watching the doctors in the ER, to know what needed to be asked and done.

Stassi finished with the calls that were on hold, along with three additional calls, then went to the records room and pulled out several charts for upcoming appointments. It was a day that never had a chance of dragging on because she was way too busy for that. With no breaks and no lunch, the afternoon brought a little more breathing room. It also brought Missy stepping off the elevator. Stassi quickly attempted to put her hair back up in a ponytail, but Missy waved off Stassi's concern of how she looked.

"How's it going?"

"Rough," Stassi admitted. "It's been a hectic day, but these days should be expected, right?" Missy nodded.

She then leaned against the counter. "Smart move in getting Brooke, even if she's only a receptionist. At least she was a body to take care of the patient load, and I heard that she didn't do too bad. Perhaps she'll have a calling as an Occupational Therapist." She shrugged. "You just never know."

"True," Stassi mumbled. She wasn't sure why Missy was there, as the conversation seemed flat, but she didn't want to pry. Missy would get around to it, which she did.

"Just wanted to let you know that tomorrow should be better. I was able to get a Physical Therapist and Occupational Therapist brought into the department. They work at a neighboring hospital, and last year, they had a similar situation, and we were able to help them out. So, they're returning the favor."

"That's great!" Stassi replied. Missy reached out and touched her shoulder, her face showing genuine warmth. "Just hang in there. We'll get through this. We always do."

She turned and got back on the elevator. Stassi thought about those words. She wanted to believe that she, too, would get through it.

As she left the hospital at the end of the day, Sage glanced over and met her gaze. Stassi's heart felt pulled toward her, and she cringed as she had to once again cross the line. She couldn't keep the tears from falling as she got in the car. Her tears fell freely and rapidly now. She hit her palm against the steering wheel. She brought most of this on herself. She had to be strong.

She drove home, and when she entered her apartment, the quietness engulfed her. That was something she wasn't confident she could ever get used to. The apartment was devoid of laughter, food, or warmth. All she wanted was to hear Sage call out her name just once more.

Sage

Sage looked towards Stassi. It'd been three weeks, and Stassi had gotten to the point where she wouldn't even look in her direction. Every time Stassi crossed the picket line, it crushed Sage's soul. It felt like every bone in her body had been smashed with a grinder, and she could only watch it all go down.

"Earth to Sage!"

Sage turned and saw Lena crossing her arms. She had a scowl on her face and started tapping her foot. "Thinking and wishing again?" Lena asked.

Sage shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've been working. It's all I've been doing over the past few weeks. Making sure this is the best picket line one could possibly have. You heard what the news station said yesterday. We're making a difference, and the hospital will have no choice but to give in to all of our wishes and desires."



“And you now sound like a politician.”

Sage rolled her eyes at Lena. She did find it difficult not to think about Stassi. But when she was working on organizing the strike, it felt like things weren't quite as hard to overcome. Seeing Stassi cross the line was always going to be difficult. It was just something she had to force herself to get through.

But as the days turned into weeks, and the support continued to flourish around them, she could hold her chin a little higher and try to put Stassi on the back burner of her mind. She grabbed a few signs as more employees came in to join the line. She handed them off, and they joined in marching to the imaginary music. Stassi slowly faded from her mind.

Two hours into the day, Wyatt approached the line. He had been steering clear of Marcus, or so it seemed. He was probably embarrassed that Trent came back in, swooping in with a proposal that Marcus couldn't refuse.

“Hey, Wyatt.” Marcus stopped marching, hesitating as he suddenly appeared nervous.

“So, I know I'm only an intern, but some shady stuff is going on in the hospital. You can truly trust no one, and I just feel like there's more use I could do out here. I also have a few reinforcements that could run and get you guys lunch, or just join in the line. Admin needs to do something to fix this because this shit is seriously broken.”

Marcus glanced over to Sage, and Sage tossed him a sign. “We'd be happy to have you.”

Over the past three weeks, that's how things seemed to progress. One by one, more and more people heard the impact they were having on one another and wanted to join the brigade. And even the patients started showing support. That was one thing that Sage worried most about. If they didn't get the care they needed, then some of

these patients wouldn't make it. But they weren't sad that they felt abandoned. They were all at peace with it.

It would have made everything feel worth it—except for one part that was the hardest to grasp. Sage's emergency fund was fading fast. She feared that she would be forced to go back to work if she couldn't resolve the strike. Legally, they couldn't fire them, but Sage didn't want to be the first employee to go back in, crawling back for her job. And that worried her more than most things did.

At lunchtime, Sage grabbed a water and a bag of chips and just went to find a quiet spot to sit, hoping she would be alone. However, she wasn't there by herself for too long before Lena joined her. "Room for one more?" she asked. Sage gave a slight nod, not willing to lose her friendship over wanting some alone time.

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Lena sighed and took a sip of her water. “You seem quiet. I mean, more so than usual.”

“Just a lot on my mind.” Sage popped a chip into her mouth. A lot that didn’t depend on confiding it all over a light snack. “Wonder how much longer this will go on. I guess I thought maybe we’d have someone reaching out to us. I don’t know...Noah, or Martin Hewitt, someone.” She shrugged and took another chip in her hand.

“You mean Stassi’s father?” Lena rolled her eyes. She regretted telling Lena that news, as Lena had yet to let go of it. “I just can’t believe Stassi would keep something like that from you. You were supposed to be lovers and tell each other everything. Stassi didn’t seem like the person that could hide such big news. It goes to show that you don’t know who you were dealing with.”

“Stassi is a good person,” Sage snapped. She bit her tongue and looked down at her water bottle. One more outburst, and it would appear that Sage was more lost than she wanted to appear.

“Good person or not,” Lena began. “She should have told you.”

Sage looked back up and met Lena’s gaze. “I can almost understand why she didn’t. Sure, it would have been less of a blow if I had learned sooner, but I get it. It’d be hard to confide in something so big. Especially if since she didn’t know how I would respond.”

“She knew. Which is why she kept it from you.”

Sage stood up from the cement flower bed. “Is there a point to this? If not, we should get back to work.”

“Don’t be angry, Sage, I’m trying to help you out here. I know that you loved her.” Sage looked down at her hands that were twitching around the water bottle. “You can’t close your heart to a new love. It’s out there and ready for you to reach for it whenever you want.”

Sage shook her head and looked up to meet Lena’s gaze. “I’ll remember that, but you remember that it’s only been a few weeks. Not nearly enough time to grieve.” She turned on her heel and stepped away from her best friend. Especially, when she was still fighting the urge to go to Stassi. She missed her and wanted to feel the excitement they shared together. Nothing was going to suddenly take that away.

Stassi

Five weeks. It’d been five weeks since Sage and Stassi had the falling out and five weeks since the union had formed. Stassi couldn’t believe she had made it more than a month, but she didn’t make it freely. She felt every pain she could inside whenever she was forced to walk by Sage. And, what’s worse, she knew that her heart would never fully be healed as long as they weren’t able to be together.

Stassi entered her lonely apartment, ready for another night of sitting in front of the TV, surfing until she ultimately decided to just go to bed. It wasn’t a fulfilling evening, but at least it didn’t require getting dressed and going out on the town. Something she once craved now held no appeal.

She padded into the living room, her fuzzy socks making a swishing noise on the linoleum. Her lounge pants were baggy, and her t-shirt was two sizes too large. The ideal outfit to wear when you have nowhere to go. She wouldn’t be sad about that. She grabbed a bowl and loaded it with ice cream, then piled it high with whipped

cream. She grabbed a cheery from the refrigerator and plopped it onto the top. All she needed now was a variety of toppings, but she could do away with those. She sat down on the couch, grabbed the remote, and began her nightly routine.

She was half a bowl gone when there was a knock on her door. She groaned. “Who could that be?” She wasn’t exactly dressed for visitors. Her hair was pulled back into a messy bun. She had no makeup on. And she just wanted to cower down in front of the door and pretend no one was there. When two more knocks came, she cringed. So much for a restful night in. “I’m coming,” she grumbled. She peeked through the peephole and shook her head. “I’m fine. Go away!”

“Stassi!” Ariel pounded on the door. “Open the door up right now before your whole apartment building comes running out to see the commotion.” She paused for just a second before she added, louder, “I mean it.”

Stassi threw the door open. “I’m good. No need to be here.” She gave a curt nod to Natalia.

Ariel looked her over. “No offense, but this doesn’t look like you’re good. In fact, this is the opposite of good.”

Stassi admitted that she was depressed, at times, but she felt that she had every right to be. She was mourning the loss of her relationship. Give her time and she was bound to be fine. She looked down at her attire. “I’m sorry I’m not presentable, but it is after eight on a Friday night, and I was not expecting company. But you’re here, so... do. You want some ice cream?” She held up the bowl and started to turn toward the kitchen.

Ariel latched onto her shoulder and pulled her back. “Not so fast. You’re coming out with me.”

“Ariel, I told you this wasn’t a good idea. If you broke up with someone, you wouldn’t want anyone hounding you.” Natalia tilted her head. “How about we go away and come again when Stassi expects us.”

“Listen to Natalia, she’s the smart one.” Stassi took a bite of her ice cream, but Ariel pulled the bowl out of her hand.

“This isn’t you, Stassi. Get dressed. Tonight is ladies’ night, and you just mind find another woman that will strike your fancy.”

Stassi groaned and looked to Natalia. “Can you believe this chick?”

Natalia shook her head. “Still love her, but she’s insufferable.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” Ariel argued.

Five minutes later, Stassi was whisked away to her bedroom, where an outfit was laid out for her, and her makeup and hair were done just as if she were working on a modeling gig. The scene was all too familiar, and twenty minutes later, they entered the club.

Stassi glanced around and acknowledged that Ariel was right. Ladies night was in full swing. She grabbed a beer off of a passing tray and took a swig. The beer didn’t hurt. She couldn’t keep up that, though, with just a bowl of ice cream to back it up. The three of them sat down, and they ordered nachos and fries, along with a side of fried pickles. Stassi glanced around the club, checking to see if she recognized anyone, and was grateful that she didn’t.

She continued to sip on her beer as Natalia and Ariel spoke with one another. Stassi tapped her foot, questioning why she even needed to be there. They looked all too consumed in each other to even know that she was there. Stassi stifled a yawn and

was relieved when the food arrived at the table. She would at least have that to keep her company.

Natalia reached across and grabbed a pickle, then looked to Stassi. “Wanna dance?” she asked.

Stassi laughed. “With you?”

Natalia shrugged. “Any better offers?”

Ariel grinned, and Stassi realized that was one of the things Natalia and Ariel had most likely been discussing. “No, thank you! I don’t know this song.”

Natalia shrugged and then reached for Ariel’s hand and escorted her onto the floor. Stassi was fine with that—it was how it should have been anyway. She didn’t want Natalia to merely offer because she felt sorry for her; it was misplaced and unnecessary. Stassi ate and drank her beer, letting her eyes drift out to where Natalia and Ariel danced. When she saw her, she nodded her head to the music, not paying much attention.

Sage was talking to Lena and a couple of other women she recognized from the hospital. Stassi stared, mostly thinking how good Sage looked. She cringed when the thought crossed her mind. Out of all the places they could have gone, why did it have to be the same club? She heaved a sigh, her heart racing as she stared.

Then, as if Sage could read her mind, she turned and met Stassi’s gaze. Sage lifted her hand to wave, but Stassi was motionless. Then Sage walked over to the table, leaving Lena and the other girls behind.

“Hey!” Stassi’s throat was dry, so how she got the words out was beyond her.

“Hey!” Sage looked over to the dance floor before turning back to her. Sage opened her mouth, but when words didn’t come out, she closed it. “I...I really should be



going.”

“Sage!” Stassi jumped up. Sage turned around and stared. “I’ve missed you.”

“I...”

“Stassi? Do you need us to beat someone up for you?” Ariel asked. Stassi cringed as she turned back to Sage. Sage gave a weak smile, then turned away and walked back to Lena and her other friends. Stassi gawked in her direction before looking at Ariel.

“Why did you do that?” Stassi asked. “We were finally going to talk. Or at least I thought,” she muttered.

“I’m sorry,” Ariel replied. “It just looked awkward, and I wanted to save you.”

Stassi grimaced. “I don’t think I need saving—not from Sage, not from anyone.” She shook her head. “I’m going home.”

“I brought you,” Ariel asked.

Stassi threw up her hands. “I’ll get an Uber or something. I just really need out of here.” She tossed down some money and then hurried towards the front door. She wanted a few minutes alone with Sage, hoping they could actually talk and figure some things out, but now it felt like that wasn’t ever going to happen.

Stassi tossed around in bed. She couldn’t get Sage out of her mind since getting back to her apartment, and there was no chance she was going to get some sleep. It was amazing how much she had changed since she started working at the hospital. That was only a few months, but it felt like a lifetime with all of the obstacles they had to face. When she started, she was more driven to make sure she had the finer things in life. But now, she just wanted to be with Sage.

She sat up in bed and stared at the alarm clock. It was four o'clock in the morning. Hours and hours of tossing and turning never made the clock move any faster. She laid back down and closed her eyes. She was glad she had the weekend off, but she didn't want to spend it tossing, unable to get any sleep. She closed her eyes, silently vowing that she wouldn't open them until it was morning. A trick that didn't work. She sat up in bed and tossed her covers back. There wasn't any point in laying down if she was going to still be wide awake.

Stassi went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of milk. She sunk down at the kitchen table and stared aimlessly. She was exhausted, but nothing seemed to help to bring her into a slumber. She took another sip of her milk, and her mind went back to Sage. She looked extra hot at the club, but maybe it was because Stassi was on the brink of forgetting what it was like to be in Sage's bed. Stassi dropped her head to the table and rested it there, her eyes closing, nearly nodding off until Sage's smile popped into her brain.

"Ugh!" she groaned, sitting up and forcing herself to down the rest of the milk.

She got up and put the dirty cup into the sink, then left the kitchen and went to the living room. Maybe a little TV would do the trick. By the time she fell asleep, she wasn't sure what time it was, but her last memory from the television was an infomercial for a vacuum cleaner. It did the trick.

The next time Stassi saw the time, it was just after ten o'clock. She yawned and stretched out, shifting on the couch to try to get comfortable. She sat up and tried to stretch again. Then Sage popped into her mind again.

"Dammit," she grumbled. A few minutes without thinking about Sage would have been ideal. She was out picketing, most likely, as Stassi's thoughts went to her. She hated that they felt the need to continue to fight for a cause that didn't seem to be making any change—just hurting everyone involved. How much longer would they

be able to make it?

The hospital had worked to fill most of the positions. All temporary help, of course, but if they could pay people to come in from other employers, then why worry about making right with the employees they already had? It was a vicious cycle, and Stassi despised seeing her co-workers running ragged to try to prove something that wasn't even going to change.

Stassi had only one more hope that maybe her father could still make that difference. He had to eventually hear the voice of reason. Right? The phone rang, and he answered on the second ring.

"Martin Hewitt," he began.

"Hey, Dad, it's me."

"Oh. Sorry for the formality. I didn't notice the name. I'm really pretty busy, though. Will this take long?"

She touched her temple, wanting to ease the ache in her head. The harder she tried to convince him things were not on a good path, the further they seemed to be drifting apart.

"Did you see the media coverage of the strike?" she asked. "These people aren't giving up. Isn't it time that someone listens? I mean, I just don't see how anyone could think this is good publicity."

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“You can’t fight politics,” he said. “People will do what they want to do. If the staff want to make fools of themselves by marching, hoping it will make a difference, then let them. Eventually, they’ll come crawling back because they’ll need to. The money will only last so long.” He chuckled, and she winced at how nonchalant he was.

“You don’t know how dedicated these employees are. They will fight for what they believe is right, and they won’t give up until some changes are made. But in the meantime, the hospital is going to crumble. I just can’t believe that’s what you would want.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“I’m not being dramatic.” Her voice was raised a few notches. “I’m being realistic. These people deserve better than what they’re getting.”

“I just can’t believe how much you’ve changed.”

Stassi sighed and stood up from the couch. “You may not get this, but I’m glad I’ve changed. That means that I’m not this egotistical bitch that only cares about money. I care about people, too. And I’m telling you that watching them suffer has about killed me inside, and I don’t want to watch them in silence anymore.”

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“I know what I have to do. Goodbye, Dad.” She hung up the call and stood up. There wasn’t any doubt that she had to take the step. She wanted things to get back to normal and losing sleep was not going to be a part of her new routine. She dialed up

Ariel, but it went straight to voicemail. “I need your help. I’m headed to the hospital, and I’m going to do what I should have done long ago. Join the fight. I know you don’t work there, but the more bodies the louder the voice. Will you join me in front of the hospital? I’ll bring the signs.”

Stassi hung up the line and hurried to get ready. She had a lot to do, but she had to take her stand. Once and for all.

Sage

Sage had to force herself to go to the hospital. After seeing Stassi and not getting a chance to really tell her what she was feeling, the wind had been kicked from her. Lena, however, kept telling her she had to do it. It was what they were working hard to fix and without her, the team would want to give up. Sage didn’t think that was true, but she had to do it because she would feel like she had let the team down if she didn’t.

Sage held up the blowhorn. “Listen up, everyone. Let’s rally up the chant. What do we want?”

“Changes.”

“When do we want them?” Sage yelled.

“Now!”

“How long will we wait?”

“Forever!” The crowd hollered back. Then they started chanting: LA County Hospital cares about themselves. That’s all. Themselves.” No one stopped chanting, even as the momentum drained from Sage. She wanted to be more enthusiastic, but her heart

was slowly losing the oomph that it needed. But then she spotted Stassi staring at her, and she took in a deep breath and began to chant even louder. Stassi couldn't know that Sage felt like she was drowning in a pool that was slowly gaining water.

She looked away, the chant still powering through the megaphone, even though she was feeling the words less and less. As she turned, Stassi moved in closer, closing the gap. Sage dropped the megaphone from her lips and waited.

"It was good seeing you last night," Stassi began.

Sage nodded, and then glanced at the bright pink sign that Stassi held in her hand. "What's that?" Sage asked.

Stassi shrugged. "I was hoping you could use some more help? I have a couple others that will be here shortly." Sage frowned. Stassi met her eyes, "I should have been here a long time ago."

Sage opened her mouth when Lena popped up behind her. "Nice use of swear words to show the imagery," Lena said. "Welcome aboard! Always room for one more."

Sage's jaw dropped. Lena was the one to act like Sage needed to move on but was now welcoming Stassi back into the group as if nothing had even happened. Stassi jumped into line and continued to chant just as loud as the rest of them. Sage shrugged and moved to the head of the line, starting the chant up with the volume increasing. She was still confused as to why Stassi was there, but there was time to figure that out. They still had a job to do.

As Stassi settled in, she carried the sign around like she owned the place. Then, when they did the chants, it seemed like Stassi was hollering the loudest. An hour after she arrived, Ariel and Natalia showed up.

“We’re here to work. Put us to use.”

Sage opened her mouth and turned to see Stassi grinning. This was something Sage hadn’t expected. Stassi had put this all together? That was beyond a surprise. What was even better was that Ariel didn’t seem to be the judgmental person who didn’t think Sage was good enough. Both Ariel and Natalia each made a sign, and it was nice to see the support coming from outside of the hospital, especially from those who had no stake in what happened.

“I’m gonna run out and get sandwiches,” Sage hollered, when it reached lunchtime. Typically, she would have gotten someone else to do the grunt work, but she needed a few minutes to catch her breath, where she wouldn’t be forced to see Stassi and wonder exactly what Stassi anticipated this would solve.

“Do you need help?” Stassi asked, almost hopeful.

Sage gave her a smile but shook her head. “I think the troops are needed, just in case HR happens to make an appearance. We want to show that we’re continuing this fight.” No matter how hard.

“Alright!” Stassi’s voice sounded resilient, but her face fell in disappointment. She turned back to the group and there was a pause. Sage nearly changed her mind in an instant. She reluctantly turned and headed to her car. At the car, she glanced over her shoulder and watched as Stassi led the picket line, yelling so loud that it echoed through the parking lot. She shook her head. What could Stassi have planned?

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Sage went to the deli on the corner. When they first began, they would get the food from the cafeteria, but then it became laughable. Why support any part of the hospital, when they still weren't able to get what they were arguing for? The deli seemed to be a more obvious of a choice and the manager supported them, without fail. Always giving them a discount and words of encouragement.

"You guys stay strong," Josef yelled out as she left. She was proud that she was making a difference, even if it hadn't officially worked yet. When Sage got back to the hospital, the line was continuing strong. Natalia and Ariel were finishing off the line and the chanting hadn't waned.

Sage held up the bags as she approached the line. "Come and grab 'em." A few people hurried to pick from what they wanted, but Stassi kept the sign held up proudly. Sage rummaged through the bags to find Stassi's sandwich, then approached her, with caution.

"Everyone stops to eat. It becomes a bigger part of the fight than the actual picketing." She laughed.

Stassi shrugged. "Someone has to continue. Go ahead and eat. I'm fine, really." She turned away and marched forward despite being the only voice. As she did, a man walked up to the line. Sage recognized him as Bobby Swihart, one of the investors of the hospital.

"Really..." He shook his head. "I didn't think a Hewitt would stoop so low."

"You think I'm stooping low? What about you, Bobby?" Her words tilted as she



stared at him. He scoffed, shook his head, and stormed off.

Sage gawked at the display, as Stassi glanced over to her. Sage's feelings of darkness started to lift. Maybe Stassi was truly there to show her support and was grateful to do so. That feeling was priceless.

Sage waved. "Thank you all for coming out today. We'll see you tomorrow if you can make it." She turned and saw Stassi still there, grabbing armloads of supplies and nearly fumbling over them.

"You don't have to," Sage argued, reaching out to help her get the items.

"Did I say I felt obligated?" Stassi asked. "I want to do it. Let me help. You shouldn't have to load this stuff up yourself." She shrugged. "It's no big deal."

Sage fell back and grabbed some items. Then they walked the first load to Sage's vehicle. "Thank you," Sage replied softly as they put them in the back of her car.

"Of course. If you need to use my vehicle to haul some of this, we can. After all, I'll be back in the morning. In fact, we really could have gotten others to take some. It's not like they aren't all coming back." She shrugged. "Maybe we could do that tomorrow."

"Yeah, makes sense." Sage quietly walked back to the pile of signs and reached for a stack, while Stassi reached for the same. When they bumped heads, Stassi laughed, but Sage rubbed her head. When she saw how Stassi laughed, she slowly started to join in. "After you." She held out her hand so that Stassi could take a load before she grabbed the last pile, and they headed over to Stassi's vehicle.

"I really want to thank you for being here today. Your support meant a lot to me." Sage looked away from Stassi. "It's meant a lot to all of us. The more people that

support us, the more we feel that we're capable of making a difference." She wanted to say more, but it was already getting too mushy, and so she let it rest, giving Stassi time to reply.

"Well, if I'm being honest, I was finding it hard to stay away. And I'm sorry that I let my ego get in the way because I should have been here long before now."

"Better late than never," Sage gave a small smile.

"Discussing my feelings is never easy," Stassi began. She heaved a sigh and even in the moonlight, Sage saw her red cheeks. "But sometimes you have to do what you fear, in order to grow as a human being. I learn that the hard way. But when it was just my father and me, growing up, I was like his shadow. I put him on this pedestal because I believed it was where he deserved to be. As I saw the hospital struggling, I didn't know how to cope with learning the truth. I thought if I shared everything I knew, you would find reasons we needed to break up, so I decided I needed to be the first one to break us. I have been working hard to get my father to understand what's going on here, and he's being oblivious. And I didn't know how to be the girlfriend you deserved to be."

"Stassi, you were always the girlfriend I deserved. I was hurt that you didn't talk to me about your father's role in all this. I guess that I didn't put it together. It's not like you're the only Hewitt in the world, but I would have understood if you had come to me. I just don't like it when people hide things from me." Sage hesitated, scuffing her shoe on the parking lot pavement. "I guess that's because I've never been lucky in love. You know that my last relationship didn't end so well and there was part of me that thought that it was easier just to throw up my hands and say that we're better off being apart." Sage shook her head. "Just one of the lies I told myself."

Stassi moved in closer. "I should have talked to you."

“And I should have been there to listen,” Sage quietly replied.

“I’ve missed you.” They both spoke in unison. Sage grinned and snaked her hand around Stassi’s neck. She pulled her in, and they kissed, the hunger igniting between the two of them. They were on a new trajectory, and Sage was ready for the ride.

Stassi

Stassi looked at Sage. She hadn’t stopped fidgeting once. Stassi reached across and grabbed her hand. “Why are you so nervous?” she asked, winking.

Sage’s eyes widened. “For starters? This is not exactly how I wanted to meet your father.”

Stassi laughed. “Just remember, we’re not going in there as lovers.”

“Besides,” Lena commented. “If you were, I wouldn’t be here.”

Stassi giggled and nodded. “She has a valid point.” Stassi leaned back against the chair. They had worked long and hard to get the meeting together with her father and the board members. Now that they were there, she wasn’t going to let any nerves waste her time. She was excited that they were closer than they ever had been. Most likely, they realized the publicity was starting to kill them. They had to do something if they wanted to save face. Stassi lifted Sage’s knuckles to her lips and gave them a kiss. She was only there because Matin was her father, and Sage thought it’d be nice to have Stassi’s support. Stassi wasn’t going to deny that. If Sage felt more comfortable, then Stassi would do what she needed.

Her fear, though, was that she’d be in the way. She wasn’t there to start the negotiations, but she would go ahead and support them and do as little of the talking as she possibly could.

The door opened, and Rene Prestley peeked her head out. “Stassi? The board is ready for you.” Stassi stood up and turned to look at Lena and Sage. “Actually, the board is ready for us.”

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Sage and Lena stood up and followed her in. Stassi knew most of the members through her father. So it was like a weird fiscal family reunion. She had to mentally remind herself that this wasn't a reunion she wanted to attend. She was there as an employee who demanded change, or else they would have no choice but to walk.

"Hello, Stassi." Her father greeted her, his words spoken through clenched teeth. Only Stassi noticed, or at least she hoped.

"Hello. This is Sage and Lena. I'm merely here for support." Stassi sat down in one of the three chairs and waited for Sage and Lena to join her.

"Alright," her father began. "So, it's my understanding that you all have concerns." Stassi shook her head. Her father did have a way of twisting things. Clearly, they had concerns. He didn't even know the half of them.

It was Lena that spoke up first. "Yes, sir." She looked around the table, her cheeks seemed to drain with fear. Maybe it wasn't the greatest idea to have her be one of the spokeswomen. From what Stassi was once told, she attempted to take it to the board, before and failed miserably. Stassi sat on her hands, so she wouldn't nervously play with them and waited. "I have been working here for many years, and over the years, I have discovered the changes that have come, and I have to admit, rarely are the changes good. It's time that we take the hospital into the twenty-first century. We have outdated equipment, and that doesn't even scratch the surface with all the issues that we have going on." Lena turned to Sage.

"Older employees are losing their benefits and OT hasn't been paid for a long time. Yet, we're expected to work overtime because it's all making sure that the job gets

done. There aren't enough staff to get the job done, so what other choice do we have?"

All board members listened as Lena and Sage continued, each tossing out various things that were in need of a major overhaul. Stassi watched with pride, especially every time Sage opened her mouth. They had come so far, and it was appearing like they could be on the home stretch.

"I love my job, Mr. Hewitt. It's why I do it. I don't do it for the money or the benefits, but I also know that I work hard. I feel that it isn't wrong to expect to be appreciated. We are willing to do fundraisers such as the gala. A lot of money was earned, but none of us saw any benefit from that cash influx. It felt like no one cared that some staff couldn't attend, and then with the strike, it was proof to us that you didn't care about us because you easily went out and found replacements. We matter. And that's what we want to show the employees that come after us."

When they had said their peace, Dad nodded. "So, I imagine you have a list of demands?"

"We absolutely do." She took out a paper and slid it towards him. "It's not much. But it's what we feel worthy of. Still, we are willing to negotiate within reason."

He looked over them and then turned to the rest of the board as he showed them the list. Stassi stared between Sage, Lena, and the board, anxiously waiting for something to be said. Finally, Dad nodded again.

"We aren't here to negotiate. You all are valuable employees, and we want to ensure that you see that." Stassi stared at her father. A glimmering light of the man she once knew. "We will get a contract drawn up, and what you want seems reasonable enough."

“Seriously?” Lena asked. “After all this time...” Stassi saw Sage nudge her in the side, and Lena closed her mouth.

“Thank you, sir.” Sage leaned forward and held out her hand. Stassi’s father shook it and smiled. “We’ll be expecting you all back at work Monday morning.”

Sage nodded. “You have my word.” She got up from the table, and the three of them left the boardroom. Once outside of the room, Sage turned to Stassi. “Did that seriously just happen?”

Stassi squealed and threw her arms around Sage. “I knew you could do it,” she whispered. She held her for a moment, it feeling good that they were finally moving forward in their reconciliation.

“Let’s celebrate.” Lena turned and held up her phone. “I’ll call Marcus and have him organize a group to meet us at the club.”

The door opened, and Stassi turned to find her father beckoning her, “May I speak to you for a moment?”

Stassi turned to Sage. “I won’t be long.”

Stassi slipped into the boardroom, which was now empty, to her relief. The other board members must have left through the other door. Her dad closed the door and turned to face her. “It finally happened,” he began. “I got some good investments, and the money is starting to roll back in.”

“That’s great to hear,” she stated.

“I thought you’d be a bit more ecstatic. You can quit the job, and I’ll start taking care of you again. You can even get some modeling contracts going. I know that’s what

you'd rather have, anyway. Now's your chance."

"Dad, you just don't get it. I've changed. What once mattered to me, just doesn't anymore. I think it's great that things are on the rise for you." She shrugged. "But I've grown and matured, and I'm happy where I am. In fact, I've never been happier."

"So, you don't need me?"

Stassi rolled her eyes. "Dad, you're my father. I'll always need you. I just don't need you to support me financially. You should be thankful." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Love you, Dad. I better go." She turned and walked away from him, feeling this huge weight slowly dissipate. When she got back to Sage, Sage arched an eyebrow. "Things are going well with my father, and he just wanted me to know that he could support me again."

"Oh wow." Sage looked away. "It's what you want, right?"

"A long time ago, but I'm happy right where I am." Stassi reached for Sage's hand and pulled her to her. They kissed and Sage continued to smile. "Let's get out of here."

Sage drove them to the club, where everyone had already started to gather. They walked into the noisy club, hand in hand. Sage grabbed two beers and handed one to Stassi, and they stood at a table and sipped their beers.

"So, you're officially back together, right?" Marcus ran up and placed his hand on Sage's shoulder.

Stassi laughed. "Isn't it obvious?" She leaned in and kissed Sage, letting the beer drip off her lips. This was going to be one hell of a night. They let the beers fly like no one



had to drive home.

Sage

Sage looked around the empty room of their new apartment, as Stassi came in and placed a plant in the corner. “Imagine there’s a table, and this plant is on top of it.”

Sage laughed. “If I squint just right, I can nearly picture it.” She winked, and Stassi leaned against her. They looked around the living room until Stassi met Sage’s gaze. “I love you so much,” Sage whispered.

“I love you!” Stassi wrapped her arms around Sage, and they kissed until they were both on the floor and wildly taking each other’s clothes off. Stassi laughed. “I do believe this makes the final room we needed to christen.”

“And all in one week.” Sage winked and straddled Stassi. Stassi tossed back her head as Sage moved down and kissed her chin, Stassi’s bare breasts brushing against hers. When they moved in together, she was worried that they were taking things too fast, but Stassi assured her that six months was plenty of time. And now, Sage couldn’t picture waiting another day.

“We’re going to miss meeting the girls at the farmer’s market,” Stassi argued, closing her eyes as Sage kissed her earlobe and then slowly moved her lips down to her neck.

“If you keep talking, we’ll never finish,” Sage teased.

“Maybe that’s my evil plan,” Stassi replied.

That brought laughter from Sage. She pressed her hands down Stassi’s sides and held

her hips as she stretched a line of kisses along Stassi's sternum.

Trailing her hands down into Stassi's pants, she dipped her finger into her folds. Sage felt how wet Stassi was, nearly as wet as she was. Nearly. She pressed her hands against the floor and moved downward, pulling Stassi's clothes off with her. Sage's inner core throbbing as she met Stassi's opening. Sage released a breath, and Stassi shuddered underneath her. Perfect timing. Using her fingers, she pressed Stassi's labia back, opening Stassi up further. Stassi waited patiently, keeping her body as still as possible. Sage then swiped her tongue out and captured a drop of Stassi's moistness.

Stassi released a whimper, and Sage did it again. Sage swiped her tongue around the inner edge of Stassi, gathering up the drops in a circle. Stassi reached out and pressed her palms against the tile, pumping her hips up to meet Sage's mouth. Sage pushed in further. They settled in this rhythmic groove. Sage's opening was dripping as she tried to show Stassi the love she felt, continuing to swivel around her with expert care. As Sage dove in deeper, Stassi stopped, growing completely still.

Sage pulled out of her and kissed her way up her stomach and to Stassi's lips. "Why'd you stop?" Stassi whimpered.

"Left you wanting more." Sage grinned, holding onto Stassi's waist as she kissed her.

"Fuck!" Stassi gasped, pressing Sage back from her. "I need you to continue."

Sage shrugged. As if she didn't mind one way or the other, she shifted herself down, so she was back at Stassi's opening. She plunged back inside her three times before Stassi released a cry and withered beneath her. Sage sloppily kissed her way around Stassi's insides, feeling her own core throbbing. She pressed her hands against the floor and licked her dry, then pulled out and flipped onto her back.

“You know what to do,” she moaned between clenched teeth. Stassi laughed as she changed positions and moved in, pressing her tongue inside of Sage and holding her still.

Sage’s mouth opened and she stared at the ceiling. Nothing would beat the sexual tension that had developed between them. As Stassi’s tongue plunged inside of her, Sage began to tremble with sensation.

A phone started bussing, and Sage groaned, parting from the kiss. “Yours or mine?” she asked.

“Who cares?” Stassi started to go back in for a kiss, when Sage laughed and pushed her way. Stassi pretended to pout as Sage went looking for the ringing phone. She finally found it in her coat.

“It’s Lena.” She checked her watch and cringed. “We’re already ten minutes late.”

“Are you sure?” Stassi sat up on her elbows and glanced at her watch. “I’m surprised Ariel hasn’t...” Just like that, her phone started to ring, cutting into the conversation.

“Hey, Lena.”

“Where are you? I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Haven’t seen Ariel or Natalia either.”

Sage tossed a look in Stassi’s direction, as she grabbed her phone. “Hey, Ariel.” She put the call on speakerphone.

“Where are you? You have to check out the adoption booth. The puppies are soooo cute,” Ariel cooed. “But I’ve looked everywhere, and we’re not finding you.”

“Um, well, we haven’t exactly left yet,” Stassi admitted. She shrugged when Sage laughed.

“Where are they?” Sage mouthed.

“Where are you?” Stassi asked.

“Corner of Beckett and Crater,” Ariel replied.

“They’re at the corner of Beckett and Crater. Something about cute puppies.”

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“Tell them we’ll see them in a bit,” Lena replied. “Hopefully we’ll see you two.”

Sage snickered. “Um, yeah, we’ll be there.” She disconnected the call. “Lena and Maya will meet you there,” Sage yelled out.

“Sounds good. But you guys have got to check out these puppies. I could take them all.”

“See you soon, Ariel.” Stassi disconnected the phone. She looked around the room and grimaced.

“My feelings exactly. I’m not really wanting to leave,” Sage shrugged. “But we have friends to see...”

Sage was glad that they had all quickly become friends, when it felt like it would never happen. It was much easier to have a loving relationship when everyone supported it.

“We should get dressed,” Stassi replied. She then tilted her head. “What do you think about puppies?”

“Love them.” She grinned as she looked around the living room. They had just returned from a conference in Chicago last week, and they didn’t have any travel plans for the next few months. “Well, we have some time to get a puppy used to us, and I would say that this place could use some energy.”

They didn’t say anything else on the subject as they got dressed and then left the

apartment and drove the two blocks to Crater Street, where a parking lot was available. They held hands as they hurried to the area where the other women would be waiting for them. As they drew nearer, they heard the barking of dogs.

“We’re getting closer.” Sage laughed and they approached the table. Lena, May, Ariel, and Natalia were all playing with the puppies, as were a few other people. Stassi went over to join them as Sage saw this dog sitting in a corner, all alone. She knelt down, and he walked over to her. He was older than any of the rest, but he immediately laid his head in her lap as Sage ruffled the fur behind his ears.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“It’s Rocks,” the woman stated, approaching her. “He’s older and, unfortunately, hasn’t had anyone that’s paid him much attention.”

“That is a shame,” Sage replied. She continued to pet him, and he looked cozy and comfortable with her.

“And who is this?” Stassi asked, kneeling beside them.

“His name is Rocks,” Sage replied. She couldn’t take her eyes off of him. He was a silver pitbull and seemed already emotionally attached. “He’s a great dog, don’t you think?”

Stassi stared at her. Sage grinned and then turned back to Rocks. “All pets, no matter what age, need a loving home.”

“Rocks’ human parents were just recently killed in a car accident. No one stepped up to care for him. It’s a sad story, but every sad story can still have a happy ending.”

“You sold me,” Stassi replied. And just like that, Stassi and Sage had their dog of choice. Rocks needed a loving home, but Sage didn’t realize how much she needed

him. The three of them were destined to be a loving family forever.