

A SINGLE MOM  
MILITARY ROMANCE

THE  
DOCTOR'S  
TWIN  
*Secrets*

SOFIA T  
SUMMERS

# **THE DOCTOR'S TWIN SECRETS**

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A SINGLE MOM MILITARY ROMANCE

SOFIA T SUMMERS

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## **OTHER BOOKS BY SOFIA T SUMMERS**

### **Forbidden Doctors Series (this series)**

**Doctor's Surprise Twins**

**Written in the Charts**

**Rendezvous with My Resident**

### **Forbidden Temptations Series (Age Gap Romances)**

**Daddy's Best Friend**

**My Best Friend's Daddy.**

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## DESCRIPTION

**I gave him my heart, but I couldn't give him the truth.**

Curt got me pregnant years ago, and I never thought I'd see  
him again.

*Until he walked right into my hospital.*

My legs shook when I saw that gorgeous face again.

I remembered those eyes all too well.

But the guilt in my heart forced me to look away.

A second chance with this hot doctor would destroy me all  
over again.

It would ruin my career, but it's tempting.

Especially when I feel his strong arms wrap around me.

Revealing the truth comes at a huge cost.

But a baby can't remain a secret forever.

*Especially* when I have another one on the way.

## PROLOGUE

### Serah

I sat at Major Thurlow's desk, tapping my fingers and praying the pharmaceutical rep coming onto the base was Curt. I knew there was a very high likelihood that it was him since he was in town, but I didn't want to bank on it and be disappointed. Thurlow was out sick, though he hadn't said what the problem was. I just knew I had to sign for a shipment of medications that were to be delivered midweek.

Thurlow's office was sort of scary to me with taxidermy on the wall and plaques celebrating all of his achievements. Mine was less cluttered, not many things on the walls except my degree and a few certificates for specializations. But I enjoyed the responsibility of stepping into his place when he was out. I felt trusted and respected. That had been a hard-fought battle, given the mistakes I'd made, and I'd made a few dumb ones lately.

I sat back and thought of the day I had planned for Luke tomorrow at Jumpy's. I was still very nervous about how it would all play out. He hadn't asked any direct questions about having a father in a few months, and I would much rather have let the sleeping dog lie, so to speak, but running into Curt had changed everything. I thought I'd have more time to adjust to the idea of how to tell Luke about his father, but now it was thrust upon us all and I was scrambling to make sense of it.

I was also trying to make sense of the emotional rollercoaster I was on. One moment, I was on cloud nine thinking about how amazing it was for Curt to be back. Last night was incredible—sex with him always was. The next minute, I was doubting everything, resentful and bitter about the fact that Curt left me five years ago for a job and never looked back. Sure, it was a mutual decision, and I hadn't known I was pregnant at the time, but that didn't mean I wasn't hurt by it. I had never been okay with the idea that we chose our jobs over each other.

I sat drumming my fingers on Thurlow's desk, unsure of what to say to Curt if it was him. If it wasn't him, no sweat. I'd sign a few papers, talk about a few drugs, and be on my way. It was Saturday, after all, and I wanted to get home and bundle Luke up in his snowsuit and take advantage of the sunshine with some sledding—as long as I wasn't in too much pain.

I rubbed my shoulder and rolled my neck. Tension always made the pain worse, and my fear of the unknown was a huge stressor. After that surgery went sideways and Dr. Marshal had to go in a second time to fix the herniated disc, I'd been in so much pain. I knew the bottle of pain meds in my pocket was something everyone told me to watch out for—dependence was a huge issue—but I also knew that without them, I wouldn't be functioning. At least for now, the pain wasn't bad enough to need medication.

When the door opened, I held my breath. I hadn't seen who walked past, probably when I rolled my neck to loosen my muscles a bit. I'd closed my eyes for a split second and that's all it took. So when Curt's smile met my eyes, I couldn't help but blush.

“Serah?”

“Curt?” A rush of excitement made my heart race and my shoulders tense. I had to hide a wince as a twinge of pain shot through my shoulders. Surprised, I stood and smoothed my hands down the front of my uniform pants. His eyes traced across my body, lingering on my curves for a moment before resting back on my face. I had to swallow a lump of nerves in

my throat. We hadn't spoken since he dropped me off last night after what was the most incredible sex I'd had in years.

"I'm supposed to meet Major Thurlow." Curt looked down the hallway and back at me, confused, then stepped farther into the office and shut the door. His crisp navy blue coat and dockers looked good on him. He had his hair coiffed to the side, a few bits spiked in front to add flair. I liked it.

"He's sick. I'm taking his place because I'm the next in command. Don't worry, I know exactly what we need." I couldn't contain my happiness to see him, but I knew I had to be professional. The last time I'd let my personal feelings get in the way of my work, I'd been strongly reprimanded and threatened with a reassignment away from Yellow Springs, all because Evan needed my help and I'd given it to him and disregarded some strong medical advice. I gestured at the seat across from the desk, and Curt sat down, setting his briefcase next to him. I watched his eyes focus on my breasts as I leaned forward to take my own seat. It made me acutely aware that I'd forgotten the top button this morning.

"Well, I'm sorry he's not feeling well, but I can't say I'm sorry you're his replacement." Curt's eye contact was unnerving, especially with the way he smiled at me mischievously. I avoided eye contact and tried to keep my composure.

"I wondered whether the pharmaceutical rep I was meeting would be you." I squared my shoulders and folded my hands on the desk in front of myself. His naughty expression didn't change, but that didn't mean I could allow myself to fall prey to his impish behavior. "We have a shortage of—"

"Amoxiclav, I know." Curt opened his briefcase and pulled out a tablet. He flicked through it for a second and looked up at me, suddenly all business. "I think we've already discussed some numbers via email. I just need a few signatures. If this works out, I may be around here a bit more frequently. There are some new trial drugs that we're testing that Major Thurlow might want to see about using here." He slid the tablet across the desk to me, and in passing it off, our fingertips touched. I

felt the electric jolt at the featherlight touch, and it made my cheeks flush.

“Curt, we have to take this very seriously. I will be your point of contact until Thurlow returns from sick leave, and there can be absolutely no fraternization. The army has a very strict policy about public displays of affection on base and relationships between military personnel.” I attempted to offer a very stern expression, but after watching his face last night while he was thrusting into me, all I could think about were those tiny grunts of satisfaction and the way his jaw dropped when his release came.

“And so you can’t even talk about the past? Like what happened that one Valentine’s Day where I couldn’t get the reservation so we had to eat dinner at my place?” He smirked at me, and I had to stare down at the tablet to hide the fact that his words were arousing me.

I glanced at the window and the door. No one was there, despite my paranoia telling me that eyes were watching me. I focused on the electronic signature boxes where I had to affix my signature. It was challenging given my heightened emotional state, but I managed to get all the boxes ticked off. Then I slid the tablet back toward him. “Signed.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Signing the paperwork digitally?” I bit the inside of my cheek in an attempt to use pain to dissuade myself from smiling. Everything about him was intoxicating. Forget the five-year separation and my broken heart that needed answers. He was here, and he still wanted me.

“The punishment I dealt. You remember how bad you were?” My breath hitched at his words. When Curt talked dirty to me, my body responded, and he had a way of saying things that aroused me more than anything else could. I swallowed hard, trying to maintain my composure, but I couldn’t hide the ache swelling in my groin.

“Curtis Brock, stop it,” I hissed, letting a grin sneak out onto my face. “You’ll get me in a lot of trouble.”

“Oh, you mean the kind that puddles between your legs? Because if you’re getting into trouble, you’ll need a talking to.” He stood and leaned over the desk, splaying his palms out on the smooth, empty surface next to mine. I caught a whiff of his cologne and swooned. “I didn’t see any cameras in here. Mind if we just have a chat?”

I had to fan myself with my hand because it felt like the temperature rose twenty degrees instantly. I knew there was a puddle of moisture forming in my panties, and his hovering over me like this only made it worse.

“Uh, no, there are no cameras in here, but I’m telling you . . . You shouldn’t be talking to me like this. If Thurlow finds out, he’ll have you removed, or me, or both of us. It’s not good.”

“So if I ask you to unbutton your top, you can’t?” His eyes trailed across my face toward my chest, and I knew I was about to cave to the temptation. I could see the growing bulge in his pants, and it made my core ache just thinking of how amazing it would feel if he bent me over this desk and took me from behind.

I glanced at the window nervously and licked my lip. “Kiki could walk past the window at any second.” Reaching for my top button in a very brash move, I opened it and pulled my shirt wider to expose my cleavage to him. A hint of my white satin bra peeked out. “And I’m not sure that letting this attraction we have toward each other blossom is a good thing.” With both hands beneath my breasts, I pushed them upward, plumping them until I saw his chest rise and fall. His pants were tightening over his crotch.

“Ah. Well, playing hard to get isn’t usually your thing.”

His eyes lingered on my chest, but I could tell his mind was elsewhere, maybe thinking the same thing I was, how incredible last night was. I hadn’t had an orgasm like that since he left, and he’d left me crying back then from heartbreak, but the tears last night were from my emotional climax.

“I’m not playing hard to get, Curt. I’m telling you I don’t want to be fired.” My nerves got the better of me. Kiki could

walk down the hallway and see him leaning over me with my chest exposed, and that would be the end of it for me. I buttoned my top. “Now, I think we both need a cold shower.” I stood, hoping it would encourage him to back away, but as I rose to my feet, his lips brushed over mine briefly. It sealed the deal for me. My heart raced, and my pussy felt like if I didn’t get touched now, I would spontaneously burst into orgasmic flames.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure working with you today, Ms. Jones, or should I say, Captain?” With a dirty grin, he bent to pick up his briefcase and return his tablet to its protection.

“God, I want you so much right now.” I bit my lip. “Why did you do that to me?”

“Do what?” His feigned innocence was almost as hot as his dirty talking. I wanted to grab that tie of his and force him to lie across my desk so I could sit on his face.

“You know what. You teased me and pushed my buttons like you used to.” I couldn’t hide my lusty grin. “I thought we’d agreed that maybe the sex wasn’t such a smart idea considering we both have some hurts to resolve.”

“Well, if you weren’t so hot, I’d be able to control myself, but dang it, Serah, your body is amazing and I want to see it undressed and spread for me on this desk in like thirty seconds.” He shifted uncomfortably, readjusting his cock in his pants. The obvious bulge made my mouth water.

“I can’t do that.” I shook my head but snickered and covered my mouth with a hand to hide the embarrassment. “What I can say is that I really liked last night a lot, and I think that we should do it again, and more often, and the rest will work itself out in time, I guess.”

“Ah, well, you know where I live then.” He winked at me. “Stop by any time you need a good talking to.” He backed away with his eyes locked on mine, and then he was gone, vanished down the hallway.

The minute I heard the outer office door shut, I rushed into the bathroom to splash cold water on my face. Five years had

passed, and not a single beat was skipped. He was every bit as gorgeous and lust provoking as ever, and despite the way we'd left things, I still found myself completely in love with him. I stared at my reflection in the mirror. There was no denying the arousal—darkened, pink lips, dilated pupils, flushed face. Curt Brock was an aphrodisiac of the gods sent to ruin every pair of panties I owned.

I brushed over the sensitive nub throbbing between my legs and wished I had privacy to fix the problem he created, but work was not the place for self-pleasuring. If he had this effect on me in a professional setting, how would I keep my composure tomorrow when he met his son for the first time? And why was I so weak to cave to the lust he evoked in me when I knew his job would only take him out of town and out of my life again and again for as long as we knew each other?

I splashed more cold water on my face and inwardly scolded myself for letting him get to me. I couldn't do that to myself again. Not ever. Curt Brock had to be held at arm's length until he proved he was here for good. If not, my heart would be shattered again, and this time, my son's heart would be collateral damage.



## Curt

**T**oys lay strewn about on the floor of the living room where Jenson and Isla had been playing before lunch. I sat across from Maggie, my sister, and Derek, her husband. The twins jabbered, each from the safety of their own highchair situated at the end of the table. Maggie had prepared a delicious egg salad that Mom used to make when we were kids. I had almost forgotten how much I hated it until just now, but I never refused food put before me. It wasn't polite.

"Not enjoying it?" Maggie asked with a snicker, and I grimaced.

"I think you planned this just so I wouldn't visit around mealtime anymore." The words were said in jest. I hadn't been home in nearly six months, so the visit with family was nice. I only wished Dad could have been here too, but I'd catch up with him later on.

"You know, Curt," Derek interjected, "eggs are the food of champions." He took a large bite of his egg salad sandwich complete with tomato, onion, lettuce, ham, and cheese.

"It isn't the eggs I dislike. It's the mustard." I chuckled and took a bite, preferring mine straight up with a fork as opposed to on a sandwich. The faster I got this food down, the better. I

didn't want the toddlers picking up any bad habits from my distaste for lunch.

Maggie wiped Jenson's face and righted his sippy cup which he'd knocked over. She was a terrific mother. Our mom would have been so proud of her, and I knew Dad was, despite the rough start to the relationship with Derek. We'd been best friends all the way through high school, so it was an adjustment watching them fall in love and get married, but it worked out. Now he really was my brother, the way we'd talked about when we were kids.

"How are things going with the horses?" I directed the question toward Derek, who loved his equines almost as much as he loved his family. His eyes darted toward the back door, where a plain view of the pasture and a smattering of brown dots on the horizon revealed the snow hadn't let up.

"Really well. We had a mare foal a few years ago, and it turns out she produced a champion thoroughbred. He's in the racing circuit now, and she's pregnant again. You should come to the barn after lunch and see them." Derek dabbed a bit of egg salad off the corner of his mouth and grinned like a proud father.

"You boys aren't playing in the snow until the dishes are done," Maggie chided playfully. "I did all the cooking, and when lunch is over, I have to get the twins laid down for their nap, so my hands will be full." She brushed a few of her brown curls out of her eyes and took a drink of her hot cider.

"Aw, Mom . . ." I whined, poking fun at her motherly attitude. She rolled her eyes at me as I continued, "I have no problem helping with lunch. I'll just need the garbage disposal." I pushed my plate away a few centimeters, and she laughed.

"Now, don't be teaching my kids bad manners. Eat all your lunch, Curtis Henry Brock."

"Wow, you really have this mothering thing down, don't you?" I smiled at her and took another bite, then turned to Jenson, who extended his sippy cup out toward me as if he wanted to share. "Your mommy is bossy sometimes."

“Dink,” he said, shaking the now-empty cup. “Peas.”

I took the cup and handed it to Maggie. “In a second, baby. You need to eat more first.” Maggie set the cup to the side and picked up his fork, placing it in his hand.

“These guys make me so happy. I can’t wait to be a father.” I couldn’t help but think how Jenson resembled me as a child. It was a bittersweet feeling, knowing I wanted so much to find a woman to settle down with and have a family, but the one woman I had loved more than anything had been the one to get away.

“Having a job where you’re on the road more than you’re home isn’t really conducive to parenting.” Derek took a gulp of milk and wiped his mouth. “You really have to be present.”

I shrugged. “There is actually a position I’ve applied for that would be a promotion and would solve that problem for me. I wouldn’t be on the road at all anymore.” Having had enough of the egg salad, I folded my napkin and laid it over the remnants of the food on the plate. I sat back in the chair and noticed Isla’s hair was in her eyes, so I curled it around her ear.

“Really?” Maggie grinned and wiped her mouth, now finished with her own food. “So you’d be working from home permanently?”

“Not exactly. I’d have a management job at corporate—in Chicago. Nine to five every day.” I braced myself for the negative reaction to my moving from New York to Illinois, but Maggie’s facial expression remained pleasant. “I’ve already applied,” I repeated, wondering whether she’d missed that part.

“I heard that before, Curt. I think it’s a great idea. You’ll have way more time for your personal life, and you really would be able to have a family.” Derek stood and picked up his plate, reaching for mine. I handed it to him, and he stacked it on top of his. “I’ll get these rinsed.”

I turned to Maggie, who was still smiling. “I think it’s wonderful too. I mean, it won’t be much different than it has

been for us around here. You'd just be living somewhere else and visiting us instead of traveling all the time and visiting. Besides, Illinois is only what, twelve hours to drive or like three to fly?" She took another drink of her cider, and Jenson whined.

"Dink, Mommy." He pointed at the sippy cup.

"One second, baby," Maggie cooed, picking up the cup.

"On it!" Derek called from the kitchen. He appeared with a bottle of apple juice in hand and filled the cup as we continued our conversation.

"So if you get the job, you'll be in one place. That's a start. I wonder if we know anybody in Chicago who can introduce you to a nice, single woman?" Maggie's eyes glimmered with excitement.

"Oh, I wonder what Serah Jones is up to now. You were really into her for a while. I heard she's stationed here at Yellow Springs." Derek screwed the lid on the cup and handed it to his son, then put the lid back on the juice bottle.

"Wait, what?" I looked up at him in confusion. "Jones is here?"

"Yeah, like more than a year ago. You are so busy traveling, you probably never knew that. Evan works out here with me. He's mentioned her a few times. I think she's got a kid too, maybe." Derek headed back into the kitchen, and I sat there with my mind reeling from the news. The one that got away was here in town, and I had no clue. The thought hadn't even occurred to me, but it made sense. We both grew up around here. Of course, if she wasn't deployed overseas, she'd ask to be stationed back home.

"You really think she's here?" I called over my shoulder.

"Yes, I'm fairly certain." I heard water running and figured I should join Derek in the kitchen to help with dishes. I rose, holding my hand out for Maggie's plate.

"Are you going to try to track her down?" Maggie asked, handing me her plate. She stood too and collected cups and silverware.

I mused for a moment what that would be like, me finding Serah and letting things spark back to life. “I don’t know. What if she’s married or moved on? She could be dating someone. I don’t want to get my hopes up. Besides, even if I found her, my job will take me out of state permanently. Then what? We’d have the same situation all over again.”

I let the fleeting hope of my long-lost love’s return escape and headed for the kitchen. It was pointless to even consider it. Serah had made it clear that her career in the army was her life. She’d been deployed, and I had taken the position as a traveling pharmaceutical rep, and we both agreed that our lives were going in different directions. It had been a mutual breakup that hurt both of us, and I knew if we found each other, we’d still be in love. There just wasn’t a chance it would work out.

“Here,” I said, setting the plates down next to where Derek stood at the counter. “I think Maggie is bringing cups and silverware.”

“I can find out, you know.” He ran a plate beneath the flow of water before setting it into the bottom rack of the dishwasher.

“Find out what?”

“If she’s single.” He winked at me, and I rolled my eyes.

Maggie walked in and handed me the other dishes, and I loaded them into the dishwasher. I was curious about it, but I knew the answer Derek brought me would either make me sad—if she’d moved on—or make me not want to take that job out of state. I had to move on with my career now. There was no other choice. If I remained an on-the-road rep, I’d never settle down in a serious relationship and have a family, which was what I wanted more than ever.

“Nah, that’s okay. Let’s just leave it in fate’s hands. If it’s meant to be, it will happen.” I heard the jabber of the toddlers as Maggie cleaned them up for their nap, and my heartstrings were plucked. Only time would tell if my hopes of becoming a father would one day be realized.

### Serah

“Of course I understand.” I didn’t like how things were going, but I didn’t have a choice. My pain level hadn’t decreased a bit, despite it having been several weeks since the second surgery I had undergone to correct a herniated disk in my cervical spine.

Dr. Gardener offered a pained smile. “I’m sorry, Serah. We do not want you to get hooked on these pain meds because coming off an addiction would be far more difficult for you than enduring a little pain. Have you seen a chiropractor? Are you still seeing the physical therapist as you should be?”

Her bedside manner was better than mine—I’d give her that. Though we were both medical professionals and I understood the measures she was taking to ensure I didn’t become dependent on the medication, I still felt frustrated. No over-the-counter pain medication would curb the pain I was in. At least she had agreed not to step me back on this prescription, but I was out of refills. From now on, I had to come in for a visit every time I needed more pain meds.

“Yes, I’ve been to therapy, but I don’t have a chiropractor. If you could refer me to one, I would definitely go. Anything I can do to lessen the pain would be amazing. This is worse than it was before the surgery.” I rubbed my shoulder and looked down at Luke, who sat so patiently on the chair across the room drawing on a sheet of paper Dr. Gardener had given him.

“Alright, well we’re done from my standpoint. It’s just pain management now. I honestly think you’ll see a major improvement in a few more weeks. We expected it to be a little rough. You had two back surgeries last year within two months. That’s a lot to endure.” She stood and patted my knee. “Let’s get you checked out, and you can go home and have a hot shower. That might help loosen up those tense muscles.”

“Thanks, Gypsy.” I smiled at her and slid off the exam table. Luke popped out of his seat, thrusting his picture out at her.

“I draw for you.” I peeked at the picture in his hand. He had drawn an airplane, as was usually the case. He loved them. His first word after “mom” was “plane,” though it had sounded more like “pain”.

“Thank you, Luke. That is so nice of you. I’ll hang this up on my office wall.” She winked at me and accepted the piece of paper, then led us out toward the reception area. As she ducked into the office, I stood by the interior window and got out my checkbook to pay. Felicia was there as usual, charming and smiling.

We settled the bill as Dr. Gardener spoke to someone through the front-facing window to the waiting area. I heard a man’s voice and thought it sounded familiar, but I was in too much pain to really focus on it. After settling the bill, I opened the door and Luke darted through. He always did. He’d take that extra minute to sit down at the toy table while I put my coat on, his way of squeezing out a few seconds with the books or blocks.

I was busy putting my wallet back into my purse when I stepped through. Dr. Gardener called a farewell to me, and I looked up at her. “Thanks again. I’ll schedule another appointment when I need more meds. Hopefully, you’re right and the pain begins to lessen.”

“Serah?”

The man’s voice was so familiar it made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. Goosebumps peppered my arms as I slowly turned and saw him standing there, the man

from whom I'd hidden a secret for now almost five years. He looked at Luke, then at me, then back at Luke. My stomach knotted, and I thought I'd pass out as my shoulders tensed and pain shot down my arms and up into the back of my head. I winced and turned away, heading straight to the coat tree.

"Hey, Lukey, we need to go, okay, baby?" It was the fastest I'd put my coat on in months, pushing through the stabbing pain in my neck and shoulders. "Baby, come on." Curt, the man I'd left behind, attempted to help me into my coat. "I've got it, thanks." I turned away from him, taking Luke's coat off the tree.

"Serah? Can we talk?" He looked concerned, perhaps a touch angry. Or maybe it was anxiety flooding his body the way it was mine. So much so that it was overriding the pain. I knew when I got home and tried to relax, I would be hurting worse than ever.

"Lukey, we need to go." I took his hand, and he protested with a whine and a stomping foot, but he rose and let me put his coat on him.

"Serah, please don't rush out. Please talk to me." Curt hovered as I crouched to zip Luke's coat.

"I can't, Curt." I whipped the door open and charged into the parking lot. Poor Luke's legs worked hard to keep up with me. If I could have lifted him, I would have. It would have been a much faster getaway, one where Curt couldn't follow, but follow he did. Right to my SUV.

I got Luke buckled and placed his sippy cup in his hands, dodging questions about the "man who knew my name". It hurt like hell lifting him into his seat, and I would have let him climb up like he had been the past few months, but I wanted out of there. My past had come back to haunt me in a way I never predicted. Curt was a traveling pharmaceutical rep. He was supposed to push his drugs elsewhere, not here in Yellow Springs.

"Is he . . . ? Is that my—"



“Stop!” I glared at him as I shut the door, blocking Luke from hearing any more. “Please don’t do this.” I tried to get my door open, but the automatic locks engaged and I wrestled with the door for a moment, then had to dig the fob out of my pocket.

“I can’t believe this.” Curt pressed his hand to his forehead and shook his head.

“Look, Curt. I can’t do this.”

“Do what?” He raised his voice, and I hissed at him to calm down.

“Stop it.” I sighed, clenching my jaw. Then I opened the car door and stood there gesturing like a mad woman. “This . . . any of this, all of this!”

“Just tell me, Serah. Is he my son?”

My heart stopped at the question. Yes, he was Curt’s son. But I’d spent the last four years and seven months raising him alone while holding down a full-time job in the military and not even taking the deployments I wanted because of my pregnancy. Everything changed the moment I found out I was pregnant, and Curt was gone. His job had overridden everything. My job was supposed to be my consolation prize for losing him, and instead, it had been Luke who consoled me.

“Yes, okay? He is.” Tears welled up in my eyes, burning my skin as they streaked across my cheeks. The January wind bit down on my exposed skin, making me shiver. “Look, I had back surgery twice in the past few months. I’m in a lot of pain. I want to go home.” I crawled into the seat, wincing as I did, and started the car. The door remained propped open, Curt staring into the vehicle at my son.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know . . .” His expression offered sympathy. “Please tell me we can talk.”

“I can’t, Curt. Please just let it be.”

“Mommy, why are you crying?” Luke’s compassion never ceased to amaze me. He was so tender for such a young heart. I couldn’t hold back any more tears. They streamed freely. I

cried because of the pain. I cried over the shock of seeing Curt again. I cried because I was caught—ashamed and humiliated for keeping such an important secret. And I cried because the man I loved more than anything stood right next to me and I felt the need to run away.

“Mommy’s back hurts, little guy.” Curt smiled at Luke, which only made me cry harder.

I situated myself in the car and buckled my seatbelt. “I have to go,” I told him, trying to shut the door.

“Look, here.” Curt reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a card. “Please call me.” He handed me the card, and I took it, with no intention of ever calling him. I couldn’t get away fast enough. “I promise, I’m not angry.”

He backed away, and I shut the door with a trembling hand. He stood and watched as we drove away, and Luke started singing me a nursery rhyme. It was his sweet, innocent way of comforting me, probably because I sang to him when he was sad. It made my heart wrench knowing I’d kept his father from him for so long. I shouldn’t have been driving. I was far too emotional, but I had no choice. It was either drive my son to the pharmacy and get my prescription filled so I could make the pain stop, or sit there with Curt and argue about why I hadn’t said anything. That would only make every bit of the pain worse.

I didn’t want any more pain right now.

### Curt

I didn't even bother opening the door when Dad rang the bell. After seeing Serah at that doctor's office, I'd called him and told him it was urgent and he needed to come over. Then I drove home and sat on my couch with my elbows firmly planted on my knees and my head buried in my hands. I could have sworn I was pulling my own hair out from the stress.

I heard the door shut and the squeak of wet shoes on the entryway's tile floor. "Curtis?" Dad called. He sounded worried. I heard him approaching. "Are you okay? You said it was urgent. I came as quickly as I could. Your walk isn't even shoveled."

I didn't look up. There were too many things flooding through my mind. Serah had admitted that the young boy she called Luke was my son. He looked exactly like my sister when she was little. It was so eerie seeing his face, a face I'd looked at only last night when I'd dined with Maggie and Derek at their ranch and played with Jenson and Isla. I was in such shock, I didn't even know how I'd explain it to them, let alone Dad who now sat beside me with his hand on my back.

"Curt, please talk to me." Dad's voice was comforting, the way any son would feel as his father provided strength and encouragement. "I'm here, Son. What is it?"

“She . . .” I couldn’t form words. Dad had been as shocked as anyone to learn that Serah and I were breaking up when I took this job five years ago. We had been so in love. No one had expected it. And now? This?

“She who? Is it Maggie? Is everything okay?”

“Serah . . . Dad, it’s Serah.” I dropped my hands and looked at him. He looked confused for a moment, then recognition dawned across his features. “I saw her today.”

“Ah, Ms. Jones.” He nodded and unzipped his coat, sliding it off his shoulders. I sighed and stared down at his feet. Melting puddles of snow he’d tracked in were soaking into the carpet. I didn’t even care. I’d gotten into town yesterday afternoon and gone straight to dinner with Maggie, not even caring that eleven inches of snow had fallen and my walk was buried. The mailman probably hated me.

“Dad, it’s bad.” I buried my head in my hands again, gripping handfuls of hair once more.

“Bad?” He tossed his coat toward the end of the couch and slapped my back. “Old flames can give us a bad case of whiplash when they come back into our lives suddenly. How is she doing? I guess she’s married and you’re feeling like she’s the one that got away?” Dad pulled off one shoe then the other, but he let them sit there on the wet carpet between the couch and the coffee table. I huffed out a sigh and stood, pacing the front of the room near the picture window that overlooked the street out front.

“Worse than that.”

Dad chuckled. “Well, you’ve never been the drama sort, Son, so I’m not sure what could be worse than her being married and unavailable. Unless she’s not married but she is interested in getting back together and you’re wanting to avoid her?” He stood and walked over to me, taking me by the shoulders. “You need a glass of water. You’re in shock.”

“Yes, I’m in shock. I have a son.” I clenched my jaw and furrowed my brow. “She was pregnant and never told me,

Dad. His name is Luke. He's almost five now. He has to be. The last time we—”

“Whoa, slow down.” Dad gestured at the couch and said, “Sit.”

He disappeared around the corner into the kitchen, and I sank onto the old plaid sofa that used to be in my mom's study. When she died, I would go there and lie down and think of her. I loved that room so much because it still smelled like her for years after she passed. I was a teen, and those memories seemed so long ago, but even then, Dad knew I had a hard time letting go. When I moved into this house, he decided it was time to remodel Mom's office and gave me the couch. For now, I'd decided it was staying with me forever.

I wanted to curl up on that couch the way I'd done when I was seventeen and cry and talk to Mom. That wasn't how men handled their problems—at least that's what society taught—but it's what my soul craved. Instead of lying down, I grabbed a throw pillow and hugged it across my stomach and laid my head back on the backrest. Dad returned with a glass of water, insisting I drink it, and he didn't let me relax until I did.

He sat next to me, angled toward me, and said, “Now, start from the beginning.”

I took a deep breath and recounted to my father how I'd bumped into Serah and how she had hurried to get away. It had been so unexpected. I was still reeling. But to add to that the fact that she had a little boy who looked exactly like my sister was hurtful.

“Son, you just need to talk to her.” He patted my knee. “I'm sure there are honest reasons why she never told you. Did you get her number?”

“That's the worst part, Dad. She said she wanted me to ‘let it be’. What does that mean, anyway? She wants me to go about my life pretending I don't know I have a son?” I was so upset I could have smashed things . . . or hurt someone. No one deserved to feel this sort of pain.

“Well, Curt, you did make the decision to break up with her because you wanted this job. And you knew this job was going to take you away from here for long periods of time. There was no way you would have given that up.”

“For my son?” I shouted. Then I instantly felt bad for shouting. “Sorry.” I sighed. “I’m really hurt by this, Dad. And all at a time when I just applied for a job that would have me moving out of state permanently.”

Dad’s eyebrows rose. “You have? Where at?”

“It’s with the company. I’d be getting a promotion and moving to Chicago. I’d still be home just as often as I am now, but I’d sell the house and move there.” This wasn’t the way I envisioned telling him about my promotion opportunity, but he was here, so I let it out.

“Well, that sounds like a great thing for you.” Dad nodded knowingly. “I can see how this is a lot for you. I think the best course of action is to just find her and speak with her. You’ll never know what happened or what could be if you don’t communicate. When your mother was here, she was the queen of communication. She’d tell me constantly that I was making assumptions instead of communicating. It always helped me remember that I can’t take any fact for granted. And neither can you.”

Communication didn’t matter much if I took that job out of state. And even if Serah and I were able to communicate and move past the fact that she’d lied to me for five years, I didn’t know if I could trust her. My heart had never stopped loving her, but some things were unforgivable. I ran a hand through my hair and closed my eyes.

“If she’s around here and she’s still in the military, she’s probably stationed here at the base. You should just call up and find out. Not to step on anyone’s toes, but that boy needs his father, and you have a legal right to know your son.”

Dad’s commonsense lecture went on for more than an hour. When he finally left, I was grateful for the silence. My heart was heavy, but Dad was right. I had to track her down.

Derek had offered to find out information from his friend Evan, so maybe I could go that route, or maybe she would call.

I pushed myself up from the couch and headed for the bedroom, exhausted and emotional. Somewhere in the back of my closet, I'd kept a box of memories from my days of dating Serah. I dug past the few dozen suits I had in plastic bags from the drycleaners, past the old sweaters I couldn't decide whether I wanted to get rid of, and to the back of the closet where I had a stack of boxes. It took a few attempts to find the right box, but when I opened the one with the pictures of Serah in it, I took a nostalgia hit.

Each picture I looked at caused me to remember more and more things about her that I loved, pushing the anger and hurt of the present away. Serah had been my world. We were best friends, like we were made for each other. Now, I had no clue what we were. We'd tried to keep in touch for the first year or so, well into Luke's life, but after a while, the letters stopped coming to my house. I blamed myself because I'd spend months on the road at a time. Traveling salesmen don't get personal mail forwarded to their current locations, which meant it would be months between my replies. She probably gave up and found someone else to talk to.

The memories gave me enough courage to look up the number for the military base. If Serah was stationed there, I'd find out, and if so, I'd try to talk to her. Even after all of this, I still loved her. That would never change.

I found the number for Fort Story and dialed it, connecting to some sort of switchboard operator. A woman with a gravelly voice answered. "Fort Story, how may I direct your call?"

"Hi, I'm just looking for a number. Is Serah Jones stationed at the base?" I waited while I heard clicking in the background, as if she were typing on her keyboard.

"Yes, I see Captain Serah Jones, MD, is stationed here. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Well, I was hoping to speak with her. Can I be transferred to her office? Or do you have her cell phone number?" I

grabbed a pen, ready to take the number down just in case.

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s after hours. Captain Jones is probably at home. I can take a message, but I can’t give out personal information.” The woman was only doing her job, but it frustrated me.

“Okay, sure. Just tell her Curt Brock called and that I’d like her to return my call as soon as possible.”

“Got it. Is that all?”

“That’s all. Thank you.” I hung up, still feeling a complete loss of control in this situation, and plugged my phone in to charge. I knew it would be a rough night of sleep, but I had to try. I had to dig my driveway and sidewalk out of the snow first thing in the morning before I hit the streets for work. I just hoped I’d be able to sleep without dreams of Serah haunting me.



### Serah

**T**he pain in my neck and shoulders was better today than it had been, though I didn't think for a second that it would last. I'd had good days before, and the pain always returned in a day or so, but for the moment, I was enjoying the lighter load. Evan sat across from me at the lunch table. The tray of food in front of him was nearly empty, while mine looked untouched. I'd nibbled on a few things, but the pain meds had affected my appetite and I felt like I was constantly nauseous.

"Still sore?" Evan asked with food in his mouth. He had a bad habit of doing that, and I always got after him, but for the past few months, I'd cut him some slack. I had to pick my battles, and nagging my best friend for his food smacking sounds seemed low on the list of priorities.

"Yeah, I am. Some days, it's really bad. Today is an okay day. It's not as bad as it could be." The food smelled appetizing, but I knew it would make the nausea worse. Still, I took a few bites of the roast beef and mashed potatoes in hopes that they wouldn't come up later.

"It's been like seven or eight weeks since the surgery." He looked concerned.

"Actually, it's been three, I think? I had that second surgery to finish the job after the first one didn't quite get it

fixed, remember?” The dining facility was loud, as usual, making me feel like my words got swallowed in the noise, but Evan nodded and took another bite before speaking again.

“Well . . .” He chewed a few times. “I’m concerned about you. You can’t be taking too many of those pills. What do they have you on, anyway? Oxy?” He swallowed hard, then chased his bite of food with a gulp of milk.

I shrugged. “Percocet, so yeah. It has oxycodone in it. And you don’t need to worry. They are stepping me back on the next prescription. Not fewer pills, but a lower dosage. I just have to discipline myself to take them at the same intervals or I’ll go weeks without anything. The pain gets so bad sometimes, though.” I rubbed my shoulder and tried not to remember the way my shoulders and neck had ached almost constantly for months.

“Yeah, that’s scary stuff. Very addicting. You need to follow doctor’s orders.” Evan had been my rock for so long, I didn’t know what I’d do without him. Even when we disagreed, he was there for me like a big brother.

“Okay, Dad.” I rolled my eyes at him, but I understood his warning came from love. “I’m okay. That’s not what is causing me concern today. I think between Dr. Gardener, Major Thurlow, and my physical therapist, I have enough eyes watching me that I’ll be fine.”

We ate without talking for a moment. I was able to eat about a third of the food on my plate before my stomach protested strongly enough that I thought it better to stop. Lunch hour was only halfway over, but I felt like I’d been sitting there for days. Evan’s eyes scrutinized every move I made, as if he were searching me for signs that I was lying to him or covering up some secret addiction I had to the pain pills. It frustrated me that he didn’t know me well enough or trust me enough to just relax and believe that I would tell him if I was struggling.

“Alright, well what gives, then?” He wiped his mouth and pushed his tray to an empty space on the table. With his hat crumpled in his fist, he stared me down. It was the big-brother

look he always gave me when he knew I needed to talk about something.

“Nothing,” I growled, grumpy and not really wanting to talk with so many people around.

“Liar. I can see it on your face. Something is bothering you, so if it’s not the pain today, then what is it?” He glanced up at a group of recruits walking past and then pursed his lips at me. “Spill it.”

I sighed and used my napkin to wipe my face. If he was going to force it out of me, I would rather it be somewhere other than DFAC. I stood and picked up my tray, gesturing with a nod of my head that he should follow me. We walked to the bussing station and cleared our plates and trays, leaving the dirty dishes stacked in their proper places, then I led him down the corridor toward MTF. My office in the medical treatment facility was far more private.

Evan trailed behind me. I felt his eyes on my back as we walked. I felt like a child being escorted to the principal’s office at school. I also felt like some of the nervous energy that I’d been dealing with for days since I ran into Curt was about to be released, except I knew what Evan would say when I told him. I just didn’t want to hear it, so I hadn’t opened up yet.

When I had shut the door behind us in my office, Evan was quick to demand answers. “So tell me what’s happening.” He sat in one of the chairs opposite my desk, and I sat next to him. The wax burner I’d left running had made the entire room smell like lavender, a calming scent, though it hadn’t done much good calming my nerves.

“I saw Curt.” I let my head droop until my chin almost touched my chest. I didn’t want him to tell me that I had to face this demon. I wanted him to tell me that I was allowed to just pack up and leave. I should never have allowed them to station me here at Yellow Springs, not knowing the risk of running into Curt. It had only been once in five years, but the risk had always been there.

“Wow . . . so, like, Luke’s dad, Curt?” Evan shifted in the chair, forcing it to scrape along the tile floor as he turned it to

face me directly. I didn't move a muscle, favoring staring at my hands folded in my lap.

"Yeah." I had nothing more to say because my fear of the future choked out any other thoughts.

Evan whistled a long, drawn-out shrill. "Dang . . . harsh." He nudged my knee with his. "What happened? You know you can't just shut down on me now. You have to tell me what is going on."

To my knowledge, Evan didn't know Curt at all. He worked at Derek's ranch from time to time, but Curt was always out of town. There was a very slim chance they'd even met, but that possibility remained. I hadn't told Evan that Curt was Derek's brother-in-law. It felt like such a small world that was closing in on me and threatening the life I had planned.

"I don't know, Evan. I'm just overwhelmed."

"Yeah, I'd say so, Serah. Remember that Gypsy kept things from me too, and you forced me to face it. In fact, you weren't the nicest person during that time." His words stung, and I scowled.

"I remember that differently. You were pretty much an angry bear the whole time. All you did was bite my head off every time I tried to help." I tried to force a chuckle, but it came out sounding like I was choking on my own spit. The humor was lost on Evan, who looked at me like I was his daughter who'd just confessed to stealing his wallet or something.

"I'm sorry I was an asshat, but I wouldn't be a good friend now if I didn't force you to open up and talk to me."

This was why I'd walked away from the mess hall and hid in my office. I felt tears stinging my eyes. The only forward progress I'd make in my life was through talking about the situation and navigating a path through the emotions. I had hidden this secret from Curt for so long. I never thought about the consequences when the secret came to light.

"Okay, well, he is upset, understandably. He saw Luke. He knows Luke is his because I told him. He gave me a business

card with his number. He even left a message with Jill at the front gate that I should call him, so he knows I'm stationed here. Even if I wanted to just ask for reassignment, it's impossible now. He knows about Luke, and he will never let me just vanish. Besides, my friends are here." I wrung my hands, avoiding eye contact again.

"Will you listen to yourself?" Evan shook his head at me. "You love Luke more than life itself. Why would you want him to suffer his whole life not knowing his father?"

My instant reaction was to be angry with Evan for saying that, but he was right. I did love my son more than anything else on this planet, and he deserved to know Curt even if it was messy and I had to face the consequences of my actions. Shame washed over me as the tears streamed freely down my cheeks. I began to realize that I had been hiding because of my own guilt. I knew hiding Luke from Curt had been wrong, but it had been a decision made with a lot of thought.

Curt was so happy getting that job, and I knew I was being deployed. Of course, that changed and I was only assigned out of state instead of overseas, but by the time that all figured itself out, Curt was gone, off on a year-long trip. By the time Luke came around, my life was different. I was different. At the moment, I was just ashamed.

"God, I messed up so bad, Evan." I covered my face with my hands and cried, and I felt him prying my hands away from my face and shoving a tissue into my grasp.

"Yeah, you did, and it's time to make it right. And I'm going to be here every step of the way, just like you are every time I go through something."

I blew my nose and wiped my eyes. The physical pain I'd been in couldn't begin to compare to the overwhelming feeling that I'd somehow caused my own child to suffer. "What if Luke freaks out?" I sniffled and looked into Evan's eyes.

"Well, he freaks out then, and you'll be the best mom you can be and comfort him. It's not like you're going to walk Curt right into your home and say, 'Daddy's here!' You're going to have to ease into it, make sure Luke is comfortable with him,

maybe let them build a friendship for a while before you tell him. Maybe you guys should get family therapy.”

I nodded. It wasn't a bad idea, really, though we were a long way from that. Before I even thought about how to tell Luke about his father, I had to sit and talk to Curt myself. I left his card in my nightstand drawer by my bed. When I got home later, I would call him and set up a time to meet. I knew he would be upset, and I had to brace myself for his emotions. I just hoped he wasn't so angry that he'd try to take Luke from me.

### Curt

**W**alking down the street in Yellow Springs was not at all like walking down the street in San Diego or Chicago.

During any given day, there were only a few people at best, and sometimes, there were no passersby to even say a polite hello to. But on a January day, when the clouds shadowed the city and the wind stole every trace of warmth, no one was crazy enough to walk anywhere—except me. I had two visits to physicians' offices this morning that were only six blocks apart, so I chose to park in the middle and walk.

My gloved hands felt like ice. The sock hat I wore barely protected my ears, and the collar of my coat didn't turn up to protect my neck like it should have. I grew up in Yellow Springs and knew how the winter weather was, but I'd spent the greater part of this past five years traveling to warmer places during winter months to avoid the deep freeze. Being home was a rude reminder of how Mother Nature could be a powerful enemy.

I had walked two blocks, and my car was in sight only another block away, but I stood on a street corner waiting for passing traffic as the *Do Not Walk* sign glared back at me. I felt my phone buzzing from deep in my pocket and tried to ignore it. I had no interest in getting my fingers frostbitten to talk on the phone, and the gloves I wore had no touch pads on

the fingertips to enable me to use the touch screen on my phone.

The light took forever, and I almost decided not to wait on it, but a police cruiser drove past, so I stayed put. I remembered when a few friends of mine got picked up for jaywalking right after I'd crossed the street ahead of them. I had no interest in trying to explain to a cop why I was crossing illegally because I was cold.

By the time I got to my car, I felt frozen through and through. My fingers barely worked to pull the gloves off my hands. I tossed them into the passenger seat after I started the car, then pulled out my phone. I hadn't realized that my phone rang three times. Two of the calls were from an unknown number and one was from Derek, probably confirming that I'd be at the diner for lunch. I didn't have any messages, and since I didn't know the number, I almost just ignored the call entirely.

As I debated whether to call Derek back, my phone rang again. The same unknown number showed on the caller ID. Without thinking, I swiped right to answer and held the phone to my ear.

"Curt Brock speaking. What can I do for you?"

"Curt?" Serah's voice made my heart stop almost instantly. Goosebumps shot across my skin. She sounded timid, quiet—like she was afraid of something. Maybe she was afraid of me? I wouldn't have blamed her.

A million thoughts went through my head simultaneously. I hadn't expected to hear from her at all. I honestly believed she would skip town and leave. If she hadn't wanted me in my son's life from the beginning, the chances of her wanting me in his life now were slim to none. My heart raced with excitement to hear her voice, but also with anxiety. I knew the state supported mothers over fathers, especially in situations like this, where the child had been raised by Mom solo for so long. If I tried to press it legally, I wouldn't get very far.

All I wanted to do was be a part of my son's life. I had missed so many important things—his first steps, his first



words. I didn't want to miss any more, even if she had kept him a secret for so long. I just wanted her to say it was okay that I be a part of his life. We could work the rest out later.

“Uh . . . Serah . . .” I took a deep breath, holding one hand in front of the air vent in the car, praying the heater would warm up quickly.

“Look, I know that the other day was really tense and awkward. I'm sorry for my reaction. I was shocked, and I was in a lot of pain. That's no excuse.” I heard the sound of a little boy giggling in the background, and my breath caught. “I'm calling because I know that you have a right to be a part of Luke's life, but even more than that, he deserves to have his father in his life. I'm sorry that I hid things from you.”

“Oh, Serah.” My chest felt like a lead weight.

“No, Curt. I need to say this.” I heard her snuffle. “I never told you because when you took that job, I felt like you wanted your career over your future with me. I didn't know at the time that I was pregnant. I didn't find out until a few weeks later. When I did find out, you were out of the country for your training. I had no way to contact you for so long because you got that new phone for your job. I never got the number.”

“But you knew my Dad's number.” I felt anger wanting to rise up, but in the interest of keeping the peace and the dialogue open, I bit my tongue.

“And I thought you wanted your freedom. I was already not getting my future. I was supposed to be deployed to Afghanistan, and when I reported the pregnancy—because it's mandatory to do so—they stationed me in Virginia. I lost my future of being a field surgeon in favor of having Luke. I didn't want you to give up your career path too. I thought you'd resent me.”

I sighed hard. Looking back, I'd have done anything to be with her, given up anything, but she was right. We'd left things in a pretty concrete state. I'd wanted this job, and we were moving in different directions. Still, she should have told me. I'd have at least tried. Part of me wanted to tell her off, to let out the frustrations that were rightfully mine to let go of, but

the other part of me wanted to just forget the past and have the future that should have been mine.

“So, I can see him?”

“Look, he knows nothing about you. He hasn’t even really interacted with kids because I don’t want him asking questions. It’s bad enough when he sees cartoons with kids having dads and asks me if he has a dad. I have to tell him his dad is working and that some dads work. It’s the only thing I could tell him without it being a lie. I never want to lie to him.” She sighed again. “He doesn’t understand things yet, Curt. He’s not even five years old.”

“So, can I meet him, though?”

“Yes, but I think you and I should meet first, talk about things, set some boundaries. If we’re going to do this, we need to do it in a way that doesn’t traumatize Luke. You have to make sure that your highest priority isn’t getting back at me for keeping you sidelined. You have to make sure the focus is on being good parents to him. That’s all that matters to me. He is the reason I’m talking to you right now. Got it?”

“Of course,” I said, shivering. The heater was finally kicking in and pumping out warm air. “I’m free now. Where can I meet you?” I glanced at the clock. I was supposed to meet Derek in fifteen minutes, but he would understand if I told him.

“No, Curt. I’m not ready. You have to understand that this is a huge thing that is overwhelming me. I need a bit of time to put myself together. How about lunch Friday? I can meet you at the mall’s food court around noon.” There was another bout of giggling in the background on her end, and it made my eyes tear up. I pinched them and the bridge of my nose, not wanting to break down.

“Yes, that’s perfect. I’ll be there.” I started to thank her for agreeing to meet, but she interrupted me.

“I gotta go. I’ll talk later.” The line clicked and went dead, and I looked down at the screen. A short ten-minute phone call had changed my entire world. I wasn’t the crying sort, but I sat

there and sobbed for another ten minutes before sending Derek a message saying I'd be a few minutes late.

I had a son. It was more than I could fathom.

Derek was waiting on me when I arrived at the small restaurant around the corner from the hospital. His work kept him super busy, so an on-the-fly lunch near work was the best he could offer. I thought it would be the perfect way to spend some one-on-one time with my best friend while also tackling a little business. There was a great new prenatal vitamin out with fewer side effects, and I thought he'd benefit from it in his practice.

The only problem was that I carried so much emotional baggage with me today following Serah's call that the idea of presenting the new vitamin to him seemed pointless. I slumped into the seat without even ordering and shed my coat and gloves .

"Is everything okay?" he asked. The place was so loud, we had to raise our voices to hear each other. He had eaten most of his lunch by the time I arrived. My face must have looked awful from crying, but I had just ridden a roller coaster of unexplained feelings. I didn't have an ounce of emotional strength to explain away what was wrong.

"I'm not sure." Last I talked to Derek, he had offered to track Serah down and find out whether she was single. At that point, she was the one who got away, and he joked about the idea that I could get her back. What a whirlwind of information he was about to be hit by. "Remember how you mentioned Serah Jones the other day when we had lunch?"

Derek sipped his water and nodded. "Yeah, you want me to call Evan and find out what she's up to?" He grinned like an idiot, completely unaware there was a Mack truck coming with his name on it.

"I know what she's up to." I scowled, finally able to let some of my feelings show. Derek set his water down and offered a concerned look.

"You do?"

“Yeah, she’s raising a five-year-old boy named Luke who looks exactly like Maggie did when she was younger.”

I watched as the lightbulb went off in his head. Shock and surprise were replaced by concern, then a thoughtful expression as he said, “You ran into her somewhere?”

“I did. She was at a private practice I visited about their pharmaceutical affiliations. The boy looks exactly like Maggie, Derek. Serah confessed to his being mine. She hid him from me for five years.” I raked a hand through my hair, shivering now due to anxiety instead of the temperature.

“Okay, slow down. You had no idea at all? No inkling this could have happened?” He laid his napkin over his plate and pushed it away as if he were suddenly no longer hungry. “She didn’t even drop a hint?”

“Nothing.” My heart thudded in my chest. I didn’t want to have to explain everything a billion times, but that’s the position Serah had left me in. “She didn’t even know until after I was gone. She never called or wrote. Nothing. I had no clue.” I dropped my hands to my lap and looked up at him. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this information? I missed so much of his life. I feel like a failure as a father and I haven’t even met him yet. And what about Serah? She lied to me. Hid things. I’m so hurt.”

Derek cleared his throat and angled his body in his seat to face me. His stern expression was more fatherly than my own father’s had been. The pursed lips, the squared shoulders—he was about to lecture me just like Dad had done. I knew I sounded selfish, but dammit, I wanted someone to take into account how I felt about the entire situation. When he opened up his mouth to speak, I cut him off.

“I know what you’re going to say, but your situation was different than mine. You hadn’t clearly defined the boundaries of your relationship with Maggie when she left town pregnant with your babies.” I scowled, realizing my defense only made me look more guilty. I had clearly defined the relationship with Serah. It was over when I left. “And Maggie came around and—”

“And I had to deliver my own twins via emergency cesarean to save all three of their lives.” Derek put his head down for a moment and then looked back up at me. “I’m not going to lecture you, Curt. You’re hurt, and you’re allowed to be. I was hurt by Maggie, but we talked it out and realized that it was all a misunderstanding. We are stronger today because of it.”

“You think I can trust her enough to have a relationship with her again? How on earth could—”

“Curt, stop.” He took a calming breath. “You are emotionally dysregulated. Let’s take a minute to just let the weight of the truth sink in. You didn’t know you were a dad. Now you do. You didn’t know Serah kept a secret, but it’s not a secret anymore. You broke up with her five years ago. You’re still broken up. That doesn’t have to change.”

He was right. I was emotionally bent out of shape and not thinking correctly. I had to calm down. I tried to ground myself by focusing on the sounds nearby, a woman talking on the phone, the waitress behind me taking an order. Nothing helped to distract me from the frustration, though.

“I am probably the one person in your life who is uniquely positioned to give you advice on this situation. I will if you’d like me to. If not, I can just listen and be a friend to you. I know you have huge emotions to sort through, and I want to help with that too.” Derek sat back in his seat and waited. I thought about it. Emotions had always been hard for me after my mom’s death, so events like this felt paralyzing at times.

“Advice. Just tell me what to do, because I can’t think straight. The emotions part will have to come later when I can even tell you what I’m thinking.” I planted my elbows on the table and buried my face in my hands. I felt like a kid who just found out his mother died all over again. The shock of the situation was no less impactful. Just the details were different.

“My advice is to talk to her. Don’t think about restoring a relationship with her. Just think about your son. Move past the reasons she never told you and get right to the most important thing. When the important thing is settled, then you can revisit

the past and her reasoning. And maybe you'll find that it doesn't even matter at that point.”

His words were like fingernails on a chalkboard. Of course it would matter. It would always matter. She had lied and hidden things. But he was right. First things first. I had to sit with Serah and find a path forward to knowing Luke—before I found out whether I had an interview for the promotion. Luke's very existence had just changed my life. I'd never be able to move to Chicago if I wanted to have a life with him. And I wanted to have a life with him. I wanted him to have a whole family, with both of his parents present.

### Serah

I had spent an hour trying to work up the courage to leave my house for lunch, hoping I could sit at a table in the food court and calm myself for a while before Curt showed up. When I walked in, it was busy as usual, only a few empty tables there to choose from. I didn't see Curt anywhere, though it was a few minutes before noon when I sat down. I tried to collect my thoughts and prepare what I wanted to say to him, but my mind raced.

I still stood behind my decision from five years ago, that not telling him about Luke had been a means to love him more fully by allowing him to chase his dreams. I felt guilty that I hadn't ever spoken up, but life was normal, and I didn't want him to give up his career. And after a while, I also didn't want to stir the pot and have the exact conversation that I was about to have when he showed up. At some point, it became less about giving him his best opportunity and became more about my shame. For that, I felt awful.

The crowd moved and flowed, people ordering their food and finding a place to sit, then finishing their meal and moving on. One woman asked if she could have one of the chairs at the table, and I silently gave permission with a nod of my head. I saw a man approaching who looked like Curt, but the closer he got, I realized it wasn't him. I was lost in thought

when I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Curt standing over me.

“Serah?”

I didn’t rise to greet him, and he sat down next to me, closer than I’d have liked. His soft smile and earnest eyes almost had me crying already. Those were the same eyes I’d looked into a hundred times as we made love all those years ago. I had an urge to take his hand and pull it to my lips, but I resisted, instead feeling ashamed just for having the thought that he could even still want me. I looked down at my lap and tried to force away my tears.

“Okay, well I’m here.” His voice was calm. I expected anger or accusation. I expected him to demand things or order me around. But he sat quietly while I composed myself. He was so patient, not saying a word until I cleared my throat and looked up at him. We both spoke at the same time.

“I’m sorry.”

“I need to apologize.”

My mouth felt dry, my palms sweaty. “Apologize? For what? I should be apologizing to you.” I wished I had purchased a bottle of water or something to wet my mouth. It helped when I felt anxious.

“Yes.” Curt glanced around. “It’s sort of loud here.”

“I just wanted to meet someplace public, you know?” I avoided his eye contact. The emotion of the moment was too thick.

“Okay, well then if this is the only place I can say it, I will say it. I’m sorry that I just skipped town for a job and left you alone to deal with a pregnancy by yourself. If you had told me, I’d have stayed.”

His words tore my heart in two. I felt guilt needle at my conscience. “If I had told you, you’d have given up your entire career.”

“And I still will. There are things in life that are far more important than a job and making money, Serah. And our son is



one of them.” I could tell by his expression that he was sincere.

No words would explain what I was feeling, so all I could do was stare at my hands. Luke was the priority, not me, not my unresolved emotions from the breakup, not even my current need for support or encouragement.

“He’s a great boy, Curt. I just don’t want him to be hurt by this. You need to be able to be patient with me and take it slow. I’m thinking you could just come along as a friend of mine for a while and get to know him, and when I think he’s ready, we can tell him. It could be weeks or months.”

I saw a fleeting look of frustration wash over his features, but it passed so quickly I almost doubted my own perception. “You are his mother, and I will respect anything you want.”

“What?” I strained to hear him, the loud cacophony of the crowd drowning out his soft-spoken words.

“Can we just walk away from here? We don’t have to leave the mall, just the food court.” His pleading eyes won me over. I felt confident enough that he wasn’t enraged with me, which was what I had feared when I planned my easy escape from the mall.

I nodded and stood, grabbing my coat from the back of the chair and my purse from the table. Curt followed me as we meandered away from the noise of the crowd and down the main concourse of the mall. We didn’t speak for a moment, walking in step as we might have done years ago. It was comfortable in his presence, like we’d not lost a single day of time together.

I saw something in the storefront of an electronics store I thought Luke would like and stepped in. They had remote control robots that stood just over a foot tall. He was obsessed with robots because of a movie we watched where a boy and his father found each other in a robot boxing match. Since then, he wanted his own robot—and his own father.

“Luke would love that,” I mused, standing next to the boxes of robots ready for sale.

“Then I’ll buy him one.” Curt picked one up off the shelf, but I laid my hand on it and shook my head.

“No, I don’t want you to buy your way into his heart. I want him to love you for who you are.” I knew Curt was a giver, and I loved receiving the gifts he’d lavish upon me, but I didn’t want his relationship with his son to be established on how much he could give. I sighed and pulled my hand back. “Lucas is the most important thing in my life. I need him to be safe, and I want him to have healthy relationships.”

Curt slid the robot back onto the shelf and nodded. His concern-etched brow matched his pursed lips. I knew he would make a wonderful father. I’d always known that about him. One of the things we agreed upon when we were dating was that we wanted a family, lots of kids, and a happy home. Until life changed and took us away from each other. I still wanted that, and I knew that deep down, he did too, even if it had been years apart and miles between us.

“He is so lucky to have a mother like you, Serah. I always knew you’d be a fantastic mother.” Curt looked into my eyes and didn’t look away. It made me nervous, him so close to me. I didn’t know what to think.

“I’m trying my hardest.”

“You’re doing a fantastic job.” He took my hand. “I am so sorry I wasn’t there for you.” His hands were cold, but I didn’t pull away. “I can’t wait to meet him, but I’ll respect your wishes and be patient. I know this is a forever thing, and I have decades of life left to live with him. For now, I just want you to know I’m here, and I’m going to be the best father to Luke, and support system to you, that I can be.”

A strange magnetism between us sucked me in. I felt smitten by his commitment to care for me and Luke, and I almost felt like he wanted more. Except, I knew falling for him again would only hurt me. It would be dangerous enough to allow Luke to get attached knowing Curt would just leave for months at a time again. It was a topic we hadn’t broached but one that needed to be addressed. We had to set expectations from the beginning.

“Curt, I . . .”

“I know you are probably hesitant or apprehensive. I’m sorry that I made other things a priority over you before. I need you to understand that no matter what it takes, I want to make you and Luke a priority now.”

Again, he took my breath away. I felt my fingers shaking, and he squeezed my hand. I couldn’t look away from him. I felt myself being drawn in, attracted and longing for something from him that I hadn’t had in half a decade. The air was so thick I could cut it with a knife. I licked my lips, my tongue so dry it scraped across a few chapped places on my lower lip painfully. Curt leaned closer—he was going to kiss me.

“I—” I yanked my hand away and backed up. “I have to go, okay? I will call you about when you can meet Luke.”

I darted out of that electronics store faster than lightning and rushed to my car, not even bothering to put on my coat. It was sunny for a January day but frigid, and I was shivering so badly by the time I got my car started that my neck and shoulders hurt. I sat behind the wheel sobbing, not even caring if Curt had followed me. I couldn’t get attached. That was my only rule.

Luke needed his father. I needed Luke to grow up knowing Curt, but I wasn’t about to let my heart get trampled by a man who wanted to dip every time his work called. I needed a man who was present in my life every day without fail, and his career wouldn’t allow for that.

Curt Brock was on the no-fly list—by my choosing.

## Curt

**S**hoveling snow was such intense work, we stopped every fifteen minutes to take a breather. Derek's friend Evan was over to help too, whom I discovered was actually best friends with Serah by no random coincidence. Ever since telling Derek about Serah and Luke, he'd been finding ways to force me to face it. It had been a few weeks, and I was starting to be annoyed. Serah had hardly spoken to me, holding me at arm's length with an excuse of making sure Luke was ready to meet me. I knew it was just her having to adjust to my being back in her life.

"I know I just met you, but do you always have a scowl on your face?" Evan joked, tossing a small shovel full of snow on my feet. I shook my head and kicked some snow at him in a good-natured fashion.

"Like you never got in your head about anything. How long have you been in the service? I heard servicemen had all this inner angst due to unresolved trauma." I scooped up the snow he had tossed at me and carried it toward the large pile we'd created.

"Man, it's like you two have known each other for years." Derek plunged his shovel into the pile and leaned on it. "I should have introduced you a long time ago."

Evan followed Derek's lead, so I did too, burying my shovel in the snow so it would stand on end. Evan took off his sock hat and wiped his forehead with it. His hair stood on end at funny angles. He sighed and watched out toward the horizon, and I turned to see Maggie's car pulling out of the driveway.

"Well, she's vacated the house. I guess we can quit working now." Evan winked. "Think she left us a snack?"

Derek rolled his eyes and said, "Come on, guys. I guess we probably have enough of this cleared for the moment. Let's go warm up." He headed off toward the house as we trailed behind him. I couldn't help but feel like Derek was right. Evan was a great guy. We had a lot in common. I could see why Serah was friends with him. I was confused, however, about why she would tell Evan about me but then keep me away. I was important enough to discuss with her friend, just not to be in her life yet. That hurt.

Once inside, we shed our winter gear in the mud room and walked in stockinged feet through the kitchen into the dining room where three mugs and a plate of cookies sat next to a carafe. There was a cute note explaining how the cookies were freshly baked and the carafe contained hot chocolate for us.

"Wow, being a mom turned her into a goddess." I chuckled as I pulled a chair out and grabbed a mug. I filled it with cocoa and picked up one of the cookies. I could feel a bit of warmth in them still. They really were fresh.

"Yeah, well she's mine." Derek winked at me again and shoved a whole cookie in his mouth as he waited for me to fill my mug. Evan sat across from us, double fisting the cookies.

"Gypsy doesn't bake like this that much anymore. She loves baking, but with a newborn it's difficult to make time for everything. I'm sure once the little guy is mobile, she'll be baking me cookies again." Evan grinned like an idiot as he chewed his cookies. When Derek was done filling his mug, he filled one for Evan and passed it across the table.

I saw the happy faces of these two men I respected and felt a little down. They had been there to witness every day of their

children's lives. I had missed so much of Luke's life, and every day that passed, I was missing more. I knew it was out of my control, but I had rights. I tried to hide my frustration behind the mug as the guys chatted about Maggie's excellent baking skills, but when Evan changed the subject, I felt my scowl deepening.

"So, how early did Jenson and Isla start talking? Dillon's only six and a half months old but he's already saying, 'Da-da.' I swear it's the cutest thing." Evan beamed as he talked about his son. I turned more inward, wishing I could vanish.

"Well, I think it was different for each of them. Jenson crawled sooner, but Isla spoke sooner. I think she seems to be more mentally intelligent, while he's more physically advanced. He ran first, too." Derek bragged about the twins the way any proud father would. I would have joined the conversation, but I knew nothing about my son. Not even what his favorite TV show was. Only that he had a smile like my sister's and he liked robots.

I shoved another cookie in my mouth and listened to them carry on, comparing their kids' first milestones. Jenson had teeth at six months. Isla didn't. Dillon had yet to sprout any. I tried to drown my sorrow in two mugs of cocoa and three cookies, but the only thing that did was make my stomach feel like an overinflated balloon. My animosity toward Serah grew by the minute, it seemed.

"Oh, and when he starts to crawl you're going to have to baby proof the entire house." Derek dramatically rolled his eyes. "They literally put anything in their mouths."

"Yeah, we're already dealing with that now." Evan laughed. "Dillon eats Gypsy's hair when she nurses him."

I couldn't take it anymore. I stood and picked up my empty mug and walked into the kitchen to rinse it. Derek and Evan continued talking, and I got myself a glass of water and stood by the back window watching out over the pasture as the horses grazed on what little tufts of dead grass still protruded through the drifts of snow. I didn't like the way that conversation made me feel angry with Serah for not telling me

about my son. It was hard enough to see it from her perspective and be patient with her. Things like that only made it worse.

“You okay?”

As I heard the words, I heard the door shut too. I turned to see Derek standing by the sink with two empty mugs in hand.

“I’m fine. Did Evan leave?”

“Yeah, Gypsy asked him to come home. Something about the baby being out of diapers.” Derek turned to the sink and rinsed the mugs, then joined me by the back window. His property was gorgeous, sprawling over several acres and lined with a massive, wooded area where he had created trails for riding.

“I’m struggling, Derek.”

“How so?” Derek angled his body toward mine and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Serah is so aloof. We met at the mall last week to discuss the possibility of my meeting Luke, but she’s moving so slowly. She acts like she doesn’t even know me. We dated for years, man. What is making her so hesitant?” Frustration seeped out through my words. I didn’t even try to restrain myself with him. He was my best friend, and if anyone had any advice to help, it was him.

“Well, you have to admit, you were gone a lot. Even Maggie and your dad missed you. Imagine if you had just had a different job.” Derek always knew exactly what to say to make me feel awful.

It had been my choice to take that job, yes, but I had thought that Serah and I were on the same page. She told me it was the best option. I hadn’t known the future. I thought at the time that we were done. That we had no future.

“But I’m not gone now. I’m here, and I want to know my son.”

“Have you tried to apologize?” Derek’s eyes narrowed at me in concern. He leaned against the wall and sighed.

“I actually did, and it got sort of awkward. Shortly after that, Serah just rushed off.” I rubbed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “What do I even do here? Waiting is killing me.”

Derek slapped my shoulder then squeezed it hard. “Well, try harder. If the apology didn’t sink in, you have to try something else. You’ve gotta think that she’s probably sorting through her own emotions about the last five years, what happened before you left, and your motives for returning. She wants you to be a part of your son’s life, but that means digging up ghosts. You know?” He gave me a shake. “It’s almost Valentine’s Day. Take her to dinner and see if you can rekindle the flames, buddy. It’s not over until it’s over.”

I doubted she would say yes if I asked, but I nodded. “I’m going to head out. If you need help with any more snow removal, I can come back later tonight. I think I just need to take a drive.”

“Sure thing. I’ll let you know. I might just catch a cat nap on the couch while Maggie is visiting your dad.” Derek winked and led me to the front door, where I slid on my shoes and jacket and said goodbye.

I was so emotionally done with this entire situation, I didn’t know if I wanted to date her at all, let alone try to rekindle flames. I just wanted things to not be difficult, but it seemed I’d picked the short straw in that regard. I’d take his advice, though. It was worth a shot and better than doing nothing.



### Serah

**T**here were times when I could put my personal life completely aside just to do my work, and today was one of those days. For the first time in weeks, I felt lighter than normal. My shoulder and neck still hurt, but the pain meds helped and I was able to forget about it for a few hours while I saw my patients.

“Thanks, doc.” Nathan slid off the table, rolling his sleeve back down after having his blood pressure checked. “So, you’ll clear me for duty then?” He fiddled with the button at his wrist as he watched me mark his numbers in his chart.

“Yes, I think we are now ready to get you back to being active. So long as you make sure to stay on the medicine and come back for weekly checks.” He was only thirty-two, so the blood pressure issue he was struggling with was a bit uncommon, but nothing that couldn’t be handled.

“Sure thing. I’m going to duck out. I’ll see you next week.” He was out the door faster than I could reply, but that was okay. Today was a busy day, with more than a dozen patients lined up for treatment. I had been through only half of them, and my stomach was growling for lunch.

I stood from the stool I sat on and headed out to the front desk. A new receptionist typed away at the keyboard, her long, polished nails so flamboyant I hardly knew how she even got

work done. I'd never be able to type with those things on my hands.

"Kiki, who's up next?" I glanced out the window toward the waiting area and saw a slew of soldiers out there.

She glanced up at me and smiled but never stopped typing. "Looks like Corporal Jeff Hastings, ma'am." Her eyes went right back to the computer, which I glanced at. She was typing a transcription of one of Major Thurlow's office visits. I noticed the earbuds in her ears and winced.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Nonsense, I could do this in my sleep." She grinned and nodded at the window. I backed away, heading toward the door to call Mr. Hastings in, but before I did, I took a deep breath and reached into my pocket. There were times when I worked so hard all day that I never checked my messages to see if the child care center needed me. Today was one of those days where I'd forgotten to check.

I had messages, but they weren't from the care center. The number that showed up was Curt's, so I almost just ignored the message entirely, but it had been more than a week since we'd spoken and I knew he was waiting. He'd been nothing but kind and supportive despite my off-putting behavior. And I hadn't meant to push him away. I was just dealing with a lot. So somehow, listening to the message now instead of waiting until after work made me feel better about the way I'd treated him.

I held my phone to my ear and let the voicemail he left play. "Uh, Serah . . . It's me, Curt. I know this might sound like a very strange request, but I'm just going to ask anyway. You don't have to say yes, but I hope you will. I don't have a date on Friday—Valentine's Day—and I was hoping maybe you'd go with me to dinner. We can catch up a little, maybe . . . uh . . . see if there is any spark there?" I heard a noise in the background and then Curt cleared his throat. "Anyway, it would be my treat, and we could eat anywhere you want. I just really want to see you."

I smiled as I listened to the message again, then again. His invitation had been because he wanted to catch up with me, not pressure me into seeing Luke. I didn't know why that mattered to me, but for some reason it did. He wanted me for me, not for what I represented to him. I stood there grinning at my phone like an idiot until Kiki rounded the corner.

“Uh, Captain Jones, the corporal is waiting. Should I tell him there is a delay?”

I looked up at her bright eyes and thick lips and shook my head. “No, I'm going. I just . . .” I grinned. “I got asked on a date.”

She chuckled. “You what?” Then she leaned in. “Who is it? Someone on base? You have a secret crush?”

Kiki wasn't military personnel, so she didn't understand the dynamic of being involved with a coworker, but she did understand the dating drama. I'd heard her pass around a few juicy tidbits from time to time. I'd rather not have my business shared, though, so I shrugged.

“Only time will tell.” With a grin and a nudge of the elbow to her ribs, I pushed past her and opened the door to the waiting area. “Corporal Hastings, can you join me in exam room one, please?”

His head popped up and he grimaced at me. I looked down at my tablet, still tucked under my arm from the previous visit, and noticed he was here for a fever and a sore throat. As he passed by me and entered the exam room, I decided I didn't want to wait to respond. If I waited, I'd get in my head and overthink things, then decide I didn't want to go. I leaned into the room and said, “I'll be right in.” Then I closed the door.

I stood there and typed up a response to Curt.

*SERAH 12:48 PM: Hey—got your message. I'd love to do dinner. Let's have Italian. I'll send you my address later.*

MY CHEST TIGHTENED as I hit *Send*, but it was done. There was no taking it back, no chance of getting too nervous, no way of letting my cold feed ruin anything. I took a deep breath and looked at the exam room door. Now, if I could just make it to Friday without freaking out internally and canceling, we'd be getting somewhere.

### Curt

**T**he drive was quiet after I told Serah that the restaurant had been fully booked when I called for our reservation.

I wondered if she thought I was lying, but I wasn't. I'd genuinely tried to get into the place, but I had waited too long. Instead, I had ordered catering for two from the same place and they had delivered it with instructions on how to keep it warm. I had rearranged my dining room to clear out a few things that made it cluttered, then got out my best table settings and a tablecloth my mother used on fancy occasions which I borrowed from Dad.

If Serah wasn't impressed by the lengths to which I'd go to make her comfortable, I didn't know what to try next. I took Derek's advice by making another effort, and I left no stone unturned. I had candles, flowers, chocolates, wine, soft music, and the lights were dim. When I opened the door for her to walk in, she smiled at the sight and covered her mouth. I thought I saw tears in her eyes too, but I didn't mention them. I just took her coat.

"You did all this for me?" She set her purse on the stand next to the front door and meandered into the kitchen while I hung her coat in the closet by the door.

"I did, because I wanted you to feel comfortable." I shut the closet and joined her next to the table, resting my hand in the small of her back. I instantly grimaced, uncertain whether

touching her was the right thing. I knew she'd recently had back surgery, and I felt awful, as if touching her would cause pain.

She looked up at me and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just nervous . . . I didn't hurt you, did I?" I took my hand away, stepping around her to pull her chair out. She sat down and shook her head.

"You didn't. My surgery was on my neck. Here." She pointed to a spot between her shoulder blades, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's just . . ." I pulled the lid off her dinner and set it aside, then did the same for mine before sitting next to her. I'd positioned our chairs so that we were close to each other and didn't have to speak over the table. "It's good to see you. I mean, when we bumped into each other that day, I got a real shock, but it wasn't all bad." I unfolded my napkin and draped it over my knee. "I didn't realize how much I missed you until I saw you again, and—"

"You missed me?" She had her fork in hand, plunging it into the meatballs that topped her pasta. "You actually did?" Her serious expression touched me.

"I honestly did." I stared down at my plate, realizing this was all happening faster than I thought it would. I'd planned for us to have this discussion tonight. I just thought we'd make small talk first, maybe chat about life and how it was going for each of us. I wanted to tell her about my potential job change and what that might mean for me and even for Luke, but we were here . . . talking about our feelings.

"Serah, I never stopped thinking about you. I wondered what you were doing, where you were stationed. I hoped that everything was okay. Once, I tried looking you up, but when I finally got down to it and discovered you were in Virginia and which base, you had been restationed and they wouldn't give me any new info." I sighed and stared at my food, no longer hungry, just emotional.

“I hated myself for leaving you, and I’m not just saying that so you’ll forgive me. I’m saying it because it’s true.” I looked up at her eyes, now clearly glistening with tears. “I made a huge mistake when I chose that job over our relationship.” I felt my own emotion welling, and I cleared my throat to conceal it. “I understand if you can never forgive me, but I’d like you to try.”

She blinked and the tears broke free, cascading down her cheeks. She covered her mouth and cried, not really responding but not refusing to acknowledge me, either. I scooted my chair closer and took one of her hands, kissing each knuckle the way I used to. She didn’t pull away.

“Serah, I was an idiot. I let my pride and my ambition take center stage. Can you ever forgive me?”

As if fate had aligned the stars in perfect order, and the cosmos was in our favor, our song started playing. It only made her cry harder. I had made the playlist and put that song on it, but it was on shuffle. I hadn’t known that was going to happen, but I went with it, offering my hand to her. “Dance with me?” We hadn’t even gotten to touch our dinner, but I wasn’t stopping this momentum for anything.

She nodded and stood with me, and I guided her into the living room where the music was a bit louder. She draped her arms over my shoulders and I hooked mine around her waist. The very tips of her long, blonde hair brushed over my fingers as I pulled her close. It felt like not a day had passed. The scent of her hair, the feel of her in my arms.

“I missed this,” she whispered, laying her head on my shoulder.

We swayed to the music, my heart soaring at the response she finally offered. “I missed it too, so much.” I turned, and she followed my lead. “You know what else I missed?” I asked her. My heart hammered in my chest. It had been far too long since I’d done something this foolhardy, but if I was taking risks, I was pulling out all the stops.

“What’s that?” she asked, raising her chin. Her lips were inches from mine. I looked down at them, then back at her

eyes, asking for permission which was granted the moment she rose up on her toes and kissed me softly. I returned the kiss, deepening it as my hands explored her back.

“Yes, that was it.” I kissed her harder. “I missed your lips, your smile, your heart. I missed holding you and touching you. I missed the way you laugh, and the tone you get in your voice when you’re really angry. I missed your presence in my bed and your calls in the middle of the day.” I kissed her again, tasting her lip gloss and searching her mouth with my tongue. “I missed making love to you and waking up with you. I missed cooking for you and—”

“Curt,” she interrupted before kissing me again, “our supper is getting cold.” Her words said she wanted to eat, but her roaming hands said otherwise.

“I can reheat it. This moment with you is too important to mess up.” I started backing her toward the hallway. “When I left Yellow Springs that day, I never thought I’d have the chance to tell you how much I loved you ever again. I never stopped, Serah.” I pulled the hem of her shirt out of her slacks and felt her skin beneath my fingertips. If she didn’t want this, she would tell me, but she wasn’t protesting at all. “Now, all I want to do is make up for lost time.”

She arched her head upward, and I sank my teeth into her neck. Her fingers dug into my back, clawing at my shirt. I heard her soft cries still and paused for a moment, resting my hands on her hips. I straightened and looked her in the eye. “Are you okay? Is this okay?”

She nodded, biting her lower lip. “You don’t understand how many nights I prayed for this, for you to come back and say you wanted me. Curt, I’ve had a million opportunities to be with a thousand other guys, but the only one I’ve ever wanted was you.” She pulled me down, and our lips met again, colliding in a fury. “Now, remind me of what I’ve been missing before I freak out and run away again, because my heart can’t even decide which way is up, and all I know is that this feels right. I just don’t want to be hurt again.”



I started gently pushing her toward the bedroom again, hands on hips, mouth suckling at her neck and collarbone. “I would never hurt you, Serah. I should never have taken that job. I thought it was mutual. I thought it’s what you wanted. I’m so sorry.” Each sentence was punctuated with a kiss in a new location on her body. “All I want to do is make you feel good now.”

“Here, then,” she moaned, taking my wrist. She guided my hand lower toward her pelvic region. I followed her lead, rubbing her valley through her tight pants. “And here,” she whispered, taking my other wrist and guiding my hand to her breast. I’d never known her to be so forward, but a lot changes in five years. Now it was she who was pulling me toward the bedroom as if she knew where she was going. We almost passed the door, and I had to stop her and grab her arm, pulling her into the room.

I flipped the light switch as we passed it, and she pursued me, again wrapping her arms around my neck and locking her hands behind my shoulders. Now the aggressor, she pushed me toward the bed, and we toppled, her landing on top of me. She straddled my hips, pinning me down, but I didn’t mind as her hands made short work of my button-down, exposing my chest. She smoothed her hands over my skin for a moment, admiring me before scooting backward and starting to work on my belt.

In one swift motion, I wrapped an arm around her body, held her to myself, and turned, dropping her on the bed and hovering over her. “I’m going to make you feel so good you never want to leave this place. Are you sure you can handle this?” I ground my pelvis against hers, and she spread her legs to give me more room.

“I’ve never been more ready in my life.”

My hand traced the curve of her breast and rested on her love handle for a moment before I pushed up beneath her shirt and grabbed a handful of skin, pushing the lacy bra aside so I could rub my thumb over her nipple. She winced as I pinched it, and I smirked. “I’ve definitely missed this.” I remembered how she liked it rough and wondered if she still enjoyed the

same things—same positions, same words . . . I whispered in her ear, “Have you been bad?”

She stiffened for a moment, her hands on my sides, and then I felt her relax. Her hand slid into my jeans and found my dick. I’d been hard since the first kiss, ready to have her. But I knew how to take care of her and what she wanted. She stroked me with one hand as she loosened my belt with the other.

“I think maybe I have been bad. I think maybe you’re going to have to teach me a lesson.” Her hot breath in my ear made a shot of adrenaline pulse through me. The hair on my arms stood on end.

“Yeah?” I asked her, pinching her nipple harder. “Because maybe I like bad girls. Maybe they make me want to do really naughty things.”

“Like?” she asked. My cock was now free of my trousers, and she stroked it while she unfastened her own pants.

“Well, for starters, no more touching.” I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away from my dick, pinning it over her head. She gasped, offering a whimper.

“But I like touching.”

“When you’ve been adequately punished, I will let you touch.” This game that we used to play never got old. I saw the flicker of playful maleficence in her eyes as a smirk toyed at the corner of her mouth.

“And if I touch without asking?”

“The punishment is worse.” I slid off her, pulling my jeans off quickly and tossing my shirt and my boxers to the side. I didn’t even stop to ask her if she was okay with it. I just reached up and pulled her pants and panties down in one smooth action, and she kicked her shoes off as I did so. She lay there clothed from the waist up, and I lowered myself to my knees, ready to make her scream.

“Take it off,” I ordered, pointing at her shirt. She obeyed, sitting up long enough to pull her sweater over her head and toss her bra to the floor where the rest of our clothing lay in

piles. “Now lie down, because I’ve got some things to take care of.”

With a grin, I grabbed her full hips and pulled her to the edge of the bed. It had been too long. I think both of us needed this connection, and I wasn’t stopping until she’d hit climax at least three times.

### Serah

Curt's tongue pushed into me, making me shudder with pleasure. I lay there letting him eat me and clawing at the comforter. His hands gripped my hips, pulling at me as he devoured my juices. How we'd gone from not even speaking to each other to this, I had no clue, but I was lost in the moment and didn't want to be found if being found meant this stopped.

"Mmm." Soft moans escaped my lips as his eager lips wrapped around my clit and he started sucking. He pushed a few fingers into me, strumming my G-spot like a guitar. I tensed and arched my back, tilting my hips until his thrusts met me at the right angle. I'd spent far too long self-pleasuring. Curt's attention to my nether region was so intense I found myself on the edge of orgasm after less than five minutes.

"Wow, I'm so close . . ." I panted, pulling at the blanket. His fingers worked their magic on me, pushing and rubbing, sliding through the glorious moisture my body was making.

"You taste so good," he mumbled, taking a breath before diving back into my valley. The startling lack of his mouth on my clit drew a whimper from my lips, and I grabbed his head by his mop of dark hair and ground against his face.

“Make me come.” I felt an orgasm nearing, a coil pinched too hard, ready to snap. My body tensed, I clenched around his fingers, and it happened. Wave after powerful wave of full-body contractions. I felt it in my toes and all the way to my shoulders and neck. The hint of pain between my shoulders was the least of my focus as I convulsed, writhing beneath his taunting lips, still magnetized to my clit.

I cried out, letting him hear my enjoyment as his ministrations continued, until the waves subsided, though my soft folds were highly sensitive. He stood, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and smirked at me. “Have you had enough? Or do I need to bring some stronger correction?”

I was delirious, so relaxed I wanted to melt into the bed. I let my eyes flutter shut as his fingers continued to slowly slide in and out of my body. I felt the bed shake and the heat of him next to me, hand still buried between my legs, fondling me and spreading my juices around. He smeared the moisture up over my clit, rubbing for a moment before trailing his fingers up to my breasts, where he wiped his fingers on my nipples then sucked them clean, one at a time.

“Oh, I’ve been so bad. I think you need to teach me another lesson.” The moment I said the words, his hand wrapped around my right breast and squeezed. I liked it rough and he knew it.

Curt was the one I’d explored my sexuality with, the one who taught me what real lovemaking was and how to feel amazing. He was the only man who’d ever given me an orgasm, and I wanted another. I grabbed his wrist and pushed his hand lower, over my stomach to my shaven mound, where his fingers dabbled in the fluids again.

“Yeah, well I can do that, but I know it’s not going to satisfy you until—”

“Just do it,” I told him, spreading my legs wider to receive anything he wanted to give me.

He rubbed my clit again, firm, circular motions spreading more juices around until he’d worked me into a frenzy. His fingers swirled around my soft folds then dipped into me, then

returned to massage the apex of all pleasure, only to dive into the warmth of my pussy and return again. He had me begging for more, breathing hard, biting his shoulder.

“Oh, be a good girl and just let it happen,” he coaxed, teasing my pussy until I was melting in his hands again. This time, his teeth raked over my nipple and he bit down hard. It sent a shot of pleasure across my body, intensifying the orgasm. His fingers hooked around my pubic bone, finding my sensitive spot, while the heel of his hand rubbed my hardened clit. The more he massaged, the stronger each wave hit me.

“Man, I love to watch your face.”

I didn't care if he saw me make the strangest faces or heard me make the oddest noises. He could do anything he wanted to me at this point. His hand was magic and I was at his mercy.

“Oh . . . God . . .” I clenched around his fingers and shook so hard I almost butted heads with him, until his lips covered mine and he pinned me down again. Each orgasm was better than the next, and he was the master at making them happen again and again. “Oh, my God . . .”

He kissed my neck and collar bone, then bit my ear and scratched his teeth down my neck. As the orgasm passed, I felt him shift on the bed. I opened my eyes to see him rising up, ready to give me what I really wanted. The look on his face indicated it was what he really wanted too.

“You are so beautiful. You know that?” Curt maneuvered himself until he was at the foot of the bed, kneeling on the comforter. His cock stood tall and proud, a bead of precum moistening its tip. He grabbed my right leg and pulled me toward the far side of the bed, and I yelped, though it hadn't hurt. It was more of a shock than anything, the strength he displayed manhandling me like a ragdoll.

“You've been working out?” I asked him as he settled between my spread legs and stroked himself.

“Gotta keep in good shape in case I need to punish you for being so bad.” His wink and smirk made me chuckle, but the moment he pushed into me, I gasped.

“Oh, God, I missed this,” I moaned against his mouth as he claimed my lips. His body weighed me down. I felt every inch of his hardened cock inside me, filling me and hitting my back wall in a single thrust. “This is going to be so good.” His soft thrusts drove my hips deeper into the mattress, shaking the bed gently at first and with increasing vigor as he really got into it.

“Wow, you feel amazing. I forgot how incredible your body is.” His hand gripped my right breast as he began thrusting harder.

“Yeah, well just fuck me and stop talking about how you’re going to punish me unless you mean it.” Our dirty talk was one of the best things about sex with him. He played the dominant one, and it pushed every button I had.

“You really want to tell me what to do?” he asked me, grabbing a wrist and pinning it over my head.

“I just want you to do what you said you’d do. Are you going to teach me this lesson yet?” I squeezed his hips with my thighs and found a rhythm with him, rising and lowering as he pushed in and drew back. He took my other wrist, pinning both beneath one hand while his other hand groped my breasts hungrily.

“You aren’t ready for this.” He drove into me harder, the headboard now banging the wall because the bed shook so hard. “You haven’t even begged me yet.”

I lost it, unable to keep in sync with his thrusts, but with the way his pelvic bone ground across my clit, I knew orgasm would come again, and this one would be more powerful than the two before it. “Oh, God, please . . . I’m so close again.” Curt thrust harder and faster, pumping his hips and forcing his cock deeper into me with every drive. I felt my body being scooted across the top of the comforter. His grip on my wrists was so tight he’d probably leave a bruise, and I didn’t care. “I’m so close.”

“Good. Now tell me you’re a bad girl.” He squeezed my breast hard, pinching my nipple. “Say it.”

“I’m a bad girl,” I panted, clenching my pussy around his cock as it hammered into me. “I’m so bad.”

I heard the grunt escape his mouth, his attempt to hold back his climax. “Say it,” he urged me. “Tell me you’re bad.”

“I’m so bad,” I whimpered, on the edge. “I’m such a bad girl.”

“Now . . . do it now,” he ordered, as if I had a choice in when my body would climax, but like my very nerve endings could respond to his voice, the most powerful orgasm yet hit me.

“Ahh.” I arched my head back, letting the strong contraction seize me. His teeth sank into my neck, and I heard him growl, vibrating his chest and mine too. Our bodies now damp with sweat, each of his gasps of pleasure sent puffs of air across my skin, causing goosebumps to rise everywhere I felt the breeze.

His heat filled me, his pounding thrusts slowed to something more reasonable, and I started to cry. And not just a whimper and a few tears. The orgasm was so powerful I sobbed, huge streams of emotion that had been locked inside my chest and mind for years. His cock buried itself inside me over and over again, like drawing water from a well. The tears wouldn’t stop. I’d never had an orgasm so strong that I sobbed like this, but it was incredible.

“Hey . . . hey,” he whispered, kissing my tears away. He let go of my wrists, and I instinctively wrapped my arms around his body. “Shh, it’s okay. I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” His thrusts slowed and then stopped. He lay on top of me, inside me. I could feel his heartbeat inside my vagina.

“No,” I cried, shaking my head. I pulled his lips to mine and kissed him, tasting my own fluids on his tongue and my salty tears on his lips.

“What’s wrong? Shh . . . I’m here.” Curt held himself up on his elbows, still remaining there on top of me. “Did I do something wrong?”



“You’re perfect,” I told him, kissing him eagerly. When the final wave of orgasm stopped and my body was calm, I wiped my tears and he pulled out. His sperm drained from me, leaving a puddle on the bed and a mess between my thighs, but I turned on my side to face him as he lay there propped on one elbow, smiling at me.

“So good you cried?” he asked with eyebrows raised.

I nodded and smiled, sniffing. “I think that might have been the best orgasm of my life.” The tips of our fingers touched as I braced myself, and he didn’t shy away. He let his fingers brush over mine gently.

“So, that wasn’t exactly the reason I asked you to dinner, but it was nice.” Curt’s icebreaker made me snicker. I didn’t think either of us planned that to happen, but the moment was too intense and we were carried away.

“No, I didn’t think you did.” I looked down at our hands, his fingers still tickling the tops of mine.

“So, maybe we should talk? And eat?”

“I want you to meet him, Curt. I’m just scared of how he’ll respond.” I pulled my hand away, suddenly nervous that we’d made a mistake. “And I’m afraid of my heart getting carried away, and I know that sounds stupid because we just had sex and it’s been five years, but what if you—”

“Whoa,” he said, reaching out and grabbing my hand. “Let’s not get carried away, okay?” His thumb rubbed the back of my wrist. “I know maybe sex wasn’t the best idea, but my heart really is determined to take care of my son. You don’t have to worry for a single minute whether my motive is pure. I have some hurts to deal with, some trust issues now.”

My heart sank, and I winced. “I’m sorry.”

“And I’m sure you do too.” He kissed my hand and then rested it back on the bed. “But the most important thing is Luke. Okay?” He sighed. “That’s not to say I don’t want you.” He scowled, looking like he was angry with himself for something.

“I get it.” I sat up, turning away from him and reaching for a tissue from the box on the nightstand. “It was just that moment, you and me dancing and our song playing. I lost myself, and I’m sorry that happened.”

I felt the bed jostle as I used the tissues to clean myself up, then tossed them in the small trash can next to the nightstand. For a bachelor, Curt was amazingly clean. I appreciated that he took care of his place so well. It gave me hope that maybe he had really grown up and was sincere about parenting Luke the right way.

He sat next to me, boxers now on, and I felt a little exposed. I reached for my clothing and started dressing slowly, standing long enough to pull my pants up and then sitting back down.

“Let’s just put whatever this was to the side for the moment. I liked it. I want it again. I want it to be when you are comfortable and we’ve worked through things.” He reached for his jeans and shoved his feet down the legs.

I felt heat creeping into my cheeks. “I agree . . . about all of that.” He stood and pulled up his jeans. His grin did not escape my notice. “And I think I know the best way to introduce you to Luke. There is a kids’ fun zone here in town called Jumpy’s. They have bouncy houses, trampolines, laser tag, and snacks. I think I will tell him you’re a friend—that’s what he thinks, anyway. Later on, we can let him decide what to call you.”

Curt ran a hand through his hair. I couldn’t help but feel disappointed when he put his shirt back on. I put my sweater on too while I waited for him to answer me. He took a while thinking, and I wondered what was going through his mind.

“Well?”

“I think we have to tell him straight up, Serah. You don’t want him to start the relationship with gifts and bribery to like me. I don’t want to start with white lies. I think we just tell him I’m his father and that I was away working and now I’m not. It’s the truth, anyway. He doesn’t need to know the complicated parts yet. We can save that for when he’s older.”

Curt handed me one of my shoes, and I frowned. He had such a valid point, but I wasn't ready for that yet. I started to protest, but he cut me off.

"I know your heart is to love him. So is mine. Just let me love him my way. Please." I took the shoe and nodded.

"Alright, but I will be the one to tell him." I sighed. I had been the one to make this whole mess, and I felt personally responsible to clean it up. I followed Curt to the kitchen where we sat and ate, though the food wasn't as hot anymore. It was still delicious, and I thanked him for a great night.

When he drove me home, he offered to stop by Evan and Gypsy's house to pick up Luke rather than me having to go back out after I just got home, but I wasn't quite ready for that step yet. He walked me to my door, and the kiss he gave me almost had me weak in the knees, ready to invite him in for another round of dirty talk and wild sex. But I sent him home after a great deal of internal wrestling. I stood watching his taillights disappear from the neighborhood before I squealed in happiness. I hadn't imagined the night would go the way it did, and as I walked to my car to go pick up Luke, I happy cried that he was back and that he wasn't furious with me.

Maybe there was still a spark.

## Curt

**H**astings was the name written on the badge of the soldier I followed. His boots squeaked on the floor with each step. We passed a cafeteria and trekked down a long hallway with dim lighting in silence. I wasn't allowed to meander away from him for any reason. He'd strictly warned me at the Jeep we'd taken from the gatehouse where I parked up to this main building, that any attempt to ditch his escort would be met with severe consequences. Apparently, the Yellow Springs base had highly classified operations, and I was a civilian with no military clearance at all.

"Man, you have to walk this far every time you need to see a doctor?" I whistled through my teeth and snickered. The man remained stoic, a permanent scowl carved into his forehead. I was there to meet Major Thurlow to discuss an emergent need on base for strong antibiotics. Their normal supplier's shipment had gone missing and they were in desperate need. When Glaxon Pharmaceuticals heard about the mess up from one of their competitors and that the base commander had been given permission to source their need immediately, my boss sent me in.

"Here," Hastings said, opening a door for me. I could see through the windows into the room that it was a waiting area, much like a doctor's waiting room. The sign on the door said *Medical Treatment Facility*.

“Thanks.” I nodded at him and smiled, and he scowled and shut the door behind me as I entered. A quick glance out the window revealed him standing by the door as if waiting for me to return. It made sense that he’d wait. How else would I get back to the Jeep and my car at the gate?

“Can I help you?” A woman with long fingernails and dark, voluminous hair called to me through the window along the far wall.

“Uh, yes,” I stuttered, advancing toward the window. “I’m Curt Brock, here to see Major Thurlow. We have an appointment.” I held out the visitor’s pass to her that I was given at the gate. It hung on a lanyard around my neck with a picture of my face on it. I was told not to smile, which seemed odd, but I wasn’t an army sort of guy, and I knew nothing of their rules or procedures.

“Sure,” she said, and I heard a buzzing sound and the lock on the door to my right clicked. “Through the door. Major Thurlow’s office is the last one on the left down the hallway to your right.”

As I passed through the door, I looked down at her and saw her nametag. “Thanks, Kiki.” She smiled at me, much friendlier than the robotic soldier-escort I’d had.

I glanced in a few rooms as I passed. All of them were empty, except an office on my left where a man sat hunched over a keyboard with his back to the door. I thought I saw Serah’s name on one of the doors, but it was Saturday, and I assumed she was at home with Luke. The light in that office was on, though, so a glimmer of hope that I’d see her while on base tugged at my thoughts.

I wasn’t expecting to see her seated at Major Thurlow’s desk when I knocked and entered the room. “Serah?”

She looked as surprised as I was. “Curt?” She stood and smoothed her hands down the front of her green slacks. I hadn’t seen her in uniform in years, and I liked what I saw. The form-fitting button-down hugged her curves and complimented the blue color of her eyes.

“I’m supposed to meet Major Thurlow.” I stepped into the office after a glance down the hallway, then shut the door behind myself.

“He is sick. I’m taking his place because I’m the next in command. Don’t worry, I know exactly what we need.” She appeared to be struggling to keep a straight face. We hadn’t spoken yet following last night’s sexcapade for Valentine’s Day. I was just giving her space considering I’d see her tomorrow at the fun zone with Luke. She gestured at the chair across the desk from her, and I sat in it, placing my briefcase next to me on the floor. As she sat, I noticed the hint of her cleavage peeking out behind the top button which was left undone.

“Well, I’m sorry he’s not feeling well, but I can’t say I’m sorry you’re his replacement.” I grinned at her, and she looked away.

“I wondered whether the pharmaceutical rep I was meeting would be you.” She squared her shoulders, all business, and folded her hands together on the desk in front of herself. “We have a shortage of—”

“Amoxiclav, I know.” I opened my briefcase and pulled out my tablet, opening the files sent to me by my boss. “I think we’ve already discussed some numbers via email. I just need a few signatures. If this works out, I may be around here a bit more frequently. There are some new trial drugs we’re testing out that Major Thurlow might want to see about using here.” I slid the tablet across the desk to her, and her fingers brushed mine. Sparks flew when we touched and her cheeks flushed. “Curt, we have to take this very seriously. I will be your point of contact until Thurlow returns from sick leave, and there can be absolutely no fraternization. The army has a very strict policy about public displays of affection on base and relationships between military personnel.”

Her mouth said “watch it” but her eyes told me she was thinking about the last time we were together. “And so you can’t even talk about the past? Like what happened that one Valentine’s Day where I couldn’t get the reservation so we had

to eat dinner at my place?” I smirked at her, and she couldn’t hide her grin.

Serah glanced at the door and then the window, through which I could see nothing but the wall on the opposite side of the hallway. I turned back to her, and she slid the tablet back toward me. “Signed.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Signing the paperwork digitally?” She struggled to maintain a calm face, and I couldn’t help myself.

“The punishment I dealt. You remember how bad you were?” She loved it when I talked dirty to her, and she really loved it when I was dominant with her. I never understood why that was her kink, but it made for some interesting conversations in public places at times.

“Curtis Brock, stop it,” she hissed, grinning. “You’ll get me in a lot of trouble.”

“Oh, you mean the kind that puddles between your legs? Because if you’re getting into trouble, you’ll need a talking to.” I stood, leaning over the desk with my hands firmly planted next to hers. “I didn’t see any cameras in here. Mind if we just have a chat?”

She fanned herself with her hand and tried to look away, but there was no avoiding me. I was hovering over her so close I could have reached out and kissed her.

“Uh, no, there are no cameras in here, but I’m telling you . . .” Her smile made my heart race. I wasn’t sure what changed, but we went from not speaking at all to supercharged flirting in the past forty-eight hours. I kind of liked it. “You shouldn’t be talking to me like this. If Thurlow finds out, he’ll have you removed, or me, or both of us. It’s not good.”

Her innocence intrigued me, the way she walked the line. “So, if I ask you to unbutton your top, you can’t?”

Her eyes turned on me, locking on my face. I watched her nervously lick her lip and glance at the door. “Kiki could walk past the window at any second.” Her hands moved slowly toward her top, and she undid a button. “And I’m not sure that

letting this attraction we have toward each other blossom is a good thing.” She pulled the front of her top open slightly, revealing more of her cleavage.

“Ah. Well, playing hard to get isn’t usually your thing.” I wanted to dive in, nip at her skin, suck her tits, and bend her over this desk. Even though we’d just had sex last night, I’d awakened to a near wet dream about her. What was supposed to have been a romantic dinner where we could talk had turned into making up for lost time with our bodies, and I had loved every second of it. So much so that I wanted her again now.

“I’m not playing hard to get, Curt. I’m telling you I don’t want to be fired.” She nervously looked at the window again and then buttoned her top. “Now, I think we both need a cold shower.” She stood, her face inches from mine as she rose. I kissed her softly, then straightened.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure working with you today, Ms. Jones, or should I say, Captain?” I picked up my tablet and slid it back into my briefcase, then lifted my briefcase.

“God, I want you so much right now.” She bit her lip. “Why did you do that to me?”

“Do what?” I asked impishly.

“You know what. You teased me and pushed my buttons like you used to.” Her grin betrayed her desire. “I thought we agreed that maybe the sex wasn’t such a smart idea, considering we both have some hurts to resolve.”

“Well, if you weren’t so hot, I’d be able to control myself, but dang it, Serah, your body is amazing, and I want to see it undressed and spread for me on this desk in like thirty seconds.” I felt my dick swelling, and I knew she’d never risk her job, but the dirty talk did things to me too.

“I can’t do that.” She shook her head, but she snickered and hid behind a hand. “What I can say is that I really liked last night a lot, and I think that we should do it again, and more often, and the rest will work itself out in time, I guess.”

“Ah, well, you know where I live, then.” I winked at her. “Stop by anytime you need a good talking to.” I backed



toward the door, giddy inside. I was still completely smitten by her. Past hurts or not, I still loved her.

She didn't even try to stop me as I walked out the door, which dampened the mood a bit, but I understood she had to take her job seriously. But the moment I had her alone again, I'd be the bad boy she wanted because I wanted her just as much as she clearly wanted me.

### Serah

I barely had Luke out of his coat before he vanished into a massive ball pit, shoes and all. The safety moderator had to remind him that he couldn't have shoes on when he was playing in the pit, and he pouted while I took them off but bounced back quickly as soon as he saw his friend from the child care center, Reagan, and followed her to the trampolines. I followed him around for about fifteen minutes before I noticed Curt near the front door. Luke was a ball of energy, and I was a tangled knot of nerves and anxiety. Part of me wanted to hide and pretend I hadn't seen him, but he waved at me, indicating he'd already spotted me.

I feigned a smile and turned back to make sure Luke hadn't jetted off somewhere without me. I could tell Curt was excited—his own huge smile matching Luke's. For five years, I'd known without even needing a paternity test that Luke belonged to Curt. I had only slept with Curt, so that was the biggest factor, but waking up each morning to that chubby little face that looked like a feminine version of his father never let me forget.

"How's he doing?" Curt asked, appearing beside me. We stood shoulder to shoulder staring into a bouncy house with more than a dozen kids in it. The moderator had to limit the number of children climbing in and could only allow one to enter as one exited. I was grateful they took safety seriously

because I was a worrier and it made me nervous to see so many kids climbing and jumping in one place at one time.

“Uh, he’s in there.” I pointed at the bouncy house where the writhing mob of children were visible through the mesh sides. I was his mother, and I had a difficult time distinguishing him from the others with all the activity, but I knew that bright neon green shirt. I made him wear it today so he would be easy to spot among the hundred other kids.

Curt’s eyes glistened with tears. “I wanted to buy him that robot so badly.” He shook his head. “But I didn’t.”

I chuckled. He was such a gift giver, and I loved that about him. “I appreciate your respect.” I stood with my arms full of items, Luke’s jacket and shoes, my purse and coat. If I’d have been smart, I’d have gotten a locker at the front desk, but Luke was too excited to get moving so I opted for carrying things. Now, however, my arms were growing tired and my shoulders and neck hurt. I tried to juggle things into one arm and rub my neck, but I dropped a shoe and Curt bent to retrieve it.

“Here,” he said, holding out his hand. “Let me carry some of that.” He took Luke’s things and with them half of my load. I hadn’t realized how a little weight put a strain on my body.

“Thank you.” I glanced around, hoping for an empty spot on a bench. It wasn’t as loud as I thought it would be, but it was busy. There wasn’t a single spot to sit on this end of the gymnasium. Curt seemed to notice and frowned.

“You’re in pain?”

“I am, but it’s okay. This is Luke’s day and I just want him to be okay.” I used my free hand to rub at my shoulder, and Curt again shook his head.

He dropped the coat and shoes at his feet and took my coat from my hands, leaving only my purse in my possession. “Hold still,” he said, standing behind me. His strong hands soothed the ache in my shoulders, careful to avoid my spine which boasted a nasty scar that peeked out of the collar of my shirt. “That looks like it was painful.”

“It was—is.” I winced as he hit a tender spot and worked out the kink. “Thank you so much.” His hands were like magic, easing the tension and soothing the ache.

“How long has it been now since surgery? You shouldn’t be having pain like this anymore if they fixed it.”

“Oh, it’s been almost nine weeks, I think, but Dr. Gardener assured me that it can happen. I’m doing everything they said, but the pain isn’t decreasing yet. It’s okay. I’m going to be fine.” A bright green shirt caught my attention, and I watched as Luke jogged over to us. My heart clenched. If I hadn’t been in such pain, I’d never have allowed him to touch me like this in front of Luke, but I’d let the pain speak louder than my fear.

“Mommy, who’s dat man?” Luke pointed up at his father, and I bit my lip. It was time to let the truth out and let Luke feel whatever it was he would feel. I’d had nightmares of him being angry with Curt and running away, or crying and not wanting him. I even had a nightmare that Luke was so hurt he wanted to go live with one of his friends and I had to convince him not to leave. Why my brain conjured such strong feelings, I’d never know, but it had, and I was face to face with that anxiety in the flesh.

“Hey, buddy. Remember me?” Curt’s hands left my shoulders and he crouched in front of Luke. “We met a few weeks ago at the doctor’s office when Mommy had a checkup.” He spoke softly and in a kind tone, but my heart still roiled.

“You the angry man.” Luke took a step closer to me, then hugged my leg. I rested my hand on his head and ruffled his hair. If I could stop time and change everything for my sweet boy, I would, but I couldn’t. He was about to have his world changed for what I hoped would be the better, but my gut told me that was a slim chance.

“Lukey, this is Curt.” I tried to crouch, but my back hurt too much, so I picked up our things and took Luke’s hand. “Let’s go get a drink and talk to him for a minute, okay?”

Luke nodded at me, but he kept his suspicious eyes locked on Curt as we walked across the facility. Curt bought us

bottles of water and bags of chips, and we found a table in the corner that was relatively quiet.

Luke munched on his chips, still eyeing Curt warily, until I spoke up. I figured it was like ripping a bandage off, only worse, in my opinion. “Honey, you know how you sometimes ask where your daddy is?” Luke’s saucer eyes turned toward me and he nodded slowly. “And you know how I told you your daddy was working a lot and that is why he wasn’t here?” He nodded again, and my heart wrenched. I felt tears welling up even though he was fine right now, mostly because for the first time in my life, I wasn’t able to control what was about to happen in my son’s life.

He turned to face Curt with curious eyes like he was putting the pieces together before I could tell him. I watched the strange interaction between them, feeling like I might throw up, and finally decided I had to say it. “Honey, this is your daddy. His name is Curt. He was working a lot, but now he’s not working and he’s here to visit you.”

I held my breath, waiting to see what his reaction would be. I expected fear or questions, even anger. I didn’t know how an almost five-year-old would process such a huge life-impacting announcement like this. His head tilted to one side, then the other, his face drawn in concentration. He reached out and touched Curt’s hand, then pulled his arm back.

“You my daddy?” His eyes were wide, but he didn’t look upset.

“I am.” Curt smiled and leaned on the table with his elbows. “Is that okay?”

“You working a lot, but you home now? You live wif me?” Luke leaned closer to me, and I rested my hand on his back reassuringly. He probably had so many questions, and I just wanted to answer every single one of them with a huge hug.

“Buddy, he isn’t going to live with us, okay? But we can visit now and get to know him. How does that sound?” I watched his little face light up suddenly.

“Oh!” He grabbed Curt’s hand and jumped off his seat. “You come see Reagan! She goes to class wif me.” He started pulling on Curt’s hand, and Curt laughed.

“Okay, buddy. I’d love to meet your friend.” Curt rose and shrugged at me, and I felt like I’d cry happy tears.

I knew it wasn’t going to be just that easy, but a heap of the anxiety and pressure just fell off my shoulders the moment he smiled. I stood with them, opting to leave our things sitting at the table except for my purse. We tried to keep up with him as he dragged us through the crowd to find Reagan. It was exhausting, but the exhilaration I felt at seeing him so happy about having a father energized me.

Curt took his shoes off and climbed on the trampoline with Luke and jumped for almost thirty minutes. By the time he was worn out enough to need another drink, I was ready to go home. It had been a full day and I was getting hungry.

“Okay, bud, we have to go home now. You’ll have to say goodbye to Curt.” I coaxed Luke toward the table where our coats lay, and he pouted.

“No, Mommy. I want Daddy to come to our house.” Luke reached for Curt’s hand. “I want him to play iPad with me.” His bottom lip stuck out the way it did when he was prepared to throw a tantrum. I looked up at Curt who looked worn out, but his eyes flashed with excitement.

“I don’t mind . . .” Curt shrugged and rubbed Luke’s mop of hair.

I sighed. I didn’t want to leave any trace of negative energy around Luke’s memories of this day, so I smiled and nodded. “Okay, Lukey. Daddy can come for dinner and play games with you.”

Luke’s face lit up, and he was more agreeable than ever as I tried to get his shoes and coat on. We had a bit of a tantrum when Curt couldn’t ride with us in my car, since he drove separately, but I calmed him by promising him that we’d have ice cream with dinner if he tried to be brave and not let his big sadness take over. He nodded, but crocodile tears graced his

cheeks. If being sad that Curt wasn't in our car was the worst of the emotions for the day, I was happy with that.

Now I just had to figure out my own emotions about Luke demanding that Curt be in our home so quickly after our adventure Friday night. I'd barely made it through the meeting yesterday, and watching Curt interact with Luke made me realize all the more how perfect of a man he was. I wanted him, but I wanted my heart to never feel the way it had when he left. Why couldn't I tell myself no?

### Curt

I was entirely absorbed in the game Luke showed me on his iPad. The bright colors and coordinated sounds made it really fun to play, and the fact that he was learning simple addition and even reading skills was even better. I sat next to him as he showed me level after level. He was so smart it amazed me. I didn't even know what to expect from an almost five-year-old, since I hadn't been around many kids his age. The twins were much younger than him, and my work and travel had made it impossible for me to even spend much time around them.

"Look!" Luke poked at the screen. "You pop the bubbles and dey spell words." He giggled and slid his finger across the screen, popping bubbles out of which sprang letters that fell into a colorful wagon on the screen. As the word was created, an image appeared, correlating the word with the picture. It was genius. He loved watching things appear.

"Look, dats a dog. D. O. G." I was amazed how he knew the letters and called them out before the picture of the brown furry mutt appeared.

"Incredible, Luke. You're really good at this game. Fantastic work."

Nothing else in the house even mattered to me right now. I was with my son, who was eager to show me everything he



knew. He was smart and funny and I was smitten. We had played with blocks, building the highest tower before knocking them down together. Then we read a book together and drew pictures. When Serah finally let him have his iPad, he insisted that I sit with him and watch.

“Well, boys, dinner is almost ready. You need to go wash up.”

Serah had to call my name twice to get my attention, but when she did, she got Luke’s at the same time. He popped off the couch, locked his iPad, laid it on the table, then took my hand. “Come on. We go in duh bafroom to wash our hands.” He tugged at me, and I shrugged at Serah, whose smile hadn’t faded all evening. The food she cooked smelled delicious, and I couldn’t wait to eat. I was starving, so I allowed Luke to drag me around. As we washed our hands, I noticed he had a robot themed toothbrush.

“You really like robots, huh?”

He used three pumps of soap from the soap dispenser, which was overkill for his tiny hands, but at least he was being clean. Serah had taught him well. I got my own soap and lathered my hands up while I waited for him to rinse his.

“Yeah. I seen dis movie about a wobot. It was so cool. I’m going to be a wobot when I am big like you.” His grin was priceless. I didn’t remember what I wanted to be when I grew up, but I felt like I probably wanted to be something just as illogical or unobtainable as being a robot.

“What sort of robot?” I rinsed my hands, and we dried them on a towel that hung over a hook on the wall. Luke could barely reach it, so I helped him out.

“Uh, well. I want to shoot lasers and freeze people.” He shrugged as if it were the most normal thing in the world to freeze people with laser beams. The kid had me continually entertained.

By the time our robot conversation was over and we made it to the dining area, Serah had the meal set on the table and a plate full of lasagna cut up and cooling for Luke. She still had

a warm smile, though I felt like she was avoiding eye contact with me. After the way things had gone during our Valentine's Day dinner, I was still uncertain where we stood. I felt the strange tension between us, my desire to catch her eye, and her avoidance of that entirely. But every time I looked at her, she was staring at me longingly.

"Well, let's eat, but when dinner is over, Daddy has to go home, okay?" Serah sat down at her seat after helping Luke situate his chair close enough to the table that he could reach.

"No, he stay here." Luke picked up his fork and dug in, taking a huge bite of his food. Sauce dribbled down his chin, but he never stopped to wipe it before he shoveled more into his mouth. I served myself a modest portion while Serah attempted to negotiate herself out of an argument with a five-year-old.

"No, baby. Daddy doesn't live here. He's just visiting. Like when Elliot comes to visit but he has to go home." I didn't know who Elliot was, but I assumed it was one of Luke's friends. I could see why parents wouldn't allow children to do sleepovers at this young of an age, but someday, he'd be able to do that.

"But it Daddy. It not Elliot." To Luke, it seemed to make perfect sense that I'd stay over with him. I took small bites and watched how Serah handled herself. She was a fantastic mother, and I wished I could stay too. She was so kind and patient with him, it made feelings inside me stir to life. I'd never stopped loving her. She was every bit as amazing as I remembered.

"Baby, just eat, okay? That's important." She used her napkin to dab at his mouth and remove some excess sauce, then turned to me. "Do you like it? It's my mother's recipe."

I had my mouth full of food, but I nodded appreciatively. We made eye contact and her cheeks flushed. It was the first time she'd looked at me in hours, at least like that. I held her gaze, both of us oblivious to anything else in the room. She searched me, as if prying in my mind for insight into how I was feeling. I tried to relay through my returning gaze that I

was feeling incredible. I wasn't sure how well that translated to her, but she looked away, and I swore I saw a half-smirk on her lips.

“Do you like food?” Luke pointed at my plate as I swallowed. I wiped my mouth before answering.

“Yes, I really like this food. Your mommy is an amazing cook. Isn't she? She makes yummy food.” Luke plastered a cheesy grin on his face and squinted as he shook his head in the affirmative. His fork hovered in the air in front of him with a bite on it waiting to be eaten. Serah batted her eyes at me. I could have sworn she winked, and it sent chills up my spine. I wanted to find out if she tasted as good as the food.

“Thank you, boys, for saying that.” Serah seemed to be nervous, and I wondered why, but I said nothing. I didn't want to discuss adult things in front of Luke, but I had a feeling she was in pain or something. She'd also looked like she was flustered at times tonight too, as if she felt drawn to me and was fighting it.

Dinner was amazing, and Serah looked exhausted. I looked up at the clock as we finished eating. It was after eight p.m., and Luke sat in his booster seat at the table yawning. He rubbed his eyes and smeared pasta sauce into them, at which point Serah decided it was time to call it a night.

“Come on, little guy. Let's get you washed up and off to bed. Tell Daddy goodnight.” She pulled the chair back and grabbed his messy hand as he slid to the floor.

“Night-night.” He rubbed his eye again, and I stood up, bending to kiss the top of his head.

“Good night, kiddo.”

Serah patted his backside and sent him toward the bathroom and then turned to me. “Thanks for coming, Curt. You can let yourself out or wait until I'm done. This will take a bit because he needs a bath.”

“Oh, I'll wait.” I had no intention of leaving her to clean up this whole mess. “I think I'll clean up a bit here, maybe wash some dishes.” I winked at her, and she rolled her eyes at

me. For a second, I watched her hold her breath, lower lip clenched between her teeth. Her eyes danced between my lips and my eyes, and I almost reached out to touch her. The air was thickening as she stepped away and broke the tension.

“Suit yourself.” She chuckled, heading to the bathroom.

I dug into the work, unsure where she wanted the leftover food. After a bit of investigation, I found some plastic containers and portioned it out and put it in the fridge. It took a bit of elbow grease to get the baking dish clean, but by the time she was done putting Luke to bed, the kitchen and dining room were finished and I was kneeling next to the blocks scattered on the floor, picking them up. Her eyes went wide with surprise at the sight.

“Curt, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Look, you had a long day. I wanted you to be able to relax and not have to worry about a thing.” I rose to my feet as she approached and gestured toward the couch. “If you give me a second, I’ll get these toys off the floor too.”

“No,” she asserted. “You’ve done enough. Just sit.”

Following her direct orders, I sat, maybe a little too close to her. Her body tensed at first, but as I angled toward her, she relaxed. “Thank you so much for allowing me to enjoy this time.” I felt the air thickening again, and this time, she had no logical reason to walk away. We had just sat down next to each other to talk for a moment.

“I . . . uh, you’re welcome.” She blinked rapidly. Her cheeks flushed. I watched the color of her lips darken as she licked them. “I think Luke likes you.”

“I think he does too, but I’m more concerned right at this very moment whether his mother likes me.”

“Curt, we agreed that maybe the sex complicated things already.” Her mouth said the words, but her eyes stared at my lips, begging me to make the first move. I wouldn’t. Not until I was certain it was what she wanted and she was okay with it. Her hand fluttered to her throat, where she messed with the small charm on her necklace.

“We discussed it, yes. But that was before I realized that the way I felt about you five years ago never went away. It’s not just sexual attraction, Serah.” I reached up and cupped her cheek. “You are an amazing mother. Watching you with Luke gives me a brand-new appreciation for your heart.”

Her blush deepened and she looked down. “I admit I’ve been feeling very attracted to you all evening.”

“Yeah?” My body wanted to lurch forward and claim her, but I still waited on her express consent.

“Yes, and I had to restrain myself several times tonight from touching you. You know . . . we used to be very physical.” Her fingers slid across the couch and brushed against my thigh. She was getting warmer.

“Yeah, being physical is nice.” I rested my hand next to hers, fingertips pressing on the side of her hand.

“But with a child in the room, things change. It’s not appropriate to be that way.” Her hand slid closer to mine, fingers weaving into mine.

“Well, there’s no child in the room right now.” I pulled her hand closer to my body, sliding it across my thigh until the backs of her fingers brushed across my groin where my body was growing firmer by the second. I sensed her breathing increase.

“He’s just sleeping, Curt. What if he wakes up?”

“You have a monitor, right?”

Serah nodded, glancing at the entrance to the hall. “I do.”

I stood, pulling her up with me. “Then we’ll be really, really quiet.” I stepped backward, careful not to trip over any of the toys lying around. “And I promise you, you won’t regret this. It’s not going to complicate anything because we’re going to do things the right way.” She followed my lead, still looking hesitant.

“What’s the right way?” We started down the hall. I didn’t stop to realize that I didn’t know which door was her bedroom door.

“The way that makes us closer than we’ve ever been and stronger as a couple. Because I want my family now.”

She stopped and pulled me back toward her as she ducked into a room. My comment didn’t scare her off the slightest bit. She was just as hungry to rekindle things as I was, and my heart could hardly contain the joy I felt.

### Serah

I turned the volume on the baby monitor all the way up as we passed it. Curt shut the door behind himself, and I guided him across the dark room to my bed. My body was aflame with nervous energy—not anxiousness but excitement. I’d had sex with Curt enough times to know exactly what to expect, but having him again after so long made it that much more enticing.

“Remember that time we had sex in the back of the library during spring break?” he asked me, advancing on me as he pulled his shirt over his head.

“Yes.” I snickered. “Everyone was out of town, and there were only a few people on campus. You made me hold every moan and gasp in because it was a library.” That night had been incredible, but risky. I didn’t think I’d ever be that adventurous again.

“I still never found out whether they had cameras.” Curt tugged at the hem of my shirt and pulled it up over my head.

“I guess if they did, the security people got a good show.” I hadn’t done much more than lift my skirt for him to drop to his knees and eat me, but the act would have been very obvious.

I reached for his belt and undid the buckle, pulling the fly of his jeans wide open. I could feel his firmness beneath the

briefs he wore and rubbed him through the fabric. “Remember the time we had sex in the backseat of Mr. Draper’s car?”

“The old man who lived next door to you on base?” His hands worked at my bra strap. “He was so mad that someone had fogged his windows that he never stopped to realize the culprits were right in front of him.”

I laughed so hard Curt put his hand over my mouth, and I nodded and calmed myself. “I still can’t believe that. Like, who else would have done it? We were the only ones around, and he thought we were out for a midnight stroll?”

He peeled my bra off me before pushing his pants down and kicking them off with his shoes. I had to sit to untie my sneakers, and I’d barely gotten them off my feet when Curt pushed me back onto the bed and yanked my pants and panties right off. I giggled quietly, stifling every sound I made. I had no desire to wake Luke and interrupt this moment.

“I’m going to make you do bad things tonight,” I told him, starting the dirty pillow talk. I knew it got him going, but even more so, his responses would get me going. It was part of the excitement of being with him, never knowing what he’d say next that would touch a nerve.

“You are?” He crawled onto the bed and used his knee to push against my groin, forcing me to slide across the mattress. “Have you been bad again?”

“Oh, no, I’ve been very good. But I want to be bad with you.” His lips captured mine, swallowing my words. I felt the heat from his body so close to mine, but a cushion of air still separated us. It made me ache to pull him down onto me, but I let him go at his own pace. Something had changed. Maybe it was because Luke was in the next room this time, or maybe I’d grown, but the dirty talk didn’t seem as exciting.

“You know what I want?” His knee rubbed me between the legs, taking the moisture my body made and spreading it around. It stimulated my clit too, causing the ache inside me to begin growing.



“What do you want? Tie me up? Make me your toy?” I forced the words out, but they didn’t feel right. I’d said them a million times to him as we had sex before, but suddenly, I felt like they didn’t fit.

“No, Serah.” His kiss lingered on my lips, savoring the closeness. It was as if he also felt the shift, that the years of being apart had changed us, not in a way that made us incompatible but in a way that matured our desire. It was no longer just hot sex to either of us.

Curt opened his eyes and looked down into mine. “What is it?” I asked with bated breath. I searched his expression in the dim light.

“We had our fun back in the day, but you’re not a toy, and you never will be.” He kissed me again, hungrier than before, but behind it was a torrent of emotion. “I want you to feel like a queen.” His hand smoothed over my side and down across my hip to my mound, where his fingers pressed into my juices, and finding my clit, he began to massage me. “I want you to feel amazing and to know I love you and I always have.” His touch was magic, forcing my body to twitch already as each stroke of his hand across my clit, down through my valley, and back up stimulated more arousal.

What he didn’t know was that the way he was talking to me pushed new buttons I didn’t know I had. I wanted to hear more words like them. I craved it. My heart felt needy. “You think I’m your queen?”

“Oh,” he said, nibbling on my neck as his hips began thrusting against my thigh, “I don’t think it. I know it.” I felt so aroused by the idea of us really getting back together, I thought I’d cry again. His hand rubbed over my soft lips, fingers pushing into my body as the heel of his hand ground down on my clit. “And when you’re on the edge you’re going to know it, that I’m the only one who can take you to heaven and back like this.”

I arched up into him, the warmth of his skin finally touching my body. As I sank down, so did he, pressing me into the bed with his weight. His lips trailed kisses across my

shoulder and up my neck to my ear, where he bit down. I raised a leg to give him more room to work my body, and he did, massaging and digging his fingers into me. The rough patch inside me burned for more attention. I wanted him deep inside me, but I let him be in charge.

“Wow . . . oh, God,” I moaned. My body instinctively clenched, but with only two fingers there, it felt less than satisfying. Still, the action made my body inch closer to orgasm. “Oh, yes . . .” His hand worked faster, thrusting and rubbing as his mouth clamped down on my neck, sucking and nipping.

“Curt, I’m . . . Oh,” I panted and clawed at his arm. I dug my fingernails in, frantic for him to go faster, so he did.

“That’s it, baby. You’re mine now, every last bit of you. And I take care of what’s mine.” His breath was hot in my ear, tingling my skin and pushing me over the edge. I shuddered, curling upward as the first contraction of my orgasm hit. I heard myself moaning as if it came from elsewhere, and Curt’s mouth covered mine, drinking it in. Over and over, he plunged his fingers into me and rubbed over my mound until I was a quivering puddle of flesh beneath him.

“Oh, God . . .” The first breath I took after orgasm was like air after being submerged under water. It brought new life into my body, life he instantly tried to suck from me by closing his lips around my nipple. His tongue swirled and played around it as his fingers pushed into me deeper. “That was amazing.” I ran my hand through his hair and tried to get him to kiss me again, pulling on him, but he resisted.

“You’re not done yet.” He sank lower, stubble scraping over my skin as he kissed his way across my navel. “Remember to be quiet, now. I don’t want you to miss out on this.”

His tongue drew a line across my mound and down my slit until it pushed into me. I stifled a groan and grabbed handfuls of his hair. My body had barely ended one orgasm, and he knew it. His ministrations drove me wild. As he sucked and slurped at my juices, he swirled his thumb around my clit,

pushing and massaging. It was torture trying to keep my voice soft, but he was right. I didn't want this interrupted, especially when his mouth moved to my clit and his fingers pushed into me again. I still wanted him deeper, but the way he worked my G-spot brought me right back to the edge again, clawing at his head and whispering my pleas for another orgasm.

“Yes . . . that . . . oh, yes . . .”

Curt's fingers curled around my pubic bone and pulled back toward himself, the repeated motion making my body tense until another orgasm hit me. This time, there was no mouth to cover mine. I gritted my teeth, exhaling through a clenched jaw as spittle flew from my mouth. I whimpered, probably louder than I should have, and clamped my eyes shut as hard as I could. This one was better than the first, and I could have been screaming his name if not for Luke in the next room over.

The bed shook. My body trembled. And when he finally pried his lips away from my body, my legs shuddered so badly I looked like an Eskimo who forgot his coat standing in a blizzard. Curt grinned and wiped his mouth, then pushed my legs back apart because I drew them up to try to make the shaking stop. He nestled in between them, and I felt his hardened dick prodding at my entrance.

“Now the fun part,” he said, pushing into me. The heat of his body and the depth to which he pushed made me groan loudly. Curt pressed his hand over my mouth to smother the moan, and I instantly held my breath. “Shh,” he whispered, reminding me of what my subconscious reaction had forgotten. I nodded, despite still letting my mewls escape, and he removed his hand.

“Sorry,” I hissed, now grabbing at his sides.

“I want you, Serah. I want you now.” He thrust in, his pelvis grinding against mine. “I want you tomorrow.” His body inside mine felt amazing. “I want you next week.” He grabbed my leg and pulled it toward my chest, gaining better access. “I want you forever.”

I could hardly contain my groans. He had me so worked up, my clit so tender, that even the faintest brushes of his body against it drove me mad. My fingernails sank into his skin just as his teeth pushed into mine. He growled softly as I clenched around him.

“God, I want you too, Curt.” My voice was too loud again, but this time, he kissed me to muffle the noise. I felt my body building toward orgasm again, and this time, I wanted him to go with me. When his lips pulled away from mine, I eagerly attacked them back, biting his lower lip.

My third climax came before his, but he met me in the midst of it. I felt him explode in me, heightening the intensity of my orgasm. The soft grunts that escaped from his mouth entered mine, and I delighted in them.

When we finished, he lingered for a moment before pulling out. I was so giddy I didn’t feel like moving, but he managed to get me beneath the covers. We lay facing each other, panting and sweating, and it felt right.

“I’ve missed you so much, and I know we will have things to work through, but I’m not taking no for an answer.” Curt’s breathy whisper was thready, his body still coming down from its high. “We belong together, Serah.”

I turned on my side and faced him, and he grabbed my hand. His fingers laced between mine, the way I felt our hearts tangled up into each other as we had sex. There were so many things I felt about those statements that terrified me, but I also felt completely smitten by them too. How long had I waited for him to say things like this to me?

“I . . .” I wanted to respond to him, but a soft knock at the door interrupted us. I scrambled, tossing the blanket back and frantically scurrying for my robe. I tied it shut just as the door opened.

“Mommy, I wake up. I sleep wif you now?” Luke stood in my doorway, light streaming in from behind him, rubbing his eyes.

“Oh, no, baby.” I glanced at the bed where I knew Curt lay, but he had pulled the covers over himself. It was a relief that Luke hadn’t seen him, or at least, I hoped he hadn’t. “You have to sleep in your own bed like a big boy, okay?” With another glance at the bed, I ushered Luke back to his room. My legs were still weak from the amazing sex, and I felt Curt’s fluids draining from my body down my inner thigh.

“Mommy, thank you for giving me Daddy. I want him to live wif us now.” Luke’s sleepy voice melted my heart.

“I know you do, baby.” I helped him climb back into bed, and he stared up at me with giant brown eyes.

“He so nice. I like him. He come over tomorrow?”

I sighed softly. Curt was really amazing with Luke, and I wanted them to have the best relationship possible. The sex was amazing, but that didn’t mean a relationship like the one Curt wanted was possible for us. What if he just left for a job again? What if he didn’t want to commit to being here like a real father should? I didn’t want Luke to be hurt when Curt was gone for six months at a time, and I needed a man who would be present every day in my life, even if it was only a visit at lunchtime.

“I don’t think so, Lukey. Okay? But we’ll see him again soon. You rest now.” I kissed Luke’s forehead and tucked him in, but by the time I got back to my room and slipped beneath the sheets, Curt was sleeping.

I curled up facing away from him and stared at the shadow on the wall. I was fooling myself if I thought Curt was actually going to stay here. And if I kept letting my body get carried away in the moment, my heart would eventually be so attached to him again that when he left, it would get ripped out. I couldn’t let that happen. It had almost destroyed me the first time. My heart wouldn’t take that a second time.

I was almost nodding off when I felt the bed jostle and Curt turned to hold me. He kissed the back of my shoulder. “You probably should have gone home.” I tried not to sound cold when I said the words, but my fear of getting too attached to him sprang up.

“Let me stay. I’ll be out before he wakes.” His kisses rained down on my skin again, and I couldn’t say no.

“Alright,” I told him, tucking myself back into his chest as his hand cupped my breast and his other arm curled up beneath my head. “Goodnight, Curt.”

“I love you, Serah. Goodnight.”

I felt tears pricking my eyes because I wanted to say I loved him too, but I couldn’t. There was no way I could. It would mean opening my heart to that pain again, and I never wanted to feel that again. So I forced the tears back and closed my eyes, praying that if Curt was going to hurt me again, he’d do it sooner rather than later—before we got too deep into whatever this was.

### Curt

**T**he small coffee house on Main Street seemed like the perfect place to host this meeting. I'd known about it for a few days, ever since I was told last week that my boss had accepted my application for the management position in Chicago. I sat at the table feeling a bit anxious about the discussion. We'd eaten our lunch, only a few remnants lingered on our plates, and I knew he would bring it up. Previous business lunches with him had all entailed eating our meal before discussing work, and I assumed this one would be no different. Since we had already eaten, I knew what was coming.

"Well, Curt," Victor said over the din of the other customers, "I saw that application you submitted last month, and I must say, I am very pleased you're interested in the position. Because you'd be replacing me, it isn't my call to make, but if it were, I'd be picking you."

I smiled at him, grateful that he thought so highly of me that he would select me over other applicants. I knew many people who were very qualified had applied. "I appreciate your vote of confidence." I wiped my mouth and dropped my napkin on the plate, then stacked my silverware on it to make it easier for the waitress to remove the dirty dishes.

"I mean it. No one else has the heart or the drive to do it." He sipped his soda and set the cup back down. "It of course

means moving to the Windy City as long as you're under contract, but since you have nothing tying you down here, that shouldn't be a problem."

I hid the wince that statement drew out of me, but I felt it inside. I had more here than I'd ever had, more reason to stay, more reason to not take that promotion. More reason to switch jobs entirely and never go on the road again. But this was my career. To be placed in that job would mean a massive increase in pay and the stability to actually have a family. Having just spoken with Maggie and Derek about it weeks ago made it seem possible, but after the things that had transpired between Serah and me, I didn't even know what I wanted.

I choked back my worries and forced a smile. "Yeah, I saw what an incredible opportunity it was and I leapt at the chance to apply. I didn't figure they'd really take my application seriously, though. I knew James and Sandra both applied. They both have more experience, and James is working on his doctorate right now too."

I wasn't trying to bait him into divulging information, though once the words were out of my mouth, I considered how that sounded like I was.

"James is not going to get the job. Management only considers people with zero disciplinary actions on record through the company. He lost an entire box of samples of one of the strongest narcotics the company makes. He's not even being considered."

In a way, Victor's words made me feel better about myself. I took pride in following rules and procedures. He was right. They'd never had to reprimand me for a single thing because as a professional, I knew what was expected and I did what I was asked. "Still . . ." I wasn't trying to self-doubt, either. In my mind, I wanted to downplay what he was saying because I'd been so excited about the job for over a month now that saying no to a job offer would be really difficult.

"Still nothing. You're a shoo-in for the promotion. Now I just wanted to go over some of the responsibilities with you before they begin the interview phase."



I nodded and stared blankly at him while he listed out all the responsibilities and tasks that would be on my plate should I get the job. I knew most of them, but a few were news to me. I nodded at the appropriate times and chuckled when he made jokes, but inside, I was torn. I felt like I was making progress with Serah. It had been a week since I met Luke, but I had called and talked to her a few times, for hours each time. It was like we hadn't missed a day together. We still loved the same things and had the same hobbies in common. She was on my mind so heavily, though, that Victor had to stop and interrupt my thoughts.

“Am I boring you? I'm sorry. I know I have a tendency to get carried away with this stuff.” He sipped his soda again, and I shook my head.

“No, not boring at all. I just got on a train of thought about something you said and my brain focused on that. Please, continue. Do you think there is any chance that the company would let me be fully remote? Live here in Yellow Springs and host meetings via computer conference?” I knew what he would say, but I had to ask. The company was very strict about middle- and upper-management positions.

“Yeah, not going to happen. They specifically want someone in headquarters to meet with vendors, reps, and private investors. You have to be a body there.” He shrugged. “Though I do work from home one day per week, so that is a good trade-off. I get to wear pajama pants and eat while I'm working on Fridays.” He laughed raucously, but I didn't think it was that funny. Still, I laughed along with him to make him feel less awkward.

When we calmed, I could no longer hide the apprehension and Victor could see it. “Having second thoughts?”

I shook my head. “No, I mean . . . maybe I am? I just met someone.” It wasn't a lie. I had just met Luke. “And now it feels complicated.”

“Yeah, well there are like eight billion people on this planet. You'll meet someone new, or this one can follow you.” He winked at me and stacked his trash up the way I had done

mine. “You can’t let an opportunity like this pass you by, Brock. You’ll never advance that way. And there is no way to move up the ladder without going to a desk job.”

“Yeah . . .” My shoulders slumped. I knew he was right. My options were to take the job or to continue being a traveling pharmaceutical rep.

“Alright, well you have another trip coming up. This one’s for two weeks. For the first week, you’ll be in northern Illinois stopping at physician offices, and for the second week, you’ll be in the office at corporate. It will give you a feel for how things work there, but it’s mandatory staff development.” He tapped his hand on the table and stood. “I have to run. I’ll send your flight itinerary via email.”

I slowly rose to follow him. “Thanks, Victor. I appreciate the visit.”

“No problem.” He reached his hand out, and I shook it. “I can’t wait to see you move up the ladder.” With a wink, he was gone, and I was feeling like a lame duck.

I hobbled to my car, weighed down by regret. Had I known I would reconnect with Serah, I’d have never applied to that job. Still, the thought of taking the promotion really thrilled me. My heart oscillated between feeling excited about the potential and devastated by the fact that I’d have to tell Serah what was happening. I didn’t know how she’d react.

Traffic was light on the highway, so when my phone rang, I used the hands-free connection to answer it. “Curt here.” I got about thirty calls a day from customers, so I was used to talking and driving, but I always made sure to be safe.

“Curt?” Serah’s voice came through the car speakers, and I grinned upon hearing it.

“Hey, beautiful, what’s up?” I pictured her seated at her desk chewing bubble gum or something while she smiled and spoke to me. Call it foolish, but I had to believe she was feeling this second wind too.

“Well,” she said, sounding happy, “I want you to come over this weekend. Luke has been asking about you, and I

don't want it to be too long before you see each other again. He's so persistent."

I probably looked like dumb fool to any motorist who passed by and looked at me. The smile on my face had to be ridiculous. "Yeah, sure. I'd love that. When do you have in mind?"

"I was thinking Sunday evening? We can have something simple and just watch a family movie or something fun for Luke."

"I would love that." A family movie sounded perfect, and the way she said it made me feel like we really did have a chance. My heart was bursting now, and I wanted to tell her about the promotion. It would mean she never had to work again if she didn't want to. She could stay home with Luke and enjoy life without the pressure or obligation of a job. But it would mean moving, which was a huge drawback I didn't think she'd go for. Besides, I didn't know if she'd even be able to get out of the service. I didn't know how that worked.

"Great, how about six? Luke will be thrilled."

I wanted to ask if she'd be thrilled too, but I held my tongue. "See you then."

We ended the call without a hint of my announcement. I knew it was better to just wait. If the job didn't pan out, she'd never have to know about that—and I'd have a huge task on my hands. I'd have to find a new job, and that wouldn't be easy.

### Serah

**T**he waiting room was full of patients when I walked in, so I kept my coat with me this time. I signed in then selected a chair in the corner of the room where I could wait. For late February, this was pretty normal. Cold and flu season had been difficult this year, and even on base, we had a record number of visits to MTF. I tried not to be impatient, but I only had so long for this visit before I had to pick Luke up from childcare.

When the nurse called my name, I was relieved to be called back, having entered after a lot of the waiting patients. A few of them cast me rude glances as I followed the nurse through the door and toward the exam rooms. She led me to room three, and I set my stuff in the chair before seating myself on the end of the exam table. I could probably have just sat in the chair, but this nurse in particular was picky.

“How is the pain today, Serah?” she asked, picking up her blood pressure cuff.

I rolled my sleeve up and held my arm out for her to slide the cuff on my arm. “It’s not really getting better.” I knew the question was only intended to break the ice. She had no say over what was going on in my body. I’d have to speak to Dr. Gardener about that. Still, I played along with her game.

She pressed the stethoscope to my inner elbow and pumped the cuff up, then listened intently for a moment. It took her a few tries—it always did—but she smiled at me and removed the cuff. “One thirty-two over ninety. That’s not a great number. I will write this down, but you should consider talking to Dr. Gardener about ways to manage your blood pressure.” She stared down at my chart on the table in front of her while she talked.

“Thank you, I will.” My numbers had consistently been higher after surgery. Dr. Gardener wasn’t worried about it and neither was I. We both chalked it up to the pain being more difficult to manage. There were times when I wished I’d have just skipped the surgery, days where I felt the pain was worse now than before.

“Alright, anything else that might be stressing you? Change in job, relationship, diet, etcetera?” She looked up at me in a nosy way, and I shook my head.

“No other changes.” I didn’t see how Curt’s reappearance in my life would be affecting my blood pressure, at least not at this very minute, so I dismissed it. Besides, it wasn’t why I was here for this visit. My prescription of pain meds had run out and I needed another refill.

“Okay.” She placed the tablet in the front pocket of her smock and headed for the door. “Dr. Gardener will be here soon.”

I settled in for a long wait, figuring with the number of people in the waiting area, they must be swamped or understaffed, but the doctor came in only moments after the nurse left. She carried her own tablet and stared down at it as she entered and shut the door. “Hey, Serah, how’s it going?” Her eyes stayed fixed on the device until she was seated on her stool. She laid it down and turned to face me.

“I’m okay, Doc.”

“How is the pain management going? I know you were concerned about that not resolving yet.” She folded her hands in front of herself and waited. I knew she was worried about

me using too many painkillers, but with the level of pain I'd been in, I needed them.

"It's not getting better." I slouched, knowing I shouldn't, but my body was worn out from work, and not sleeping well, and just life in general.

"Says that your blood pressure is up too. That's a concern to me now." She glanced at the tablet. "Have you been doing the physical therapy like we discussed?"

"Yes, twice a week. All the stretches and exercise like I'm supposed to. The therapist says I'm tight, but with so much pain, I can't seem to relax. I can't even get in a comfortable position to sleep well. I wake up several times a night in pain."

Dr. Gardener frowned. "I don't like to hear that. It's possible that environmental stress is playing a part in this. The follow up imaging tests we did showed that everything is healing fine. You shouldn't still be in this much pain."

I squirmed on the table, feeling uncomfortable sitting there. "So, what? More tests or something?"

"No, I don't think we need new tests. I think we need to focus on restrengthening the muscles. I think a massage therapist along with the PT you're doing would help. I want you to start doing yoga too, really loosen up those muscles." She turned again and looked down at the tablet, this time giving a closer look to the information there. "You are on the highest dose of Percocet we can prescribe, but I've lowered the number of pills per month. When did you run out?" Her concern was evident in her furrowed brow.

"Last week. I've been in a lot of pain all week now, and I ate ibuprofen like candy."

Dr. Gardener stood and pulled a pair of gloves out of the box on the counter. I watched her as she put them on her hands and walked closer to me. "Mind if I have a look?" She reached for my collar, and I turned slightly on the table so she could see my back more easily. She pulled my shirt away from my skin in the back and touched the place where my incision scar

was. It had healed quickly like it should have, but she still checked it when I came in.

“It’s really the bones themselves, or maybe the muscles around them.” I winced as she gave my shoulder a squeeze.

“I’m sorry, Serah. I have to palpate the area to ensure we’re not developing any calcium deposits. It’s one of the things that could be causing the pain you’re feeling.” Her fingers prodded and pushed in on my neck and shoulders, and even my upper back. When she pulled away, her eyebrows were high, but her face told me she hadn’t found anything. “It seems normal.”

I sighed. “Why does it hurt so badly, then?” I adjusted my shirt and pulled my hair across my shoulder.

“Well, I think your muscles seem pretty tight.” She took off the gloves and tossed them in the bin. “I think you really need to keep up with the therapy, and get a massage once a week too. Definitely start some yoga or at least more stretching. The therapist should have more stretches to add to your routine.”

I knew I hadn’t done all the stretches on my own that I should have been and silently scolded myself for not being diligent enough. “And the pain meds?” I knew last time I was in here, she had all but told me she was planning to cut me off from them. “Ibuprofen does nothing.”

“I’m going to keep stepping you back.” She sat down and gave me a concerned look. “If you finished that prescription a week early, you’ve been taking too much. How long has that tremor been happening?”

My fingers shook as I raised my hand to brush my hair out of my face. I noticed that happening a few days ago, but I thought it had to do with the pain in my shoulders. When she saw it, however, she clicked her tongue.

“Uh, just a few days.”

“Since you ran out of your meds, or while you were on them?”

I looked down and folded my hands in my lap. “Not until after I ran out.” I knew what it meant. My body was going through withdrawal because I was becoming too used to having the powerful drug in my system. “I swear, it just started.” I knew the signs, and they worried me too. “But the pain really is still bad. It’s the only thing that helps.” I felt like I would cry if she said she couldn’t give me any more, and only because I just wanted to sleep at night.

“Right, well first of all, I’m switching you to a different pain medicine. It’s just as strong, but it will help get your body off the Percocet. Then we will start the weaning from there.” She touched her tablet, then paused and looked up at me. “You understand I’m worried about you, right?”

“Yes, I do. I’m concerned too. I just can’t live with this pain.”

“Alright, Serah. Well, this will be a two-week prescription and then we will have another appointment to set the next two-week period until we’re at a place I feel comfortable for you.”

I nodded appreciatively. “Thank you, Gypsy.” I didn’t often call her by her first name, but this moment called for it. As my best friend’s wife, she was wary to even treat me from the beginning, but ethics aside, she’d been nothing but the best doctor I’d ever seen.

“You’re welcome. The prescription will be called in later today. I’ll have the nurse send an email with some great places to do yoga and get massages.” She stood and patted my knee. “I’ll see you in two weeks.”

When she left the room, I felt relief wash over me. At least she hadn’t asked about my stress level too or I’d have blurted out everything about Curt. That would have made me seem unstable, but I felt like I needed someone to talk to, and Evan had been too busy to sit and talk. I slid off the table and collected my things, grateful for a doctor who really cared about me.



### Curt

I sat on the floor with Luke, driving trucks on the carpet. He pushed the digger truck I brought him this evening around on the activity rug we sat on, roads and buildings covering it. He loved it and instantly got out his entire assortment of trucks and machines. He could name every single one of them, which was shocking to me because I didn't know the difference between a skid loader and a backhoe.

I looked up across the room to where Serah stood with a hand towel in hand. I noticed the grimace on her face as she rubbed her neck. When I handed her the flowers I brought for her, she winced as she took them. I had the florist put them in a nice glass vase, but it was too heavy for her, so I ended up carrying it to the kitchen table for her.

"Everything okay?" I asked. She opened her eyes and looked in my direction and nodded, but I could tell everything was not okay. "Want me to help you?"

"No, you boys have fun. It's almost done, anyway." She turned over her shoulder to look at something in the kitchen and I saw her wince. It tugged at my heart to see her in so much pain, even after having her pain medicine.

"Alright, that's it, bud." I stood and held my hand out. "We have to finish dinner for Mommy because her back hurts."

Luke popped to his feet and dropped his car. “I help,” he announced cheerily.

“Great.” I took his hand and led him past Serah, who looked relieved. “We’ve got it. You go sit down.”

She mouthed the words, “Thank you,” and draped her towel over her shoulder. I took Luke into the kitchen where I gave him a stack of paper plates and napkins. “You know where to put these?” I asked him, but he shook his head no. “Okay, you put one in front of Mommy’s chair, then one in front of Daddy’s chair, and one in front of your chair. Think you can handle that?”

“Yes.” He nodded and hurried to the table and I checked the timer on the oven. Only two minutes until the homemade pizza was ready, so I grabbed a few cups and filled them with soda. By the time I got them carefully arranged on the table, the oven was chiming. Luke clapped his hands and cheered.

“Alright, buddy, get on your chair. I’ll cut the pizza.” I looked out into the living room. Serah had her eyes shut again, rubbing her neck. “Mommy, it’s time to eat.”

“Yeah, Mommy, come eat!”

I winked at Luke and pulled the pizza out of the oven. The pizza cutter was a mystery, but I found it in the knife drawer next to the refrigerator. Serah sat next to Luke, and I cut the pizza and carefully slid each slice onto the serving platter so the hot pan was not within reach of the table. Luke cheered again when I set the platter in the center of the table and took my seat. I realized after we were seated that we hadn’t washed our hands, but Serah never spoke up. That’s when I knew she was in real pain.

“Oh, buddy, you forgot to wash up.” I attempted to correct the error of my ways, but he had a piece of pizza in his hand aimed at his mouth too quickly.

“Ugh . . . okay, well it’s alright.” Serah grimaced again but forced a smile. “It will build his immune system.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.” I wanted to be the best father possible, but I was already starting to see how some of my

own bad habits might rub off on him if I wasn't careful. I used the pizza server to slide a slice of pizza onto my plate, then one onto Serah's.

"Thanks," she said, but her voice was extra quiet. I lost my appetite. I wanted to do something to help her not be in so much pain. Watching her struggle to pick up her pizza and eat it did things to me.

"Are you okay? I mean, really. Your hand is shaking, and it looks like it's difficult for you to eat." I took a bite of food, and even though it was delicious, my only thought was of her.

"It's this whole thing. I had to switch pain medicine because the doctor thinks I'm getting dependent on it. I swear it actually hurts really bad. I would never put Luke's future in jeopardy by abusing drugs." Her countenance fell, and I reached for her hand.

She pulled her hand away from mine before I had a chance to touch it, and I glanced at Luke who had wide eyes staring at us. Serah probably didn't want him seeing any physical form of affection between us yet, so I understood her reaction, but I wished I could have done more. I thought about what she said about the doctor's concerns as I took another bite of food. Her shaking hand worried me, though.

"They think you're getting addicted?" I was hesitant to ask it in front of Luke, but most things like this went over a kid's head. When she shied away from eye contact, I figured I had angered her, but she looked up at me with a solemn expression.

"I think I am."

I looked down at her untouched pizza and wondered how I could help. I didn't know if it was too painful to lift it to her mouth or if she'd lost her appetite too. She seemed discouraged by the confession, but that didn't seem to affect Luke. He hummed and talked cheerfully as he stuffed pizza in his mouth. I finished my slice of pizza but didn't feel like eating anything else, not while she was suffering.

When Luke finished the food on his plate, I cleaned his hands and helped him down. Serah still hadn't touched a bit of food on her plate. "Do you want me to get him ready for bed?"

"Uh, yeah. If you don't mind?" She started to stand up, and I held up a hand to halt her.

"Does he know where his pajamas are?"

"Yeah, he does." She sat back down. "Just skip the bath. I'll give him one in the morning since I don't work."

I followed him into his bedroom wondering why on a Monday morning she wouldn't be working, but I didn't ask. I wasn't keeping tabs on her, but I was concerned. If it was due to the pain, that brought up a whole host of worries I didn't know how to talk about with her.

Luke picked out a pair of pajamas with a robot on the front and got dressed by himself. He was pretty self-sufficient already for not quite five years old. It amazed me.

I read him a story and tucked him in, and he was out like a light. I made sure the monitor was turned on properly before leaving the room, but I left the small light on his dresser turned on in case he woke up.

When I entered the living room, Serah had the food put away and was seated on the couch. I'd have done it for her if she'd have waited for me. I didn't want her to have to wait for me to leave to go relax, so I kissed her on the forehead, but I remained standing.

"Look, before I go, is there anything else I can do?"

"Yeah, rub my shoulders?" she asked, eyes pleading with me.

"Of course, baby." I didn't hesitate. I knelt on the couch beside her, and she turned so I could reach her back. I rubbed her shoulders first, trying to avoid her spine which was where I thought probably hurt the worst, but she directed my hands closer to the incision scar. "Here?" I asked, pressing my thumb right on the vertebrae.

"Ugh, yes . . . that's it."

I noticed her muscles were very tense, almost as if she were carrying too much stress and not really from the surgery. But then, all of it would contribute to her body not healing well. I worked the muscles well until my hands were sore. I spent at least forty minutes rubbing her neck and shoulders, and when I was done, I leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

“Now that you’re relaxed a bit, you should go take your meds and lie down.” I stood, but she captured my hand and turned to face me.

“Stay?” she asked and brought my hand to her lips.

“I didn’t do that to put the moves on you, babe. If you’re in pain. Maybe you should just relax.” Hesitant to do anything that might make her pain worse, I tried to pull away gently.

“And if a good orgasm or two helps my body really relax?”

Serah rose and pulled me by the hand, leading me toward her bedroom. If that was what she wanted and she thought it would help, I was more than happy to try it. How could I resist her?

### Serah

I led him into my bedroom and shut the door. Having sex while Luke was in the next room was something I'd have to get used to, which meant I'd have to learn to be very quiet, but after how amazing and sweet Curt had been all evening with me, I wanted him. So despite my reservations about being tangled up in a relationship with him again, I initiated it. I kissed him hard, running my tongue over his upper lip and my hands through his hair. Curt seemed hesitant, and I had to coax him toward the bed. I knew it wasn't due to lack of desire because the hard bulge in his pants told me he wanted me too.

“Serah, I don't want to hurt you. You've been in so much pain.” He lingered a few inches away from me as I pulled my shirt off and tossed it.

“Look, last week when we did this, I slept better than I had in weeks. I think it helps me relax . . .” I was taking a calculated risk. I wanted to believe that he was as amazing as he seemed, and the only way to know was to wade out into the waters and prove he was. I reached for his belt buckle and loosened it, and he rested his hands on my bare shoulders. His thumbs caressed my skin as I opened the fly of his jeans and pulled his firm cock out. I knew a relationship based only on sex wouldn't work, but we had so much more going for us than just sex. So much history. And I wanted to feel him close

to me again, this time without the reservations I had the last few times. I was all in.

“Are you sure it won’t hurt you?” He still seemed reluctant, but when I dropped to my knees and took him into my mouth, he let out a soft moan of enjoyment and stroked my hair. “God . . .” His grunt of pleasure was music to my ears. I had no intention of making him finish like this. I just wanted him to understand that I really wanted him. I sucked and stroked until his firmness turned rock hard. Then I licked the bead of precum from his head and stood.

“I’m sure.” I wiped my mouth and pushed his pants down over his hips, and he let them fall to the ground, then kicked off his shoes and stepped out of them. “Now will you just have sex with me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He chuckled and pulled his shirt off.

I grinned and pulled my pants off, letting my panties drop to the floor with them. Curt spun me around and unhooked my bra, and I peeled it off as his teeth sank into my shoulder. I had no more than gotten the silky material free of my body when both of his hands reached around me and each of them cupped a breast.

“Your tits are so huge. I forgot how much I love them.” He squeezed and fondled them for a moment, then let one of his hands slip lower, pushing across my mound until he found my clit. “And this . . . your body just gets so wet.” His fingers dipped into my juices and swirled around in them. I leaned my head to the side and sighed as he continued to massage and fondle me.

Soft moans escaped my lips the more he touched me. I felt him pressing into my backside, and it aroused me. I pushed into him, letting the dribbles of precum from his body smear around, and it seemed to spur him on. His massaging intensified. I felt my legs growing weak in the knees. I raised one foot and rested it on the side rail of my bed, and his fingers eagerly took advantage of the space created. He sank two fingers into me, and I convulsed around them. I leaned forward, catching myself on the edge of the mattress, and he

bent with me, his arm still wrapped around my body with his hand stroking my pussy. I whimpered, biting my lip as the orgasm intensified then waned.

Curt grabbed my ass and squeezed it, then gently nudged me, so I crawled up onto the bed, the perfect height for him to stand behind me and penetrate me. I looked back over my shoulder when his hand finally retreated from its position on my mound, and he licked his fingers.

“Me now?” he asked, stroking himself. His eyes were hungry, like he wanted to do really naughty things to me, but we’d both expressed a clear shift in our relationship. His hunger, though, was real.

I nodded and reached back, pulling myself open. He ran his dick up and down my slit, smearing the moisture around. And when he pushed into me, I squeezed around him. I felt the way my body resisted him, as if he had to force himself past my strong muscles to penetrate me. He growled and grabbed both of my ass cheeks, pulling on them as he sank into me. His cock felt longer at this angle, like he hit me in deeper places than usual. I had to clench my jaw to keep the noises from escaping.

“Yes . . . wow.” I arched my head back and closed my eyes. Curt’s hands roamed my back. He pulled my hair slightly, then let it go. I’d have let him do it. I liked it rough, but we couldn’t go there—not if we wanted it to be our secret. Then he grabbed my hip bones and thrust into me harder.

“You like it? Does it feel good?”

“Ahh, yes.” I hissed, feeling my body tensing again, growing toward climax.

“God, I want to make you feel good.” I felt him shifting again, reaching around my body. His fingers touched my clit, and I was on fire. I felt his body molding around mine, his chest on my back, and he kissed my shoulder blade. I was undone the minute he started stroking me. My body snapped like a cheap violin string, reverberating waves of ecstasy as he drove into me from behind.



I had to reach for the pillow and bury my face in it. I screamed so loud it scared me. His fingers continued pressing and searching my soft folds. The spasms and convulsions did make my shoulders hurt, and the angle at which my head was pressing into the pillow was uncomfortable, but I knew the moment I lay down, I'd relax into a heap of afterglow and every muscle in my body would be jiggly.

"Oh, shit," I moaned, unable to think of any better word to articulate how incredible he made me feel. His thrusts, however, did not slow. He merely straightened and grabbed my hips again. I was his ragdoll, sliding on and off him as he pounded me into that mattress. His body released, flooding me with heat and sex, and I collapsed to the mattress. When he pulled out, the absence of his dick inside me made me ache for him to return, but we were both spent.

I reached for a tissue on my nightstand while he wrestled the blankets to turn down the bed. I cleaned up and crawled under the covers beside him and tangled myself around him. I was right. The afterglow was amazing, and every ounce of tension left my body as I lay in his arms.

"How do you feel?" he asked, pushing the hair out of my face.

"I feel incredible." I craned my neck upward, happy to feel that my pain was only minimal. I could likely fall asleep without the drug tonight, and it was all thanks to him.

"Good." He sighed contentedly and relaxed more. I felt close to him, like I hadn't in years. I let my thoughts wander a bit, to a time when we were so happy and in love. It felt tangible now. I imagined that if he were serious about putting us first, I could be okay with some work trips. I didn't know if it was possible for him to cut back on how much he traveled, but my heart was already too attached to him now to pretend I could resist him.

I hadn't yet said that I loved him again. I didn't know if I should. But something about this moment made me want to. I did love him. Every fiber of my being did, even when I was scared or uncertain about us. There were so many questions I

still had, but I knew if we were both committed, we could make it work. I opened my mouth and prepared myself to blurt it out—that I loved him, that I wanted him forever now—but he spoke first.

“Gosh, Luke is such a smart kid. Did you know he could name every single truck he has? I couldn’t believe he knew what a boom lift is? And a cold planer. I had no clue that name even existed.” He sighed and grinned. “I want to enroll him in literally the best private school. I know a few in Evansville, but I think maybe the ones in Utica might be better. It’s a drive, but—”

“Curt?” I cut him off. His excitement and amazement were admirable, but Luke was my son.

“Yeah?” Curt propped himself back up on his elbow and looked down at me. He had a stupid grin on his face, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t like what I had to say.

“Luke has a preschool right now. And I sort of want him to attend a regular public school. It’s good for him to be around kids like himself. In this area, and with my career, that means military kids.”

After I voiced my concern, he seemed stilted. He closed his mouth, the grin now replaced with a furrowed brow. His eyes roamed my face, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob.

“You can’t be serious. He’s literally the smartest kid in the world, Serah. He needs that to be nurtured. He could be the next Einstein or something. Like, he’s really intelligent.”

“Yeah, I know, and Einstein was actually kicked out of school. He had behavioral problems, and I believe it was because his parents pushed him too hard. You understand the pressure put on kids these days? I just want Luke to have a good childhood.” Never mind that I had my own poor experience in childhood that made me believe even more strongly in allowing children to grow and learn at their own pace and not be forced to grow up. And Curt knew that.

“Yeah, but he’s my son.”

I bit back my sharp reply, but I wanted to remind him that he hadn't been a part of any decision making for Luke since the moment he was conceived. I took a deep breath and smoothed the sheet between us before I responded with, "Yes, and we will talk about big decisions like this when the time comes. For now, he's in a very good preschool program at the child care center."

Curt seemed perturbed with my response, but he didn't push the issue. All the relaxation from after-sex high had vanished. I wasn't in a lot of pain, but I felt my shoulders tensing unconsciously and had to focus on letting that tension go. Curt had no right to come in and tell me how to raise Luke. Not yet, anyway. Not until he committed to me in a way that made me trust his ability to watch out for Luke the way I would.

"Okay, well I need to tell you something." His tone was colder, though I could tell he was trying to remain patient with me. He always got this edge about him when I hurt his feelings, and I hated that I had, but I let him be himself without trying to change him.

"Yeah? What's that?" I pushed my hand across the mattress until I was touching his chest, and he clasped his hand around it.

"I have a work trip." He paused for long enough for me to feel the kick in my gut. "It's only two weeks, and only to Chicago, but I have to do it. It could mean big things for my career."

"Yeah, okay." I retracted my hand, not able to maintain my calm demeanor anymore. Disappointment flooded every cell in my body. I knew it shouldn't have. I knew I should be supportive of him and champion his career, but this was exactly what I was afraid of. I let my guard down too soon. I jumped into the water when the water wasn't fine, and my heart wanted to swim—not sink.

"Are you upset?" he asked as I rolled out of bed.

"Yeah, I'm okay." I sorted through the clothing and found my panties and put them on, then shuffled over to my dresser

and pulled out a nightgown.

“You don’t seem okay.”

With the nightgown in hand, I gestured at the bathroom door. “I just need to pee.” I was fighting back tears, but I wouldn’t let him see me cry. “Go ahead and get dressed. I don’t think tonight is a good night to stay over. I have a therapy appointment early, and I have to have Luke bathed and over at Evan’s house by eight.”

I locked myself in the bathroom and let the tears fall. I felt like a failure of a person for not putting Curt first and loving him, but his announcement just triggered so many fears for my future. Just when I was about to tell him I still really loved him and I wanted to see if we could work on things, he opened his mouth to show his true colors. I could handle the overly zealous approach to parenting. We’d work through that. I just couldn’t handle him being gone.

When I was dressed and had washed my face, I returned to the bedroom to see him sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed and ready to leave.

I didn’t want to start an argument. That was what happened when I told him I didn’t want him to take this job years ago. He was a free man. He could make his own choices. But that didn’t mean I had to let my heart be trashed in the process. I had to relegate the emotion I was feeling toward him to a dark corner of my mind where it wouldn’t hurt me so much when he left. And I needed to stop letting that part of my heart feel anything ever again.

“I hope you have a great time on your trip. I hope it gives you clarity about your job and your responsibility as a parent.” I turned the bed down again and straightened the sheet.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked, standing and hovering next to me.

I turned and pecked him on the cheek. “Please lock up when you leave. And shut the lights off out there. It will save me some money on the electric bill.” I crawled into bed and lay down, and Curt slunk toward the door.

“I love you, Serah.”

His words lingered in the air long after he was gone, and I lay there crying. I was stupid to think he'd ever just want to be here with us. It really was time to let that part of my heart finally die.

**Curt**

**S**ecurity was a nightmare. I sat down and put my shoes back on after having my entire bag searched and X-rayed twice. They must have been on a witch hunt. I'd never seen the airport that crazy. When I finally got my phone and wallet back from the bin I'd placed them in, I had missed a call from Victor and two texts from Serah. We'd been chatting as I rode to the airport in the backseat of an Uber. I checked the voicemail first. Victor wanted me to call him. Then I looked at the messages.

*SERAH 9:18 AM: So you're home on the 21<sup>st</sup>?*

*Serah 9:21 AM: I guess you should plan on coming by the next day to see Luke. He's already asking when Daddy can come play again.*

I STILL FELT frustrated by her reluctance to let me parent Luke. Yes, it had only been a few weeks since I came back into her life, but I had really strong convictions about how I wanted my children raised. Still, I respected her enough to back off. I didn't want to argue about things. Not when we just reunited.

*CURT 9:38 AM: Sorry, security was a pain. Yes, let's plan on getting together on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. How about I take us to dinner or something?*

I ADDED a few hearts to the end to show her I was thinking about her and not just myself. Then I shoved my phone in my pocket and collected my carry-on bags and headed off toward my gate. I didn't understand how a private school would be any different from a public school as far as Luke being able to be a kid, but I knew Serah had been forced to grow up very quickly as a child. Her older sister had so many struggles, and it fell on Serah's lap to be the model child in order to appease her parents' frustrations with life in general. That put pressure on her to be the best, the smartest, and the overachiever. It set her up for everything she was today, but I could see how it made her very protective of Luke. I had to pick my battles carefully, and early in our reunion wasn't the best time to battle this one out. So I let it go, even though I wanted to speak my mind. She was more important.

I felt my phone buzz, but I wanted to get to my gate before I responded. When I found the gate, there were only a few seats left. I wasn't running late. Everyone else was just early like me. And the gate next to ours was overfull too, packing the place with anxious travelers. I found a seat next to the window and sat down, placing my carry-on and laptop between my feet. I pulled out my phone and read Serah's response.

*SERAH 9:47 AM: I think my place is better. Luke doesn't do well at restaurants yet.*

*Curt 9:59 AM: Fine. Your place it is. I'm looking forward to it.*

*Serah 10:00 AM: And no gifts this time, please. I don't want him to think he gets a present every time you come over. His birthday is coming up before too long. You can spoil him then.*

SHE SENT A SMILEY FACE EMOJI, probably to cover up the fact that she was upset by me bringing that truck to him last week. She did that—used emojis to cover her real emotions. It probably wore off on me because I sent her a heart in response. Then after realizing she'd probably think that was just my frustration showing, I sent another text.

*CURT 10:02 AM: I am sorry if I upset you by saying Luke should go to a private school. I wasn't trying to step on your toes.*

I HIT *SEND* AND WAITED, but no response came. I stared out over the crowd. A woman sat with a young girl, probably a few years older than Luke. The man to her right read a newspaper and swatted at the girl when she tried to speak to him. I didn't want to be that sort of parent, who was annoyed by their child and irritated by their actions. I wanted to be the loving parent who always took time for their kids. The kind who doted on them and gave them the best of everything. My mother died when I was a kid. I never really got to know how to be a nurturer like that because my father wasn't exactly the most nurturing type of person. This was all new to me, so I knew I'd have to follow Serah's lead. I just hoped that one day, she'd understand that I wanted to have some sort of say in his life.

My phone rang, and I looked down at it to see it was my boss. "Hey, Victor," I answered, forcing a lighthearted tone to my voice despite being discouraged that Serah hadn't responded to me.

"Curt, I have a car ready to get you as soon as you touch down at O'Hare."

"Ah, great. I have a twenty-minute stop at Washington-Dulles, but my flight into Chicago lands around one forty-five Eastern time. I think that's only just before one Central."



Traveling across time zones had been tricky to begin with, but I was used to it now.

“Sure, sure. I’ll have them waiting. Remember, we are headed right into a meeting with the board of Premier Health Systems, so be on your game. And after that, I’ll take you to a late lunch at this amazing Korean place. You’ll love it.” Victor cleared his throat and said something to someone in the room with him before returning to the call. “I imagine if you enjoy it as much as I do, you’ll end up getting takeout at least once a week from the place once you get settled here.”

He was talking pretty confidently about my getting the promotion, which still unnerved me. Serah and Luke meant a lot to me, and I didn’t know if I wanted to stir the pot like that or not.

“Alright, well I’ll see you soon, then.” My phone vibrated, and I looked at it to see a notification that Serah had replied.

“Yep! Can’t wait.”

Victor hung up and the call ended, and I swiped right to check the notification.

*SERAH 10:07 AM: We’ll talk about it when you get back. Have a good trip.*

HER WORDS WERE LESS than encouraging. I scowled and locked the phone. I knew if I responded, I’d just end up saying things I would regret later. I had to temper myself and be patient, and that wasn’t an easy thing for me to do. Serah was worth it, though, and I had to remind myself of that.

“Heading to DC?” A chipper voice broke my concentration, and I looked to my right to see probably one of the most stunning blondes I’d ever seen in my life. Her high cheekbones and perfectly contoured makeup drew me in right away. Full, pouty lips curved up into a smile, and the blonde ringlets that stretched across her chest drew my eyes

downward to her cleavage—a lot of it. I had to pry my eyes away before my dick stirred.

“Uh, actually, no. I’m catching a connection to Chicago.” I cleared my throat and scanned the crowd, as if someone would catch me feeling attracted to this woman.

“Ah, such a shame. A handsome man like you with no ring on his finger would be a great sightseeing partner.” She grinned and thrust out her hand. “I’m Katie. I’m headed to DC on some business, and this is my connection from Utica.” I grasped her hand and shook it. She let our hands linger together for a moment.

“Well, safe travels, Katie.” It felt wrong shaking her hand—or talking to her, for that matter. Not that I shouldn’t speak with whomever I pleased, but that my body was reacting to her as if Serah didn’t exist. “My name is Curt.”

“Ah, Curt is my brother’s name.” She squealed like a child, and I realized she was probably years younger than me. Probably in that adventurous stage where life was just a blank canvas waiting to be painted. “So, what’s your story? Seeing anyone?” She angled to face me but didn’t give me a chance to respond before she continued. “I’m single. Looking for some fun. And I think you look fun.” Her eyes flicked around the room. “Ever joined the mile-high club?”

I chuckled. No, I hadn’t, but I wasn’t about to tell her that. She pushed a few buttons, but not all of them. Not the way Serah did. “Look, Katie, I’m really flattered that you find me attractive, but I’m seeing someone very special to me. And I have a four-year-old son.”

“What they don’t know won’t hurt them.” Her fingers walked up my thigh until I brushed them away with a swipe of my hand.

“I appreciate that sentiment, and two months ago, I’d have taken you up on that offer, but I’m in love.” More in love than I’d ever been. And I knew the best way to ruin everything was to do something so colossally stupid as to cheat on Serah. “But I really hope you find the adventure you’re looking for.”

Katie turned and put some earbuds into her ears, and I responded to Serah with a few hearts and an emoji that showed two hands making a heart. I hoped that whatever this disconnect between us was, we could iron it out soon. She was all I could think about, and I liked it that way. I just wished they were all loving thoughts, not troublesome. I had tried to push away my trust issues with her hiding Luke from me. I just wanted her to push away her trust issues to let me be a part of his life now.

### Serah

**T**he way the physical therapist took my arm and raised it straight over my head hurt like hell. I screeched in pain and winced, but he didn't back down. He was far too strong for me to resist him, and I knew I needed to be doing these exercises, but they hurt and I wanted to cry.

“Alright, deep breaths, Serah.” He pressed his hand into my side and stretched my arm upward. “That’s it. Just like that. Deep breath in, cleansing breath out. Imagine your arm as a line that extends straight up into the ceiling, past the roof and into the sky.”

His metaphors drove me insane. I had to continuously remind myself that he was only trying to help because between the emotional irritation and the physical pain, I wanted to snap at him. That wasn't who I was, but it's what pain wanted me to be.

“Gosh, can we take a break?” I asked, adding a slight moan on the end of the question. He nodded.

“Yeah, did you ask the doctor about this?” He slowly lowered my arm and folded it across my stomach. Then he stood at my side, massaging my shoulder. Now his hands felt like magic, soothing away the pain he'd induced.

“Yes, I did. She's worried about my pain management. I am too, sort of. I know I have to stop taking the pain pills, but

I've been in so much pain it's hard to sleep sometimes." On the new prescription, I hadn't had a decent night's sleep, but I knew there was no going back to the old pills.

"And have you been doing your stretches?" He really worked a spot along the top of my shoulder and into my collarbone that made me melt into him.

"God, that's the spot. It hurts so bad." I gritted my teeth as he worked on a kink in my neck. "Yes. I've been trying to remember, but I'm so busy I sometimes forget." Busy was an understatement. Between work and handling Luke, his new zeal for Curt, and that whole topic, I hadn't been practicing self-care very well.

"Is there anything that has really helped with the pain management?" His fingers worked up and down my back, searching out the tender spots and zeroing in on them as I twitched and jerked.

"I have. My boyfriend—" I stopped myself for a moment, but it was too late to take that back. I didn't know what he was to me right now. "Uh, he rubbed my back the other night for like almost an hour, and I felt really relaxed after that." I left out the part about the sex. My physical therapist didn't need to know all that.

"Yeah? Well I think maybe you need to get massages more often, then." He patted my back and walked around in front of me. "I think what's happening is that your vertebrae are still very sensitive from the surgery. Your muscles are tight from post-surgery stress, and even your daily stressors. That makes your muscles really tighten up a lot. It is putting too much strain on the vertebrae itself, thus making it feel crushed. I think the more you lower your stress and relax, the less you'll need those pain meds."

"I'm not really under that much stress." I felt fine. Yes, Curt was an added element to my life, but usually when I was under stress, I had no appetite or I was distracted at work. My life wasn't any more stressful than any other person's.

"What else has Dr. Gardener suggested?" He sat down across from me and stared at me intently.

“Yoga, massage, that sort of thing.” I reached up and rubbed my neck, now tender as if it had been bruised.

“Yes, okay. Well, if you’re doing all that and it’s still too painful, I recommend more imaging tests. But first, you have to take the non-surgical stuff seriously. Keep doing your stretches and strengthening exercises. Get massages at least three times a week. Start yoga, maybe fifteen minutes a day. That should set you up for success.”

The rest of the appointment was just as painful as the first half, and I left that place wanting to never return. Things ran late, so by the time I got home to Luke, Evan was ready to pull his hair out. He looked frustrated and tired when I walked through the door.

“Was he a nightmare?” I asked, glancing at his open bedroom door. I was in too much pain to really deal with him, but I loved him more than anything. I also cared about Evan, and I was grateful that he’d stepped up to help me with child care when the center was closed.

“Yeah, he was a bit rambunctious. Tried to convince me that you let him jump on the couch.” Evan chuckled. “Are you okay?”

“I’m in so much pain.” My voice was a whimper, but I didn’t mind showing my weakness in front of Evan. He and I had been best friends for years.

“Gosh, I’m sorry. You should just go lie down. I can get Luke down for bed if you want.” Evan was so sweet, just like Curt. Only I knew nothing would ever develop between me and Evan. We had always only been friends.

“That would be so amazing, but you have your own little guy to get home to.” Evan’s baby was only eight months old now. Gypsy was probably waiting on him. It was late.

“No it’s okay. Gypsy is visiting her dad tonight. I’ll handle it. I’ll just lock up when he’s sleeping. Go lie down.”

I almost started to cry. “I don’t know what it is I did to deserve a best friend like you, but thank you.” I gave him a hug before dropping my things on the table. I also looked in on

Luke and I kissed him goodnight, then I made my way to my bedroom. I laid my phone on the nightstand and changed into pajamas. It was a feat considering how sore my neck was, but I managed. Then I lay down and curled up in a ball.

My phone buzzed. I could see the screen lit up, but I didn't reach for it. I knew doing so would only make the stabbing pain worse. I had to relax a few minutes before I moved again, so when I did, I reached for the pills on my nightstand and the phone. I had missed a call from Curt. I sighed, knowing he would be upset that I hadn't answered, but I just couldn't emotionally deal with anything when I felt like this physically. I took a pill. I was tempted to take two, but the idea of not having them the rest of the month scared me.

I stared at the bottle for a long few minutes with the lid off. If I took another one, I'd sleep so well. But if I took another one, that was one day I'd have to go without. I didn't think I could do that. Slowly, I screwed the lid on and let the tears well up. I wasn't addicted. I was in pain. Or was I? I set my phone and the pill bottle down and lay there looking at it until my eyes were so heavy I couldn't keep them open any longer.

I didn't want to hurt anymore. Not my shoulder or my neck, and definitely not my heart.

**Curt**

I savored the delicious Korean barbeque, letting the flavors mix together on my tongue. Victor was right. This was the best Korean food I'd ever had, and it was within walking distance of the office. I'd spent the day being shown around after our meeting with Optimum Health this afternoon. I still had several visits this week to attend before my time in the office next week, but if this was how a normal workday in Chicago would go, I was almost sold on the promotion. I still had interviews to walk through, but it made me want the job more than ever.

"You're absolutely right. This is heaven in my mouth," I mumbled, still chewing my last bite. Victor nodded and sipped his Cheongju. The tart Korean wine was deliciously paired with the bulgogi, and I'd had more than my share of it.

"I'm glad you like it. There are so many more perks where this came from. Imagine having a house that overlooks the lake, being able to entertain the big wigs, and that salary. Wow." He lifted his glass into the air and winked at me. "You'll love it."

I didn't disagree. I'd love everything about this if I knew Serah would join me. It was the one thing that kept me from going all in with the idea of moving and starting a life here in Chicago. I had a lot to talk to her about.



“Thank you for taking the time these past few days to show me around. It has made the trip so much nicer than most. Usually, I’m out on the road alone, feeling untethered.”

“Curt, I’m telling you. When I got off the road and into a day job again, it made all the difference. I met the woman of my dreams and settled down. I have two kids now, and we couldn’t be happier. I couldn’t have imagined doing this while still traveling. The on-the-road-rep job is for young, single men who have time to kill and oats to sow, if you know what I mean.”

I knew what he meant, and even though I had never been one of those wild-oat-sowers, I had my fill of adventure. The women I’d been with were very few, and I’d only attempted it when I felt like their lifestyle matched mine. I just never got over Serah, and no one could ever stand up to her beauty and intelligence no matter how amazing they were.

“Got something on your mind?” Victor asked, setting his glass down.

“Nah, just thinking about how I’d manage to reorder my entire life.” It was a huge feat making a move anyway, but a move hundreds of miles away was a different sort of beast. And trying to do that while dating someone who was pretty set in their job would be nearly impossible. I didn’t relish the idea of making her angry and ruining any chance I had with her, but the job was too perfect to pass on.

“Well, make your decision quickly. Corporate will want to have an answer next week. They’ll take you to dinner and interview you until you feel like you’re coming unhinged. Then they will bait you with fancy offers, and if you resist, they’ll cut you loose quick. You’ll still have a job, but your chance of moving up here will be over.”

I wanted to call Maggie and ask her advice. Not that Dad wouldn’t give good advice, but he wouldn’t understand the complication with Serah. He’d just make the leap with the new career and let the pieces fall where they may. Maggie would give me the best path forward, something I should probably know on my own, but I didn’t trust my own intuition anymore,

not after leaving Serah when she needed me most and not even knowing it.

“Thanks again for dinner,” I told Victor as we finished up. He headed out first after paying the bill, but I lingered to finish my drink first. My hotel was just across the street, so I didn’t have very far to go. The Korean wine wasn’t as strong as what I was used to, but I felt a slight buzz. I also felt a strong need to discuss things with Serah, so I trudged back to my hotel room, ready to raid the minibar if necessary to keep the buzz going. It might be the only way I had the guts to bring up the job with her.

I shut myself into my room and dropped onto the bed, phone in hand. Serah’s phone rang through to my ear, and I glanced at the time. It was already nine my time, which made it ten her time. I didn’t realize it was so late until just now, and I almost hung up because I assumed she’d be in bed sleeping. But at the last minute, I heard the line click through and her voice.

“Hey, Curt. Sorry, I was in the shower.”

I pictured her wrapped in a towel, hair dripping onto her creamy skin, and it made my body tingle with excitement. It had been a few days and I missed her. “Hey, beautiful. I miss you.” The alcohol was talking now, but I still really wanted to bring up the topic of the job and whether she’d be up for moving to Chicago.

“You sound a little saucy.” She chuckled. “Had a good day?”

“Uh, you could say that.” I felt a little saucy just hearing her voice. It made me want to touch myself. “Have some time to talk, or are you too tired?”

“Oh, I could squeeze out a bit of time.” The last conversation we’d had in person hadn’t gone the way I intended. I knew I’d upset her then, and I wanted to avoid any mention of that topic. She sounded happy to hear my voice, so I went with it.

“How was your day?” I reclined on the bed, kicking my shoes off and staring up at the ceiling.

“Oh it was alright. I’ve been in more pain than normal, but I’m managing. Work was a bit stressful today. It’s still cold and flu season for a few more weeks.”

“Yeah, I bet that’s tough.” I sympathized with her. “You must be exhausted.”

“I’m tired, yes. How was your day?”

I thought about telling her right then and there, but we were on a roll, and rather than ruining the mood with a serious talk, I decided to be a bit playful. “Well, it’s been okay, but it’s better now that you’re here. And I like that you’ve just gotten out of a shower. I imagine you’re sitting around wrapped in a towel?” I added a sultry tone to my voice, which she picked up on.

“Uh, yeah . . . I am just wearing a towel.”

“Is Luke sleeping?”

“Curt . . .” I sensed hesitation in her voice.

“Hey, it’s okay. I just thought maybe you’d want to be a little bad with me.” There was a long silence on her end of the line. I felt my dick swelling already, but I’d shut it down if she wasn’t interested.

“Yes, Luke is sleeping, but really, I’m not in the mood tonight.” Her reluctance won out, and I knew if it wasn’t the time for being playful, it probably wasn’t the time for talking about a serious topic either. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no. That’s okay, baby. You don’t have to be sorry. Let’s just talk tonight.” I hadn’t ever had phone sex with her before—or with anyone else, for that matter—but if tonight wasn’t the night, then that was okay.

“I appreciate you considering my feelings.” She sighed. “Luke got in trouble in class today, so I’m a little frustrated by that.”

I held my tongue. I didn’t want to give her any unsolicited advice and stir the pot where Luke was concerned. I’d tell her

what I thought if she asked me, but not before. “I’m sorry to hear that. Luke’s a good kid, Serah. You’re a great mom.”

“Thanks, Curt. That actually means a lot to me. Your opinion about that means more to me than anyone else on this planet.” She yawned, and I felt bad for keeping her awake.

“Look, you’re tired. You should lie down and rest. We can talk later on. I have a few full days, but maybe we can catch up on Thursday night?”

“Sure, but not too late. I have PT early Friday morning.” She yawned again and made a squeaking sound, which I thought was cute.

“Good night, beautiful.”

“Night, bud.”

I hung up and had the overwhelming urge to touch myself still, but I resisted. I’d wait for her for a few more days before I self-pleasured. But God, did I want to. Instead, I chose to strip down to my boxers and climb into bed. Tomorrow morning would come early enough, and I wanted to be fresh. If they really offered me the job, the next few connections I made might be crucial. If I didn’t get the job, the bonuses from the connections I made this week might just make it possible to find something more sustainable with a family.

The thought of having a family put a smile on my face as I fell asleep. I wanted that so much now.

### Serah

I had just sunk into the hot bath when my phone rang. I knew Curt would be calling. I planned a time to soak and talk to him, and it worked out perfectly. I answered the call and turned on speaker phone, then set the phone on the stand next to the tub and said hello.

“Hey, Curt.”

“Serah, baby, I miss you so much. How you feeling today?”

“I’m good. Oh, sorry. I have you on speaker phone, if that’s okay. I’m soaking in a hot bath.” I pulled the bubbles up around my body to cover myself. I always enjoyed baths, but I rarely got a chance to have them anymore. I probably wouldn’t until Luke was old enough to keep himself entertained without getting into mischief while I soaked.

“Yeah, that’s okay.” I heard how his voice turned sultry instantly. It made me smile thinking how he was probably turned on by the idea that I was naked in a bath right now while he was talking to me. “How are you soaking in a bath? Where’s Luke?” I also loved that his first instinct was to think of our son and how he might be faring while I practiced self-care.

“He’s staying the night with Gypsy and Evan. My therapy is so early. I just didn’t want to mess with it in the morning,

and Evan loves hanging out with him.” I bit my lip, nervous for his reaction. Evan had sort of been a stand-in father to Luke for the past several years. I knew he needed a male role model, and my best friend seemed the obvious choice. I just hoped it didn’t make Curt jealous.

“Yeah, that’s really nice of them.” I heard the tinge of disappointment in his voice and I hated it. I felt bad, but at the same time, I felt justified. Luke needed men in his life, and Curt hadn’t been around. I wasn’t going to make Evan distance himself now that Curt was back.

“Yes, well that means we are alone now. So I can talk as long as you want.” I hoped it was some sort of consolation to him, as the other night, I was too tired to sit and talk. I knew he’d wanted to be playful with me then, but I had turned him down, and it wasn’t just because I was tired. I felt conflicted doing that with him—phone sex—when I felt so distant. I didn’t want to build a relationship with him if he was going to keep up his heavy traveling schedule. But I was also fighting strong feelings for him too, which made my head spin sometimes. I wanted him, then I didn’t. Then I needed him, then hated him. It was hard to keep up with.

“I love talking with you.” Curt was acting sweet again, which was major green-flag energy. I wanted him to be like this, caring, sweet, focused on me, not on sex. But I also felt like it was the dangerous slippery slope I’d fall down into heartbreak. And that kept me guarded for the moment.

“I like talking to you too.” I sighed and laid my head back and closed my eyes.

“So, how is your back today?”

His question was an innocent one. I liked that he cared. “I’m okay. It’s been a rough few weeks. The new pain medicine doesn’t help like the old one. I ended up taking two of them last night because it was very painful.”

“Gosh, I’m really worried about you, Serah. It’s not safe to take too much. Your body already got accustomed to the other one. You can’t do that again.”

The weight of disappointing him made me draw inward, but I had no reason to feel ashamed. I really was in pain, and if I needed the drugs, I needed them. “Thank you for being concerned about me.”

“I am worried about you. Listen, what helps you relax? What helps the pain lessen other than drugs?”

“Well, I know massage does, but it’s not covered on my healthcare plan. When you rub my back, or when the therapist rubs my back, it really helps.” God, what I wouldn’t give for a good back rub today.

“Gosh, I’m sorry I can’t stop by and rub your back. Do you think anything else would help? Obviously, you are having a bath, but what about a glass of wine?”

“Got it.”

“Maybe your stretches?”

“Did them.”

“Well, the only thing left is to have a great orgasm, then.” He chuckled, and it made my body start to tingle. My groin burned, aching for him to say something really naughty to me the way he used to. Why was I like this?”

“Yeah?” I swallowed hard, trying to fight the urge to talk dirty to him. We were alone, and we were adults. We could do as we pleased, but my heart just got more and more attached every single time we did.

“Yeah, well I was joking, but if you want, I can help you.” The way he took on a serious tone with me had my nipples hardening beneath the thin layer of bubbles. He had a huge *Danger* sign stamped on his forehead, but I wanted him.

“Uh . . .” I didn’t know how to respond.

“Does my bad little vixen need to be punished tonight?”

I gritted my teeth. He knew just what to say to push my buttons. Without even thinking, my fingers slid between my legs and touched. My body was soft and supple there, but the thickness of my arousal between my lips was distinctly different from the bath water. I wanted him.

“Has she been a very bad girl?”

I hesitated, but the ache inside me was growing. “Mmmhmm,” I moaned, now fully massaging my own clit. “So bad.”

When he spoke again, he lit me on fire. “I think you should find a shampoo bottle to put inside your pussy and make it really full. Stretch it out a little, make sure it fits nice and deep inside you.”

I felt my cheeks burn at the absurdity of using a bottle as a sex toy, but he had me looking around my bathroom. Instead, I chose to push my own fingers into my body and man, did it do the trick. “Curt, I need you.”

“Oh, yes, I know.” I heard his zipper and knew he was going to touch himself too. The thought of that made the hair on my arms stand up. “And you’re going to get me. Now touch yourself really good for me. I can’t be there, but if I could I’d trace a line down your side, across your mound, and push my fingers into you so deep I could feel your muscles grip my fist.”

I groaned, the water sloshing around me as I played. I had one hand massaging my clit while the other gently thrust a few fingers into my opening. “And what else would you do to me?” The temptation had been too great, my need too desperate. I knew I was playing with fire, but my body wanted something my heart scolded it for.

“I would bury my face between those thick thighs and suck every bit of your moisture right up, then lick your clit until there was more to enjoy.” Rustling in the background on his end sounded like he was stroking. It was hot. I massaged myself faster.

“Say it . . . say the thing,” I begged him, knowing my body was close already.

“You’re a bad girl, Serah. You need me to spank you?” It was all I needed to hear, but the sound of his hand smacking his own flesh put me over the edge. For a split second, I really wished I’d found a shampoo bottle to masturbate with, but my



fingers had to do at this point. My body clenched and convulsed. I sank deeper in the water and used a foot on the end of the tub to push myself back up.

Guttural moans and grunts escaped and he said, “Oh, come on now, you can be louder than that.”

I let loose, my body now aflame with my orgasm. I swore the neighbors could hear my playing in the bath. The water sloshed and my body trembled, and when I thought I was done, he kept pushing my buttons. “You want me to do really bad things to you, Serah? Maybe shove my fist up inside you and twist it around a bit, make you really feel me?”

I panted and whimpered. “Yes . . . God . . .”

“Want me to shove my dick in your ass and make you beg for climax?”

I hissed, just thinking about him inside me like that. “Yes . . .” I panted again, still massaging my clit. I wanted to go again. My body needed it.

“You want me to dig my nails into your sides while I get you from behind and smack that curvy butt of yours until you have a bright red handprint?”

That did it to me. I couldn’t stop the next orgasm from coming. I had three fingers buried and I still wanted more. Curt was so good at this because we always talked dirty to each other. It heightened every one of my senses to hear his voice saying such crude things to me. I loved it. I wanted more.

I heard his grunts too as he finished, my orgasm still gripping me tightly. And when I calmed down, my tender clit still begged to be touched, but I pulled my hand away. I knew I would sleep well tonight, and my shoulders already felt looser. He would never know just how much that helped me relax.

“Wow, that was incredible,” I said, breathing heavily. “Thank you.”

“You’re so welcome, baby. Now you need to dry off and ride the afterglow into sleep. Alright?”

I sighed. “Yeah, okay.” He really cared about me. I could tell it in his voice. But here I was leading him on, or at least my brain told me I was leading him on. My body screamed for more of what he did to it every single day. But it didn’t matter how incredible the sex was. He wasn’t what I needed in my life.

“Good girl. Now, go sleep. I’ll call you in the morning. Good night.” Curt hung up, and I sat there for a few more minutes realizing the water was getting cold. When he got home, we had to have a serious talk. This hooking up had to stop. I had to cut him off. I was already in too deep, and now my heart was going to suffer, but I knew it was the only way to keep myself from totally breaking down.

## Curt

**I**t was the nicest day of the year so far. Seventy degrees and Sunny today, though as the sun set, the temperature dropped. I stood outside my garage at the grill, flipping burgers as the gang arrived. I loved hosting little parties like this, though my grill was typically around on the back deck. I just hadn't moved it out there yet this year. It was the first party barbeque of the year, and I was looking forward to announcing my relationship with Serah to everyone.

Maggie and Derek had been the first people to arrive, and Derek manned the food tables in the garage as others arrived while Maggie finished her dessert in the kitchen. Evan and his wife arrived shortly after—invited by Serah because Evan was her best friend and she wanted us to get along. When Serah arrived, Derek took over cooking the meat and I helped her with Luke. He came along since her only babysitter was Evan, and he was attending.

“Hey, little man.” I tousled his hair and took his coat off. “Came to Daddy’s house to play?” I had managed to childproof almost everything. I hadn’t put child safety locks on the drawers in the kitchen because the store was out, but I did have a child safety gate installed so he couldn’t get in the kitchen.

“Look, I bring my truck!” He held it up proudly and grinned. “You drive it with me?”

“In a bit, okay, bud?” I guided him to the stack of books near the toybox in my front room. I managed to find a bunch of toys from my childhood during my last visit home, and I bought a few new ones for the fun of it. Serah eyed me, but she offered a kiss.

“Welcome home,” she whispered. Luke was so enamored with the toys he didn’t pay attention to Serah’s greeting.

“I missed you.” I grabbed her hips and leaned in for a more passionate kiss, but she resisted, though she still smiled.

“Not in front of Luke, okay?”

I let her go, but I didn’t understand why she was still reluctant. I had made it abundantly clear how I felt. Still, I respected her enough to give her the space she wanted. “He’ll be fine for a second. Let’s take your pie into the garage.” I took the pie from her hands as she slipped out of her jacket. “You can hang that on the coat tree.”

I watched as she nervously glanced at Luke then at me. “I don’t like to leave him.”

“The door is open here, and he can’t get into the kitchen. He has no other place to go.” I took a step toward the garage, and she still hesitated. “Hey, Luke. See this door?”

He looked up and nodded. “Yes.”

“If you need Mommy and Daddy, we’re out here, okay?”

He nodded again but turned back to the toy box distractedly. Serah sighed and followed me into the garage. I set her pie on the table with desserts, and she joined me as I greeted some new arrivals, a few work colleagues and a few more friends from college.

“Guys, this is my girlfriend, Serah.” I couldn’t be prouder to announce that she was mine, though her face didn’t display the same happiness. James raised an eyebrow and reached out his hand to her.

“Looks like old money bags is thinking of settling down?” He scoffed. “I never thought it in a million years.”

“Uh, thanks, I think?” Serah seemed uncertain, and Evan interrupted, reaching his hand across the gap toward me.

“Nice to see you again, Curt. Thanks for hosting this shindig.” Evan’s warmth brought a smile to Serah’s lips, and I was glad I’d invited him.

“No problem, man. Serah talks about you a lot.” I ignored James’s odd comment and focused on Evan as Derek brought some meat in from the grill. “And thanks for helping her so much with Luke. You are such a great friend.”

His wife splayed her hand on his chest and grinned at me. “He’s a great dad too.” She pecked him on the cheek, and Serah made a face as if gagging—a joke between them, I guessed.

Luke came bounding down the stairs with his truck in hand making engine noises. “Daddy, you come play now.”

“Hey, dude!” Evan whipped around and scooped Luke up. I would have been lying if I said it didn’t bother me that he had a better relationship with my son than I did, but I had to let it go. “I love trucks. Let’s go play.”

“Evan, I not know you here.” Luke’s face lit up, and he threw his arms around the man. “Daddy buy me truck.” He displayed the truck proudly.

“Wow, that’s an awesome truck. Your daddy knows his stuff.” Evan winked at me, as if that were supposed to assuage my frustrations. “I’m gonna go drive trucks, guys. Let me know when all the food is ready.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” I couldn’t hide the irritation that slipped out through my tone of voice. Serah elbowed me, and Gypsy snickered before turning to receive a large dish that Maggie carried in. She left us alone just long enough for Serah to scold me.

“Play nice, Curt.” Her voice was quiet but stern.

“It’s difficult to see my kid like someone else more. That’s all.” My whisper sounded angry, and I didn’t have to try to justify it. She placed her hand in the small of my back, but it was little comfort. I had missed so much of his life. This party

was meant to introduce the woman I love, not cause problems between us.

“I’ll be back in a sec,” I told her, heading toward the kitchen. I needed to clear my head for a moment, so I went to retrieve the pitcher of lemonade from the fridge. By the time I got back, more guests had arrived and Serah was standing with James and Patty, another of my coworkers, talking. I set the pitcher down on the drink table and approached them, wondering what they were talking about. I heard the tail end of James’s comment and froze like a deer in headlights.

“I can’t believe he didn’t tell you. Yeah, he’s up for this huge promotion. He’ll be moving to Chicago soon.” James turned to me. “You didn’t even tell your baby momma?”

I glanced nervously at Serah, who looked hurt and confused. “I was waiting for the right moment. Thanks, James.” I put an arm around her and guided her away from the crowd. “Can we talk for a moment?”

She stiffened but went with me. As we passed through the living room, Luke didn’t even look up. He was so excited to play trucks with Evan, and I felt like I’d earned the Bad Dad award because I had let some other man be more of a father to my son than I was. I just didn’t know how I could host the party and play with him at the same time.

“You are moving to Chicago?” Her hurt tone and expression made me shrink back in shame.

“I wanted to tell you but I was waiting to see how the trip went.”

“Wait, this trip was about a job and a move, and you didn’t tell me before you left?” Now she looked angry.

“Serah, let me explain. If I get this job, we can move to Chicago. I’ll have a desk job, nine to five, home every single night. Minimal trips, and we can get Luke in the best schools in the country there.” I tried to hold her hand, but she pulled away from me.

“I told you I want him to go to a normal public school, and I am planning to retire from the military, Curt. Here in Yellow

Springs. I don't want to move to Chicago." Her voice pitched higher, and I could tell she was really angry now—or hurt. Sometimes, her hurt came out as anger. I tried not to take offense at it. I knew it would be a difficult thing for her to hear if she wasn't in the mindset to move away from here.

"It could be a great life for us. There is a lot to consider but —"

"But nothing. I don't want to move. And I don't think you understand the concept of me being Luke's primary guardian. I am the one who makes decisions for him. Not you."

I didn't like her tone at all. I wanted to snap at her, but I didn't want to hurt her. I held my tongue while she continued to go off on me.

"I knew this would happen. You came back into my life to tease me. You demanded to know Luke, and now you're leaving again. You had no intention of committing to us." Tears filled her eyes. Definitely hurt, not anger.

"Look, you don't know what I intended." I sighed. "Let me explain." I wanted to tell her that I would pass up the promotion, find a different job, but she was too upset to listen.

"No. I don't want to hear any more explanations. I want to leave." She stepped over the baby gate and moved toward Luke, and I followed her.

"Serah, please. Let's talk about this."

"No, Curt. I'm not talking to you about this. I'm protecting my son. I can't even trust you to choose him over your job. Why would I think for a second that you'd choose me?" She stooped to pick up his coat from the couch where I tossed it when he came in, and Evan looked up at me with a look of surprise. I could tell he just wanted to leave the room. Seeing him there made me furious.

"I don't know why you can't just let me be his father now. Or is it too convenient to have a friend with benefits? He just comes along to raise your kid and you don't need me?" As soon as the words left my mouth, she whipped around.

“You are the one who left. I did what I had to do. Evan is an amazing friend, you even said so yourself.” I glanced down at Luke, who stared up at us arguing with saucer eyes.

“You are the one who hid my child from me for almost five years and let some other man raise him.”

She blinked, and tears streamed down her cheeks. As she crouched next to Luke, I realized we should never have been arguing in front of him and I felt horrible. Like my heart was torn out of my chest and stomped on right in front of me.

“Hey, baby, we are going home now, okay?” Serah cooed. She could turn off the anger and transition into mother mode so quickly. Meanwhile, I still glared at Evan as if he should have disappeared by now.

“Look, I’m sorry.”

“Luke and I are going home, Curt. When you are ready to apologize, you can call me.” She picked him up and walked out, leaving her jacket behind. I stood watching her through the window as she walked to her car and buckled Luke in. She shouldn’t have been carrying him. It would have hurt her a lot. I was such an asshole.

“Look, man. She’s been through a lot. I didn’t mean to step in and take your place.” Evan rested his hand on my shoulder and offered compassion even though he should have been just as angry with me as she was.

“I really thought she’d be happy about my taking a job where I didn’t have to travel. I really screwed up not telling her. And I shouldn’t have said any of those things.” I rubbed my face and scowled angrily at myself.

“Did you even talk to her about your feelings about the whole thing?” That was just about the wisest question anyone could ask me.

“Not really. I mean, it’s this elephant in the room. We never strictly discussed our emotions, just the circumstance of how it happened.”

“Well, that’s why it all came out like that.” Evan squeezed my shoulder then slapped it. “Give her some space for a few



days. She'll calm down. I'll have a chat with her. You need to talk about how you feel, man. She's all about that. And she'll come around. Even if it doesn't work out between you two, all she's talked about for years is how she wished you would be a part of Luke's life."

Evan walked away leaving me feeling a bit comforted. I wanted to go after her, but I had a house full of people. He was right. She needed space. And apparently, so did I.

### Serah

**S**tanding in the hallway outside MTF on my break, I decided it was time to take my pain medication. I hadn't had the best week and I knew I was in for a meeting with Major Thurlow and Curt. I hadn't spoken to him since the party, and I didn't know what to say if he brought up personal things. He shouldn't. Thurlow would be in the meeting too, and that would bar him from speaking about our private matters. At least I hoped it would.

"You look moody," Evan said, nudging me. He watched me swallow the pill with a drink from my bottle of water then scowled at me.

"I had my surgery about a week after you had yours. My pain is gone." He snatched the pill bottle from my hand. "Why are you still on pain meds?"

Everyone was so worried about my pain levels and the medications I was on, but no one stopped to think about my heart and what I was going through emotionally. "I'm fine." I grabbed it back and shoved it in my pocket. "Just drop it."

"I am concerned you're taking them too much. That you don't really need them and you're going to be addicted if you don't stop." His words sliced through my heart and enraged me.

“I said drop it, Evan. I’m fine. I don’t need your advice on that topic.” I didn’t need anyone’s advice. I was managing as best as I could.

“Geesh.” He held his hands up defensively and backed away with a scowl. “What has your panties in a twist?”

I sighed deeply and turned away from him but didn’t walk away. Evan was my best friend. When he needed me, I was there for him until he snapped at me. Then I distanced myself from him, and that hurt him a lot. I didn’t want to do that to him because I needed him.

“Look, I’m just in pain, okay?”

“Serah, I’m just watching out for you.” He touched my arm, and I spun around.

“I have to see Curt today and I’m still upset with him.”

Evan rolled his eyes and pulled me in for a hug. “Look, girl. All you talked about for years was how much Luke needed his dad. Well, his dad is here now. He might not be perfect—no dad ever is—but he’s here. Give him a chance. You don’t have to date him. You don’t have to move. You do have to work this out for Luke’s future.”

I hugged him back, but the sound of shoes squeaking on the floor approaching us made me jolt back. I bit my lip nervously. “I know. I’m sorry he went off on you like that too.”

“He apologized already.”

“He what?” I was shocked. “When?”

“Minutes after you left.” Evan gave me a no-nonsense look. “He really cares about you both, Serah. You need to just talk to him. He was really hurt that you didn’t tell him about Luke from the beginning. Have you talked about that? About how bad you were hurt when he chose the job over you?”

I shrugged. One of the sergeants walked past and eyed us but kept walking. “I told him a little, but we haven’t really repaired after that break. We just sort of tried to pick up where we left off.” I knew it was a bad choice, but I had let my

attraction to him and the hope for a good future override any hurt I had.

“Talk to him.” Evan gave me a stern look and walked away, and I was left to deal with the fallout. I stared after him until I knew I would be late meeting Thurlow.

By the time I got to Thurlow’s office, it was ninety seconds past our appointed time. I knew he’d reprimand me, so I knocked twice and entered, only to find the chair behind his desk empty. The one across from his desk wasn’t, however. Curt sat there waiting. He looked up at me as I entered.

“Serah? I didn’t know you were coming.” He rose and turned to face me. “I thought this was just the major and me.”

I shrugged and glanced over my shoulder. I didn’t see Major Thurlow anywhere, and I really didn’t want to do this right now. Not here in my CO’s office. I avoided eye contact as I pushed past him and sat down, but he was not going to let me off that easily.

“Serah,” he said, sitting next to me. “I’m really sorry. Look, I know we have a lot to talk about, but I need you to listen to me.”

“Not here, Curt.” I refused to look at him. The pain in my neck was too bad today. In order to look at him, I’d have to actually angle my body to face him, and that might give him the wrong message. I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw his frown.

“Did Evan talk to you?” He touched my knee, and I moved my leg away. I wasn’t so furious that I didn’t want to talk. I just didn’t want to argue, especially not here.

“I talked to him, yes.”

“Then you know I’m sorry. Please listen to me.”

I sighed, realizing I was not getting out of this room without having a discussion. I gritted my teeth and sighed through my nose. My hands curled into fists, a defense mechanism, but I nodded. I was willing to hear him out. Luke was worth that much. I’d had so many ups and downs in my emotions over the past week that I didn’t know what to think. I

was in love with him, but I also didn't like the way he handled the promotion by not telling me anything about it.

“Alright, you have until Thurlow walks in and no longer. After that, if you bring it up or even hint that something is going on between us, I'm in trouble.” I angled my body toward him and listened, but I didn't look up at him right away. I feared if I did, I would start crying again, and that was the last thing I needed. Thurlow hated waterworks.

*Curt had better make this quick.*

### Curt

I finally had my chance to speak to Serah and set the record straight, and I choked. I sat there watching her wring her hands in her lap and didn't know the first thing to say to her. I had screwed up by not just telling her how hurt I was from the beginning. I didn't figure this was the place to dredge all of that up, but brushing over it lightly wouldn't help in the long run.

"I need to start by saying I am obviously hurt and upset with you for keeping Luke from me for so long. I think you knew I would be, and I think you know I'm trying to move past it. I just never told you that, and Evan said I needed to tell you, so there you have it. I'm angry and hurt. I should have known so I could be here."

Serah's angry face softened into a frown of disappointment. "I'm really hurt that you chose that job over me, Curt. You and I had something so special. I didn't want to just move on with my career. I wanted you to choose me." Her bottom lip quivered.

"Why didn't you just say that?"

"It would have been so selfish of me to say that. You had so much going for you. I really loved you. Who was I to stand in the way of your dream? You wanted that job, and I wanted you to be happy. I just hoped at the time that you'd choose me

to make you happy when you had no intention of that. When I realized you would never choose me over your job, I decided I was better off finding a guy to whom I was the world.”

It made perfect sense to me now. “So it was a test?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t mean it to be a test. I really did want you to have what you wanted. It’s just that part of me wanted you to want me more.”

I had failed her so miserably. I grabbed her hand and kissed it. “I did want you more.”

“Do you want me more now? Because lining up a job that takes me away from my job, and Luke away from his friends and the family we have here, isn’t the right choice.” She pulled her hand away again, and I realized how I had hurt her this second time. It hadn’t occurred to me that choosing the promotion would make her feel like I was choosing something other than her.

“The promotion was supposed to be for us, not for me. I wanted to show you that I was taking you seriously. I could be home every single night. I’d make enough money that you wouldn’t have to work if you didn’t want to. You could get a job at a hospital or something there.” I grimaced at how selfish I suddenly sounded. “I thought you’d be happy that I wasn’t going to be on the road. I did consider that you wouldn’t want to move, but—”

“I don’t, Curt. Evan is here. My doctor, my friends. Your sister. There are so many reasons to stay.” I could sense her softening toward me, and I knew we were finally getting somewhere.

“Alright, well you never let me explain to you what I had in mind.”

Serah looked up at me, the hope drained from her eyes. The past several weeks of getting to know her again had been such a whirlwind. I knew she was the woman I wanted for the rest of my life, but I kept managing to screw it up.

“Fine.” She turned her face down and her shoulders slumped. A woman never said “fine” when she was actually

fine. It was always some code for an unresolved issue that would spring up later. I just didn't have time to talk that out and find out what was wrong.

"I won't take the promotion, then."

She looked up at me, confused.

"What?"

"Yes, I won't take it. I don't want it if you're upset about it. I wanted it only if you were okay with it and wanted to go with me. The bad part is, I have no other job prospects right now. That means I will be traveling. I will likely have a few more weeks at home, and then we will have to be apart for months at a time. I didn't want it that way. I wanted to be here with Luke, but if you're not okay with moving, then I'm not moving. I'd rather have you than the job."

Her eyes welled up and she covered her face. "Oh, Curt." I heard her fighting the emotion, and when she pulled her hands down, her eyes were clear again. I hated that I'd made her cry at work. "I don't want you to have to give up your career path for me. I just can't . . ." Her words trailed off, and I took her hand.

"No. I did what I wanted last time. It's time for me to do what you want this time. I love you, Serah. I never meant to hurt you by not telling you. I was just waiting for the right time, and I didn't want to worry you if it never ended up coming to fruition."

"But I don't want you to be away from Luke that much."

"If I take the job, you can transfer to a base closer to Chicago. We could commute, or I could weekend with you. Serah, I'm going to do what it takes to make this work. I told you that." I kissed her hand, and she threw her arms around my neck.

She smelled good, like honey and lavender. I wanted to drink her in right there, to cherish this moment of her feeling so loved by me. I lingered in her embrace for a moment, and when she pulled away, she offered a kiss, and I responded. Our lips pressed against one another, her tongue dancing across



mine, and suddenly, the door opened. Major Thurlow walked in, and Serah bolted to her feet, shoulders squared in some sort of tense stance.

“Sir,” she said, staring off into space. I was left reeling, wondering what just happened.

“Captain Jones, what is the meaning of this!” His booming voice could have been heard all the way to my house across town. I startled at the sound and froze. He put the fear of God in me.

“Sir, I can explain.” I sensed emotion in her voice, but I could tell she tried to repress it.

“To your office now, Jones.” His finger pointed out the door as an angry scowl appeared on his face. “You’ll hear from me when this meeting is over.”

“But sir,” she protested.

He bellowed, “Now!”

Serah’s eyes fell, but she didn’t look at me. His scowl turned to a glare, and she walked past him and out the door, which he closed behind her. I could sense the rage buried deep inside him, repressed like some sort of caged predator on the hunt, ready to pounce. I wondered if all military people felt like that, angry and brooding, or if it was just him. A kiss wasn’t any reason to get that bent out of shape, but he certainly had.

“Sir, I can explain.” I tried to smooth things over, but he held his hand up as he sat.

“Is she sleeping with you to get discounts on the drugs? Is that what it is?” He waved his hand as if to dismiss the question he had just asked. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. Let’s just get this over with.”

My mind went to Serah and how she must be feeling right now. I didn’t know what rule she’d broken by kissing me like that, but I knew it couldn’t be good, not based on his reaction. He didn’t appear to be the sort of guy who would give her the benefit of the doubt, so I kept my mouth shut and we started

our meeting. I just hoped that whatever happened to her, she wasn't upset with me for it.

### Serah

I parked in front of Evan's house, but I stayed in the car. After the day I'd had, my neck and shoulders hurt twice as much as normal. I just wanted a few minutes of no interruptions before I got Luke. He was the love of my life, but even mothers need a break now and then. I stared at the house, the light on in the front room. I saw Evan pick Luke up and spin him around. He was an incredible father, and his child was so lucky to be growing up in a home with both parents. I sat and thought about what Curt had said to me regarding the promotion, but it only made me more tense.

Pain radiated up into my head, down my back, and down into my arms. I tried to roll my neck to get rid of it, but I was too tense for that to work. I'd have given anything for Curt to come rub my shoulders, but that would only lead to more sex, and I needed a clear head to think about what had just happened today following the dressing down Thurlow had given me.

When I noticed Luke staring out the window, I knew he had seen me and I needed to go in and get him. His chubby little arms wrapped around my neck would hurt like hell, but they would soothe the ache in my heart. So I climbed out of the car and walked up the sidewalk. Evan held the door open as I approached, and Luke collided into my legs, knocking me off balance. I tried to laugh and smile, but it was coupled with

a wince of pain. Gypsy came to my rescue, prying Luke off me.

“Come on, buddy. Let Mommy come in.”

I mouthed, “Thank you,” and followed her inside. She set Luke on the floor by his toys and sat down with him as Evan shut the door behind us. For early April, it was still cold, and the warmth of their house was welcoming. “How was he?”

“He’s an ornery little guy, but nothing we couldn’t handle.” Gypsy started to pick up blocks, but Luke tossed them out of the box as soon as she put them in. I’d seen him do this before. It was his silent rebellion against leaving some place he wanted to stay.

“Hey, Lukey, we need to go home soon. Can you help clean up?” I rubbed his back gently, but he shook his head.

“No. Want to go see Daddy now.” He screwed his face up and dumped out the blocks. I sighed hard and sat back on the couch. He hadn’t seen Curt since that day at his house when we argued, and before that it had been almost three weeks. They probably missed each other, and I felt selfish for keeping them apart.

“You okay?” Evan sat next to me as Gypsy worked with Luke to convince him to clean. I was so grateful for good friends right at this very moment because as much as I loved my son, I was at my wit’s end with all the emotional stress. And it was only getting worse.

“Horrible day . . . I mean, not entirely horrible. I talked to Curt, but what came after that was horrible.” I rubbed my shoulder with my right hand and winced at the pain. There was a massive knot in the muscle that needed to be worked out, and I still hadn’t found a decent massage therapist.

“You look like you’re in pain. How is that going?” Gypsy was the only one with any right to question me. I’d made that clear to Evan earlier today, but when she asked, I was forced to answer. She didn’t bring up the fact that my two week appointment had come and gone and Dr. Marshal had sat in for it. He renewed my prescription without a blink of the eye.

“Yeah, still painful. I think it’s worse now than ever.”

Evan frowned. “Serah, I’m really worried about you. Are you sure it’s really pain? Or are you—”

“Stop.” I interrupted him. I would not be accused of having an addiction yet again today. And I didn’t want to talk about it in front of my son. “Feel the tension in my shoulders and ask me again whether I’m in pain.” I knew my tone was cold, but my heart hurt. There were only so many available places inside my mind to shove negative emotions before they all started piling up on me and making me suffocate.

Gypsy came in as the voice of reason. “You want me to rub your shoulders? Maybe relax some of the pain out? I can try to get you in with a friend of mine, but she has a waitlist a mile long.”

“That’s okay. I think I just need to lie down.” I glanced around the room, hoping to find Luke’s coat and get him out of there. I hated the lectures and feeling like I was doing something wrong. I also hated feeling like a failure. I wanted to go back to the way life was three months ago.

“Alright, I’m not letting you leave until you tell me what else is wrong. It’s not just the pain. I can see it in your eyes. You’re hurting.” Evan rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together in front of himself. When he got stubborn, there was no arguing with him.

“I’ll go get Luke a snack,” Gypsy said, standing. “Luke, want some berries?” She tempted him with his favorite treat, and he leapt to his feet immediately. It was the only thing I knew I could always bribe him with, and they’d learned the trick too.

“Spill it.” Evan stared at me and looked away. The pile of blocks on the floor wouldn’t clean themselves. I slid to my knees and started cleaning, pondering what I’d tell him. He sat next to me and helped in silence until I had the courage to speak.

“I got called into Thurlow’s office. He literally screamed in my face for twenty minutes.”

“Gosh, what for?” I didn’t want pity, and Evan knew that. He knew me better than anyone.

“For kissing Curt.” I threw some blocks in the box a little too hard, and one bounced out into Evan’s lap.

“Crap. What happened?” He held the block in his hands as mine stilled. I felt paralyzed.

“So, we had a meeting with Curt as a pharma rep to the base. Thurlow wasn’t in his office. Curt wanted to talk. He explained about the promotion and we talked a bit. It led to me kissing him in an emotional outburst of relief, and Thurlow walked in and saw it. The problem is, because Curt was there in a professional capacity, now I’m being looked at as having an inappropriate relationship.”

“What? How?” Evan acted shocked, but I knew this would happen.

“Because he thinks the only reason we’re getting the deal we’re getting is because I slept with Curt or something. He’s not even hearing my side. It doesn’t matter. He told me there would be consequences, told me to take three days off unpaid, then sent me home with orders not to speak to Curt again.” I felt tears burning in my eyes. “I can’t not speak to him. He’s the father of my child, but it’s too messy to explain to some military guy who doesn’t get it.”

It felt good to get it off my chest, but it didn’t do anything to relieve the pressure I felt from Thurlow. I had no idea what my punishment would be, but I knew it wouldn’t be good. Thurlow had a way of twisting things and making them worse than they were. After my failure to treat Evan professionally last year, I had it coming as far as he was concerned.

“God, that sucks.” He dropped the block into the box and picked up a few more. If anyone knew what I was up against, it was Evan. He was the only person in my life I’d consider a friend who understood the military and how their strict rules were unbreakable.

“Yeah.” I had nothing else to say. I was discouraged and anxious.

“You want us to keep Luke overnight?” he asked, putting the last of the blocks away. “I can bring him back before my shift tomorrow.”

I thought about it for a moment. A hot bath and a glass of wine sounded good, but so did cuddling with my little boy and watching a movie. Maybe the best therapy would be to return life to some semblance of normal before everything got thrown into chaos again.

“Nah, I just want to go home. But thank you for offering.” I pushed myself off the floor with great difficulty and stood there waiting for him to get up. He slid the box of blocks onto a shelf across the room, then called out to Gypsy. When she brought Luke in, she had a wash rag in hand, and he had a purple face, berry juice dribbling from his face.

“Mommy, she had blackberries.” He grinned and showed me a handful of berries and his purple fingers.

“That’s so good, baby. Let’s get washed up and go home. We can watch a robot movie.” I figured the more I distracted him with things he loved, the less time he had to ask for Curt. If the MPs saw Curt on base right now, I’d be in huge trouble.

“If you need to talk about anything, you know I’m here, right?” Evan touched my elbow lightly, reassuring me.

“Thanks, Ev. That means a lot to me.”

Evan grabbed Luke’s jacket from the coat closet and started putting him into it, and Gypsy’s mouth screwed sideways in a sympathetic smile. “I’m going to have Evan text you some yoga stretches to help tonight. You need to do them before bed, okay?” She gave me her best doctor-friend look, and I nodded.

“I’ll try.”

“Not try—do. Those are doctor’s orders.” She shook her head. “We need to get your body calmed. I don’t think this is surgery pain as much as it is your body’s too tense from stress to heal properly. If you remain in this heightened state for too long, you’ll end up with another herniated disc and another surgery.”

“God, no,” I groaned.

“Do the yoga, Serah.” Evan put Luke’s hand in mine and opened the front door. “I will call to check on you tomorrow morning. If you need anything at all, please call me. I’ll be there in minutes.”

I let myself out after thanking them for their concern. At least my doctor wasn’t still calling me an addict. I felt like they were finally getting it. I needed help, and I didn’t know what form it was going to take, but I knew they weren’t going to stop until this was resolved. I almost wanted to stay there just to feel that comfort a bit longer. Instead, I drove Luke home to our promised movie. I would even make him popcorn and eat chocolates for dinner, just to see him smile at me.

I needed that smile.



**Curt**

“**Y**eah, but I need more time to make the decision.” Victor was pushing me to decide now whether I wanted the job. Corporate had officially given the offer and they wanted an answer now. If I moved on the promotion, I’d be out of Yellow Springs in three weeks. Serah and I had not definitively chosen what I should do because we had been interrupted. It had been three days and she hadn’t spoken to me once. Her phone was off, or at least it went to voicemail each time I called her, and Thurlow had mentioned going with a different rep from my company. I felt like things were spinning out of control.

“Corporate isn’t going to wait, kid. You have to move now or lose the shot.” Victor’s advice would have been helpful if he could also talk to Serah and let her see what a golden opportunity this was. I’d still give it up if she wanted, but that meant months of job searching coupled with maintaining my current travel schedule. I didn’t know how I’d do job interviews locally if I was on a trip. It was a mess.

“How do I buy more time?” I turned down the highway toward Serah’s house. If she wasn’t answering her phone, I was just going to show up at her house. My phone was clipped in the hands-free mount and I was on a mission. We had to discuss this tonight.

“I don’t think you can.”

My brain went into overdrive, trying to think of ways to make the entire situation work out for me. If I told them I could do it, it would buy me a bit of time, but only if I gave them an excuse as to why I needed that time. Then if Serah wasn't favorable, it would also give me time to look for another job. It wasn't the most ethical thing to do with work, but my entire life revolved around my son now, and the woman I loved.

"Think they'll give me until Labor Day if I need to sell my house and stuff?" It was a long shot, but it might work. "I can start asap, but it would be a hundred percent remote until I sell and find a new place."

"Yeah, I'll see what I can do. So that means you'll take the job?"

His words struck panic into my heart. After not having told Serah about the job to begin with, I didn't want to make this decision without her, but I didn't want to miss out on the opportunity in the event she might change her mind. I was gambling with my future in every way, and I wasn't the luckiest man in the world.

"Yeah, just tell them I said yes." A dark, foreboding feeling weighed on my shoulders as Victor whooped in the background.

"About time. I'll get everything set up. You just start working on selling the house and preparing for the move. I'll be in touch." Victor hung up, and the car switched from the dead air of the ended call back to the song playing on the radio. I didn't know what the heck I was going to tell Serah, but I had about three minutes to come up with something.

I turned on her street and saw her car parked in the driveway. I knew she was home. That was a good thing, but it made my anxiety worse. I parked and walked up toward her door, my heart hammering in my chest. I felt like a kid who'd gotten in trouble and was headed for the principal's office. I knocked on the door and waited, but it wasn't Serah who answered. Luke stood with an ice cream bar in his hand and the doorknob in the other, smiling at me.

“Daddy! Mommy,” he called over his shoulder, “Daddy here!” He jumped up and down in celebration. It was good to see him smile. It had been two weeks or so since I’d seen him, but that visit had been cut short by our disagreement.

“Serah?” I patted his head as he took a huge bite of ice cream, and I made sure the door was shut behind myself so he didn’t go outside. I didn’t see Serah in the living room or dining room/kitchen area, so I traipsed back to her bedroom, where I heard rustling. It wasn’t like her to leave Luke unattended for very long, so I knew she probably hadn’t heard the door.

When I stepped into the doorway of the bedroom, she was rifling through her nightstand. It was late, past dinner. Luke was probably eating his dessert on the run instead of at the table where she left him. She looked frantic, so I cleared my throat so as not to startle her too much. She looked up at me.

“Gosh, I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you. How did you get in?” Luke pushed past me into the room, opening the door wider. His hands were covered in melted chocolate that smeared across his face too.

“Mommy, Daddy here,” he said, handing her the stick from his ice cream bar.

“Yes, thank you, honey. Go in the bathroom and wash your hands.” She plucked the stick from his messy hand, and he ran off to wash up. “Sorry about that.”

“Luke let me in. It might be wise to get a chain he can’t reach . . .” I let the unsolicited parenting advice hang in the air as she walked past me and back up the hallway. That wasn’t the best way to greet her after so long being apart, but it just came out of my mouth. I followed her into the kitchen, where she threw away the stick and continued her frenetic search of drawers there.

“What’s going on?”

“I am in so much pain and I can’t find any of my pills. I think I took them all, and I just need one to sleep. My prescription ran out yesterday.” I could hear the anxiety in her

voice, but the way she tore apart the kitchen made me fear the worst.

“Serah,” I said softly, grabbing her wrist. She turned to face me, and I could see pain in her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“No, Curt,” she whimpered. “I’m not okay. I’m in pain. A lot of pain.” Her lip trembled as she spoke. “Do you have any samples or anything? Like something stronger than ibuprofen or whatever?”

The question landed in my gut like a sack of rocks. “No, baby. I don’t have anything like that.” I took her by the arms. “I’m worried about you.”

“Please make it stop hurting.” She blinked, and tears streamed down her face. I pulled her into my arms and held her, rubbing her shoulder with one hand. She sobbed, probably overwhelmed in some way or another. I had come with such unsettling news to share, and now I knew it was not the time nor the place.

“Alright, baby. This is what we’re going to do. You’re going to go lie down, and I’m going to come in after I tuck Luke in for bed, and I’ll massage your back. Okay? And if that doesn’t work, I’ll do what I did last time.”

“Sex?” she whimpered.

“Yes, sex. Okay? I know maybe it’s not on your mind, but I know the release helps relax you. And that’s what you need. So go lie down. Let me handle our little guy for you.”

She pulled away and looked uneasily at me, but she nodded and trudged off to the bedroom. I glanced around at the house. She’d been searching for a while, from the looks of it. There were jackets strewn about. Her purse lay empty on the dining table with the entire contents spilled out next to it. Drawers hung open, and the couch cushions looked like they’d been turned out. It wasn’t a pretty sight. I hated that she was in so much pain.

I managed to get Luke laid down in record time, but I had to read him three bedtime stories before he would even think of letting me leave. I promised him I’d be there when he woke

up to make him pancakes because there was no way I was leaving Serah like this. Not when I felt she was vulnerable, and not when she was in so much pain. I didn't care if she didn't like it.

When I was certain he was sleeping, I snuck out and headed for her room. She lay on the bed wearing nothing but her panties, the blanket tucked up around her chest and one leg dangling off the side of the bed. She had an arm draped over her eyes.

“Hey . . .” I crooned. “I’m here, baby. Turn over. Let me rub your back.” Serah harrumphed and turned over. Without a word, I crawled up on the bed and began working her muscles until I felt her start to relax. A few times, I heard her whimper, then yelp, but I didn’t back down. I knew she felt awful, and all I wanted was to take every ounce of pain she felt and throw it into the ocean.

“How’s it feeling?” I asked after more than thirty minutes.

She didn’t answer for a moment, and I thought maybe she was sleeping, but she cleared her throat and sighed contentedly. “I think it’s feeling better. Man, was that awful. I thought I’d pass out from the pain.”

“Want me to keep going?” I smoothed my hand over her skin, resting it in the small of her back. She didn’t respond, so I slid my hand lower across her panties to the back of her leg, my thumb tracing along the elastic hem. “I can really help you.” I had no intention of taking advantage of her. I sincerely wanted her to feel better.

“Okay . . .” Her sheepish agreement was all the permission I needed. I slid her panties off and positioned myself behind her on the bed between her knees. She didn’t even have to turn over. I could do it this way.

### Serah

I had been getting aroused the entire time Curt was rubbing my back, but when he pulled my panties down and spread my legs, it set my body on fire. He didn't ask me to turn over or anything, so I lay there, anxiously waiting for his fingers to touch me. His hand slid down the back of my leg and back up, grabbing a handful of my ass and squeezing it. Then he mirrored the action on my other leg until he had both hands squeezing and spreading me.

Moans emanated from deep in my chest. I felt tension in my shoulders as my body arched toward his movements, but my body craved to feel more. Curt pressed his hand in the small of my back and cooed, "Shh . . . Let me do it, okay?"

I relaxed again, waiting for him to turn up the steam, but he teased me more, drawing a line down my backside until he got to my entrance, then diverting around the sensitive spots. His fingers toyed at the edges of my tender lips, taunting me. When I moved right, he moved right, narrowly avoiding an intimate encounter. When I writhed left, desperate for relief from the torturous ache, he moved with me.

"Ah, ah, ah," he clucked. "Be a good girl and lie still."

I gripped the pillow, burying my face in it, and just as I did, he made his move. It was as if he had been waiting for me to cover my mouth because as soon as his fingers touched my

clit, I gasped. Steamy breath pushed out through the down of the pillow, and I sucked in the same heat. I knew if he put his fingers in me, I would make noise, so I kept my face there as long as I could stand it. The sensations were exquisite and excruciating at the same time. Enough to push me to my limit, and not enough to make me jump. I clawed at the mattress and whimpered.

Curt swirled his fingers in my juices, finding the tender nub of my clit hardening beneath his fingers. He pinched it and rubbed, at once finding it difficult to keep hold of it because of the amount of moisture I made. I scooted down on the bed, hoping his fingers would push into me, but he restrained himself.

“God, please . . .” I panted, finally turning my face away from the pillow.

“Oh, you’re begging now?” I could hear the smirk on his face, the way the words slithered out of his mouth in a seductive fashion. I could sit on his face and make him eat me if I wanted to, but he wanted to be in charge.

“Please . . . Curt, it’s torture.”

“Oh, but it will be so worth it . . .” His words trailed off just as I felt him kiss my backside, soft but scratchy, his stubble scraping across my skin.

As he did, his fingers gloriously slid into my pussy, not filling me, but easing the scream of lust that throbbed in my groin. I shuddered as he started thrusting, pushing into me and finding my G-spot to stroke. “Come on, pretty girl, you know you want to.” His voice tingled my skin, caressing a place in my mind that needed to be touched. “God, you’re so wet. I want to taste you.”

“Oh . . . yes . . .” I moaned, again deciding to bury my face in the pillow. It didn’t take long before I was a quivering bowl of jelly he could smear on his dick and let me suck off him. I grunted and groaned, thankfully into the pillow, as my body convulsed. His fingers were sensational, and I was a mess.

“Ahh, yeah, that’s it,” he coaxed, still thrusting into me, even as my climax began to fade. I expected him to turn me over, to strip off his clothes and penetrate me, but he didn’t. I felt his stubble on my ass again, only this time, his face sank between my thighs. I lifted my body off the bed, rising to all fours with him behind me as he began licking and sucking at my fluids. Each flick of his tongue was more intense than the feeling of his fingers had been. His teeth raked across my lips, then he sucked my clit, pushing his fingers into me again and again.

My arms gave out, and I let my upper body drop back to the pillow. I knew I’d never contain the screams of pleasure this time. My neck hurt as I hit that awkward angle, but I didn’t want him to stop. I reached between my legs and scratched at his face, urging him to suck me harder, which he did. His lips locked onto my body, and he went for it.

Tension built in my thighs, then my lower stomach, and my climax hit me. I writhed, punching the mattress and clenching my teeth so the moans wouldn’t come out, but they came out anyway, right into the pillow. I bit down on it and let it take me, convulsing and shaking as his sucking continued. My thighs would be raw before he quit, and I didn’t care. He could do this to me all night long. I was putty in his hands.

When my body stopped spasming and twitching, I slowly relaxed back down onto the bed. Curt pulled his fingers away, and I felt the bed shake as he climbed off. I heard his belt unbuckle, and something hit the floor. Then the bed shook again, but I didn’t feel what I thought I would. The blankets covered me, then I felt the heat of his body next to mine. He draped a leg over mine, then his arm lay across my back.

“How’s the neck?” he asked quietly. Kisses rained down across my shoulders. I turned inside his embrace to lie on my back, sweaty and out of breath.

“So much better,” I told him as I pushed my long hair out of my face. I reached up and cupped his cheek and kissed him, tasting myself on his tongue. “Your turn?” I asked, searching his expression in the dark.



“Not tonight. Tonight was about you.”

Confused, I stared into his eyes. I felt the hardness of his package digging into my thigh. I knew he wanted me. It didn't make sense.

“But . . .” I protested, but he placed a finger over my lips.

“The only thing I want from you is to talk about this issue.”

I felt so loved that he would do all of that for me without expecting anything in return. I also felt cornered. I knew how desperate I must have looked, digging through drawers and cupboards to find a single pill which I never found. As it turned out, his massage and the sexual release he gave me had helped tremendously.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I'm worried about you, Serah. You can't ask me for drugs like that. I know you were just in pain, but that is a huge ethical issue.”

I looked away, ashamed of myself for ever mentioning that to him. I would never have done that if the pain hadn't been so bad. I didn't even know why I had. “I know that was really wrong. I'm sorry.”

I bit my lower lip and let my hand drop from cupping his cheek to my stomach. My heart was so torn up. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to pick Luke up without being in pain, and lately, even when I could sleep, it was because of the drug which I knew was making me feel nauseous a lot. I hated the position I was in. I wasn't addicted, but I knew if the pain didn't stop soon, I would be. Gypsy was right. I needed yoga and massages, and I'd been too prideful to make the appointments or join a studio.

“Look, baby. If you want, I can come over and give you orgasms every day.” I heard the humorous tone in his voice and smiled, which made him chuckle. That idea wouldn't work because I wasn't always in the mood, and sometimes, Luke didn't go to bed on time.

“That’s very kind of you to offer.” I turned back to him. “But I think massages are the best I can do on a daily basis.” Besides the fact that I would have my period at times and that wouldn’t be conducive to play time.

“Alright, well we both agree that you need some more help with pain management. I want to help you, but it can’t be with drugs. We need to find ways to help you relax.”

“Dr. Gardener and my PT both told me the muscles are probably too tight, putting strain on the vertebrae and making it harder to heal.”

“That makes a lot of sense. Probably why climaxes help so much too. You get all worked up and release the relaxation hormone in mega doses.” He winked at me. “I stand by my offer of free orgasms every day.”

I craned my neck up to kiss him. “I think we have some issues to work out before you just move in.” Sighing, I added, “And I think you’ll need to head home now. I don’t want Luke to—”

“I am not leaving. You need me here in case he wakes, so I can handle that. And I already promised him I’d make him pancakes. So, you just don’t worry about it. If you prefer, I can wait until you’re sleeping then sneak out to the couch so he doesn’t see us in bed.”

I thought about it for a second and decided not to press it. I wanted to be held by him. It had been too long that I’d slept in this bed alone. “Stay . . .” I told him, turning away from him so he could curl around me. I slept better that night than I had since surgery, but I dreamed of him leaving me. Why was I still doing this to myself? Why couldn’t my heart just let go?

### Curt

**T**he therapist held Serah's arm at such an odd angle I thought she would punch him. Her eyes grew wide then her face collapsed into a hard scowl. I could see the pain written across her furrowed brow, and I wanted to kiss it away.

"Hey, baby, it's okay. Breathe." I held her hand, and she squeezed so hard I thought she'd break it.

"Ahh . . ." She yelped and cried out as he lowered her arm and held it into a new position, this one more common but apparently just as painful.

"Okay, one more time," he said, rubbing her shoulder gently as he lifted again. I gathered they were working on range of motion, but I could only stand and watch and give moral support. After another ten minutes of watching the guy work on her shoulders, he stood and waved me over. "Here is what I do."

I had come along to learn all of the techniques he used for massages so that I could reproduce them and help her more at home. He stood to her right and pressed his thumb into her shoulder muscle, drawing small circles outward and down toward her rotator cuff. "You need to move in slow, small circles so you can feel if anything is tight." He worked back up toward her neck and stopped. "Give me your hand."

I reached out to him, and he placed my thumb right where his had just been. “Now you draw the circles.” I started moving and felt a huge lump there. If I didn’t know it was just a tight muscle, I’d have thought she had a tumor or something. It was hard and huge.

“What is that?” I asked, knowing full well what it was.

“She’s all knotted up.” He shook his head. “So what you have to do is press here.” He moved my hand away and pushed with his thumb right into the center of the knot. “Just steady, firm pressure into the muscle. You don’t want to rub a lot when you do this or you’ll bruise her. Just find the knot, then push it gently. When you sense it release, find the next spot and repeat. When you’ve worked out all the kinks, you have to give a good rub down.”

Serah yelped and arched her neck to the side. “God, it hurts, stop.”

“You know I can’t do that.” He chided her softly and continued working. “You’ll thank me later.”

He winked at me and nodded at her other shoulder, so I began working the muscles, finding the sore spots and helping her body release the tension. Every time she whimpered, I pulled away, but the therapist reminded me that she needed this or the pain would be too bad.

When we were finished, he pulled up his rolling stool and sat down. “You’re quite the lucky woman, having someone come to therapy for you just to learn what I do. This will help you tremendously.”

“Doc,” I said, interrupting.

“Not quite a doc yet, but go on.” He seemed flattered that I’d mistitled him.

“Well, I’m worried about why she’s still having so much pain.” Serah glared at me as if she didn’t like the fact that I was talking about her while she was in the room, but I continued. “This should have been said and done weeks ago.”

He nodded. “Yes, it should have. And I’m no counselor, but something tells me that Serah is going through some major

stress right now that she's hiding from people.”

I hid my understanding by raising my eyebrows. I was the stress she was going through. I knew it. I just never thought it would have had this much effect on her. She was always cool under pressure.

“And I explained to her last time she was in that the emotional stress we endure is carried in our bodies. She probably gets tense in the neck and shoulders when she is stressed. Other people may carry it in their hips and lower back. For her, what happened is that she had surgery and afterward encountered something stressful. The tight muscles are compacting the vertebrae that were just operated on and making blood flow decrease and inflammation increase.”

“Ah, so that's why massages help . . .” I thought out loud. I didn't want to bring up sex because I didn't want to embarrass her, but the therapist beat me to it.

“Sexual release can also help too. It is proven to help lower stress levels by releasing oxytocin into the bloodstream.” He looked like he'd said something he hadn't intended then asked, “You two are partners, right?”

Serah chuckled. “Yes. It's okay.” She took her hoodie and pulled it back on over top of her tank top and stood. “Thanks for teaching him that. I feel a bit better now.”

The therapist stood and reached out his hand, and I shook it. He turned to Serah and said, “You should also consider talk therapy. If you can't talk to this guy, find a counselor. It will help lower your stress too.”

We thanked him for his help, and I walked Serah to my car. I'd driven to the appointment following a rough morning for her. She had to call me to get Luke dressed when he refused to get out of bed. It was my pleasure to help her, and it shed new light on the fact that she was really struggling.

We sat in the car for a moment before I started the car. “Want to go for lunch?”

“Nah, I'm feeling nauseous again. I don't think I'm in the mood to eat.” She buckled her seatbelt and stared out the

window. I could tell she was a bit green. She said the meds were making her feel sick, so that was a bonus. If she had a bad side effect, she'd be less likely to take them.

“Look, why don't you take a bit of leave? You need some time to recuperate and heal. I looked into it, and Wee Care has two slots left in their summer preschool program. I'd love to put Luke in there and—”

“No.” She heaved out a sigh before turning to me. “I told you, I like the childcare center he goes to. Besides, I used my leave right after surgery. I don't have any left.” Her lip quivered as if there were something she was holding back from me, but she didn't seem to want to share it.

“I can't see why you're so against it. Wee Care is ranked number one in the city. It's got far better marks than the military child care center.”

“I said no, Curt. Why can't you just let it go?” Serah turned and stared out the window again, but I didn't want to let it go. I wanted to talk about it. I deserved equal say in Luke's life.

“Serah, please. I am his father. I want to be able to parent him too.”

“And you do, when you show up toting gifts I told you not to bring. I am his mother. I have raised him this far, and I don't need help raising him.”

“Then why did you call me this morning?” The words stung like a slap across the cheek. I could feel my hand burning as if I had actually done it, and she looked down at her lap as if she felt it too.

“Take me home, Curt.”

I drove in silence, not even bothering to put the radio on, and when I got to her house, she sat there sniffing. I had hurt her feelings and I hadn't meant to. This was why Evan had told me to talk about my feelings, so I didn't blow up on her like this. Even Derek had warned me from the start to be real with her and tell her what I wanted and needed. Now I just felt

like a fool who'd pushed his way back into her heart where I wasn't wanted.

"I'm sorry, Serah." I couldn't look at her. I didn't want to see if she was crying. I felt so ashamed.

She opened the door and put one foot out onto the driveway, then turned over her shoulder. "You know, the reason I don't really feel like you should start parenting Luke is because I don't know if you're going to be here to follow through, and whatever choices we make for him, I have to answer for when you walk out again." She stood and climbed out and shut the door. I watched her walk to her door and disappear inside. I was a total imbecile. She was never going to agree to move to Chicago with me. She still thought I'd pack up and leave. And if I did that after we moved there, she really would have no one.

I had exactly four months to convince her I wasn't leaving. It was a good thing the board took my offer because time was ticking now on the relationship and on a new job. It was obvious we weren't going to Chicago, and it was obvious I couldn't keep the job I had now.

God help me . . .

### Serah

I perched on the edge of the chair waiting for Thurlow to call me into his office. I knew this was coming. He had told me there would be repercussions for that kiss I'd shared with Curt. They'd done a full investigation and I had to divulge the fact that Curt was my ex-boyfriend and the father of my son. I hadn't told them that we were currently seeing each other, but they'd gathered as much. I knew I wasn't in trouble for dating him. I was allowed to date whomever I wanted. The problem came when I didn't divulge the relationship to my CO the minute I knew I'd be working with Curt.

I wrung my hat in my hands and bit my lip. My leg bounced rapidly. My hands were sweaty. My mouth was dry. I felt like I'd throw up just from the nerves of the entire situation. This reprimand came on the heels of all the pain and stress of Curt returning, the surgery, and before that, the tongue lashing I'd gotten from Thurlow himself regarding my care of Evan when his knee was going out on him. I'd given too many cortisone shots in an attempt to help him ease the pain.

“Jones.”

Thurlow's angry tone rang out, and I jolted in shock. I bolted to my feet and saluted. “Sir, yes, sir.”



“At ease . . .” He sighed. “My office, now.” He stepped aside so I could enter, and I glanced over my shoulder at Hastings who sat waiting to enter MTF.

The weight of the world was on my shoulders right now. All I could think about was what terrible punishment I’d have. If they gave me double duty, I’d have a nightmare of a time finding childcare for Luke. If they docked my pay, I’d have to consider finding someplace cheaper to live. I wouldn’t even allow myself to think of worse options. I prayed to whatever god may be listening to save me from the worst of my fears.

“Sir,” I said, standing with my shoulders squared across from his desk. I put on my bravest face and awaited his lecture.

“Jones,” he said, sitting down, “I’m actually surprised by your actions.” He tapped his fingers on the file in front of him, a copy of the report after they finished investigating the claims against me. “You knew the minute he walked through the door the first time that you should report your relationship with him, and you said nothing. Why?”

“Sir, I don’t know.” It was the most honest answer I could give. He wouldn’t stand for my being sloppy and emotional, and I hadn’t thought at the time that anything would come of it. I lived in a constant state of oscillation between thinking we had a future and knowing he would just walk away, anyway. I didn’t think it would have affected me long-term. If Thurlow hadn’t walked into his office right when we were kissing, he’d have never known Curt and I were together.

“Well, your lack of knowing doesn’t save you.” He opened the file. “It says you are currently on indefinite service.” He looked up at me and scowled. “You have to give three months of notice if you plan to leave, and you’ll have five years of reserve duty too.”

My heart sank at the idea of leaving. I didn’t think my infraction called for dismissal, but I wasn’t the one in charge of making that decision. I knew officers were held to a higher standard than those below us. Still, it was just a kiss.

“Leave, sir?”

“Yeah, like cut the cord, go somewhere else.”

“Am I being dismissed, sir?” I let the first hint of emotion trickle into my voice, and he snapped.

“No boo-hooing in my office, Jones.” He stood, glaring at me. “You made the bed, now lay in it.” Thurlow leaned over the desk menacingly. “You’ll be transferred to Ohio, near Columbus. You’re being given until mid-September to settle affairs here and set up camp there. You’ll have no dock in pay or rank, but you can kiss any promotion goodbye for at least a few more years.” He shook his head. “This is really all such a shame. You had such potential here.”

I wanted to cry, but I didn’t dare do so. My heart raced. I licked my lips and said, “Thank you, sir.”

“You should be thankful I spoke up for you because they were ready to ship you overseas.” He cleared his throat, and I could see the unnatural compassion in his eyes. “I know you have a kid.”

I nodded. “Thank you again, sir. That means a lot to me.” Tears filled my eyes, but I blinked them back. “Is that all, sir?”

“You’re excused. I’ll send your paperwork over next week.”

I was barely out the door when the tears started. Hastings looked up at me in shock and opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but I held up a hand to stop him and charged past. I had my phone in hand. I wanted to call Curt immediately and tell him what had happened. I needed a friend to talk to, but I didn’t want to do it where anyone else could overhear. It was bad enough to have the punishment handed down. I didn’t want people to start talking about me.

I was almost to my car when I bumped into Evan. He was smiling brightly as he approached. “Hey, Cap!” He jogged over to me, and I swiped at my tears, hoping he hadn’t seen them. My shoulders were hurting again today, but not bad enough to warrant tears. I knew he would pry.

“Hey, Ev. What’s up?” I sniffled and tried to force a smile.

“What’s wrong, Serah?” Genuine concern showed on his face.

“Uh, nothing. What’s going on? Why are you so happy?” I made myself chuckle to prove to him that I was okay, but I wasn’t sure it proved anything except that I wasn’t okay.

“Got my wedding invitations!” He beamed, thrusting one in my direction. “I thought I’d save postage on these ones.” The violet envelope had been embossed with silver letters, his initials and Gypsy’s.

“That’s so incredible. Congratulations.” I threw my arms around him to go in for a hug, another distraction so he wouldn’t ask me why I was crying again, but it didn’t work.

The minute his arms wrapped around me, I broke down. Tears streamed down my cheeks and I thought I’d really collapse. I hadn’t even taken a moment for the realization to sink in. I was being forced to move away from here. Not only did that throw a major hurdle in my career path, but it also complicated everything with Curt, as if it wasn’t complicated enough as it was.

“Talk to me,” he said, not letting go. He squeezed me hard. I could barely breathe.

“I’m being transferred.” I cried harder than I thought I would. I wasn’t losing my job, just my community. I’d make new friends there, but Evan was here. Curt was here. My life had been here for years, and one stupid mistake had changed all of that.

“Whoa, that’s huge.” He pushed me back and held me at arm’s length. “Because of that incident with Curt in Thurlow’s office?”

I covered my mouth with my hands and said, “Because I didn’t divulge the relationship as soon as I knew it was a conflict of interest. He didn’t say, but I think the higher ups think I was sleeping with him for discounted drugs. Evan, I don’t want to move. Yellow Springs is my home. I want to be here. What will I do?”

“Well, the first thing you’re going to do is sit down.” He guided me to a bench under a shade tree, and we sat. “Have you said anything to Curt yet?”

“No. I just found out. I was going to call him right away, but I didn’t know how to tell him. He’s got this huge promotion he’s up for in Chicago. He said he’d give it up, but I don’t know. What if I’m moving to Ohio and he just takes off for Chicago without me? Luke needs him now.” I wiped my eyes, and Evan reached into his pocket and pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to me.

“I can handle if Curt runs off. My heart would get over it. But I can’t let that happen to Luke. And will he even want to follow me to Ohio?”

Evan rubbed his face. “You have to talk to him, Serah. I don’t know what the right thing is. What I do know is you hid Luke from him for years. You can’t keep secrets. He needs to know right away.”

I blew my nose and hid my face again. I never meant to keep secrets. I only did what I had to do to keep my child safe. This hit me like a ton of bricks to the gut.

“Have you considered retiring? I mean, you could still practice medicine elsewhere . . .” Evan’s suggestion hadn’t even crossed my mind, but I didn’t think it would work anyway. I didn’t have the capacity to work strange hours and long weekends. I had a toddler who needed me.

I shrugged. “No. I didn’t.”

“Alright, well, I’m here if you need to talk more, but I think the person you should be speaking with is Curt.” Evan sat with me while I cried a bit longer. We discussed things a bit more, and he made sure I was safe to drive before he headed out.

Life seemed to be out of control more than ever, and all I wanted was to put my feet on solid ground and get out of this whirlpool of stress and pain.

### Curt

I sat across the table from Dad and Maggie. Derek was in the back room laying the twins down in the crib for their nap. Lunch was delicious. Maggie had made a wonderful bisque and grilled cheese for us, far better than the egg salad she'd made for my welcome home dinner. Dad even enjoyed it, and that was saying a lot for a man who hated soup.

“Something wrong, Son?” Dad set his spoon in his dish and dipped his grilled cheese in it and took a bite. I didn't know if a family dinner was the place to open the can of worms I'd created by telling Victor I'd take the job. Of course, I knew in my heart it was only a time-buying matter, but given how pressing it had been for me to answer him, I didn't think there was any other choice at the time.

“You know, I'm sort of struggling with a decision I made.” The soup suddenly didn't look appetizing anymore.

“What's that?” Maggie asked as she took a bite of her bisque. Her eyes stayed glued on me, and all I could see was Luke's face staring up at me. I wanted to be with my son. I wanted a family. I wanted Serah to be my forever, and I was jeopardizing things by not communicating well.

“So, I got offered the promotion I told you guys about.”

“Whoa!” Dad dropped his sandwich on the plate. “Congratulations, Son!”

“Yeah, Curt, that’s so amazing. You’ll be able to get off the road and not have to worry about traveling so much. You can really have a family now.” Maggie beamed with happiness. She continued eating as if it wasn’t one of the most challenging decisions I’d ever have to make.

I stewed, staring at my plate and avoiding eye contact. I knew Serah had been firm about not moving to Chicago, but I knew it was the best chance for us to be a family. Not only would I have a day job where I could be home every night, but Luke would have great opportunities. There were a few military bases she could work from, and best of all, I would have them in my life. I could see it working so perfectly.

“You don’t look happy about it.” Dad cleared his throat and wiped his mouth. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, Serah was very adamant that she didn’t want me to take the job. Or—well, she doesn’t want me to move.” My shoulders slumped.

“Oh, I see.” Dad’s tone grew somber. “Did you tell her you got the job or just that you were seeking a promotion?”

“I didn’t tell her I accepted the position.” I heard Maggie gasp at my announcement.

“Curt, no.” I could see her shaking her head from the corner of my eye. “Why did you do that?”

I knew I was impulsive, but they had to know I hadn’t intended this. “Look, if I said no, it would mean taking another work trip immediately. I’d have been sent to Southern California for three months. I know I can’t keep this job. I have to do something different.”

“So you make a decision like that without talking to the mother of your child?” Maggie quizzed me like she was hurt just by being associated with someone like me.

“I had no intention of truly taking the job unless she fully consented. I just knew it would buy me time to think.” I pushed my plate away, now feeling repulsed by myself so much that I had no desire to eat ever again.

“What are you going to do?” Dad picked up his sandwich and had another bite, chewing loudly while I collected my thoughts.

“Well, obviously, I’m going to tell her. If she doesn’t want me to take it, I’m going to search like crazy for a different job. If she is keen, then we will move.”

“And if you don’t get a job?” Maggie asked, still prying. Her tone was less than comforting, but I deserved as much. Serah deserved better than me, and I kept messing up.

“Dad . . . I might sell my house and move home.” The comment brought a round of chuckles. When I moved out just out of college, I swore I’d never be one of those guys who has to move back home, and so far, I’d been very successful at keeping my word.

“You got it, kid.” He winked but continued. “You know, Derek’s brother Peter still has a house here in town. I bet he’d rent it out to you if it came to that. I know you have some in savings, so don’t sweat it. Everything always works out in the end.”

I thought about Peter. I hadn’t seen him in a while, and last I heard, he was really struggling. I got lost in my thoughts, and Derek returned with some funny stories of the kids and his attempt to make them sleep. We shared a few laughs about them, and Dad and Maggie got up to start cleaning up after lunch. Derek turned to me and patted me on the back.

“So, it’s pretty messed up right now?”

Confused, I stared up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well I heard bits and pieces of your conversation with Dad and Mags, but Evan tends to tell me things too.”

I huffed out a frustrated sigh. Evan was a thorn in my side. He stole my kid’s heart, and now he talked about my relationship problems with Derek? “Evan should keep his mouth shut.”

“Look, Curt. Evan really cares about Serah. They were in some pretty dark places together. He’s getting married in a few months, and I have it on good authority that you’re being

invited along with Serah.” He shook his head as if I were even more shameful than I knew I was. “You should ask Serah how her day went today.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she got in trouble for something, and it’s not looking too great. I’m not going to say a whole lot more because it’s not my place. But you need to be there to support her. She is what matters right now. You have time to make your decision about Chicago, but she needs you. With everything she’s been through, she needs all of us right now.”

I felt like the wind was sucked out of my lungs. I knew she said she would face consequences after her commanding officer caught us kissing, but she hadn’t elaborated on what those consequences could be, but now my heart was worried.

“Did Evan seem worried?” I asked, suddenly feeling the need to get up and leave.

“Oh, now you care about him?” Derek offered a pointed expression. “Yes, he seemed worried. I am not worried at all because I know things always work out.”

There it was again. That saying ate away at me like rust on a Volkswagen. *Things always work out.* But things didn’t seem to be working out for me. I needed fate to intervene or something. If not, I wasn’t sure how any of this would work.

I was lost in thought when Maggie came back in carrying a pie. “Here’s to the promotion, even if you don’t take it.” She set the pie on the table and used a fork to scoop a piece onto her plate. “Because,” she said, licking her finger, “you’re finally moving up in the life you always wanted. Now you can decide if you still want it. And if you do, that’s okay. And if you don’t, that’s okay too.”

I nodded and helped myself to my own slice of pie. She was right. No matter what decision Serah and I made, it would be alright. And I would be okay.

I would be okay . . .



### Serah

**A**fter three days of feeling so ill I could hardly get out of bed, I sat on the exam table with a needle in my arm giving blood. Luke had his iPad and he sat in the corner playing an educational game while the nurse poked and prodded at me. She had a grumpy demeanor and a difficult time finding a vein from which to draw the blood. It hurt, but she finally found the spot after sticking me at least five times.

“Let’s just get these vials down to the lab. Dr. Gardener will be back in here in a minute.” The nurse pulled the needle out, pressing a cotton swab against the dot of blood left on my arm. She applied a bandage, pulled off her gloves, and took her things and left.

I rubbed my arm and wondered how long it would be tender and watched Luke playing contently. Being transferred to Ohio would disrupt his entire life. He was young enough that he’d make new friends easily no matter where I was stationed, and moving around was a natural part of being a military kid. I just hated to tear him away from the only family he’d ever known. Evan wasn’t getting a reassignment this time. Only I was, and it was all my fault.

For mid-May it was sweltering outside, which made everyone turn on the air conditioning. The office, however, was chilly to me, and I sat there shivering with my arms folded across my stomach, hunched over a little. The more I shivered,

the worse my nausea got until I thought I'd throw up right in front of Luke. I had tried to shelter him from it, but it was challenging as a single parent with no privacy. I hated what the pain meds did to me, and they didn't seem to be helping with the pain that much at all, which was why I was there in the office.

The door swung open after twenty minutes of waiting and Dr. Gardener walked in with a huge smile on her face. She hugged her tablet to her stomach and shut the door behind herself. "How's the patient?" she asked Luke, tapping his shoulder. He looked up at her as if he had no clue what she was talking about and shrugged, too invested in his game to understand her joke.

"Anxious for some relief, Doc." I fidgeted.

"Well, the preliminary blood tests are back. There are a few I need to send to the lab," she said, strolling to her small round stool. She sat and looked up at me, still hugging the tablet to her body. "We need to check that liver function after you've been on these medications for so long."

"And the other preliminary tests?" I tapped my toes on the footrest. I hated appointments like this. I just wanted the pain to go away, not a full workup.

"Well, I have some really great news for you and I have some really not great news for you." Her posture changed when she said that, making me nervous.

"What tests did you run?"

"Have a look." She handed me the tablet, and I stared down at the chart. Most people wouldn't have a clue what the numbers and letters meant, but I'd seen a million of these in my career and I knew exactly what I was looking at.

My stomach rolled. My jaw dropped. I felt a flutter of dizziness as I stared at the tablet. "I'm pregnant?" I didn't know how to react at first. The shock of it . . .

"But I'm on the pill." The longer I looked at it, the warmer my face felt. I glanced at Luke and smiled, tears brimming in my eyes, then to Gypsy, who was also tearing up.

“Yes, you’re pregnant, which is why you were so sick. It wasn’t the pain medication.” She blinked hard, forcing her happiness down. “Which leads me to the really not so great news. You can’t take any narcotics anymore at all, Serah. In fact, you can’t take ibuprofen or any other nonsteroidal drug. Only acetaminophen.”

I instinctively reached for my neck and rubbed it as she connected the dots for me. I’d have realized that sooner or later. As a medical professional, I knew what was safe and what wasn’t, and then I gasped. “Oh, my God, I’ve been taking them this whole time.” My eyes darted back to the tablet, and I looked at the numbers. My HCG was so low that either I was only just a few weeks pregnant, or there was something wrong.

“Whoa, calm down. That’s why I sent the blood on to the lab.” She reached for the tablet, and I handed it to her. “We’ll be able to check a lot of things from that blood sample, and we’ll set up a sonogram for you too. The most important thing now is to make sure you’re not taking any more pain meds.”

I winced just thinking of going without anything to help me. Acetaminophen would do nothing for the pain, but I knew it was the only option now. I sat there feeling sorry for myself for a moment until her hand on my knee brought me back to the room and the present.

“Serah, you’re going to have a baby. This is such good news.”

Turning to look at her again, I felt a smile creep across my lips. Luke would be a big brother now, and Curt would be ecstatic. My heart swelled with joy, but I was still confused. “Gypsy, I’m on the pill. How could I be pregnant?”

She stood and set the tablet on the counter and looked down at Luke, still absorbed in his game. “Well, the amount of NSAIDs you’ve been taking alongside your pain medication probably played a part in that. If you take enough of them, it can interfere with the effectiveness of oral contraceptives. My guess is that’s what happened. And definitely stop taking birth

control now. You don't need it, and the added hormones can affect your body and the baby too."

"Baby?" Luke lowered his iPad and peered up at me with a scrunched-up face.

Dr. Gardener glanced at him then back to me, but she didn't say a word. I appreciated that she let me be the one to tell him the news.

"Uh, yeah," I muttered, sliding off the table.

"I your baby." He scowled.

"No, honey, you're a big boy. I just call you baby because it's a sweet name that means I love you. Dr. Gardener is talking about a real baby." I crouched next to him and set his iPad aside.

"A real baby?" he asked, sitting up in the seat. "Reagan's mommy have a baby. She poop a lot."

I chuckled and nodded. "Yes, babies poop a lot." I heard Gypsy snickering behind me, and I continued. "I'm going to have a baby." As I said the words aloud, it made me tear up. The reality of those words right now in the midst of everything else that was going on brought such an overwhelming amount of joy it felt sinful. I blinked, and a tear streamed down my cheek.

"Mommy, you crying?" Luke's chubby little fingers reached up and wiped away my tears.

"Yeah, bud. I'm happy. Sometimes when you're happy, it makes you so full inside that you cry a bit." I grabbed his hand and kissed it several times. "And I want you to be happy too. You will be a big brother soon. And then you'll have someone to play trucks with."

"And wobots." His giggle made me shed a few more tears, and I stood up and turned back to Gypsy.

"Wow, okay." I had to wipe my eyes a few times, and she handed me a tissue. "Uh, I have to tell Curt, obviously. And I have no clue how I'm going to get through the pain now, but this is the best news I've had in months."

She bit her lip. “How do you think he’ll take it? I mean, with everything that’s going on . . .”

I shrugged, feeling a twinge of pain in my neck. “He’s going to be thrilled, but it adds a layer of complication to an already messy situation.” In my heart, it cemented the fact that Curt and I belonged together. It didn’t matter that I was being restationed or that he wanted a job out of state. It didn’t matter if he was going to travel nine months out of the year or if we only saw each other for Christmas and Easter. We were having another baby, and I wasn’t about to keep this one from him. Not after how things worked out with Luke.

“You look like you need a friend. Should I call Evan?”

I did need a friend, but the person I needed to talk to wasn’t Evan. It was Curt. “Nah, but you can feel free to tell him about the baby. Guess I’ll have to set up an appointment for the ultrasound.”

I bent to pick up Luke’s iPad, and he hopped off the chair and followed me and Dr. Gardener out front where I scheduled the next appointment. She offered me more advice for pain management, and I left feeling unsettled about how I’d manage the pain. At least everyone would get off my back about using medication too much. I had none left, and I couldn’t take it even if I did.

As I drove home, however, the dumb smile returned to my face. I couldn’t wait to tell Curt he was going to be a dad all over again. I never got the joy of making that announcement the first time. I wanted to plan something special for it. This was going to be fun.

### Curt

I pulled into Serah's driveway and parked. It wasn't like her to leave her garage door open, so when I saw that I figured she must be having a bad day. I had brought a bouquet of flowers, but following her previous comment, I did not bring any gift for Luke. I wanted this day to be perfect. I had to tell her about my plan for us because I wanted her in my life forever. I woke up this morning prepared to ask her to be my wife, though I hadn't had time to go out and buy the ring. I didn't care what it took. We needed to make this work.

"Serah?" I called, strolling into the garage. She wasn't in there, so I checked the doorknob. It wasn't locked, so I let myself in. As I did, I pressed the button to shut the garage door. Serah was seated on the couch hunched over some papers. She looked really upset. "Serah?"

She looked up at me startled, then back at the papers she held in her hand. I saw tears in her eyes and laid the flowers on the kitchen counter as I passed into the living room. "What's wrong, baby?" I sat down next to her and saw the official army logo on the heading of the letter. My heart sank instantly. Derek had told me to talk to her about what happened after Evan revealed that she'd been reprimanded, but I'd been so busy trying to apply at any place in Yellow Springs I could think of along with learning the ropes of the new job online, I hadn't even stopped to think about it again.

“Curt, I’m being restationed.” She thrust the paperwork into my hands. The large brown envelope it had arrived in was stamped with black ink in large letters. It lay torn open, staring up at me accusingly. My gut roiled. I had let her kiss me in that office, and it was my fault this was happening. I stared blankly at the paper in my hand, not able to make sense of the words on the page because my own shame blinded me.

“What?”

“They’re transferring me to Ohio. I thought I’d have three months, but it turns out I have sixty days. That’s it. I’m being forced to take a transfer because I didn’t tell them I was dating you from the first moment you came onto the base.”

“That’s crap.” Scanning the document furiously, I felt anger rising. I had been so excited to tell her about my plan, and now I knew I couldn’t. Ohio was closer to Chicago than Yellow Springs, but not close enough to have any sort of real relationship. “They can’t do this.”

“It’s the United States Army. They can do anything they want. They own me.” She carefully took the papers back and laid them on the table, then laid down and put her head on my lap. “This is so infuriating. I don’t want to move to Ohio. I want to be here, with you.”

The words warmed my heart. It was the first time she had mentioned being with me like that since I came back. Most of the time, I felt like she was holding me at arm’s length to keep me from getting too close to her heart. It was a step in the right direction, but I couldn’t even celebrate that tiny baby step because she was so upset. I put away any notion of trying to comfort her with my news. I thought it was the perfect solution. Maybe she could get them to transfer her to Illinois somewhere instead. Or maybe she was in too much trouble to even ask. That was why I bit my tongue.

“I’m so angry.”

“I know, baby. I’m here.” I smoothed her hair down. She had no idea that my own mind was now in a hurricane of doubt. Things weren’t supposed to be this difficult. I wasn’t

supposed to feel like I was about to lose everything after I'd just gotten it all back.

“She not a baby,” Luke said, standing in front of me. I didn't know where he'd even come from, but he held a toy truck in his hands triumphantly.

Serah sat up instantly, taking Luke's hand and ushering him away so fast I thought my head would spin. She led him to his pile of toys and knelt next to him, whispering something in his ear, and then stood and brushed her hands along her pants as she did so.

“What was that about?” I asked as she sat back down next to me.

“Nothing,” she said, wiping at her eyes. “Just wanted some privacy with you for now. Is that okay?”

She looked like she was hiding something, but I didn't want to pry when she was already upset over the disciplinary action. When she rubbed her neck, I knew the stress of all of this must be causing her pain, so I reached up and rubbed her shoulders a little.

“Want me to get you some ibuprofen or something?” I didn't want to suggest her pain meds because I wanted her off them.

“Uh, no.” Serah shrugged and leaned into me, tapping her shoulder in a different spot. “Here . . .”

“Well, I can massage your shoulders, but the other sort of massage I can't do until Luke is in bed for the night.” I wagged my eyebrows, and she rolled her eyes at me.

“I think we can work something out later. Right now, I just want some of this tension gone while I try to think things through.”

“Alright, well sit here,” I said, pointing at the floor by my feet. She sat down in front of me where I was able to reach her better, and I used the massage techniques her therapist had shown me. “Tell me your thoughts, and I will help you sort them out.”



“So I’m on a month-to-month contract now. My contracted enlistment period expired a few months ago, and I don’t have a set time period that I would have to serve anymore. I just have to give three months’ notice before I go. The problem is, I have to be out of this place in sixty days, which means even if I did that, I have to go to Ohio for at least a month. Then it’s the trouble of having a new house, a new job, all of that. I wanted to retire from the army, Curt. It’s what I wanted to do ever since I joined up. I just screwed it up, and now it’s not going as I planned.”

My heart went out to her. I should have listened to her when she told me not to talk about personal things with her at her workplace. Yes, she’d been the one to kiss me, but I hadn’t made it any easier by continuing the conversation. We should have just kept it professional. This was all my fault. I knew how much she wanted to stay in the army.

“Listen, we’ll make it work.” Ohio wasn’t a horrible place to live. I’d been there multiple times. If it was near the state capital, there were tons of great schools and neighborhoods. I just didn’t know if there were jobs around that area I could take that would provide enough money for the life we wanted.

Her hand rested on top of mine. “I appreciate you so much, Curt. I’m sorry that things have been so difficult over the past few months. I never meant to make them difficult. I just felt scared that I was going to let my heart get out of control, and then I’d get hurt again.”

“What changed?” I was genuinely curious as to what changed. Only a week ago, she had thrown that fear in my face, telling me she was afraid I was just going to leave again, and what sort of mess would that leave for Luke and her if I did?

She shrugged. “I can’t put my finger on it right now.”

I continued rubbing her shoulders for her until she almost dozed off. Then I helped her lie down on the couch and rest with the promise that I’d make dinner for her as she napped. Something was different about her today, and I didn’t know what, but at least she wasn’t shying away from me now. Luke

helped me prepare dinner and kept talking about a baby and his friend Reagan's mom. We had a good chat about where poop comes from, and when dinner was ready, I woke Serah to eat with us. It felt like a normal night as a dad and a partner, only I hadn't worked up the nerve to ask her to be my wife. I didn't want to complicate things any more today. Serah had enough on her plate.

### Serah

I held the sonogram printout in my hand feeling emotional. “He’s perfect.”

“We don’t know if it’s a he yet, but yes, the baby is perfectly healthy.” Dr. Gardener sighed contentedly. “And all of the bloodwork came back perfect. Your liver is fine. Baby is fine. The drugs are fully out of your system, and this pregnancy is on track.”

Her words brought relief I’d been needing since the blood had been drawn and sent in. I had worried myself into a very painful frenzy for the past ten days, and I felt like now that I knew my new little guy was healthy and growing well, I would be able to work on pain management more effectively. Other than a few ups and downs, life seemed to be stabilizing now, and I just had to tell Curt about the new baby and make a few tough decisions.

“You seem happier today.” Gypsy wheeled her little stool around to face me and clasped her hands in front of herself.

“I am.” I looked up from the picture of the baby, not quite fully human-shaped yet. “The new baby is such a gift. I’m so thrilled that Luke will have a baby brother or sister.” I couldn’t help but let the ambivalence of my current life station show through in a furrowed brow.

Gypsy cocked her head sideways and her eyes bored into me. “You don’t sound fully convinced. You know, it’s okay if you’re nervous about having another baby. Lots of moms actually really want their child and feel nervous about the family dynamic changing. It’s a lot to handle, the new baby, the toddler, the way attention and time have to be divided now.”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing like that. I’m sure those challenges will arise, but I’m really very happy about having another baby.”

“What is it, then?”

She was going to keep prying until I told her. Of course, a good doctor would definitely want to hear the concerns of their patient, and that’s what Gypsy was—a great doctor. “Well,” I said, deciding that she might have some sort of advice no one else has had, “I am being transferred to Ohio, near Columbus. It’s a disciplinary move. I could end my contract, but that would be really crushing. I wanted to retire from the army. They have such good programs. Things are sort of up in the air right now. Curt might get a promotion that takes him to Chicago, which would be great for him, but how would we make things work if I was stationed here or in Ohio? And if he doesn’t take that job, he’ll continue traveling a lot.”

“Ah, I see.” Gypsy readjusted her position on the stool and nodded as if she understood. “Things are a lot more complicated than I thought, and now I understand why you’re under so much stress that your back and neck are still hurting.”

I didn’t respond. There was nothing left to say. It seemed every day, something else popped up to add to the list of things that were challenging me. It was time to start getting things off my shoulders and stop adding more weight. I didn’t even know why I was telling her. Evan was my best friend, not Gypsy. She was my doctor. If I crossed that professional boundary, she’d have to send me to Dr. Marshal, and while I liked the man, he wasn’t my doctor. She was.

“If you turn in your notice and stick around Yellow Springs, you can find work at Mercy. I’m sure of it. There is a

huge need for doctors around here.” She smiled reassuringly. “And I’m sure being here with your friends around would be better than relocating. Luke would have us, and so would you. And when Curt is home from his travels, you’ll have him here too.”

Her plan sounded simple except for the nights when I was dealing with a colicky baby and a fussy toddler and had work the next morning. That didn’t sound good. Even if things went perfectly and the new baby was not a crier, Curt would miss out on just as many milestones as he had with Luke.

“Look, thank you for talking with me. I really appreciate the advice. You’re right. I’ve known about the need for doctors in the area for a while. I guess maybe that might be the path I take, after all. We’ll see.” I forced a smile, then thought of how becoming a mother all over again would change everything. And that made my smile genuine.

“You’re so welcome!” She stood and helped me down from the table. “Did Evan give you the invite for the wedding? Save the date.”

“Of course, he did.” I straightened my jacket and followed her out of the room and down the hall.

“I can’t wait. It will be a blast. Only this time, I’m not babysitting!” She chuckled. “Seems like every time someone gets married, I end up babysitting for the kids. I think I’ll need a sitter for Dillon when we go on our honeymoon.”

“Oh, I’d love to help out, but I think it depends on my station in life.” She led me out of the inner office to the waiting area where only one patient remained waiting.

“That would be awesome! You’ll have to let me know. I’m sure Evan would be thrilled for you to keep Dillon. Or maybe Maggie will . . . I’ll see.”

“Thanks again, Gypsy.” I offered a brief hug, and then we said our goodbyes.

I had so much on my mind, it felt like I was on autopilot as I drove across town to the childcare center. Luke was eager to get going, and I just wanted to get home and have dinner. I

waited for the woman to help him with his shoes, something I'd asked them to help with weeks ago when my back was too sore. As she did, another mom stopped in to pick up her child. As they handed the young infant over the counter, I watched the mother's face light up.

I remembered that feeling. I still got it every time I picked Luke up. The thought of feeling that joy twice over every day once the new baby arrived brought tears to my eyes. My hand rested on my stomach again, an unconscious habit I realized I was already doing. I was surprised Luke hadn't blown it when I was napping last week and Curt was making dinner. Every time Curt called me baby, my heart fluttered, especially when Luke was around. I had planned a way to tell him. I was going to invite him for dinner and make baby carrots and baby peas and veal, then make him guess based on the meal what the clues were saying. It was cheesy, but I knew he'd love it.

Luke barreled out of the back and into my legs, and my heart swelled. I leaned down and kissed his head, aware of the ache in my shoulders. I wished I could carry him, but my body still hated me.

"How was your day?"

"Mommy, I made a picture," he announced proudly. He waved a sheet of paper in the air with crayon scribbled all over it. I took it from his hand so I could see what he'd drawn. It was a picture of a man with brown hair, a woman with blonde hair, and a little child with brown hair. "It you, me, Daddy. Like it?" He grinned and pointed, and I was so proud.

"I love it, baby. Let's go hang it on the fridge at home so Daddy can see it." I was thankful he hadn't drawn baby number two.

### Curt

**F**or the first unofficial day of summer, Memorial Day was gorgeous. I finally had the grill brought around to the back deck, and Derek had helped me set up the pool. I had badminton and volleyball in the backyard, and a game of croquet in the side yard. More than thirty guests milled the property. Serah and Luke were around somewhere, probably taking turns with the other children on the swing I hung from the old oak tree for him.

“What a day this turned out to be!” Dad stood with a grill utensil in hand, turning the burgers. I was glad he’d been able to make it out. It wouldn’t have felt like the first barbeque of summer without him here.

“I know. I love hosting get-togethers, and with the way things have worked out so far, I should be able to have one a month all summer.”

“Hey, big brother,” Maggie said, strolling up with a plate of freshly pattied burgers. “I have another round ready for the grill. Looks like we’re feeding an army.”

I took the platter off her hands and set it on the grill rack where Dad could swap out cooked meat for stuff that needed to go on the grill. He thanked me and kept working, and I stepped away and looked out over the yard. “Yeah, we have about thirty adults and five or six kids.”

“I’m so glad you’re home for a while. Did you get things worked out?” She dusted her hands on the front of her shorts and then folded her arms over her chest. I wanted to avoid the entire topic today and just relax and enjoy the weather, but Maggie was my sister. She was only concerned for my wellbeing, so I broke down a bit.

“Well, Serah got transfer orders to Ohio. It’s a disciplinary thing. I don’t know exactly how that’s going to work out, but what I do know is I’m going to ask her to marry me. I made the mistake the first time we were together of letting her slip away, and I don’t want to do that again.”

“Wow, that’s a big step, bud. That’s a huge commitment.”

“Yeah, I know it is. But I think it’s the right one. I really love her.” I watched her from across the yard, just where I thought she’d be. Luke gripped the swing chains and laughed as Serah pushed him. I saw the tiny wincing of pain as she did and knew she shouldn’t be doing that. “Look, you want to meet her?”

“Yes, I really do, but first . . .” She screwed her face up sideways and tilted her head. “I know of a pharmaceutical company near Cincinnati, Ohio. They might be hiring, and with your experience, you’d be a shoo-in for any job there. You should think about maybe just making the transfer with her. It would take you away from here, but any relationship worth having is worth sacrificing for.”

I had considered the idea of going with Serah to Ohio and I’d already looked into a few places. “Yes, Mags, I actually looked into it. There were a few openings. I applied for all of them. We’ll see.”

“Wow, you’re really taking this seriously.” She smiled, and I thought it looked like she might tear up. “I’m really proud of you, Curt.”

“Me too,” Dad called over his shoulder.

“Let’s go officially introduce you. You were all here at the last party, but she had to leave early.” I strolled out across the lawn toward Serah, who now chatted with Gypsy while Evan



pushed Luke on the swing. I was beginning to not mind that so much after Evan showed me how he cared about Serah. Derek was nearby too, so I tapped his shoulder on the way over. “Join us?”

“Yeah, sure.” He waved off the people he was talking to and followed.

I walked up behind Serah, who didn’t see me coming, and wrapped my arms around her waist. She was startled, but I buried my face in her neck and kissed her skin. “Guess who?”

“God, Curt, you about made me pee my pants.” Her laugh was infectious, making me and Gypsy both laugh with her.

“Sorry.” I let her go and took her hand. “Look, I want to introduce you to my best friend and my sister.” It felt odd that I was finally introducing them after all this time. Serah had heard so much about Maggie, but back in the day, Maggie was out on her own soul-searching mission, and I pulled away from Derek to be with her so much that I hardly kept in touch with him.

“Oh, it’s so nice to meet you.” Serah reached out her hand to shake Maggie’s hand and then Derek’s. “I’ve heard so much about you, Maggie. I haven’t heard much about you, Derek.”

“Oh, not to worry. Curt is a bit of a lone wolf. He doesn’t want me prowling around his lady folk.” Derek winked, and I punched him on the shoulder playfully.

“Derek is an obstetrician, and Maggie is his nutritionist. They make a good team.”

Serah bristled, her body going rigid next to me. I didn’t understand what I had said wrong, and Gypsy eyed Serah suspiciously too. It was a tense, awkward moment until Maggie spoke up.

“So, you’re a doctor too? Curt said you’re a captain.” Maggie’s eyes flicked from my face to Serah’s and to her husband’s. She must have seen Serah’s reaction too.

“Yeah, I am. Uh, that’s like three ranks above Evan.” Serah made a joke, and Evan played along.

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.” He turned to salute, and the swing came back with Luke still clinging tightly to the chains and bumped into him. He faked an injury, which made Luke giggle.

“Careful, boys,” Serah chided, and everyone laughed. I curled my arm around her waist and whispered in her ear.

“Hey, is everything okay? What was that about?”

She tittered and added, “Not now, babe. Later, okay?”

“Curt! I’m gonna need some assistance.” I glanced up at Dad’s call and saw some flames shooting up from the grill.

“I’ll be right back.” I dashed off ready to retrieve a cup of water to douse the rebellious grill and left my company to chat. I didn’t know why Serah would have that reaction to Derek’s introduction unless maybe she felt intimidated in the presence of another doctor, but Gypsy was there, so that didn’t make sense either. I didn’t have time to really hash it out in my thoughts. I raced in the back door, got a cup of water, and returned to the grill. Dad doused the flames and kept on grilling like nothing had happened.

“Thanks.” His cheery voice never skipped a beat. I, on the other hand, had to catch my breath. The running coupled with the sudden shock of seeing my grill catch fire had my heart racing. I stood catching my breath, staring at the grill and waiting for it to erupt again, and Dad continued talking. “So, you tell Serah you took the job?”

“Dad, I told you that in confidence, and you know I—”

“You what?” Serah stood right behind me. Her presence was now so obvious I wondered how I had missed it seconds before Dad asked the question. Dad turned before I did, and I saw the regret on his features. I turned slowly and faced her—and the music.

“Okay, so let me explain what happened.”

“You took the job?” She looked hurt, her eyebrows drawn together, her mouth hanging open.

“Yes, but let me explain why.” I started to panic. This was all part of the plan of proposing to her. I was going to tell her my entire plan, how I took the job to buy me more time to find something different in Ohio near where she would be stationed. I just didn’t want to blurt it out in the middle of an argument or confrontation.

“I thought we’d make this decision together?” Tears gathered in her eyes and she shook her head. “You just accepted the job knowing I was going to be sent to Ohio?”

“There was a possibility you wouldn’t be. That you could quit.”

She scoffed, and I knew that was the wrong thing to say. This wasn’t going well. “Serah,” I started, but she turned and walked off the deck. “I’m not taking that job,” I mumbled, knowing she hadn’t heard me.

“Go get her, Son,” Dad said, but I was frozen. I watched her pick up Luke and say something to Evan, who followed her down the side yard. I raced through the house and out the front door, knowing she was leaving. This had to stop happening. I cut her off before she got to her car.

“I wasn’t going to take the job, Serah.” I stood in front of her, but Evan followed along, drawing a line along his throat as if to halt me. “Please listen to me. I wasn’t going to take it.” I followed her to her car, but it was like she had tuned me out entirely.

“Dude,” Evan said, pulling me back. “Give her space.”

I jerked my arm out of his grasp. I knew he was right. When she was upset, there was no talking with her. I knew she was hurt. It was my fault because I hadn’t just been forthright. She climbed into her SUV and backed down the driveway as I said aloud, “I’m not taking the goddamn job, Serah.” But over the roar of the engine, she would never have heard me. I planted both of my hands on my head and watched her drive away.

“Look, give her an hour and go to her house. Let her settle. She is confused about a few things, and she has some of her

own things to tell you, and right now, the emotional state she's in isn't helping."

I turned to Evan, for the first time, not angry with him. "I was just trying to plan something special. I wanted to propose and explain that I took the job offer so I could work remotely until September and it would give me time to search for a job. If I hadn't taken the job, I'd be on the road right now. I'd have no way to interview or even apply. I'd be gone."

Evan sighed and looked as frustrated as I was. "She will understand, Curt. But you were dumb to plan that. You should communicate directly. Both of you should."

"What does that mean?" I asked, confused.

"I told you. I can't give you her news. She has to do it herself, but you'll want to hear it, and you'll want to be really patient with her as she tells you. It's nothing bad, but I won't spill her secret, okay?" Evan was being really weird. I wanted to get in my car right now and leave, follow her and chase her down so we could talk, but I knew her as well as Evan did. She needed some space, so I would be tortured for the next hour while I waited for her to cool off. Then Maggie and Dad would have to host the rest of my party. I wasn't letting things go south again.

### Serah

I paced the living room, unable to sit down and rest. My heart was overwhelmed with emotion. Even though Curt and I had spoken about the potential for him to have a promotion, I thought we had decided not to make any decisions without talking about things. Guilt needled at my conscience, though, because I had turned in my notice at work already, and that was half the reason I fled Curt's party again. Not because I was that upset with him, but more because I was upset with myself for doing the exact thing I felt he was guilty of.

Dating as an adult was so different from dating as a teen or in college. Back then, people expected you to be individual and make decisions based on where you saw your future going. But adult dating was complex. Especially when children were involved. Conversations needed to be had, and choices affected more than just yourself. It was something new for me, and Curt too. He had been used to dating women as a single man with no strings, but there were so many strings in this relationship—the past, our jobs, our children . . .

“Mommy, it lock.” Luke carried his iPad over to me and showed it to me. He had accidentally locked the device, and I had a passcode on it so he couldn't grab it and play whenever he wanted. I typed it in and handed it back just as the doorbell rang. He accepted it with a smile and moved toward the couch,

but I knew it had to be Curt. I didn't want Luke around for this conversation.

“Baby, go sit in your room and play, okay?”

His eyes flicked up toward my face, then he stared like a zombie back into the colorful screen and meandered down the hall to his room. I approached the door, straightening my T-shirt on the way. Curt stood outside, staring down the street. His hands were jammed into his shorts. I had run off without giving him any chance to explain anything, and in the hour I had to calm down, I hadn't thought of a single thing to say to him about my end of the miscommunication.

My hands were sweaty as I gripped the doorknob and opened the door. “Come in.” I stepped aside. “You left the party?”

“Serah, you're more important than any party. I'd have come an hour ago, but Evan told me to give you time.” He turned to face me as I shut the door.

“Evan was right. I needed that time, and I need to start by saying I'm sorry.”

Curt's eyes narrowed and his eyebrows furrowed. “Sorry?” I watched his Adam's apple dip and rise. “I should be saying I'm sorry.”

“Sit,” I told him, gesturing toward the couch. When we were both settled, I continued. “I'm upset, yes. I thought you understood how your taking that promotion would affect me and Luke. I don't even know how to approach that decision you made without fully talking to me. If we weren't dating, it would be difficult enough, but you pour your love on me so I will want you again, and then you go and do something that selfish, expecting me to just jet off to Chicago on a whim.” I seethed. I hadn't allowed myself to feel this anger yet due to my own guilt. I kept my voice at a harsh whisper, though. I didn't want Luke to hear us bicker or even argue.

“I'm sorry, Serah.” His head drooped. “I—”

“I'm not finished.” I cut him off and instantly felt horrible again. “I'm sorry for just leaving. The reason I did is because I

am guilty too.” I twisted my hands together in my lap and avoided looking at him as I said, “I made the decision to turn in my notice because I don’t want to move to Ohio. And I made that decision without consulting you because I am used to being independent and making choices for me and Luke.”

“I see.” He sounded calm, but I could tell he was uncertain too. When I looked up at him, he was staring down the hall where the sound of a child’s video game resonated. “What will you do?”

I had expected him to blow up on me, but I was glad he hadn’t. “I thought about just partnering with a GP here in town or applying at the hospital here or in Hudson. There is a huge need for doctors.” He turned toward me, and I added, “And when you come home from being on the road, I’d be here.” My fingers trembled as I spoke. “I am really sorry I just jumped the gun. I never meant to create a double standard, but now I’m feeling like it’s happening all over again.”

“What’s happening over again?” he asked, leaning toward me. “What is going on, Serah? You’ve been acting strange for weeks, distant at times and engaged like you are very interested at others. I realize that we have some things to work out, but I really want you. I’m a screwup. I admit that. I don’t communicate well because in my head, it always works out, but I’ve learned that you can’t understand what’s in my head unless I tell you.” He reached for my hand. “I’m worried about you—about us.”

“I’m not taking the pain pills anymore, if that’s what you’re worried about,” I snapped at him defensively, and his eyebrows rose.

“Is that why you’ve been in more pain?” Compassion flitted across his face as he kissed my knuckles one at a time, but I pulled away from him. Why did it always come down to that? I was never addicted. I was in pain.

“Yes, it is.”

The second I heard Luke’s little feet slapping the tile floor in the hallway, I knew he’d heard me snap. I covered my face in shame. I never wanted my child to watch me fight with his

father. I'd seen my parents argue too many times. It wasn't healthy for anyone to view that.

"Mommy you crying?" Luke didn't carry his iPad this time. Instead, he carried the weight of our relationship in his eyes.

"No, honey. I'm okay." I welcomed him onto my lap and made sure not to mention the word "baby" around him. I wanted to tell Curt, but I wanted it to be a special moment between us, not on the heels of a tense conversation. I looked up at Curt, who must have gotten the subliminal messages I was sending, because he brightened his face up and pinched Luke's cheek.

"Thanks for coming to play at my house. You can come swing any time you like, little guy."

"That might be difficult if your house is in Chicago," I said through gritted teeth, but with a smile on my face.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, Serah. I am not moving."

The news halted my thoughts. I stared at him, not knowing what to say. Luke climbed off my lap and onto Curt's, and I sat speechless as he explained.

"Look, I meant to tell you, but you were in pain. You didn't want me to take the job, but I knew if I went back on the road it would mean I couldn't be available for interviews for new jobs. I agreed to take it with the idea that it would buy us more time to make the decisions we had to make, and then after your disciplinary action, I didn't want to throw more pressure on your shoulders. We just haven't sat and talked."

The stress of weeks' worth of miscommunication melted away. "You're not moving?" I licked my lips and looked at Luke, who had snatched Curt's phone out of his chest pocket and was fiddling with it. Curt had never in his life done anything selfless. I was stunned.

"Yes, baby." He reached over and took my hand. "I'm not moving. I want to be with you. I want to be here to help with Luke. You two are my family. I even found places in Ohio



near the base where I could apply if you want to take back your resignation and just accept the transfer. You can still retire from the army.”

The sentiment brought tears to my eyes. I had never felt so thought of and loved as I did in this moment. I covered my mouth with my hands as the tears began to fall. I didn't even care if Luke saw them. They were happy tears.

“You're not moving?” I asked again, my heart needing that reassurance more than anything right now.

“No, baby.”

“Baby? Mommy not a baby,” Luke chimed in, and I gasped. Just as he said his next line, I spoke too. “Mommy having a baby like Reagan's mommy.”

“Luke, no, don't.” I swiped at my tears, eyes locked on Curt's face as the announcement sank in. He looked confused for a moment, then slowly, his features resolved. His chest rose and fell in a slow rhythm as a smile began to stretch across his face. I couldn't hide my grin either.

“You're going to have a baby?” he asked, searching my eyes.

I nodded, not sure how else to respond because I was about to start bawling. He shook his head as if he didn't believe it. Tears brimmed in his eyes, and he kissed the top of Luke's head.

“Now? Like, my baby?” he asked, still needing the same reassurance I'd just needed.

“Yes, I'm like eight weeks or something. The pain medication messed with my birth control and made it less effective and . . . Yes, we're having a baby.” At the admission, the dams broke. What was a trickle of tears became a torrent. I scooted closer to him, and he threw his arms around me, pulling me in. I tried not to crush Luke, but Curt's embrace was strong. Luke wriggled.

“Hey! Don't squish me.” He pushed at me and slipped off Curt's lap, disappearing down the hallway to his bedroom with Curt's phone.

“Bring that back, you little bugger!” Curt chuckled. “Don’t worry, the passcode is secure. I just hope he doesn’t lock me out for a year.”

I laughed and cried at the same time, holding Curt in my arms. “Are you happy?” I asked him, still on the fence about whether he would be.

“I’m so happy. You have no idea, Serah. I am the happiest man in the world.” He kissed my forehead and squeezed me so hard I could barely breathe, and I knew no matter what decisions we made, it would be alright.

### Curt

**M**y hand shook as I opened the car door to help Serah out of the car. Luke was having an overnight with Evan and Gypsy, and we were having a night on the town. And if everything went according to plan, by the end of the night, we'd be engaged and Serah would be the happiest woman alive. I just had to get to the proposal part without her figuring out why I was so nervous. I held my hand out to help her stand, and she rose like a queen, elegant and sure of herself.

“You are stunning,” I told her with a soft kiss on her cheek. I shut the car and locked it, then held my elbow out to her. She blushed and took my arm.

“So fancy. You didn't have to get a hotel room or anything. It's just dinner on the town.” I led her toward the doors of the hotel. The restaurant inside was one of the best places in town to eat, and I had booked a jacuzzi suite for us. I figured it would help Serah relax, since she had been doubling down on her commitment to use yoga and stretching to reduce her stress and pain levels.

“You're worth it,” I whispered as I slipped the bellhop the key to the car. “Room four eighteen.” I winked. “Two bags in the trunk. Leave the key on the dresser, please.” I had already gone up to the room and spread flower petals and had a cask

with nonalcoholic champagne chilling. The bell hop would have our bags taken up, and the night would be perfect.

As we walked toward the restaurant, Serah's heel caught on the carpet and she nearly took a tumble. I helped her steady herself, but not without jarring her neck. She yelped and winced, and I felt awful. "Gosh, I'm an idiot. I should have grabbed your waist, not your arm," I told her, but my hands shook worse than ever.

"It's nothing. I'm okay." She shook out the layers of her blue dress and offered a soft smile. "Let's go eat."

The host recognized me as we approached and clasped his hands in front of himself. "Mr. Brock, right this way." He made a sweeping gesture with his arm, directed toward the dining room, and we followed. This time, I was careful to make sure Serah was tucked against my side in case she faltered again. We didn't need pregnant momma to fall and get hurt on what was supposed to be one of the best nights of her life.

The dining room was dim, perfect for romance. And the waiter had a basket of fresh-baked bread waiting on us by the time we got to the table. We sat, and he filled our glasses with sparkling grape juice, my request when I made the reservations. I had also requested two of their finest bison steaks with fresh steamed vegetables and rolls, and a slice of carrot cake for dessert. Serah's favorite.

"Gosh, you surprised me, Curt. This is pretty extravagant even for you." Her grin was priceless.

"You haven't gotten to the best part yet. We have a jacuzzi to enjoy this evening, and I think there are some chocolates on your pillow." I winked at her and snapped my napkin out, then draped it over my waist.

"Thank you for arranging this for me. I thought we'd celebrate differently." She unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap too, then sipped her grape juice.

"Well, it's not an easy choice to pack up and move hundreds of miles away from your friends and family, but I

think for our family it means a fresh start and a great chance to see everything life has for us.” Serah had continued with her commitment to resign from the army, and my entire world was rocked when she told me she wanted to move with me to Chicago.

“I think the schools near where we want to buy a home are going to be perfect for Luke.” That had been a tough decision too, talking about Luke’s schooling, but at least she let me hire a private governess to teach him four times a week from home until we moved. It was the least I could do knowing she’d be giving up her position on base and he’d have no childcare.

“I think so too. And it’s really great that you got an interview at Northshore, though the offer Rush made you is pretty awesome too.”

The waiter interrupted our discussion about her job with salads. We paused our conversation until he had refilled our glasses and made his exit. I knew Serah had been apprehensive about the move, but it was good to see her finally excited about a new job. Not only would she have better benefits from whatever hospital she chose to work for, but she’d be paid better and respected more too. It was a win-win, in my opinion.

When the waiter left, Serah said, “Yes, I think Rush made a great offer, but Northshore is so much closer to where we want to buy. I can’t wait to go look at a few properties.” We had discussed making a preliminary trip to the Windy City to tour a few homes. Dad offered to keep Luke—with Maggie’s help, of course—and Serah had agreed. It made everything feel all the more real.

“Serah,” I said, suddenly feeling nervous again. It wasn’t how I felt the proposal would go, but the moment was perfect.

She took a bite of her salad and cocked her head to the side as she chewed, her way of telling me she was listening.

“Things have been touch and go for too long with us. I came home and got the shock of my life, then found out the woman I loved had hidden such a precious little secret from

me. Now I'm going to be a dad again, and we're going to be a family."

"Yes, I know," she said, wiping her mouth. "I thought that was what you wanted." She set her fork down and studied me.

"Oh, it is. Don't get me wrong. That's exactly what I want." I pushed my hand into my jacket pocket and felt the edges of the diamond on the white gold band I had chosen. The tangibility of my love remained pinched between my thumb and forefinger as I continued. "I couldn't want anything more than I want that."

"You're being weird." She snickered. "What's going on?"

I rose from my chair, dropping to one knee as I pulled the ring out of my pocket. "I loved you from the first day I met you, Serah, now almost ten years ago. Your laugh is infectious. Your heart is the size of the sun. You're smart and funny, and you smell like a spring morning just after the rains have fallen. You are the only person who can make me smile when I'm down. You infuriate me to no end sometimes, and the way you put the toilet paper over the back instead of over the front is annoying, but I want to be with you forever.

"I want to wake up with you by my side, looking me in the eye every morning. Hold you while you fall asleep every night. Serah, please say that you will marry me. Be my wife." I held out the ring, and she blinked furiously as if keeping her tears back.

She nodded, slowly at first as if she were adjusting to the idea, like when you inch your way into the cold pool water to avoid feeling chilled. Then her nods became fervent, and she dived into my arms, embracing me.

"Yes, Curt. My God, yes, I will marry you." I heard the emotion in her voice and knew she was crying. I held her to my chest, still clinging to the ring until she calmed in my arms, even as the few tables around us erupted into applause. It was clear what I was doing and what her answer was.

"I never thought this day would come." She pulled away from me, and I rose, pulling my chair around the table to sit

closer to her. I clasped her hand in mine and slid the ring onto her finger.

“I knew it would, but not until I saw you again. That day in the doctor’s office parking lot, I just knew we were supposed to be together. Like the stars aligned to bring you back to me.” I kissed her fingers and stared into her eyes. “And there was no way I was letting you slip away again. In fact, it’s not too late. I can still just take a job here in town. It won’t be along the same lines as my degree, but if you want to stay, I’m staying. You are the most important thing to me now.”

“I like our plan. And I love you.”

I was the happiest I’d ever been, and I never wanted it to change—until baby number two came next spring and brought us a whole new level of love to share.

### Serah

“That one goes over there.” I pointed at the tall stack of boxes with the word *Fragile* scrawled on them.

Curt’s dad carried the box toward the driveway and set it down with the others, then returned into the house. It was moving day for me. I had thirty days left to work, but Curt had to be on a plane first thing in the morning to Chicago. The next month would be difficult without him, but it was all going to be worth it.

“Hey, baby,” Curt cooed, wrapping an arm around my waist. He kissed me generously as Derek and Evan passed by us heading toward the box truck with arms loaded down with boxes.

“Get a room,” Evan called, and I rolled my eyes at him.

“So, the truck is almost full of all your stuff. Think you’ll be okay at my place finishing up?” He let me go, and I gazed up at the house. The door stood open, and inside, I could see Maggie on the floor with Jenson. She had come to help watch Luke while we moved things, but no one was letting me do anything besides bark orders anyway. I could have handled it.

“Yes, well this would all be going faster if you just let me help.” I peeled a strip of tape off Curt’s shirt, left there after a tape war we had this morning. The day had been fun, despite the overprotective nature Evan and Curt had toward me.



“You have no business lifting,” he chided.

“I am pregnant, not an invalid.” At sixteen weeks, it was still early enough I could do everything I would normally do, but Curt still insisted on babying me.

“And you had back surgery less than a year ago. Don’t forget that. So just let me take care of you.” He rested his hands on my hips and swayed them back and forth as he pulled me into himself.

“Just so you know, when you’re gone, I’m going to be packing up the rest of your things, and that means some lifting.”

“I heard that!” Evan called as he walked past. “Don’t worry, Boss, I got your back.”

Evan had taken to calling Curt “Boss” today for some reason. I was happy they were finally getting along like brothers. I loved them both, and it was important to me that Luke learned how real men have strong relationships.

“Alright, let’s finish this bit up and we’re done.” Curt’s dad walked past with another box and turned over his shoulder to add, “And I’ll order pizza for everyone because Luke keeps asking for peppawoni.” He emphasized Luke’s mild speech impediment, which made me grin. Luke fell in love with Pop-Pop, as he called him, and it made me happy that not only did Curt’s return to my life give Luke a father, but he gained a grandfather too.

“Yes, let’s get back to work, and you can keep your grabby hands to yourself until we’re alone tonight.” I snickered and backed away from Curt, but he tugged me against his body one last time.

He whispered in my ear, “But we’re going to have lots of phone sex while I’m gone this month.”

I swatted at him playfully and joined Maggie in the house. She looked up as I sat down next to her, and Isla toddled over to me with a toy in hand. “I don’t know how you do it with two of them the same age. I’m going to have my hands full with baby number two, and Luke will be five by then.”

“It’s not as difficult as you might think. Infant days were tough, especially while nursing, but I managed.”

I looked down at her growing belly and smiled. “I am so happy that our kids will grow up together and have close cousins. I don’t know a whole lot about my family, and I wish I did.”

“Well, the Brocks are about as tight knit as a family can be. You’ll see us about twelve times a year for family functions and even more if you just come to visit. Our kids will have built-in best friends for life.”

“Maggie . . .”

“Yeah?” She set Jenson to the side, and he ran off, Isla following him across the room to where Luke sat coloring.

“Thank you for helping Curt when he needed advice. And thank you for not judging me when my secret came out.”

“Of course, Serah. I would never have judged you.” She laughed, and I wondered why. “You know, when I found out I was pregnant with the twins, I left town. I had no intention of telling Derek because I thought he would be upset with me. We had a fling, and he was vague about his feelings toward me. In the end, it worked out, obviously. My point is, we’re all human, and I think you’ve done a fantastic job with Luke so far. You’re a great mom.”

I sighed happily and watched Luke sharing his crayons with Isla, who instantly walked toward the wall with one in hand. Maggie jumped to her feet to intercept the vandal before she struck just as Evan walked in. I started to get up, and he offered me a hand.

“Here, let me help.”

I reached up and took his hand, but after I was on my feet, he didn’t let go. “What the heck is this!” He stared down at the rock on my finger. Curt’s dad and Derek both walked in at the same time, followed by Curt.

“I, uh . . .” I stammered, holding back a grin. “Curt? You want to tell them?”

We hadn't told anyone we were engaged yet because we were planning to do so tonight when Curt's grill got fired up for the last barbeque of the season. Curt smiled too and shouted, "She said yes!"

I had never been hugged so many times in all my life. Everyone was thrilled that we were engaged, and even the kids got in on the celebration. Curt's dad approached me and planted a kiss on each cheek. His only words were, "It's about time." I didn't disagree.

Life with Curt hadn't seemed possible due to our differences and the way our careers and lives seemed to diverge. But here I stood, surrounded by a family I never knew I needed but always wanted. Falling in love with Curt Brock was one of the bumpiest roads I'd ever traveled, but I'd do it again and again, just to feel the happiness of this moment. He planted a kiss on me that made me weak in the knees, and it was interrupted by his father taking requests for pizza lunch. I stared into Curt's eyes as I wrapped my arms around him.

"I love you, Mr. Brock."

"I love you too, future Mrs. Brock."

## EPILOGUE

Music played softly in the hall, the lights dimmed to allow for a more romantic scene. Gypsy and Evan danced slowly in the center of the room with twinkling lights strung overhead. Tables were organized around the dance floor, and flowers sat on just about every surface as decoration. I couldn't wait to get Serah out on the dance floor for a slow dance.

"She's so beautiful," Serah muttered quietly, and I agreed. Gypsy made a beautiful bride, and Evan beamed with pride. Though I hadn't been invited to be a part of the wedding party, I was invited to sit at the table next to Serah.

"Look," I told her, pointing at Luke who sat on Dad's lap. He had cake smashed in his hands and smeared on his face, but he looked happy as can be. Isla and Jenson toddled around near the table too, also in the care of Dad, who had a new lady friend with him to help.

"Your dad was so kind to help with the kids for the wedding."

"Are you kidding? He loves kids. And with two more grandbabies on the way, he'll be in grandpa heaven after a while." I chuckled and sipped my sparkling cider, chosen to help Serah feel better about not drinking tonight. The music changed over as the crowd applauded the happy couple. The song switched to something more upbeat, and people flooded the dance floor. I wanted to finish my slice of cake before dancing, so I picked up my fork and had a bite.

“You think this many people will come to our wedding?” Serah asked. She munched on some blackberries she’d brought as a healthier option than cake.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, mouth full of food.

“Didn’t your mom ever teach you not to talk with your mouth full?” I felt a slap on my back and turned to see Evan standing there. Serah and I stood and greeted him and Gypsy. Beside them were a couple of strangers. I wiped my mouth and tossed the napkin as Evan made the introductions.

“Guys, this is Cameron and Chelsea. Cameron is Gypsy’s boss. Serah, you’ve probably met him. And Chelsea is his wife.”

The older gentleman reached out his hand, and I shook it. “So nice to meet you.”

“Yes, we’ve met. How are you, Dr. Marshal?” Serah shook his hand too. “And Mrs. Marshal, your daughter is adorable. I saw her little dress, and it made me hope this is a little girl! I can’t wait to dress her up!”

Cameron’s eyebrows rose. “You’re pregnant? How exciting, Serah. Congratulations.”

“Congratulations. And thank you,” Chelsea said, smiling politely. “We are actually trying to get pregnant now. We’d like to have a little boy just like Luke. He’s so polite.”

“Yes, until you take away his iPad,” Serah joked, and it brought a round of laughter.

Evan nodded at me and gestured with his head to follow him, so I did, leaving Serah behind to chat with Gypsy and Chelsea. I followed him a few yards away where he stopped and asked, “So, how are things really going in Chicago? Is she happy? Be honest with me.”

I appreciated his concern for Serah. They’d been friends long enough that it was humbling knowing he wanted to protect her as much as I did. “She’s doing great, Evan. The neck pain is almost gone now thanks to lots of focused attention on healing.”

“She’s off the pills for good?”

“Yeah. She never had a real problem. It was the pain.” It felt good to say those words, that Serah was aware enough to know when enough was enough. “And now that pain is gone, so I’m confident we’re on a new path forward.”

Evan nodded and reached for a glass of champagne as a waiter passed by with a tray. “You know, I’m really glad you came back into her life. You really were the one who got away, and I’d have never forgiven you if you’d ended up breaking her heart again.”

He was an intimidating man. I was in good shape, but Evan was something else. It took a lot of mental and physical determination to be a service member. “I know you would have. Maggie would have too,” I joked, but it was true. I had been an idiot for letting her down back then, and I’d never make that mistake again.

“I’d better go chat with other guests. You just make sure we look as good in the tuxes we get for your wedding as we do tonight. Gypsy can’t keep her hands off me.” Evan winked and strolled over to his beautiful new wife, and I was left laughing. I watched the crowd from a distance, dreaming about how our wedding would go. For December, it was a great turnout. Serah and I had planned ours for the spring, though we hadn’t set an exact date yet.

I couldn’t wait to make her my wife despite having all the privileges of being her husband already. There was just something about the commitment behind the ceremony, the rings, and the certificate that told us we could finally file taxes together. It was the deeper meaning of placing your heart in someone’s hands and knowing they will hold it forever, no questions asked. I wished my mom could have been here for it, but I knew she would be with me in spirit, and until then, I had an amazing woman by my side to keep me in line.

I walked back to Serah, who now sat at our table with Luke on her lap. Dad stood nearby with a twin on each hip. I leaned down and kissed the top of her head, and she looked up at me.

“You ready for this to be us?” I asked her.

“I’ve never been more ready in my life.”

“Aw . . .” Luke whined. “Another wedding?” He pushed his bottom lip out, and we all laughed. He had no clue what it would mean for our family, and I couldn’t wait to show him.

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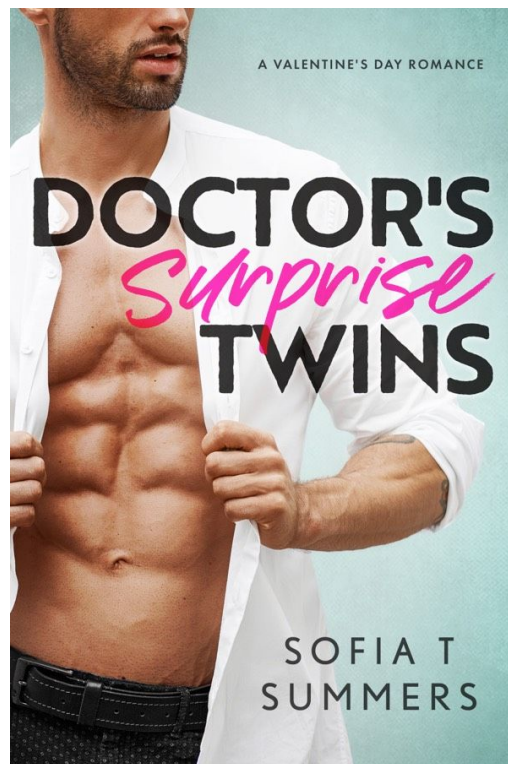
*[Doctor’s Surprise Twins - Derek and Maggie](#)*

*[Written in the Charts - Evan and Gypsy](#)*

*[Rendezvous with My Resident - Chelsea and Cameron](#)*

# DOCTOR'S SURPRISE TWINS (PREVIEW)

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## DESCRIPTION

**Derek never learned he was becoming a father.  
My guilt and his misconceptions made it so much harder,  
And when he delivers my twins, *our twins*,  
That one icy night seems to seal our fate forever.**

I once drew hearts around his name.

We pushed the boundaries of our fine lines,

But he was my brother's best friend—

Off-limits and out of reach.

**Years later, the story hasn't changed.**

**Derek is a OB-GYN at my new hospital,**

**As sexy and self-assured as ever,**

**But our stolen moments aren't just a PR nightmare.**

My heart isn't the only one I need to protect,

And I refuse to be a pawn in a lovers' game.

No matter what he says or does,

Life won't wait for him to realize the truth.

**How did our story end up like this?**

**Did I fool myself into hoping for a better ending,**

**Or will those tempting amber eyes finally see**

**That *we* are worth fighting for?**

## PROLOGUE

### Maggie

**T**he pain was excruciating. It felt like my body was attacking me from the inside out. Thank God Gypsy was there to drive me to the hospital because an ambulance in this town would cost a fortune, and I had already waited far too long.

As early as it was in the pregnancy, there was a risk of complications. I knew that. But I was stubborn and had waited until my body was shutting down instead of rushing to the hospital when the pain was less severe.

“Hold on, okay?” Gypsy whipped the car into the hospital drive, speeding up to the emergency room entrance. She seemed in control but on high alert. I didn’t blame her. I wouldn’t want a pregnant lady giving birth in the front seat of my car either. As it stood, it was too late to stop labor, so the babies were definitely coming.

“Just . . . help me . . . get out.” The contractions were horrible. I had to breathe through them, but even then, I barely held it together. I didn’t know how women did this.

I was not a weak person, but this pain brought me cowering to my knees, wishing my mom were still alive. And simultaneously, I was cursing Derek Holt for the amazing way he’d fucked me and made me an addict for his cock.

“Maggie, fuck . . . this is early.” Gypsy threw the car in park and hopped out. She ran around the front of the car to my side and opened the door, holding out a hand to help me. It did little good. I was a big girl as it was, but with a stomach swollen with pregnancy, I felt like a giant pear, stuck in the bucket seat.

“It’s not too early. Twins come early like this all the time.” I tried to wave off her worry as I strained to get my right foot out the door. Just as my foot hit the edge of the curb, another contraction hit me. I screamed, doubling over and hugging my stomach. It felt like every cell in my body was on fire at once. I couldn’t even tell where the pain was coming from.

“Shit, I’ll be right back.”

Gypsy disappeared, leaving me cradling my womb and crying. I managed to get my other foot out the door and my body turned by the time she returned.

Two male nurses had joined her with a wheelchair. Neither one of them looked experienced with this sort of thing— young, maybe fresh out of college—but I had no choice but to take their hands and let them help me out of the car.

Hovering nervously around me, Gypsy barked orders like a true friend would. The nurses seemed to take it in stride, staying out of her way and talking calmly to me as the next contraction hit. At less than one minute apart, I was really kicking myself that I hadn’t called Gypsy sooner.

Her ninety-minute drive from Yellow Springs to Evansville had allowed the labor to advance further than I should have allowed. And I hadn’t even gotten through to my OB yet.

“Who is your doctor?” The taller male nurse pushed the wheelchair toward the sliding doors while the other told Gypsy to move her car and meet us inside. I was just grateful to be at the hospital where I would receive the care I needed.

“Dr. Rhee, but I didn’t get through to him yet.” I puffed out short breaths, trying to stay relaxed. The nurse took me

right past the check-in desk to an exam room and locked the wheels.

“Dr. Rhee is out today, but we have a great on-call doctor, okay? You’ll like him a lot. For now, we need to get a monitor on you and check your progress. It’s twins?” He helped me out of the chair and turned to sort through a cupboard behind him, tossing a gown, some draped towels, and a bed pad onto the exam table.

“Yes, twins. Fuck—” I used the bed as support when the pain gripped me again. I couldn’t help the tears that fell or the scream I let out. The nurse helped me out of my clothing and into the gown, and I barely made it onto the table before Gypsy staggered in, drenched.

“It’s raining.” She gritted her teeth and shivered, standing at my side and holding my hand.

“I’m okay now. You go back to my place and clean up. I’ll have them call you if I need anything. Maybe you can visit tomorrow.” I took a deep breath, glad to be between contractions. Moving a bit seemed to ease their intensity and made me want to keep moving to keep the pains at bay.

“Are you sure?” She looked hesitant, so I reassured her.

“Of course. I’ve got this now.” Deep down, I didn’t want to be alone, but Gypsy wasn’t a close enough friend for me to feel comfortable with her being in the delivery room with me. I just wasn’t sure how to say that without being offensive. She’d been so great to me.

“Okay, well I’ll be here if you need me.”

She patted my hand and walked out, and as she left, two more nurses walked in. They checked my dilation and strapped two baby heart monitors to me. The pains started coming more intensely again, and I begged for an epidural, but when they couldn’t find the second heartbeat, the nurses got nervous.

“We need to call the doctor and see what he will want to do.” A spindly blonde with a turned-up nose held a phone

receiver to her ear and talked in hushed tones. Before I could protest, they were transferring me to a gurney.

Fear raced through my mind, and I instantly wanted Gypsy back. I wanted my mom, or dad, or even Curt. I felt out of control and I hated it. I was a strong woman, so this should not be scaring me, but an emergency C-section had not been part of the plan. I was supposed to have a natural birth and be able to see my twins and hold them immediately.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Brock,” the spindly nurse said, “we use a spinal block to numb you from the chest down, so you’ll be awake and able to interact with us.” She held her hand out when I whimpered in protest. “It’s not scary. It’s just some pressure you feel, and you’ll get to see your babies right away. The doctor has performed this a million times, okay? It’s routine. Not scary.”

Her words comforted me a little, though I was still concerned as to why they couldn’t hear baby B’s heartbeat on the monitor. I started to get down on myself again for waiting so long to come in. I stared up at the ceiling as they wheeled the bed toward an operating room. It was all happening so quickly. It felt surreal. I had lost all control of the situation and had to trust some total stranger I’d never met to keep me and my babies safe.

I doubled over in another strong contraction and screamed out my pain as the bed came to a stop in a large, brightly lit room. They positioned me on the side of the bed, back arched so the anesthesiologist could numb me. As they worked, I heard voices talking in hushed tones, and I thought I recognized one of them, but I decided it was the pain talking.

Until I lay down and the face of Derek Holt peered down at me.

I thought I’d pass out from the shock. I couldn’t do anything. My body felt like a log. My chest was heavy, whether from the anesthesia or the surprise of seeing my babies’ father here, scrubbed up and ready to do surgery. He looked intense, serious, but not angry—just focused.

“Hello, Maggie.” His face vanished beneath a mask one of the nurses tied on him, and he continued, “I hear you’re having twins.” I heard the emotion in his voice and tried to keep a straight face. “Baby B is missing, huh? Well, let’s do a little search and rescue, shall we?”

His casual nature put me at ease. I knew Derek was a fantastic doctor. I should. I worked with him and saw him in his element. Our history made me ill at ease about his learning my secret, but I was less scared about how things would turn out.

All I could do was lie there and listen to them talking and the sound of my heart monitor beeping. They hung a drape sheet between me and their work, so I was hidden from the blood and mess of it all, but the nurse was right. It wasn’t scary, just a lot of pressure and talking. And before long, I heard one, then two babies crying.

I cried too.

A nurse showed me one baby, then the other. Fraternal twins, one boy and one girl—just like the sonogram showed. They were perfect, and they had my father’s tiny button nose and amber eyes. I was in love. I watched as they wiped the babies off and put them in their tiny beds complete with heat lamps.

“Ms. Brock, we have to take the babies to the nursery to check their blood sugar and do a few metabolism tests. All routine stuff. Doc will sew you up, and Amber and Todd will wheel you back to your room. Your little guys will meet you there, okay?” Spindly nurse had a kind voice, and I felt fatigue setting in, so I nodded and smiled.

They wheeled the bassinets out as I let my eyes blink shut. I was almost dozing off when I heard him ask the dreaded question. I didn’t realize he was already done sewing me up. When I peeled my tired eyes open, he was seated next to me, hair net removed, face mask pulled down.

“When did this happen?”

Derek's eyes pleaded with me not to lie to him, the same eyes that stared into mine time and again as he fucked me into oblivion. My heart fluttered. I still loved him. What I wouldn't do to tell him these babies were his, that I wanted him to take me home and hold me until I felt whole again. To feel that passionate connection we had.

But I couldn't ruin his career—or his friendship with my brother.

I mustered all of my energy and courage. "He's not in the picture, Derek."

I wanted to feel his hand graze the side of my cheek, push my hair out of my face. I wanted his lips to press against my forehead and hear him say my name the way only I could make him. My heart ached for the lie on my lips.

"The timing . . . I don't see how . . ."

"I said he's not in the picture, okay?" A whimper escaped me, and Derek grimaced. I was so tired, and suddenly shivering too.

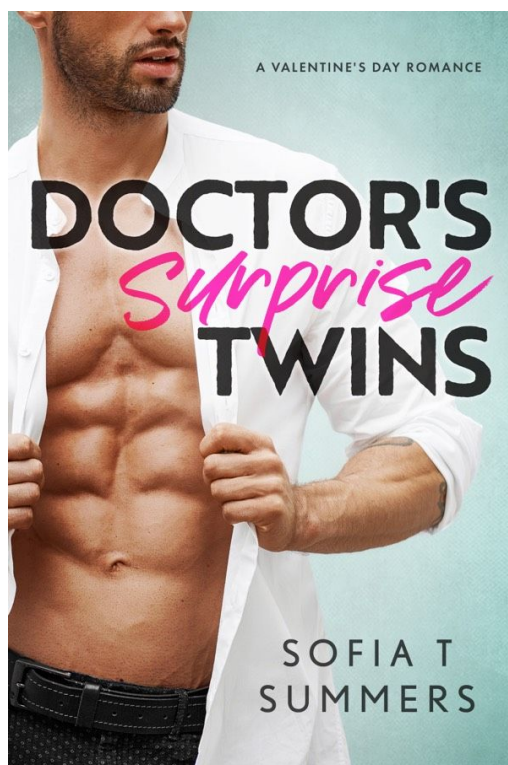
"Todd!" Derek called out, and the door opened. "Thanks for giving us privacy. We need some warm blankets for Maggie now, and she would like to rest a bit. She is exhausted."

Derek stood and peered down at me. I could see the pain and questions in his eyes, but his words remained unspoken. For that, I was grateful.

But later, when I was holding baby A—still unnamed—I noticed Derek staring at me through the window of my recovery room. His intense stare told me he wouldn't give up easily. I thought I'd bought myself the time and space I needed by moving to Evansville five months ago. Apparently, I was wrong. I had no idea he would end up in the same town as me, nor why he was there.

I had to pull my eyes away from him and ask the nurse to shut the blind so I could try nursing the baby. Derek didn't deserve to see that part of me. Not anymore.

End of preview. [Continue reading Doctor's Surprise Twins here.](#)

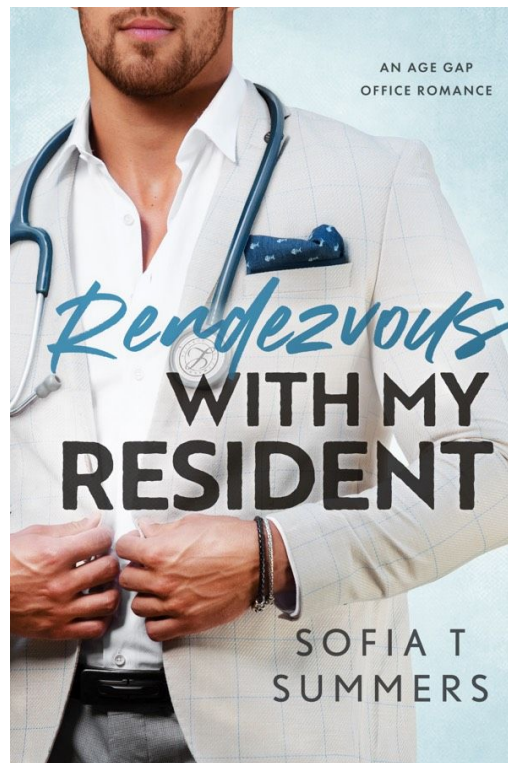


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