

The Ultimate Reunion Contest

Untitled

by Danielle Peck

The plane's tires chirped as they made contact with the tarmac and Shasta couldn't have been more glad to be back on the ground. She hated flying but the situation called for it so she really hadn't had a choice.

Half an hour later, she was in a cab on her way to the hospital where her baby sister lay dying.

Shasta hadn't allowed herself to think of Cassandra during the flight from Los Angeles to Baltimore because she'd been afraid she would break down and have nowhere to go to pull herself back together; but now that she was back in Maryland, she couldn't help but think of the sister she hadn't spoken to in more than five years.

Chris, Shasta's brother-in-law, had said Cassie didn't have much time left. The cancer had progressed much more quickly than anyone had anticipated and if Shasta didn't get there soon, she wouldn't get to say goodbye.

She didn't want to say goodbye. Tears stung her eyes and Shasta dashed them away with an impatient hand. The circumstances that had caused the rift between them now seemed so petty and stupid, but continued to play over and over in her mind...

"I can't believe you slept with him!" Shasta cried, anger flashing in her eyes like caged bolts of lightning.

"Shasta, please try to understand. We're in love," Cassie begged desperately, reaching out to her older sister.

"I've been dating Chris for eight months, Cassie. Eight months!" Shasta jerked her hand away from her sister's and, with all the loathing she could muster in her voice, added, "You're not my sister anymore. I never want to talk to you again."

Shasta had left their parents' home that day and never returned. She'd heard through the grapevine that Cassie and Chris had gotten married and had a baby, a nephew that she'd never even seen pictures of.

Five years were gone, which could never be reclaimed, and now, Cassie was dying. What Shasta would give to have those five years back.

The taxi pulled up in front of the hospital and after paying the fare, Shasta stood outside the front doors staring up at the glass-encased structure that would be the last place her sister ever saw.

Why couldn't I forgive her before it was too late?

Shasta hated herself. Even before she'd found out that Cassie and Chris had been intimate she'd known that her relationship with Chris wasn't marriage material. Why had she been so stubborn and refused to let go?

"Get it done, Shasta," she whispered to herself, then entered the hospital. She always hated hospitals—the stale antiseptic smell that clung to a person long after they'd left the building, the hushed voices of doctors and nurses talking about the fate of someone's family member made her uneasy. Especially now that the family member being whispered about was her own.

"Can I help you?" a nurse asked softly.

"Yes, I need Cassandra Dayton's room, please." Shasta nervously picked at a loose string on the strap of her purse and watched the nurse's pleasant and helpful expression change to one of sadness and compassion.

"You must be Shasta. I think the only reason she's hung on as long as she has is because she's been waiting for you."

Shasta wanted to cry then. She'd almost hoped that Chris had been exaggerating Cassie's condition as an effort to get her to make amends. But the nurse's words confirmed for her that this was real.

"Can I see her?" Shasta croaked out, her voice hoarse with emotion.

"Of course. She's been asking for you." The nurse led the way down the hall to a darkened room on the right. "She was sleeping when I was in here a few minutes ago, but she wakes up frequently."

Shasta nodded then watched the nurse walk away, leaving her at the doorway to face this on her own. She stepped inside and could hear the quiet beeping of a heart monitor and the clicking of an IV machine administering medications into the various tubes that were connected to Cassie's hands.

She stared down at her sister who was once so full of life and vitality; now she was as pale as the sheets she lay on and so thin her bones seemed more prominent than anything else. Her once golden locks of hair were now thin bits of patchy stubble on her otherwise bald head and dark smudges made her eyes look like they'd sunk into their sockets.

“Oh, Cass, honey, I’m so sorry.” Shasta whispered, this time letting the hot tears slip down her cheeks unchecked.

“Shasta?” Cassie’s voice was weak and soft and the effort it took her to open her eyes seemed like it was almost too much.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Shasta sat down in a chair beside the bed and carefully took Cassie’s frail hand into her own.

“I knew you’d come... I waited for you.” Cassie let out a contented sigh. She was quiet for so long that Shasta thought she’d fallen back to sleep, but then she spoke again. “I’m sorry I hurt you, Shasta. I should never have done what I did to you and I hope that someday you can forgive me.”

A quiet sob escaped from Shasta’s throat and she pressed Cassie’s hand to her face. Her sister’s hand was cool compared to her own overheated skin. “I already forgive you, Cass. I’m sorry I took so long. We lost too much time and I’m so sorry.”

“Take care of Chris and Ben for me, okay? Make sure they keep living when I’m gone,” Cassie requested. “Promise me.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Shasta cried openly now, her heart breaking into a million pieces for her sister whose life was being cut much too short.

“You can. I love you, Shasta,” Cassie whispered, and then... she was gone.

The End