



MARLYN LOVE  
THE IRRESISTIBLE SERIES

*Beyond  
Friendship*

# **BEYOND FRIENDSHIP**

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THE IRRESISTIBLE SERIES

BOOK 3

MARLYN LOVE

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Thank You

Acknowledgments

## About the Author

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### **The Irresistible Series:**

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Book 3: Beyond Friendship

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# BRIAN

## *SIX YEARS AGO*

“BRIAN,” Dr. Wilson says from his black leather chair as he rotates his computer screen toward me. His expression is unreadable, but I sense a warning in his voice. “Your test results show irregularity, which could explain the sudden dizzy spells you’ve been having lately.”

I lean forward, brows furrowed as I take in the array of lines on the monitor. When the words finally stop flowing, I sink back into my seat across from him.

“But you’re not completely sure?”

He fixes me with an intense stare and clears his throat. “Vertigo is associated with your condition, and these new results have raised cause for concern. Have you read through the information folder?”

My gaze rambles around the familiar office—its white walls cluttered with diplomas and the thirsty plant withering in its corner next to the window overlooking the crowded parking lot.

“Yeah,” I reply warily. “I’ve gone over it.”

“What do you think?”

A resigned sigh escapes my lips. “Let’s just hope I’ll never need it,” I say, lifting my eyes to meet his.

He twitches a half-smile at the corner of his mouth. “We both agree on that. But, as your doctor,” he says in a stern tone, “I need to remind you that with this condition, things can change quickly.”

Cold chills run through me as painful images from my past resurface. “I know,” I murmur, “but if it stays like this—just a little vertigo every now and then—then there’s no way I’m doing this,” I say, holding up the folder he gave me last time.

“I know it sounds scary, and we’re not at that stage yet, Brian. But if the new medication I’m prescribing you doesn’t work and your symptoms worsen, I’ll urge you to reconsider it.”

When I give him a subtle nod, he switches back to his laptop. “Until next time,” he says while entering something else into his notes, “pay attention to how your body feels and stay away from things that may increase your chances of developing further problems. This includes drinking too much alcohol and taking recreational drugs.” He looks up again and adds one final reminder, “And if you feel a fever—”

“Doc”—I cut him off before lifting myself off the chair and rubbing my finger over my temples—“no need for a repeat every appointment. My brain is working fine. Are we done?” I ask, lifting myself off the chair and rubbing my fingers over my temples.

He nods, sighing. “Yeah, but if you experience any more dizzy spells or one of the other symptoms, you—”

“Yep, I’ll call.”

The warm air hits my skin like a wave once I’m out the door and into the parking lot, and I squint through the sun. I pull my sunglasses down from my head, shielding me from the light. Slipping into my royal blue BMW, a buzz startles me. I press the button on the steering wheel.

“Hello, honey. What did the doctor say?” My mother’s voice is laced with worry.

I take a deep breath before answering. “Mom, I’m fine. Cross my heart. He prescribed something new.”

Her relieved breath comes through the speakers like a whisper. “Okay.”

I switch topics before she can continue any other line of questioning.

“So, Mom, tell me all about dinner with Paul last night. Did you two have a good time?”

An uneasy stillness hangs in the air.

“Mom?”

She emits a deep sigh. “I canceled.”

A sour taste sits in my mouth at her confession.

“Are you still coming for dinner tomorrow? I’m making beef stew.”

From her tone, it's clear this is her attempt to move away from this topic, and I let her. "Looking forward to tasting it. See you tomorrow, Mom."

We say goodbye and twenty minutes later, I turn off the engine and step out of the car, keys jingling in one hand as I make my way up to my front door.

I enter and toss my keys on the side table.

"Hey, ya," comes a voice from across the living room.

I turn to find a blond woman stretched out on my extra-large L-shaped couch, watching TV. "What are you doing here? Didn't I tell you to leave before I left this morning?"

The woman rises from the sofa, her breast on full display, ready to pop out of her tight, low-cut top. I seize my phone and roll my eyes as she swings her hips excessively on her way over to me.

"You one of those grumpy mornin' people, huh?"

"Not when people do what I told 'em earlier. What's your number?" I ask.

Her face shows a content grin as she sums up the digits, but when she reaches her manicured hand out to touch my chest, I step away and show her my screen. "Where to, Tiffany?"

Her smile fades, and her nose scrunches as she understands I'm ordering her an Uber.

"Don't be mad. I told you before we fucked, it stays with one night. Look through the window. A new day."

Tiffany strides back to the couch, snatches her shoulder bag from the ground, and pulls out her iPhone.

"Don't bother. I'm leaving and will order a ride myself," she says, hurrying through the door and slamming it shut.

Not bothered by the blaring television, I shake my head while making my way upstairs. Why do women always get mad when I warn them in advance?

I scratch my beard as I lie on my king-sized bed, staring at the ceiling. It must be the dopamine stuff that releases itself in their bodies and causes them to forget my earlier warning. *Brian Fox doesn't do relationships.*

But hey, that's their problem. I try to sleep, something that doesn't come naturally, but the doc's words have my nerves on edge. After tossing and turning for a while, I slide off the mattress. Instead of napping, I walk back downstairs and drop onto the couch. With a click on the remote lying next to me, I open Netflix and continue watching an action series. The perfect

temporary remedy to power down and claim back control of the internal emotional chaos the hospital visit causes every time.

I SLAM the tumbler of scotch back across the bar at Shooter's club, trying to drown out the doctor's words from this morning. When I spot the empty seat next to my buddy Cole, I ask him, "Where's Nick?"

Cole glances over his shoulder. His six-foot-five powerful physique is like a brick wall, and he has an intense presence that commands attention.

"He messaged me. He's running late."

I shake my head and growl. "Didn't he say he had something important to show us and demanded we be here on time?"

He shrugs. "Yeah."

"Hello, Brian," a sultry voice purrs in my left ear while a hand roams from my knee to my crotch. "Why don't we get out of here and have another wild night?"

I stop the hand and lean back on my barstool, staring into the woman's blue eyes. "It's a hard no from me," I grit, "and if you'd listened last time, you wouldn't be here now."

Her mouth falls slack. "But I thought—"

"Yep, there's your problem."

Fury flares in her eyes and her hand flies up. Before it lands on my cheek, I grab her wrist and lean forward until our noses almost touch. "I warned you last time, Annabel. I don't fuck a woman twice."

I let go of her and turn my attention back to my drink.

"Asshole," she hisses before storming out.

Cole's voice rumbles behind me, "Another broken heart in the path of Brian Fox." As I scan the room, he adds, "You're becoming a real gigolo here, buddy."

I glide off the stool while settling my eyes on the dance floor. "Judge me when you're perfect, Walker. Women avoid you," I fire back. "Maybe if you weren't scowling so hard at everyone who walks by, you'd have better luck." Cole, Nick, and I met when we were in college. We clicked straight away even though we have different personalities. Cole's demeanor can tend to be broody but beneath his intimidating exterior lies his true character; sincere, straightforward, and honest, without any bullshit.

He grinds his teeth and grunts. "I actually like my single life as it is."

A laugh slides past my lips. “Don’t you miss having a warm body to cuddle up next to? Someone who fits into your big double king-sized bed?”

He shakes his head slowly. “Nah, I’m good without all of that.”

We share a knowing smile—he needs every inch of that massive bed to sleep comfortably. Cole and I both don’t do relationships. The only big difference is he also doesn’t do one-night stands.

“I’m looking forward to the day you catch genuine feelings for one of the female species,” he says, raising his beer.

“Not going to happen. I’m content with a life full of temporary lust and desire. That serious shit is not for me.”

He gives me a mischievous smirk. “Just be careful, Foxy-boy. You never know when karma will come knocking—probably wearing some serious heels too—to teach you a lesson or two.”

I pat him on his shoulder as he takes another sip of his beverage. “Life is short; it can be over in a second. So *carpe diem*. I’m going to prowl. See you later.”

I cruise through the crowd of people on the dance floor. I love this intense, vibrant energy, and the loud music is a welcome murmur against the slumbering noises in my head. When I notice it’s not working tonight, I saunter to a dim corner and rest my back against the wall, pushing my thoughts back into the right mindset by focusing on my ultimate dream.

Becoming the owner of a bar/nightclub and turning it into the best one in Boston in the next six years. I can see it so clearly: bartenders crafting cocktails to perfection while exchanging lively banter with customers; a distant lounge area filled with friends relaxing and sharing stories over drinks; and the dance floor—beckoning them to move and groove to electrifying music chosen by Boston’s elite DJs. A grin stretches across my face at the sound of its name. *Six-Pack*—that’s perfect.

I must work hard, never give up, until I create something bigger than myself that remains long after I’m gone. I have no desire for children of my own, so achieving this goal will be the living legacy I leave behind.

A stream of determination flows through me and diminishes the obnoxious ones. *Ah, much better.*

As my eyes dart across the room, they pause on a goddess standing by the entrance door. My tongue flicks over my bottom lip as I try to calm my racing heartbeat. She’s beyond gorgeous, and more important... new.

The attractive woman shakes her head as she looks at her phone, swiping

the screen with her finger. Her eyes survey it as if she's reading an important email or message. Then she slides the device into the back pocket of her deliciously tight pants.

A man stops beside her and whispers something in her ear that causes her to spin around and poke him in the chest with a manicured finger. She says something to him that seems to throw him for a loop. He laughs and puts his hands up in the air as if to surrender, and watches as she walks away. I go back to checking a few text messages, but when I glance back up, my eyes somehow settle on the stunning woman again.

Now she's talking to a man who is smiling at her, but her eyes dart through the room as if she's searching for a way out, and when the guy says something while leaning toward her and touching her thigh, my feet come into action. Carnal appetite rises as I approach her. She's around five-foot-seven with a delicate, yet regal figure, boasting an hourglass shape. Dark chocolate locks frame her heart-shaped face while elegant black heels, paired with tight leather pants, outline her toned calves in exquisite detail. Her rose-colored button-up blouse graces her curves perfectly. Lust roars through my veins when I realize what I plan to do—slide all those layers off her body. But before I do that, let's help her get rid of mister dipshit, who clearly doesn't see she doesn't like his attention.

Stopping beside her, I slide my arm around her waist and say in a low voice,

“Ah, here you are, my goddess.”

It takes a moment, but then a smirk plays around the edges of her lips. “What took you so long, babe?” She places one palm on my chest and looks at where her admirer is standing—only to find him mumbling something and scurrying off. She turns back and time slows to a crawl as we look into each other's eyes, an unspoken connection between us. My subconscious tells me to abort, but I continue to gaze into her depths that are a divine mixture of warm espresso, scattered with droplets of honey in the irises.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, her voice soft and inviting.

“My pleasure,” I reply. “What's your name? This is the first time I've seen a goddess in need around here.”

To my dislike, she takes a step back. But seeing her lips curl up in amusement as she answers my question with one of her own pleases me.

“Do you think you can seduce me with that line?”

I smirk, arching an eyebrow in challenge. With my gaze never wavering

from hers, I reply in a low and suggestive tone, "Seduce you? Not likely. But I can certainly arouse your curiosity."

She takes another step back, leaving a tantalizing distance between us. With her eyes twinkling with mischief, she tilts her head and asks in a playful tone, "Oh really? How do you plan on doing that?"

I step forward and let my fingertips graze her cheek, hoping she feels the spark of electricity that passes between us. Moving my other hand to the small of her back, I lean in closer, my mouth almost touching hers, and murmur softly, "Can you feel this chemistry between us, or is it just me?"

Our eyes lock, and another spark passes between us as she nods in agreement. "If we give in to it, we could create something spectacular tonight," I say.

She takes a small, shaky breath and my heart thumps wildly as I wait for her response.

"I'm tempted, Mister..."

"Fox," I fill in.

The corners of her lips quirk up into a tantalizing grin as she savors the name on her tongue. "But, Mister Fox, I'm waiting for someone."

"Me too," I admit, "but if you say yes to you and me exploring this all night long, I'll cancel my plans."

Before either of us can say anything else, her phone beeps in the background, interrupting our moment. She groans out in frustration. "I'm sorry, but I really have to take this call."

I shove my hands deep into my pockets to stop them from touching her as I answer her with a simple, "Sure."

She lifts her phone to her ear and angles away from me, her voice low and melodic as she confirms the meeting place.

"Oh, you owe me an evening of free drinks," she says into her phone. "See you in a second," she adds before hanging up.

My breath quickens when her attention drifts across my body. A half a head shorter than me, yet her presence commands authority.

"Boyfriend?"

Her brow furrows, and she shakes her head. "No, of course not. I wouldn't have flirted with you if I had a boyfriend. Do you have a girlfriend?"

Before I can answer, someone calls out.

"Amanda!"



My heart drops as I recognize the voice, and my jaw clenches when a familiar figure comes our way. With his eyes never leaving my goddess, he strides toward her with a smile stretching across his face before throwing his arms around her and pulling her close.

“Hey, Sis. Good to have you back in Boston.”

*Fuck. No!*

“I missed you too,” she says, returning his hug before breaking away to look at me with an almost apologetic expression. A sinking feeling washes over me as I stare at my best friend, Nick, who has sun-kissed brown hair, sharp chocolatey eyes, and a lopsided grin that melts the hearts of many women. He meets my gaze and his brows arch up in surprise. “Fox? What were you doing with my sister?”

“You know him?” she inquires.

Nick’s face breaks into a wide grin and he strides toward me, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Amanda, meet my best friend, Brian Fox.”

Her jaw drops, accompanied by a rosy hue brushing her cheeks. “Best friend,” she mumbles, attempting to disguise her embarrassment by hanging her chin low.

*Oh, fuck. You gotta be kidding me.*

Tension hangs in the air as I swallow hard, trying to hide my inner turmoil. *How could I not have seen she’s my best friend’s sister?*

Nick’s gaze sharpens, and he glares at me. “Please tell me you haven’t been flirting with my sister? You are such a shameless womanizer,” he says as his hand slams playfully against my chest.

“Never. A moron was pestering her, so I interceded.” When Amanda’s and my eyes meet, I quickly divert my gaze back to Nick.

He grins, but as his lips stretch into a smirk, I don’t miss the warning glance in his eyes.

“Thanks for that. However, don’t even think about screwing with my little sister. She’s not one of your casual hookups.”

Nick looks at his relative. “Brian is one of my best friends,” he says, “but he’s also the biggest flirt and breaks a heart every weekend.”

Amanda swallows and bites her lip.

Nick’s oblivious to his sister’s reaction and changes the subject, asking where Cole is; I point him in the right direction.

“Let’s go, Amanda,” he tells her, already moving through the crowd. I

take a step forward, ready to follow his lead, when a gentle touch on my shoulder whips me back to reality.

“Brian?” she whispers.

I freeze, taking a shallow breath as I realize what must be done.

I can feel her eyes burning into me and as I turn, the intensity of her gaze makes my stomach churn with dread. I force myself to look at her.

*How have I not noticed that she has the same dark, expressive eyes as her brother?* Dammit, Nick. Just as I’m ready to blame it on him, I remember my best friend mentioning his sister coming back to Boston after having lived and worked elsewhere for years. *Well, fuck me.* My heart sinks and if my dick had a voice, it would scold me now, trying to prevent me from doing what needs to be done. If were anyone else, it would have been so easy to succumb to the heat between us and take her home for the night. And with our connection, I’m not doubting it would be sensational, but knowing who she is and the risk that comes with it, I can’t do that—she can only stay a fantasy I’ll never fulfill.

She opens her mouth as if to speak, but before she can say anything, I lean close to her ear and murmur, “Let’s forget what happened.”

Blood pumps through my veins as she straightens her posture, locking her gaze with mine.

“Yeah, that would be better, wouldn’t it?”

My conscience and my libido are at war inside of me as I try to determine the correct course of action while simultaneously daydreaming about undressing the beautiful woman in front of me and running my tongue over every inch of her body. I grit my teeth. No, not an option. She’s my best friend’s younger sister. I take a deep breath and try to keep my expression as calm as possible.

“I will not jeopardize my friendship with your brother. So it’s better we forget what happened.”

She sighs but nods.

A pang of something—guilt? Regret?—hits me in the chest.

And a moment later, it’s accompanied by a sudden strange yet alarming set of palpitations in my chest. I press a hand against my heart. This, along with the fact that she’s my best friend’s sister, further cements the impossibility of us ever being together, so I murmur, “We can be friends, but that’s all it will ever be.”

She edges closer to me, her fingertips brushing my arm. “Guess we’ll be

friends with chemistry then.”

I swallow hard, trying to push away the sensations that fill my body from her touch.

She stares at me for what feels like an eternity, not saying anything. I wait for her to speak, and she does.

“Let’s go,” she says before walking off toward my two closest friends sitting at the bar.

An hour later, I’m captivated by Amanda Brown as we talk.

“So a clothing boutique,” I say with a smile, admiring her ambition to start her own business.

Nick, sitting on the other side of his sister, says, “Brian is going to own his own bar/nightclub soon.”

Amanda sits up. “How far along are you with this plan?”

“Getting there,” I reply. “These two are a big help.” I shoot them both a grateful smile. Nick is born with entrepreneurship coursing through his veins and a brain for business pointed enough to make him a millionaire. The only thing he fails at is cooking—you should have seen the kitchen after he attempted to make an omelet. Cole, on the other hand, can craft flawless contracts but has the dancing finesse of two left feet. Together, they are an unstoppable force when it comes to investing in upcoming businesses. “With their help, I’m on the road to realizing my dream.” For a moment, the guilt of keeping my condition from them wants to take over. What if they invest and I...? I quickly stop my thoughts and focus on the woman beside me.

She rewards me with an earnest smile. “That’s amazing, Brian.”

As the evening progresses, Nick leaves us behind to dance with a girl he recognizes and couldn’t resist. Cole, however, left to find refuge in his own world by working on some business deals he had slated for the night, which leaves Amanda and me alone. We sit at the bar, and I notice her sneaking peeks at me in between sips of her drink.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

“I’ve seen you drink tonight, but no alcohol?” She gazes into her cocktail glass, grinning. “Guess I caught myself assuming that every future bar owner drinks alcohol.”

My smile widens, savoring how she doesn’t question if I’ll realize my dream but assumes it’s happening. I could tell her I have my occasional alcoholic beverage, but never more than two, but where’s the fun in that? So, I say, “Well, another assumption debunked then.”

Her laugh tinkles like a bell, setting off sparks in my gut. Our eyes lock like magnets, like they have all night. There's that damn spark again, tempting me to lean closer and caress her skin. *Why does she have to be Nick's sister?* If not... we wouldn't be chatting here at this bar. No, we'd be tangled up in my bed with her moaning my name while I'm nestled between her thighs.

She glances at her small wristwatch. "I think it's time to call it a night."

Nick strides in our direction. The woman he's been dancing with has her hands firmly clasped around his arm. His whimsical smirk is an undeniable evidence of his intentions.

"I'm heading home," Amanda says to her brother, who raises a dubious brow.

"Oh, right. Let me..." He glances at the woman, then back at Amanda as she shakes her head.

"Don't worry, I'll grab a cab."

"No, I promised you a ride home, so—"

"Let me," I interrupt without hesitation. "I'll drive Amanda back. You have fun."

He looks from her to me, his eyes narrowing. "You're sure?"

"Yup, had one drink hours ago, so I'm able to drive. She'll get home safe."

"No funny business with my sister, understood?" When I nod, a relieved smile etches over his lips. "Thanks, man."

"No problem."

As soon as we step out into the night, Amanda turns facing me. "No need to go out of your way. There's a cab—"

"No way." My voice is stern as I cut her off. "You're coming with me."

Without further protestations, we hop into my car and speed off.

"Nick's place, I assume?"

She nods with an air of resignation. "Yeah, for the next two weeks—then I can move into my own place."

We zip through the night in silence. The slight movements she makes are magnified in this moment, like when I watch from the corner of my eye as she leans forward and removes one of her shoes with a sigh of relief, wiggling her toes with blissful pleasure.

"Maybe next time wear flats when going out?" I suggest casually.

Her brown eyes shift my way. "Not a chance. They're an essential part of

this outfit—no pain, no gain.”

I ask curiously, “And what is the gain?”

A devilish grin teases the corner of her lips as she says, “Having a good-looking lifted ass!”

We both chuckle and continue on our journey.

“So what kind of movies do you like?” she asks out of the blue.

I shrug. “Mainly action films and Marvel stuff.”

She shakes her head and grins. “No surprise there. Who is your favorite superhero?”

The words leave my mouth before I can even think twice about it. “I love Wonder Woman.”

Amanda’s eyes light up as she sees my embarrassment for confessing to having a ‘crush’ on the character. “Oh, really? Like the one played by Gal Gadot?”

I nod and add with a smirk, “You could totally pull off her look for Halloween.”

She laughs again.

As we pull up to Nick’s, I switch off the engine. “Well, guess I’ll see you around then.”

She twists toward me. “I suppose so.”

Her warm brown irises penetrate my soul, and everything inside me screams to do more than gaze upon each other, yet I can’t take action.

My gaze drifts to her mouth as she tugs at her lower lip.

“Too bad you’re his best friend because honestly, I haven’t felt this gravitational pull before.”

With that said, she steps out of the car without looking back, striding gracefully toward the entrance.

As I watch her walk away, an onslaught of unknown but powerful feelings course through me like boiling hot coals.

*Guess Karma is wearing heels tonight.*



# AMANDA

## TWO YEARS LATER

I GASP IN DISBELIEF, my breath hitching as I rake a hand through my hair while squinting at the barely white and so far from the vibrant pearl walls I intended my store to have. This isn't what I asked for. This is—totally hideous.

My stomach churns with anxiety, frustration boiling beneath the surface. The store needs vibrance, something that'll catch people's eye and draw them in. Not this dullness; not when I've worked so hard to get everything ready for the grand opening in seven days.

I march toward the cans of paint that the painters left behind and grab for my phone to call them back when I finally read the labels—Powder White. *How hadn't I noticed it?* Probably because I was too busy running around getting everything done and had just assumed it was the right paint. Working in fashion has been a dream of mine since I was young. So when the chance to work at an upscale fashion store in New York City came up after I graduated, I was ecstatic. Although I enjoyed the job for some time, they eventually began to cater to an unrealistic beauty standard with their clothing sizes. I expressed dissent toward this and was given the ultimatum: accept it or find another job. At first, I stayed because I needed the money, but when I found a woman sobbing and scolding herself in the dressing room because she couldn't find anything that fit her, I knew I couldn't stay any longer. Counseled by a dad who had opened his own gym and instilled in Nick and

me the importance of achieving our dreams, I knew what I had to do—open a store of my very own. A place where women can be empowered, feel beautiful and accepted regardless of size and shape, without the pressure of impossible ideals pushed by society. I want it to be a safe space for all women to embrace themselves and all of their quirks, flaws, and unique qualities without judgment. But now, looking at the walls, I feel like a failure. I put all my savings into this dream. And the thought of it falling apart is my worst nightmare.

I swallow down the growing panic at the chaos around me and take a deep breath in and out. Okay, everything will be okay. I can figure this out. Three long hours later, after frantically searching multiple stores, I'm surrounded by the correct color paint cans and stare at the task ahead.

I reach for my phone to call Nick but remember he and Cole are away on business.

Shit. I consider Brian. He said he'd help when he had time. But with Six-Pack's sudden success, his workload must be insurmountable. I can't ask him to take care of a problem I've made for myself. And with my parents gone for a few days, I'm on my own. I huff, regretting that I haven't taken the time to get out and make friends since moving back to Boston. Female friends would be great; someone to open up to and spend quality moments with. But today won't be it; instead, I tie my hair into a ponytail, donning an old pair of jeans and flats as I get started, alone.

The bass throbs through my speakers, drowning out all other concerns except the task at hand—three days until the shipment of clothes arrives. The garments must be hung up straight, and since I don't have enough storage space for them now, the paint needs to be bone dry before delivery.

A pleased smile forms on my face as my brush moves up and down gracefully, coating the wall in pearl white. But the optimism fades quickly when I realize that two coats are necessary for an even result. I'm going to be here all day and night, alone with my spiraling worries. *What if the store can't keep up? What if I can't bring in enough customers? Will I succeed or will all this effort have been for nothing?*

During a quick lunch break, I answer Nick's text, wherein he asks me how it's going. I sugarcoat it, not wanting to worry him but making it believable by saying I'm a little overwhelmed and stressed. The sudden ping notifies an incoming message in my mailbox. My fingers tremble as I open the email that reads "Delivery Notice." No! After a call, the voice on the



other end of the line confirms my worst fears. Instead of arriving in three days, my clothes will be here tomorrow afternoon.

Jesus. Tears prick at my eyes, but I quickly wipe them away. No time for a pity party. My jaw clenches as anger and frustration rise from my gut and swirl around me, but I shove it all down. It's fight or flight, and I'm ready to fight. This is my dream, and I'm going to make it a success.

Many hours later, my arm and shoulder scream with pain as they pump up and down, while my legs feel numb. It's one o'clock in the morning and all I've done is paint for hours on end, pausing only to sip a cup of coffee or make use of the restroom. My eyes are strained, exhausted, begging for restful sleep, when a throat clears behind me.

Pivoting around, my heart leaps at the sight of the man who does weird things to my ticker every damn time.

I try to give him a small, yet genuine smile, but my lips can barely form one.

"What are you doing here?" I say.

Brian smiles. "Nick called me. He said he was worried about you after reading your text."

It's clear my brother saw right through my polite words.

Brian's gaze drifts over me and he frowns. "What are you still doing here? You look like you're about to drop dead on your feet."

"Thanks for the pep talk," I mumble, gesturing to the half-painted walls as I slap another coat of paint onto it. "I'm still here because I bought the wrong shade and am trying to fix it, but it needs a double coat to look like I intended it.

"Can't it wait till tomorrow?" he suggests.

I stop painting and peer up at him. "I received an email that my shipment is coming tomorrow rather than the day after."

"Ah, okay," he says. "Why didn't you call me for help, Amanda?" he asks, his voice heavy with concern.

"Because I put myself in this mess." My arms move, but my fingers are starting to feel numb from constantly gripping this brush.

Seconds later, I find Brian beside me. His coat is gone, and he squats next to me while grabbing a new brush and dipping it into the can of paint.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

Our eyes meet in a moment of stillness, and he tenderly tucks an unruly lock of my hair behind my ear. The soft, compassionate smile on his face

intensifies that connection I've been trying to withstand, but it sticks like glue.

"Helping a friend," he whispers back before gesturing toward the untouched cabinet to our left. "Shall we start with that one?"

I let out a tired sigh and nod at him. "Thanks."

"You should have called me, Brownie." The nickname he usually calls me fills my tired body with warmth. We move side by side, our brushstrokes in harmony.

"How's Six-Pack doing?"

He grins, his face lit up with pride. "Pretty good. People seem to like it, and we're doing better every week."

His enthusiasm is contagious, and I can't help but smile back. "It doesn't surprise me. The place turned out amazing. I remember overhearing people in the diner across the road raving about it while I waited in line. Their eyes light up when they talk about it," I comment.

He beams even brighter, his chest puffing with pride at the recognition of his hard work. What he doesn't know is that the women were also gossiping about how 'hot-as-fuck' the owner was too—though I won't bring it up. Jealousy burns in my stomach as thoughts of what could be if we weren't just friends run through my head.

His phone blares, and he answers it gruffly. Seconds later, his voice is a deep baritone.

"Who gave you my number?"

I'm close enough to hear a woman's voice utter something that makes him sigh deeply and look away from me. He mumbles in response, "I'm not interested. Just tell Delilah to delete my number."

He breaks the call abruptly and turns to me, his gaze intense.

"Broke another heart?" I ask knowingly because in the years I've known this man, I've become familiar with his fleeting romantic entanglements. In Brian's language, a 'good night' is a fling with no strings attached. Usually, women don't mind; they tell him what he wants to hear until the night ends and they attempt to change his mind. I shake my head silently; good luck with that effort.

Brian stares at me as if challenging me before he speaks.

"Someone gave her my number, and she called to..." His words trail off, but I know what he's going to say—she wanted to be one of his 'good nights.' Thinking that perhaps she'd be the one who would make him rethink

his stance on relationships.

My eyes glide over Brian. His charisma is palpable, like a force of nature. Everywhere he turns his attention, it feels like the universe revolves around that single individual. Even after all these years of being friends, I still find myself spellbound by him. There's a certain connection between us, so strong that I can feel it sizzling in the air whenever we lock eyes.

My heart drums with anticipation as my mind indulges in fantasies of what could be. *What if I initiate the first step? Would his lips be as smooth and inviting as they seem in my dreams? Would his touch set me alight with passion?* I will never know; not only because he's best friends with my brother but also because he's a close friend to me. With a heavy sigh, I force myself to repress the intense emotions that have been brewing ever since the night we first met.

My lids feel heavy and my muscles ache as I murmur, "I need a break," getting up from the ground to retreat to the corner chair wrapped into a blanket. He turns to face me, his perfect lips mimicking the word 'okay' before spinning back around, his golden locks shifting with each movement.

God, he's so beautiful. His shirt clings to his body in all the right places, highlighting every curve of muscle beneath that he acquired through regular workouts with the guys. My pulse quickens at the thought of being close to him, and I fight against it, trying to stay focused. But when I close my eyes, the hint of sandalwood and citrus teases my nose and pulls me into a dreamscape inhabited only by him.

My name rolling off his lips in a soft, inviting tone gets me to open up. I blink away the haziness, struggling to remember where I am before he speaks again.

"Good morning, Brownie?" He chuckles, but I hear the exhaustion in his voice and know it's time to get back to work after my moment of rest.

"Let's get back to work." Reluctantly, I stretch out my body, dreading the thought of hours of painting, only to find myself stunned by what I see; the walls are all finished. My eyes flitter across the room, noticing even the intricate woodwork is pearl white.

"It's done," I cry out in disbelief, not quite believing that the immense task is finished.

Brian stretches out his own exhausted frame and a weary smile tugs at his lips as he hears my reaction.

"How is this possible? What time is it?"

I glance at the clock on the wall. “What? Eight o’clock. Oh my God, I fell asleep?”

He chuckles.

I face him. “Brian. Why didn’t you wake me?” I grumble, feeling an odd sense of warmth bubbling up inside me.

He shrugs before offering a reply. “You were exhausted, so...”

Without conscious thought, I take him by the neck and hug him close to me. “Thank you,” comes my muffled voice against his shoulder.

His arms encase me, pressing me closer with care, like I’m made of something fragile and precious.

“Hey, that’s what friends do,” he murmurs in my ear. His words are loving, and I shudder involuntarily with pleasure at the warmth of his breath on my skin. Heat gathers in my body as I recognize the strength of his muscles below my palms while his hand glides lightly up and down my back in a mesmerizing motion. He isn’t pulling away from the embrace either. *Does this mean anything? Is he enjoying this closeness the same way I am?*

I lean back, and the electricity between us is palpable. The connection I’ve been striving to deny all these years is finally staring me in the face, begging for acknowledgment as our eyes meet.

I press myself against him, and his gaze sparks with a familiar longing, like he’s been waiting for this moment too. My heart races in anticipation. My lips are barely a breath away from his when he abruptly pulls away with an agonized expression on his face.

“I’m sorry. I can’t,” he whispers. A powerful ache surges through me and a single tear slips down my cheek as he strides across the room, collecting his things. “I’m going home to take a shower and nap before heading off to Six-Pack. You should rest too, Brownie.”

Before I can reply, and without looking at me, he’s gone, leaving me grateful for his assistance but swamped by the longing to understand. *Why am I not enough?*



## BRIAN

*Present.*

WITH MY BACK to the dance floor, I grasp the glass filled with liquid amber and let the bubbling laughter that's permeating the room seep into my ears. I'm so attuned to her presence that my senses are on high alert every time I'm in the same space with her. *Don't turn and look.* Focus on something else. But I can't, so I sneak a peek over my shoulder at the goddess standing a few meters away in conversation.

She's wearing a low cleavage mint-green dress, her open back exposing her sculpted figure in a way that entices all males in the area. Her date is standing beside her, and my hand clenches around the tumbler when I see how he rests his hand on her hip.

"Okay, give this to me before it breaks."

I frown at Darius, who's prying the tumbler from my hand.

"You're not working, boss. Go have fun. Why don't you ask Amanda to dance?"

My head snaps to my loyal employee. "What?"

"You've been grinding your teeth and eye-fucking her the whole damn time. I've never seen you this tense."

"I'm not... tense, and I'm not eye-fucking anyone. Especially not one of my friends."

My phone buzzes. I glance at the screen and walk off. "I need to take this. You keep pouring drinks."

Once in the less noisy hallway, I answer.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Hi, honey. How’s Cole’s wedding party going?”

My heart swells with warmth, hearing the pride in her voice. After entering my office and closing the door, I sink into my leather chair. “Six-Pack looks fantastic. I snapped some photos, and I’ll show you when we have dinner Wednesday night.”

“Any interesting single women tonight?” she asks.

“Mom!”

“What? I’m just hoping to see you in a committed relationship soon. My darling boy deserves a wonderful woman by his side.”

I rub my hand over my face as she continues.

“Brian, sweetheart. You’re an amazing man. It’s time to stop those playboy one-night stands and find a special woman who you can keep around for more than one night.”

“MOM,” I say with a cough. “I’m thirty-two.”

“Exactly. And you’re blessed with your father’s charisma and handsome appearance. Women always loved getting his attention.”

“Until he met you. Dad always said you rocked his world from the moment he met you and that it never changed.”

Her stifled sob echoes in my ear, and my heart aches with sadness as an image of them dancing through the living room rises. Their love was pure and intense.

“I miss him,” she whispers.

“Yeah, I do too.” I sigh, heavy with sorrow when I think of my father, knowing his death left a gaping wound that made her shut the door to any other romantic relationship since then.

My mom clears her throat and changes the subject. “Now, have you called the doctor yet, Brian?”

My jaw sets, feeling the worry in her voice. “Mom, I’m still not sure what to do.”

“Sweetheart, I know it sounds scary, but that operation could lower the risk of you dying if things go wrong. Why don’t you talk about it with your friends? They—”

“Mom, they don’t know,” I cut in.

“Oh, Brian. Why haven’t you told them?”

“Please, Mom, don’t.”

She lets out a deep sigh. “Okay, we’ll talk about it at our Wednesday dinner. It’s time to hang up, so you can follow my advice and search for a woman who wants more than a good night.”

I chuckle at her subtle warning.

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too. Have fun and give my best wishes to Cole and his wife.”

“Will do.”

After hanging up, I lean back in my chair before opening a special photo album on my phone. Staring at my parents’ smiling faces, I can almost feel the warmth of their embrace. But then, like a sniper’s arrow hitting his target, pain stabs through me as I remind myself how their love and happiness turned into unimaginable pain in a blink of an eye. I witnessed my mother go from being happy to sinking into despair after my father’s death. And there was nothing I could do. The sound of her endless, gut-wrenching sobs still echoes in my ears when I lie in bed at night. This is why I stick to fleeting romances. I don’t want someone to suffer the same anguish as my mom did.

Amanda comes to mind; the only woman who makes it hard for me to stick to my one-night stand pattern. She elicits feelings that are extraordinary, powerful, and scary as fuck. And regardless of how hard I try to deny them, they stay as a thick splinter that won’t break away. Every time I see her, an impulse within me yearns to surrender to these feelings, but I know she’s better off as a good friend than a lover. That’s the number one reason why I banned us into the friend zone six years ago. She deserves someone who can offer her an assured future. The only thing I can give her is dread and an uncertain tomorrow. Two things she doesn’t deserve. She deserves love and to have that gorgeous smile on her face all the time.

I yank open the drawer of my desk and snatch the booklet given to me by Dr. Wilson two days ago. Through gritted teeth, I flip through the pages, seeing the same words I’ve read before. And ICD. A precaution, an emergency device for when my ticker stutters or stops. It enhances my chances of surviving, nothing more, nothing less. Just like my father, I have a heart that’s like a grenade with a wonky safety pin. Only he didn’t know he had it until it was too late. I do know. Which feels like I’m living with the sword of Damocles lurking in the shadows every day. My chest heaves, my breathing quickening as I violently slam the drawer shut. *Time to focus on fun things.*

With my phone back in my pocket, I rise and make my way back to the



party. Seeing the newlyweds together fills me with joy. Cole and Alisha, who would have thought? Two years ago, Nick invited Cole and me to meet his new girlfriend, Emma. Her two friends, Alisha and Bella, accompanied her. The moment Cole and Alisha saw each other, there were sparks flying between them, though neither of them wanted to admit it. We found out they met once before, which ended in an argument and Alisha giving Cole the nicknames Grumpy and Bulldozer. But then life threw them both a curveball and they needed each other—whereupon love blossomed instead of disdain.

My gaze races around the room, seeping in its spotless glory, my sanctuary and hard-earned success. After years of working night and day to get customers, Six-Pack is now a luxurious club that offers its services for events and weddings with effortless grace. It's a pleasure to make people content and give them a place to temporarily put their worries aside.

Staying busy with my business or hanging out with my two best friends keeps me from thinking about the uncertainty of life. But now that they are both married, things have changed.

My muscles stiffen as my gaze focuses on Amanda, perched atop the barstool, and her current beau, Steven, hovering possessively next to her. My opinion of Amanda's taste in men has never been positive. Throughout the years, I've seen her attempt to find a man worthy of her. But till now, none of them have realized what they had in their arms. And I'm kind of thankful for that. Because what Amanda needs is a man who can recognize how special she is and worship her for the successful goddess she has become. And the dipshit she has been dating sure didn't see that.

Within seconds, I find myself back behind the bar. Steven is around my height, with a decent physique, but I'm pretty sure I could beat his ass in the gym. My teeth are grinding against each other in frustration when I hear him lecture her about having another drink.

"Drinking alcohol has been shown to cause premature aging in the skin," he tells her, winking. "It also messes with brain cells and encourages people to do stupid things that make them end up in the ER."

Before he can preach any more medical mumbo-jumbo, I cut in and stand next to Darius as I shoot Steven a piercing look. "If Amanda wants another cocktail, she gets one."

Mister dipshit crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow at me. "I'm not saying she can't," he scoffs. "I'm just giving her my professional advice."

"Well, it's terrible advice," I reply. "Amanda's skin is going to survive

one more drink. She's celebrating her best friend's wedding."

I reach for a glass from the shelf and fill it with ice, then pour in a combination of cherry liqueur and vodka before placing it in front of her. "One Red Russian for the lady," I say with a smile. Her eyes meet mine for a moment before darting away.

"So you don't drink alcohol?" Darius questions Steven.

"Only in moderation. I'm wiser because I'm a doctor."

I'm rolling my eyes inwardly at his arrogance. Yeah, right. Wiser, my ass. You presumptuous dick. *What the fuck does she see in him?*

My heart rate increases as he steps closer to Amanda and asks, "Why don't you forget the drink and come out to dance with me?"

Amanda looks between my Red Russian and the guy holding out his hand.

Don't do it, I silently beg. But it doesn't work. I watch her push the drink away and hop off the barstool to take his hand. It feels like I just received a punch in the stomach. As he leads her to the dance floor, I pick up the drink I made for her and take a big gulp.

"I can't stand him," Darius states while wiping a glass.

I glare over my drink at them. "Me neither. What the hell does she see in him? He's nothing more than a condescending jerk who thinks he knows it all because he's a doctor. He has the gall to tell a woman like Amanda that she shouldn't drink alcohol due to skin aging or some other stupid shit."

Darius gazes at me silently before leaving to help other guests.

A slow melody starts up, and my stomach knots as I observe Steven move his palms down to her hips. *He's her date. He has the right*, I remind myself. My hand hovers over a fine bottle of whiskey, but before I can pour my glass, the smooth timbre of a voice murmurs from behind me.

"Ah, there you are."

I turn, and Cole's crooked smile greets me. "Go to my wife," he commands. "She wants you to dance with her."

The edges of my lips pull against one another in amusement as I give him a questioning look. He has earned himself quite a fitting nickname from his delicate bride for his height of six-foot-five, broad shoulders and biceps that seem to have lives of their own.

"Can't the 'Mighty Bulldozer' please his wife tonight?" I jest.

Cole chuckles softly and the twinkle in his eye is unmistakable—a tell-tale sign of how much this feisty woman has changed him since they've been

together. Prior to Alisha, he repelled all forms of love and was content to live in solitude. In some strange way, we are similar; creatures cloaked in darkness, but Cole has something I'll never have—the opportunity to take off his shield and have love.

“Oh, shut up, Fox. She is determined to get dances out of all the men here.”

“In that case, it may as well be me. I'll show her how it's done.”

Cole's booming laughter follows me as I make my way over to Alisha.

“What did you tell my husband?” the radiant bride inquires.

I grin. “That he looks like an Irish tap dancer even when he's not moving.”

Alisha giggles and sends an air kiss over to her partner.

“Come on, lovely.” I offer her my hand.

She takes it and I spin her around, causing her to raise an eyebrow. “You can dance?”

I laugh at her shocked expression before guiding her around the room.

“Yep, my hidden talent. My mom enrolled me in ballroom classes when I was thirteen. She said girls like a man who can dance. And she was correct.”

After a few upbeat songs, I can't help but say, “Cole is right about Steven. He's a dickless rooster. What does Amanda see in the twat?”

Alisha inspects me. “Maybe that he's a kind and successful doctor who's interested in her. You should be happy for her.”

I let out a huff. “How can you say that? It's clear he's not right for her.”

Alisha peers at me and I continue, “She doesn't need a man who criticizes her every decision.”

“Wow, them dating sure bothers you.”

I shrug and spin her around. “Of course, and it should bother you too. She's our friend. Don't we protect our friends from pain and bad choices?”

“Yeah, but I don't think that's your true motive,” she states with an unwavering voice.

I grit my teeth and press my lips together, trying my best to stay composed. “What do you mean?”

Alisha shakes her head and takes a step closer. “Brian, you really are an ostrich. Admit it, you've got feelings for Amanda that go beyond friendship.”

I stand motionless, trying to ignore the pounding of my heart.

“When you two gaze at each other, it's like electricity,” Alisha states. “But if you keep this up, you'll find yourself watching as another man

sweeps her off her feet and into a wedding dress—and then it'll be too late.”

A chill runs down my spine as I imagine Amanda standing before the altar, hands locked with the dipshit doctor.

Alisha crosses her arms, piercing me with her gaze. “Let me tell you something as Amanda’s friend. If you can’t be honest about your feelings for her, stay away from her love life and let her make her own choices.”

“I care about her like a sister,” I protest tightly. “She’s free to do whatever she wants. I’m just looking out for her well-being.”

“Bull,” she fires back. “And you know it.”

Her next words come slower, each one chosen carefully. “Let me drive home my point by using another method.”

A sudden piercing ache races down my right foot and I understand why when I realize her heel is embedded in it. Our dancing pauses.

“Ah, there is my latest dance partner,” Alisha says with an upbeat tone. When I glance to the side, I see we stopped near Steven and Amanda. I glower at the bride, or should I say scheming witch.

“Time for a dance, my old neighbor. We have not waltzed yet. And there is a rule that states you can’t refuse the bride on the day of her wedding,” she says in a sweet voice, yet her eyes gleam with mischief.

Steven laughs and agrees.

Before Amanda has the chance to speak, Alisha grabs Steven’s hand and tugs him away. Then Alisha shoves me forward and I almost walk into Amanda.

Immediately, the sweet scent of her perfume surrounds me—a mix of warm vanilla, almond, spices, and musky wood. Amanda peers at the other couples around us as she bites her lip and adjusts her dress. I know that expression all too well; she’s wishing for a dance.

I shouldn’t touch her. But when the DJ starts playing a slow dance tune and I see another man coming our way, I take a step forward, drape my arm around her waist, and pull her close. *Just one dance.* By the way her eyes widen, I know she’s surprised by my action, but she doesn’t protest.

Our bodies sway together in perfect harmony, and my palms tingle with a burgeoning possessiveness. I should release her, but instead, my thumb caresses the exposed skin on her lower back. An unspoken desire that I am unable to admit rages within me as I observe her skin flush from her neck to the apples of her cheeks. *Exquisite.*

“Did you enjoy the wedding?” I ask, trying to restrain my emotions.

She nonverbally responds with a faint hum and a smile gracing her glossy lips. “It was perfect. Witnessing two people vow their eternal love for each other is so romantic.”

“You know love isn’t always roses and chocolates, right? And when it is, someone usually gets hurt,” I say, not entirely sure why I persist in this line of conversation... other than to push her away, to put distance between us so I don’t do something stupid like kiss her.

Her gaze burns into me.

“Why are you so cynical about love and relationships?”

I shrug, my jaw clenched and my chest tightening with each passing second that we remain close together. “Just am.”

“So you don’t believe in true love?” she asks.

I can’t look at her anymore without acting on the burning desire that’s growing inside of me, so I focus on the fact that she’s here with Steven instead of the way her touch sends vibrations through my body.

To break the moment, I pose a question I know will make her angry.

“Do you really think that the no-good scumbag you’re dating is true love?”

I grit my teeth and give her an uncompromising stare. She digs her nails into my shoulder.

“Stop talking about him like that.”

With our bodies synced to the beat of the music, we stay locked in the moment.

“Why do you keep going out with him, Amanda?”

She fixates her eyes on my chest as she replies. “Because... he’s not so bad.”

He is bad. I want to scream, but I swallow my words down and instead lower my head, speaking in a low whisper in her ear.

“Listen to me. That man can never be good enough for you. He’ll never understand your worth, Amanda. He’ll never realize that you’re an independent and powerful woman who doesn’t need anyone to tell her what to do. You deserve someone who treats you with respect and admiration and never fails to show their love for you.”

She swallows, her gaze meeting mine.

“Well, if you know a man who fits that description, give him my number, will you? But if not, please stay out of my love life.”

I clench my fists. Her defiance only pushes me closer to the edge. “Come

on, Amanda,” I growl. “I’m just being a good friend who doesn’t want to see you get hurt.”

Her gaze sears into mine. “Thank you, but I can make my own decisions when it comes to who I want to date. Just like you can decide yourself who your next plaything of the night will be.”

“So you’re just gonna date him, knowing full well he isn’t the one for you?”

My words hit her like a truck, her body tensing as she takes a step back and glares at me with a mask of determination.

“Don’t you dare judge me, Brian,” she snaps. “What do you actually know about relationships and being in one?”

I try to reply, but my mouth runs dry and my cheeks burn with embarrassment. She stares me down, and I can’t bear to look away. She’s right. I know nothing about being in a real relationship.

Amanda’s tone softens then, her anger fading away as quick as it had flared up. “Finding love isn’t easy,” she whispers. “But I still believe there’s someone out there who can love me for who I am. I don’t need Prince Charming; I just want someone who can love me unreservedly and with all their heart. And if it means I’ll have to get hurt a few times along the way to find him, so be it.”

She turns away then and walks off the dance floor, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the room, my mind more confused than ever.



## AMANDA

The air around me feels stifling, like a sea of dread I can't outswim. My fingertips dance along the cold, jagged stone wall behind the club, trying and failing to douse the fire of emotions burning inside me. Tipping my face up to the night sky, I pray for these feelings to vanish. How much simpler it would all be if the spark between us was snuffed out. But no, it's always there, and since he chooses to ignore it, I won't beg him to initiate something more, so we remain in the friends with chemistry zone. Even though I desperately want to blank out my craving for him, a tiny glimmer of hope still lingers that one day he'll look into my eyes and say he wants to give us a try. *But what am I wishing for?* He is the king of casual flings, while I yearn for a serious relationship—fidelity and commitment.

"Amanda?"

I lift my gaze and watch Bella march toward me with intent. The delicate fabric of her soft pink dress clings to her pale skin while her vibrant red hair is secured in an elegant bun.

She takes another step closer. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing much. Just Brian and his big mouth again."

Bella listens as I explain what happened. She knows, like the rest of the girls, that I've got feelings for the man who is our mutual friend. When I'm done, her gaze never leaves mine as she gives her opinion.

"Don't let our one-night Romeo friend confuse you."

I chuckle at her new nickname for him. My gaze draws back to the twinkling stars above us. "Yeah, you're right. I need to focus my attention on making things work with Steven."



She gives my arm a gentle squeeze.

“How are things going between the two of you?”

I shrug. “Kind of good. We’ve been on four dates so far and he’s a nice and attractive guy who loves to talk about his job and his successes.”

I trail off, glancing away from Bella when addressing another truth. “But sometimes I feel like he’s competing with me, like he insists on proving his success while belittling my dreams and efforts. And he never really compliments them either.”

“Then I say move on,” Bella says in a clear tone. God, I love her down-to-earth attitude toward life and the levelheadedness she exudes. She always gives you her honest opinion but never in a cruel way. It’s just what I need to calm my emotions.

The thought of finding someone new to date tires me. I look at my friend. “Or maybe I give it another chance? He is a good kisser... that counts for something.”

Bella pauses, wiping a strand of red hair from her cheek. “But is that something enough?”

I shrug. “Time will tell.”

My sweet friend nods.

“So how is your dating going?” I ask.

“Disastrous. So let’s not get into that, please.”

I chuckle. “Okay. What about your painting? How is that going?”

Straightaway her face lights up.

“Not bad. And I’m having a chat with Brian soon, as he wants to pimp the VIP lounge with fitting, unique art.”

“Oh, that’s great. You’ll no doubt make something stunning.”

Bella is an artist who makes paintings for a living. She’s modest about it herself, but she shouldn’t be because what she makes is mind-blowing. And I still wonder why her talent hasn’t been discovered yet. But then again, I’m not an art expert. Our heads turn sideways when we hear approaching footsteps, and for a second, I hope it’s Brian, but it’s not.

“Ah, here you are,” Steven says with a smile as he turns the corner. “Everything okay?”

I smile while rubbing my hand over my forearm.

“Oh yes, I’m fine. I needed fresh air. Bella accompanied me, and we lost track of time with girl talk.”

“You missed Cole and Alisha taking off in the limo. They’re on their way

to their honeymoon,” he says.

“Oh, that’s fine. Those lovebirds only have eyes for each other.”

Bella stands and brushes over her dress. “I’m going inside. You have fun tonight,” she whispers as she hugs me. “And if you need to talk, you know where I am.”

“Thanks,” I whisper back.

As Bella strides away, I inch closer to Steven, my need for physical contact burning in my veins.

My fingertips caress the hard contours of his chest as I press myself against him. “That black suit looks incredible on you,” I purr, my digits grazing his biceps before seizing his lips in a passionate kiss. Our tongues tangle while our hands explore each other’s bodies.

A low, throaty moan slips from my throat as he presses into me and pleasure shoots through me like lightning. I crave this distraction more than anything now. His palms drift lower to cup my butt, trapping me against him. I react by nibbling at his earlobe, silently pleading for something special tonight. And thankfully, he catches on.

“How about us having some naughty fun out here in the open?”

I can barely contain my delight at the thought. My finger traces along his full lips before I tell him, “Well, there is something I’d love for you to do.”

His body tenses up with anticipation. “What do you want?”

“I want to feel your tongue against my clit.”

He stares into my eyes for what feels like an eternity before hesitantly removing his hands from my thighs and scratching the back of his neck. “Um, this might sound strange, but I don’t give oral sex.”

I take a step back. “What?”

“I don’t like it,” he says, scrunching his nose as if he had just smelled something sour. “During my internships at the gynecology ward, I saw women with some nasty issues down there.” His words come out like a shudder.

“Well, what about women giving you oral sex?” I ask, not wanting to know the details of what he has seen.

He grins, displaying a mouthful of perfect teeth. “Oh, now that’s different. I love it.”

His hands move from my shoulders to my hips as he closes the distance between us and descends his lips toward mine.

I freeze as the pang of reality hits me in my chest. *Who am I kidding?*

Steven might have a perfect set of teeth and be a successful doctor, but he's far from the right one for me.

I put firm pressure against his chest and shake my head. His hands fall to his sides as he takes a step backward. We stare at each other for a moment until he finally speaks.

"This isn't gonna work out, is it?"

My throat tightens, and I bite down on the inside of my cheek. "No... I'm sorry. I do think you're great, but I think it would be better if we stay friends."

He snorts and shakes his head, like he knew the answer before he even asked the question. "Guess the bar owner wins after all."

I furrow my brow. "What are you talking about?"

He raises an eyebrow as if my question is stupid. "It was pretty obvious that you two were into each other when you were dancing."

When I don't answer, he sighs and looks at his Patek Philippe wristwatch. "Well, since I have an early shift tomorrow and need sleep, I better go. Do you need a ride home?"

I offer him a polite smile. "No, thanks, I have to talk to Emma."

He doesn't question me further and simply accepts the answer before making his way to the door. With one last look, he murmurs a goodbye before disappearing into the night.

I stand there, rooted in place. The thumping beat from inside the club is merely a distant rumble as a wave of heaviness oozes through me until it seeps into every crevice of my body.

*What is wrong with me? Why can't I find love?*

A hot lump forms in my throat as Brian's words about me finding love echo in my head. Needing space, I walk inside.

Nobody notices me as I grab my coat and bag and hurry toward the entrance. To my luck, a taxi lingers around the corner. I let out a sigh as I flag it down. *Home*. I need to get home. When it stops, I swing open the back door and jump in.

The driver greets me as I mumble my address, and he accelerates away.

I lean my head against the window, watching the city lights pass as I mull over the same questions again and again. *What is wrong with me? Why can't I find love?* Eventually, they blur into a single thought. *I'll never find true love.*

"Everything all right, miss?"

The driver's worried gaze meets mine in the rearview mirror. I wipe the tears from my cheeks and force a smile. "Weddings make me emotional."

He gives me a nod before turning his focus back to the road.

Half an hour later, I pay and thank the man before stepping out. The neighborhood at this hour is still, with only the leaves of the oak trees rustling in the wind, creating a peaceful melody. I rummage in my purse for a key I don't often use before walking to the front door of my childhood home. When I spot a soft light coming from one of the side windows, I wander over to the side and peek through a window to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table, stirring a spoon in her teacup. Not wanting to startle her, I head toward the back door and knock gently. My mom's head whips up, and when she sees me, she hurries to unlock the door.

"Amanda, honey, what are you doing here at this hour?"

I shrug, but when my mom's loving eyes meet mine, the dam bursts and my tears spill out. She opens her arms wide, and I step over the threshold into her warm embrace.

"I'm never going to find love, Mom. I'm always going to be someone's bridesmaid."



## AMANDA

A month has gone by since Cole and Alisha tied the knot, and despite being swamped with work, I'm still reeling from that weekend's fiasco. *Maybe love just isn't in the cards for me right now.* With that in mind, I've decided focusing on my business is a better idea. *What do I need true love for when I'm blessed with the love and support of my family and friends?*

I smile, watching my mother hum in contentment as she finishes reorganizing the kitchen.

"Looks good, Mom."

She grins. "Thanks. Your dad will disagree, but he learned to deal with my organizing mania moments."

I chuckle, knowing next time my dad wants to get something from the kitchen, he'll be complaining as he roams through the many drawers and cabinets searching for his favorite mug.

I take the last sip of my berry tea before placing my empty cup in the dishwasher.

"How are you, honey?" my mom asks, adding her own cup.

I turn and lean against the counter. "I'm fine. The preparation for the launch of the lingerie line has me working late this past week, and—"

"That was not what I meant, Amanda," she says, lifting her brows.

I know she is hinting at my emotional outburst that weekend. Thankfully, my phone interrupts us, and I answer. "Amanda Brown."

A woman rambles in a high-pitched voice, and by the time she finishes, my mind is on high alert. I stroke my fingers along my jawline.

"My God, that's terrible, Kim. But don't worry, I'll find another

location.”

I end the call and lay the device on the kitchen surface before planting my elbows next to it and dropping my head into my palms.

*Why now?*

“Hey, what’s going on, honey?”

I run my hands through my hair and stare at the marble countertop. “The location where I was going to hold the launch of my lingerie line has gone up in smoke.” When the ringtone wails again, I glance at the caller ID and letting out a deep sigh before answering.

“Hello, Christal... Yes, Kim called me a minute ago.” With sweaty palms, I listen to Christal’s unsalted opinion. “Yes, I’ll arrange a new place, and it will be perfect, I promise.” I rub my temple with my free hand. “I understand. No problem. I’ll call you by the end of the week to give you an update.”

I pocket my phone and pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to think of how I can salvage this. Someone clears their throat and I open my eyes to find my mom standing before me, her face expectant.

“That was Christal, the CEO of Lingerie Deluxe, informing me that if I don’t find an alternative venue that she approves of within two weeks, she’ll postpone our partnership,” I growl, pacing back and forth. “I’ve worked so hard on this launch. Everything was perfect and now...” I flop into an armchair, racking my brain for a solution. My store has been struggling since a new clothing store opened down the street. And this exclusive lingerie deal is probably my last hope to save it. I told no one because I want to solve it myself.

My mom halts beside me and lays a hand on my back. “You’re a savvy businesswoman. You’ll figure it out, like always.”

“Who’s a savvy businesswoman?” my father asks from behind my mom, nuzzling her with his chest and planting a kiss on her cheek.

I admire my parents, who, after thirty years of marriage, are still madly in love. *They are the example that true love exists.* My mom explains what’s going on and when she’s finished, my dad wraps his arms around me in a comforting embrace.

“Maybe I should ask Brian?” I say, but I cringe at my suggestion. It makes sense. He’s my friend, sure. But asking him? After what happened at the wedding? I could use some serious distance from the guy who I’m trying to permanently ban to the friend zone without chemistry.

My mom stands with her hands settled on her hips. “It’s a wonderful plan,

Amanda.”

I clench my teeth together and keep my doubts to myself.

“And if you pay him for leasing Six-Pack, it’s nothing more than a business transaction between friends,” my dad adds before walking over and pressing a kiss to my mom’s cheek and murmuring something in her ear that turns her cheeks pink before leaving.

One look at them, and it’s clear: That’s the kind of love I want. *But will I ever find it?*

Strolling to the cabinet, I open a special drawer and smile when my favorite stress relievers greet me. Reaching for the bag, I sigh as a piece of smooth, dark Lindt chocolate melts on my tongue—little bundles of heaven.

“I hope I can find what you and Dad have one day. How have you two managed to stay so in love after all these years?”

My mom comes over and places a hand on my shoulder. “Sweetheart, love isn’t something you can plan for. But you’ll know when you meet the one. The telltale signs never fail,” she says with a fond smile.

“But, Amanda, remember this,” she says, her voice soft but full of conviction. She breaks into one of her favorite love songs and sings, “Can’t hurry love.”

I groan and join in for the next few lines. When I’m done, she pulls me close for a tight hug before her gaze meets mine again.

“Love and relationships take hard work if they’re going to last. Even after all this time together, your dad and I still have our differences and quarrels now and then, but we respect and accept each other. That’s why we’re still together today.” Taking both of my hands in hers, she says tenderly, “My one piece of advice is to follow your heart with love and listen to it whenever it speaks.”

I let out a long breath and squeeze my mom’s hands. “I’ll try to remember that, but I gotta go. I have to search for a new place for the venue.”

“Ask Brian,” my mom comments as I walk to my car.

After making various calls to find another venue has failed, my Porsche skids into the Six-Pack’s parking lot. I gaze up at the white building with its grandiose gold-painted windows. The location is perfect. It’s at the edge of Boston’s center, making it easy to reach with different modes of transportation. The longer I consider this option, the more enthusiastic my professional brain gets. But the thought of asking Brian for help causes my stomach to twist.



My mother's words reverberate in my mind: You're a smart businesswoman. I snatch my phone and read the daily motivational quote on the screen. 'A challenge only becomes an obstacle when you bow to it. Take what you have and use it to create what you want.'

Taking this advice to heart, I give myself a mental pep talk. *I can do this.* I'm so close to having this exclusive launch with Lingerie Deluxe. If I get this, and it goes well, it will save my business. My eyes glide back to Six-Pack and nerves kick in.

"All right. Let's do this," I murmur while stuffing my cell phone into my bag before stepping out and walking towards the club.



## BRIAN

I listen to the words while staring at the new upholstered chair in the corner of the doctor's office.

"I think it's time to schedule you for surgery to place an ICD, Brian. With your ECG showing increasing irregularities, I cannot stress enough the urgency of this procedure."

My heart sinks at my doctor's grave expression. And my anxious mind comes up with reasons to postpone.

"I've got a club to run. It's my livelihood, and things are hectic at the moment. I can't just take a few days away from it. I've got to make arrangements first."

He nods. "I understand, but I don't want to wait too long. The dizzy spells and heart palpitations that you're experiencing show that the medication is ineffective in managing your heart condition. This means we have to take this precaution."

I inhale a deep breath and nod in understanding. "You're sure an operation is the best solution?"

He nods solemnly. "Yes. An ICD will monitor your heart rate and rhythm twenty-four hours a day as a preventative measure. And it's able to give your heart a shock when it senses a dangerous, irregular heartbeat. Without it... I don't have to tell you the consequences; you know them too well."

A wave of nausea hits me as the memory of my father's untimely death comes to mind, making me grip the armrests of my chair tightly in fear of what might befall me.

"Yes, but like I said, I need a few weeks to make sure the club is in good

hands. Can we wait till then?”

He gives me a resolute nod, and I clasp his hand and mumble a thank you before leaving.

Back in my car, I hit the steering wheel with a thud as a tornado of emotions swirls within me.

*What the hell am I going to do?* I’m not telling my friends. No way. I don’t want them to worry about me. Seeing my mom doing so is already too much. She tries to hide it, but I see it. Her eyes speak a thousand words—it’s heartbreaking.

Maybe I can come up with a plan that doesn’t involve telling them. Like say, a business trip or something. Surely there must be another way. Amanda’s face flashes through my mind. She can’t know. I don’t want her to worry about me. I’ll do anything to keep that beautiful smile on her face. Sighing, I start the car and head to the club.

But as soon as I enter Six-Pack, I’m shocked to see Amanda at the bar, talking to Darius, who says something to her that makes the waterfall of brown hair sway as she spins around to face me.

I grit my teeth when her espresso eyes lock onto mine, and I imagine how it would feel to gaze into them while lying on top of her. My dick twitches.

“What are you doing here?” I say head-on as I stop beside her.

She blinks, clearly surprised by this welcome.

“Well, I—”

My phone interrupts, and I answer it. When I hear who it is, I gesture to her to follow me.

As we walk through the bar and hallways, Sharon, one of my employees, rattles off about a family emergency. By the time we reach my office door, she’s done explaining what’s wrong.

“My condolences, Sharon. I understand the situation, so don’t worry and take your time. Call me when you’re back and ready for work.”

Placing the phone on my desk, I stalk over and grab a bottle of Johnny Walker from my liquor cabinet, pouring a bottom into a tumbler. This day just keeps getting better.

“Problems?”

Spinning back, I find Amanda leaning against my desk. My mind gets distracted by the way her breasts get pushed up and accentuated in her elegant, form-fitting, silk blouse. Whether it’s day or night, business or casual, Amanda Brown is a fashionista at heart. Who I’m sure can slay the

hell out of a potato sack if needed. I shift my attention up and get a reality check when I see the hesitation in her gaze. *Something is up.*

“What brings you over here?” I ask.

“Business,” she states while her attention wanders through my office.

“Business?” I repeat.

She nods. “Did you hear about the fire breaking out in the Decant lounge bar down south?”

“No.”

“Well, news update. It was the place where I was supposed to hold my collaboration event with the lingerie brand, Deluxe.”

“Oh, fuck. That sucks. What are you going to do?”

As soon as the question leaves my lips, I know the answer. But before assuming, I wait with dread for her to confirm it.

“Well, if I don’t find a new location within two weeks, I’ll have to push back the launch until next year. So I’ve been searching and calling around for alternative venues all morning, but nobody has room to accommodate it on such short notice.”

“Oh,” is all I can let out, knowing she’s waiting for my reaction.

She ambles over, surprising me when she takes the drink from my hand and brings the edge of the glass to her lips. After a sip, she squints her eyes and clears her throat.

“Damn,” she says, blinking. “Strong, but good stuff.”

Then she locks eyes with mine and throws the bomb, “Can I do the launch here, Brian?”

I grab the empty glass from her hand and turn to refill it. *Fuck.* Thoughts race through my head. *What am I going to do?* Her business is her everything. But if I say yes, it means I’ll have her around me a lot to plan the event. *What if I won’t be able to keep my distance? What if she finds out about my condition?*

I have to start making arrangements for the operation. *I can’t help her right now.* With my back still toward her, I answer.

“I’m fully booked.”

“Are you sure?”

I grind my teeth, hearing the mix of hope and determination in her voice. I want to help her. She deserves it. But fuck, I can’t right now. The chance of me fucking up is too big of a risk.

With a knot in my stomach, I whirl the drink in the tumbler while giving

her my final answer. “Yeah. I’m sure.”

When it stays silent, I place my drink on the cabinet and turn to find her still leaning on my desk, one hand planted on the wood next to her body. Her head tilts sideways as her eyes examine me through narrow slits.

“I haven’t told you a specific date, and you say no just like that? So typical, Brian Fox,” she says, pushing off the desk and walking away.

The moment she reaches the door, I stop her by breaching the last meters of space between us and slamming my palm against the wooden surface.

Being this close, I’m assaulted with an image of my fingers brushing her long chocolate locks aside and my lips nibbling on the skin of her neck. *Would she moan if I did that?* I push away the urge to find out. When she keeps her back toward me, I lower my lips near her ear. “I’m an entrepreneur who knows his agenda for the next couple of months, Amanda. So don’t accuse me of lying.” *God, I feel like such a dick. But I have to do this.*

She swallows before tilting her head sideways and meeting my gaze.

“I never accused you of lying. I’m only disappointed you’re not willing to help a friend.”

Her words hit home. “Amanda, I—”

“Don’t bother, I have my answer. I’ll find another solution. Now please, let me leave.”

Struck by her icy tone of voice, my arms fall to my side. Without another word, she opens the door and walks out, her heels clacking against the floor until there’s nothing but silence.

I slam the door so hard the impact sends one of my cityscape paintings crashing to the floor.

Out of the blue, an onset of vertigo sets in and I stumble to my desk, nearly missing my office chair. Thank God it only lasts a few moments, but when it’s gone, Amanda’s last words echo in my head. I rest my elbows on my black oak wood desk, massaging my temples with my fingertips. *She’s disappointed in me...* I close my eyes, tormented by a rampage of thoughts.

A while later, the phone rings, shattering the silence like a gunshot. My heart pounds in my chest and I lunge for the phone when I see who it is.

“Hey, Nick.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he growls. “She’s your friend and my sister, and you don’t even try to help her?”

I flinch, my fingers twitching against my stubbly chin. “Nick, I—”

He cuts me off before I can finish. “Save it for the gym tomorrow

morning. I'm already late for a meeting. You're my best friend, but right now, I want to throw you through a wall, Fox."

He ends the call and I'm left to stare at the lifeless display. An uncontrollable rage boils up inside me and I throw the phone across the room before grabbing a tumbler and downing it in one gulp. The whiskey burns down my throat but does nothing to ease the ache burning in my gut. I slam the glass back onto the desk, wishing I could slam Amanda out of my thoughts as easily. "Sorry, Doc," I mumble as I lean back in my chair, "but I really needed that."

As minutes pass by, the agony of my dilemma becomes more vivid. *What should I do?* Amanda's words still haunt me—the idea that she despises me is cutting into my heart like a jagged blade. But I'd rather have her hate me than know the truth and look at me with pity or anxiety.





## BRIAN

The next morning, after twenty minutes of rowing in the gym, I stop when a multitude of fluttering sensations arise in my chest. This isn't good. This is more than usual. Maybe working out wasn't the best option. I twist the cap off my water bottle and guzzle down the cool liquid.

"Hey, Fox. Your turn," Cole calls out as Nick delivers a series of jabs to the pads he's holding with full force.

"Give me a minute." I lower my bottle, tilting my head to the side, and stare at Nick. With his jaw set and brows furrowed, he's punishing the pads with high kicks.

*Is he imagining he's hitting me?* The muscles in my neck tighten. We haven't talked since our phone call yesterday. And he hasn't looked my way since I arrived. I can't blame him. If I were in his shoes, I'd be pissed too. The fact is, I've upset his sister. A knot forms in my stomach when I think of Amanda. I've been awake the entire night mulling over how hurt she sounded when I said no to her. I get up and walk over to my buddies, who are taking a break. Time to face my friend.

"How is Alisha doing?" Nick asks Cole.

Cole runs his hands through his damp locks. "She's tired and nauseous every morning, and I want to help her, but I can't. The doctor says these symptoms are common in the first trimester and should get better since she'll enter her second trimester soon. I sure hope they do," he says, tired.

"Make her ginger tea. It will help calm her stomach," I say.

Both friends cast me a skeptical side-eye.

"Since when are you an expert on pregnancy problems?" Nick asks as he

wipes the sweat from his forehead with a towel.

I roll my eyes. “Women like to talk when they’re around me, and when they do, I listen.”

“Thought you wanted to tell us you got one of your hookups pregnant.” Cole grins.

I punch his shoulder. “Fuck, no. And for your information, I haven’t fucked anyone in weeks.”

A handful of people twist their heads our way as Nick’s and Cole’s bouldering laughter travels through the air.

“Sure,” Nick says with a chuckle, but when he sees my frown and crossed arms, he stops.

“Why not?” Cole asks, still grinning. “Is the Fox losing his touch with women?”

I grin. “Hell no, the ladies still love me.”

“Then why?” Nick asks.

My throat becomes dry when his sharp gaze meets mine.

I shrug. “I just have found none of them interesting enough.”

Cole lets out a sharp laugh. “Since when has ‘interesting’ become one of your golden rules when it comes to your one-night stands? It’s all about, and I quote, Brian Fox, ‘good times’ with those ladies.”

I snort but halt when meeting Nick’s intense glare. When he opens his mouth, I know what’s coming.

“Speaking of interesting, I’d love to hear your reason for refusing to help Amanda.”

Cole’s facial expression goes from upbeat to serious in a millisecond when catching Nick’s deep, serious tone. “Huh, what?”

Nick crosses his arms in front of him. “He’s refused to help Amanda with the launch.”

I flinch from the disappointment in his voice.

Cole shakes his head. “Jesus, Fox, why won’t you help her?”

They fix me with a hard stare, and although my mouth opens, I become tongue-tied, the words lodging in my throat. So I squat to tie my laces, stalling to find a way to answer them. But as I do, the ground shakes beneath me as if a sudden earthquake struck without warning.

“Come on, Fox. Answer the question,” Cole presses.

I want to answer, but these overwhelming foreign sensations override my ability to form any sentence. *What the fuck is happening?*

Cole pushes against my shoulder, repeating his question, and I lose balance. My ass hits the floor, my eyes squint, and the flutter in my chest intensifies. I try to push myself back on my feet, only to smack back onto the vinyl floor.

“Brian, what’s wrong?” Nick asks, touching my arm.

“Dizzy,” I breathe. My heart races, pulsing faster and harder until it feels like it’s about to rip through my ribcage.

“He’s getting paler by the second. Brian, lie down,” Nick urges.

The cold floor welcomes me as it cools my now burning skin. Clutching Nick’s shirt, I struggle to breathe as my heart constricts inside my chest.

“Ambulance,” I mumble.

Nick’s eyes widen while Cole shouts for help, his voice booming through the gym room.

“Call nine-one-one. We need an ambulance. Someone call a fucking ambulance. I think he’s having a heart attack.”

The flickering fluorescent lights above me make me want to vomit. With fear evident in my friends’ voices, and my heart behaving like a metronome gone haywire, I wonder if this is what my father felt before he died.

My mind shifts to my mom. She doesn’t deserve this—she already lost one person she loves. Fear swirls through my veins as images of my father’s dead body flash through my head. My ears buzz, and the pressure in my head amplifies.

“Tell her I’m sorry,” I whisper as my vision blurs.

“Tell who, Brian?” Cole asks.

“Tell my mom I love her, and tell Amanda that I’m sorry.”

Nick answers me, but the whooshing sound in my ears deafens me. My lungs burn, and the world fades as I spiral down into a darkness that is both suffocating and nauseating.

A SOFT HAND grazes the top of my knuckles, causing my eyelids to flutter open. As focus returns, I recognize the familiar face—my mom.

“Brian? Honey,” she gasps, her voice quavering as she stands from her chair at my bedside.

“Where am I?” My eyes dart around the strange room.

“You’re in the hospital. You collapsed in the gym.”

As I meet my mother’s watery gaze, the memory of what happened seeps

back.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, knowing her nightmare came true, and I’m to blame for the pain in her eyes.

She shakes her head, caressing my cheek. “No need, sweetheart.”

Before I can say anything, my heavy eyelids flutter closed and I drift back into dreamland.

The next time I wake up, my mom is still by my side.

We both look at the opening door.

“Ah, hello, Mr. Fox,” a nurse says, walking in with a generous smile. She pushes a lock of black hair that escaped from her bun behind her ear while inspecting the bag of fluid attached to my IV. “Are you in any pain?”

I shake my head.

“Good. If so, let me know.”

The door opens again, and as she leaves, my cardiologist, Dr. Wilson, walks in. He grips the back of the bed and greets my mother before turning his attention to me.

“Hello, Brian. How are you feeling?”

“Tired. What happened?”

“Your Brugada surfaced, causing severe arrhythmias. Have you experienced an increase in dizziness, palpitations, or the fluttering sensations in your chest prior to this?”

“Yeah, yesterday, I got an intense dizziness spell in my office and this morning at the gym, I felt a couple of flutters in my chest and then it all went wrong.”

I clench my teeth and force a tight breath out as I take in his frowning face. “I was about to contact you after the workout,” I start, but Dr. Wilson cuts me off with a shake of his head.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it, Brian,” he says sympathetically. “We all know that with this syndrome, anything can happen anytime, anywhere.” He holds my gaze for a few seconds more before continuing. “Rather than dwelling on this, be thankful that it happened in front of people who could help.”

I try to sit up, but a stiff and piercing soreness in my chest pins me to the bed. I glance down and let out an audible gasp at the Band-Aid covering three quarters of my left upper pec.

“Let me guess, the ICD?” I say with a thick voice.

“Yes.”

“Well, guess you’ve been right about me needing it.”

“Brian, I didn’t foresee this would happen so soon after our appointment,” Wilson says. “But like you know, Brugada is unpredictable in its nature.”

*Brugada is a Bitch.*

“And it’s the reason I had you sign the consent form for a device implant in case of an emergency all those years ago.”

I close my eyes and swallow hard as the truth of this whole situation sinks in as he explains further.

“When the paramedics brought you in, your heart went into ventricular fibrillation. This can lead to cardiac arrest and death in minutes, as it did with your father. We had to shock you twice to get your heart into a normal rhythm.”

Fuck. I peek through my lashes, scowling internally when seeing my mom’s watery gaze. I’ve been a selfish prick.

“What does the ICD do, specifically?” Mom questions Dr. Wilson in a voice tinged with fear.

He clears his throat before answering. “It monitors your son’s heart rhythm around the clock and sends an electric shock if needed.”

Mom’s fingers tighten around mine as she looks up at him, voice trembling. “So it’ll happen again?”

His expression softens as he addresses her concern. “Maybe, maybe not. Only time will tell. That’s why having this ICD is so important for Brian.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose as overwhelming, dark, frightening thoughts hint at my uncertain future. They’re keen on consuming me, but I confine them to an impenetrable vault in my subconscious.

“When can I go home?”

“Brian, that’s not funny,” my mom mutters.

The doctor looks at me, a grin adorning his lips. “Good to see your determination is still intact. I’ll be by to check on you tomorrow. If the ICD works correctly and you don’t show any signs of complication, I’ll decide when you can be discharged. For now, rest.”

My mom shakes the doc’s hand, sweeping her eyes after he leaves.

“Are you ready for two visitors? Nick and Cole are eager to see you.” She pauses. “You should have told them about your condition, Brian.”

I swallow, avoiding her gaze.

“They’re your best friends. They care for you, honey.”

When I don't respond, she places a kiss on my cheek.

"I'll give you time to talk to them."

When she's gone, I glance at the large Band-Aid. A fucking ICD. Just great.

Minutes later, the door opens, and Nick and Cole walk into the room. Cole has a deep frown and lips pressed into a thin line. This tells me he's in what Alisha likes to call his grumpy state of mind. Then my eyes travel to Nick, who sweeps his fingers through his hair, a gesture he does repeatedly when he's nervous. I brush my hand over the white bedsheets as their eyes travel over me, inspecting every detail.

"Good to see your ugly face, Fox," Cole says.

I force a smile as both men take a seat next to the bed.

"Damn it," Cole groans, wriggling his colossal frame to find a comfortable spot on the small chair. "They should spend money on buying better furniture. My ass is numb from sitting on these uncomfortable things."

Nick's brown eyes are unreadable as he stares at me and asks, "How are you?"

Their intense gazes cause my heart to skip a beat as they await my answer. Wanting this next part over and done with, I blurt out the truth in one go. "I've got Brugada Syndrome. It's a condition that can cause heart rhythm disorder."

Cole's brows shoot up. "What? How is that possible? You were healthy as a horse this morning."

My right hand roams through my hair as I stare at my sheets. *Here it goes.* "I have an inherited heart condition. My dad had it too." I let out a sigh. "I said my dad died from a heart attack. But he actually died from sudden cardiac arrest in bed due to this condition."

A knot forms in my stomach as the frown lines on Cole's face deepen. I know he witnessed his father die from a heart attack and it's still a sensitive topic.

Both friends remain quiet as I continue, "They did an autopsy and found that a rare heart condition called Brugada Syndrome caused his sudden death, and because it's genetic, they tested me."

Nick's thumb drags along his bottom lip as his mind whirls. His eyes flick to mine and I know what he's going to say.

"Are you saying you knew you had this condition?"

My silence says enough.

Cole's jaw tightens. "Why on earth didn't you tell us, you shithead?"

"Because my symptoms were minor, and I didn't want you guys to worry or treat me differently."

Fury sparks in Nick's eyes. "Bad choice, buddy," he says before pointing to the Band-Aid. "So what did they do?"

I explain what happened and how Doc treated it.

"So that could happen again?" Nick inquires, brow raised in concern.

I nod.

Cole plants his elbows on his knees, forehead creasing as he stares at the ground while Nick lets out another sigh and rubs his temples with both hands.

"Jesus," Cole mutters. "When we tell the girls..."

My attention shoots to Cole like an arrow. "Don't tell them," I plead in one breath.

Cole blasts out of his chair like a rocket. "Are you fucking shitting me?"

His gaze drills into me, and I clench my teeth in response. "No, I'm not. Come on, guys, please."

"Don't you fucking dare 'come on' me, Brian," Cole shouts before turning and marching toward the door. His blue eyes flare like fire as he turns to face me. "You damn near died, Fox, and now you're asking us to lie to our families?" He shakes his head in disbelief. "I need fresh air."

Nick pats my leg, but it does little to ease the rising knot in my stomach.

"The cat's out of the bag now, Brian. If the girls find out we've been keeping this from them, they're gonna be pissed."

A wave of nausea crashes through me at the thought of Amanda discovering the truth. I take a deep breath and meet Nick's gaze head-on.

"I don't want people to treat me like a goddamn invalid."

"We won't."

"Please, Nick, give me a few days until I'm home?"

My friend holds my gaze for what feels like forever before finally nodding in agreement.

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything."

The tension eases from my body and I let out a long breath of relief. "Thanks."

The nurse from earlier walks in with my mother in tow.

"Hello, Mr. Fox." She grabs the blood pressure meter and Nick rises and offers my mother his stool.

"Your mother raised you well," she says with a smile. Nick grins and

places a hand on my shoulder.

“I’m going to find Cole and talk to him. You rest, my friend.”

As the nurse touches the skin around the dressing, an involuntary yawn escapes my mouth. “Sorry,” I offer with a bashful grin.

“Don’t be. It’s normal. Rest. If you want anything else, press the call button.”

As she’s out of the room, my mom’s warm hand wraps around mine. A tear glistens in her eye, and my throat tightens at the sight.

“Mom,” I whisper before wrapping my good arm around her and placing a tender kiss on the side of her head. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

She cups my face in her palms and holds my gaze, determination gleaming in hers. “I love you so much, sweetheart. Now close your eyes and I will stay here with you and read a book while you take a nap.”

Warmth blossoms in my chest at her words. “Love you, Mom,” I say before closing my heavy eyelids. As I drift off to sleep, I can’t help but think about Amanda and wonder. *What will she think when she hears about this?*





## AMANDA

With curiosity running through my veins, Bella and I enter Nick and Emma's place after Alisha asked us to come over ASAP through a text in our group's app. The mouth-watering smell of Emma's fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies lures us straight to the kitchen of her bakery, Simply Irresistible. My brother helped the love of his life to realize her dream by building this large professional kitchen with extra storage space. And with great success. Next to baking custom cakes for birthdays and other occasions, she now bakes and delivers her baked goods to two diners in the area. I grin as Alisha sinks her teeth into a delicious-looking chunk of cake, letting out a delightful moan.

"Oh, I'm taking you home, Emma, so you can satisfy my craving for sweets," she exclaims with her mouth full.

Emma holds up a round tin. "No need. I've made a bunch of your favorite cookies for you to take home."

Alisha strolls over to Emma and kisses her on her cheek. "I love you."

Emma chuckles. "I'm only protecting Cole from the hormonal outburst you'll have when you can't satisfy your three a.m. cravings."

"Hey, you two," Bella calls out, eyes moving over the array of treats on the countertop. "What's going on? Why the ASAP text?"

Alisha and Emma exchange a furtive glance, and my curiosity piques.

"What is it?" I probe them.

Emma bites her lip, and when she gives Alisha a nod, our red-loving friend speaks.

"Last night, Cole came home pretty quiet, and he was grumpy as hell," she explains, her voice barely above a whisper. "So I asked if something was

wrong, but he just shrugged me off and walked away. Later, I put on this little red lingerie set that left not much to the imagination”—she slides her hands down her body suggestively—“but he didn’t even notice!”

Bella snickers softly before catching herself, as if realizing this isn’t an ordinary story.

Alisha continues, “So I confronted my man, threatening to take away his naughty shower time unless he talked to me.”

I look up from the tray full of heart-shaped cookies with pink frosting when she doesn’t continue to find Emma’s and Alisha’s faces tight with worry. My pulse quickens at their expressions, a thick tension weighing heavily in the air.

My throat tightens as I force out the question that I’m almost afraid to hear the answer to. “What’s going on, girls?”

“Brian’s sick,” Alisha blurts out.

My blood turns cold.

“What do you mean by sick?”

The girls exchange a sorrowful look before Emma says, “You should ask Nick and Cole—”

“Where are they?” I croak out, mouth dry.

“In his office,” she whispers in reply.

Needing answers, I pivot around and step into the corridor, and sure enough, muffled voices drift from my brother’s office. Just as I’m about to barge in, I stop cold when I overhear my brother speaking of Brian.

“Until Brian gets released, Darius will be in charge of Six-Pack. How did you sleep, Cole?”

“How do you think? Our best friend is in the fucking hospital after nearly dying?”

I place my hand on the wall, steadying myself as a bone-chilling fear explodes inside of me. *Brian. Hospital. Dying?*

“As soon as he’s released, we can—” Nick begins, but I don’t let him finish.

With all my strength, I forcibly push open the door. My brother blinks and Cole inhales sharply. They stare at me as I stand on the threshold, steaming.

Cole runs his hand over his face. “Shit.”

I step forward, letting the girls come in behind me.

“Tell her and Bella, Nickolas,” Emma says, walking to her husband.

My brother runs his fingers through his hair and looks away, deepening my suspicion. I clench my fists and narrow my eyes at him.

“What’s wrong with Brian?” I demand.

Cole, who is the most forthright, stands up, towering over us in the room, his expression unreadable yet serious. “He’s in the hospital,” he states bluntly.

Terror rises within me as his words sink in and my hands grip my hips tighter. I urge for more information, my voice trembling slightly. “Why? What happened?”

Nickolas answers quietly, guilt written all over his face. “He collapsed at the gym yesterday. There was something wrong with his heart and they had to rush him to the hospital.” He takes a deep breath, squeezing Emma’s hand so hard it almost hurts to watch. “I had to get his mother... We almost lost him.”

Pain drills through my bones hearing those words and I turn to look at Cole. His watery gaze tells me this incident brought back memories of his father’s death. Cole witnessed his father, who was once a gifted pianist, die on stage of a massive heart attack.

The wave of panic that fills the room is palpable and I force myself to ask Nick the dreaded question.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Nick looks away from me, shame written all over him. “Brian asked me to wait until he’s back home.”

A wave of hurt crashes over me knowing he wanted to keep this hidden, but I try to push it aside and focus on getting answers.

“Which hospital is he at?” I ask, determined to see him whether he likes it or not.

Nick shakes his head despite my pleadings. “He doesn’t want any visitors.”

I can feel desperation rising inside me and I stare right into my brother’s eyes without blinking until he finally breaks eye contact. “Please, Nick, I need to see him,” I beg softly.

“Boston Medical Center. Sixth floor, room 605,” Cole says. “Visiting hours start in half an hour.”

“Thank you.”

Bella dangles her keys. “I’m driving. Let’s go.”

PRESSING THE GAS PEDAL, we make it to the hospital in twenty minutes flat. Bella gently squeezes my hand as the elevator brings us to the sixth floor. Adrenaline courses through my veins and horses gallop in my chest when the doors open, and my gaze falls on the sign ‘Cardiology.’

*How is this possible?*

“Hey, get moving, will you.”

Before I can react, I stumble forward when the man behind me shoves himself past me.

“Asshole,” Bella mutters as we get out.

We stop by the nurses’ station.

“Hello, we’re looking for Brian Fox’s room.”

The woman with a black messy bun smiles at me. “He’s in room 605. It’s the last room on your right at the end of the hall.”

Nerves skyrocket as we make our way through the corridor. My hands get sweatier and my heart is pounding in my ears when arriving at room 605. The door is open and I remind myself to breathe, but it’s hard with a brain that’s firing horrific what-if scenarios at me.

Bella gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “You go first.”

Letting out a trembling sigh, I shuffle inside. The room aesthetics are as cool as the hallway. There’s only a small table, two chairs and an overbed table. My gaze lands on Brian, who’s lying on top of the covers, his eyes closed, dressed in black sweatpants and a gray T-shirt. His skin is pale, his lips pressed in a thin line, but other than that, he seems normal. *Thank God.* I take another step forward but pause when his eyelids part and he lifts his head.

“Amanda? Bella?”

My heart skyrockets at the sound of his voice, and I clench my hands to hide the tremble.

“Hey, Brian,” Bella says.

“What the hell are you two doing here?”

I ignore his gruff greeting and move until I’m near the chair next to his bed.

He rests his head back on the pillow and stares at the ceiling, his jaw muscles clenching as I sit.

“You didn’t have to come. I’m fine.”

“You’re our friend,” Bella answers in a calm tone.

I force myself to speak, knowing that my voice will tremble as Cole’s

words echo through my head.

“They said you nearly died.”

A tear trails down my cheek.

“Shit! Please don’t cry, Amanda.”

I can’t help myself, wiping tears away. His face contorts as he raises himself to a sitting position.

“What happened, Brian?”

After a long sigh, he speaks. “I was working out with the guys when my heart rhythm went berserk. Then I blacked out.”

“How is that possible?” I ask, confused.

“I’ve got a heart condition that can cause rhythm disorders.”

I study his face as I digest the words. *A heart condition?*

“That must have been a shock to find out,” Bella says.

When his eyes dart to the ground, an unimaginable truth dawns on me. “You knew... you had this condition?” I lean all the way to the back of the chair when he answers with a nod. *He knew and never told us. Why?*

“How long have you known?”

“Why does that matter?”

“Just answer me.”

He sighs. “Since I was twelve.”

Bella’s sharp inhale tells me I’m not the only one shocked. My head buzzes, but I keep asking questions. “Why haven’t you ever told us?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t want any of you to worry.”

“Jesus, Brian. That is a shit reason,” I say, rising from my chair. “Have you forgotten how Cole’s father died?”

His eyes shoot up. “Don’t you think I fucking know that?” He slides his legs over the edge of the bed, then slowly pushes himself off the mattress.

“W-what are you doing?” I ask.

He lowers his chin, meeting my wide-eyed gaze.

“I’m getting out of this damn bed to stretch my muscles.”

I reach out to help when his face contracts in pain.

“Don’t,” he growls. Like a proud but wounded lion, he strides to the window and gazes outside.

Bella places a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Go talk to him. I’m going for a walk,” she whispers, her voice oozing with sympathy. I nod while watching him in silence.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask once Bella’s gone.

“So you could look at me with pity like you’re doing now? No, thanks,” he snarls, frustration palpable in his voice.

I pause for a moment before asking the inevitable question. “What happens now?” The fear my voice conveys is enough for Brian to tense up.

“Nothing. There’s no cure for this, Amanda. That’s why this device is stuck in my chest, ready to give me an electric shock if my heartbeat rises too high or stops.”

My heart feels as though a thousand needles are being thrust into it as a heavy sense of helplessness washes over me. I can’t bear to see him hurting this way. I want him to know he’s not alone, that I’m here for him.

My mind drifts to three years back when Nick called me while on a business trip and asked,

*“Hey, sis, can you check on Brian?”*

*I’d frowned while closing the store. “Why?”*

*“Cole and I called him, and he didn’t sound like himself. Like he’s sick or something. He said he’s fine, but I don’t believe him.”*

*My heart warms at the concern those two men show for their friend’s well-being.*

*“Sure, I’ll drop by on my way home.”*

*“Thanks, love you. And text me to let me know when you’ve seen him.”*

*Arriving at Brian’s dream, I go straight to Darius standing behind the bar. He seems relieved to see me.*

*“Good, maybe you can convince him to go home. He’s in the corner seat,” he says, pointing to an area in the back.*

*I move through the crowd and find him sitting alone in a corner booth, his head in his hands. As I stop next to him, he slowly lifts his head and looks up at me. His eyes are wide and watery, his cheeks flushed.*

*Concern tugs at my heart when seeing him in this state; my voice softens as I ask, “Brian, what’s wrong?”*

*He lets out a defeated sigh before speaking, “Nothing... I’m just not feeling too well. Have a massive headache and a cold, but it will pass. So don’t worry.” He looks away from me, but I’m aware of the fact that he seems visibly distressed himself.*

*“Go home and get some sleep, Brian,” I say, my voice heavy with concern.*

*“No,” he groans, “I have business to attend to later.” Knowing he’s stubborn as a mule and won’t accept my help easily, I ask.*

*“Have you taken painkillers?”*

*“Yeah, Tylenol.”*

*A twisted sensation settles in my chest as helplessness washes through me. What can I do?*

*I pause for a few seconds to think of something else I can do for him other than send him home. “Let’s get some fresh air. It might help with your headache. “Come with me.”*

*He shakes his head in defiance, but when I take his hand, he gets up out of the booth and follows me outside. We both inhale deeply as the cool air fills our lungs.*

*He shuffles to the side of the building and leans against the hard stone wall, closing his eyes.*

*“You really should go home, Brian.”*

*He sighs in response. “And do what? Lie in bed? No, thank you, that’s the worst thing I can do right now.”*

*“Huh. Why? When you’re sick, your body needs rest.”*

*A faint smile tugs on his lips. “Well, mine is different, and I know what I need.” He meets my gaze, gratitude radiating from his eyes. “Thank you for coming by, Amanda. I appreciate it.”*

*I place a hand on his shoulder. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily, Mister Fox. Let me whip up some ginger tea. It will help boost your immune system and might ease the throbbing in your head.”*

*He smiles at me, a silent understanding prevailing between us. “If I accept that drink, will you stop fussing over me and go home?” he says, tenderness seeping through his watery gaze.*

*My cheeks flame as I respond, “Perhaps, but how do you know I’m worrying?”*

*“Your emotions play out on your face, Amanda.”*

*My lips quirk up involuntarily, comforted to find that he knows me so well. “Since you can read me so easily, you should be able to see that I never leave when I’m concerned about you. So let’s go inside so I can make the tea; then maybe I’ll depart after getting you to promise me to call if anything arises.”*

*My hands tremble at this memory, which makes me realize that this man tries to handle and deal with everything on his own. But like then, I won’t let him. I rise and step closer to him. With a shaky finger, I trace the rigid line of his jaw, only to see it tense beneath my touch.*



“Don’t push me away, Brian.”

“I don’t want you to worry about me like my mom does all the time.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Well, tough luck, Mister Fox. Because you don’t get to choose whether or not I worry about someone who is my friend. You know that about me.”

A line sets between his brows as he scowls at me from the corner of his eye.

“Would you worry about me if the roles were reversed?” I challenge.

He answers without missing a beat, “Of course I would.”

“So what’s the difference?”

His lips press into a stubborn, thin line, and his eyes dart away. “It just is.”

As soon as he says this, another possible answer pops up and whirls through my head. *What if his condition is the reason he has been denying our connection all these years?*

I want to ask, but I can see the tiredness weighing down his shoulders. So, instead of pushing him further, I turn and walk away. “You need to rest. I’m going home. See you later, Brian.”

In desperate need of caffeine and sugar, Bella and I enter the hospital restaurant, ordering coffee and cake.

“How are you feeling?” she asks as soon as I plop my ass into a chair, while sliding the plate with two slices of marble cake to the middle of the table.

With tears in my eyes, I ask, “How do I help him cope with this, Bells?”

Bella meets my eyes with a knowing look. “Brian’s like a cat—chase him and he’ll run away and get grumpy. But if you sit back and let him adjust, he might come to you and end up purring at your feet.”

“Brian purring? Not likely,” I scoff.

Her gaze intensifies. “Give him time. He’s feeling vulnerable, something he hates. And remember, fear can make you do weird shit.”

I grumble and let this realization roam around my mind. Yes, a heart condition is serious, but it definitely doesn’t change my feelings for him.

My temples throb from the overload of information. “Can you drop me off at home? I need time to process all this.”

“Sure thing,” she replies, standing up.

I YAWN, stretching my tired body while warm water trickles down my skin, massaging my muscles and relaxing me. I need more sleep than I've gotten in the past few days, but it'll have to wait until I find a space for the lingerie launch. Time is running out. My heart skyrockets at the intruding sound of Avicii's, "Hey Brother" ringtone yelping through the air. I flip the handle and step out of the shower. *Shit, forgot a towel.* With a chill running through my spine, I run to my bedroom, leaving a wet trail of footsteps on the hardwood floor.

"Nick?"

"Good morning, sis."

"What's wrong? You never call so early in the morning." I find my towel, wrapping it around myself.

"Daddy, can I talk to Auntie Amanda?"

My brother chuckles. "Yes, you can, but when I'm back, I need to speak with her. You have to get ready for school."

"Hello, Amanda," Charlotte chirps through the phone.

"Hey, sweetie. How are you?"

"I made a drawing for Brian. It has hearts on it, and a rainbow, and colorful drinks."

My soul warms hearing my niece shower her pure love to everyone she likes.

"That sounds amazing, Charlotte. I bet Brian will love it."

"Can you give it to him, please?"

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to see Brian today."

"But Daddy said that you—"

"Charlotte, let me talk to Amanda," Nick says in the background.

"But, Daddy, you said—"

"Smarty," he says, using the nickname for her lovingly, "don't worry. Brian will get your picture."

I squint my eyes, focusing on the whispers that follow, but I can't decipher what they say. I place the phone on speaker so I can walk to my closet and pick out a set.

"Amanda, are you still there?" my brother asks moments later.

"Yeah, I'm here. Now, why did Charlotte think I was going to see Brian?" I stroll back, laying the outfit I selected on the bed.

"Hmm, yes, well—"

"Oh, what's wrong?" I ask, pulling up my panties.

“Vera called me last night.”

“Why did she call? Is something wrong with Brian?”

“No, he’s okay. She called and asked if I could pick him up from the hospital and drive him home this morning. I said yes.”

“Okay, but what does that have to do with you calling me?”

“Well, Liam woke up in the night with a slight fever, and Emma has a business meeting with Clair’s diner this morning, so I have the kids today.”

“Oh, I understand. I’ll come over and watch Liam while you go pick him up.”

Nick clears his throat. “I don’t think it’s wise. What if Liam has the flu, and I infect my best friend, who is recovering? Can you take him home?”

It’s been three days since I last saw him. To give him space, I’ve texted Nick every day since he visits his best friend daily to find out how he’s doing. So I know that I’ll be dealing with an irritable crab. And I’m not looking forward to that, but at the same time, I can’t wait to see him.

I rub my forehead as my brother says, “Brian may act like he doesn’t need us, but he does. His doctor said he can’t drive for two weeks and his mom asked us to look after him so that he won’t push himself too hard.”

I pluck invisible dust particles off my dark blue skirt, rolling my eyes to Nick’s incessant pleas when the sudden loud sobbing noises from my nephew pierce my heart.

“Daddy,” he cries.

“Amanda, I—”

“What time?” I ask.

“I told him I’d be there around ten a.m.”

I jump off the bed, running my hands through my hair, and calculate how long it’ll take me to get ready.

“So, you’ll do it?”

After letting out an exasperated sigh, I answer, “Yes, of course. I’ll call Alisha and ask her to open the store without me. Give Liam and Charlotte a big hug from their aunt.”

“I will, and thank you, Amanda. You’re the best sister in the world. Just ignore Brian if he’s cranky. It’s just his defense mechanism kicking in. He’s still dealing with the fact that we know now.”

With a huff, I end the call and call Alisha.

I smile as she answers with, “Hey, girl.”

“Hey, question. Can you open the store for me? Nick just called to ask if I

could bring Brian home.”

“Sure, no problem,” she says with ease.

“Thanks, you’re the best, Mrs. Walker.”

She chuckles hearing me call her by her new surname. “See you later, Brown.”

I smile as I hang up. I’m so lucky to have her work for me. The day Alisha entered the store looking for a job, I was dumbstruck by the fire in her green eyes and the vibrancy of her hibiscus lips. Within moments of our first conversation, I knew I had to hire her. Our friendship developed quickly and strengthened further when we realized that my brother Nick had fallen for her best friend Emma. And now she’s married to Cole, who is Nick’s best friend. After tossing the phone on the bed, I get dressed in record time. Once downstairs, I seize my bag and throw my phone inside. With one last glimpse at myself in the mirror, I leave my house and rush to the car.

My foot slams onto the accelerator as my mind returns to the thought that maybe Brian’s illness is what’s been driving him to deny our chemistry and sticking to fleeing flings. But before addressing that, let’s focus on getting him home so he can start his recovery before coming up with an idea on how to make him realize that even with his condition, I’d like to be with him.



## BRIAN

Dark clouds pass by as leaves whirl, dancing as they're blown off the tree branches by the strong wind.

*What the hell is keeping Brown?* I want to go home.

I let out a yawn. The last two days, I slept like shit because my mind keeps ping-ponging between the last conversation with Amanda and worrying about Six-Pack. Darius is doing a fantastic job, but that place is my heart and soul. Not being there every day feels unnatural.

"Someone's ready to leave."

My lips curl as I peek over my shoulder to find the friendly nurse standing in the doorway, pointing to my bag.

"I was ready to leave the moment I woke up, Akito."

"One more blood pressure check and you're good to go."

I nod, rolling up my sleeve while sitting on the edge of my bed.

Akito's dark brown eyes meet mine as she stops next to me. "Don't forget that you entered your recovery phase, Brian."

I let out a huff, and she chuckles while wrapping the band around my upper arm. "I get you're impatient, but do me a favor and give yourself time. You've been through a traumatic experience. The emotional impact of having to live with your condition is real. So if there comes a time when you need to talk, do it. And if you can't find anyone, come and see me."

I press my lips together. "What makes you an expert?"

She smiles and places a hand on my shoulder. "Next to working as a nurse in the cardiology ward, my husband has Brugada like you. You remind me of him."

I send her a playful wink. “So your husband is a blond god as well?”

“Oh no.” She chuckles. “He’s Japanese like me, but he has the same stubborn personality. He got diagnosed five years ago, after having a cardiac arrest at home while watching television. As soon as he woke up, he wanted to leave.”

I smirk. “I like him already.”

“I’m guessing like him, you present yourself to the outside world as a strong, confident person—which you are—but you keep your deepest thoughts bottled up.”

My muscles tense under her words.

“Just remember this. Even a courageous person has moments of vulnerability, and that’s okay.”

I twist my head at the sound of footsteps coming from behind me. *That must be Nick*. A flare of energy ignites my system at the sight of not my best friend, but his stunning sister, standing on the threshold and leaning against the doorframe. I brush my palm over my pants, seeing the pinched expression on her face as she inspects me and Akito.

Akito pats me on my shoulder. “Take my words with you and have a good recovery, Brian.”

“Thank you, and if you ever find yourself at Six-Pack, ask for me, and I’ll give you a drink on the house.”

Akito leaves, passing Amanda, who walks in and stops beside the bed. I can’t help but feel a stirring inside me at the sight of her.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I’m here to bring you home. Liam is sick, so Nick called and asked me to help out.” She turns and strolls to the door. “Is that your bag?”

I swallow as her round derriere teases me. Sinking my teeth into those buns would—

“Stop looking at my ass and answer my question. Can you go home?” Her eyes meet mine for a second time before focusing on the window behind me.

“Ah, Brian. I see you haven’t left yet,” Dr. Wilson says, walking in and offering me a booklet. “Here.”

I take it and frown.

“It has extra information on ICDs. Read it, and if you have questions, call.”

I nod.

Amanda looks at the doctor. "Sorry, but can I ask you something?"

"Of course," he says.

My eyes shoot to Amanda. "I can answer your questions."

She cocks her brow. "You could tell me a half-truth, so no, thank you."

Doctor Wilson chuckles.

"What are the things Brian can or can't do during his recovery?"

"Brian can go on with his life, but he needs to avoid lifting or pulling objects that weigh over ten pounds for at least six weeks. This is to give his ICD and the wires to his heart time to settle in his body. Anything else you want to know?" he asks.

She shakes her head.

"Okay. Then I'll say, have a good recovery, and I'll see you at your next checkup in six weeks, Brian."

"Time to leave this place," I say.

As soon as the doctor leaves, I reach for my bag at the same time as Amanda, causing our heads to clash.

"Aww, damn!" she whimpers while grasping the bag and pulling it toward her. We gaze at each other while rubbing our sore spots. "What the hell are you doing? The doctor said, 'no lifting.'"

Irritation bubbles up inside me. "For fuck's sake, I'm not an invalid, Amanda. The bag weighs less than ten pounds, and for your information, this arm," I mutter, grabbing the bag with my right hand and tugging at it, "works perfectly fine."

With eyes that sparkle with annoyance, she says, "Brian Fox, if you want a ride home, you better let go."

We hold each other's gaze for a few heavy seconds before I release the bag and watch as she struts off to the elevator. *Damn, she's sexy when she's not taking any of my crap.* It triggers a memory, one that always makes me smirk. It was the time I overheard Alisha saying she believed Cole could make her come with one touch. When I said I couldn't wait to tell my best friend he might possess a magic touch, Amanda spun around and pointed at me in warning with a seductive glint in her eye, and said, "Don't you dare tell him that. Or else you'll meet *my* magic touch."

Her passionate demeanor sparked something inside me and before I could consider it twice, I pulled her close and whispered near her ear, "You nearly make me need to find out."

Her breath hitched as I withdrew, leaving us both shaken by the intensity



of our exchange. Desperate to cool my heated body and clear my lust-filled mind, I strode away.

Outside, the autumn breeze carries thin drops of rain, each one a promise of more. I grin as Amanda keeps wiping rebellious strands of hair out of her face. My moment of enjoyment vanishes, and my jaw clenches when she opens the passenger side door of her white Porsche Cayenne.

“Amanda, I can open the goddamn door myself.”

With a loud bang and mumbling something under her breath, she closes it and stomps to the driver’s side, throwing the bag in the back seat. I huff and get in. *This will be fun.*

“Sorry, I know you mean well. It’s just—”

“Yeah, you don’t want my help. Got it, won’t happen again,” she spits out, turning the key and driving off.

*Fuck.*

I stay silent and sit back as she maneuvers her way out of the busy parking lot. Suddenly, I notice her biting her bottom lip and knowing her well enough, I say, “What’s on your mind, Brownie?”

The silence is heavy until she takes a deep breath and speaks up, “I’ve been wondering. Is it because of your condition that you’ve been denying our connection all these years?”

Her words shoot through my core like an arrow, paralyzing me. But I manage to force out the truth. “We’ll never work, Amanda. Next to my broken body, we don’t want the same things.” My hand runs over my jaw. “You want a relationship, while I only have time for fun. I don’t do serious stuff.”

“Well, you, Brian Alexander Fox, can cancel your gym membership because it’s obvious you’re getting all the exercise you need jumping to conclusions.”

“I’m speaking the truth,” I hiss.

“No, you’re just making shit up,” she retorts with fire in her voice. “It’s not fair of you to predict what will happen between us without giving us a chance.”

Glancing outside, I struggle to contain the sigh that threatens to escape when visions of her standing in my bedroom wearing nothing but my shirt emerge in my mind. My fingertips tingle as I imagine what it would be like to slide them up her thighs and... *Stop it*, I scold myself, pushing away all thoughts of desire. But it’s too late; I can feel the telltale signs of arousal

stirring in my pants as her delicate scent engulfs me. Her phone rings and I'm relieved for this perfect distraction from our otherwise unbearable closeness.

Her eyes dart to the screen. "Shit!"

"Who is it?" I ask.

"The CEO of Lingerie Deluxe. Checking to find out if I have a new venue. Excuse me. I need to take this."

A posh voice with a London accent fills the car as soon as she presses the button.

"Ah, Amanda. How are you, dear? I called the store, but they told me you weren't there. Did you find another location for the lingerie launch?"

"No, I haven't, but I'm in the middle of some negotiations. So I'm sure I'll have good news soon," she says in a direct tone.

The woman lets out a hum. "You know we want to give you the exclusive privilege to show our newest line of luxurious lingerie, but without a venue, I have to consider giving another associate this unique chance."

Amanda's face turns shocked at the woman's indirect threat. "No, No, Chantel. I promise you—"

Chantel cuts in.

"You know, I stumbled across an article of an interview with your brother, Nick. He's such a successful entrepreneur," she coos.

Amanda's knuckles turn white from the grip on the steering wheel as the woman swoons over her successful brother.

"He has connections. Maybe he can help you find a suitable location."

"Chantel, my brother—"

Not able to stay silent, I clear my throat and speak.

"Excuse me, sorry for interrupting, but I'd like to say something."

"What are you doing?" Amanda whispers.

"Who are you?" the posh voice asks in a snappy tone.

"Hello, Chantel," I say in my business tone of voice. "I'm Brian Fox, and Ms. Brown and I were discussing the possibility of her using my place for this event when you called."

"And where is your place?" Chantel asks.

"I'm the owner of Six-Pack. It's—"

She lets out an audible gasp before saying. "The nightclub, Six-pack?"

I grin and send Amanda a wink.

"Yes. Have you heard of it?"

"I have. It's in the top ten ranks of the hottest nightclubs in Boston," she

gushes. “Oh, Mr. Fox, it’s a pleasure to be speaking to you.” The woman’s voice turns sweeter than English tea with ten sugar cubes. “Our lingerie launch at such a trending location would be amazing.”

“You’ll have to thank Ms. Brown. She’s the one who approached me. So, if you don’t mind, I’d like to continue my business with her to see if we can complete this deal. She will call you back.”

“Sure, I—”

I press the end call button before Chantel can finish and turn to Amanda.

“Brian!” she gasps, eyes wide in shock.

I flash her a cheeky grin and shrug. “Don’t worry. The eager Ms. Chantel will wait patiently for your call.”

Amanda twists a strand of hair around her finger as she focuses on traffic.

“But you said—”

I let out a huff, remembering our conversation gone wrong in my office. “Oh, I consulted my agenda,” I explain, giving her an apologetic look.

A devilish grin appears on her lips as she casts an inquisitive glance in my direction. “I never mentioned the specific date, Brian.”

*Busted by the goddess.* My lips twitch in amusement and I shrug.

“See it as my apology for my behavior that day.”

She cocks a brow and smirks. “Only for that day?”

I give her a meaningful wink, which causes her cheeks to blush a soft pink. *So adorable.*

“I hate it when people presume I can’t hold my own in the business field. And it’s even worse when they think I can’t do it without my brother’s help.”

I nod. “That Chantel woman has no shame. The way she suggested you ask Nick for help was disgusting. If anyone can handle their business, it’s you. You’re a talented woman who set up ‘Venus’ with outstanding success. So Chantel should thank her lucky stars that you want to sell their lingerie line in your store and not the other way around. Without wonderful stores that sell their stuff, they’re nothing.”

She casts me a sideways glance. “Thank you.”

“For what? I’m simply stating a fact.”

She stops the car and stares out the window.

“We’re here,” she says, admiring my place.

I glance at my contemporary home, smiling with pride as I exit the passenger side. Some people assume as the boss of a nightclub, I’d live in an upscale, luxurious penthouse in the Centre of Boston. Well, not this guy. As

much as I enjoy the high, energetic buzz of Six-Pack, when I lock it up and go home, I love to have my privacy and space. That is why I love this place. Tucked away in a quiet cul-de-sac, my home stands at over nine thousand square feet, approximately seven miles west of the hustle and bustle of downtown Boston. Natural light floods my two-story home through a multitude of oversized windows. Thanks to a few smart investments over the years, and with Nick's knowledge, I've been able to buy this private oasis.

I grin. Pulling the keys from my pocket, I saunter toward the entrance. Out of the blue, a dizzy spell comes over me, and I stumble. Within a second, Amanda is right beside me, gripping my arm with a steady hand. The daze disappears as fast as it came.

"Brian, are you okay?"

*Fuck. I hate hearing the worry in her voice.*

I pull my arm free and stride to the front door. "I'm fine. Want to come in?"

She shakes her head while coming my way.

"Your body is telling you to rest, Brian. And I have to go to work."

After I open the door and deactivate the alarm system, she places the bag next to me. I stare at her, realizing I don't want her to leave, and speak before I can think it over. "What are you doing after work?"

Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Uh, nothing. Dinner and taking a shower. Why?"

My lower region stirs with thoughts of her wet body glistening in the shower. *Dammit, I need to get laid.*

"I have a blueprint of Six-Pack in my home office, and I thought it might be a good idea to go over the possibilities and your ideas for the layout after work."

She averts her gaze and bites her bottom lip while considering my proposal.

"You can call that snob Chantel on your way to Venus and tell her I said yes to having the lingerie launch at Six-Pack. It will show her your dedication."

A dazzling smile lights up her face, and I'm stunned by the glimmer in her eyes as they connect with mine. That smile could make any man's heart skip a beat.

"Are you sure you're up for that tonight? Your body—"

"Remember when you were one week away from opening Venus, and I

found you in the middle of the night having a painting crisis?”

“You finished it all while I was out,” she says, while I remember how I watched her drift asleep. Her face softening as her locks of brown hair tinged with white paint fell over her closed eyes. In that moment, she looked like an angel sent down from above—a goddess I’d do anything for.

A blush creeps up her cheeks before her eyes meet mine.

My hand finds hers, giving it a gentle squeeze as I explain, “Because that’s what friends do. They help each other when they need it. So please, help me by coming over tonight.”

She glances down before meeting my gaze again and steadying her voice. “Okay, if you swear to take it easy, how does me being here around six forty-five sound?”

“Perfect. I’ll take care of the food.”

“But—” She pauses and a lopsided grin spreads across her face when she notices my raised brow. “Okay, I’ll see you later tonight.”

Once she’s gone, I slump against the door, disheartened, the feel of my ICD beckoning me back to reality. Thoughts of what could happen to me any day gnaw at my consciousness. I force them away and stride purposefully toward my office. Time to get those blueprints ready for Ms. Brown’s return. And later I’ll order her favorite Thai food. A rush of satisfaction fills me, knowing that even though I can’t give in to my feelings for her, I can still do something that will make her smile. Something that will help her reach her goals.



## AMANDA

The day flies by, and I glance up and smile at Alisha as she walks into my office after closing the store. “Another successful day, boss.”

“Good to hear. Now, look at this,” I say, pointing to my laptop screen.

As soon as Alisha stops beside me at my desk, she lets out a delighted squeal. “Oh, those sets are freaking hot. That black lace one is spectacular. And I have to have those red ones.”

A smile spreads across my face at the lingerie photos displayed on my laptop screen. The London CEO was delighted to hear the launch would be at Six-Pack. Within minutes, she sent me the pictures of the entire new collection.

Alisha whistles. “Girl, those will sell like hot cakes. Every woman will want one, and every attending man will give their lover their credit card willingly when they have a boner imagining their partner in one of those sexy outfits.”

We giggle and share a high five.

“I’ll make sure Cole will be there. He loves naughty foreplay,” she says with a wink while caressing her bump. “In a few months, I’ll be round like a cannonball with these two. So I better enjoy it while I still can.”

“God, I can’t believe you’re going to have twins. You’re going to be such an amazing mom, Alisha. How is Cole coping with the pregnancy?”

“The morning sickness has subsided, but now the poor guy can barely keep up with my pregnancy cravings,” she says with a chuckle. “I swear every time I see him, I wanna ravish him on the spot. Just last week I walked into his office and...” She fans herself while raising her suggestive brow,

leaving me no doubt as to what happened next.

I laugh out loud, picturing poor Cole at the mercy of his pregnant wife's libido. Watching these two is like witnessing the perfect balance between yin and yang—two opposites coming together perfectly to create something beautiful.

“And how is Samantha doing?”

A smile spreads across Alisha's lips. “She loves the idea of becoming a big sister and shopping for baby stuff together with me.”

Samantha is Cole's daughter, the one he only found out about when she was fifteen years old. Cole found himself out of depth as he tried to be a dad to this teenage girl, not knowing where to start and realizing he needed help. Help came only from the person he least expected it from. My mind still spins, knowing the rollercoaster events that followed. But they survived it all, and now they are a tight-knit family expecting twins.

Alisha taps her watch. “Time to get your ass moving and visit Mr. Fox. Maybe you two can play some naughty nurse games.”

My eyes shoot to hers. “Jesus, Alisha. That's not funny. What he has is fucking serious.”

Her smile falters. “Sorry, I know. The whole event stirred up such a truckload of old emotions in Cole that he made an appointment with his psychologist.”

I shake my head. “I can't believe Brian kept it from all of us, especially the guys. They're like brothers.”

“Yeah. It's scary knowing he's got such a serious heart condition.”

I swallow as the nauseating image of Brian lying on the floor, gasping for air fills my mind. “Yeah, and he needs help and support, but he tends to act like a grumpy hedgehog every time I try to help.”

“Oh, in that aspect, Cole and Brian could be blood brothers. They're men who convince themselves that they must deal with their issues alone.”

Alisha grins when I tell her about him getting grumpy when I opened the car door.

“Want my number one tip for breaking through that thick skull of his?” she asks.

I nod.

“Be patient, but be clear. He's gone through a lot, but if he's acting like an ass, set him straight like a good friend would do.”

I let out a tired huff. “Easier said than done.”



“I know. Just remember, fear is temporary, but regret lasts forever.”

“Damn, these babies are turning you into a wisdom guru.”

Alisha shrugs. “Maybe. But thanks to these wonders, I can’t drink any alcohol but still manage to get a hangover every morning.”

I burst out into laughter at her sour face.

She glares back. “You wait until you’re pregnant and throw up your guts every morning. It’s disgusting, but enough talking. It’s time for you to go. Remember, dreams come true when passion transforms into concrete action.”

My smile widens. “Wow, you keep throwing them out.”

She chuckles and grabs her bag. “This oracle is going home to a home-cooked pasta dish—nothing better than carbs when you’re pregnant.”

Once in our cars, we honk as we both take off in opposite directions.

#### WHY ISN’T HE OPENING?

I press the bell again. No answer. I turn, ready to check if his car is in the garage when, “Amanda?”

I nearly fall off the step in shock at the sound of his voice.

“Goddammit, you scared me. Why—” My breath hitches when I turn around and find him standing there, his sweatpants hanging low on his hips, his rippling muscles exposed and perfect. My fingers tremble with anticipation as my eyes trace the path of light blond hairs down the middle of his chest until it disappears beneath the seam of his pants. His six-pack is calling to me, begging me to explore every ridge and crevice of his exquisite body. I feel my cheeks flush as I meet his gaze and find them twinkling with pleasure as he takes in my reaction.

“Never seen a man’s chest before, Brownie?”

I try to keep my composure and lift my chin higher. “Many, actually. So don’t get too full of yourself. I just wasn’t expecting you to answer the door in such a... casual manner.”

He chuckles and steps back. “Good, come in. I need your help.”

Stepping through his double-height foyer, I take in his unique floating staircase and the dark herringbone wooden floor. *I love his exquisite taste.*

“Follow me,” he says, strolling toward the French doors of his living room.

I stop, blinking at the sight of Brian stretching himself out on his chaise lounge couch. He pats the seat beside him. “Come here, Brown.”

“Why?”

A grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. “I need you to remove this adhesive plaster.”

I look at the white square below his left collarbone.

“Doc said I could take it off today. I was showering when you came, trying to get it off, but...” His mouth twists. “It hurts. So that’s where you come in.”

I reluctantly sit beside him and inspect the plaster.

“My chest hair is stuck to it.”

“Then you’ll get a free wax,” I tease, my lips quirking up into a smile as his face lights up with amusement. His familiar grin sends warmth throughout my body. The moment my fingers contact his skin and pull on the tip of the plaster, a soft hiss leaves his mouth. To distract him from the pain, I keep talking.

“You were right about Chantel. She became downright sugar-sweet when I told her that the launch is at Six-Pack.”

He grunts in reply as I keep carefully peeling the plaster away from his skin. He winces as I make contact with his tender flesh and then inhales sharply when I finally rip it off.

“Jesus, FUCK.” His face contorts in pain, but a moment later, he cracks a smile as he looks up at me and says, “My hero.”

I blush but shoot back with some lighthearted teasing, “Yeah, yeah, crybaby.”

His attention darts to the wound.

“Does it hurt?” I ask as my hand brushes over the tenderness of the surgical incision and surrounding areas.

He winces slightly. “Not really. But the annoying stiffness in my shoulder and neck muscles is downright exhausting.”

Without missing a beat, my hand moves to his collarbone, gently rubbing small, soothing circles over the tense area. His eyes close and his chest visibly relaxes, letting out a long exhale with each rotation of my fingertips. “Amanda...” he mumbles.

“Shh... just enjoy this moment,” I whisper back, continuing the slow massage up his neck with featherlight motions.

He sinks further into comfort and murmurs in blissful appreciation, “God, your fingers are magical.”

My lips curl, but my heart is dangling on dangerous territory. This man

has such a profound effect on me. The attraction I sense when I'm near him is palpable in every fiber of my being. It's like drinking a cocktail of emotions. Every sip is different and can stir up another mixture of emotions. I never know what will happen with him, and it's exciting and scary at the same time. He can make me want to slap him one moment and kiss him the next. My eyes land on his mouth. *Kiss. How would his lips feel against mine?*

I pull myself out of my wandering thoughts and look at him as a blond lock falls over his forehead, making him look like a golden god. My fingers itch to touch it, and I'm about to when a knock on the door prevents me, and I rise instead. Brian doesn't react. He's fallen asleep.

A smiling delivery man holds up a white bag with the name Thai Mi. "Order for Mr. Fox."

The spicy scent coming my way makes my mouth water. "Yes, thank you." I take the bag and close the door, placing it on the kitchen's island top moments later. I peek inside and a fragrance that's a combo of fried egg and spicy peppers hits me. Thai food. Yum. My favorite. My attention falls on the picture of hearts and colorful drinks hanging on one of his cabinets. Oh, he hung up Charlotte's picture. That is so sweet. She adores him, and he's a natural with her. He'll make a great dad someday.

"Hey..." Brian says, walking in with a yawn. "Sorry for dozing off."

"You clearly needed the rest."

He grabs a hoodie draped on the backend of a chair and puts it on—at least he tries. My first instinct is to help when I see him struggling, but I stop myself. If he needs help, he will have to ask me. He's a proud man who values his independence, so even if it's hard to watch him get frustrated, it's something I need to learn.

"Where are your plates?" I ask.

"The second cabinet on the left."

I bite my lips when he lets out a painful hiss, struggling to get his arm through one of the sleeves. *Don't help.* I set the table to prevent myself from stepping in. Sketches with different layouts of what I believe will be the runway for the models lie next to Six-Pack's blueprints. I peek over my shoulder. "You did this?"

He nods and comes my way with the food. "I had some ideas and put pen to paper."

We open the baskets, and the smell and sight of Pad-Thai, fresh rolls, and a yellow curry make my stomach growl like a grumpy bear.

“Oh God. I’m starving. Shall we grab a bite while we hash out these papers?” I suggest, tapping the table.

“Absolutely.” He beams, stretching his neck and rubbing his hands together. “I feel good as new after that massage.”

Not wanting him to catch me blushing, I look away.

For hours, we chat away, bouncing ideas back and forth, finding new angles and solutions that had managed to escape us earlier. Brian is an attentive listener, and I feel a profound sense of ease when I’m with him.

I check my watch. “It’s past ten. I think we’ve covered everything we can.”

He agrees, nodding. “Let me know when you can come over to Six-Pack and we’ll walk through the plan then. Maybe new thoughts will come up.”

A small smile tugs at my lips. “I’ll need to check with the owner, ask if I can come earlier so I don’t have to overwhelm Alisha during her pregnancy.”

Brian’s grin becomes electric, radiating a warmth that washes over me like a soothing balm. His intense gaze holds mine for a moment longer than necessary, and I feel my heart flutter in response. “You’re an amazing boss and friend, Amanda Brown,” he murmurs.

Our eye contact lingers in the silence; both of us straining against the electricity between us. The atmosphere becomes so thick with unspoken words that I can almost feel them crowding the air. He eventually steps away and strides to the worktop, yet it feels as if an invisible thread still ties us together.

He opens the cabinet. “Tea?”

“Sure, but since when are you drinking tea?” I say with a chuckle.

He gives a half-shrug. “Doctor suggested that I lower my alcohol intake, and I found out coffee later at night isn’t working out well for me. So my mum gave me this Relax Tea.” He holds up the small bag in his hand and smirks.

“How is your mom doing?”

He answers while opening the bag. “Much better, now that I’m out of the hospital. She only calls me once a day instead of three, which, to be honest, was getting a bit too much.” The soft smile appearing on his lips kindles warmth in my heart.

“Well, it shows what a caring mom she is.”

His face lights up with love and pride. “She is. She’s the most important person in the world to me. I try to visit her every Wednesday, and if I’m

lucky enough, I get to have dinner with her. Best beef stew in the world, trust me.”

I grin at the scene painted before me and I whisper, “That’s sweet.”

His shoulders lift in a shrug, but I notice the corners of his mouth turn up as he turns away to fetch two mugs of steaming hot water. When he turns back to me, a daring question finds its way out of my mouth.

“Can I ask you something personal?”

My gaze locks with his and the amusement fades from his face. He takes a deep breath before answering, “Depends how personal?”

I feel the courage in me growing. “I’ve been wondering... why did you say no when I asked for your help?”

His eyes search mine for a moment before he looks away and speaks.

“I wanted to help you, but I had an appointment with the doctor earlier that day. He told me I needed to plan for an operation in a short time span. And since I planned on not telling anyone about it, I figured it was better to say no to you than risk having you find out.”

My heart clenches tight in empathy as I realize the lengths this man has gone to mask his illness. His façade is a tough shield of masculinity, but underneath it all, a fragile vulnerability persists. This moment marks the first time he’s ever been so honest about his emotions, and something about it is oddly comforting. “How are you feeling now?” I ask, praying that he’ll share more with me about his innermost feelings.

He sets the two cups down on the table, and after taking a seat opposite me, he places his clasped hands on the table. “Still struggling.” The soberness in his tone makes me swallow. “For years, I was able to brush off the random palpitations and dizzy spells as nothing, which made it easier to ignore the gravity of the situation. But now... seeing the scar and having lived through an attack, it’s hard to ignore.”

The fear and uncertainty in his soulful irises are almost palpable. The thought of him dealing with this on his own for all these years saddens me. Because they are the things you should share with people you trust so they can support you. Without thinking, I take his hand in mine. I want him to know he’s not alone anymore. His gaze darts to our now joined hands, and I expect him to pull away, but he doesn’t. Instead, his thumb traces dizzying circles over my skin.

“When life gives you lemons,” he murmurs, “grab tequila and salt and start the party.”

In daily life, Brian tends to only show no other than the charismatic nightclub owner, but there's no trace of the usual flirtatious behavior he normally has on. No, this is a side of him I love most, the side that draws me in and pulls at places deep within my heart.

We remain in silence, our hands locked, and I'm all too aware of the warmth of his skin against mine, and I can't help but wonder if he can feel my heart beating faster. I could get used to this. Him and me. Sitting like this after a long day or simply because we want to.

My mind uses this moment to remind me of our conversation in the car this morning. The one where he admitted that his heart condition is the reason he's been denying our connection. Before I can stop myself, the words spill out of my mouth in one breath. "So your heart condition is one of the reasons you stay away from romantic relationships?"

And just like that, the moment we're sharing is gone and tension mounts as he slides his fingers away from mine. Dread fills my chest as I witness his expression changing into one of wariness.

"Romantic relationships just aren't for me, Amanda."

In the past, I would have accepted this answer, but with his tone carrying no conviction, I refuse to accept it so easily.

"How do you know if you haven't tried?" I challenge him.

A heavy silence hangs between us before he responds, his tone sharp.

"I've seen what happens when everything goes wrong." His words pull at my heartstrings. It's clear the thing he's referring to wounded his soul and made him fear commitment.

"But, Brian," I plead. "That doesn't mean it will happen to you too. Take Nick and Emma or Cole and Alisha—they're doing well together, after going through a lot."

He clamps his lips together in a tight line, his gaze boring into the floor as if battling with something internally. Then he looks up again, and the agony in his eyes takes my breath away. "I'm sorry," he murmurs, "but I'm not willing to take the risk."

My heart screams out, "*Please don't say that,*" but before I can react, the doorbell rings, causing him to close off this topic by standing and striding out of the room.

A moment later, a woman's voice gets my attention. I peek around the corner into the hallway to find a woman, about my height with long blond curly hair and bubblegum pink lipstick, standing in the doorway.

“Janelle, what are you doing here?” Brian asks, while taking in her outfit, or should I say, lack of.

The woman’s tight black halter dress hugs her curves and plunges dangerously low, exposing a generous swell of cleavage. She sidles up to Brian, her body language oozing seduction. Her long, fake lashes flutter as she parts her glossy lips in a coy pout.

“Oh, babe...” she purrs, “I heard you were sick, so I wanted to come here and see what I can do to make you feel better...”

My stomach turns when he doesn’t step back as she slides one of her manicured hands over his chest toward his neck.

“I missed you,” she purrs before planting a lingering kiss on his cheek. “Let’s have a good time.”

I spin around and snatch my coat and bag from the stool. *If he wants to go back to his lifestyle, that’s fine, but I’m not going to stand by and watch.* Brian’s head snaps, his lips pressing into a line when he spots me.

“I guess I’m off,” I say, halting in front of them. “Thanks for dinner and the help.”

Janelle’s flare of surprise and wide-eyed gaze somehow satisfy me. She quickly recovers and her gaze rakes over me as she asks with a plastic smile. “Who is she?”

“Just a friend,” I reply, taking my leave toward my car.

“Amanda.”

Brian’s voice and following footsteps make me quicken my pace. I scramble into the car, but he yanks the door open before I can start the engine.

“Amanda. We were drinking tea.”

“Raincheck. I’m tired and you’ve got company,” I say, without looking at him.

“Amanda, Janelle is—”

“The right woman for the lifestyle you prefer.”

His brows furrow at my words.

“And that’s okay.”

When he stays silent, I glance at the front door to catch the bleach-blond Barbie doll striding farther into the house, a harsh reminder that he chooses to stay Mister One-night stand.

“Good night, Brian.”

He exhales a deep sigh before his arms fall to his sides. I force a faint

smile as I close the door, trying to ignore the growing weight in my chest as I rev the engine and drive away.

The night passes by in a blur of reminiscing and my heart constricts as I recall Brian's words. "I'm not willing to take the risk."

*What could have wounded him so severely that he chooses to close himself off from being in any kind of relationship and keep himself stuck with these flings?*

Tears cloud my vision, and I wonder if he'll ever change his mind. Am I being foolish to cling to this speck of hope that one day he will realize what he's been missing?





## AMANDA

Walking through the doors of Six-Pack, I chuckle to myself as I hear Golden oldies purr through the speakers, casting a relaxed atmosphere. This doesn't sound anything like the normal playlist in this place. I push open the double doors and enter the key zone. The style and elegance of the gold-and-purple walls draw me in. Vast chandeliers hang from the ceiling as natural light reflects on the enormous glass dome, adding an impressive touch of romance.

"Hey, Amanda." Darius smiles brightly at me from behind the bar. "Brian should be here any minute. You want something to drink while you wait?"

"Why not? Show me your espresso-making skills, barista-boy."

I wander over to the bar and take a seat atop one of the barstools.

"Brian mentioned something about you hosting an event here? But he told me to ask you for the details." He scurries over to the coffee machine, pulling out the cups.

"Did he now?" I say with a chuckle. "Well, I'm holding a launch event for an exclusive lingerie line that I'm going to sell in my store. Think of it like a mini-Victoria's Secret show, with models strutting all over a catwalk to display the new collection, which will be available in my store afterward."

He turns and says, "Models in lingerie? Here, on a catwalk?"

"Yup, plenty of them." I giggle, seeing him contain his smile.

"On behalf of me and every other employee who will be working that day, thank you."

I laugh out loud. "You're welcome."

A melodic chatter from the hall draws my attention and when I pivot, I expect to see Brian. And I do, but I squint when he's followed by a flock of

elderly ladies flitting inside. They're at least sixty-five if not seventy. Brian ushers the ladies to a lengthy table in the rear while wearing a wide, beaming smile on his handsome face.

"Who are they?" I ask as Darius sets my drink down in front of me.

"LWC," Darius hums with a smile.

"The what?"

"The Lonely Women's Club. They come here every Monday morning for a few hours to catch up. Most of them have lost their partners and don't have any nearby family."

"That's sweet. Who—"

"Brian's concept," Darius interjects. "He knows one of the ladies well, and when their community center closed, he gave them an invitation to come here once a week, and they accepted and are our exclusive regulars on Monday morning."

I shift my gaze to Darius and raise an eyebrow. "If he showed his selfless side more, instead of putting his flirtatious club owner persona in the constant spotlight, people would see the real him."

He grins and bobs his head in agreement. "Yeah, tell him that," he encourages.

I can't help but smirk as I watch Brian captivate the crowd with every word. Beneath his charismatic exterior lies a gentle soul passionately devoted to helping others. He radiates compassion for those around him. It's why everyone loves him so much.

My heart warms recalling when one of Brian's employees came to him begging for more hours. When Brian found out they needed money for their kid's cancer treatment, he created a fundraiser, donating fifty cents to one dollar from each drink sold directly to this family and their cause.

"Hey, you wanna help me bring these lovely ladies their tea?" Darius asks with a smirk on his lips.

"Sure."

I grab the two thermos cans he puts before me and follow him as he carries a tray with cups. I can't help but be in awe of Brian's effortless charisma as he moves and talks.

"Good morning, ladies!" Darius says, setting the tray on the table to a chorus of radiant smiles and returned greetings.

"Is that your girlfriend, Darius?" a blond woman beside him queries with a mischievous grin.

“Nah, this is Amanda, Betty. She’s a friend of Brian’s.”

Five sets of eyes drift to me, taking me in from head to toe.

“Whoa, you’re stunning.” One of them swoons.

“Yeah, she’s a real looker,” another one croons.

The woman with salt-and-pepper hair pulled up in a messy bun and sitting next to Brian flashes me a friendly smile. “I’m Olga, the leader of this crew.”

My grin broadens. I’m instantly drawn to these ladies’ no-nonsense attitude. I can easily visualize Alisha, Emma, Bella, and me being just like them when we’re their age.

“Hey, everyone,” I greet with a wave while looking around the table.

Olga chuckles and looks at Brian. “You’ve got some fine-looking friends.”

Brian opens his mouth to speak, but his phone rings. He stands. “Sorry, I have to take this.” He looks at me. “Do you mind waiting a few minutes?”

“No problem, we’ll keep her occupied.” Olga winks.

He grins. “Won’t take too much time,” he says to me before striding away.

“Take a seat with us, sweetheart,” Olga says, gesturing to an empty seat.

When I do, Darius leans in and whispers, “Don’t let their age fool you. These gals still got it where it counts, if you know what I mean,” he says before making his way back to the bar.

Olga, who clearly has sharp hearing, gives Darius a wink before bringing her green eyes back to me and saying, “We have an issue that needs a special touch. And I think you’re just the one for the job, Amanda.”

“Oh, am I?”

Just then, the woman with short blond hair pipes up with a sultry grin, “I love Brian. If I were his age, I’d seduce him.”

Olga shakes her head in response.

“Hush, Veronique. You could be his grandmother, for crying out loud.” The group of ladies erupts in a fit of laughter as Veronique shrugs unapologetically.

“So what’s the issue?” I ask.

Olga gestures to a bundle of scarfs spread out on the table.

“These. And since you have such an impeccable sense of style”—she nods at my chic pink high-waisted flare pants and pumps—“we need your help to pick the most attractive shawl.”

I scan the plethora of winter garments in a variety of hues and designs.

“You expect me to pick one winner from all of this?” I stretch and hike over to the other side, letting my gaze roam over every item, rubbing a piece of fabric between my fingers.

Darius strides in and sets my cup of coffee on the table. “You forgot this, Amanda.”

Veronique bats her eyelashes and lays a slender hand on his arm. “Oh, you’re such a gentleman, cupcake,” she purrs.

The kind bartender flashes her an amused smile before sauntering away.

“So, Amanda, what do you do for a living?” Olga asks.

“Well, I’m the owner of a women’s boutique called Venus.”

Olga arches an eyebrow at me. “Oh, so you’re a fashionable genius. Your husband is one lucky dude.”

“Actually, I’m single,” I say, while continuing to examine the scarves.

Olga gasps and shakes her head. “Good Lord. How can such a gorgeous, young lady like yourself be without a man? You taking the time to help out a bunch of old ladies speaks volumes. What’s wrong with men nowadays, right?”

I shrug. “I’m wondering that myself.”

Brian’s deep voice rumbles from behind me. “The answer is simple. Amanda’s wasting her time dating the wrong types.”

I spin on my heels and am greeted by his two piercing blue eyes taking me in. His lips are pulled taut into a serious line and his brows are furrowed in concentration. A tense standoff ensues, as if he’s daring me to disagree with him.

“Oh my, what’s going on here?” Olga gasps, her face wrinkles crinkling with amusement when I look at her.

I fold my arms in front of my chest. “Brian thinks he knows what I want better than I do.”

Olga grins. “Brian, since you’re back, you can help Amanda pick out the winner of our scarf competition.”

Veronique stands up and saunters over to Brian, her lips twitching into a subtle smirk. “If you choose mine, Brian, I’ll cook you a delicious beef stew.”

“Not fair,” another woman sitting on the other side of the table says, pointing a finger at Veronique. “You can’t bribe him with food. We’ll disqualify you.”

“Whoa, ladies,” Brian exclaims, shooting his hands up. “I’m afraid I’m not the bribable type, so let me take a peek at the masterpieces.” As he strides up to the table and passes me, I instantly forget his words when I catch a whiff of his cologne. The man smells like a dream come true.

Before I can stop myself, I’m overwhelmed with a vivid image of me pressing my nose to the crook of his neck to inhale his scent even more. I hastily shift my focus onto the colorful knitted scarfs, trying to ignore the urge to fling myself at him.

“Ladies, you’ve truly outdone yourselves. These are magnificent,” Brian muses, examining the scarfs with a critical eye.

“Okay, enough with the compliments, Brian,” Olga interjects. “We need a winner while I’m still alive.”

I can’t help but give out a chuckle as I tilt my head toward him.

“Which one is your favorite?” he asks.

His gaze sends shivers down my spine as I consider his question. I redirect my focus onto the knitted scarfs.

“The second one on the right,” I whisper.

His eyes trail down to my chosen favorite—a brown-and-purple scarf with soft pink hearts. He raises his head, giving the group of women a quick glance before meeting my gaze again.

“I declare the winner is... this one.” He proclaims, picking up my choice.

“Yes! That’s mine,” Olga states with a beaming smile. “And now it’s yours, Brian.”

Without warning, Brian drapes the scarf around my neck, his fingers brushing against my skin. The moment he touches me, I’m sucked into the vacuum we create when we’re near each other.

“The soft brown and bright purple make your eyes pop.”

I swallow and touch his hand while staring at him. “Thank you.”

Streams of delicious warmth flood my body, but then Olga’s voice breaks the spell.

“You two would make a lovely couple,” she quips, the suggestion drawing a collective yes from the other women.

Brian takes a step back and clears his throat, his cheeks turning a light shade of pink.

“Oh, ah...” he stammers, not meeting my gaze. “I’m afraid I don’t believe in, uh, relationships.”

The group of women gasps in unison. Feeling emboldened in my stance

on this matter, I can't help but add.

"Brian is known in our group of friends as the one-night stand Romeo."

"What?" Brian exclaims, his eyes blazing with disbelief.

"Are you crazy, young man?" Olga says. "You should be looking for someone to settle down with—not someone for a one-night stand. You're way past your teenage years to be doing stuff like that."

The other women echo Olga's sentiments, each taking a turn to berate him with their words for his one-night stand lifestyle.

"You should find someone to settle down with," Veronique chimes in. "You're not getting any younger, you know."

"What about your future children?" Betty adds. "What kind of example are you setting for them by running around town picking up random women?"

Olga laughs, the sound resonating around the room. "You need to start thinking more long-term and less short-term. Don't waste time because you've got commitment issues. Love is too beautiful for that."

"What can I say? I'm a lone wolf," Brian jokes half-heartedly, attempting to lighten the mood.

The women all groan in response.

"We love you, Brian, but it's clear when it comes to love, you're a fool," Olga says, her expression softening as our gazes meet.

"I am who I am," he says before whirling around and beckoning me as he walks off. "Let's talk business."

Before I can follow, a hand grasps my wrist and I turn back.

"He's a fool if he can't see what's right in front of him," Olga muses, her gaze brimming with sympathy.

My cheeks burn. "Wha—"

Veronique smirks. "Oh, no use trying to deny it, young lady. We may be old, but we know love and chemistry when it's plain as day."

I smile at the group of wise women who have picked up on the connection between Brian and me, so I don't try to deny it.

"Any suggestions, ladies, on how to convince him relationships aren't as scary as he seems to think?"

The women's faces light up with mischief as they hear my confession and ask for help.

"Patience," Veronique says, "but don't forget to give him a little taste of his own medicine. If the opportunity arises, show him you're a woman who

likes to have a good time, just like him.”

I chuckle. “Thanks for the wise, encouraging words, ladies. It’s been a pleasure to have met you all.”

“You’re welcome to come over and chat with us oldies,” Olga says.

I nod and make my way to Brian, who’s standing at the bar, scrolling through his phone.

“What were they saying to you?” he asks, his eyebrows forming an inquisitive arch.

“Nothing,” I reply, feeling heat fill my cheeks as I shift my gaze away from his.

“Who the hell called me a one-night stand Romeo? Alisha?”

“Nah.” I chuckle, a smirk playing on my lips. “None other than our Bella Jenkins crowned you with that honor.”

He frowns. “You know the ladies are going to grill me about my love life every Monday now.”

I can’t contain the chuckle that bubbles up from my throat at the thought of Olga and her clique, prodding him and sharing their unsolicited opinion.

“Maybe you’ll learn something from these sassy ladies?”

He steps closer, trapping me with his gaze. “Like what?”

“Oh, maybe how to conquer your fear of commitment phobia.” My voice is gentle, but my heart is pounding as I wait for his response.

“You told them you were single,” he says instead. “So it looks like Steven the rooster isn’t the right guy for you after all.”

My eyebrows knit together in surprise as he turns the conversation back around to me.

“Steven’s a nice guy,” I say. “We just decided that we’re better off as friends.”

His smirk widens as if the notion of me being single pleases him. Irritation rises within me, pushing me to confront him with one of my unanswered questions.

“So, did you and Miss Barbie have a good time last weekend?”

“I sent Janelle home the second you left, Amanda,” he says, not leaving any space for doubt.

I try to mask my surprise, shrugging as I continue, “Why? She was obviously more than willing to offer you what you usually go for—a quick pleasure without strings attached.”

He stays silent, his mouth twitching slightly before reacting. “I’m not the



kind of guy who takes whatever woman throws herself at me,” he defends himself in an icy tone.

Silence stretches between us, and I realize I don’t want to further this tension. I came here for business, not to get into relationships and other private matters. Things that always end up with us getting into a quarrel, so I try to diffuse the situation.

“Olga and the girls invited me to come back and have tea with them.”

Brian’s jaw relaxes, and a soft smile appears. “Doesn’t surprise me,” he says in a calmer tone. “You’ve bewitched them with your Brown charms.”

I arch an eyebrow. “What Brown charms?”

His eyes lock with mine. “Your innate ability to make others like you in an instant.”

“Thank you, but you have the same gift, Brian. And I think it’s admirable what you’re doing for them.”

He shrugs, looking away. “They needed a place, and I figured we don’t open until one, so why not?”

I pause, catching myself smiling. “It shows once again you have more compassion and depth than you let on.”

“Maybe I do.”

I look at him and see a hint of vulnerability in the depths of his eyes, but a moment later, his natural confidence is back in place.

“Now let’s get to planning and make your night an even bigger success than I believe it will be.”

I raise a brow. “You seem pretty sure of that.”

“Yeah, because I only host the events I believe in. And I believe in yours. Now, come on Miss Brown, let’s get to work.”

I follow him but can’t help but wonder. *How much more of himself is he hiding?*



## BRIAN

The lights pulse in time to the rhythm, engulfing the crowd and the dance floor in a kaleidoscope of colors. Aromas of sweat, perfume and energy hang in the air. Joyous couples move gracefully to the rhythm while others launch into wild spins and jumps. From the sidelines, I swell with pride at the sight of my club's success. Even celebrities, politicians, and athletes come here for fun on their free nights

My eyes flicker to the bar, where Darius and his crew are ready to help all patrons get their drink fixes for the night. The mahogany bar gleams in the flickering light of the dance floor, its glossy finish reflecting its sheen. Behind it, hundreds of bottles of liquor, wine, and spirits are displayed in neat rows, illuminated by neon spotlights. Bartenders navigate through the maze of bottles like maestros of music, quickly fulfilling orders while laughter and jokes provide a backdrop of sound. In this place I have created, filled with music and drinks, I am king.

“Hey, is everything under control?” I ask Darius.

“Yeah,” he says with a grin, sliding the next tray with five whiskey margaritas my way. “Table twenty-three in the lounge has requested you specifically. This is their fifth round. They're a young group of female influencers having their bachelorette night, and they want to meet the owner.”

I thank him for reminding me and make my way to the lounge area, which is a space apart from the main dance floor, featuring dark leather couches and armchairs, low tables, and ambient lighting. It is a safe haven for those seeking a respite from the pulsing energy of the dance floor. Five sets of eyes eat me alive when I arrive. Their smiles are wide, their gazes hungry

for attention.

“Ladies,” I say with a smile as I set the tray of drinks down on the table. A woman with bright red hair reaches out and latches onto my wrist as I place a drink before her.

“Are you the owner of this club?” she asks, lips parting slightly.

I smile with pride, “Yes, I am.”

The group of women erupts into excited whispers and the bride-to-be adjusts her faux crown and says, “Please sit with us. We’ll post on social media how amazing this club is if you do.”

Knowing social media is a powerful tool and my target audience uses it a lot, I say, “Okay, five minutes, ladies.” I take a seat next to the woman who appears to be the least tipsy. “Are you girls having a good time tonight?”

The woman across from me, with the red hair, sets her lips apart and purrs. “Yes, of course.” Her foot gently tapping mine, a sly grin tugs at the corner of her lips as she continues, “But I would quite fancy getting personal attention from an attractive bar owner, maybe a nightcap?” Her shoe strokes my leg beneath the table, making my heart race in anticipation of what may come next. But then I remember Amanda’s face and regret sweeps over me for what I was planning to do.

I clear my throat and say calmly, “Thanks for the offer, but I’m not available.”

My response doesn’t seem to faze her as she leans closer to me with a coy expression and asks, “Are you married?”

My gaze remains on hers as I answer honestly, “Yes. I’m committed to this establishment.”

“So you’re single?” the brunette next to me asks next.

All five women await a response. I give them a curt head shake, not wanting to lead them on any further. “No, I’m taken.”

The bride giggles. “Told you so.”

The red-haired girl pouts in response. “Are you sure about that?”

I give her a nod. “Absolutely sure.”

The girls ask if they can take a picture with me to share on their Instagram accounts.

I nod and feel the women closing in around me as I stand, with each trying to grab my attention. The brazen redhead slides herself up against me and wraps her arm tightly around my waist. I used to bask in this kind of attention and anticipate a night of fun. But now? Now it feels like a noose

around my neck, stifling the life out of me. Clarity suddenly hits me as I recognize that I'm not the same person I used to be. My mind is flooded with questions. What kind of life do I want to live? Having come face to face with my own mortality, I know I should focus on what matters in life and seek out the people and things that bring me joy. And one-night stands don't do that.

Just as these thoughts cross my mind, my gaze shifts and falls on Amanda standing a few feet away. Her attire ignites a flame inside me that I struggle to keep contained. The tight leather skirt she's wearing hugs her curves in all the right places, and the sheer black top draws the attention of every person in the area. Damn, she looks fabulous.

The bride on my left holds up her phone to take a photo, but there's no way we can all fit into the frame.

"Let me help you," Amanda says.

"Oh, thank you," the bride exclaims with a brilliant smile as she passes Amanda the phone. The girls crowd around me and Amanda points the camera.

After taking a few snapshots, she hands the device back to the girls and all of them part from my side except the red-haired one. To my surprise, she gives me a kiss on my cheek and murmurs, "If you change your mind, you know where to find me, hot stuff."

I step back and give them a professional smile. "It was lovely to meet you. Have a great night, ladies."

When I see Amanda walking away, I scoop up the tray from the table and give a quick wave to the ladies before scampering after Amanda.

I catch her near the bar area and touch her wrist to get her attention.

"Hey. What brings you here tonight?"

She waves her free hand in a flustered manner. "Oh, nothing, I had something to tell you, but it can wait. You're busy—"

It's been over a week since I saw her. And she's been on my mind a lot. She looks stunning, and I'm beyond curious to know what she wants to tell me.

"Amanda," I say in a firmer tone. "What's up?"

She shifts her weight and shrugs. "All guests responded to the RSVP. Everyone is coming. It will be a full house. I thought I'd let you know."

I smile, understanding the satisfaction that comes with success.

"That's incredible. Congratulations."

"Yeah. You never know if anyone is actually interested."

I arch an eyebrow, surprised she felt worried. “A night of watching gorgeous women strut down the catwalk in lingerie? How could you think that wouldn’t sell out? Every invited man would be foolish not to attend, and every woman is curious and excited to see the latest line from this exclusive brand.”

The hesitation that lingered in her brown irises evaporates and when her lips curve into a wide smile, I smile back at her. “Every employee came over to me and volunteered to work that night. Come on, this asks for a drink to celebrate,” I say, pointing to the bar.

We approach Darius, who smiles when he sees us. “Hey, Amanda. How are you?”

“Good, thanks.”

Darius taps his fingers along the counter, showing off his skills as he mixes up a drink for a customer.

“She needs to celebrate—the event sold out,” I say.

Darius’s eyes widen. “Oh wow. Congrats. That definitely calls for a celebratory drink.”

Within minutes, Darius slides a long glass toward Amanda. “One Deluxe Special,” he says with a wink. The cocktail is a work of art; vibrant swirls of pink, yellow, and blue create a mesmerizing pattern that resembles a dusk or dawn sky with ribbons of color cascading around each other in ever-changing shapes. This is one of the reasons he’s the head bartender.

Amanda thanks Darius before grabbing the straw and taking a long sip. My breath hitches as I watch her luscious lips curl around the straw, and my mind ponders how it would feel to brush over them with mine.

Her humming in contentment seems to light up the room, and Darius says, “Enjoy,” before wandering off.

My pants tighten as she takes another sip and I have to clench my fists to keep my composure.

“So how did the others respond to this amazing news?”

She nibbles her lip, her cheeks blushing a light pink. “You’re the first to know.”

Hearing she’s chosen to share this huge moment with me touches me and a lump forms in my throat. “Thanks, Brownie.”

Her eyes lift and when they meet mine, she asks, “You’ve been calling me that for years. Why?”

Without thinking, words come floating out.

“Simple. You resemble my favorite dark chocolate delight in so many ways. Your hair and eyes resemble the color of a brownie, and your innate personality is just as sweet and warm.”

*Fuck, did I just say that out loud?* The rosy hue flooding her cheeks tells me I did indeed. And when her gaze meets mine, a lightning bolt strikes between us and an intense yearning blazes to life. Sparks crackle in her immense dark irises, radiating a potent emotion I can't put my finger on but one that mirrors what's stirring inside me.

My will to resist her is weakening with every second. All I want is to pull her close, yet like always, Aunt Georgia's words rise from the depths of my subconscious and echo in my head like a haunting tune. I can still sense her hand on my shoulder as she huddled next to me after my dad's funeral.

“Brian, sweetheart,” she whispered, “let me give you some life advice. Don't ever fall in love.”

A lump formed in my throat as I glanced over at my mom, tears streaming down her face as grief and pain had taken over. Swallowing hard, I turned back to Aunt Georgia. “Why not?”

She cupped my cheek tenderly and gave me a sad smile. “Because love never lasts, not even true love,” she said, pointing at my mom. “So be clever and protect your heart from the inevitable pain it'll bring when it comes crashing down.”

“Brian?”

I startle out of my trance, unaware that I was staring at the floor.

“Where did you drift off to?” Amanda asks.

“Uh, nowhere,” I mumble.

She reaches out, but I back away, the reminiscence leaving me feeling exposed and disturbed each time.

The distress in her eyes reveals her reluctant surrender as I construct an invisible barrier between us.

“So, any plans tonight?” I ask without emotions.

She casts a glance over her shoulder at the boisterous crowd of people and replies, “Well, since this is the place to meet interesting men, and the ladies of the LWC advised me to keep dating. I'll stick around and see if I can find someone new tonight.”

Rage flares inside me and my jaw stiffens. “Maybe you should stop dating,” I suggest, trying to appear unfazed.

She lets out a derisive snort and wheels around to face me. The warmth of

her anger radiates off her as she crosses her arms. “How about you put an end to your one-night stands,” she retaliates.

My fists clench involuntarily as I fight to remain composed. “I have,” I murmur before thinking better of it.

“Yeah, right,” she scoffs, her voice ringing with incredulity. Under her breath, I can hear her muttering Janelle’s name. She still believes I hooked up with Janelle that weekend.

Desperate to make her understand, I grit out through my teeth, “I already told you I’ve sent Janelle home the second you left, Amanda.”

A moment of strained silence follows our argument before a man stops beside us and breaks the icy atmosphere.

“Well, if it isn’t the lovely Amanda Brown.”

I clench my fists when photographer Cody Michael rests a hand on her shoulder. Amanda flashes him a warm smile, and he leans in closer while I fight the urge to push his paw off her.

“Hey, Cody,” she greets him in a sweet and welcome tone.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he asks.

I open my mouth to object, but Cody replies, “I know you already have one. So maybe I can buy you the next,” he says, winking at her.

To add to my annoyance, my name gets called, and when I look sideways, Darius beckons me and I have no choice but to go. *Damn it, I don’t want to leave her with him.*

“Don’t worry about this beauty, Fox. I’ll take good care of her,” Cody says, already taking his seat beside her.

Reluctant, I turn away, my stomach churning as Amanda refuses to meet my gaze.

The next two hours are an eternity as I run around all over the place, and when it quiets down, I frantically search the room for her. I’ve tried to keep an eye on her, but she isn’t in the spot where I last saw her. *Did she go home? Did she leave with Cody? The thought of that makes me want to punch something.*

Needing an answer, I ask Darius, “Have you seen Amanda?”

Darius catches my eye and nods toward the VIP lounge.

“Tread with care, boss,” he says as I turn and leave.

My feet freeze in their tracks and my blood boils like a cauldron of emotions as I arrive at the lounge and take in the image before me: Cody and Amanda sitting on one of the velvet couches, him with his posture angled



toward her, and his arms stretched out across the back—a blatant sign of interest. I know Cody Michaels all too well; his reputation with women is as notorious as mine and I don't like that. Because she deserves better than being someone's one-night stand.

My eyes clash with Amanda's for a split second before she turns them back to Cody. Puzzled that she didn't smile or even acknowledge me, I walk over and say in an even tone, "Hey. Everything all right here?"

Cody's eyes flicker between me and Amanda, and a smirk curls on his lips. "Oh yeah. Amanda's a tough one... I've been trying to get her to pose for me, but she keeps turning me down... I'm such a heartbroken soul," he jokes. "Can you imagine how gorgeous she'd look in lingerie? Magazine sales would go through the roof. Hell, traffic would jam up when she's on a billboard."

My fingernails bite into my skin as my insides churn with an electric fury. Amanda's laugh tinkles like a knife running along my spine when she grazes Cody's wrist.

"I said I need to think about it."

"You mean there's still a chance you could say yes?" He wiggles his eyebrows.

"Amanda, can I speak to you alone?" I grind out between gritted teeth. My temperature reaches the boiling point when our gazes lock.

"Not right now. I'm in the middle of a business meeting with Cody. I'll catch up with you later."

Cody strides up, hand outstretched. "Care to dance?"

My throat constricts and all I can do is watch in horror when she sets down her drink and stands up from the couch. "Sure."

As soon as she passes me, I take the opportunity and reach out and seize her wrist, which causes her to halt in her tracks. Cody notices and glances between us. She offers him a smile. "I'll be out in a minute."

He nods and leaves.

"What the hell are you doing, Amanda?"

Her innocent façade slides back into place. "Just having a few drinks with Cody and talking business."

"And he's flirting with you," I spit out.

She locks eyes with me and coolly responds, "So?"

My voice rises and I scoff, "So?"

People around us turn to see what's happening.

“I’m single, Brian, I can date and dance with whoever I want.”

Frustration blazing, I bark, “I know, but that guy is no good for you. He’s just tryin’ to get you in bed!”

She lifts an eyebrow and a smirk edges onto her lips. “Maybe that’s exactly what I want right now.”

Surprise ripples through me. “That’s not like you, Amanda.”

“Says who? Have you ever asked me what I want?”

The words sting as they hit me like a punch to the gut. She doesn’t give me time to answer and continues on with her cutting words. “Thanks for your concern, but you’re not my boyfriend, Brian—we’re friends and business partners—nothing more.”

My mind swirls and my throat constricts as I recognize the truth in her words. As she moves toward the dance floor, a maelstrom of anger, desire, and confusion roils inside me, clashing with all my reasons for why I shouldn’t pursue her. My heart and mind both battle for control, but I end the conflict when I accept that there is too much at stake. Keeping my focus on helping Amanda launch the project is paramount, so I turn away from the dance floor and keep walking. My heart and treacherous body scream against my mind’s resolution. But I ignore them and focus on my goal. Keep Amanda happy and protect her from pain no matter what.



## AMANDA

A month later, I pause and take a moment to admire the calm beauty of my boutique. My heart swells with pride, knowing I created this haven to help women feel confident and secure about their appearance. Wistfully, I wander over to the empty lingerie section and envision the finished product—shelves full of feminine apparel that will give women the opportunity to buy and match their lingerie with their fashionable outfits right here. There’s nothing more rewarding than imparting women with a sense of contentment and joy about their appearance. This is my life’s mission. The thought of failure frightens me, so I cross my fingers and hope that this endeavor will be the change that is needed to get Venus to be a go-to clothing store in Boston.

“I’ll take this one,” a customer says, placing a dress on the counter.

“Good choice. It looks amazing on you,” I say as I scan the item and begin to wrap it up.

“This place is fabulous,” she gushes. “You two know how to help a woman look beautiful while staying true to herself.” She points toward Alisha. “Her body confidence is inspiring. She rocks her pregnancy curves with pride.”

I laugh and nod. “That she does.”

After the woman pays for her purchase, my gaze follows her out of the store and lands on Alisha. Our regulars call her Miss Spicy Red Lips because she never goes anywhere without painting her lips a daring shade of red. Her collection includes all shades of red, but Cole’s favorite is Fire Brigade Red, the one she wears most often.

The bell clinks and, as always, my heart explodes with anticipation when

Brian struts in. I scold myself for marveling at how his dark blue jeans hug tightly against those toned hips and pert behind.

*Really classy, Amanda.*

But this man has an energy I can't seem to resist. From the get-go, he's been the one my body craves. No other can fill that spot. Even charming Cody Michaels, who knows how to use his captivating looks to gain attention from women, cannot measure up. His seductive charms may work their magic elsewhere, but not on me.

No, I'm driven toward the man with the smirk and electric blue eyes that ignite fireworks deep within me with just one gaze, just like it is doing now. I know I should cease my daydreams about him, especially since I told him at Six-Pack that we are nothing more than friends and business partners, but it's hard to deny when my body hums from his presence.

"Good morning." The tenor of his voice thrums through me as if he's playing me like a guitar. He's standing on the other side of the counter, and I want to reach out and touch him. But I stay rooted in place, trying to quell my emotions with logical thoughts.

"I'm warning you, Fox," Alisha says as she stops beside me. "If you give all women that look, they'll think you've got naughty ideas up your sleeve."

My cheeks heat as my imagination runs wild with visions of my own naughty thoughts involving Brian and ice cream. But I know the chances of that happening are slim.

"I'm sympathizing with Cole already if it turns out your twins have your mouth," Brian jokes.

Alisha laughs, her eyes twinkling when he mentions her husband. "He'll love it like he loves me."

He points to her swollen stomach and raises an eyebrow. "The kids are growing fast."

She strokes her bump tenderly. "Second trimester. Let's just hope they don't inherit their father's stocky frame or else I'll need a miracle to push them out."

"Jesus. Don't put images in my head," Brian groans, scrunching his nose.

A smile tugs at her lips. "You're such a baby."

"So what brings you here, Foxy-boy?"

He rolls his eyes at the nickname she gave him.

"I'm here for Amanda."

"Well, why doesn't that surprise me?" she says, eyeing me with a smirk.

“Excuse me,” a woman says, standing by the new arrivals section. “Can you help me?”

“Of course.” I come into action, leaving Brian standing by the counter because customers come first, I remind myself.

Alisha continues to talk with Brian while I hold different hues near the customer’s face and explain the best colors for her skin tone with confident ease. Ultimately, we end up with pants that are a deep navy hue, crisp and tailored with a hint of stretch to them, combined with a top that is a delicate white lace that hugs the curves of the customer’s frame, hot yet businesslike in its appearance—a beautiful blend of classy and sultry.

As the woman slips into the dressing room, my focus is yanked to Brian, now seated in the corner chair. That same one I passed out in when he came around and helped me with my painting deadline years back. I watch his lips tug up into a roguish smirk when he notices the plate of dark chocolate brownies on the side table. Yeah, I asked Emma to make me a bunch. How could I not, knowing the man who makes my heart race mentions that my personality resembles those sweets? His way of saying it had my knees buckling in an instant. I look up again and find him biting into one, and the way he relishes it bewitches me. Watching Brian Fox eat a brownie is true decadence.

Oh God. I’m doomed. Because no matter how hard I try, my attraction to him isn’t fading away—in fact, our professional working relationship has only intensified it. It’s become electric; his intelligence is invaluable, and I feel empowered by his respect for me. But I find the chemistry between us has become almost unbearable. The way I blush whenever he looks at me; the burning heaviness I feel inside when I look into his eyes... these have been resurfacing nightly in my dreams.

As my client leaves with her new attire, I turn to Brian.

“Hey. Sorry for the wait.”

“No problem,” he drawls, his voice slightly deeper than usual.

*Or am I just imagining it?*

“Let’s go to my office.”

Our feet pad through the narrow corridor and when I step into my office, which is half the size of his, he says.

“So you said in your text something was wrong?”

I nod and move behind my bureau and shuffle some papers until I come across the right one that I slide his way. “Yes, I think there’s a mistake in the

invoice. The numbers don't match our agreement."

"It's not wrong," he says, peering at the paper. "There's a discount included."

I bite my lip, trying to hold back my doubts as I battle the feeling of being favored because of our friendship, or even worse, me being his best friend's sister. That isn't what I want. I want to be considered an equal.

"Brian, I—"

He shakes his head. "It's enough, Brownie."

"You didn't mention a discount before. I don't want you to feel like you have to give me a discount because we're friends."

"Amanda." My eyes find him as he says my name in a no-nonsense tone. "Trust me when I say this is enough."

The sincerity in his gaze eases my worry. "Okay," I say, stepping around the desk and focusing on my other question. "Would it work if I stopped by Six-Pack or your house this week? I'd like to discuss the last details about the décor and placement of the runway."

He nods in agreement before tossing out a different query. "Is there something going on between you and Cody Michaels?"

Brian's question hits me like a sudden gust of wind, knocking the breath out of me. *Is there something between me and Cody Michaels?* The audacity of the question threatens to unravel the composure I fight so hard to maintain. I force a calm façade, refusing to let Brian see the shock that churns within me.

"We had a good time at Six-Pack, and I got him to be the lingerie launch photographer," I reply, my voice laced with defiance.

His jawline clenches, his eyes darkening with a mixture of anger and something else I can't quite decipher. His next words cut through the air. "Do you think it's wise to mix business with pleasure?"

His accusation strikes at the core of my trust, and the pain resonates deep within my chest. "Really, Brian? You think I'm involved with Cody while doing business with him?" With a glare that could sear through steel, I say, "You should know me better than that." I turn and storm away to bury myself in work, desperate to escape the hurt.

His footsteps echo behind me. "Fuck, Amanda, I'm sorry."

I halt in my tracks, unable to resist the pull of his voice. I slowly pivot, my eyes meeting his breathless and mesmerizing stare.

"It was wrong of me to ask because it's not my business." His words hang

in the air, laced with regret and genuine remorse.

Damn him for sounding so sincere. It renders my anger impotent, leaving me teetering on the edge of an emotional precipice. I take a step back, needing distance from the man who has stirred my heart into chaos. As I do, my heel catches on the threshold, and my body tilts backward, plunging me into a momentary freefall.

Brian is quick, his reflexes sharp, but as he reaches out to steady me, he loses balance as well, and we crash against the wall with a resonant thud. Every nerve in my body comes alive when I find myself pinned between the unyielding panel and the heat of his body pressed against mine.

He braces himself against the wall, creating a fraction of space between us, his breath brushing against my cheek.

“Are you okay?” His voice, a low timbre filled with concern, sends shivers cascading down my spine. I inhale shallowly, struggling to form coherent words, my gaze drawn to a small piece of fluff on his shirt collar.

Without thinking, my fingers reach out, trembling slightly, and brush the offending fluff away. A sound escapes his lips, a mixture of a groan and a sigh as the electrifying connection between us intensifies. Our eyes lock, a silent understanding passing between us, and his heat seeps into me, fanning the flames of desire that flicker within. I move closer, drawn like a moth to a flame, our breaths mingling in the charged space we occupy. Time slows, the world around us fading into insignificance, as we stand there suspended in the ethereal realm of longing.

The universe holds its breath, as if aware of the pivotal moment that awaits us—the moment when our lips will finally meet, when the barrier between us will crumble, and our desires will intertwine.

“Amanda? Oh shit!”

We jerk away in shock to find Alisha staring at us from the hallway.

“Uh, never mind. I can fix it,” she stammers before hurrying away.

Brian takes a step back and clears his throat as he looks at the floor. “Sorry. That... I gotta go.”

He flees from me as if his life depended on it. At the entrance to the store, he looks back over his shoulder for a moment before disappearing.

Then the realization hits me—we almost kissed. But then he said, sorry. *Does that mean he didn't really want to kiss me? Or does he mean sorry that we got interrupted?* A mix of desire, confusion, anticipation, and uncertainty rushes through me. I take a deep breath and run my hands through my hair as



I try to make sense of all these mixed-up feelings inside me. Okay, we almost kissed, but didn't. I make a mental note not to read too much into this moment. Because with Brian Alexander Fox, I know my heart hopes he'll change his mind and give us a try, but to protect myself I have to keep in mind that it might stay a wishful dream.



## AMANDA

As I pull up to Six-Pack, anticipation courses through me as I spot vans from the technicians and crew building the stage scurrying in and out with boxes. My heart flutters as I behold Brian's car, parked in its usual spot.

My mind keeps recalling the moment he almost kissed me at Venus.

It's been over a month, but my mind keeps reliving it. I take a deep breath and compose myself. These thoughts and feelings can wait until later; right now, the only thing that matters is the upcoming launch.

I bolt inside, feeling my heart race with anticipation.

"Hey, Amanda!" Darius calls, jogging up to me. "Are you excited?"

I smile at Darius, who stops tall and proud, with a bright smile on his face beside me. He's wearing stylish blue jeans and a simple black T-shirt. This, combined with his slightly disheveled light brown hair, gives him a relaxed look.

My eyes light up as I survey the room. Everything looks how we planned it. They completed the runway in the middle of the dance floor, and technicians are tinkering with the lights while other workers are bustling around setting up the seating area. Large black pillars stand at the corners of the catwalk, each adorned with an overflowing vessel of fresh flowers that fill the room with a sweet aroma. I'm overwhelmed with joy at the sight of it all and I can't help but let out a loud gasp of wonderment.

"Man, I can't wait for tonight," Darius says, his words tumbling out in excited tones as he shares his enthusiasm for the evening. "A night of beautiful women in lingerie—all courtesy of you."

I chuckle. "You're very welcome. Where's Brian?"

“Oh, he’s near the dressing rooms. Your order of lingerie arrived half an hour ago, and he made sure they placed it in the right room.”

“Great. Then I’m off to work.” I pause, realizing I may need his help. “Darius, if any models arrive, can you welcome them and then bring them to me?”

A smirk stretches across his face. “Yes, ma’am! I’m about to become the best host those ladies have ever had.”

I laugh at his enthusiasm and clap him on the shoulder. “Thanks. If anything comes up, let me know.”

I weave my way through the building, my heart pulsing in anticipation. When I reach the women’s locker room, my breath catches in my throat when I see Brian standing, illuminated by a solitary beam of light that filters in from an open window. Damn, he looks sexy as hell with his rolled up sleeves, the curve of his biceps exposed, and a lock of golden hair moving back and forth with every move as he searches for something.

“What are you looking for?”

“My phone. It’s here somewhere,” he mumbles.

I smile as I take my phone and press a few buttons. Seconds later, a ringtone erupts nearby and I crane my neck to find his device, shaking on the ground behind a pile of boxes.

I reach down and pick it up, only to view the name *Brownie* popping up on the screen. My heart skips a beat. It sounds so intimate. *Does it mean anything?* I hand him his phone and we lock eyes. The warmth of his gaze is like an abyss I wouldn’t mind getting lost in while he lies on top of me, naked. *Okay, stop it.* I clear my throat and take a step back, needing to put some distance between us.

“I better get to work,” I mumble, barely able to keep my focus as I grab the first box.

“Can I help?” he asks with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“You’re asking to help me unpack lingerie? Not surprising,” I fire back, playing coy and averting my gaze so he can’t see how much he’s getting to me.

He grabs a box, winks at me, and adds, “It’s as close as I’m gonna get to touching them at the moment, so might as well take advantage.”

My breath catches in my throat. *What does he mean by that?* I don’t ask, afraid I’m reading too much into it, and watch him grab another box.

We work shoulder to shoulder, and I become aware of how his gaze

lingers a bit longer each time he hands me a set of lingerie, and all I can do is hope he doesn't see the blush on my cheeks.

"Wow," he breathes, and I turn to find him mesmerized by a black lingerie set. Its whisper-thin silk glimmers in the light, and its intricate lace detailing swirls around the edges and curves of the piece, creating an almost floral-like pattern. It's my personal favorite and judging by his reaction, I'm not alone.

"Hmm," he hums, running his fingers along the fabric. "Very delicate and sensuous."

Heat washes over me as his eyes linger on me.

"This would look good on you."

My heart stops at his words. *Is he even aware of what he's saying?*

I take the set from him and hang it up. "It's for the models to wear, not for me."

He turns to me with curiosity in his gaze.

"I never asked you, but why did you decide to add lingerie to your store?"

I answer while keeping my hands busy with organizing.

"Because even though I believe genuine beauty is something that comes from within, the right clothing and lingerie can help women feel confident and help them unlock their inner diamond and give it the chance to sparkle brighter than ever."

My heart races as he leans in closer and drops his voice an octave. "So how do you let your inner diamond shine, Brownie?"

I take a deep breath, standing tall and confident. "I find wearing the right clothing and adding some sexy lingerie to it helps me feel empowered in any situation."

He grins. "From a man's perspective," he says, with a wry smile playing on his lips, "there's nothing sexier than a woman who knows her own power."

The chemistry between us reaches new heights, and I can't help but ask, my voice barely above a whisper, "Do you think I'm powerful, Brian?"

His eyes glow like brilliant searchlights. "You, Amanda Brown, are a force to be reckoned with," he says in a low, velvety voice that sends chills down my spine. "Your fierce determination sets you apart from the rest, and your confidence and intelligence are magnetic and impressive."

His supportive words warm my heart, but unfortunately, they do so much more. Such as launch themselves straight at my pussy, causing me to want to

grab him by the neck and kiss him. Thank God, we're interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Ladies, here is the dressing room," Darius notes before walking in, followed by a group of women.

"Welcome, girls," I say with a bright, professional smile before hiding a chuckle when seeing the Casanova grin on Darius's face as he talks to one model.

"I'm your man when you need a drink tonight."

The red-haired woman giggles and bats her lashes at him.

"Okay, ladies. Pay attention. This is Brian, the owner of Six-pack," I say, pointing Brian's way.

Ten pairs of eyes slide over him, each one shooting him something that he's grown so used to—lustful gazes.

Brian smiles. "Glad you all could make it. I hope you have a wonderful time here. If there are any issues or questions, come find either me or Darius."

"Are you single?"

I whip my head to the tall blond woman standing next to me. Irritation floods me as she undresses him with her gaze. The glint in her eyes indicates she's used to getting what she wants.

"That's not what Mr. Fox meant," I say in a no-nonsense tone. "Let's keep it professional. I'm not against flirting, but save it for your free time."

Brian and I lock eyes. His intense gaze and smug grin mess with my head and heart. *Friend and business partner*, I remind myself, but my body disagrees. This is going to be a long day.



## BRIAN

With ten minutes to go until the event begins, I'm behind the catwalk curtains, searching for Amanda to give her some good luck. The level of anticipation and curiosity in the air infects every person in this building as it swirls around like a rampant virus. Working with Amanda these past weeks has been a constant struggle between me wanting to help her as a friend and business partner, and my growing desire for her. God, I almost kissed her at Venus. My heart races as I battle with an inner turmoil. On one hand, I'm thankful that Alisha had the impeccable timing to prevent me from succumbing to the temptation. On the other, I'm left agonizing, knowing if she didn't come in, I would finally know how it would feel to have her supple lips pressed against mine.

But I guess it's better this way and I thought I had myself under control since then, but today in the dressing room was almost too much for me to handle. Once I pulled out that black set, my mind couldn't stop imagining her in it. My rational side whispered 'no,' but my emotions screamed 'give in,' and I did by flirting with her. Thank God Darius interrupted, otherwise I would have asked what she was wearing underneath her outfit. *What the hell am I doing?* My reasons for keeping my distance have become hazy over the past weeks, leaving me vulnerable to my inner desires taking over. *Would it be that bad?*

Maybe if we just let ourselves go one night, the flame would die down and we'd be able to see this thing between us is nothing but lust. *No, not a good idea, or maybe. God, I'm teetering on a tightrope.*

Passing Alisha and hearing her go over the details with the models in a



tone that says don't mess with me makes me grin. That woman can be bossy as hell, but it's just what her grumpy husband loves and needs. I find Amanda standing a few feet away. She's holding a mic in one hand while bouncing on her feet and looking at her wristwatch every few times.

I stop beside her. "Ready?"

She turns to me and my mouth goes dry when I admire the front of her form-fitting dress. Its low-cut cleavage with the wide lace details—classy and sexy as hell. I'm ready to throw out all my reasons for not acting on my desire and reach out and touch the skin between her breasts with my hands and lips. *Fuck*. "Well, I doubt anyone will even see the models tonight."

"Why, what's wrong?" She turns and glances at the ladies in lingerie, checking for any problems.

I chuckle, realizing she's oblivious to how stunning she looks. She deserves to know. So I lean in and whisper near her ear, "Relax, Brownie. Nothing's wrong with them. What I tried to say discreetly," I hum, "is that you're so fucking hot that every man will have his eyes on you instead of the models."

She spins back to me with a hooded gaze, causing my cock to stir as she bites down on her glossy bottom lip.

"Thank you."

She breaks eye contact and peeks past the black screen in the room.

"It's packed," she says, her voice filled with pride.

"Yeah, the turn-up is amazing. How are you feeling?"

She lets out a chuckle. "Oh, you don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

She holds up her free hand, and I notice the slight tremor.

"Being nervous isn't bad," I remind her. "It just means something big is going to happen. You're going to nail this, Amanda."

"Thank you. Without your help, I wouldn't be here right now."

I shake my head. "Maybe not here, but I have no doubt you'd make it happen somehow because you are Amanda Brown, resourceful and determined."

She catches me off guard by wrapping her arms around me, and I freeze for a moment before sinking into her embrace. I pull her against my chest and inhale the sweet aroma of her perfume radiating from her body. Her breath tickles the side of my neck, sending shivers down my spine as the fire in my veins intensifies with each exhale. My cock stirs at the thought of what could

be. I close my eyes to savor the warmth of this moment until an unwelcome voice brings me back to reality.

“Excuse me, Mr. Fox? I have a little emergency.”

As Amanda and I part, our gazes lock with the intensity of a thousand burning stars. My body aches with longing, each passing moment making it harder to resist the temptation of kissing her right here on the spot. Damn, I am most certainly at risk of succumbing.

I turn, only to find the blond model from earlier standing before me.

“What seems to be the problem?” I ask.

With a mischievous glint in her irises, she takes a step toward me. “This,” she says, pointing to the lace strands of her corset top. I follow her fingertips as they toy with the strings.

“This needs to be pulled tighter.” She cups her breasts over the corset. “The girls need to be displayed perfectly for tonight.”

I stare at her hands. What some women will do to get attention.

“My friend Rachel told me you’re a man who knows how to show a girl a good time. And I love good times,” she purrs.

Amanda lets out a loud snort and I scowl internally, realizing I’m still staring at the woman’s cleavage. Well, not really because I’m still recovering from our moment, but I know she must think that I’m interested in this woman since it looks like I’m staring at her breasts. *Fuck.*

“Well... it’s clear you’re... needed. Enjoy presenting the girls and the good times, Mr. Fox.” Gone is all the warmth we shared a minute ago.

I call after her as she walks away, but she doesn’t turn around. *Shit.*

THE EVENT IS AN UNDENIABLE SUCCESS, and the after-party is in full swing when Nick, Cole, and I join one another at the bar. Nick orders a round of drinks and I glance around the room in search of Amanda, but she’s nowhere to be seen. My desire to locate her and explain that nothing has happened or will happen with Fiona or any other model in this place is intense. As if summoned by my thoughts, the flirtatious model appears next to me.

“Mr. Fox, did you enjoy the sets I modeled?” Fiona asks, her eyes wide with seduction. “Would you like to go somewhere more private so I can give you a special performance?”

She doesn’t even acknowledge Nick and Cole as they exchange glances, and she brazenly runs her fingers down my arm. “Your club is so huge.”

*Got to give it to her. She's persistent.*

I grasp her wrist and take a step back when her hand travels toward my trousers. "Thank you, Fiona. You looked amazing in those outfits, but like I said earlier, I'm not available."

Her fake lashes flap as she blinks.

"Are you sure?" she asks, licking her lips.

I hide a curse. Unbelievable how thick this woman's skull is. Right now I want to be blunt, tell her to fuck off, but I can't. What if she causes a scene and ruins the end of Amanda's amazing night? So, keeping my composure, I stick with being polite but clear.

"Yes, I'm very sure, Fiona."

She shrugs and presses a note into my palm. "If you change your mind, call me." And with that, she turns and ambles away, swinging her hips in search of her next target.

"Wow, did we just witness Fox saying no to carefree sex?" Nick quips.

Cole smirks. "Yeah, we did. Guess he's maturing."

Both men laugh as I roll my eyes while drinking my soda. Even though they are annoying right now, these two have been amazing friends during my six-week recovery. They had me over for dinner with their families multiple times and ignored my cranky ass when I couldn't help them with sparring in the gym because a hit to the chest would be painful if it landed on the still fresh scar and might damage the device.

I crumple the piece of paper into a ball and drop it on the floor when my eyes find Amanda. The way she stood on stage tonight was captivating. Her charming personality shined like a rare diamond. No lingerie model could beat her natural beauty or match her intriguing energy. I watch as she and Alisha mingle with the guests. A smirk adorns my lips as my best friend watches his wife with lustful hawk eyes.

"You're drooling, Cole," I say.

"Yup, and I don't care. The moment this after-party shit is over, I'm taking her home. Samantha is in LA with her best friend, so we have the whole house to ourselves."

Nick nods, swirling champagne in his hand. "Same here. Charlotte and Liam are at my parents'."

They make eye contact, exchanging disgustingly, expanding smiles. A pang of loneliness hits, and I find myself wanting to be one of them.

A little later, Alisha comes in and stops next to her husband with a wide,

naughty grin. “Do you want me in bright or dark red?”

Cole smirks and swoops his arms around her, pulling her to him. Damn, the love between these two is solid as a rock.

“I want you in both.”

Alisha licks her lips before pecking her husband’s cheek. “Perfect answer. Let’s go home.”

With only a quick bye to us, he follows his wife.

“He’s in for a wild night,” I murmur, downing the last of my drink as a wave of envy crashes over me. The unwavering devotion they have to one another is unbreakable. Cole and Alisha have battled an insidious stalker, coming out stronger than before. And Nick and Emma. They faced the terrifying kidnapping of their daughter Charlotte, who miraculously survived due to Nick’s brave actions. The thought of having something as strong as what they have fills my soul with longing. And as hard as I try, I can’t stop my mind from picturing Amanda to be the one to have that with. My eyes trail to Nick as he takes a sip of champagne, his gaze firmly on Emma as she flows through the room, mingling her freshly made pastries that welcomed guests at the door. From a hardworking single mother working from home to owning a luxurious kitchen and providing a selection of treats to restaurants across town, Emma has come so far.

My eyes go back to watching Amanda. She’s talking to photographer Cody Michaels, and I can feel my fists clench at my side when Cody utters something close to her ear and she laughs. *What is he saying? She said she doesn’t mix business with pleasure, but he wouldn’t mind. Fuck.* I can’t stand the thought of them together, and the twinge of jealousy that stabs through me makes my stomach twist.

“Is there a reason you’re looking at Amanda the way you do?” Nick asks.

I try to act like I don’t understand his question, but my heart drops faster than a stone in a well. “Huh? No idea what you mean.” I shift my weight, trying to hide my growing discomfort. He exhales deeply and rakes his fingers through his hair.

“You sure? You know you can tell me anything. We’re best friends.” His voice is soft, almost gentle, yet there’s something hidden in it too. Something that unnerves me.

“I know,” I mutter.

Nick is a genuine guy—he cares about people deeply, but when it comes to his sister, his protective instincts turn into Big Brother mode at lightning

speed. I know he wouldn't be cool with me telling him my thoughts of Amanda; of how I'm thinking of stripping her naked and having her beneath me for hours on end; not with my track record with women.

Nick flashes that famous charming grin as Emma beckons him to come over. He places his drink down on the counter and looks at me with appreciation in his eyes.

"I'm off. Gonna charm my wife into leaving this place. Thanks for helping Amanda get this event together. You're a damn good friend, Brian."

I watch him leave and sigh as my gaze falls back on his sister, but in my eyes the goddess of the night. My heart races recalling all these weeks, even years, of wanting her and yet still not being able to admit it, the familiar voice berating me louder than ever to take a chance and show her how a real man should treat her. The battle between my apprehension and desire wages on as I ponder what to do—take a chance or remain silent?

HOURS LATER, I let out a soft sigh of relief while closing the door with a quiet click. As I spin around, I survey the now empty club. Soft, intimate lights cast a warm hue over the walls, sending dancing shadows across as soft music plays in the background. From the corner of my eye, Amanda comes into focus. She's perched on top of a barstool, her face illuminated by the soft glow of the lights.

I advance behind the bar and stop opposite her. Her twirling of the straw between her fingers ceases as her thoughtful gaze fixes on some distant point.

"Where's Fiona?" she asks, and I don't miss the tension in her voice.

"Don't know and don't care. I'm not interested in her. Told her that too."

"Really? Why? You looked quite intrigued by her, or should I say, parts of her, earlier tonight." Her disbelief is evident in her tone.

Resisting an urge to hurtle a glass across the room in frustration, I settle for lowering my voice to a harsh whisper. "Not everything is what it seems, Amanda."

She exhales a deep sigh and continues stirring her drink. Desperate to escape this conversation, I attempt to redirect her thoughts by doing what we're here to do.

"Tonight was an incredible success," I say with a smile.

Her eyes glimmer with emotions as she brandishes her phone triumphantly. "I just checked and there's been a massive influx of orders for

both lingerie and clothing.” The joy in her voice compels me to keep the conversation rolling.

“Let’s toast,” I propose, lifting my glass to hers. Our eyes interlock, and in an instant, I’m aware of every part of her body: the curve of her neck, the way she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, to the way her creamy skin glows in the gentle light; she’s breathtaking.

“To the successful launch,” I say, my voice huskier than I had intended, the weight of my unspoken desires hanging in the air between us.

Amanda’s glass clinks against mine, and as her lips brush against the rim, my mind ignites with a blaze of longing. The thought of kissing her, tasting her, fills my every thought. I need to regain control, to douse this fire threatening to consume me. But when she sets her glass down and looks at me, her eyes filled with unspoken questions, it’s as if she can read my very thoughts.

I take a deep breath, my gaze dropping, but she strikes while the iron is hot, her voice soft yet resolute. “Aren’t you tired of fighting the chemistry between us?”

My heart skips a beat as I lower my gaze, struggling to find the right words. “It’s safer to fight it,” I say, my voice laced with a mix of fear and longing.

“Safer for who?” Her question cuts through me, the intensity of her gaze searing into my soul.

My throat tightens, and I swallow hard. “Safer for us both,” I respond, my voice strained with the weight of regret.

A flicker of pain passes through her eyes, and she shifts, her lips pursed in frustration. I steal a glance in her direction, my stomach knotting at the sight of her hurt expression.

“Then why do you keep flirting with me and looking at me like you’re doing now?” Her words strike deep, hitting the mark of my conscience.

I force myself to meet her gaze, my heart aching with the need for honesty, even as fear grips me tightly. But before I can find the right words, she speaks, her voice strong despite the underlying emotion.

“Well, it seems I’m the fool once again. And you know what, Brian?” Her voice trembles with a mix of frustration and resignation. “I’m done waiting for you. If you’re not willing to try, I’m going to look for it in someone else. I’m tired of hoping for something that clearly will never happen.”

Her words hit me like a blow to the chest, my muscles tensing, and my heart pounding in my ears as I watch her leave. I can't let her go like this, not without a fight.

Without hesitation, my feet propel me forward, urging me to chase after her. I catch up to her just outside the dressing room, my hand grasping her arm firmly, spinning her around to face me. Our eyes lock, and the silence is thick with unspoken words, swirling like smoke around us.

"Brian, please," she says, her voice trembling with a mix of vulnerability and defiance. "Let me go."

I know that if I release her now, I'll lose her forever. The thought tears at my soul. Taking a deep breath, I speak, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry."

A solitary tear escapes her eye, her pain mirrored in the depth of my own. I press my forehead against hers, my hands cradling her face, my thumbs brushing gently against her soft skin.

"I've only been keeping away for your sake, Amanda."

Her voice trembles as she whispers, "What do you mean?"

"I can't give you what you want and deserve."

She steps back, and her eyes blaze with a combination of courage and agony. "You never asked me what I want, Brian. Since the day we met, six years ago, you've been calling the shots and pushing us in the friend zone. Not me. And I'm done with it. You keep saying we can't be together, but then you look at me in a certain way and get jealous when I date other guys. That hurts, Brian. Do you even really want me, or is this just a game you like to play with my heart?"

A wave of emotions crashes over me as her words ignite the powder keg inside my chest. My breaths become quick pants before I explode. "A game? You think I'm playing a game?" I roar, no longer able to contain the force of it all. "Of course I'm not playing a fucking game with you. I've wanted you from the day we met, and I want you every fucking time I see you, Amanda Brown."

Her dark chocolate eyes shimmer with tears. "Then explain why you keep fighting against it."

After a deep breath, the words rush out.

"I'm a man who might never be able to give you the future you deserve, Brownie. My heart is a fragile bomb, and being with me is like having a ticking time bomb under your pillow, ready to explode at any minute. Is that

what you want? An uncertain life, living in fear? Just like my mom, who lives with the constant dread of me sharing my dad's fate. My father's death changed my mother forever and I won't do that to you, Amanda."

To my surprise, the pain I thought would consume me is replaced with an odd sense of serenity now that I let out this deep truth.

I feel her presence on my skin before her delicate fingers intertwine with mine.

"I understand that it's a risk," she breathes, her words charged with emotion, "but I want to take that chance."

Our eyes meet and our gazes lock in a collective understanding.

"What do you mean by taking a chance?" I ask, needing to make sure I've understood her words correctly.

She steps forward and a tender smile lights up her face as she looks at me with an insatiable desire before sliding her arms around my neck and pulling me into her embrace. "It means, let's investigate this connection we have together."

With that said, our lips meet in the gentlest of kisses, and the world around me fades away into the background as I sink into the bliss of feeling her mouth against mine. *Divine*. Better than any of the fantasies and daydreams I had about kissing her. My arms wrap around her waist and I deepen the kiss. She draws me in with a passionate response, and it feels like I've entered an oasis of perfect stillness. A place where all my worries evaporate. And as I'm pulled deeper into the moment, I wish I could stay here forever, cocooned in this beautiful embrace. Her kiss is like a promise that here in this moment, nothing else matters but us. And for the first time, I believe it. Right now there is no fear, just her and me, and it feels so damn right.

She steps away, lowering her arms to her sides, and I take a moment to admire her long brown hair, her lush eyelashes and lips so full—she is pure sin, and I want to devour her whole.

"Take me to your place."

I pause. "Are you sure?"

Her slight nod and smoldering gaze intensify my rising hunger for her. "Yes. I've waited six years. I want you... even if it turns out to be for one night."

Her words ignite a fire within me, silencing any contradictory thoughts. I pull her close and as I place a kiss on her forehead, a feeling of rightness



flows over me.

As we walk to my car, she speaks again.

“But what about mine?”

“We’ll pick it up tomorrow.” After opening the door, she gets in the passenger seat, and I grab her seat belt. “You can’t escape now,” I tease with a smile. She reacts by planting a peck on my cheek and looking at me with a mischievous glint that sets my body ablaze with need.

We ride home, the radio playing in the background, but I increase the volume when “Take You Dancing” blares out from the speakers. She grins at me as I lip-sync the lyrics before shaking my brows in time with the beat. Her joyous laughter echoes throughout the car and fills me with delight; I could listen to that sound forever.

As soon as I park in the driveway, I step out into the cool night air. The wind caresses my cheeks as I walk to the other side to open her door.

“Brownie?” I say, holding my hand out to her.

Possessing a gaze that could hypnotize, she takes it. The warmth and softness of her hand in mine fill me with a sensation of rightness. As if it’s meant to be there. Once inside my house, my heart palpitates in my chest. *What is wrong with me? I’m never this nervous around a woman.*

A finger grazes my cheek, cutting into my train of thought.

“Everything all right?” she murmurs, her voice like a soft whisper against my skin. I drink in her beauty, which causes me to pour out all the thoughts I kept to myself for years.

“God, your beauty leaves me breathless every time I see you, Brownie.”

She smiles. “And your smooth words turn me on.”

We move closer, lips almost touching.

“I can’t believe we are finally here,” she whispers, her breath fanning my skin. “Me neither, but there is nowhere else I’d rather be than here with you.”

“Stop the smooth talk, Mister Fox, and kiss me.”

A symphony of lust and hunger detonates the moment our mouths meet. Her touch is like torture, and when a sexy moan escapes her lips, I scoop her up into my arms and walk up the stairs.

“Brian, your arm.”

Grinning, I press a peck to her lips. “Doc said I could start resistance training again and you’re the perfect weight.”

She laughs and brings her mouth to mine again. “In that case,” she breathes, hovering her lips inches from mine, “bring me to your bathroom.”

I'm in for a hot shower."

"Your wish is my command tonight, Goddess."

Her eyes gleam with delight at the nickname I gave her six years ago, and my cock throbs in anticipation at the thought of having her wet, naked body in my shower. With long, hurried strides, I take us up the stairs and I know—tonight will be an evening I'll never forget.



## AMANDA

I'm certain of nothing else in my life. This—his arms around me and his lips on mine—it just feels right. Every contour of his strong body molded to my soft curves, his strength and warmth all-consuming. I never want this moment to end, his divine lips so soft and firm and tasting of blissful promises.

When he finally voiced his emotions and the truth as to why he's been ignoring our chemistry all these years, a weight lifted off my chest while my heart flooded with sympathy for the deep fear of not wanting to hurt me.

This only shows what a sensitive, considerate man lies beneath the playboy shell. A man who deeply cares for the well-being of others and tends to deny himself things in hopes it will prevent others from pain.

But now the waiting is over and I don't have to worry about waking up and finding this has all been just a dream. No, this is real. And I'm going to enjoy it.

My fingers play with the strands of his hair as he carries me up the stairs. No other man has ever stirred my soul like Brian Fox does. When he stops in the bathroom, I peel my lips from his.

"Wait right here. I'm going to turn the water on," he says as I glide down his body.

The instant my feet touch the gray tiles, an unexpected thought crosses my mind. *What if he's the type who doesn't like oral sex?* I shudder at the memory of Steven uttering such blasphemy and rub my now sweaty palms over my dress.

"Amanda?" Brian takes hold of my hands and brushes his thumbs over the back. "What's causing that deep frown, Brownie?"

Hearing that sweet nickname, coupled with the sincere care in his eyes, causes me to develop a sudden case of verbal diarrhea.

“Please tell me you like oral sex? I mean, give oral sex.” I pull my hands from his and press them against my now burning cheeks. *Why did I blurt that out?*

Brian chuckles. “Is that what you’re worried about? Why don’t I rectify that?”

With eyes that glitter with mischief, he pulls off his shirt and gives my eyes free rein to take in the cut, toned muscles of his abdomen, rippling and flexing as he undresses. His thighs and calves undulate as he steps out of his pants and boxers. Once he’s naked, my eyes linger on the curve of his buttocks and the hard length of his erection standing proudly, pointing outward—God, his body is perfection incarnate.

He ambles toward me with an intense gaze that sets me on fire.

His fingers slide over my zipper, tugging it slowly down as he speaks. “I have undressed you in my mind a thousand times.”

With a whoosh, my dress drops to my feet, and I am standing before him in nothing but a black lace strapless bra, a G-string, and fishnet stockings.

“Look at me, Brownie.”

His eyes burn into me with unbridled hunger as he takes in my form, roaming his hand through his blond locks. “You’re breathtaking, a vision of immaculate beauty.” He holds my gaze, and I gasp as his thumb brushes my lips. “You have the mouth of an angel, eyes of a temptress, and”—his other hand slides from my waist to my hips—“curves of a goddess.”

Empowered by his words, I remove my bra and drop it on the floor. Then I kick off my heels, and after getting rid of my stocking and G-string, I stroll into his enormous walk-in shower and let the droplets descend on my skin. Leaning his shoulder against the glass wall, he drinks me in.

“This is an image that will never leave my memory.”

“I’m sure you’ve told that to every girl you’ve taken home.”

His gaze bores into mine as he closes the distance between us. Taking hold of my chin with two fingers, he strokes my bottom lip with his thumb. “They never meant anything to me. But you do.”

I peck his lips and return. “And you mean a lot to me.”

With a mischievous grin on his face, he grabs a bottle of body wash. “Time to soap you up.”

I straighten and swallow as we stand naked before each other. It feels

surreal. For years I've fantasized about this moment, expecting it to stay a daydream, but here we are.

Soapy bubbles cascade over my body as his hands travel, leaving an inviting warmth and a trail of goose bumps in their wake. "Hmm, I must cherish these beauties," he purrs when cupping my breast before dipping down and capturing one of my nipples between his lips. His hot, damp mouth closes around it, massaging and teasing it until a needy whimper escapes me. *God, can you die from sensory overload?* His palms move down, exploring every inch of me until he reaches my backside. With a greedy growl, he grabs and squeezes my behind.

"Jesus, Brown, your ass is a masterpiece on its own."

Coming up, he presses his lips against mine and caresses my body as if he has a map of it and knows all the right places to touch me. A God-given gift that makes me understand why he has so many women lined up to spend the night with him.

He moves us back until my back is pressed against the cool tile wall before breaking our kiss. Deep blue eyes swallow me whole as our ragged breaths mingle in the air.

"Tell me what you want, Amanda."

With need, I trail my hands across his neck before pressing down on his shoulders.

With a knowing grin, he kneels before me. The warmth of his breath across my inner thighs makes me gasp. His hands lightly caress my skin as they travel up my legs, and my body quivers in anticipation of what is to come.

"I can smell your sweet arousal," he says before leaning in and letting his tongue swirl around my throbbing bud, which turns my body into a vessel that produces low moans and pleased cries.

When I find my voice, the only word I'm able to whisper is, "More," while instinctually thrusting my hips toward his face. I've enjoyed oral sex before, but nothing comes close to the way Brian is giving it to me. *This is goddamn heaven.* He doubles up the pleasure by adding two of his fingers and creating a rhythm that causes my body to bow off the wall. His tongue speeds up, taking me closer and closer to the summit until I fall, and a masterful orgasm comes crashing over me in a relentless wave of pleasure that engulfs every nerve in my body until I'm left trembling in an intense, euphoric high. Brian holds me close, prolonging the blissful aftermath until

I'm back on solid ground. His mouth finds mine in a gentle kiss that lingers long after our lips part.

"So, what's the verdict, judge?"

I open my eyes. "Wow."

His face breaks into a big smile.

"But," I say, dragging out the word.

His head jerks back. "But what?"

I slide my hand across his chest. "Now it's my turn to explore."

His gaze intensifies, and he bites his bottom lip as I tweak his nipples between my fingers.

"I really like your chest," I whisper.

"It was much nicer before," he replies.

The vulnerability in his tone tugs at my heartstrings, making me aware of all he has gone through. When I lean forward, he holds his breath, and his body tenses as I plant a kiss on the thin scar that carries so many emotions. Hoping to bring him back to a state of contentment, I jokingly remark.

"Women find men with a scar fascinating. So don't worry, your sex appeal has increased by two points."

He chuckles and his muscles relax. "So I'm a perfect eleven now? I can live with that."

My fingertips graze up and down his steel-hard shaft, eliciting a throaty growl of pleasure. Like he did, I drop to my knees and press my lips to him, tasting the delectable saltiness of his arousal. His body quivers in response as I swirl my tongue around the sensitive tip, taking pleasure from every moan that escapes his lips. He tightens his grip on my hair and orders, "Look at me." I raise my eyes and am greeted by the blazing fire in his irises.

I continue licking and sucking him, delighting in his rough gasps and sharp intakes of breath before tightening my grip around his base and taking him deeper into my mouth. I love seeing how each stroke of my tongue drives him closer to the edge. His hips thrust forward with a primal urgency that makes my core clench in anticipation as he warns, "Amanda, if you keep going this way, I'm gonna blow." Since that is exactly what I want, I continue. Having understood my answer, he rocks his hips and tangles his fingers deeper into my hair. As I reach the bottom of his shaft, I glance upward and enjoy watching him being lost to pleasure with his head tilted back.

After a few strokes, he looks down and sees me opening my mouth wider,

granting him entry. He drives his cock deeper, and I relax into the rhythm of his thrusts by taking deep breaths through my nose, but a little gagging sound escapes me.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes, pulling out of my wet embrace.

“Don’t be. I love it when you do that.”

“God, can you be any more perfect?” he says before letting out a “fuck” when my tongue leisurely circles his tip, to lap up the pre-cum before sliding my lips back down his hard length. His body trembles with pleasure and I swoon at the knowledge that I am the one responsible for the thrill coursing through him. As he edges closer to the climax, our eyes meet—a silent understanding passing between us—and with two powerful thrusts, he releases with a deep grunt.

A few moments later, he pulls me up and frames my face in his hands. “You,” he breathes, “are remarkable.”

A blush coats my cheeks. His arms wrap around me, and he pulls us back under the showerhead. Here we stand in a tender embrace, wherein we let our hands stroke each other’s skin in calm but tantalizing movements.

“It’s clear we’re a good match when it comes to oral sex,” I breathe against his neck.

He pulls away and I can feel the intensity of his gaze burning into me. “Were you questioning that?”

I shrug. “Maybe for a second. You can never be sure.”

“Well, I didn’t. I knew from the moment we met our bodies would be a perfect fit.”

“Well, aren’t you being a cocky peacock, Mister Fox?”

He grins devilishly. “I take being a peacock over being an arrogant, cockless rooster any day.”

My laughter echoes off the walls as I recall Steven and his quirks. *If he only knew.*

“Okay, Mister Confidence. You might have shown your oral talents, but don’t call yourself king just yet, Fox.”

“Bed and condoms. Now,” he commands, flipping the water switch off and dragging me to his bed. Moments later, his body pushes mine back into the black sheets, and he hovers over me.

“It’s time,” he whispers with a teasing smirk, “to show you I can fuck you better than in all the fantasies you had about me.”

With a wicked grin, he reaches into the nightstand drawer and throws a



handful of condoms onto the bed before ripping open a packet and rolling it on with practiced hands. “Might need all of these,” he says, his dark gaze sending blazing heat through my body.

I love his playful, yet confident persona. His gaze meets mine, and in that single moment, I’m mesmerized by the intensity of it.

His voice drops to a whisper as he grabs my hands and pins them next to my face before saying, “But know this—you and I will never be just sex, Brownie.”

My heart races and I know by the way he says this, he’s serious and not just trying to swoon me with his words. I intertwine our fingers before pressing my lips to his. “I know.” And with that said, the heat flames up between us. I moan into his mouth when he rubs his hardness against my slick entrance. My need to feel him inside of me swells, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

“Please,” I whisper, and he responds by entering me with one deep thrust. Our movements synchronize in this primal and passionate dance, wherein his length moves, amplifying the waves of pleasure that wash through my core with every stroke. His hands keep mine pinned to the mattress as he continues, driving me mad.

“More,” I plead, arching my back as delightful shivers shoot up and down my spine as he moves like he wants to consume me whole.

“Yes!” I cry out. My inner walls quake in response to each of his thrusts until the fervent tension mounts to the point of no return.

An orgasm comes flooding in like a tsunami, crashing around me and sending tremors rippling through me. Then his body goes tense as his rapturous release pulses through him.

“Fuck,” he moans out before crashing on top of me. We’re both panting as we lie there intertwined in an afterglow of euphoria. Rolling off me, he wraps me in his arms, pulling me close into a warm embrace. I rest my head against his chest and as I listen to the thunderous beating of his heart, a sudden fear of losing him due to this heart condition rises. The thought alone is horrific, and I quickly push it back by reminding myself that all we have is right now. And no matter what the future holds, we’ll always have this perfect night. His gentle breaths and cedarwood scent overwhelm me with a tranquil feeling of contentment. We lie there in peaceful silence, no words needed, only our trembling bodies tangled together in an intimate bliss. And before I know it, the warmth and safety of this moment lull me to sleep.

THE SOUND of raindrops pummeling the window jolts me out of my heavy slumber. My heart races as I open my eyes. *Where am I?* When I realize I'm pressed up against Brian's side with my head in the crook of his arm, my lips curl. I lift myself up to a seating position and take in the sight of the man lying on his back, one arm stretched above his head. His ruffled hair, sinful lips, and chest on full display, slowly breathing... Lord have mercy. My clit pulsates with sheer need, thinking of what we did and how badly I want to feel his hands on my body and his cock deep inside of me again.

I glance at the clock on his nightstand. Five in the morning. I need water. My throat is drier than the Sahara Desert.

Careful not to wake him, I sneak out of bed, grab the first shirt I can find from his closet, and tiptoe downstairs. After quenching my thirst, I glance out the kitchen window and watch the raindrops trickling down.

Something about the sight of early morning and the sound of water pattering against glass is soothing. Last night was amazing. Better than I could have imagined. Brian is such a giver, making sure I get everything and more before he gives into his own pleasure. But what happens now, I don't know. *Does he want to continue or will he wake up and say this has been enough?* I hope for the first and dread he'll say the latter. Maybe I should just get dressed and go home before he wakes up. This way it will be less awkward and I protect my heart from hearing him say, *thanks for the good times.*

Just as I decide to go, I gasp when two arms circle me, pulling me flush against a naked chest. "What are you doing out of my bed?" Brian asks, nuzzling his face into the crook of my neck. I close my eyes to enjoy the heat of his body radiating against my back.

"You scared me for a moment," he whispers.

"How did I do that?" I ask, uncertainty slipping in my voice.

He turns me in his arms and looks down at me, his gaze burning into mine. "When I woke up and only found myself in the tangled sheets, I..." His hand slides under his shirt I borrowed, caressing the skin of my hips as he continues, "I thought for a moment that it had all been my imagination. Thank fuck it wasn't." The smoldering desire in his eyes is almost overwhelming as he pulls me closer, brushing a soft kiss against my lips.

"Because I'm not done with you..."

My heart sings at his words.

His hands are a force of gravity as they wander over my curves, pulling me in and making me his as he finds the apex of my desire. I quiver against him and he ever so slightly withdraws to get an eyeful of the desire that radiates throughout my being.

“Look at you,” he murmurs against my neck. “You left the bed while your body still throbs from my touch and your pussy aches for more.” He slides two fingers into my already wet core and I pant for mercy. His response is a devious grin that sends a spark through me. Just when I think I will go mad with pleasure, he withdraws his fingers, brushing a gentle kiss against my lips before guiding us out of the kitchen.

“Where are we going?” I ask, my voice barely audible.

He doesn’t answer, simply pulls me into the living room and guides me toward the couch.

“Sit on my face,” he commands, his eyes ablaze with desire.

The heat from his body radiates through my skin as I approach him, trembling with anticipation.

He lays himself out on the couch like a king demanding attention and holds out his hand for me to take. I obey without hesitation, sinking into him as soon as I’ve perched myself above his face. His rugged facial hair tickles my inner thighs, then his hot tongue joins and presses against my entrance. “Mmm,” he hums, his breath sending ripples through me. “You taste so damn good.”

I gasp in delight as he swirls his tongue around my clit, causing a wave of pleasure to crash over me.

He speeds up his movements, each lap of his tongue amplifying my whimpers of satisfaction, my nails digging into the couch for support. The building pressure inside me begs for release, and I push my core shamelessly against him.

“Oh God, Brian,” I whisper while finding the sight of him between my legs highly erotic

“Yes, that’s it,” he hums back, eyes never leaving me. “Keep looking at me while you ride my mouth.”

Fuck, his direct words turn me on even more.

Rocking my hips back and forth, back and forth, back and then... stars explode within me and an orgasmic firestorm takes over. His name is the only thing on my lips before I surrender to it, my body quaking in pleasure as

I collapse back into exhaustion.

Moments later, I open my eyes to find him still between my legs.

“Definitely my favorite spot to be,” he says, a teasing smile now widening into a victorious grin.

I move, but before I can get off, he sits up and pulls me toward him. Now straddled on his lap, he wraps his arms around me and his fingers caress my hair.

“Next time, when you leave my bed, let me know,” he growls.

“Yes, sir.” I smirk.

He grunts before smashing his lips against mine. I try to suppress the sensations coursing through my veins, but I can’t. As we pull away, my eyes fill with tears and the question I’m afraid to voice escapes me.

“What happens after this, Brian?”

My breaths become shallow as he stares at me in silence. The seconds feel like hours until he finally speaks up. His thumbs brush my cheeks as he exhales a deep sigh.

“Would you be willing to take it one day at a time?” he asks, resting his forehead against mine, and my heart drops. “At this point, all I know is that I’m not ready to let go of this.” His grip tightens around me as clarity hits me like a ton of bricks.

For him to even acknowledge his struggle out loud is an enormous step. *Who am I to expect him to give me more than this?* My mind tells me to take it slow, but my heart begs for more.

“Okay, let’s take it day by day.” I lace our fingers as our eyes interlock.

“Are you sure?” he asks in a low voice, his lips hovering over mine.

“Yes,” I whisper before pressing a gentle kiss against his mouth. “I don’t want to let you go either.”

Our lips dance around one another, sending sparks of warmth throughout my body. I moan as his hands wrap around my waist, a deep longing rising within me.

But before I can act on it, my stomach growls and we let out a laugh.

“Hungry?” he inquires, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

I blush and nod, biting my lip in embarrassment.

He presses a gentle kiss to my nose, whispering, “Let me make you breakfast,” before sauntering off to the kitchen in all his naked glory.

I giggle, amused by his boldness, before I follow him in.

Sitting in the kitchen chair, I admire the way his muscular back flexes as

he cooks up a storm. A few minutes later, he sets a plate of pancakes and fresh fruit in front of me and I let out an appreciative sigh while taking a bite of a strawberry.

We share stories between bites, laughter bubbling up from our chests and weaving its way around the kitchen.

Once we're done, he looks at me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. With a raised eyebrow, I ask, "What?"

He leans forward, running his tongue along my bottom lip before smirking. "You had a little syrup on your lips."

My heart flutters. This man has no idea what he's doing to me.

"Oh, really?" I say breathlessly.

"I removed it because you taste sweet enough without it," he says with a wink.

He stands and sweeps me up into his arms and carries me to bed. "Time to relax." We settle under the covers and listen to rain patter against the window until it lulls us into a peaceful sleep with both of us cuddled up in each other's warmth. One day at a time is fine by me.



## AMANDA

It's Sunday afternoon when I enter my parents' kitchen through the back door. "Hello! Anyone here?" I call out. "Mom?"

"Hey, sis."

My head swivels to find Nick leaning against the kitchen island eating chocolate cake. "Why is it so quiet here?"

He grins. "Because Mom and Dad took the kids to the forest."

I snicker at the thought of my parents doting on their grandchildren, just like when we were young. We would get down and dirty, climb trees, and have lots of fun. I remember those days fondly. I sidle up next to him, hip pressed against the counter. "How was your weekend with Emma?"

Nick grins from ear to ear. "Perfect. We savored every minute of much-needed quality time."

My lips curl in a smile. "Family life suits you."

Nick nods and says softly, "Yeah, I mean, when I look at Emma, I just feel so blessed that she and Charlotte came into my life. They're honestly the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Charlotte had you wrapped around her little finger ever since she called you Giant."

Nick's only response is a delighted chuckle.

My heart swells as I recall Nick and Charlotte's instant connection—a six-year-old girl yearning for a father figure, and my tall, handsome brother ready to be that for her. It took longer for Emma—barriers formed after the biological father left when she became pregnant at nineteen. All that mattered to Emma was protecting Charlotte from pain, but once she let Nick in, their

passionate love ignited like wildfire and they now have two children—Charlotte and Liam.

“So, how was your weekend? Anything special happen after the launch?” I turn to the sink, filling a glass of water as I shrug nonchalantly. “Nah, not really.”

Nick gives me a stare that says ‘Yeah right.’

“What?” I put on a show of innocence.

“Did something happen between you and Fox?”

My face heats up and my jaw drops. “I...”

“You two...” Nick prompts, his teeth clenched together.

I bite my lip thinking of how to answer honestly. “We like each other... a lot,” I finally say.

He shakes his head, his expression turning stony. “Brian lied to me.”

“What?” I ask.

A furrow appears between his brows as he explains. “I caught him staring at you all night during the event. And I asked if there was any reason for it. He said no.”

I squirm under his gaze, searching for the right words to explain why Brian hasn’t been honest. “He’s afraid of commitment because of his heart condition, Nick.”

A pained sigh escapes his lips as he rubs both temples with frustration. “That may be true, but still... He should have told me that he likes you more than just a friend. He’s my best friend.”

“But you’re also my brother,” I remind him, my voice gentle. “The same one who once warned him not to hit on me.”

“Yeah, because with relationships, he’s the ‘no strings attached’ man.”

“He’s changing,” I say, my gaze flicking to his for a second before turning away. “Plus, Brian and I always had a connection.”

Nick groans, running a hand down his face as he mutters under his breath. “Yeah, I guess I’ve noticed it for years.”

My eyes widen in surprise. “You’ve noticed?”

He gives me an incredulous look. “It’s pretty obvious there’s something between the two of you.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything before then?”

He shrugs helplessly. “Because honestly, with his track record with women, I would rather have you two stay friends.”

I sigh, understanding his point of view, since he’s in between.



“So what’s going to happen now? Are you two going to start dating or something?”

I chuckle at his words. “Well, we’ve agreed to take things slow and explore our connection day by day.”

His mouth turns down into a frown. “Meaning?”

The corner of my lips inches up and I can’t resist teasing him while he pops the last piece of his cake into his mouth. “It means we’re going to have lots of sex.”

Crumbs go flying as Nick chokes on his bite. I hand him my water and he stares at me over the rim as he drinks from it. “Don’t ever say that again.”

“You asked for the truth,” I grin, nudging him playfully. “Don’t act like you didn’t have your own wild weekend with Emma.”

His expression shifts, and he places his palm on my shoulder, looking almost sad. “Are you sure about this? Taking this kind of risk?”

Touched by his concern, I touch his cheek and smile at him. “Thanks for caring, but yes, I’m willing to take the risk. These feelings I have for him... they’re real. They have been for a long time.”

Without another word, Nick pulls me into a tight hug and whispers, “Please be careful. He’s never been in a committed relationship before. And if he hurts you...” He trails off as his grip on me loosens and he looks away.

“I know it’s complicated, but I can’t just turn off my feelings for him.”

A heavy sigh escapes Nick’s lips as he meets my gaze again. “Right, but just so you know, I’m going to have a chat with Brian.”

I let out a quiet breath, knowing begging him not to would be futile. But warmth blooms in my chest, witnessing how much my big brother cares for me. He wants to make sure I’m safe and secure, even though it must be uncomfortable and challenging for him too. If things don’t go according to plan, he’ll be stuck in the middle of us both—an unpleasant prospect, no matter which way you look at it. But let’s not assume the worst, because as I can see now, Brian and I are doing deliciously fine.

“Daddy!” Charlotte’s voice calls. Nick’s eyes widen in shock and I follow his gaze, laughing hard. Charlotte is standing on the threshold. Her red raincoat is dirty, caked with stripes of dried mud everywhere, including her beaming face. A perfect little mud girl.

“We went to the forest, and I jumped and ran through giant mud pools.”

My dad comes in behind her, followed by my mom, holding Liam, who’s fallen asleep. Charlotte walks to Nick and pulls her hands out of her pocket,

showing him stones she's collected and running away as she giggles.

My mom walks to me. "Can you hold him for a moment? I have to remove my boots and wash my hands."

"Sure." As I take Liam from her, he opens his eyes to slits and looks at me. "Hey, sweetie," I whisper.

"Ama," he mumbles before resting his head on my chest and closing his eyes again. My heart melts. I place a kiss on his head and inhale his sweet smell. I watch his soft features as he sleeps, and I forget my surroundings. It isn't until Nick stops next to me and taps on my shoulder.

"We're gonna get going," he says as he takes Liam.

Charlotte stops before me and smiles. "Daddy said Uncle Brian likes the picture I made for him."

"He does," I say. "I saw it hanging in his kitchen."

Her face beams with joy.

"Charlotte, let's go home so Liam can sleep in his bed."

She nods to her dad.

"Bye, Amanda," she chirps as she hugs me.

"Bye, sweetheart. Give your mom a hug and a kiss from me."

She waves and walks off, and warmth spreads through my chest at the sight of her taking her dad's hand as they leave.

I swallow and bite my lips as I picture myself in Nick's shoes and walking hand in hand with a child that has blond hair like their dad. Shocked by my own thoughts, I push them aside.

My parents close the door after waving goodbye to Nick and the kids and turn their attention to me.

"How are you, honey?" my mom asks, kissing me on my cheek. "Your dad and I want to hear everything about the launch. Nick said it was an enormous success, but I want to hear it from my precious girl."

I smile. There's nothing better than receiving the love and support of your family. So after I take a seat at the kitchen table, I fill them in on the details of the show.

A WEEK LATER, I strut through the store with a satisfied smile as the last customer of the day leaves.

"My feet are dead," Alisha whimpers, plopping down near the dressing rooms and rubbing her hands over her pregnant tummy.

I stretch out my aching muscles. “Same here. We sure had a rush this week.”

Alisha grabs the newspaper from the round coffee table, her face lighting up with delight. “The article and photos made it to the front page of the newspaper. You really put Venus on the map, Miss Brown.”

Pride swells my chest and warmth radiates throughout me. “Yeah.”

We both look up as the sound of the doorbell rings. A delivery man strides into the room carrying a massive bouquet of roses and a small box. “Miss Brown, I presume?”

When I nod, he hands me the bouquet. The soft petals brush against my fingertips while the sweet perfume of the velvety red and pink roses envelopes me. I thank him, and he takes his leave after placing the box on the counter.

“Who are they from?” Alisha asks, her eyes wide in anticipation.

My heart flutters as I pick up the card attached to a single rose stem and read the note, “Just because. Brian.” It’s been a week since our night together. We called and texted a few times, but we’ve both been caught up in running our businesses that we haven’t had time to see each other.

I open the box and find two dark chocolate brownies inside with a note that says, *You taste so much sweeter.*

My cheeks flush.

“Oh, the Fox is really putting on the charm,” Alisha jokes, walking up beside me with a smirk on her face as she takes in the presents.

I reply with a grin that reaches my eyes. I told Alisha everything about our situation the moment she came to work on Monday. Her response?

“Finally, it’s about time he got his head on straight and gave in.”

“Well, I’m off to see my husband,” she says, gathering her things then leaving, calling out over her shoulder, “Most men love red.”

I laugh at her not-so-subtle suggestion and answer back, “See you tomorrow.”

She hums as she exits, and I am left alone with my thoughts, in awe of Brian’s romantic gesture.

I grab my phone, ready to text him, but I don’t. No, this asks for a personal touch. With a wide grin, I walk through the store and grasp one specific item and put it in a bag before locking up the store and making my way home.

Two hours later, I look at myself in the mirror and assess my deep scarlet

color dress, made from a lightweight, but smooth and silky fabric. It clings to the curves of my body and falls just above the knee. The neckline is modest but shows off the collarbone and the wide sleeves reach to the wrists and flutter slightly when moved. On my feet, red pumps with heels that are glossy and sparkly, with delicate straps that wrap around the ankle for a secure fit. *Perfect.* Time to surprise Mister Fox at work and thank him.



## BRIAN

I glance at my watch, again, for the millionth time tonight. Nothing on my phone either.

My heart is pounding, and I'm overwhelmed with a thousand thoughts. *Should I call her? Text her?*

The florist said my gifts would be delivered in the afternoon. It's already 10:00 p.m. My brows furrow and my chest tighten as I try to process what could have gone wrong. I've never sent a woman flowers. *Maybe she doesn't like them. Fuck that. I know she loves roses. So why hasn't she contacted me yet? What if after having time to think about it, she's put off by my heart condition and doesn't want to get involved long term?* I sigh in exasperation and glance at the clock again.

The days feel like an eternity since I last saw her. Though we texted and called a few times, it's not enough for me. I want to see her face, hear her voice, touch her soft skin again; feeling it all summer under my fingertips. I've never been so obsessed over a woman. But then again, this is Amanda, who captured my attention from the moment we met. And now that I know what she tastes like and the sounds she makes when I pleasure her, I want more. So much more.

"Hey," a familiar voice says, and when I look sideways, I find Nick coming my way. His usually kind eyes are narrowed, and his jaw is set in a tight line. It's obvious something is bothering him, and I have a sinking feeling that it's about Amanda.

"Nick," I choke out, my body tense with both surprise and apprehension. "What's going on?"

He stops in front of me, his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. His mouth twists into a thin line as he looks me deep in the eyes. “Why haven’t you been honest with me about Amanda?”

I take an instinctive step back, my heart pounding hard against my chest. This is it—the confrontation I knew was inevitable.

“Look, Nick...” I start, struggling to steady my voice. “It’s complicated.”

He snorts, his eyes narrowing even further. “Complicated? There’s nothing complicated about lying to me about your feelings for my sister, Brian. I won’t let you treat her as just another one of your flings.”

I raise my hands in defense. “I swear she’s not.”

Nick studies me intently. “Then why didn’t you tell me? Why keep your true feelings for her a secret?”

I swallow hard, the weight of my guilt crushing down on me like a ton of bricks. “I never wanted to admit these feelings for her, Nick. With my health condition and our friendship. I breathe out heavily and shrug. “I tried, man, I tried so hard to only think of her as a friend, but I can’t anymore. She means too much to me.”

Nick’s expression softens slightly and he takes a step closer, searching my face for sincerity. “I want to believe you,” he says, doubt still lacing his voice, “but—”

“Yeah,” I cut him off with a bitter laugh. “My track record with women isn’t reassuring, but this time is different—she’s different.”

I can feel the weight of Nick’s concern and protectiveness hovering in the air between us. We’ve been through thick and thin, stood up for each other countless times, and now I’ve put our friendship at risk by falling for his sister. It’s a precarious situation, and we both know it.

“I get it, Nick,” I say, my voice laced with determination. “I understand your worries, and I won’t deny that things can get messy. But you have to trust me. My intentions toward Amanda are pure and sincere. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

Nick’s gaze softens as he listens to my words. “You know I only want the best for my sister. And I won’t stand by and watch her get hurt.”

“I know, man,” I reply, meeting his eyes. “And I promise you, I’ll do everything in my power to protect her and make her happy. I won’t let her down.”

Nick sighs, his shoulders relaxing a fraction. “You better not, Brian. Because if you break her heart, I won’t hesitate to break more than just your

nose.”

I chuckle, a mixture of nerves and relief bubbling up within me. “Well, I hope it doesn’t come to that. I value my nose, you know.”

Nick shakes his head, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Don’t make me regret this, man. I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Fair enough,” I say, extending my hand toward him. “I appreciate your concern. And I promise I won’t take this lightly.”

He grips my hand tight and we silently acknowledge our understanding that our friendship is strong and can withstand the possible storm of romance.

Nick looks at his watch then back at me. “Gotta go. Emma’s waiting. I just came over to clear this up.”

“You can trust me. I won’t do anything to hurt Amanda, Nick.”

He claps my shoulder, a gentle mixture of caution and trust in his eyes. “You better not. Catch ya later, Fox.” As Nick walks away, his warning lingers in my mind like an echo. I can’t help but replay our conversation over and over again, dissecting every word and analyzing every expression. The weight of his concern weighs heavily on my conscience, and I find myself questioning my own intentions.

Nick is the kind of friend who would take a bullet for you without a second thought. And now, I’ve placed him in a precarious position by falling for his sister. I can’t shake off the internal conflict that gnaws at me.

I find a quiet spot away from the bustling crowd and sink onto a nearby bench, trying to calm the rapid beating of my heart while Nick’s words reverberate in my mind. “I won’t let her become just another one of your flings.” His protectiveness for Amanda is undeniable, and it’s justified. He knows my history, my reputation as a womanizer. But here’s the thing: Amanda is different. She’s not just another conquest, another name on the list. She challenges me, makes me laugh, and understands me in a way no one else ever has. It’s a feeling I can’t ignore, no matter how hard I try.

I can still taste the sweetness of her lips on mine, feel the warmth of her body against mine. The memory sends shivers down my spine, and I can’t help but smile at the thought. But beneath the surface of that blissful memory, doubt creeps in. Doubt that I could be the one to hurt her, to let her down.

I pull out my phone and scroll through the messages Amanda and I have exchanged this past week. Each word, each emoji, is a testament to the connection we share. The conversations are filled with laughter, vulnerability, and genuine understanding. Our connection is real, something worth fighting



for. And yet, the fear lingers. Fear that my heart condition will push her away, that my flawed past will taint our future. Fear that I'll lose both the woman I've fallen for and the friend who has been my rock.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what lies ahead. I refuse to let fear dictate my actions. I won't allow doubt to sabotage what could be the most meaningful relationship of my life.

As I pocket my phone and rise from the bench, determination courses through my veins. I'll prove to Nick that my feelings for Amanda are genuine. I'll show him that I'm willing to fight for her, to protect her, and to cherish her with every fiber of my being. With newfound resolve, I rejoin the vibrant crowd, only to hear...

"Hello, handsome."

I glance sideways to see a gorgeous brunette saunter up to me. Her lips unnaturally full as she attempts to give me a seductive smile. "Evening," I say, firmly stepping away from her.

"Oh, so formal and correct. I love it!" she purrs, reaching into my personal space again. When I take a step back, she licks her lips and says, "And a challenge, exactly how I like it."

I put up a hand to stop her. "Not interested. I have a girlfriend," I state firmly. "Now move on, or I'll have security escort you out."

She plants her hands on her hips and snaps, "And who do you think you are, God?"

"Not God, but I do own this place," I reply with amusement. "If you want to enjoy yourself, then you'll have to find someone else. I'm taken."

After a few blinks, she moves on, pouting, and I can't help but laugh at the situation. "Cole was right," I muse to myself, shaking my head in amusement. "I am maturing."

"Girlfriend, huh?"

I spin around, a jolt of surprise coursing through me as Amanda appears two feet away. She's dressed in a figure-hugging scarlet dress that radiates warmth and confidence. My gaze is drawn to her wide Cheshire cat grin, and I feel my heart galloping in my chest.

She steps closer, electricity crackling between us like it did the night we first gave in to our desires. I can almost feel the tumult of emotions swirling around us, a dizzying combination of excitement and uncertainty.

My lips curve into an answering smile. "Hey."

Amanda smirks, her voice tinged with mischief. "Tell me, who's the

lucky girl who made you say no to all those willing ladies? I'd love to meet her."

I chuckle hearing her teasing tone—I get why. I've never been one to dive into relationships headfirst, so me using the girlfriend card to get rid of a woman is new. Well, tonight when I said it I had Amanda in mind and it felt right. Surprised by my own thoughts, once again I ask myself while looking at her. *Am I ready to take things to the next level so soon?* Last week I asked her if we could take things day by day, and now here I am, seeing her after a week, and all I want is for everyone to know that this beauty is mine. The idea sounds right in my head—and my heart couldn't agree more. And after the talk with Nick, my feelings for this woman have become crystal clear. So I take a step closer and say in a meaningful but playful manner.

"You'll love her, she's amazing. I sent her something special today, but I don't know if she received it?"

Her smile grows brighter. "Well, isn't that interesting. Funny enough, a delivery man came by Venus today with stunning roses and brownies."

Ignoring the stares of passersby, I pull Amanda into me and press my face into the curve of her neck, inhaling her unique scent with each breath I take. Before I can stop myself, my heart speaks through my lips, "God, I've missed you."

"I missed you too," she replies with a sigh, her hands making circles on my chest. "And thank you. Those roses were beautiful, Brian."

Just the sound of my name rolling off her tongue ignites shivers through my veins. My palms rest on her hips and when I tilt my head back slightly to gauge into her pretty brown irises, that ever-present desire for her grows stronger. A primal urge to take her by the waist and have her pinned against the wall in my office is strong, but I quell the craving and listen to the rational part of me and ask, "What's been going on today? How has your week been?"

"Absolute mayhem. Like I said on the phone, it feels like every woman in Boston has come by to buy lingerie this week."

"That's great." I smile. "I saw the article in the paper. It was a raving review, so no wonder you're doing so well."

She looks pleased with herself. "I never expected this level of reaction to it, but I'm grateful all the same."

"Well, you did all the hard work, so you deserve nothing less." Our eyes lock before she tiptoes up and plants a lingering kiss on my mouth.

She pulls away with a whisper. “Thank you for saying that. It means a lot hearing it from you.”

The corners of my mouth sink slightly. “Why?”

“Most men I’ve dated say they admire an ambitious woman. But when I’m around their friends, they expect me to keep quiet about my success.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “You’ve been dating some real idiots, Brownie.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to see that.”

She steps back and as she swings her hips in time with the music, every guy within proximity swivels their necks to gawk at her.

My fists clench as a wave of possessiveness sweeps through me. I step toward her. “Easy there. You’re drawing attention, Miss Brown.”

My heart races as she grins mischievously before tugging on my dress shirt and pulling us closer together.

“Only need and want yours,” she whispers in my ear before pressing her body firmly against me, every inch of skin screaming for more.

My breath catches in my throat and an uncontrollable longing roars inside of me, begging to be released.

Our lips touch in a gentle kiss before parting, yet staying connected by our eyes. Her tongue teasingly caresses her upper lip, which further ignites the fire burning inside of me.

“Brownie,” I groan, trying to maintain my composure, “I’m working.”

“I know. I can wait,” she says with a sultry smile before tracing a finger down to my groin.

“Oops...” She pretends innocence, but those devilish eyes give away her naughty thoughts. An animalistic growl escapes from my lips as I grasp onto her hips before lifting her over my shoulder.

“Brian,” she gasps, surprised as people part like the seas, allowing us through as we make our way toward my office, with Darius watching us with an approving smirk.

Once in my headquarter, I set her down, and she looks at me with a stern expression that can’t quite hide her amusement.

“Please don’t do that again,” she warns, but I can tell she’s enjoying this little game of ours.

Gently brushing a strand of brown hair from her face, I give in to an urge and caress the side of her cheek with my thumb. “You, Amanda Brown, are one in a million,” I murmur, admiration heavy in my voice.

She blushes and warmth spreads through me like wildfire. This woman has set my internal world upside down and I'm powerless to stop it—or maybe I don't want to. After years of suppression, I can show my true emotions for her.

"I really like you, Brian Fox," she purrs.

I pick her up and set her down on top of my desk, cradling her face in my hands. Her eyes swallow me up and all I can think about is how much I care for her. "You make me feel things I've never felt before," I whisper, letting the honest words leave my lips as they graze hers.

Her fingertips roam over my chest. "Is that a good thing?"

"It's something... special," I reply, barely audible above the thumping of my heart.

She smiles.

"Tonight when I said I had a girlfriend, I could only imagine that special someone being you, Brownie."

Amanda's inquisitive eyes search mine before she brushes her thumb across my cheekbone. "Do you really mean that?" She breathes out, her sweet words hanging in the air between us.

I answer without hesitation, "I mean it."

Tears sparkle in her eyes and she reveals a gentle smile as she speaks again. "Well, you're in luck because I'd love to be that special someone to you, Brian. But that also means exclusivity and communication in my book."

I expect my doubts, fears, and urge to flee to kick in, but they don't. Instead, all I can think is this wonderful woman wants to be mine.

My hands come to rest against her waist as we look into each other's eyes, speaking volumes without saying another word.

"No problem, because I only have eyes for you."

Her irises sparkle with desire when I let my hand travel up her thigh.

"You and your way with words. You make me feel..."

"How do I make you feel, Brownie?"

"Wanted, special." She gasps as my fingers stroke the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. "And so damn hot."

My gaze scorches over her creamy skin as I unbuckle my belt and unzip my trousers in one fluid movement. Our eyes lock as she slides her hand inside my boxers and wraps her delicate fingers around me.

A burning fire of yearning and desire explodes between us the moment our mouths and tongues unite. In one smooth motion, the papers on my desk

fly off as I hike up Amanda's skirt, revealing her tiny red thong.

"Beautiful," I purr, navigating the fabric down her legs before tossing it away, "but I want you bare. I need to taste my favorite and *exclusive* Brownie. It's been too goddamn long."

I wrap my hands beneath her knees and lift them. "Put your heels on the edge of my desk and open your legs."

She nods before leaning back on her arms and obeying my instructions. The sight of her wide open on my desk takes my breath away.

"My God," I whisper, taking a step closer to the edge of my workspace, "you are an absolute wet dream come true."

She purrs in response and parts her pussy lips wider, her velvety voice falling like honey on my ears, "Hurry up, I need you inside of me, Mr. Fox."

I yank open the desk drawer, only to let out a frustrated curse when I find nothing inside. "Well, damn it all. No condom."

She clears her throat, and I raise an eyebrow when she reaches into her bra and pulls out a square package.

A smirk curves my lips. "Isn't that an interesting place to store protection, Brown?"

She shrugs, offering me the package with a cheeky smile. "Let's just say I came here with high hopes."

I snatch it from her hand and sheathe my length before sliding it up and down her soft, inviting lips. Her breathing quickens as she devours me with her gaze. This woman wreaks havoc on my insides, stirring up emotions I never knew existed. But instead of going for an analysis, I choose to stop them by losing myself in pleasure.

I thrust into her in one powerful motion, which elicits a deep moan from us both. Amanda's head falls back and I use the opportunity to let my tongue lick its way up her neck. She tastes so damn sweet. Thrusting into her with fervent, primal intensity, the familiar pulsation rises in my groin too soon, so I slow down and bring my hand up to cradle the back of her neck, using the leverage to lift her up so we can kiss with our bodies moving in unison.

"You bewitch my cock. It only wants you."

A thrill runs through me as she giggles, soon replaced by a moan as her nails dig into my scalp.

"Faster. I want you to make me come on your cock," she pants against my ear before nipping my lobe and clutching my shaft with her inner walls.

"Well, in that case, I know this little spot that works wonders," I say,

sliding my other hand between our bodies. She moans in approval as I glide my thumb over her clit while pumping my cock in and out.

The heady scent of pleasure rising from our bodies fills the air and heightens the intensity of the moment. I feel like I'm about to be swallowed by the raging whirlpool of pleasure that's spiraling between us.

"Oh God," she cries out, her voice desperate. "Don't stop—harder! I'm about to come."

I smirk and press my forehead against hers, pushing in with every ounce of power I have left as I dominate her body without remorse. Her breathing is ragged and as she nears her climax, her nails claw deeper into my skin while her body begins to quake violently beneath mine. "Fuck, yes. Come for me, Amanda."

"Brian!" she screams as her inner walls tighten around me like a vice. I lunge forward one last time before stilling as I reach my peak.

We stay like this for a few moments before I pull myself out of her warmth. As I dispose of the condom in the trash, she lowers her legs from the desk. After rearranging my clothes, I offer her my hand. She takes it, glides off my desk, and repositions her skirt. I wrap my arm around her waist as she looks up at me.

"Thank you for coming," I say with a smirk.

She chuckles and pats my chest. "Which time, Mr. Fox?"

I cup her ass with my hand, and she gasps. "Both," I say.

A loud knock on the door startles us. "Brian, you here?" Darius's voice calls.

I groan, pecking her lips before letting her go and opening my office door. "What is it?"

"We got an issue with a few drunks."

"Okay, be there in a minute."

Darius nods and turns but stops and peeks over his shoulder.

"Before you get back out there, zip up and change your shirt—it's got lipstick all over it." His smirk widens as I look down at my chest.

"Tell Amanda I'll make her a drink, boss."

Amanda's bubbly laughter coming from behind me causes me to chuckle.

"Where are you off to?" I ask as she appears ready to leave my office.

"Getting that drink."

"Are you going to wait for me?"

The corners of her lips curl up into a teasing smirk as she looks up at me

through thick lashes. “Isn’t that what an *exclusive* girlfriend does?”

I grab her, kiss her hard until she moans, then reluctantly let go. “Woman, behave,” I say, grabbing her hand and placing it on my semi-erect cock.

Amanda gives me her signature sexy, cocky brow and adds with a playful smirk, “I’m happy to see that your precious equipment, after years of inhibited behavior, developed a particular preference and dare I say, good taste.”

After planting a chaste kiss on my cheek, she walks past me with a mischievous glint in her eye. “Later, Fox.”

I can’t help but grin at her audaciousness as I hurry into my office to change my shirt. Once back on the floor, my eyes fly across the room to where Amanda sits at the bar chatting with Darius and other employees. A wave of energy rushes through me when I realize that when this shift is finally done, my girl will be waiting for me. And I’m taking her home.





## BRIAN

The Sunday a month later, as we walk over the lawn to the side of Brown's house, Amanda's hand tugs on my jacket.

"One quick kiss before we go inside, Brian."

The hunger in her voice makes me stop. God, I can't resist her. I turn her around and push her back against the brick wall.

"You're becoming insatiable, Miss Brown... But since I'm a gentleman who loves to help his gorgeous girlfriend in need, who am I to say no?"

She beams and I hum with pleasure when she presses her mouth on mine. *Perfect fit.* A second later, her arms wrap themselves around me and a greedy kissing battle for dominance awakes.

I growl when she teases me by rubbing herself against me. Fuck, my body keeps reacting as if it hasn't had sex in weeks instead of this morning.

Her sexy whimpers tingle my ears, and when one of her legs comes up, I can't stop myself and grab it. Two seconds later, she is wrapped around my waist. Our actions become ravenous as I push her back firmer against the wall. It's impossible to be quick with her when she kisses me like this.

"Daddy! Auntie Amanda and Uncle Brian are doing the yucky kissing thing against Grandma and Grandpa's house," Charlotte shouts.

Our lips disconnect, and the moment our heads turn sideways, my best friend comes storming around the corner, stopping dead in his tracks when he sees our tangled up position.

"Oh, for God's sake," he mutters.

Amanda unwraps her legs and places her feet back on the ground. Charlotte stops next to her father.

“Why do grown-ups kiss in those yucky ways, Daddy?”

I throw my head back and let out a boisterous laugh as Nick’s eyes bulge at Charlotte’s question.

Amanda giggles but helps her brother and refocuses her niece’s attention by opening her arms and saying, “Come here, you.”

Charlotte runs, and after her aunt picks her up, they hug. “Oh my God. How have you grown so much since the last time I saw you, young lady?”

Charlotte beams with pride. “I’m eight, and I’m wearing Mommy’s lip gloss. Do you like it?” she asks, pursing her lips.

“Oh, you look gorgeous,” Amanda states, placing her back on her feet.

“Mommy and I made an angel food cake because Daddy calls Mommy ‘his angel.’ Come, I’ll show you.”

I follow the girls as they make their way to the back door of the house, but a hand stops me.

“Next time, keep your X-rated behavior for when you’re alone.”

“I’ll try, but you need to tell your sister. She begged me, saying she needed her Fox fix.” I wink.

“Oh, shut up, you fucker.”

I chuckle and pat him on his back. “Come on, golden boy. Let me go inside and say hello to your family.”

The Brown kitchen is a lively place of people chatting as I enter. Martha is the first to come my way, welcoming me with a hug. “Oh, Brian, I’m glad you came with Amanda.”

“How can I say no to you, Martha?”

She chuckles and gives my cheek a kind pat. “Good to see you didn’t lose your charming ways, honey.”

“Me? Never.”

Nick huffs, rolling his eyes. “He was fondling your daughter outside this house.”

“Oh, stop, young man. Or do I have to remind you how I walked in on you and Emma having a cozy time in my kitchen a few weeks ago?”

I chuckle, seeing the Cheshire smirk on Nick’s face.

“Coffee?” he asks me.

“Yeah.”

My best friend walks to his father, who’s standing by the coffee machine. I focus my attention back on Martha. “Thank you for the get well soon card. I appreciate it.”

“Oh, sweetheart, when we heard from Nick what happened, my heart stopped.” She gasps. “Oh, damn, wrong word choice.”

I chuckle.

“Let me just say that we’re glad you’re okay and healthy. How is your mother? It must have been hard for her too.”

I smile at the caring question. “Yeah, it was tough, but we made it, and now I’ve got my shock buddy with me,” I say, tapping over the ICD.

Martha sends me a knowing stare, and I swallow when she gives my hand a soft squeeze. “Neither your heart condition nor the device defines who you are. To me, you’re a sweet, hard-working, charming young man, Brian Fox. Who not only has been an amazing friend to my son, but who also makes my precious daughter smile in a way I love to see.”

My eyes flash to Amanda, who is talking and laughing with Emma and Charlotte. Her eyes sparkle, and as if she notices me staring, her gaze darts to me. As usual, the world fades when her warm irises focus on me. I could watch her all day long without getting bored.

“Fox. Coffee,” Nick shouts.

Martha chuckles. “Don’t worry about him. He has to get used to the idea of you and his dear sister. But I like you for my daughter, Brian. The way you helped her with the launch was heartwarming. Some men don’t like a successful woman who can stand on her own two feet.”

I shrug. “Well, their loss. I love every side of her.”

*Jesus. Did I just say the word love? I have never said it when talking about another woman, apart from my mom.*

My eyes shoot back to Martha, but she smiles, and instead of reacting to my confession, she walks to Charlotte, who is calling her.

“Fox, coffee,” Nick repeats and I wander to him. We talk business, and I enjoy the cozy and laid-back atmosphere. Everyone is simply themselves. John and Martha remind me of my parents. Their love feels strong and warm, just like that of my mom and dad. Only theirs was cut short.

A cry coming from a baby phone makes Nick move. “That’s my boy,” he says before taking off and leaving me with John.

“Do you have a moment to talk?” John asks me.

I nod and he leads the way into the living room. He then peers into the hall to check for eavesdroppers before turning back to me. “How serious are you about Amanda?”

I swallow and lean my back against the sofa, trying hard to mask my

unease. I've respected John since day one; his success as a business owner, as well as his commitment to his family is unmissable. He's kind of a role model to me, and I don't want to disappoint him.

Looking into his eyes, I speak from the heart, "Her happiness is my top priority."

His lips twitch into a proud smile. "You're a good man, Brian."

I give a little shrug, embarrassed by the praise. "Well, I try to be."

John holds my gaze longer than necessary, like he's reading all the emotions beneath my façade.

"Your heart condition doesn't define who you are," he says softly.

A chuckle escapes my lips. "Martha said something similar," I say, using an ironic tone.

"She's wise," John replies with a smirk.

"When Nick told us about what happened and how you kept it hidden from everyone else... It spoke volumes about who you are as a person," he says, his voice calm and even.

I shift uncomfortably, feeling exposed under his perceptive gaze. "What do you mean?"

"To me, it shows that you're someone who prioritizes other people's needs over your own. Someone who hides their true feelings behind their charming smile. Someone who doesn't fall in love lightly because they know that when they do love, they love hard and with every fiber of their being."

He pats me on the shoulder. "And that is exactly the kind of man my daughter deserves at her side."

Just then, Nick comes walking in with Liam on his arm, glaring at both of us. "What's going on here?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say with a shrug. "Just having a chat with your father, and since the girls were being so loud, we took it here."

He grins. "Yeah, they can be quite noisy."

Liam stretches his arms to his grandfather, who takes him from Nick. The little boy's affectionate giggle roams the room when John plays airplane with him by shooting him through the room while making engine sounds. They disappear into the hall. Before I can follow, Nick speaks and my feet freeze in place.

"Have to admit, I was a little uncertain about you two dating. But seeing how you make her smile like no other guy has done, it's obvious you're good for her. So stay with it, bud. Take care of my sis."

My throat thickens and I mumble a quiet thank you. He flicks his head toward the kitchen and we move. His words resonate in my thoughts. I'm serious about Amanda and care deeply for her, but knowing they recognize that means the world to me. It only solidifies my feelings for her.

As we approach the kitchen, I take a moment to reflect on how far I've come since first meeting Amanda. From merely being her friend, hiding my true feelings, to now being able to call her my girl, is truly an amazing journey of self-discovery. Every day I thank the gods for blessing me with such an incredible woman in my life—for making our paths cross and allowing me to look past my fears and become something more than two people who were friends at one point in time.

As Nick pours himself another drink, I turn away from him to take a deep breath and push away the sliver of doubt of things going wrong by sending a silent prayer up to the heavens, hoping and wishing that this happiness will last forever and that these beautiful moments will never end.



## BRIAN

A few weeks later, I take a few steps back and marvel at my masterpiece. Not bad for an amateur. I've never taken the time to do this before, but something about Amanda and knowing she loves this time of year pushed me to go the extra mile. After starting this morning, I left to spend Christmas day with my mom, and when I came back, I finished it.

The screech of tires on the pavement has my adrenaline pumping. *She's here.* As soon as I'm on the front porch, her silhouette comes into view, then her smiling face, which fills me with a warmth I can't quite explain.

When she makes it up to me, I take her hands in mine and bring them to my lips for a soft kiss before drawing back and saying, "Hey."

"Hey there, handsome."

I lean in and whisper with our noses almost touching, "Are you eager to find out what I have in store for you?"

"Oh my gosh, yes. It's not nice to just text me that you have a surprise. You know I don't enjoy waiting for surprises."

I chuckle. "Yes, I remember the time Nick let slip he bought your birthday present. You wouldn't stop bugging him until he spilled the beans."

I lead her to the front door before turning toward her and whispering, "Close your eyes."

She complies, and as I guide her into the house, I can sense her anticipation radiating off her.

Reaching our destination, I let go of her waist and announce while taking a step back, "You can open your eyes now."

Amanda blinks a few times as she takes in the transformed living room.

Illuminated in the room's corner stands a large Christmas tree I put up for her. Its bright white light dots glimmer like a million tiny stars, giving the room an ethereal, magical atmosphere.

She spins around to look at me, amazement etched on her face. "You did this for me?"

My heart swells with happiness, seeing the admiration and appreciation in her gaze. "Yeah. You like it?"

She launches herself into my arms and buries her face against my neck, muffling a sob of happiness. I hold her close, running my hands up and down her back in soothing circles until she pulls away, a radiant smile lighting up her beautiful face. Her soft lips brush against mine as she whispers, "Thank you."

I love how such a simple gesture can have this immense effect. It's kind of the same satisfying reaction I get when I see the gang from the LWC arriving every Monday. Just by offering them Six-Pack as their weekly hangout, they repay my kindness with their infectious laughs and funny antics, which bring me more joy than all the handsomeness and sexiness I possess. Which is a lot, but these aren't traits I want to be remembered by when I die.

She yawns. "Sorry."

I chuckle, taking her coat from her shoulders. "Let me guess, Christmas at the Brown family was lively?" She nods as I hang up her coat.

"You've got that right, but I loved it. Charlotte and Liam were two hyper bunnies when they saw the presents under the tree my parents put up. It was an exhausting day but worth it. How was your Christmas with your mom?"

"Good, I say. We cooked dinner and watched a golden oldie while eating on the couch together. Simple but perfect if you ask me."

"It's all about quality time with the people you care for most," Amanda says, and I nod. Her eyes fill with warmth as she looks at the tree once more before turning back to me. "Thank you for doing all this for me." She steps closer and wraps her arms around my waist in a tight hug that leaves me feeling comforted and content. "Any other plans for tonight?" she hums.

"Well, I was thinking of hot chocolate and a movie?"

"This shows once again that underneath that smooth-talking businessman lies a warm-hearted romantic."

The heat rises to my cheeks as I glance away bashfully.

"What can I say... You bring out sides of me I didn't know I had..."



She grins and looks deep into my eyes. “I must be pretty special then, huh?”

My heart skips a beat as I gaze into her irises and all the words that want to pour out of me seem to stop short. Instead of speaking them aloud, I nod before cupping her face in my hands and leaning down to press a tender kiss against her lips.

When we pull apart, her eyes are bright with emotion as she whispers, “You’re pretty special yourself.”

We stand there for a moment before she speaks again, “Let’s get that hot chocolate and cuddle up on the couch for a movie like you said.”

My insides quiver with anticipation at being able to spend an evening together without all the distractions of everyday life. Finding time, when you both run a business, can be a challenge, but until now it goes well. No, we don’t see each other every day, but that’s okay. That makes the time we do have together even more special. Taking Amanda’s hand in mine once more, we walk over to the couch where we settle down side by side and get ready for an evening of relaxation, hot cocoa, and a movie.

THE MOVIE IS PLAYING, but I admire how the glimmers of light coming from the decorations in the tree highlight Amanda’s face while she stares at the Netflix screen, enthralled in a sappy love story. Warmth radiates through my chest at the sight of her peaceful and content presence, her chest rising with each calm breath.

*I’ve never been this relaxed with any of the women I’ve hooked up with in the past. And this is because of this incredible woman lying against me.*

“You’re not looking at the film.”

“Nope, I’ve got much better things to look at.”

Her lips quirk, and without looking away from the screen, she finds my hand and intertwines it with hers.

“Oh, I love Ryan Gosling,” she hums.

“Hmm... Some women told me I’m as good-looking as him.”

She chuckles and pecks my chest. “Oh, he’s a handsome man, but don’t worry... He’s got nothing on you, sexy.”

I smirk at her comment, arching a brow in a playful challenge. “Oh, really? What do I have that he doesn’t have?”

She grins in response, and her eyes leave the screen as she moves closer

to me and reaches up to stroke my cheek.

“Let’s see... For starters,” she says, tracing circles on my skin with her fingertip, “you have this adorable way of looking at me when you want something that’s downright irresistible or naughty. And you always know just the right way to make me laugh when I’m stressed with work.”

Her gaze drifts over my face as she speaks, and I can’t help but admire this amazing woman.

“Plus,” she continues, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, “you know how to be silly and playful but still show your serious side when it matters. It’s like you’re two different people sometimes.”

I bring my hands up to frame her face. “Well then,” I reply, searching her eyes for a moment before leaning in to kiss her lips. “It looks like Ryan Gosling can’t compete with me.”

Nope, you’re irresistible. She winks. “So now tell me what you like about me, Mister Fox.”

I throw my head back and laugh before brushing a finger over her jawline. Her eyes twinkle and I swear I can see a million different stories in them.

“Well, Amanda Brown,” I start. “First and most important, you’re hot as fuck.”

This confession earns me a notch in the ribs.

“Seriously, my physical appearance is what you like best about me?”

I grin. “Well, it is the first thing I thought when seeing you that night.”

I touch her cheek with my fingertip, tracing the line of her cheekbone to her lips. “But when I got to know you, I liked your ambition and drive when it comes to going for your dreams. Add to that your generous and kind heart and you became stunning in my eyes. Now every moment with you is special, whether we’re cooking dinner or just vegging out watching movies. You’ve got an energy that can make me smile on my grumpiest days, and your stubbornness can be both admirable and endearing.”

I lean in close until our noses almost touch. “But what I like most about you,” I whisper, “is that even on the days when I don’t deserve it, you still give me the sweetest kisses.”

She pecks my lips and a profound sense of bliss fills me as we return to our comfortable position.

Hours later, Amanda snuggles close against me in bed, her head resting on my chest.

“Thank you for this perfect day,” she mumbles into my shirt.

My heart skips a beat as a flashback of my mom saying those same words to my dad on their anniversary day floods my mind. I freeze, fear rising as the similarities between us become overwhelming.

Amanda senses my unease and her hand finds mine, running calming circles over my now clenched fist.

“Brian, what’s wrong?”

I glance down, the memory of that day burning like a fire inside me, desperate to be unleashed. I open my mouth to speak but then close it again.

Amanda pushes herself up until she’s able to look me in the eye. “Talk to me,” she pleads.

I take in a deep breath before slowly opening my mouth, scared of ruining this perfect night with my words. “Y-you thanking me for the day triggered a memory...but it’s okay. I don’t want to ruin the mood.” My voice trails off into a whisper and I close my eyes in a bid to escape my own thoughts.

When I open my lids, Amanda’s gaze is full of understanding, and as her hand finds mine, I feel an instant calmness rush over me.

“You won’t ruin anything. Nothing you say can ruin this,” she says with a slight smile in her voice, attempting to lighten the heavy atmosphere. “Well, except maybe if you break up with me.”

A grin tugs at the corner of my lips in appreciation for her effort to uplift my mood. She is so incredibly amazing and I finally realize that it is time I tell her everything. I stretch my arm to the side and open the bedside drawer.

My fingers find the cool surface of a silver frame, and I hand it to her. She sits up, taking it in her hands, and when she turns it around, she gasps. It’s understandable. She hasn’t seen a picture of my dad. I’m the spitting image of him. Blessed with the same hair color, bone structure, height, and, of course, heart condition.

“It’s eerie, isn’t it?” I attempt a smile but fail miserably as memories from that day wash over me. I can still sense my dad’s arms around me as he whispered words of encouragement while playing football. The bright sun as we walked through the park...

I take a shuddering breath, tears forming in my eyes as I tell the story.

“The day before my father died, we celebrated their twelve years of undying love. We went to our favorite diner—a greasy little joint with photos taped up of family nights and smiling faces. I remember the waiter’s kind smile when he saw my dad pull out a giant bouquet of camellias for my mom,

with a note that read, 'You are my only and ever-lasting love. I will always love you.' The whole place applauded them as they shared happy tears and laughter. Later on, we walked to the park, hand in hand, and Dad chased me around as we played football. We finished with ice cream cones. It was the perfect day until..."

Amanda's gentle fingers keep brushing circles on my clenched fists, grounding me back to reality.

"At four twenty-eight a.m., a piercing scream tore me awake. It took seconds for me to realize it wasn't a nightmare. It was real, it was coming from their bedroom. When I opened the door..." My voice catches in my throat as the memory returns, flooding into my mind like acid on metal.

"I found my mom's sobs echoing around their bedroom. She was clawing at my dad's chest, pleading for him to wake up, but his purple lips and ash-gray skin told me all I needed to know. Somehow I forced myself downstairs and call nine-one-one..."

A sigh leaves my lips. "Life never was the same after that."

Her warm tears dampen my skin as she embraces me in a tight hug, her arms draped like a shield around my shoulders. Somehow, her presence soothes away the agony that remembering that night brings. "I can't imagine what you must have gone through," she says.

"It was hell, and I never want to go through it again," I whisper into her hair as I draw her closer to me. Memories of that night flash before my eyes again, but this time I don't feel the same level of despair as before. Her arms are like a balm to my soul. The comfort she's providing erases away some of the pain and sadness that swell up inside me whenever I think about it.

"Let's not talk about this anymore," I murmur, cupping her face as our eyes meet. "It's making us both sad."

She smiles at my genuine worry for her and clings to me even tighter. "It's all right, I like it when you open up to me. It helps me better understand who you are today."

"And who am I today?"

"Sweet and damn sexy, she says.

I laugh and lean back. "I still prefer seeing your gorgeous smile or hearing you moan my name in ecstasy," I whisper, tracing circles on her neck with my index finger.

My mouth moves down to hers until they meet in a passionate kiss that leaves us both gasping for air. We break apart and both of us are smiling

now, our previous sadness replaced by desire and laughter.

“Let’s forget about all that and have some fun,” I say, nipping at her earlobe before I trail my fingers along her skin and press gentle kisses against her neck, our bodies tangling together in an embrace that soon turns into something more.

As our bodies writhe and twist in an intimate dance, we both forget sadness by solely focusing on each other and the pleasure we bring to one another.



## AMANDA

A smile of satisfaction spreads across my face as I swallow the last of my warm black coffee. As I set it on the table near the window, a sense of tranquility washes over me, and I close my eyes to take in this moment. My body is relaxed and filled with pleasure.

Being in a relationship with Brian these past two months has been nothing but a dream come true. It's been hard to find time during the week to see each other, but every Saturday evening, I make my way to Six-Pack and wait until closing. Then like clockwork, we head back to his place, leaving all of our work worries behind, and fill the rest of the night with passionate lovemaking, conversation, and laughter. He's an absolute vision—sexy, loving, and oh so tender—that it seems like all of my dreams are coming true and then some. Romantic movie nights with him give me a sense of perfection. Cuddling up together, watching the silver screen is more than I could ever hope for us to have.

The thought of losing him devastates me; his condition has made my future unsure too and the idea of him dying causes panic to course throughout my body, so I search for something to focus on.

My eyes float through the living room and land on the photo frame on a shelf next to the bookcase. I gaze at the wedding picture of his parents and I can't help but be awestruck. The love radiating from the photo is palpable as they pose in a tender embrace. I feel my heart flutter as I take in his father's charismatic smile and eyes, which sparkle like sapphires. When my gaze shifts to his mom, my heart skips a beat when I take in how she gazes up at her towering husband, eyes filled with pure admiration. If dictionaries had

photos to match their definitions, this one should go right under the word 'love.'

But as perfect as their love seemed, it was cruelly snatched away, raising questions if ours will too? Am I willing to accept that possibility? No, definitely not! But walking away is out of the question for me; Brian and I are bonded together by emotions too strong to break apart. So I guess all I can do is live with this fear and pray that life will be kind enough to grant us a happy future.

"Here you are."

My eyes shoot up to the man—only wearing boxers—walking toward me. A beautiful grin spreads on his lips, lighting up his sleepy face. God, that right there is the definition of sinfully sexy.

He wraps his arms around my waist and I let my fingertips trace along his stubbled jawline as his hands flame across my back, never losing eye contact with those captivating depths.

A ringing phone breaks the moment. "Shit, I need to take this. It's my mom."

"Take it," I say. "I'm making coffee. I need another caffeine boost."

He gazes at me with a twinkle in his eye and whispers, "Your nipples say something else. They scream for my attention, Miss Brown."

I glance down at the two round peaks pressing against the fabric."

"Well, they'll have to wait, Mr. Fox." I turn away to hide my reddening cheeks and hard nipples. But his cocky chuckle tells me he knows what he's doing to my body.

I give him a brief wave with my hand, but as I turn away from him, I hear him answer the phone.

"Hey, Mom." A few moments later, he hums. "Yeah, sure, I'll fix it. See you in a bit."

As I turn, Brian stands before me, his expression tender but troubled.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He nods with a small smile. "My mom needs help with one of the lights in her garage and asked me to come over and take a look."

I prepare his coffee in silence, watching as his brow furrows in thought. When it's ready, I offer him the mug brimming with steaming liquid.

"Here you go," I say, "just the way you like it."

He looks up at me, his eyes searching mine. Like he's unsure of something.



“Will you come with me? Meet my mum?”

My heart thumps against my ribcage at the invitation.

“Of course,” I say, touched by his gesture. “I’ve seen her maybe once or twice, but never had the chance to really talk to her.”

With another genuine smile, he takes my hands into his and brings them up to his lips. He places soft kisses on my knuckles before looking deep into my eyes with an intensity that leaves me breathless.

“I’ve never introduced a woman to my mom. And I avoided my mom talking to you because I assumed she would talk to you about her worries regarding my bachelor status.”

I chuckle while both excitement and nerves fill me at the thought of meeting his mom, but deep down I’m happy. Because him asking means he’s serious about us. I touch his cheek. “Do you think she’ll like me?”

“I have no doubt,” he murmurs and leans in to give me a tender kiss on the forehead.

An hour and a half later, we arrive at Brian’s childhood home. A two-story red brick colonial on a quiet street in one of Boston’s suburbs. The wraparound porch runs along the front of the house and is complete with white railings and a sitting area.

“So you grew up here?”

“Yep.”

As we get out of the car, my nerves start to build. *What if his mom doesn’t like me?* Brian squeezes my hand reassuringly as we step onto the porch before taking a key from his pocket and unlocking the door. He holds it open for me, allowing me to enter first, a gesture of chivalry that melts my heart. The scent of freshly baked cookies greets us as we pass into the hallway, and I can’t help but smile at the welcoming smell.

Brian leads me through to the living room, where a woman sits in an armchair next to the fireplace, reading a book. She looks up as we enter.

“Hey, Mom.”

The woman’s eyes land on me and I can see astonishment on her features, but it’s gone the next moment. Brian’s mom is approximately five feet tall with dark auburn hair, and her irises are a shade darker than that of her son, but they emit warmth and kindness that make me feel comfortable instantly.

When Brian gives his mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek, my heart flutters at the sight of the mother-son bond.

“Who did you bring with you?” she asks, not hiding her curiosity.

Brian chuckles.

“Mom,” he says softly. “This is Amanda.”

The woman sends me a generous smile while holding out her hand. “Hello, Amanda, I’m Vera.”

I shake her hand and smile. “Amanda Brown. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

She stares at me for a moment before saying with curiosity lacing her voice, “Aren’t you Nick Brown’s sister?”

“Mom,” Brian groans.

I chuckle. “Yes, I am.”

Vera grins. “Ah, I see,” she says before sauntering over to the kitchen.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee, homemade cookies, and aromatic spices and herbs fills the air as we enter the cozy kitchen. We take a seat at the wooden kitchen table. Brian grins as he sees me survey the room. Mustard yellow walls, white tiled countertops, and there’s a quaint gas stove and an ancient refrigerator with vintage white and copper knobs. The cupboards are made from weathered wood, and the floor is tiled with rustic-colored tiles.

Vera places steaming coffee cups on the table. Then she looks between me and her son before giving him a soft smile. “So she’s the woman you mentioned to me at Christmas?”

When he nods, I can’t help feeling warmth spread through my chest. He told his mom about me when he was visiting for the holidays.

“So tell me what do you do for a living, Amanda?”

“I have a women’s clothing store called Venus.”

“Oh my, that’s incredible,” she says before frowning and tapping her finger against her chin. Her eyes dart back to her son. “Didn’t you host a launch party at Six-Pack a while ago for a women’s clothing store? You told me the owner was, in your words, a crazy talented woman with an amazing sense of business.”

Brian clears his throat as my lips curl into an extensive grin.

“Wow, she sounds like a marvelous woman,” I say.

His mom’s eyes dart between us, and then she links it.

“Oh my God. You’re the woman he spoke so highly of.” Her eyes gleam with pleasure. “Now it all makes sense.”

Brian pulls his ringing cell phone out of his jeans and lets out a sigh. “Sorry, but I have to take this.”

His mom grins. “No problem, we can stay here and have girls’ chat.”

Brian’s eyes dart to me. “I’ll also look at the light in the garage.”

I make a gesture telling him to leave us before he throws me a sexy, lopsided grin. Shaking his head, he turns and moves into the hallway as he picks up the call.

“Didn’t you drive him home from the hospital?” Vera asks.

I nod.

She reaches over and pats my hand. “Thank you. It warms my heart to see my son finally letting a woman like you into his life.”

A blush creeps up my face, but she ignores it and continues talking. “Brian’s love life and his health have worried me for years... After his father passed away and they diagnosed him with Brugada Syndrome, the carefree boy he was became a young man who did nothing but pretend to be happy.” A thin layer of water covers her irises. “Watching him fade like that pained me. And the day Nick knocked on my door to tell me he was in the hospital...” She swallows. “I’m glad it ended up with him surviving and needing to come clean and telling his friends what he’d been hiding. Living with a secret is unhealthy.”

“The resemblance between Brian and his father is huge,” I say.

Vera’s lips curl upward into a soft smile. “Oh, yeah. It’s like looking at the past.” She nods toward the side and I feel my heart swell as I catch sight of the photo perched atop the shelf.

Brian and his father beaming into the camera with young Brian tightly gripping a soccer ball.

I swallow hard and whisper, “Brian told me what happened... It must have been so hard.”

Vera’s face conveys a mixture of sadness and joy. “Oh, it was. But even though we only had such a short time together, it was worth it knowing that we created this amazing boy. My son is a blessing and my husband lives on in him, which oddly enough brings me comfort.”

She pauses and stares at the picture with fondness as her eyes water. “For Brian to open up to you about his father is a big deal, Amanda... It proves you’re special to him.” She stands and after grabbing what I think is her purse and roaming through it, she pulls out a small square and shows it to me. I’m in awe while gazing at a baby picture of Brian.

“Oh my God. He was cute.” I take the picture she holds out to me.

“He’s eight months here, already sitting up on his own.” The pride in her

motherly voice is clear and melts me.

I stare at the blond boy with sparkling blue eyes. He looks adorable, holding a light brown teddy bear and smiling into the camera.

My head shoots up, and I grin as Brian comes our way.

“Lamp fixed,” he says, with a grin, but his brows are knitted together, eyes moving from me to his mother as he closes the distance.

“What are you looking at?” he asks.

When I turn the picture, his eyes widen, and he grasps it out of my hand.

“Jesus, Mom. Is that necessary?”

She shrugs. “I’m only showing your girlfriend that you were a handsome baby. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell her about how you always farted when I changed your diaper, honey.”

The open-eyed glance Brian gives his mom makes me laugh so hard I have to place a hand on my belly while the other wipes tears from my face. It takes me a while to recover. But when I do, his mom is already talking about the time Brian was three and he tried to climb a tree in the backyard.

“He got stuck halfway up, and I thought my heart would burst out of my chest. I was so scared he’d fall, but he kept saying ‘I can do it, Mommy’ with such determination.” She smiles at Brian’s embarrassed expression.

“But that wasn’t even the worst part,” she continues, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “When I finally got him down, he started running around like nothing had happened. He ran all the way to the front yard and started digging a hole in the flower bed of the neighbors, looking for treasures.”

Brian groans while his mother shakes her head fondly. “Of course I had to scold him for it, but deep down inside I was proud of his adventurous spirit.”

She pauses and looks at me before continuing with another story about how Brian used to sneak into neighbors’ yards to pet their cats when he was five or how he once found a baby bird on their porch when he was six and kept it in an old shoe box until it learned how to fly.

The stories keep coming as she talks about all of Brian’s childhood escapades and misadventures—from sneaking out at night with his friends when they were teenagers to organizing parties.

“I wish you two could stay and have dinner here, but I must take Mr. Ash to his appointment at the hospital,” Vera says regretfully.

“No worries, Mom. Tell him I said hey.”

She raises a brow and chuckles. “Are you sure? You used to run and hide

behind me, too shy to talk to him.”

“Hey.” He feigns offense while defending his younger self. “The man had a glass eye that freaked me out.”

They both erupt into laughter before Vera lovingly takes Brian’s face in her hands and beams at him. “You take care now. And don’t forget to bring your girlfriend over for dinner soon.” Turning to me, her face radiates warmth and love. “Thank you for making my boy smile like he’s doing right now.”

With that, we all grab our coats and head out the door. Once Brian’s mom walks off, giving us a last wave, we get back into the car.

“You’ve got the sweetest and funniest mom ever,” I say while putting on my seat belt.

Brian’s smile widens. “I know. She’s the best.”

“It’s sweet to see how close you two are.”

He nods. “She’s my everything. She always pushed me to chase my dreams and is my biggest supporter.”

“Thank you for bringing me to meet her,” I say.

As we drive on our way back home, past a bright yellow fast-food joint that’s advertising burgers, my mouth waters.

“Let’s get one,” I exclaim, barely able to contain my excitement.

Brian laughs, shaking his head playfully in mock exasperation. “All right, all right,” he says as he pulls into the drive-through.

We go through the menu and when we pull up to the drive-through window, Brian looks at me with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Two burgers, please,” he says with a sly smirk. “But don’t go easy on the condiments. We want every single topping you have.”

The worker at the window chuckles and looks at us. “Really? You two sure know how to live it up.”

Brian grins back. “It’s just part of our lifestyle.”

I reach into my pocket to grab my wallet, but before I can pull it out, Brian is already handing over his card. He winks at me and gives a cocky grin as if saying ‘I got this.’

I roll my eyes but don’t argue with him as I turn away to look out the window.

Moments later, we’re handed two piping hot burgers with an insane number of condiments tucked inside them. We laugh at the ridiculousness of our orders. I watch as Brian takes an enormous bite out of his burger and

sauce oozes out onto his lap.

“Yup, definitely getting a bib for next time,” I quip.

He flashes a sly grin back at me. “Hey, the sauce is part of my outfit.”

By the time we’re finished, we wipe our greasy hands off on a napkin.

“Let’s get home so I can change before heading to Six-Pack,” he says.

As we continue our way home, I glance over at him and remind myself yet again how lucky I feel to have this sexy man at my side. He’s by far the best boyfriend I’ve ever had. He makes me laugh until my sides ache, supports and listens to my ideas, and gives valuable feedback, never complaining when our schedules don’t line up, and last but not least, looks panty-wetting good in a pair of jeans that’s got a big sauce stain on it. But not telling him that.

As Brian ascends the steps to change his pants, I straighten up the kitchen—a habit passed down by my mother. A little while later, two arms encircle me from behind, and warm lips graze the nape of my neck.

“I love seeing you relaxed in my house,” he whispers.

A smile spread across my face as I pivot around to meet him. “It’s easy when your home is so welcoming.”

Brian stares at me while taking both of my hands in his own. His voice quivers as he says, “It may not be the perfect time or place, and I might not get it right, but I have to get something off my chest.”

A wave of curiosity washes over me, urging me to speak. “Just tell me what’s on your mind.”

He clears his throat. “I enjoy every moment we’re together... You make me happy.”

His words touch me on a deep level. “Thank you. You make me happy too.”

He shakes his head. “Fuck, that’s not how I meant for it to come out.”

He mutters something under his breath—a nervous tic reminiscent of Nick’s habit of ruffling through his hair—then locks eyes with me once again. His vulnerability trembles before me, causing my chest to constrict as I take a deep breath and ask softly, “What did you mean to say, Brian?”

Brian takes a deep breath and looks down at our intertwined hands before meeting my gaze once more. “I can’t find the words to express how special you are to me... Never felt this deeply for another woman like I do for you, Amanda.”

My throat tightens and I draw closer, laying my head on his chest. His

familiar scent envelops me with warmth and security as he tenderly kisses my forehead before moving down to capture my lips with an electric touch that sets every nerve alight. Our hands roam over each other's bodies as if they know no other home, deepening this connection even further until we both pull away, panting heavily.

"I usually don't mind going to work, but now I'd rather stay here with you—take a shower together, have you in my bed, eat your pussy and then cuddle up..."

I chuckle and gaze into those eyes that never fail to make me melt.

"What if I get some clothes and come back here?" I suggest, tracing circles on his arm with my fingertips. "That way, you can cuddle up with me in bed when you get home from Six-Pack and I can leave for work from here in the morning."

He leans down and presses his lips to mine, tenderly caressing my cheek. "I love the idea of going to bed with you and seeing your face when waking up," he murmurs against my lips. My skin tingles as butterflies swarm in my stomach. All too soon, he pulls away and leaves for the door, but not before stealing one final peck and saying with a mischievous grin, "See and feel you tonight, Brownie."

My head swirls as I lean against the counter, taking in the moment he said he's falling for me. The man who ran from relationships is now sharing his soul freely with me. Years of waiting and hoping have brought me to this yummy place. Joyous euphoria overtakes me while I dance around the kitchen, but a sudden image of him lying in bed lifelessly cuts off my happy feet. His mother's words surge forward. *Even though our life and love together on this earth were limited, it was worth it.* And being with Brian and loving him is worth every second of uncertainty.





## AMANDA

Quality time with family and friends is something I deeply cherish—they are my rock when I'm lost in tumultuous seas. I've been fortunate enough to have had a charmed life, nurtured by loving parents who remain madly in love and an older brother who is not only my sibling but also my best friend. As I survey the group sitting around the table in Nick and Emma's place, I acknowledge that most of them are now couples. First, we have Cole and Alisha sitting side by side. Alisha murmurs something to her husband, whose face goes from serious to amused. Cole has always been the most sober out of the three amigos; his towering presence and broody demeanor tend to intimidate people. Add on the formidable wall of muscles he has, and you have what Alisha often jokingly calls him, Thor, minus the hammer. They are a sight to see together. Alisha with her killer outfits and heels. Don't know how she does it, but she makes being pregnant with twins and wearing heels look easy. She's just entering the third trimester of her pregnancy and looking fabulous.

My gaze drifts to Emma as she extends a delectable portion of her homemade cake to Nick. The admiration flooding from my brother's expression is palpable, and my heart fills with warmth knowing this kind-hearted woman is his wife.

I grin at Liam, my little nephew, who sits at a table next to ours, covered with paper and stuffed with art supplies, cheerily smudging crayons on a sheet of paper.

And last but not least, the only single friend in our group is Bella, who controls her pencil with expertise as she explains to the excited Charlotte the

art of drawing faces.

“Amanda, I’m going to draw you,” Charlotte says, halting near the table with a twinkling smile.

“Can’t wait,” I enthuse, blowing her an air kiss.

“Hey, why not me?” Nick asks his daughter, giving her his most charming smile.

“Dad,” she drawls, unimpressed, “Auntie Amanda is much prettier to draw—you’ve got too much hair on your face.”

Brian grins. “Don’t ya like your dad’s beard, Charlotte?”

Charlotte shrugs. “It’s too tickly,” she says with a deadpan expression.

“I’m sure your mama loves feeling those hairs on her—What?” Brian says, faking innocence after I pressed my elbow into his side.

“I wanted to say cheek.” Brian winks at Emma, whose face burns at his words.

“Mom, do you want a beard like Daddy?” Charlotte questions with a disgusted face. Her query leads to a roar of laughter from us all.

Brian gently ruffles Charlotte’s hair before tickling her cheek with a mischievous grin, eliciting more giggles from her before she runs to join Liam’s creative activities. He’s brilliant with kids. I twist my head to connect with his gaze and can’t help the smile that spreads across my face as he runs his fingers over my back before settling his arm on the back of my chair.

At the sound of whistling and the words, “They are hungry, for more than food,” I glance around and find my friends looking at us with amusement.

Alisha leans forward, her eyes sparking with mischief. “Yeah, Brian is ready to eat his Brownie,” she teases, smirk widening.

“Where is Uncle Brian’s Brownie?” Charlotte says, looking at Brian’s plate.

Nick groans. “Please don’t answer.”

The entire table bursts out in laughter, and Charlotte frowns in confusion before turning back to her drawing.

Emma shakes her head before looking at Brian and me. “To be honest, there was a time I thought you two were never going to figure it out.”

Bella chips in, “But they did. And are still going strong. So back off and let them be happy. They both deserve it.”

Brian grins. “Thanks for that, Bella.”

“No problem. Just don’t forget that; hurt her and there’ll be hell to pay.”

Charlotte skips up to Brian, eyes wide and bubbling over with excitement.

“Can I be your flower girl when you marry Auntie Amanda? And be a big aunt when you have a baby?”

I choke on my drink as the room falls silent.

Cole grins. “She still has the knack for catching people off guard with those questions, huh?”

Before Brian can answer, Emma interjects, “Sweetheart, what did we say about asking those questions?”

Charlotte pouts her lip. “You said I had to wait and see, but waiting is so boring.”

“Well.” Nick helps his wife. “This will be your time to learn it because neither Amanda nor Brian will answer those questions.”

Charlotte bats her lashes at her dad and tilts her head sideways, giving it another try. “But, Dad...”

“Char,” Liam calls out.

“Your brother needs his big sister,” Nick says, caressing her cheek.

“Okay.” She sighs, walking back to the other table.

“Sorry,” Emma apologizes. “Ever since Cole and Alisha’s wedding, she’s been obsessed with wanting another one. And don’t have me talking about babies. She’s excited to see the twins and wants everyone to have kids.”

Brian smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes and I wonder what he’s thinking.

The rest of the afternoon passes as we chat and savor some of Emma’s delectable homemade snacks. Once back at Brian’s place, we settle on the couch with takeout Thai food and an action series. Warmth radiates through me as I gaze at Brian beside me. I never imagined being with him could bring me this much joy. We have a natural synergy that could defy time. As fellow entrepreneurs, we understand the long hours and there is never a hint of envy, only a mutual esteem and supportive admiration. I can’t help but think the dream life I always wanted is becoming reality. My heart skips a beat with delight, but when I recall Charlotte’s question about marriage and babies, apprehension saps away at my dream for the future—marriage, kids.

*What are his ideas on those topics?*

Brian is brilliant with Charlotte and Liam, but I’ve never heard him speak of wanting kids, and we never talked about it. I turn to him, studying his face while he eats pad thai. *Is now the right time?*

“You’re amazing with kids,” I blurt out and search his expression for some sign of understanding of my inner thoughts. He humbly shrugs and

mouths a thank you before returning to his meal. My heart races as I nervously ask the next question, “Have you ever thought about having children?”

His eyes fix on the table, avoiding my gaze. “I’ve never considered it,” he mutters, voice low and tense.

I nervously bite my lip, waiting for a response that doesn’t come. My hands shake as the realization dawns on me that I need to speak what’s in my heart. Taking a deep breath, I intertwine my fingers and voice my true feelings. “I’d love to have kids someday.”

There’s an almost tangible stillness that hangs in the air. Brian breaks it by slowly pushing away his plate and leaning back on the couch, his arms folded over his chest and his eyes closed.

“Can we stop talking about this topic for now?” he croaks.

My brows furrow as I tilt my head in confusion. “Why?”

He looks at me, face filled with dread and pain. “My heart condition is hereditary, Amanda. It can be passed down like my father did with me. The only difference is he didn’t know he had it.” His voice cracks before continuing, “I watched him die from it without being able to do anything about it. The idea of putting a child through this or worse yet, having them die because of it... it’s just too much to bear.”

I sit there in silence, digesting what he just said. Chills run down my spine at the thought of our baby being sick. It would be scary as hell knowing his heart could be as fragile as a crystal vase. I glimpse indirectly at the man sitting beside me. “Would you be willing to talk to a doctor about this?”

With his gaze averted from mine, he nods before picking up plates and carrying them over to the sink.

Understanding that this is a loaded topic for him, I drop further questioning and rise and join him at the sink, helping to load the dishwasher. After we finish cleaning together, we curl up on the couch, watching TV without talking further about it, both of us knowing that this is something we will have to confront eventually but not ready to tackle it today.

HOW MUCH TIME passed I don’t know, but my eyes snap open as Brian’s panicked voice reaches my ears. I bolt upright, heart dropping when I see him trying to rise from the couch with shallow, rapid breaths.

“Brian?”

He attempts a response but is thrust back with a cry that pierces the silence. His fingers curl into fists and his face contorts in agony. That's when I realize his implanted defibrillator is sending a jolt of electricity through his body. Terror seizes me and tears spill down my cheeks as I search desperately for my phone.

I punch the numbers into my cell phone, fingers trembling with terror. I can barely gasp out when it answers, "My boyfriend... he has Brugada Syndrome and needs an ambulance right away. He just got an electric shock from his ICD." The operator's voice is a far-off buzz in my ear that I answer on autopilot, all my attention focused on Brian as he lies before me, trembling with pain.

I grip his hand tightly as if it could somehow save him, wishing I could take away his anguish and spare him from this suffering. My heart feels like it's being squeezed by a vice as I listen to her promise of an ambulance arriving soon.

"It'll be all right," I croak out, but I know deep down it may not be. The fear of losing him sinks in like a blade through my heart as images of him dying flicker across my mind and I gag at the thought. No. Not now. Please don't let these be his last moments.

Guilt washes over me in a relentless flood, crashing into my heart like an icy wave for bringing up the topic of children earlier today. *Could I have been the cause of this?* I push these thoughts away and lean forward to press a desperate kiss on his forehead. His weak smile gives me hope and courage even though I feel so hopeless inside.

A shot of relief fills me when minutes later, the siren wails split through the air like a beacon of hope, drawing closer until they reach our house. After opening the door, two paramedics walk through the front door carrying medical supplies and monitoring equipment. With quick and expert hands, they secure him to the monitors and soon murmur reassuring words that his ICD did its job and that his heart rate is normal. But because Brian still feels dizzy, they lift him onto the stretcher and bring him to the hospital.

"Take this," one of the two paramedics says, handing me a white square block as I take a seat in the back of the ambulance. "It's sugar. You are a little pale."

I give him a faint smile and take it, letting it dissolve in my mouth as my eyes drift back to Brian—so vulnerable beneath all those wires and monitors. The gravity of how fragile life can be hits me like a ton of bricks; no matter

how much he and I try to protect each other, there are still things out of our control.



## BRIAN

Rage boils in my veins. “Three fucking months.” I slam my fist on the kitchen counter and a searing pain runs through my chest, a reminder of the ICD that shocked me.

“I’ve got a business to run, and now I HAVE to look for some way to get around for three months.”

A hand brushes my arm. “Brian, it’s going to be okay.”

I glare at Amanda with narrow eyes. “It’s NOT okay. It’s not fair that I have to find alternate transportation because of THIS.” I gesture at my chest. We’d left the hospital two hours ago, after they kept me for observation for six more hours. Amanda had called my mom, who then rushed to the hospital, and they both stayed at my bed until Doctor Wilson reassured them that everything was back to normal. Then, when we left, Nick and Cole had been there waiting in the restaurant to bring us home. My two best friends have come through for me once again. I’m grateful, but I can’t help feeling like a burden.

Nick looks up from his seat at the counter. “Chill, man. You’ve got us. We’ll help out.”

My fists remain clenched as I take a deep breath, struggling to free myself from the sobering reality. For the next three months I have to depend on others because there is a rule for people who have an ICD that states you can’t drive for at least three months after receiving your first shock. Ridiculous.

Cole’s unwavering gaze locks onto mine as he says, “I get it that you don’t want to be dependent. But call me soft-hearted, I’d rather have it turn



out this way since it means you're still here."

Silence falls at this sobering truth. Then Nick clears his throat. "We should head home. You two look like you could use some rest."

As Nick and Amanda walk to the front door, Cole comes my way, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Don't shut Amanda out, Fox. I know it's scary, but bottling your feelings up won't do any good. Don't forget, we're here whenever you need us or just want to talk," he says before walking away.

I mutter an acknowledgment without turning back. As the door slams shut, I exhale and slump against the counter. My gaze drops low, my chest heaving as I struggle to contain my rising panic and deal with my old fears returning. It all mounts inside me like an invisible pressure, tearing at my heart and mind with agonizing force.

I try not to think about what happened, but my mind won't relent. One second I'm fine, lounging and with my girl sleeping peacefully beside me, and the next a soft flutter rises, and within moments I'm upright panting, my heart racing out of control, giving me the feeling it's going to burst. The worst sensation in the world. The doctor said that in those moments, there's absolutely nothing I can do but attempt to stay calm, get help, and pray for the best. How ironic—trying to stay calm when you're gasping for air. I failed miserably tonight. I clench my teeth as I think of Amanda's expression when I woke her. The flash of terror in her eyes infuriates me. It's my fault she was scared and this might not be the last time. What if from now on my life is a never-ending game of ping-pong with these kinds of attacks? She'll be stuck beside me in this wretched show.

A gentle hand slides along my arm. "Do you want to watch TV?"

"You don't have to stay," I say, barely above a whisper.

It takes a while before I can bring myself to look up at her, but when I do, there's only warmth in her brown eyes. "Why wouldn't I want to stay?" she asks, so calm it evokes a kaleidoscope of emotions to build up inside me and erupt.

"Because as you've seen," I say, struggling to keep my voice from shaking, "I'm screwed up, Amanda. Attacks like this could happen again, maybe even deadly next time. So it might be for the best if you walk away now."

She straightens her posture. "Don't try to scare me off, Brian."

"Why not?"

She takes a deep breath, her gaze radiating compassion as she looks into

my eyes. “Because you are more than this. Yes, what happened is terrible, and it frightened me. But it doesn’t change how I feel about you or us.”

Waves of relief and guilt wash over me at her words. Relief that she isn’t leaving; remorse that she has to bear all of this just because of me.

“Please, don’t push me away,” she says, her voice trembling with emotion. “I’m here because I choose to be here—with you—no matter what.”

I let out a shaky breath, my heart warming at her words while my mind still wrestles with the fear that the shadows will eventually envelop us both.

“Thank you,” I whisper before pressing my lips to hers. The moment our mouths connect, all my anxious thoughts melt away and a wave of warmth spreads through me, sparking something within my heart that gives me a sense of calm, despite the chaos inside my head. Our kiss deepens and her presence envelops me like a comforting blanket, assuring me that in this moment, I’m all right. Her closeness reminds me of the beauty of life, despite the darkness and lurking insecurities.

When we pull away from one another, we remain cradled in each other’s arms. She leans her head against mine and we stay there, relishing being together. She strokes my cheek with her thumb.

“It’ll be okay. We’ll get through this together.” Her words are no guarantee of the pain to come, yet the warmth in her voice ignites a spark in me that blazes with determination, promising to fight against the darkness no matter what obstacles lie ahead. And I hope I’m as brave as her.



## BRIAN

For the past month, Amanda and I have taken a lot of leisurely strolls together. Hitting the gym doesn't feel right, so this is a nice alternative. And today we're in the forest. We've been walking through the cool winter breeze, talking and laughing, and I'm mesmerized by the impulsivity with which Amanda commands my attention in even the most mundane moment. She's everything I didn't know I needed. As I look at her, something dawns on me so powerfully that it takes my breath away: I'm head over heels in love with this woman. I love Amanda Brown. I love her strength, her upbeat personality, her stubbornness, her drive to succeed, her naughty side, but most I love her caring heart. Next to my mom, she's the only woman I've ever felt so strongly about. And I'll do everything in my power to make sure she gets everything she wants and deserves in life.

My body tenses and my cock jumps to life as I watch her move, her hair sweeping from side to side. Before I know what I'm doing, I'm crossing the few feet of space between us and pulling her near, determined to make the fantasy playing out in my mind a reality. Trapping her in between my arms and the hood of her car, I bury my nose beneath her velvety chocolate locks.

"Brian." She chuckles. "What are you doing?"

My hands wander onto the swell of her curves, and she softly moans in pleasure.

"Ever done it in the woods before?"

She pushes her hands onto my shoulders and flicks her lashes up at me. "It's winter. People don't have sex outside when it's this cold."

I take a second to survey our surroundings, then let my gaze drift up to

the sun radiating its warmth on this idyllic February day and offer her a naughty smile. “Why not? We’re alone, and what fun is life without a bit of spontaneous adventure?”

“We do have an appointment to get to.”

She’s trying to deny that my suggestion is igniting some fire within her, but the glint in her eyes reveals I’m right on point. I lean forward and capture her lips with mine, whispering into her ear between kisses.

“How do you want me to take you?”

Her arms wrap around me and she melts into me as I ravish her mouth.

After a while, she pulls away and sends me a sultry glance. “Take me from behind.”

A mischievous smile curves my lips as I loom closer. “Place your hands on the hood of the car,” I order.

A wave of lust slams into me, making my hard-on push urgently against my fly when she complies. “Hope you don’t mind the chill.” I smirk, sliding down her pants and thong until they pool around her ankles. She quivers with aroused anticipation. “Push your gorgeous ass back, Brownie.”

“Like this?” She enticingly grinds her hips.

My hands cup her tight buttocks. “Dammit, woman, I can’t keep from telling you how much I worship this butt of yours...” A passionate moan shakes the woodland when I dip and bite the side of her buttock.

“Brian.”

“Just claiming what’s mine.”

Her gaze locks with mine through her long lashes, a tantalizing smirk on her lips as she arches her torso over the metal. My eyes widen when she undulates her hips to the side while slipping one of her hands between her legs to massage her clit.

I open my zipper and shove down my jeans and boxers to my knees, freeing my firm cock—which is unaffected by the cold air due to the pulsating blood coursing through it. “Widen your legs farther,” I demand while snatching a condom and sheathing my length.

She shifts her stance, and I notice the hunger in her eyes.

“On a scale of one to ten, how badly do you want me?”

“Eleven,” she murmurs and I smirk, curling my fingers around her hips. “Good girl.”

I grind against her core, tantalizing us both with pleasure that’s just out of reach. Then I keep my gaze locked on hers as I drive into her, passion

crashing over both of us like a tidal wave. Her breath comes out in frantic pants and I can't help but take my time in devouring her with my eyes—the way her curves melt against the car, desire pouring off her skin. She's perfect.

I grip onto her hair tightly and she moans deep in her throat when I pull it. “Look at you, Brownie... You fucking love it when I get rougher, don't you?” I whisper against her neck.

“Yes,” she cries out, pushing herself back into me in desperate need for more. And that's exactly what I give her, each thrust accompanied by a tug of her hair to make her gasp.

“Oh, yes!” Her cries echo through the trees and our bodies move together in a frenzied rhythm as I thrust harder and faster into her warmth. I feel her trembling in anticipation beneath me and suddenly all I can think about is giving this goddess what she needs, what she deserves.

So I wrap my arm around her waist and muffle her cries with my hand, while slipping the other between her legs to stroke her sensitive nub. The combination makes us both shudder uncontrollably as we draw ever closer to the climax. She's so perfect and beautiful and everything I've ever wanted, and right now all I want is to make sure she experiences all the pleasure I can give to her.

Amanda's moan reverberates through my palm as I rub her clit but stop my thrust.

I lower my head to the crook of her neck and whisper in a teasing tone, “What's wrong, beautiful?” I move my hand away from her mouth.

“Don't fucking stop. Fuck me. I'm so close,” she pants.

“Needy, are we?” I laugh in amusement.

“I—” Her voice trails off as a moan escapes her throat when I plunge deep inside her delicious cunt.

“Oh God, yes, just like that. Don't stop,” she cries out.

There is no way I could bring myself to stop; it feels too good.

Our flesh merges together, and the sight of her brown hair swaying with each thrust has me delirious with pleasure. To push her over the edge, I tug on her hair and increase the power of my thrusts. She comes loudly, screaming my name. And when her walls grip my cock with immense force, I surrender to bliss with a roar of pleasure.

“Sex outdoors is added to the favorite list.” Amanda gasps for air after our mind-blowing ride.

I suppress my laughter as I separate from her body and watch as she dresses herself up. Disposing of the condom, I close the gap between us, taking hold of her hand before planting a kiss on the back of it. “You’re perfect... Now let’s go so the doctor doesn’t wonder where we are.”

MY PALMS ARE sweaty and my pulse races as I sit in the waiting area of the cardiologist’s office, fidgeting with my hands as nervousness builds inside of me. Amanda reaches over and takes one of my hands in hers, giving it a comforting squeeze. As good as we’re doing as a couple, I’ve noticed the theme, kids, is hanging above our heads. So we’re here to get clarity on the subject.

My pulse races as I consider the words Doctor Wilson might say.

*If the news isn’t what we hoped for, will she leave me?*

*But what if the news is bad and she stays with me by sacrificing her dream of having her own family?* These and other possibilities swirl in my mind, making my stomach churn as I cling to the strand of hope that this visit will bring positive news for us.

The door of Dr. Wilson’s office opens, and a couple comes out together with him following behind. As soon as they leave, the cardiologist gestures for us to come inside.

“Good morning.” The wrinkles around Doctor Wilson’s eyes deepen as he smiles and shakes our hands.

“How are you doing, Brian?”

“Good, can’t wait to get my freedom back when it comes to driving.”

He nods. “I understand, but these are the rules after an ICD shock.”

When I nod, he leans forward and props his elbows on the desk.

“So what was it that you two wanted to discuss with me?”

I take another deep breath and break the silence by asking the direct question. “If we wanted children, what are the chances our child would inherit Brugada Syndrome?”

My leg jostles restlessly as the doctor lets out a slight grimace and reaches for the chart on his desk. He steadies himself in his seat before replying. Amanda grabs one of my hands, entwining our fingers together.

“I see... Well, if I were to put it in percentages,” he begins, “your child has a fifty percent chance of inheriting Brugada Syndrome or the predisposition to it.”

My mouth feels like cotton as his words land. “Fifty percent?” I repeat.

“Yes, but it needs explaining. It’s uncommon to find Brugada in young people. If a child inherits this condition, it usually manifests during teenage years to middle-aged adulthood. As it did with you.”

“So having a kid is like flipping a coin and hoping for the best—maybe they get Brugada and maybe they don’t get a fucked-up heart.”

The doctor focuses his attention on me.

“No. Even if your child inherits this, it doesn’t mean they would display symptoms.”

I interject, “But there are kids who do show symptoms at a young age.”

Wilson sits up straighter. “Brian, truth be told, we don’t know enough about the precise prognosis or threats of Brugada in children. But I’ve seen through my years as an expert in this syndrome that many offspring who acquire the gene won’t require any treatment and possess a low risk of developing abnormal and dangerous heart rhythms. If you are considering having children, my advice would be to screen the boy or girl for Brugada at a young age.”

The reality of what he is saying sinks in, and fear and disbelief take over. I pull my hand free from Amanda’s before rising from my stool and walking toward the door.

“Brian, where are you going? Amanda asks.

“I’m sorry. I know enough. Thanks for your time, Doc. I need fresh air.”

Wandering through the halls, swirling thoughts crowd my head. Once outside, I stop and lean my back against the wall. The number fifty percent blinks in my mind like a neon sign, illuminating the stark truth of the situation and taunting me with its bright, unyielding presence and reminding me of the risk that looms ahead. *How can I bring a child into this world, knowing it could have this? It isn’t fair.*

“Brian?”

Amanda’s soft voice interrupts my thoughts. A pang of guilt emerges as my gaze meets Amanda’s worried expression.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

I swallow hard before giving a curt nod and mumbling, “Can we go?”

She nods and a moment later, Amanda climbs behind the wheel, since I’m not allowed to drive, and takes off. The world outside is nothing but a blurry haze until Amanda stops and turns off the engine. I blink, only to find she stopped us at a nearby park.



“Let’s take a walk. We both need fresh air,” she says before getting out.

Side by side, we walk through the park, taking in the beauty of nature.

The park is alive with sound as the warm winter sun filters through the trees, creating dappled light on the ground. I take a seat on a bench near a playground and watch as a few children play around on swings and slides while their parents watch from other nearby benches, smiling fondly at their antics. I take it all in while pushing the tears away before turning to Amanda.

“I’m sorry for walking out,” I say.

“It’s okay,” she says before squeezing my hand and leaning her head against my shoulder.

I take a deep breath. “Fifty percent. That’s the chance that any child of ours will have Brugada.”

Amanda takes my hand in hers. “There is also a fifty percent chance that our children won’t inherit Brugada. We don’t know for sure until it happens. I know this is hard for you to accept—”

“But it’s the reality,” I interrupt, pulling away from her touch and leaning my elbows on my knees. “This isn’t something we can just ignore or hope away.” I gaze at the ground and wait for her reaction.

“I know it’s scary,” she murmurs. “But...”

I glance sideways to find her gazing at the playground with kids. “But what?” I say.

“I want to be a mother one day, Brian. It’s not just hormones and biology; it’s something deeper—a longing to experience the ultimate connection with another human being. I want to create a life that reflects both of us. I want to feel a human growing inside me knowing it’s part of you and me.”

Images of Amanda as a mother come to mind. She’d be the ideal parent—patient, kind, and filled with love. I can already picture her cooing over a baby, singing lullabies and telling stories.

But a wave of guilt washes over me, knowing I can’t give her that.

I take Amanda’s hand in mine, forcing myself to look into her eyes. In that moment, a million words are spoken between us, conversations about love and fear and our future together.

“Amanda,” I start hesitantly as my mind races, searching for the right words to say, “maybe we should take some time apart—think about this.”

The air around us feels like it’s crushing us, both of us aware of the consequences of my words.

She shakes her head. “Brian, please,” she pleads, her voice wavering as

tears stream down her cheeks, “don’t do this.” Her sobs wrench at my soul and I feel my own eyes prickle with tears in response to hers.

“I need time to think. Alone.” I stand up and turn away from her. Before I can even take two steps away from her, Amanda grabs onto my arm with both hands, holding on tight.

“Look at me, Brian,” she commands, though still choked by sobs.

When I reluctantly meet her gaze again, there’s an intensity so strong it nearly knocks the breath out of me.

“I love you,” she whispers with heartbreaking sincerity.

My heart cries out for me to say it back, but I don’t. Instead, I repeat, “I need time to think. I’ll take a cab home.”

The pain in her gaze explodes like fireworks, and she releases my arm. And just like that, I turn and walk... walk... and keep walking.

HOURS LATER, I stumble into my house and collapse onto the couch. The silence in the room is deafening as I stare blankly at the wall in front of me until my phone buzzes. Curious when I see who it is, I answer.

“Olga?”

My heartbeat rises in a second when I catch the panic in her tone. Her words are fast and chaotic.

“Olga, calm down. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s your mom, Brian. She’s had an accident.”



## BRIAN

I jolt off the couch as Olga's horror-filled words ring in my ears.

"What happened?" I bark frantically.

"I... I don't know exactly," she stammers, her voice trembling. "All I know is that when I came to have coffee with her, I found her lying in a pool of blood at the bottom of the stairs."

An agonized cry escapes Olga's lips, which sends shivers down my spine and causes nausea to swirl through my system.

"Where is she now?"

"They're rushing her to the hospital," she sobs.

I hang up, grab the car keys with shaking hands, and sprint toward the door. Not caring that I shouldn't drive, I hop into my car.

The pattering of the engine reminds me of the conflict within me—a chorus of emotions, each vying for control. Fear and dread claw at my heart, and guilt tangles in my guts. The thought of my mother being in pain twists within me until I think I'm going to be sick. I push the accelerator harder until I arrive at the hospital and push through the automatic sliding doors of the emergency department.

There, I approach the counter and ask about my mother. The lady behind the desk stands and addresses me, asking my name.

"Brian Fox. My mom's name is Vera Fox," I tell her.

She nods. "Yes, Mr. Fox. The doctors are still with her. I'll take you to the family room."

"No. I need to see her," I plea.

"I understand how you feel," the woman speaks in a gentle tone, "but

your mother is in emergency surgery, and the doctor will come out and talk to you when they can.”

*Emergency surgery?*

The nurse leads me away to the visitors’ room. Inside, I plop down on an uncomfortable bench. Many others had surely done the same while waiting for news about their own loved ones—I’d seen this scene play out on TV, but experiencing it in real time is mortifying, and I wish I could do something, but here I am, stuck in this helpless waiting game.

God, I hate waiting. Minutes drag on to hours before a tall figure enters the room. I feel my heart speed up as I recognize the man in blue scrubs: a surgeon. He runs a hand through his hair and approaches me.

“Mr. Fox?”

“Yes,” I say, standing up to shake his hand. “How is she doing? What happened?”

He motions for me to sit, and I do.

“Your mother has Traumatic Brain Injury, after a fall from the stairs,” he starts. “She had a fracture in her skull and blood was causing pressure to build. So we operated right away.”

I close my eyes tight and swallow against the bile rising in my stomach.

“Is she...” I start but can’t finish the sentence.

“She’s alive,” he answers.

I exhale in relief until my breath freezes upon seeing the stern expression on his face.

“How bad is it?” I ask.

His eyes are already telling me what his mouth is about to say.

“We don’t know if she’ll make it through the night. We stopped the bleeding, but there’s severe swelling in her brain... We’re treating it with medication, but there’s nothing else we can do at this moment.”

My body tenses up, but I jump to my feet. “Take me to her.”

The man rises from his seat and nods. “Follow me.”

*Please don’t take her away from me,* I pray as I follow him through the hallways. My heart lurches and my inner world shrinks to a single thought: *this can’t be true.* Surely I’m dreaming. But the nurses’ scurrying and the phones and pagers ringing around me dash that hope.

A low hum of murmured voices fills the corridors. The ICU area, however, is eerily quiet. Suddenly, the doctor stops before a doorway on our left, and I take a ragged breath before turning my head to glance inside.

A horrified gulp of air leaves my lips when I spot my mother lying on the bed with her delicate face hidden by a white bandage while hooked up to monitors and an IV. The steady beeping of the monitors cuts through the stillness like a mechanical metronome.

I stumble into the room, feeling like I might pass out from the shock. My eyes dart to the beeping machines around us. “Can she hear us?”

“I encourage people to talk to their loved ones, but she has been given strong pain medications,” the doctor replies.

“We’re monitoring her closely, hoping the swelling subsides in the next hours. You can stay and we will regularly come in to do checkups.”

As he exits, I walk over and take hold of my mother’s hand, my voice lowering as I look upon her pale features. My throat tightens, and I fight to get the words out. “Mom... I’m here. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there when you got hurt, but I’m here now and I’m not leaving until you wake up.” Gently, I kiss the back of her hand. “I love you, Mom.”

For hours, I sit by her side, talking to her. A memory surfaces in my mind of Sunday mornings when Mom would make me a big stack of pancakes topped with bright red strawberries. We would pour on the syrup and talk while we devoured them all together.

“I always loved the summer vacation,” I say while rubbing the back of her hand with my thumb. “Do you remember how just before school started again, you and Dad would take me camping for one final family trip? Every night we’d build a fire, roast marshmallows, and tell stories until late into the night. And on our last night there, you’d treat us to a special surprise: chocolate-dipped fruits from a nearby farm stand that remained open even during the off-season months. It made me feel so special and loved.”

The memories bring tears to my eyes as I squeeze my mom’s hand tighter in mine and hope more than anything else that everything will turn out all right and that soon enough she’ll be back home where she belongs.

Hours pass by as I cling onto hope for a miracle, endlessly recounting funny stories from my past in an effort to keep myself sane. The night wears on, and then, as the room fills itself with the light of the morning sun, an almost imperceptible squeeze gets my attention. My head whips up, my pulse racing when my mom’s eyes flutter open, and a relieved sigh escapes me as she looks up at the ceiling.

“Hey, Mom... Everything will be okay,” I stammer, my hand gently stroking her cheek. My heart soars from the love I have for her, but before I

can express it, the monitor erupts with an alarmed beep. I look at the noisy equipment.

*What the—*

My eyes shoot back to my mom, and I'm horrified to see the blue eyes I've known for my entire life roll back in her head, turning white before closing again.

"Mom?"

Her hand goes limp and I shake my head. "Mom. No, please. Mom!"

The door swings open with a heavy bang and the doctor, flanked by two nurses, rushes into the room and pushes me aside as they begin CPR. Another nurse tries to persuade me to leave the room, but I'm unmovable. No way am I leaving her now. The doctor shouts orders to the others as they take turns compressing her torso.

A part of me wants to look away, but I can't tear my eyes away from the scene unfolding before me. Tears stream down my face as I silently beg for her to keep fighting for something, anything to work. After multiple attempts at reviving her, the doctor glances at the machine, and in a drawn-out breath, he announces, "Time of death, six forty-three a.m."

My heart sinks as the realization that this is it dawns on me.

I stand there frozen, unable to process what just happened. Every beat of my heart is a sharp reminder that my mother is gone. The nurses disconnect the machine and remove the needles and IVs.

The doctor turns, his gaze heavy with sorrow before he speaks. "I'm sorry..." He then steps aside and motions for the nurses to leave. A hand placed on my shoulder as he exits serves as a reminder that I am not alone, but it is small comfort as I take a step toward my mother's lifeless body resting on the bed.

My knees buckle under me, and everything blurs until all I can see is her. The pain is unbearable, lurching through me like an unstoppable wave, leaving destruction in its wake. I hug her tight, wishing against hope that this is nothing more than a nightmare.

"Why did you have to leave me?" I sob into her neck and let my soul cry from its foundation, letting the grief hurricane swallow me whole until there's nothing but a sense of emptiness.

Time passes when a nurse comes in. "My condolences," she says, stopping beside me.

I nod. "What's going to happen now?"

The woman gives me a caring smile as she sees me caressing my mom's hand. "We'll take care of her until you make plans with your chosen funeral director."

"I don't think I can leave her yet," I choke out, barely able to form words.

"No problem. You can stay longer if you'd like, but maybe it's better to go home and get some rest. Let someone inform other family members of her passing."

When the door closes, and I'm alone, I take her hand in mine, feeling the coldness of death already settling in her skin. Even with her usual warmth gone, the contact of her skin is still soothing; like a comfort blanket that reminds me of what I'm about to lose. I inhale deeply, savoring her unique scent for one last time.

The tightness in my chest intensifies at the thought of living without my mom's advice or scoldings when I don't act as she taught me; without our Wednesday dinner together. "I'm going to miss you so goddamn much." My voice breaks and turns into an agonizing sob that fills the room.

I lean forward and kiss her forehead, feeling a warmth that can never be replaced. "Give Dad a hug from me," I choke out before gathering the strength to turn around with an ache in my heart that will never subside. As I walk out of the room, I acknowledge; grief is the loudest silence I've ever heard, and I fucking hate it.





## AMANDA

My body is still, my dark eyes standing out against my pale complexion as I glare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. A single tear runs down my face, reflecting the relentless replay of yesterday's events inside my head.

Brian's disheartened expression and his suggestion for taking time apart is reverberating, mocking me, like a tragic omen. I told him "I love you" for the first time in my life, only he turned away, as if nothing had been said at all. Fear surges through my veins as I contemplate the possibility of losing him.

No. No space. No separation. All I want is him. I need us. But...

The sound of buzzing startles me, forcing me to turn away from the mirror. I take a deep breath before picking it up when I recognize the caller ID on the screen. "Good morning, Cole," I answer.

"Amanda." His tone is dark and foreboding, and it makes my stomach drop.

"What's wrong?" I ask, though I'm almost certain of what he'll say.

"It's Brian," he says, his words low and heavy.

I clench my eyes shut and an image of Brian lying in the hospital shimmers before me.

He must sense my dread and adds, "No, Amanda, he's okay. But..."

My heart races as he hesitates, so I jump in.

"Cole, what—"

As if my voice jolted him into speaking, he interjects. "It's his mom... she... she died." His voice cracks and I gasp in horror.

My hand clutches the vanity as I'm unable to form words, while Cole

continues speaking into the receiver. “Brian called me a while ago with the news. I’m with him at the hospital.”

My brain is spinning with questions like *When? Why? How?* But instead of asking, I say, “I’m on my way,” while running out of the bathroom and down the stairs.

“You’ll find us in the restaurant of the hospital.”

The moment Cole hangs up, autopilot takes over as my only thought is now focused on Brian and getting to him as soon as possible.

The faint clinking of silverware and murmurs of conversation fill the air as I make my way into the restaurant. My gaze sweeps through the room until it lands on them. My heart withers with pain at the sight of a broken Brian, his blank stare fixed outside as I approach the table.

Nick and Cole sit with him. Both men have pained expressions on their faces as they look up at me. Cole gets up and sits next to Nick on the other side of the table while I take a seat next to Brian, who’s still looking outside.

“Brian?” I say, with my gaze fixed on the man I love with every fiber of my being.

He turns and my heart sinks in my chest as he speaks with a hoarse voice while his stare is vacant.

“She left me.”

My lips tremble when seeing a tear slipping out of the corner of his eyes. I pull him in for a hug, and he lets me. I’ve never had to deal with death before. So witnessing the man you love carrying such grief and suffering is shattering.

*How can life be so cruel? One moment life is normal, and the next, you’re thrown into a pitch-black place that causes your soul to scream for mercy. I want to shout at the universe for doing what it did. Why does there have to be pain in the world? Why do we lose people we love?* I hate these helpless feelings.

After a while, he pulls back, and I ask, “How did this happen?”

He stares down while answering, “She fell. Olga found her at the bottom of the stairs, lying in a pool of blood when she came over for coffee. The fall caused severe brain swelling and... she didn’t make it.”

Questions start to race through my mind as he goes back to staring out the window.

*How long after he walked away in the park did this happen? Why did he call Cole and not me? Does he even want me here right now?* No, don’t think

about that. I push away the thought that he hasn't called me first—that isn't important now. What is important is being there for Brian and helping him through this unbearable grief that's consuming his heart.

As Brian takes a sip of his coffee, I ask, "Is there anything we can do?"

"You can't do shit. She's dead," he says, his voice stoic.

"We're here for you, Fox," Cole says, leaning in to place a hand on his forearm.

He makes eye contact with both of them before returning to stare at the heavy rain ticking on the glass. "Nick, can you call Six-Pack and inform Darius? Tell him I'll try to come by tomorrow."

"Sure, no problem. Why don't we bring you home so you can rest? You've been through enough," my brother says.

Brian stands. "I got to piss first."

When he's out of sight, I look at Cole, the only person here with personal experience when it comes to losing a parent.

"How can we help him?"

Cole looks at me and Nick, his eyes warm but firm. "It's going to be a hard road for him." He lets out a deep sigh. "All we can do is support him as he grieves. Be there if he wants to talk or just listen when he needs to vent and get stuff off his chest. Which I hope he does."

I nod, wiping another tear from my cheek.

"And of course, always remind him how much you care about him," Cole adds with a gentle smile. "He needs us more than ever right now."

My heart pounds faster and my breathing quickens, questioning if Brian wants me to care for him after he asked me for space and time alone. But that was before this happened. Right now, he needs all the support and love to get through this.

Minutes go by, with no sign of Brian returning. A rumbling thunder echoes through the air when Cole curses before pointing outside. As soon as I see what he sees, I take off, nearly tripping over my own two feet to get outside. Cold rain hits my skin while lightning streaks across the sky, followed by an ear-splitting roar of thunder. I find Brian standing in the center of the lot, still like a statue. The rain cascading down from the tumultuous sky above like a curtain of tears, saturating every inch of his clothing. Once before him, I reach out to grasp his hand. He raises his head and looks at me with such anguish and sorrow, my heart squeezes in pain. If only I had a magic wand to make it all go away.

“She’s gone,” he whispers in a broken voice.

His eyes disconnect, and I tighten the grip on his hand. “Come, you’re going to get sick if you stay here. Let me drive you home.”

“I came in my own car,” he whispers.

I blink for a moment, knowing he’s not allowed to drive yet. But hell, I would have done the same in his case. When he doesn’t move, I gently dig out the car keys from his pocket, and when I move, he follows and gets into the car. The guys watch from a distance, and I gesture to them that I’ll call them. I’ll pick up my own car later.

Once home, I take him to his bedroom, where I grab dry clothes from his closet and place them on the bed. “Here, change into this.”

Like an obedient robot, he undresses, and once in a new set, he plumps down on the end of his bed. I quickly switch my outfit, and when I’m done, he asks, “Can you call Olga and tell her she...” He hands me his phone.

“She’s in my phonebook list. I want to be alone for a while,” he says, staring into nothingness.

“Sure.” I take the device and walk to the kitchen. I let out a deep sigh when I sit at the table. “Okay, let’s do this.”

The next half hour is spent talking to Olga, who came over when I called. She’s shocked and cries when I tell her what happened. The moment she leaves, my phone rings. Seeing it’s my mom, I answer.

“Amanda, are you at Brian’s?” she asks.

The lump in my throat reappears, but I manage to squeeze out a yes. A sudden knock on the window by the front door makes me glance up.

“Ah, just a second, Mom. Someone’s at the door.”

I hurry to open it and get greeted by a pair of caring eyes. I bite my lip, withholding myself from crying as my mom strides in, enveloping me in a hug before leading me to the kitchen and helping me sit down.

“Oh, honey...” she whispers, cupping my face in her hands and wiping the disobedient tears from my cheeks.

“She died, Mom. And Brian—he’s...” I muffle a sob with my hands and struggle to stay composed.

My mom sits down next to me and takes hold of my hands. This warm gesture calms my powerful emotions.

“He’s devastated and I don’t know how to ease his pain, Mom.”

“The only thing you can do, my sweet Amanda,” she says in a soothing tone, “is to be there for him. Stand by his side as he mourns. You can’t fix his

grief for him; he needs to go through it in his own way.”

I want to confide in her about what happened between us in the park. But I keep it to myself. This is not the time or place to talk about my own insecurities. Right now, being here for him is key.

We both look up when Brian enters the kitchen. My heart is pounding when he doesn't turn to either of us until my mom walks his way. She doesn't say anything; she just offers her hand to him. I'm overwhelmed with emotion when he rests his hand in hers.

“I need to make sure that she gets placed with my father's ashes. If I don't... I'll disappoint her.”

My mom caresses the back of his hand. “Oh, sweetheart... I promise we'll help you every step of the way. But let me tell you one thing, and your mother would validate it when I say that a mother's love for her child is unconditional and everlasting.”

He breathes in a shaky breath and thanks her for her words when his stomach growls.

“That's a clear sign that you need food,” my mom says with a smile.

“I know, but I just don't feel like eating.”

My mom cuts Brian off before he can continue. “I understand how you feel, but you should eat something anyway. Your body needs strength.”

He nods mechanically, not meeting my eyes as he hovers by the door. “I'll be in my office,” he mumbles brokenly, “calling the funeral home for an appointment.”

The magnitude of this death slams into me like a freight train, shaking me to my core. Even though Vera wasn't a part of my family, her passing hits me hard. My heart tightens with icy fear. *How would I ever survive if something happened to Brian?* I force myself to keep standing and focus on another worry. *How will Brian be able to go on without his parents?*



## BRIAN

I glance at the coffin with a giant bouquet of camellias—her favorites—standing three feet away. The woman doing the eulogy tells the guests the story of who Vera Geraldine Fox was while I stare at the picture placed next to the flowers. My soul aches to its depths as it's stuck in this perpetual state of despair. These past five days have been a torment to me; the process of interacting with the funeral director was endless. Questions like whether to cremate or bury my mother? Where should the service be conducted? What time should it start? How many cars do I need? Pine or oak coffin with chrome handles or gilded ones? Live music or taped music playing at the funeral service? Will anyone be viewing her body in its casket before burial? Do I want my mother to wear makeup for her final viewing? For goodness' sake! How can you possibly even think about these things when it feels like everything has come to an end and I'm still stuck reliving the moment she left this world. Her faint smile plays over and over in my mind while her flatline echoes in my ears.

*How did my mom manage this all with my dad?*

In my case, Nick and Cole kept Six-Pack running, while Alisha, Emma, and Bella came to help Amanda and me with the arrangements for the funeral. Amanda has stayed close by me without fail, attempting to lessen my immensity of grief; yet I'm still emotionless after days of agony. I've trapped my emotions because if they are released, it won't just be me who's hurt.

The sound of Amanda's gentle voice rouses me from my trance, and I turn to meet her gaze.

“Brian? It's your turn to speak.”



I nod, and after a long sigh, I rise and grab the microphone, standing next to my mom's coffin. "Thank you all for being here," I begin, my eyes sweeping the room and taking in the large crowd who have come to pay their respects to my mom. I'm not surprised; she was the kindest person on the planet, maybe even in the universe. I focus on her coffin as the stares of the crowd become unbearable.

"Dad used to call you Wonder Woman in a five-foot human body. He said you were a vibrant, unselfish, patient, heartwarming angel walking this earth. And I agree. You, Mom, were the most amazing woman I've ever got the honor to meet and love. You made an effort to connect with everyone you met and you always saw the best in every person. Your warm smile and unconditional devotion made me who I am today."

I glide a hand through my hair. "You and Dad would often tell me, 'Can't never did anything for anyone.' You were supportive of my dreams and ambitions, and together we had great conversations and brainstorm sessions when I was setting up Six-Pack. Whenever I encountered an obstacle, you said to me, 'Brian, when life gets difficult, persist and show the world your best self.'"

My fingertips trace the rough wood of the coffin beneath them. No matter how many days have gone by, this still feels like a dream, a bad one.

"You also taught me to be candidly honest. So here is my plain truth: I fucking hate the fact that you're dead, Mom. How will I cope without your weekly phone calls, wherein we talk about nothing and everything? How am I supposed to go without your wise advice and respectful ways of setting me straight when you think I'm acting like a fool?" My throat constricts as my chest tightens. "I don't want to learn how to continue without you. I don't want to miss you cupping my face and kissing me on my cheek the second I walk into your house, even though I hated it when I was a teenager." A faint smile glides over my face as my heart fills with nostalgia. "But I guess this is the universe being a bitch by throwing another bomb and demolishing my life when it finally made sense. The only silver lining to your passing is that you're back with Dad—the love of your life. "

I gaze into her blue eyes in the framed picture and sigh. "Thank you both for being the best mom a kid could have asked for. I am going to miss you so much."

My chest rises and falls with a powerful wave of emotion that threatens to swallow me whole as I return the microphone and walk back to my seat.

Every memory of my parents, no matter how good or bad, feels like needles tearing into my soul. My emotions are not like a delicate jasmine flower but like my heart, a live grenade, ready to lose its safety pin and explode.

After the service, we arrive at Six-Pack, where Olga and the other members of 'the lonely women's club' have laid out an array of refreshments. I dutifully greet every single person who comes to speak with me, each handshake a reminder of the harsh truth. When the last person leaves, I flee to my office and lock the door behind me. Usually, I love the silence in my office, but now it amplifies my repressed emotions as they reverberate in my head like a discordant symphony I cannot escape. I sink into my leather armchair, feeling like a pressure cooker about to burst.

"Brian?" Amanda's voice calls out. "Are you here?"

The worry in her voice is fuel to my troubled mind.

"I need to be alone for a while."

"O-okay." Her footsteps disappear, and I push my chair back to the cabinet behind me.

A fair amount of amber liquid fills my tumbler, and five seconds later, I stare at the empty glass while enjoying the burn. I fill my next cup and down it like a professional.

After my fifth or sixth drink, or maybe more, the nagging voices inside of my head blur into the background, but of course, my fucked-up brain picks up the slack by tormenting me by playing back the memories of the doctor's appointment and Amanda's tears before I walked away from her in the park.

My sweet, perfect goddess deserves better than a kid with a fucked-up heart like mine. She will hate me if that happens. As much as I love her, I can't have her.

Resting my head on my desk after I lay my arms on its surface to use them as a pillow, I let out a heavy puff of air. *Why can't the pain stop?*

Hoping it will help, I close my eyes, but as soon as my eyelids meet, I become a prisoner of my mind, as it tortures me by showing a slideshow of disturbing, painful mental pictures of my dead parents. Then it strikes me with an image of Amanda looking at me with tears running down and her voice echoing as she says, "It's all your fault. You killed our child."

A loud knock, followed by a distinct voice, pulls me out of my mental confinement for a moment. "Brian, come on, open the door," Cole says.

I stay silent, looking at the door.

“Come on, show Amanda that you’re okay,” Nick demands. He knows she’s my weak spot. I exhale a deep breath and spin my chair back, the loud thud of it crashing against the cabinet reverberating through the room. A moment later, a shrill clang echoes out as an empty bottle shatters on the ground.

“Brian?” Amanda’s voice quivers with worry.

“Go home. I-I’m fine,” I mumble, resting my head on the desk again. Moments later, I hear a key jiggle in the lock, then footsteps racing toward me.

“Brian?” Amanda’s trembling voice questions.

“Go home,” I mumble, not lifting my head.

Amanda steps closer, picking up my tumbler from the side of the desk. “How many did you have?”

“Not enough,” I grumble, pounding my fist on my head. “All I want is quiet in here.”

I try to get up, but my balance fails me and I grasp at the side of my desk to keep from tumbling onto the ground.

Nick’s hand catches me on my shoulder. “Hey, easy, buddy. It’s going to be okay.”

I jerk away, shooting him a glare. “Pff... Fucking bullshit, golden boy. You have no idea what it’s like to be me. Your life might be a fairy tale, but mine isn’t and never will be.”

“Fox,” Cole warns with a sharp look. “We know you’re hurting, but there’s no need to take it out on us.”

I return the scowl. “I’m speaking the truth, as my mom told me to do.”

“Brian, you have me,” Amanda says.

I turn my head as her soft hand touches my arm, and when I meet those beautiful brown eyes filled with worry, the Pandora’s Box of demons that I kept hidden bursts open. Still looking into her eyes, I open my mouth and let the venomous words flow out. “No, I don’t,” I say coldly. “Our story ends here. The one that never should have started in the first place.”

Her eyes glisten with tears as she shakes her head in denial.

Nick steps between us and grips my upper arm tightly. “Brian, enough. Stop.”

I jerk my arm away and point a finger at him. “Oh, butt out. I’m just telling your sister what’s what.”

Cole chimes in with a low rumble, “Brian, cut it out. You’re drunk and

talking shit.”

My jaw clenches tight before I snap back at him. “I’m not talking shit, Bulldozer, just stating the goddamn ugly truth.”

My eyes slide to the male version of the Brown eyes. “Your sister wants babies,” I slur. “But I do not.”

Nick lets go of me and walks to his upset sister, who’s wiping tears from her cheeks while standing a few feet away from me. I focus my attention back on my goddess, ignoring the misery in her eyes.

“I had time to think and I’ve got my final answer on the kids topic. Which is hell no. You’ll need to find yourself another sperm donor because you will not get a baby from me, Amanda.”

“That’s enough, Brian,” Cole says as his hand lands on my shoulder. Ignoring him and the fact Amanda’s lips quiver, I press on. “I don’t want to adopt and I certainly don’t want kids of my own because my swimmers will create babies with messed-up hearts. We should count ourselves lucky we didn’t have an accident, otherwise you could be pregnant now, carrying a misfit child of mine that we’d have to abort.”

Her palm smacks my cheek, the sudden sting bringing a brief respite to the oppressive sadness inside.

I let out a dark chuckle. “A typical girl’s punch.”

Before I can process what happens next, a force like a brick slams into my face and sends me sprawling. Ouch.

“How can you fucking say that?” Nick roars while Amanda’s cry pierces the air.

“No—Nick!” she pleads.

Through my blurred vision, I see him lunge forward, but Cole steps in, holding him back. “Nick. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

I look at Amanda and lock eyes with her. “Oh, I meant every word,” I say, knowing this will be the final nail in the coffin. “We’re over. Thanks for the fucks, sweetheart, but this man needs more than one boring Brownie for the rest of his life.”

Nick launches himself at me, but with Cole’s large frame in between, he doesn’t stand a chance. “You fucking asshole,” Nick shouts. “You said you wouldn’t hurt her. You—”

“Nick, take Amanda and the girls home now. I’ll take care of him.”

Nick reluctantly takes Amanda away, tears streaming down her face as she whispers my name. With a heavy heart, I drop my head back onto the

cold floor and close my eyes.

Time passes and all I can listen to is my uneven breathing.

“Here, take this.”

I peek through my lashes and grab the cloth in front of me. A hiss leaves my lips when I press it against my cheek and eye.

“Come on.”

I stare at Cole’s outreaching hand.

“You don’t—”

“Don’t make me say it twice, Fox.”

The warning in his voice, combined with the threatening glare, makes me take his hand and let him help me up.

A spiral of dizziness hits me as I stand on my feet again. Cole notices and grabs my shoulders to steady me. I mumble a thank you when it subsides. When we move out of my office, Darius comes our way.

When he sees my fucked-up face and my furrowed brows, he freezes and says, “I’ll finish and lock up here.”

I nod, and Cole thanks him and says to my precious employee that he’ll be in touch later today. Darius nods. Cole helps my drunk ass into his car. As soon as he drives off, I lean my head against the cool glass and close my tired eyelids, succumbing to the darkness within every part of me.

MY LIDS STRUGGLE TO RISE, but when they do, a searing pain stabs through my skull as the morning sun assaults my senses. I clench my fist in agony, biting back a groan. *Fuck.*

“Take these—they will help,” Cole says, placing two Tylenol tablets on the bedside stand. “I’m making coffee.” He exits without another word, leaving me to my own thoughts.

As I push myself up to lean against the headboard, memories from last night come crashing back like shrapnel from an explosive. The images of Amanda’s cries and tear-streaked face carve shame into my heart. Taking the pills, I shuffle to the bathroom mirror, knowing what awaits me there will reflect the inner turmoil that roils within me.

The painful swelling in my eye and the tenderness of my cheekbone capture my attention in the mirror. I can feel Nick’s punch vibrating through me again, each cell reverberating with its force. Sighing, I probe the tightness of my flesh, acknowledging that I deserved it.

My heavy gaze drops and lands on the bottle of Amanda's perfume resting on the sink. I pick it up and inhale deeply. The scent is like a soothing elixir to my wounded soul—something I lack the strength to refuse, though I'm undeserving of such comfort. After placing it back on the countertop, I dry-swallow two pills with a mouthful of water before changing into comfortable sweatpants and a tee. Taking one final look at my reflection, I trudge downstairs.

I sit down at the table, watching Cole's silhouette. He swivels round, eyes bloodshot and hair frazzled from lack of sleep.

"How long have you been here?" I ask.

He takes a sip of his coffee before answering, "All night."

"Why?"

"Because it's dangerous for people with your condition to binge drink—It doesn't matter how much my pregnant wife misses me. I ain't leaving your ass alone."

My stomach churns. "How'd you know about that?"

"C'mon, Brian," he says in a no-nonsense tone. "I did my research after you told us you had Brugada."

Shame scorches my cheeks and I swallow hard.

Cole leans closer and booms, "Get off this suicide train you're riding before it's too late."

I hang my head, unable to meet his gaze. "I'm not—"

"Yes, you are," he interrupts. His voice resonates like thunder. "I understand that it's natural to grieve but don't take out your pain on those who love you—especially Amanda."

A tsunami of guilt washes over me at the sound of her name. I clench my jaw and slam my hand on the table. "I did her a favor by ending it, Walker. She wants a kid, and I can't give her that."

"Why not?"

The memory of my father's dead face appears. I throw my coffee cup through the air, and it smashes into pieces against the wall.

"My child has a fucking fifty percent chance of being a crippled piece of shit like me," I hiss. "Can you imagine how devastating it would be if we found our son or daughter lying dead in bed one morning? Or what trauma I'm giving my kid when it sees me lying in bed dead. I've seen it and it's not a pretty sight." Tears fill my eyes at the memory.

Cole swallows.

“Amanda will hate me and be heartbroken for the rest of her life if that happens. I can’t take that chance. She is better off with another man.”

I pace back and forth, trying to lessen the emotions burning through my body.

“You could have explained it to her in a decent way. Instead, you lost one of your best friends by hurting his sister and ending it the way you did, Brian.”

I swallow down the emotions that want to spill out.

A beep sounds, and Cole curses as he looks at his phone screen.

“Who is that?” I ask.

“Alisha. She has a checkup in an hour.”

“Then what are you doing here? You’ve babysat long enough. I’m up, alive, and walking.”

The deep wrinkle set between his eyes makes me grin. “Go, Bulldozer.”

He gets up and grabs his coat from the back end of the stool, sighing. “If you need anything, call me, Fox. I mean it.”

I roll my eyes. “My headache and I will be dandy.”

A slight grin appears on his lips.

“I’ll call you later,” he says, walking to the door.

“Yeah, yeah.” I stop when Cole turns and pierces me with his gaze as he is midway through the driveway.

“I’m here for you, my friend.”

A nod is all I can give as emotions rise when hearing him call me friend. He had every reason to abandon me after the way I acted, yet he didn’t

Once Cole is gone, I get back in the kitchen and throw the pieces of the broken cup in the bin. As I watch the fragments fall, I conclude that my life is nothing but a dark, empty void without a future. I wander through the hollow house while a truckload of emotions keep pestering me. Stopping in my bedroom, my eyes meet the picture of my parents, then the set of black pumps sitting by the bed, and I turn into a raging tornado.

Shoes fly, pictures crash against the wall, and like a madman, I tear the TV from the wall and let it crash on the ground. Tears hot like lava flow until my legs cave. With big heaves, I let the build-up waves of pure agony tear through my soul. I roll onto my back and scream from my core when I realize I’ve lost everything that’s worth living for.





# BRIAN

## 4 WEEKS LATER

A STARK CONTRAST of pleasure and pain pulses through me as I stand in the middle of the overcrowded club. The music blares, overlaid with laughter, as vibrant colors blur together to create a single vibrant energy engulfing everyone here. Yet, I remain an outsider, my feet rooted to the same spot for eternity, unable to move or relate to their joy. The only thing I can feel is the intense loneliness pressing against my chest.

My stare flits around the room, and memories burst to life. Everywhere I look, something reminds me of Amanda—the door she walked through so many times; in my office, the fragrance of her perfume still lingers, reverberating with the noise of all our laughter and passionate lovemaking.

I can't help but be plagued by what-ifs. *What if I could have just been her friend? What if I had resisted temptation? If only my decisions had differed and my convictions been stronger, would we be here now?* Blame creeps up, as I can't deny it's been my own selfish choices that led us here.

I thought working tonight would be a distraction from all these thoughts, a way to forget for a moment by focusing on work. But it only serves to amplify how alone I feel inside. Everyone around me is here for a purpose, but I don't have one. I've lost it. I've lost my mom, the woman I love, and with that one of my best friends.

I turn away and walk back toward the bar, lost in my own thoughts. A tap on my shoulder makes me turn around and see Darius. He looks at me with a

knowing look in his eyes, and I know he can sense my sadness.

“Hey,” he says. “You okay?”

I shake my head and look away. He sighs and looks around the club before turning back to me. “Go home. I’ll close up with a few others. You’ve done enough for today. Get some rest,” he says, putting his hand on my shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

I nod and give him a weak smile. “Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, boss,” he says before clapping me on the back and walking away.

THE SUN’S rays stream through the window, spilling warmth across my skin and dragging me from my sleep with a groan. I roll onto my back and take in the chaotic state of my bedroom. Clothes haphazardly all over the floor, along with empty take-out boxes and other assorted items. The television is still lying on its side, broken screen facing up to me.

A heavy sigh leaves my lips as I think about the day ahead of me. Another day filled with work. Memories of Amanda fill me with longing and sadness. A pang of guilt stabs at my heart thinking back to the night I pushed her out of my life.

I force myself upright and swing my legs off the bed and stretch out my tired limbs. Taking a deep breath, I walk over to the closet and pull out some fresh clothing to change into before heading down to start my day.

My hands claw at my shirt, tugging it over my head with a desperate need to forget, but everywhere I turn, the ghost of my lost love permeates the atmosphere, taunting me with memories and mocking me with her absence. Inevitably, my mind turns to my mom, her death so sudden and unjust that I’m forced to grapple with a reality incomprehensible in its cruelty. The memory of her opening her eyes, and the spark of hope that filled me up, only to be snuffed out a second later when her eyes closed and her heart stopped, keeps swirling around in my head.

*Why is life so cruel? Why do the people I love die? What have I done to deserve this?* My thoughts wander through each memory, every moment with my mom and dad forever imprinted on my mind. My sentiment drifts back to my beautiful Brownie. No, she’s not mine anymore. I know ending it was the right decision, for a life with me would never allow her motherhood. The thought of creating a child and risking them to live and possibly die is more

than I can bear. *How can any man live with that kind of burden?*

Okay, time to stop my marathon thoughts and try to do something productive before heading to Six-Pack. My eyes fall on my TV and I decide it's time to purchase a new television and use it to fill my endless restlessness with Netflix binges.

IT'S ALMOST noon when I pull up to the barista shop to grab an espresso. As I get in line outside the store, my eyes flick across my phone's messages—but something in the building's corner next to this one catches my attention and holds it there. A young boy stands alone, his hand running through his jet-black hair like a comb as he anxiously scans his surroundings. When our eyes meet, he abruptly throws his gaze away, hiding his trembling fingers in his coat pockets. He soon resumes his searching movements, but when he doesn't find what he was searching for, the trembling of his bottom lip betrays his disappointment. Without a second thought, I step away from the queue and approach him.

"Hi," I greet in a gentle tone.

He looks up.

"Are you lost?"

He nods but says nothing.

"Who did you lose?" I inquire further.

"My parents and my little sister," he whispers.

"Where did you last see them?"

He shrugs and looks around again.

"Do you remember where you were when you lost them?"

"In a boring store."

I chuckle, then ask, "Do you know the name of the shop? Maybe we could go there?"

"My mom and dad told me never to go anywhere with a stranger," he mumbles.

I rub the back of my neck. "Well, they're right. You shouldn't." I contemplate what to do next. "How about if I stay here until they come to find you?"

He nods, his eyes still searching the crowd.

"I'm Brian, by the way. Want to tell me yours?"

"Nathan," he almost whispers, still focused on the mass of shoppers in

front of us.

“Nice to meet you, Nathan.”

Minutes drift by, and we both observe the throng of people when a man suddenly cries out the boy’s name. Nathan’s eyes widen seeing the man with a striking resemblance stride toward us. He takes Nathan in his arms and embraces him tightly. The man crouches and seizes the child’s shoulders.

“What was going through your head, Nathan? Mom asked you to wait at the entrance of the store.” His gaze shoots up to me; I hold up my palms.

“No bad intentions here. I was waiting in line at the coffee shop when I noticed him standing here alone. He told me he had lost you all, so I offered to help look for you, but he mentioned his parents had said never to leave with strangers.”

The father grins warmly at his son.

“So instead, I waited with him until you showed up.”

The man stands and extends his hand. “Thank you.”

I grip it and reply, “No problem.”

“Nathan!” A lady pushing a stroller runs over and clutches the boy in her arms, murmuring something into his ear before kissing him on top of his head. When she smooths her sleek straight ebony locks off her forehead as she rises straight again, I recognize her.

“Akito?”

The nurse who cared for me following my surgery stares in surprise. “Brian. What are you doing here?”

“This man found Nathan and stayed with him while he waited for us to find him,” her husband explains.

“Oh, thank you so much. This young man can be so impatient,” she says, stroking her son’s cheek.

My mind reminds me of what she had told me about her partner having Brugada. I glance at the two children and blurt out. “You have kids?”

The man frowns, but Akito seems to understand my particular comment. She smiles and looks at her husband. “This is Brian. He’s the patient I told you about. He was on my floor a few months ago. He’s got Brugada and received an ICD like you.”

The man’s eyebrows rise up and his lips curve into a smirk. “Brugada can be a real pain in the ass,” he declares.

I snort. “Yeah, excellent description.”

The two of us let out a chuckle, and I’m surprised to connect with

someone I hardly know.

“Let me treat you to something from the barista bar,” Akito offers, gesturing toward the line of people waiting for their orders.

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that,” I reply.

“It’s the least we can do,” the boy’s father interjects, nodding at his son as he speaks.

Nathan frowns, unhappy with his father’s suggestion.

“None of that now,” he chides. “You’ve chosen to disobey our order and walk away, so you’ll thank Brian accordingly by getting him a drink.”

“But, Dad—”

“No Dad-ing me, Nathan.”

Akito rests her hand on her son’s shoulder. “Let’s go.”

The man chuckles as his wife leads their son toward the long line for service.

The man smiles, then looks at me and introduces himself. “I’m Niko. What about your Brugada? Any issues?”

“One shock, after I earned this medical device,” I say, tapping my chest.

Niko nods. “Did you know you had it?”

“Yeah, my dad died from it when I was a teenager. So when they found out what caused it, they tested me. You?”

“Oh, I didn’t know I had it until I got a fever and had an attack while watching TV. It was a surprise. But with the help of my doctor, they figured it out. They did a generic screening and saw I had the gene. Then I got another severe attack, and they put in an ICD.”

I take a deep breath before asking my burning question. “How old are your kids?”

“This one,” he says, pointing to the stroller, “is Hana. She’s two and a half years old, and Nathan is seven.”

My vision goes from the little girl asleep in the stroller to Nathan, who is smiling from ear to ear at something his mom said.

“Do you have children?”

I shake my head in response while still staring at Nathan. One single thought teases the edge of my mind until the man speaks again and answers it. “Nathan inherited the gene.”

My heartbeat thumps in my ears as I gaze at the now loud, laughing young boy.

“Thankfully, he’s healthy so far; no symptoms.”

I turn my attention to Niko. “Aren’t you scared as heck he’ll develop any?”

He nods solemnly, his brows knitted together.

“Of course. Any parent would be scared. But being a parent is about learning to accept the possibility of your kids getting hurt or sick one day. We just have to make the best of every day we have together.”

He pauses for a moment before continuing, “Brugada isn’t necessarily a death sentence; it can make life challenging, but we are both alive and healthy. Nathan is a happy boy living life to its fullest.” He looks away in thought, then back at me again. “Akito and I treat him no differently than anyone else, but we remain aware of any potential danger. For example, we always carry Tylenol, knowing a fever can trigger Brugada symptoms. Initially, I was devastated when I found out he had the gene,” Niko admits. “But I reminded myself of the fact that I grew up symptom-free and without any health issues. Just because I have an ICD doesn’t mean he will need one in the future; many people with this condition are able to live healthy lives with medication and some are simply carriers.”

With a cup in his hand, Nathan comes our way, followed by his mom. He stops before me and offers me the drink. “Thank you for your help.”

My lips curl, and I take the mug from him. “No problem. Just make sure you think twice before you walk off next time.”

His cheeks color and Niko smiles.

“Daddy?” a soft voice mumbles. I glance at the little girl rubbing her sleepy eyes. Niko squats, and after removing her safety belt, he picks her up and kisses her chubby cheek.

“Hey, sweetie.”

The little girl hides her face in her dad’s neck when she sees me.

Akito chuckles. “She’s a real daddy’s girl.”

“Mom, I’m hungry,” Nathan says, rubbing his stomach.

“That is our cue to go. Thanks again, Brian. Hope you had a pleasant conversation with my husband,” she says with a knowing smile.

Niko nods. “Yeah, we did.” He grabs a card from his pocket with his other hand and holds it out to me. “Call me if you want to talk.”

“I take it. Thanks,” I say, shaking his hand.

Akito takes the stroller, and as a family, they disappear into the mass of shopping people. I take a sip of my drink and ponder the situation at hand. My thoughts swirl around one point in particular: They have a young son

with the Brugada gene and a daughter who does not, yet both are happy and content. This realization eases the oppressive darkness of my mind, which has been my sole companion these past weeks. Then suddenly, the familiar smell of my mother's perfume fills the air around me like a gentle embrace, and a smile finds its way onto my face for the first time in what feels like eternity.





## AMANDA

The gentle morning light washes over me and I sigh as I gaze at the Italian sunrise.

“No other sight can compare to the beauty of Mother Nature.”

I turn and smile at Aris, the housekeeper, before refocusing my gaze on the spectacular sight before me. “Yes, it’s a stunning display,” I say in admiration as I take it all in.

Aris stops next to me, and a few minutes pass before he speaks while looking over the blue water. “Something is weighing heavily on your mind. Am I right?”

I glance sideways and meet his gentle hazelnut-colored eyes inspecting me. Not able to speak, I nod. He lays his warm hand on my shoulder. “Just remember that this moment is the only one we truly have for sure. Breathe and let go.”

“Those are wise words, Aris.”

“Oprah’s wisdom, not mine.” He grins before holding up a bag. “I arranged breakfast for you. Would you like to eat outside on the terrace?”

“Yes, that would be lovely,” I say.

He nods and as he walks back toward the entrance of this impressive villa, my focus goes back to the clear water stretching out to the horizon. This place is a stunning oasis. But how can I enjoy it when my heart is trying to make its way back from the gloomy gutter of sadness?

I clutch my arms around myself as I stare off into nothingness. Four weeks have passed since Vera’s funeral, but the agonizing pain of Brian’s departure lingers in my heart with a searing intensity. His final words

continue to ring through my mind like an ever-present echo, taunting me with their cruel finality.

Sleep has become a rare companion, refusing to come easily and preferring to make its appearance only when I've cried myself into exhausted oblivion. My family and friends try their best to be encouraging, but the anguish remains; a deep chasm that cannot be filled no matter how hard they try. One night, engulfed in grief, I crouched down in the bathroom corner and feared the river of agony would undo me.

That's when Nick showed up, a concerned expression on his face. I can only imagine what thoughts rushed through his head the moment he found me huddled up on the bathroom floor wearing nothing but a towel, tears streaming down my face. He said nothing as he walked forward and enveloped me in his warm embrace. No questions or judgment, only love and him pledging his determination to help me.

He said he could arrange for me to go somewhere, to heal my broken heart, but I immediately told him I couldn't leave my store unattended. He stopped me mid-sentence, offering up an option I hadn't considered: Ask a business friend who could take care of Venus while I took time for myself.

And now, I'm here, on this beautiful island. We've been here for a week. Seven days where my mind has had a hard time enjoying this as it keeps drifting to one specific man every chance it gets. My eyes dart to my phone in my hand. *Should I try to call him? See how he is doing?*

Instead of calling him, I video dial another number. Seconds later, Bella's face pops up on the screen.

"I was just thinking about you. How are you?" she asks.

I blurt out the truth, "I want to call him."

"Don't do it," Bella says, pointing a brush that she's holding to the camera. "Give him the room to mourn, Amanda."

"But..." I let out a wobbly sigh as tears begin to build.

"Oh, sweetie," she says in a gentle, soothing tone. "Cole is watching out for him. Instead of worrying about him, focus on healing yourself."

I release a deep breath, knowing she is right.

"I'm making something for you," Bella says with an enthralling twinkle in her eye. I know she's using this to lift my mood, and bless her, it's kind of working.

"Are you making a painting for me?"

When she nods, I ask, "Can I see it?" while trying my best to peer past

her, even though I know that's impossible on a video call.

She chuckles as she sees me attempting to look beyond her.

"It's not ready yet. But I promise it will be worth the wait, and I think it would look amazing in Venus."

"Oh, I love that idea. Then every customer can see what a talented artist you are."

She shrugs. "I could use the promotion," she whispers under her breath, but I catch it anyway.

"What do you mean, 'you could use it?' What's going on, Bella?"

For a second, Bella's eyes wander off and I sense worry in her features, but it quickly dissipates when she looks back at me and says in a reassuring tone, "It's nothing." She offers me a warm smile.

"You sure?"

Her red hair skims her cheeks as she nods.

From the corner of my eyes, I see Aris gesturing that breakfast is ready.

"I need to go, Bells."

"Okay. Enjoy your stay. And remember, you're there to take care of you, so please do so."

"Thanks for the reminder. Give the girls a kiss from me."

"I will. And when you're back, we'll schedule a girls' night."

After hanging up, I stare at the prestigious waterfront property nestled right in front of a pristine sandy beach. The plot, right on the shore, has preserved all the charm of the typical Sardinian nature, thanks to the unspoiled setting with century-old juniper trees and the modern lines of the house integrating harmoniously with the natural environment.

I walk to the set table and the housekeeper gestures to take a seat by pulling a chair back.

"Oh no, Aris. Sit down and have breakfast with me."

The man's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "But, Miss Amanda, it's my job to take care of you."

"I insist," I say with a warm smile.

His lips curl upward into a beaming grin. "You're such a friendly young woman. Too often I've come across people with their heads so high up in the clouds that they're disconnected from reality. Wealth changes people's perspectives."

"Wealth doesn't excuse bad behavior."

His smile widens. "Agreed, Miss Amanda. That's why I like to take care

of you. You expect nothing, and you've been kind-hearted from the moment we met."

He walks to the fully equipped kitchen lying inside the front door and returns, holding a tray with fresh orange juice. When he places it on the table filled with croissants, bagels, fresh grapes, strawberries, and blueberries, he takes a seat on the other side of the table. "Buon appetito."

"God, Italian sounds so much better than English," I say with a sigh and Aris laughs.

We continue talking and enjoying our delicious morning meal while Aris tells me about the island and its history. Suddenly, my phone rings. I grab it from the table and when I see who it is, I stand.

"Excuse me," I say, striding away as I answer my ringing phone.

"How are you?" Nick asks before I can greet him.

"Oh, this place is heaven on earth, Nick. Please thank Nero for letting me stay here."

My brother chuckles before letting out a relieved deep breath. I bite my lip, staying silent as I try to avoid asking what I really want to know.

But then the words come spilling out anyway. "How is he doing?"

Nick sighs. "Amanda, you—"

"I need to know how he's doing," I interrupt, running my hand through my hair. Then Cole's familiar voice comes through.

"Amanda. He's managing." Pain stabs at my core upon hearing his statement. Unable to restrain myself any longer, I take a seat on one of the lounge chairs standing on the sun terrace and press further. "Is he drinking?"

"No, not a drop," Cole reassures me. "He's even going to Six-Pack to work every day," Cole reassures me.

I huff and close my eyes against the surge of relief that floods through me.

"Promise you'll call me if anything is wrong," I say.

Nick huffs again in response, but it's Cole who answers first this time.

"I will."

"Are you eating properly?" Nick asks with concern laced in his tone this time.

I arch an eyebrow even though he can't see it and puff out a breath at his overprotectiveness. "I just finished devouring two croissants and a bagel and washed them down with fresh orange juice. Okay, Nickolas?"

Cole laughs at my words, providing some much-needed lightness to our

conversation. “Ah, there’s the Amanda Brown I know.”

I smile at his comment and turn my attention away from Nick’s grumbling. “How is Alisha doing?”

“She’s fine. She ranted about how it’s not fair she can’t fly. But after I gave her a foot massage and promised to give her one every day, she calmed down.”

“You’re a good husband, Cole.”

“And, Nick. Thank you for making this possible. I love you,” I whisper.

“Anything for you, sis.”

I take in a deep breath, letting it fill my lungs before asking, “Have you talked to Brian, Nick?”

The line falls silent and seconds stretch out like an eternity before he finally takes a breath and responds, “No.”

My heart clenches inside my chest as tears form in my eyes—memories of how close they were before my feelings for his best friend tore their friendship apart. “Nick, just because we broke up doesn’t mean that you two can’t be friends again.”

He swallows hard before a breath of air escapes him and he says, “Let’s talk about that another time. It’s time to hang up so you can take care of yourself.”

After saying goodbye, I place the phone beside me and close my eyes. Brian’s face flashes in my mind with vivid clarity; his kiss still alive on my lips, his rich smell lingers around me as if he’s sitting next to me. My heart drops when I remember how his cold words about children felt like they had sliced through my chest and dug deep into my soul. But his final “thank you for the sex” followed by those three awful words “you’re not enough” made me feel invisible, like a toy being tossed away when its fun has run out.

My eyes fly open and I take in deep gulps of air as I once again grapple with the puzzle of how to put myself back together.

I return to the table and Aris smiles.

“I’m going to miss your company when you leave here,” he says, reaching out to caress my hand. “You remind me of my late wife; she had a similarly warm personality.”

My throat tightens as I ask, “She passed away?”

His smile falters, and he looks away for a moment. “Yes,” he breathes out. “Two years ago. She was painting in the garden when she collapsed.” He pauses for a beat, as if drawing strength from within himself. “She died after

having a massive brain hemorrhage... Miss her every day, but knowing she didn't suffer and that she died doing what she loved helps ease the pain I've still got left." He lets out a long breath. "The memories of our years together are what get me through the rough days... And the painting she made that day is now hanging in my bedroom."

My throat constricts as tears sting in my eyes. "How long were you two married?" I ask.

A genuine smile spreads across the man's face. "It was an incredible forty years," he says fondly. "I met her one day when I was twenty-three. She was painting on the beach and absolutely captivated me from the moment I saw her. There was just something about her that I couldn't ignore. Then, when I stopped behind her, blocking out the sun, she shot me a glare." He chuckles. "Well, I stepped aside right away and apologized for interrupting her work. After some convincing, I managed to get her to have a drink with me and... it was like magic. We never separated after that." His eyes twinkle as he reminisces. "We understood each other so well and we never wanted to change the other person. She was my compass in life. Being around her just made me feel alive and more importantly, safe. It's really the best feeling you can experience when you find your soulmate."

He notices the tears rolling down my cheeks and Aris gives me a look of concern.

"Care to fill this old man in on what's troubling you? I might be able to help," he suggests. Without hesitation, I tell him all about what brought me here.

*"Il dolore è solo amore senza un posto dove andare."*

I glance at Aris. "What does that mean?"

He leans back in his chair and smiles. "It means; grief is just love with nowhere to go. To me, it sounds like this Brian is terrified. He witnessed twice that life can take away the people you love in a blink of an eye, and to prevent himself from more of this pain, his broken heart decided to push away the people he loves."

"But—"

Aris cuts it. "I know it makes no sense, but a heart in pain can't think rationally and acts out of pure emotion."

"Do you still love him?"

My focus goes to my hands as I answer. "Yes."

An olive skin hand touches mine and when my gaze goes up, I meet his

gentle hazelnut eyes that hold so much wisdom.

“It takes a strong heart to love after it has been hurt. And his heart needs time. So my advice, let him grieve in his own way.”

The man removes his hand and sits back in his chair. “We all want a piece of paper telling us what to do. But there is no right way to love because no relationship is the same. You and Brian are the only ones who can feel if what you have is worth fighting for or if it’s time to let go and move on.”

I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye. “Thank you.” He pours me another glass of fresh orange juice and I take a large sip, letting the taste rejuvenate me.

“What makes your heart beat faster? What do you like to do?”

“Fashion,” I answer without a doubt. I smile at the frown on his forehead. “I own a women’s clothing store back at home.”

Right away, the frown disappears and by the time he stands, his lips curve into a massive smile.

“Then I know what you need. I’m bringing you to a place you will love.”

Three hours later, after buying a few items in a drugstore, I’m roaming the racks of an exclusive clothing boutique. I’ve bought different outfits in other stores, but this place sells high deluxe pieces of fashion. A designer dress of fifteen hundred dollars is a bargain here.

My hands touch the multitude of colors and fabrics, and my heart sings as my entrepreneur’s brain spikes. Ideas come to life as I grab a few pieces to admire the lines and details.

“Can I help you, miss?”

I watch as a shop attendant stops beside me as I’m admiring a red dress. “No, thanks, I’m only browsing,” I say politely.

The clerk’s lips tighten as her gaze sweeps over my casual jeans mixed with a simple white blouse, makeup-free face, and a messy bun. The woman whispers something to her coworker in Italian while glaring. I can tell from the way the hairs stand up on my neck that they are talking about me negatively.

Suddenly, Aris, who stood by the door, walks over and stops before both women. He crosses his arms, giving them both a blank stare.

“Miss Amanda? Excuse me to interrupt,” he says, bringing his focus to me. “It seems I brought you to the wrong store. This place is clearly not up to your standards.”

The woman with Cleopatra’s hairstyle mimics Aris’s stand while sending

him a hostile glare. I hang the items I hold back into place, and without questioning, I walk to the kind housekeeper, who starts to speak when I stand by his side. His eyes focus on Cleopatra.

“I brought this lovely lady to your store, on the assumption that she would be treated with the respect every customer who walks in here deserves.”

The woman cocks a brow as Aris continues.

“You assumed that because she’s a tourist, a foreigner wearing jeans, she’s likely a potential thief? That, miss, is a big and unacceptable mistake.”

Cleopatra and her colleague cocky’s attitudes falter and their eyes widen.

“I’m taking this lovely lady somewhere else to shop. And I’ll make sure to advise the Onasis family not to shop here anymore. I’m sure they’ll go somewhere else to spend their money. Good day.”

I grin as I follow Aris out of the store. Once outside, Aris turns and gives me a guilty glance. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. The nerve of those ladies... If they were my employees, I would have fired their asses in the blink of an eye. Their behavior was disrespectful and atrocious.” I place a kiss on the Aris’s cheek. “You were my prince in there. I loathe narrow-minded women like them. She walked like she had a stick up her ass.” My attention goes to my attire. “If people can’t see past the casual outside, it’s their loss. I was tempted to spend my hard-earned money on that cute red dress. But I’d rather keep my jeans than give them a buck.”

“Let’s go home. I’ll make you a well-deserved fruit cocktail,” Aris says.

With bright smiles, we make our way back to the car.

HOURS LATER, I gape up into the night sky, transfixed by the majestic, silvery moonlight shimmering across the sea, yet I can’t enjoy it with a mind that is overcome with a whirlwind of thoughts. A few hours ago, while traveling to the city, I realized that my period should have arrived over a week ago. Initially, I tried to convince myself that it’s due to the stress I’ve had, but deep down I knew there’s a possibility that the cause could be something else. That’s what made me buy the pregnancy test earlier, but now, instead of taking it, I’m wandering along the shoreline and driving myself mad with numerous what-if questions.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to gather my thoughts. My mind races with so many questions, and the notion that I could actually



be pregnant terrifies me. *What if I am? How would I ever manage to raise a child by myself while running my business?* All my life I've dreamed of having children with someone I love, happily sharing in the joys of raising a family; but the man I thought did want them, doesn't want them now.

I walk away from the shore, my feet dragging as if weighed down by the gravity of the situation. Tears prick at my eyes as I try to make sense of everything. How am I supposed to do this all on my own? It's not just about money either; there's so much more that goes into raising a child—emotional support, guidance, and most of all unconditional love.

A feeling of hopelessness washes over me as an unfamiliar wave of loneliness engulfs me like a blanket and pulls me further into despair. *Is this really what life has in store for me? Me being a single mother—without a partner to share the joy and struggles of parenthood with?*

*Only one way to find out.*

Twenty minutes later, I'm pacing my bedroom, barefooted, anxiety prickling in my chest with each step as I grip the slim plastic stick tightly in my hand. My heart is pounding and I can feel a film of sweat on the back of my neck. It's now or never. After battling the option of throwing this out the window or facing it, I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever the digital display will show me before slowly moving my trembling fingers away from the screen. Peeking through my lashes, I watch the stick glide out of my palm and hit the floor with a light thunk. "Goddammit!" I groan at my clumsiness. As I'm about to bend down and reach for it, I spy two pink lines on the screen. My mouth gapes open and closes like a guppy.

"How..." I rub my forehead with a wavering hand. We had double protection. This has to be wrong," I exclaim, now holding up the stick. "It must be a false positive."

I plop down onto my couch and let the tears pour from my eyes. Minutes pass, and when I'm calm again, I take another deep breath before getting up and diving into the bathroom again.

Twenty minutes later, I gaze at the three sticks lying on the vanity.

"I'm pregnant," I mumble.

*What am I going to do? How am I going to tell Brian?*

My heart aches. I can't throw this emotional bomb on him while he's mourning the loss of his mom.

Suddenly, panic builds and my heart races as a craven thought pops into my head. *What if our baby has Brugada Syndrome?* My breath becomes

heavier and I place my hand on the vanity to steady myself while telling myself to breathe.

Focus on the facts: I'm pregnant. The best thing to do is go home to see a doctor so I can talk about my concerns and get answers.

After rearranging my flight back and some TV watching, I head back to my bedroom. Once in my bed, I brush my fingertips across my stomach and let the tears stream down my cheeks as I whisper, "Oh, sweet little miracle bean, if you really are here, I want you to know that I'm here no matter what."



## BRIAN

Cole's gaze locks on mine as he sits opposite me in my office. "So how are you doing?"

I lift my shoulders in a helpless shrug. "I don't know... I can't stop missing her."

His expression remains unreadable. I know he still talks to Amanda and Nick. They are still his friends.

"How is she doing?" I ask.

"Better," Cole answers, his tone even.

My body tightens as frustration rises within me. His simple response fuels the fire of my anguish.

"What do you want to do, Brian? What do you really want?" he presses further.

My throat constricts as I force out the words that have been swirling around my mind for a while. "I want to go back in time, undo what I did wrong, and get her back." I take a shaky breath. "Do you think there's a chance I can fix it?"

"Are you saying you want a second chance at being with Amanda?"

"If she'll have me," I whisper.

The silence stretches long between us as Cole takes in my words.

"But what about having children? She still wants them," he prods.

A spark of determination lights up inside me and I nod before voicing out loud what has been forming in my head since the run-in with Akito and her family. "I've been thinking. Maybe I do want a child," I say. "Do you think she's still open to that with me?"

“Only one way to find out,” he responds.

“I want to call her, but it doesn’t feel right. I need to see her.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “What’s stopping you?”

“You really think she wants to talk to me after all I’ve said and done?”

Cole shrugs, his eyes holding mine. “If it were me, and my heart was set on winning the woman I love back, I’d move mountains to get her.”

Cole stands and I follow him as he moves to the door. “Pay her a visit, my friend. Even if Amanda doesn’t want you back, she deserves an in person apology. Because you saying that she wasn’t enough for you hurt her the most.”

I nod and we walk out. When we’re near the bar, I spot Darius speaking with a woman. As soon as he notices me, she turns toward me.

“Well, you’re in for a treat,” Cole whispers, seeing who it is. “I’m out. Good luck,” he says as the woman comes our way.

Sweat covers my palms, and my heart pumps hard in my chest.

“Good morning, Brian,” Martha greets me.

“Hello, Martha. What brings you here?” I manage to ask.

The intensity of her gaze is unmistakable. “Can we go somewhere private to talk?”

I give a nod in agreement. “Sure. We can go to my office.” I look up at Darius and then back at Martha. “Please make sure we’re not disturbed.”

He nods before turning his attention back to doing inventory.

I stuff my clammy hands into the pockets of my pants as Martha follows me through the hallway. My heart races as I try to think of what she might say. The moment we enter and I slam the door shut, she takes a seat and lets her gaze drift around my office. Tentatively, I sit in my chair and entwine my fingers together in my lap.

“How are you, Brian?” she questions in an unwavering tone.

“I’m doing better day by day.”

“Good.” She mirrors my position by placing her hands on her lap.

“I like you, Brian. However, what you said to my daughter was unacceptable...” Martha pauses for a moment and examines me with a raised eyebrow before continuing. “My family doesn’t know that I’m here right now, and I’d like it to stay that way.”

Dread and fear of what’s to come course through me, but I manage to give her a nod of understanding. When she sees this, she continues with a newfound intensity in her voice. “Do you know what happened to Amanda

after the incident in this office?”

I shake my head, regretful.

Martha’s jaw tightens, her despair palpable. “Amanda just... broke,” she says, her voice a whisper, and my throat clenches at the tone. “For two weeks, Bella, Emma, Alisha, and I took shifts to be with her, making sure she ate and drank, trying to console her while she wept and lay bedridden.”

She pauses, then her voice cracks as she continues, “We thought she was doing better, but then days later, Nick showed up on our doorstep in tears. He told us he’d found Amanda curled up in a towel on her bathroom floor, completely broken.”

Every muscle in my body stiffens as the weight of this conversation settles over me. Because of my fear, I hurt Amanda and there’s no going back from that. Embarrassment floods through me and my eyes drop to my hands clenched in my lap.

I destroyed Amanda’s spirit. Just the visualization of her crying and lying in bed because of what I said and did creates a gaping wound in my chest cavity; it swallows any hint of joy I felt when I thought about going over to see her. The thudding of my heart within that ugly infected emotional wound is unbearable beyond words. *What have I done?*

“That’s why Nick sent her on a trip to that Italian island, hoping to help her get over you.” Martha pauses for a moment, as if considering her next words. “The grief of losing something you cherish is difficult to bear, yet it does not grant you permission to trample on the dreams of those who love you.”

I close my eyes and run my fingers through my now disheveled hair while a deep sigh from Martha reverberates in my ears.

“Before Amanda got on that plane, I told her that if someone you love hurts you badly, sometimes the only thing left to do is let them go, for good.”

My eyes fly open with shock as I process her words.

“From your reaction, I guess after some soul-searching, you’ve decided that you want another chance?” she inquires.

I swallow the lump in my throat and give her a barely perceptible nod.

Martha fixes me with an intensifying stare. “And what about her wish for children?”

With a voice nothing but a whisper, I say, “I want to ask her if she’s open to adopting.”

Martha’s piercing gaze holds mine as she rises. She reaches out to me, but

instead of striking me like her son did, she cups my cheek with her small hand. “All I want is for Amanda and you to be happy—together or apart,” she says. Tears well up in her eyes. “If she decides to give you another chance, don’t break her heart again. Instead, let her love you and let your arms provide the safety and security she needs. Because from a mother’s perspective—she’s quite possibly the best thing that has ever happened to you.”

She turns to leave the room after one last ominous warning, “But if you do hurt her again, run. Because Nick giving you another black eye will be nothing compared to what I’ll do to you.”

With a cheerful flourish, she adds, “Have a wonderful day, Brian.”

When the door closes behind her, I fall back in my chair and stare at the ceiling as my gut twists with guilt. I deserve to drown in the pain that caused my goddess’s heart to shatter like glass. I’ve been a goddamn bastard. If my mom were here, she would have given me a good whack on the head while scowling at me and using my full birth name.

The last weeks have been the hardest in my life, but Martha’s visit makes it more than clear that I put the people I love and care about through hell with me. *How could I think that pushing love out of my life would protect me from any more pain?* It fucking made everything worse. This is no way of living. The thought of living without Amanda is like breathing the rest of my life through a straw. It’s surviving, not living. I did the worst thing to the best girl. I could never be with anyone else. She’s the only one I want, but I’m clueless about how to make it right. I need to talk to her, apologize for the hurtful words. My heart screams. *What if she doesn’t want a future with me anymore? What if my hurtful words caused too much damage?*

For minutes, I stare at the screen until a knock on the door snaps me back to the real world. “Come in,” I say.

The door opens, and Darius peeks inside. “Everything all right?”

I let out a long puff of air. “Yes and no.”

He enters and closes the door behind him. “Want to talk?”

“What’s there to say? Martha came by to hit me with the truth. She might be short, but she’s spirited when it comes to her family.”

“What did she say?” Darius asks.

Not wanting to go into details, I give the short version. “She gave me a choice. Fight for a second chance, or let Amanda go forever.”

Darius whistles. “Well, you’re Brian Fox. You’re resourceful, you like a

challenge, and you're not a quitter. So wake up that entrepreneurial brain of yours and find a way to win the woman of your heart back."

I get up from my chair and walk to him. "Thanks for the confidence booster," I say with a smirk.

He chuckles. "No problem. We're glad you're back to work. But you're happier and more productive with Amanda at your side. So fight with everything you've got to get her back."

"Do you have time to lock up tonight?" I ask.

"Sure."

I pat him on the shoulder. "Thanks, man. I appreciate all you've done. Let's talk about a raise in the upcoming weeks and a few days off because you deserve both for being here when I fell down the rabbit hole."

"No worries. I love this place," he says with a smile.

I nod and grin. "Mind if I leave right now to see a certain someone?" I say, opening my office door and walking out.

AT 7:29 P.M., the cab arrives at Amanda's house. A swirl of anticipation ignites as I stroll to the front door and ring the bell. A minute passes, but nothing happens.

I glance over my shoulder to check if I'm not hallucinating. Nope, her car is here. I repeat my action and listen for any sounds, but nothing.

Then it dawns on me. *She doesn't want to see me.*

Just as I turn, ready to arrange for a ride back, an uncomfortable sensation rises in the pit of my stomach. *What if something's wrong with her? What if she's injured and alone, like my mom?* In a flash, I move the plant beside the entrance. Squatting down, I lift a loose brick and grab hold of the extra key that was beneath it, then unlock the door with it.

"Amanda?" I call out as I enter.

Nothing.

When I am about to shout again, a sound coming from upstairs gets my feet to move. I sprint, taking three steps at a time. Entering her bathroom, my gut clenches at the sight of her on the floor, hunched over the toilet, puking her guts out.

I rush over and grab her hair when she continues. She's pale, and tears stream down her face.

"I'm so nauseous," she cries the moment I touch her.



I place a kiss on her head and hush her, asking how long this has been going on.

“It began in the store this morning,” she murmurs. “After I bumped my head against the wall when I had a dizzy spell. I thought I was okay. But then I got nauseous and started throwing up at random times throughout the day. When I came home... It’s been nonstop. I’m exhausted.”

“Why didn’t you call the doctor?”

“My phone is in the bedroom, and I’m too dizzy to get up.”

Fear creeps through my veins and snakes its ugly tentacles around my heart as I imagine the worst... *What if this one hit to the head was enough to do serious damage to her brain?* The lump in my throat is getting bigger as she moves forward again for another round of throwing up.

My pulse races and my heartbeat trashes in my ears. I clench my jaw and close my eyes for a second to give myself a mental slap.

*Get yourself together. There is no time to freak out.*

I may have been too late to save my mom, but I’m not letting anything happen to my Brownie. When Amanda’s done throwing up and falls back on her ass, I squat behind her.

“I’m calling the doctor’s office.” I draw out my phone, and while Amanda pulls herself up for another round of throwing up, I search for the telephone number, and as soon as I find it, I hit the dial.

The woman answering the phone asks what’s going on. After explaining, she advises me to take her to the hospital, since the doctor on call is attending an emergency. I place the phone back in my pocket and look at Amanda. Gently stroking her back, I tell her, “We’re going to the hospital. You need to be examined.”

She protests weakly, “But I’ll vomit in the car and you can’t drive yet.”

“Well, fuck that. You need a doctor, and I’m going to get you to one. Can you stand?”

She attempts to rise, but her legs shake. So I pick her up and she rests her head against me and closes her eyes without resisting.

I help her into the car and then hand her a carton box from the back. She looks up, tears welling in her eyes. I brush away the drop that had made its way down her cheek with my thumb before planting a soft kiss on her forehead. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

The entire car ride, Amanda dry heaves. Seeing her in this miserable state is weighing down on me, guilt eating my heart, telling me this is all my fault.

I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to her.

As soon as I park the car near the entrance, I turn and face her. "I'm going to get a wheelchair. I'll be right back."

She hums.

I sprint to the entrance. To my luck, I bump into a woman in a hospital outfit pushing an empty wheelchair.

"Excuse me, where can I get one of them?"

The woman glances at me.

"My girlfriend is in the car, but she can't walk and needs to see a doctor. She hit her head and has been vomiting the entire day and—"

"Sir, breathe. Take this wheelchair and bring her inside," she says, offering me the chair.

I thank her and turn around to get back to my car, but when I open it, my heart almost stops seeing Amanda slumped in her seat. "Amanda?" I ask as I touch her face and she responds with a faint groan. Within seconds, I scoop her up in my arms and rush into the emergency room entrance, forgetting about the wheelchair. "Everything will be fine," I promise in an effort to sound reassuring.

The nurse who gave me the wheelchair sees me and points to a set of doors. "Please, this way."

I follow her, and once we're through the door, she addresses a doctor standing nearby. The woman stops by a bed. "Lay her on the stretcher."

The man stops beside the bed and looks at Amanda, then at me. "What happened?"

"I found her in the bathroom. She told me she's been throwing up all day after hitting her head, but it started nonstop over three hours ago when she came home. I called the GP, and they told me to bring her here. Please, you need to help her."

The doctor grabs Amanda's wrist, checks her pulse, and asks, "What's her name?"

"Amanda," I answer.

The doc pats her hand. "Amanda, I'm Doctor Carlson."

She opens her eyes to slits and shakes her head. Her hand goes to her belly, and her eyes dart to me and then to the doctor. "I'm pregnant," she whispers. "Please, I need to be sure it's okay."

My heart stops as her words sink in.

*Pregnant? Did she just say she's pregnant?*

My gaze glides to Amanda. Worry whirls inside her eyes as she holds her palm protectively over her lower belly.

“Don’t worry, we’ll take good care of you,” he answers in a calm way before turning his attention to the nurse.

“Okay, let’s put her on an IV with fluid. I’m going to add something that hopefully reduces nausea. I want to run a blood test and do a few tests to get a complete overview of what is wrong.”

“Can you please make sure my baby is okay? I need to know if it’s okay,” she says in a panicked tone.

The doctor nods. “Calm down, miss. I’ll see if we can do an ultrasound.”

“Thank you,” she whispers before closing her eyes.

As she rests, my mind is a spinning wheel with questions. *How long has she known she’s pregnant?* Bile rises when I recall what I said to her about what I wanted her to do if she was pregnant with my baby. The questions keep coming. *What happens now? And most importantly, what about the baby? Is it healthy? Does its heart beat?*

A long two hours later, a stream of elation flows through my heart, softening the tension that’s been building in my body since I found her in her bathroom.

I observe Amanda’s demeanor, taking note of her appearance, which seems to be improving. She is no longer vomiting and the color has returned to her cheeks. She looks exhausted but better. The doctor performed a few neurological tests to determine if further scans of her head were necessary. Thankfully, she passes all the tests.

A doctor comes into the room with a tool that I expect to be an ultrasound machine. She asks Amanda a few questions, and then Amanda lowers her pants and pulls up her shirt. I scoot closer to her in my chair as the lady applies gel to her belly. After she spreads the gel, the woman glances at the monitor while moving the equipment around. Despite the panic rising in me like an unstoppable tide, my eyes are glued to the screen, even though I’m not sure what I’m searching for.

Suddenly, Amanda gasps, and she points to the screen.

“Is that...”

“Yes.” The woman smiles. “That is your baby.”

My eyebrows pull together. “There’s... no heartbeat,” I say, the octave of my voice rising in terror. A few precise movements and taps to the panel later, a rapid whooshing sound fills the air.

“There it is,” the woman says with a smile.

The biggest sigh of relief leaves both our lips. My heart syncs with my child’s and without warning, my bottom lip quivers while a single tear slides down my cheek.

After assuring us everything is all right and advising Amanda to make an appointment with an OBGYN, the doctor leaves.

We stay silent for a moment, but then Amanda takes a deep breath and says, “I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“You had every right not to tell me.”

Just after I say this, the doctor enters the room with a pleasant smile and queries Amanda about her health. “Feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“No problem. It’s my job.” He grins and hands her a prescription. “Take these meds if you’re still feeling queasy. I’ll have the result of your blood work in two days. This to see if your extreme nausea spill is caused by hyperemesis. But for most women, pregnancy nausea decreases around the second stage of their trimester. I’ll fill out the paperwork needed for your release so you can get a good night’s rest at home.”

“And you’re sure nothing is wrong with her brain?” I ask to be sure.

The doc meets my gaze. “I’m sure.”

We thank the doctor again, and when she’s released, Amanda slides off the bed and we make our way out to the parking lot. Not a word is spoken as we walk to her car and drive away; only silence inhabits the space between us.

When I pull up and park at her place, I take a moment to appreciate the beautiful sight of Amanda sleeping in the passenger seat. I stroke her cheek and whisper her name, but no response. I climb out of the car and grab the key to her place before letting myself into the front door. When I come back outside, I scoop her up and carry her upstairs. After placing her on the bed and taking off her shoes, I spot the vomit stains on her blouse. My eyes travel from the fabric down to her smooth skin as I unbutton it. Stunned by her beauty, my gaze moves to one unmistakable fact: she’s pregnant with our baby. An indescribable unknown emotion swells inside me as I lay my hand over her belly. Leaning down to kiss her temple, I whisper, “You’re my home and my greatest adventure all at once, Brownie.” I get comfortable in the large chair in the corner of her room and watch her sleep until I drift off myself.



## AMANDA

I startle awake, the images of Brian striding away from me still lingering in my head. Taking deep breaths to try and calm the tumult within me, I wipe away my tears before snatching up my phone from the bedside table. It's six in the morning. Immediately, memories of the previous night flood back, along with a barrage of questions. *Why did he come over last night? And what did he think when he found me retching?*

My nose scrunches in revulsion at the recollection. I peer down—only wearing a bra. More inquiries surface in my head. *How did I get here?* The last thing I remember is Brian driving us back after leaving the hospital. *Oh God, he knows I'm pregnant.*

Noises emanating from below startle me out of bed, and after shrugging on a robe for coverage, I cautiously investigate. It's a refreshing change to wake up without rushing to vomit or having the sensation that you ran a marathon while sleeping. Thanks, anti-nausea medicine. I'm still tired as fuck and my breasts are more sensitive, but I take that over being nauseous every day of the week.

Downstairs, my feet freeze to the floor when I see Brian in my kitchen.

I take in his form-fitting jeans and black casual shirt, bringing out his blond hair and azure eyes. The sweet smell of his citrus cologne fills my nose. Thankfully, it doesn't make me retch. But I can't ignore the hardening of my nipples or suppress the urge to groan.

*Stop it.*

"Hey," he says in a careful tone.

My fists clench at my sides as I take a steadying breath, trying to keep my

voice cool. “What are you doing here?” My tone is full of ice, the only way I know how to defend myself against the still raw wound deep inside my chest.

“Making coffee and tea,” he says. “Don’t know which one you prefer... with you being...”

He trails off, but I finish for him, my voice dripping with dread hearing he finds it hard to say the word. “With me being pregnant.”

He nods.

*What if he asks me to abort the baby?*

I walk past Brian and fill a glass with water before taking a long breath to ready myself for what comes next. When I turn back to him, he is looking at the snapshot of me and Charlotte making odd faces. My niece means so much to me, yet nothing can match the intensity of love I feel for *our* unborn baby.

My heart twists in my chest like a rope burning against my ribs at the word *our*, and before I can even react, the glass slips out of my hand and shatters into pieces on the tiled floor.

“Shit,” I say.

I reach down to grab something to help clean up, but Brian moves faster than lightning, his muscles tensing as he scoops up shards of broken glass and throws them in the trash can. Warmth blooms in my chest at this action and despite myself, I blush in embarrassment when staring at his moving muscles unleashes feelings of arousal—a reaction caused by these infernal hormones that have been running wild throughout my body lately. If only I could hide away under a blanket till this storm of emotions passes. As our eyes meet again, though, I find myself unable to look away; my mind an impenetrable tangle.

“Can we talk?” he asks.

I step back as my untrustworthy emotions rise to the surface when my mind fills in the options of what he might say next. “I can’t do this,” I whisper and turn away from him.

“Please, Brownie,” he says, his voice choked with emotion. A blast of memories blows through me as he uses this once so special nickname—one that used to fill me with so much joy. I turn back to face him.

“Please what? You said we were over, said I wasn’t enough, that you needed more than me. So there is nothing to talk about,” I scream at him, allowing my emotions free rein.

Tears form in his sapphire eyes. “I’m so sorry for all the awful things I said. If I could go back and take it all back, I would do it in a heartbeat,” he

says, his voice raw with emotion.

My stomach churns as bitterness wells up inside me and I can't help but blurt out my raw truth about this broken relationship. "Your words made me feel like a disposable good-time girl."

A sob lodges in my throat, and I want to flee, but before I can move, his firm arms wrap around my midsection and keep me in place. Hot tears stream down my face as all the sorrow that had been weighing down my soul erupts like an untamed beast. Then the words tumble out of me faster than I can stop them. "I know you were grieving that day, but you still chose to tear my heart apart without a second thought."

My legs give out and Brian lowers us both to the floor. With my head resting against his shirt, he gently rocks me back and forth while I let go of all this built-up misery. His embrace creates an impenetrable barrier around me, allowing me to surrender without fear of vanishing forever into an unrecognizable mess.

I can't tell how much time passes, but when I've calmed down, his warm arms wrap around me and lift me off the ground. They carry me through the house. I'm too tired to protest further, so instead, I rest my head against his chest and breathe in his familiar scent. A wave of memories rushes over me and a sudden longing for things that used to be.

He takes us up the stairs and places me on a bed. I sink into its softness and turn onto my side, peeking through my lashes at him sitting next to me, hunched in defeat. I want to bridge the gap between us, to feel his warmth against mine once more. But if I reach out, what will it imply?

"My below-the-belt words of that night are inexcusable," he says in a soft, upset tone. "They were an outburst of fear and panic, from what happened with my mom and what might happen in the future, so I lashed out instead of talking with you and sharing my deepest worries."

When he stays quiet, I touch the back of his hand that's lying on the covers with my fingertips. "Brian, I'm too tired to fight you or discuss what we do next. Could you—"

He lets out a defeated sigh. "Yeah, sure. I'll go."

I squeeze his hand. "No. Can you stay here with me?" I glance at the empty space beside me. Without uttering a single word, he removes his shoes and lies down on the bed, fully dressed, facing me. His presence in the place I have so often imagined him during my sleepless nights brings forth a flood of emotions. As my lips tremble, he strokes my cheek.



*God, I've missed his touch so much.*

Without words, the blue depths of his eyes communicate to me on a soul level; a tear glides down his face and I wipe it away with my finger before intertwining our digits. I rest our hands on the sheets and succumb to the exhaustion that has been nagging at me for days. I push my worries and doubts aside for now and let a sense of contentment and serenity envelop me and carry me away into a deep state of relaxation that I've been desperate to reach but could not find alone.

The sound of a voice startles me out of my sleep. I hold my breath, seeing Brian in bed beside me, mumbling something indecipherable and flailing his arm about. My eyes travel to the clock: 1:00 p.m.

"No, don't leave me," he says, the sadness in his voice clear.

I scoot closer to him and caress his face. "Brian," I whisper. He's so lost in his dreams that I can't reach him.

"Please don't go, Brownie," he murmurs.

I lean in and whisper in his ear, "Brian, I'm here."

His body twitches and his eyes shoot open. "Amanda?" he rasps, turning on his side and locking onto my gaze.

"Yeah, I'm here."

The swirl of emotions in his eyes pierces my soul and when he relaxes back against the bed, drawing me closer, I give in and nestle up in my favorite spot, my head resting on his chest and one leg draped across him. He plants a kiss on top of my hair, stirring an indescribable feeling within me—like coming home. We both need this closeness, so I remain still and drift off for the second time.

"Amanda." Brian's voice is gentle but holds an unmistakable intensity beneath it. My heart flutters when I open my eyes and look into his. Glancing at the clock, I gasp in disbelief: - 7:30 p.m.? The realization that I slept all through the day hits me hard.

I heard him say something about how I needed rest. But as if on cue, panic sets in when I remember what day it is today. *Venus*.

I try to get out of bed, but Brian's hand on my shoulder stops me. "Emma's taking care of the store," he says, his voice soothing my worries about work.

But I'm pulled into awareness by our closeness and the intensity in his gaze as he watches me almost protectively. Drowsiness fades and I stumble out of bed, heart racing as the events of last night and this morning flood

back to me, making me remember how he broke down my walls before carrying me to bed.

My hands shake as I grab clothing and rush into the bathroom.

A few rushed minutes later, I emerge with teeth brushed, hair combed, and clothes buttoned up.

Brian sits on the edge of the bed, phone in hand, but when his eyes lift to mine, he sets the device aside and stands.

“Amanda—”

Not knowing if I’m ready to talk, I try to pass him, but with one swift movement, he stretches his arm out and blocks me from moving past him.

Heat pools in my stomach as his breath skims against my ear.

“Amanda,” he murmurs. “You’re pregnant. We need to talk.”

Before I know it, tears stream down my face. *Is he going to ask me to get an abortion?*

“What’s wrong?” He sounds uncertain and confused.

I wipe away the wetness framing my eyes and after mustering up my courage, I quietly utter, “What are your thoughts on the baby?” When he doesn’t answer, I slowly back away and look up into his eyes. “You said—”

His gaze holds mine as he takes in a deep breath. “Ninety-nine percent of the things I said that night came out of grief and pure fear. But you gotta understand that fear. It—”

He stops and swallows. Traces of pain fly over his features.

“Tell me what that fear was telling you, Brian.”

The tears in his eyes break my heart as he speaks. “The fear—it showed me everything that could go wrong. Images of our child lying dead in bed... like how I found my father. Then mental videos of you telling me how much you hated me, for killing our child. Followed by pictures of me lying in bed and my kid seeing it like I did.”

My breath hitches as understanding dawns on me—his concern isn’t irrational but things that could become reality. My lips quiver, feeling each beat of his heartache.

“When I saw you last night, ill and so helpless, I was terrified something bad would happen to you. And then the baby...” He trails off. As I watch Brian standing before me, so vulnerable, a wave of terror overtakes me. For a moment, my heart seizes as I think about the baby and what it might portend for us. I understand his fear. He has lost both support systems, and that is devastating. The knowledge that he may pass on an inherited condition to his

child? God, it would be soul-crushingly painful and fill him with guilt. No one should ever have to accept such a heavy burden.

Brian deserves peace of mind. He deserves the freedom to live without fear. And having a child means truckloads of responsibilities, worries, and anxieties. With a deep breath, I speak softly, “Please listen to me.”

Confusion clouds his eyes, and he swallows hard, but still, his gaze won’t break from mine.

“You said you don’t want kids, and I get it. I do.” Conviction builds inside me, my voice rising in strength with every syllable. “And I didn’t plan on this happening, but here we are. As scared as I am of the what-ifs, my body hums, knowing that this baby is meant for me.”

A moment passes before I continue, “But if parenthood isn’t something you want to take on, then I understand, Brian. Really—and I won’t judge you if you decide not to be a part of our child’s life.”

Tears brim at my eyes as my throat constricts. “That’s why I’m asking you... If parenting isn’t your thing, turn around and walk away now.” Every molecule in me screams at the possibility of losing him, yet this decision must be his alone to make.

“There’s no obligation for you to stay just because I’m pregnant.”

I stare at the ground, a heavy silence pressing between us until he speaks.

“Amanda, please look at me.”

I force my gaze up to meet his, universe-blue eyes overflowing with emotion. He takes a deep breath before saying.

“You’ve said your piece. Now let me give you mine.”

My shaking fingers clench together, steeling myself for what’s to come.

“I don’t want you to abort our baby, Amanda.”

A wave of relief floods through me like the tide. “You don’t?”

He shakes his head. “I was coming here last night to plead for another chance and ask if you’d consider adoption, but it seems fate has other plans. We used protection and still managed to conceive. That’s practically miraculous.”

Hope starts to flutter through my system as he says this.

His voice trembles. “I hurt you, and I know how hard it is to trust me after the things I said. But believe me when I tell you that I want this child too. Yes, I’m scared it might inherit the gene—but what terrifies me more is living without you from now on. The days without you were like torture and made me realize that you’re my home, my biggest dream—the love of my

life. And last night, when I heard our baby's heartbeat"—tears fill his eyes and he looks away for a second before turning back to face me and continuing his sentence—"I understood I could never turn my back on it." His voice becomes fainter, just above a whisper. "Please give us one more chance."

Tears drop down my face as I dash toward him, and two strong arms encircle me. *Oh God, how much I missed his warmth.* Lifting my eyes up to look at him, I lean in and offer a soft kiss on his lips. "I love you," I murmur against them.

He curves an arm around my waist while intertwining his fingers through my hair, meeting my mouth with a fervent kiss that sets fire to every molecule in my body and pauses time only for us two.

"I love you, so fucking much," he says between kisses. He squeezes my hand and leads me to the bed, inviting me to lie with him. I obey, like a moon orbiting a star.

As he pulls me into an embrace, he whispers, "This is what I missed most. You in my arms." His voice is more than mere sound, it's a deep rumble that resonates in my bones and brings tears of joy to my eyes.

I curl up against him and whisper, "Me too."

Time passes as we just bathe in each other's presence.

Then I ask, "How have you been dealing with the loss?"

"The first week was hell," he says.

My heart cracks hearing the anguish in his voice.

"I felt punished by life, so angry and sad that she was gone. I had so much I wanted to tell her and ask her." His fingers trail over my back like waves across sand, slow but steady.

He takes a shuddering breath as if preparing himself for a storm.

"After our doctor's appointment and me walking away from you, I wanted to talk to my mom about it—she always could help me make better sense of myself, point out things I couldn't see or was scared to look at. But that conversation never happened."

Tears blur my vision and as I let my fingers trace patterns over his chest, I take a shaky breath and whisper against his skin, "I'm sorry you didn't get the chance."

Grief fills his voice, raw emotion lurking beneath the surface as he replies gruffly, "Me too." Taking a moment to compose himself, he adds, "But I have to accept that there are things I can't change." His strength is

remarkable; despite the cracks in his own heart, he still stands tall.

“How was Italy?” he asks.

I glance up at him with surprise. “Who told you?”

His eyes grow warmer. “Cole. He came by my place every day and told me what was going on with you and the others.”

I chuckle. “He did the same for me when I was abroad, reassuring me by telling me how you were doing. You know he considers you one of his brothers.”

Pain flashes across his face, like a lightning strike in the dead of night as he runs a hand through his hair and mumbles, “We were all thick as thieves— Cole, Nick, and me—always standing together no matter the situation, until now. I messed it all up.”

“Nick only sided with me because you hurt me,” I say. “He still misses his best friend.”

Brian heaves a sigh, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “God, I hate how it all changed,” he mutters to himself.

Wrapped up in each other’s arms, we let time pass by, until Brian groans. “Shit, I need to go to Six-Pack. I’ve got a meeting tomorrow, and I have to get some papers from my office.”

I push myself up onto my elbows and smile. “Want me to come? I can drive you. It will be faster and cheaper than a cab.”

His large hand grazes against my cheek, and his expression softens. “You’re sure you’re not tired or feeling queasy?”

Moved by his concern for my well-being, I reach up and press a light kiss against his rough jawline. “I’m all right. Actually kinda craving one of Darius’s alcohol-free cocktails.”

He entwines our fingers together, then smiles. “Well then,” he says as he guides us off the bed, “let’s go, love.”



## AMANDA

The moment we enter the back entrance of Six-Pack, Brian stops me. “You go sit at the bar. I have to make a few phone calls. Once I’m done, I’ll come and find you.”

“Sure. Go, I’ll be fine, Mr. Fox.”

When I want to walk past him, he grabs my wrist. “Don’t go into the crowd. Tonight is a busy night. We have a popular DJ playing, so please, stay off the dance floor.”

I glance up to see him frown.

“Hey, I can handle myself.”

“I know but...”

I peck his lips. “Don’t worry about me. See you later.” And with that said, I leave. The beat of the music increases in volume and when I open the door, the sweeping rhythm bursting from the speakers engulfs me. God, he wasn’t kidding. The place is packed, and I’m proud of Brian for accomplishing this success. He worked his ass off for years—working day and night—to get it to where it is now. Now that he has established a level of excellent and trustworthy staff and crew, it’s possible for him to leave if necessary.

Arriving at a less crowded spot at the bar, I search for Darius. But he sees me when I wave to get his attention.

“Amanda, what are you doing here?”

“I’m here with Brian.”

Curiosity sparks in his eyes, and I smile.

“We had a good talk.”

His entire face lights up. “Good to hear.”

“Could you make me one of your delicious alcohol-free cocktails?”

“I sure can.”

My attention shoots to the jam-packed dance floor as Darius whips up my drink. Normally, I wouldn’t mind joining the crowd, but now—I place my hand on my stomach. I’m not taking any risk.

For over an hour, I enjoy the atmosphere, the drinks, and Darius coming over for a chat when he can.

Suddenly, the beat dials down and a familiar voice floats through the speakers.

“Good evening, everyone. I hope you’re enjoying yourself. Sorry for interrupting, but I’ve got something important to say.”

I blink, seeing Brian stepping forward on the elevated platform in the back. My hormones have a field day when the dim lights hug his strong jawline and he runs his hands through his blond hair. *What is he doing?*

“For those who don’t know me,” he says into the mic, “I’m Brian Fox—the owner of this place.”

A huge cheer erupts from the crowd, and I can see the pride radiating off him.

“This is the hottest spot in Boston to have an unforgettable time with your friends, flirt, dance, and drink!”

Another loud cheer goes up.

“Tonight, I just had to seize the chance to pour my heart out to one very special woman.”

I gasp as his piercing gaze lands on me.

“Amanda Brown. You’ve been blazing through my world since the minute we met.” His velvety words conjure images of that first night we met, and it makes my stomach erupt with butterflies.

“And I want you to know that I’m eternally grateful for being given a second chance. Because you’re my true heart’s desire. You’re the only woman I want, need, and love for the rest of my life. And I’ll do everything in my power to keep that smile on your face every single day.”

A deafening cacophony of howls and whistles fills the room and my heart joins it by hammering behind my ribs.

“Thanks for being here tonight. Enjoy yourselves.”

Brian hands the mic back to the DJ, who gives him a congratulatory pat on the shoulder while he exits. The music resumes its usual volume and as



people return to their dancing and drinking, my mind races to digest what just happened. He apologized and professed his love to me in front of practically all of Boston.

My eyes scan the room for him, and the moment they find him, my feet move. With a quick sprint, I close the distance and launch myself at him.

The moment my arms wrap themselves around his neck, his limbs secure me in place against his body, and I know this is where I belong.

“I love you, Amanda Brown.”

I lift my hand and brush over his jaw. “And I love you.”

His hand covers mine, and I press myself up and connect our lips. Pure desire awakens in the pit of my stomach like it does every time we kiss. His tongue demands access and when I want to grant him that, his phone rings. We pull apart and when he checks it, his eyes widen.

“Who is that?”

“Your brother,” he mumbles, surprised. “He sends me a video.” He blinks and presses a button. We stare at the screen and realize someone recorded Brian’s love declaration.

*Who made this?*

I get my answer when I glance at the bar to see a broad-smiling Darius holding up his phone and coming our way. Brian looks up to see why I chuckle.

“I made it and sent it to Cole and Nick after I put it on Instagram so the whole female population will accept Brian Fox is off the market. And I thought this might smooth out and repair your dented friendship,” Darius says with a grin and gives his boss and friend a pat on the shoulder before going back to pouring drinks.

Brian brushes a hand through his hair and when he stares at me, I ask, “What did my brother say?”

He shows me the text. *Nick: That is what I call apologizing, Fox. A smiling emoticon followed by the words. Welcome back, my friend.*

Another ping and message arrive, and I chuckle, seeing Cole’s name pop up.

“Open it,” I say. “I want to read what he thinks.”

*Cole: You made my wife cry with tears of joy. Well done and spoken from the heart. I’m proud of you, Fox.*

Seconds later, my phone rings. I grab it and when I glance at the screen, my lips curl, detecting the incoming video call. The moment I press the

button, my three best friends' faces show up, and they explode.

"Oh my God, it was so romantic," Emma states with her hands on her cheeks.

"Angel, let me talk to my sister." Nick's face appears behind his wife and I chuckle, seeing my brother's frown.

"You're happy?" he asks.

I pull Brian to my side and kiss him on the cheek. "This man makes me more than happy, big brother."

Brian hugs me tighter.

"Fuck, yes," Alisha screams. "Finally. But if you ever do something like that again, I swear I—" She's unable to continue her words as her husband stops her by covering her mouth with his hand.

"Easy, Alisha. Fox is well aware he's a lucky bastard for getting his second chance with his woman. He will not mess up again."

"Yep, agree with you, Cole," Bella says. "The most important fact is, they made up," she says. "No need for another round of threats. Instead, let's hang up and leave the two of them to enjoy their love reunion."

Our friends say goodbye and after hanging up, Brian places a kiss on my temple while I stare at the black screen. I tilt my head. "Are you done here?" I ask in a whisper while turning my body to him and placing a hand on his chest.

His eyes meet mine and the heat inside of them tells me he's in the same spot as me. He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles.

"Where to?" he asks in a deep, husky tone.

"Your house."

My knees go weak, witnessing the spark igniting in his eyes. He pulls me with him and before leaving, we stop at Darius's station, who's been observing everything with a giant grin.

"Damn, seeing both of you smiling like this is the cherry on this evening. Impressive move, boss. Talk to you tomorrow at the staff meeting."

Brian nods and pulls me with him. The energy between us is sizzling with anticipation, and my body is more than clear on what it wants. With one hand resting on my thigh and his fingertips drawing little circles, I steer us through the streets. When the engine stops blaring and the music ends, it leaves my racing heart to show off its steady drum solo.

My eyes follow Brian, stepping out and opening my door. When he holds out his hand, it reminds me of the first time he took me home. I slip my hand

into his as we make our way to his house, and an intense longing to get nearer overwhelms me. I tug on his arm, yet he shakes his head and leads me up the stairs in silence until we arrive in the middle of his bedroom. There, he holds both of my hands in his firm grip and looks me straight in the eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I question him.

“Part of me expects to wake up and find this has all been a beautiful dream,” he responds.

The vulnerability in his tone resonates with me, and I give him a small smile. “Oh, let me show you this is not a dream.”

His smile widens as I undo the top buttons of his shirt, pushing the fabric aside.

“Oh, I missed this sight,” I say, letting my gaze take in his toned body. Unable to resist any longer, I follow the path of my eyes with my fingers, tracing his pecs and abs down to the V-shape dipping into his pants.

“My goodness, how I’ve missed your touch,” he breathes out.

I lick my lips and place my finger over the scar on his ICD.

“I miss everything about you,” I murmur as I press my lips against his neck.

He stirs from his trance and moves his hands to my hips, tracing circles over them before grabbing my backside. A moan slips out of me as he pulls me closer to him and I bite down on the skin of his shoulder. His hardness tells me that he is just as affected by our actions as I am.

“May I undress you, Amanda?”

The intensity of his gaze and the gentleness of his voice leave me without words, so I take a step back and nod. His hands lift the hem of my shirt and after tugging it off, he tosses it aside. With shaking fingers, he unfastens my pants, and as soon as it’s on the ground, he stands and starts tracing the lines of my bra with his fingers until he reaches around, unclasps it, and slides it away.

“Your beauty is out of this world,” he breathes while cupping both of my breasts with his palms.

My nipples become hard as diamond points the second his thumbs caress them.

“I love the way you respond to my touch.”

“Then continue.”

A mischievous smile appears on his face as he bends and takes the left nipple in his mouth while his other hand toys with and shapes the right. To

steady myself, I grip his shoulders with my fingernails as this marvelous sensation turns me weak in the knees. His swirling tongue does marvelous things, causing me to purr like a cat in heat. It has been far too long, and all my body desires is a sinful climax. I come alive under his touch in the most extraordinary way, craving him just like my lungs crave air every second of the day. His mouth shifts to my other breast and my nails dig into his skin as my pussy clenches, driving me wild with a longing that needs to be satisfied right now.

“Brian.” As I say his name aloud, he releases my breasts and looks back at me with those captivating blue irises.

“Tell me what you need, Brownie.”

“Make love to me.”

His eyes blaze as he stands, his hands cradling my face. “I’m going to pleasure you until you can’t take it any longer.

This statement sends my pussy into overdrive. I take hold of his hand and guide him to the bed, removing the remainder of his clothing before pushing him onto his back.

“Fucking sexy, Brown.” His eyes gleam with lust as I slip out of my panties and straddle him on top. This position is empowering; I love it. His hands grip my ass cheeks, causing me to moan as he fondles them. Now I understand why Emma and Alisha are always talking about pregnancy horny; these hormones are ruling over me and exaggerating all my senses. My body only wants one thing, so after rubbing my pussy against his shaft, I lift my behind and grasp his hard cock.

Brian moans when I press it against my entrance.

“Amanda,” he grunts before biting his bottom lip in pleasure as I let it slip between my inner lips. My cry of pure pleasure echoes in the room. The way he stretches me as I lower myself onto him is sensational.

“Holy shit,” he purrs as he takes my face in his hands, pressing his warm lips to mine. We kiss for a long time, touching and tasting; as we move, desire flows through my veins. I slide my hips back and forth, and he groans into my mouth.

“Damn, you feel incredible,” he says.

I whimper in agreement while I keep grinding against him. After a while, I move my hands up to his chest and start riding him.

“Jesus, Brownie. Slow down or I won’t last.”

I stop moving, not wanting this moment to end. But aroused beyond

sanity, I slip my hand between my legs and start caressing my aching clit. His eyes widen when he sees me stimulating myself while we make love.

“Yes,” he says, gripping tight onto my hips. “Keep doing that and raise that sweet ass of yours a bit.”

I comply and place one hand on his chest for balance as I lift myself higher up. My mouth falls slack when he moves in and out in the perfect, mind-blowing rhythm.

“I love you, Amanda,” he murmurs.

His thrusts become passionate and as our gazes meet, we’re transported to a world of pleasure and desire. I’ve missed this connection, like a missing limb, and now it has been returned—it’s like a comet crashing into my heart and healing all the fractures.

The tension between my thighs is becoming unbearable, so I moan. “Faster. Please.”

“Like this?” he murmurs, spanking me before his thrusts become even more rapid.

“Oh God, yes. Just like that,” I shout. Our bodies move together in perfect harmony; his rapid thrusting and kneading hands are sublime tools, driving me to the brink of ecstasy. As I massage my sensitive bud and pinch it, I am sent into a whirlwind of delight.

“Yes, Brownie. Let yourself fall. I’ve got you.”

Those words set off a wildfire throughout my body. I shudder and tense up, while Brian grunts heavily as his cock twitches deep within me. He clutches my hips even tighter as he climaxes, while my head slumps back and my nails dig deeper into his skin as meteors race behind my eyelids. I bask in this intense release by rocking my hips back and forth. All the built-up stress of the last few weeks melts away. When it fades away, my body flops forward and two arms embrace me.

“Hmm,” I hum while nuzzling my nose in the crook of his neck and enjoying the scent of sex and his body.

Minutes pass wherein his fingers trail up and down my spine.

“Let’s stay like this forever,” he mumbles.

I lift my head, and when I seal our lips, a long, sweet kiss follows. My hands find his face and stroke through his hair, and when I peel my mouth off his, I stare into his eyes while resting my forehead against his.

“Thank you for coming back to me. I love you, Brian Alexander Fox.”

His eyes pierce my heart and soul as he speaks. “You’re my sanctuary,

my home, Brownie. There is nowhere else I'd rather be than right here."

I press my lips on his and whisper, "Then let's enjoy and celebrate that we're both home." I wiggle my hips.

He grunts, but his cock hardens deep inside of me, and I hum in contentment at the thought of another round of lovemaking with *my* man.



## AMANDA

Two months later, I step into Brian's house and smile at the last box standing next to the staircase. A day after we made up, Brian asked me to move in with him, and it took me a second to give him my answer. But since we're both busy with our business, it took us a while to move my stuff here and make this our home. I stop in the living room, where the walls have been plastered over with a new coat of paint and decorated with photos that are special to us. Pictures of his parents and a picture of us and our friends and family. Looking at it makes you realize how important family and friends are. A small smile crosses my face as I take in the ultrasound photo that Brian hung up on our wall. Even though details are hard to make out, he saw fit to display it. According to him, the picture will be updated with a new one each time we get one.

Waking up side by side and having him slip into bed after his shift at Six-Pack is blissful. We went over to my parents and surprised them with the news about the pregnancy. My mom cried and hugged us both. She said something to Brian, and when I asked what she said, he said it was something between her and him. And I dropped it.

A sudden delicious aroma makes my stomach growl in contentment. I rush into the kitchen and stop on the threshold. God, thank you for this man. I stare at Brian, dressed in his workout clothing.

"Hey."

He turns around and smiles. "I will serve dinner in thirty minutes," he says, strolling my way. My lower regions stir at the sight of his muscular frame getting emphasized in his wet shirt. I drop my eyes and moisturize my



dry lips.

“Nope. Not now, I’m sweaty,” he says, surpassing my reaching hands and hurrying away.

“Sorry,” he says with a chuckle when seeing my pouty expression. He winks and sends me an air kiss. “I’m going to take a quick shower.” He jogs up the stairs, and my stomach growls another time, looking at the lasagna warming in the oven. God can’t wait for that. I’m hungry as hell.

“MMM, THAT WAS TERRIFIC,” I hum after devouring the lasagna. When I look up, Brian is staring at me.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just love watching my pregnant girlfriend enjoy her dinner.”

I stand and grab a chilled ice tea from the fridge while I hear the doorbell ringing. I open it and find a broad-smiling postal worker. “Good evening. Package for Brown.”

“That’s strange, I didn’t order anything.”

“Oh, but I did,” Brian cuts in and takes the box before I can say anything else.

“Hey, where are you going with that?” I shut the door and face him walking away. “Hold on there. That man said Brown, not Fox,” I remind him as he heads back to the kitchen.

Brian chuckles and shakes his head. “I realize that—I accidentally ordered it using your name.”

Accidentally, my foot! I move closer to him since he is still admiring it from a distance. In one swift move, I take the package from his hand.

“Hey!” He whirls around to face me, and I can’t help but smile at the surprise on his face.

I laugh and walk around the table, holding the small box up to my ear and giving it a little shake. “What’s in here? Doesn’t feel like much…”

“Amanda, give it back.”

“What’s the rush? Is this something secret?”

“No.”

“Is it meant for me?”

He groans, exasperated. “Yes, but not yet.”

I look down at my name on the white sticker. “Man, I hate surprises! Can I open it? Please?”

I bat my eyelashes at him, and he mumbles something I can't quite make out.

"All right. Open it!"

"Seriously? You—"

"Amanda, if you don't open it now, I'm taking it and hiding it someplace you'll never find it."

I hesitate for a moment. "If you do that, when will you give it to me?"

"Months," he answers without missing a beat.

"No way. I'm opening it now, no matter what. My fingernails search for an opening. When I find one and open the box, I see a piece of fabric lying inside and pull it out to look at it more closely—a sweet silky soft romper. The thought of him buying this for our baby has my emotions soaring high in the sky.

"Did you order this for our little bean?"

"No, I bought this for you," he says softly. "Turn it around?"

I turn it over and gasp when the words printed on the front of the romper become clear: Will You Marry Daddy?

Two strong hands grab my waist, and when I meet his gaze, he gets on one knee in front of me.

"I wanted to ask you this when our baby arrived, but since we don't know what the future holds, why wait? So here it goes, my sweet Brownie. I knew I was in trouble the second my eyes landed on you. From that moment, my heart ached with the need to claim the most exquisite woman in the world. You made my heart more than just a vessel to pump blood through my body. I want to wake up next to you every single day, and I want to watch every romantic movie there is with you on our bed. And I can't wait to raise our child with you. My heart is yours, and it will continue to be yours unconditionally, forever. You are my haven, my home, my forever love. Amanda Brown, will you be my wife and marry me?"

Not able to produce any words after his mind-blowing proposal, I nod.

"Sorry for not having a ring. Promise to get you one ASAP," he says, getting up.

I frame his face in my palms and find my voice. "Ring or not. I love you more than life itself, Brian Alexander Fox. And spending the rest of my life with you is my ultimate dream come true. So yes, I'll marry you."



## BRIAN

“Brian, wake up.”

A set of warm lips brushes over my cheek and when my eyes flutter open, I find Amanda standing next to the bed wearing a soft green nightgown. She’s caressing her belly while shifting her weight from left to right. A stream of light coming from the hallway radiates through the open door and highlights her contours—giving her an angelic vibe.

“What time is it?”

“Five oh two a.m. I called Kim. She’s on her way.”

My mind tries to grasp what she’s saying. Kim? Why...

When the meaning lands in my still fuzzy brain, it’s like someone injected a triple dose of caffeine straight into my veins, and my body jolts out of bed while my mind shoots into high-alert mode.

“The baby?”

She nods. “My water broke an hour ago when I went to the bathroom.”

“We’re about to have our baby... today?”

She hums, letting out a long breath in response.

“Well, why didn’t you wake me up earlier?”

Her lips curl into a smirk. “You just got to bed, and it can take hours before I’m fully dilated.”

My heart rate quickens as her expression morphs with pain.

“Are you having a contraction?”

She nods and breathes as they have taught us in birth class.

*What do I do?* I mentally berate myself as I struggle to remember what should be done when she goes into labor. But all my thoughts are scattered.

“They’re getting stronger. But the worst part is the tightness in my muscles,” she says while trying to massage her lower back. That’s when I take action.

I stand before her and start making circles with my fingertips on her back muscles and applying slight pressure to them.

“Oh, yes, don’t stop,” she hums while resting her forehead against my chest. Even though I’m doing my best to focus, my head is like a broken pinball machine that went haywire, since the moment I felt those little kicks against my palms that were placed on Amanda’s stomach. It was such a beautiful moment, but afterward, constant worries of her falling down the stairs or something else terrible kept taking over my mind and drove me to check up on her often. The worst time was when I freaked when we were home and I called out to her and she didn’t immediately respond. Like a maniac, I ran through the entire house, checking every room, and when I didn’t get a response, I called her, only to find her phone lying on the kitchen counter. I ran outside and stopped dead in my tracks when I found her... talking and laughing with the neighbor. The moment I saw she was okay, I tried to conceal my fear, but of course Amanda easily spotted it. Aware of the severity of my anxiety, we mentioned it during her checkup and Kim said it’s normal for expectant fathers to be anxious. She thinks it will settle once the baby arrives. Let’s hope so.

This last month, every part of me wanted to be home. But with three people on my staff sick, I had to be at Six-Pack more than I wanted and for the first time I hated to be the responsible boss. Amanda eased my mind every time by checking in on me every hour or two, by sending me a text or a funny photo of herself when I’m at work. It’s been the only way to keep my mind sane.

The doorbell rings. “That must be her,” Amanda says, patting my chest.

I quickly put on sweatpants and a shirt and hurry downstairs.

When I answer the door, Kim gives me a reassuring smile. “Are you nervous, Brian?”

“Is water wet?” I reply, to which she chuckles.

After I close the door, I face her.

“Are you sure this home birth is a good idea?”

The older woman gives my shoulder a soft squeeze. “Breathe, Brian. Amanda and your baby are in excellent hands. I’ve done over two hundred home births, so I know what I’m doing. If I didn’t trust it, I would have said

so. Now, let's see how they're doing?"

I nod, and Kim follows us upstairs to the bedroom. Amanda, who's standing by the window, looks up with a glowing smile as we enter and greets Kim warmly. I'm in shock—here I am, a bundle of nerves, and she has the energy to smile in the middle of labor.

"Are you all set to become parents and find out what you two are having?" Kim queries.

"Absolutely," Amanda answers with an exuberant grin. "He thinks it'll be a girl, but I'm placing my bet on a boy."

Kim and Amanda carry on their conversation while I pace back and forth across the room.

"Okay, let's check how many centimeters dilations you have."

My amazing soon-to-be spouse gets on the bed and I hasten over to take my place beside her while Kim does her thing.

"Well, your cervix is already five centimeters dilated, Amanda. That is fabulous. If this keeps going at this rate, the new addition to your family will show up shortly."

My lungs are desperate for oxygen as I hold my breath when Amanda's face contorts in pain during a contraction. I feel powerless sitting here holding her hand while she does all the work.

"How can I help?" I ask with an elevated voice.

"Just be here," Amanda says as the contraction subsides. She reaches for my cheek and caresses it gently. "You being here is enough."

"I don't feel helpful," I comment.

Both women have a smirk on their faces as I make this statement.

"We're going with the natural process, Brian. This means Amanda will inform us what she needs at this stage of your journey to Parenthood."

I help her out of the bed and, for the next hour, we move around the room. Every time a contraction begins, we stop so she can lean on me until it's over. After another sixty minutes pass, we find ourselves back on the bed. Amanda lies between my legs, her head on my chest. Her nightgown is gone, replaced by sweat. Her contractions are like waves coming in quick succession, and my forearm is marked with a unique pattern of scratches from her nails digging in. I don't mind, though; if it helps ease the pain for her, she's welcome to scratch me all she wants. Seeing the woman you love in agony is nerve-wracking, to say the least. Amanda heaves with every contraction and I whisper sweet words as I wipe away sweat from her face

with a cold cloth that Kim had given me.

“Oh my God! I have to push. I can’t hold it,” Amanda cries out.

“All right, just keep breathing in and out while I check.” Kim smiles. “It looks perfect; you can push when the next contraction arrives.”

Amanda turns her head to look at me and our eyes lock.

I give a reassuring smile and whisper softly, “You’re doing amazing, Brownie. I’m so proud of you.” I press a kiss to her cheek as another painful contraction takes over and she grabs my hand tightly as she pushes. Instead of screaming like what is depicted in movies, Amanda retreats into her own world, humming and groaning loud, listening to her body while paying full, careful attention to what she’s doing.

“You’re doing great, Amanda! Almost done, just one or two more pushes and your little one will be here,” Kim comments as another wave comes.

Amanda inhales deeply and brings her chin to her chest as she pushes with a wave of labor. A tiny cry escapes from her lips and I feel my veins grow cold from her tight grip on my hand. Seconds later, Kim is lifting a slimy, crying infant into the air.

“Congratulations, guys.”

“What is it?” Amanda pants, resting her body against me.

My throat tightens with emotion as Kim lays our newborn onto Amanda’s chest.

“It’s a boy!” I say in awe.

Amanda places small kisses on our son’s head and sobs of joy trickle down her cheeks.

“Oh, Brian, look at him. We have a son. He’s perfect.” She glances up at me with a beaming smile.

I bend down to kiss her lips, and my own eyes fill with tears. “Yes, he is, just like you.”

Kim turns to us and asks, “Do you two have a name?”

Touching his cheek, Amanda answers, “Yes. Chase Alexander Fox.”

“Charming name. Would you like to cut the umbilical cord, Brian?”

“Sure.”

Kim hands me a pair of scissors and guides me where to cut the fleshy string connecting mother and son. After that, the flurry of the labor fades and we focus on our newborn son, who has fallen asleep. Once the placenta is out and Kim tells us that Amanda is healthy, my nerves settle a bit. However, when Kim does a checkup on our Chase and he lets out a loud wail, I tense

up again.

I watch her as she weighs him. “Is he okay? Is he in pain?”

Kim laughs. “Don’t worry. He is fine,” she says while dressing him in a diaper.

“If he is okay, why is he still crying?”

Kim smiles and places Chase back on Amanda’s chest. The second he touches her skin, he stops crying as if someone just pressed mute on a remote control.

“This is the power of skin-to-skin contact. Snuggling your baby close to your body is the best way to help them adjust after emerging from the safe environment of their mother’s womb.”

I look down in amazement as my son peacefully rests against Amanda’s chest.

Kim grabs a large, fluffy blanket and places it over both of them before saying her last congratulations for our birth. “I am downstairs if you need me. I will leave the three of you alone for a few minutes.”

After she leaves the room, I turn to Amanda.

“Are you okay?” she asks, glancing at me.

“You’ve just been through hours of pain and you’re asking me if I’m okay?”

She smirks.

I gently trace my fingertips across her cheek. “I’ll love you forever, Amanda.”

“Take your shirt off,” she mumbles.

My brow furrows in confusion. “What?”

“You heard what Kim said. Chase needs skin-to-skin contact. So do as I say, Mr. Fox.”

She gives me an expectant look and I comply, tugging off my shirt and tossing it away before settling back down onto the bed beside her. When I’m comfortable, Amanda places him in my arms. His little body is so small and delicate. I study his tiny face in awe and gape in shock when he wraps his tiny fist around my index finger. I press a gentle kiss to his knuckles and declare softly, “No worries, little man, from now on Daddy will always be here to keep you safe.”

My breath catches in my throat as he opens his eyes—they are deep brown.

Amanda touches his cheek tenderly and tells him, “You are perfect,



Chase Fox.”

It looks like he tries to give a little smirk at the sound of his name and my heart bursts with pride and joy at this incredible being who we created together with love. Is life really this good?

When I spot Amanda next to me with adoration in her eyes, a surge of contentment fills my soul. I’m the luckiest man alive that this extraordinary girl loves me, despite all the hardships I’ve put her through. From not letting her get close for many years, to pushing her away and causing her suffering when I was down. She has been the strong one throughout. And now we have a child together.

Kim knocks before reentering the room. “Oh wow,” she says, gazing at us. This is a moment you want to capture in a photo. “Would you like me to take a few pictures?”

“Yes!” we both say simultaneously. She grabs my phone from the nightstand and positions the camera at us. “Say parents,” she jokes before taking a few photos.

AFTER TWELVE HOURS, I brush my fingers against my face, stepping into the bedroom where Amanda is nursing Chase. Our first day as parents has been both tiring and incredible. Learning how to change diapers was a tricky process; I watched Kim do it so effortlessly, but as soon as it was my turn, it was like I was doing battle with an infant. He didn’t like it and peed on himself, screaming in surprise as the pee splashed his face. But when I pulled him close to my chest, he settled down and snuggled against me.

We called our friends and family two hours after his birth, who suggested that we take the day to cherish this moment. Amanda’s mom and dad asked if they could come over right away and greet their grandson, which filled my heart with happiness as they hugged and kissed him.

Just as I walk into the bedroom, my son Chase releases a loud burp and I laugh.

“Right on cue,” she says, handing him over to me. “I need to use the restroom.”

I take him and hold him against my chest before striding out the door. “Time for a tour through your new home, young man.” I make my way through each room of the house, introducing him to them all, but when I come to our photo wall in the living room, I pause. A wave of sadness washes

over me as I look up and see my parents' cheerful faces.

With a quivering voice, I say, "Mom, Dad. This is Chase Alexander Fox. Your first grandchild."

My eyes move back to my sleeping boy. "God, if only they could have met you, Chase. They would have been such proud and loving grandparents. When you're old enough, I'm going to take you to the park we used to go to and show you a few ball games my dad and I used to play there."

Just as this thought enters my mind, a familiar delicate floral scent engulfs me, and at that moment, there is no doubt in my heart their spirits are here with us. I close my eyes and savor the sweet perfume that used to be my mother until it fades away. When it's gone, I open my eyes and smile at the photograph.

"I love you guys."

#### TWO WEEKS LATER:

I slowly straighten up and reach into the small crib, breathing a sigh of relief when his steady heartbeat thumps under my fingertips. A hand touches my shoulder, and I turn to find Amanda standing there. She wraps her arms around me and speaks softly.

"Have you been sleeping here again?"

I nod, my gaze still fixed on the tiny chest.

She sits in my lap. "Talk to me," she whispers, gently pushing the hair away from my face.

"I'm just more comfortable when I'm near him," I explain.

"Brian," she says, her voice laced with worry, "he's sleeping in our bedroom, just four meters away from us." Her other hand slides to the back of my neck, lightly tickling the hairs on my neck.

"What if I gave him a gene that is even more messed up than mine? What if..." My sentence is left unfinished when I look back at my sleeping son.

Amanda takes both of my cheeks in her hands and lifts my face up so I'm looking into her eyes. "Stop torturing yourself. You've been sitting in this chair next to his crib for two weeks now; it's not doing you any good."

She rests her forehead against mine, providing a healing salve to my stressed spirit. I hoped the overwhelming worries left the moment Chase was born. But they merely shifted shape and multiplied when I remembered the higher likelihood of boys inheriting the Brugada gene. I tried to stop my

worries by recalling the seven-year-old Nathan having the gene but no symptoms, yet my mind still bombards me with what-ifs. Day after day, I sit next to him while he sleeps, checking on and off if his heart is still beating.

“It’s time to call Doctor Wilson and get Chase tested for the gene,” she says calmly. The sound of her calmness warms me, and I slide my hand behind her neck, bringing us closer.

“I’m scared.”

“Me too, but we’re going to deal with this together,” she replies, touching my cheek with her fingertips.

“God, I love you two so much,” I say before feeling her lips brush mine.

“And we love you,” she whispers.

We chuckle when Chase makes soft smacking noises and when we glance at him, he’s sucking on his fist and opening his eyes.

“Good morning, my handsome boy,” Amanda says with warmth. “Are you hungry?”

His head turns the second he hears her voice and sucks even harder.

She slides off my lap and picks him up. “Hello, sweetheart,” she coos, kissing his cheeks. “Time for breakfast,” she whispers while walking to the bed.

My heart warms seeing Amanda with our son. She’s a natural mom who enjoys motherhood to the fullest. And right now, with her long brown locks in a mess and wearing her wide nightgown, I find her strikingly stunning and sexy as hell.

After she takes a comfortable position and breastfeeds, I get off the chair and slide behind her on the bed.

“Just so you know, the next diaper change is on you, daddy,” she murmurs.

My lips curl. “Anything for you, my goddess.”



## BRIAN

“How are you holding up, Fox? Any last-moment jitters?” Nick asks as I enter the living room and face my two best friends who’re relaxing on the couch. Both men wear custom-made tuxedos that complement my night-blue attire. I send them my signature smile while showing them my steady hands.

“Oh, this man is in complete control! Calm and collected, as always. Why should I be nervous? I’m finally making sure every man on this planet knows Amanda’s mine forever. And she’s happy because she hooked the most handsome man on the earth plane.”

“Good Lord, Cocksy Foxy is back,” a familiar female voice says.

The three of us look up to see Alisha walk into the room.

Cole’s face lights up and he gets up. “Hey, what are you doing here?”

“We need more diapers. Little Fox is full of shit, just like his daddy,” she says with a giant smirk.

Nick and Cole burst out in laughter.

“Damn! I see Bulldozer still didn’t tame that mouth of yours,” I say with a grin.

Alisha brushes her hand seductively over his chest when he stops next to her.

“He loves my mouth because he found out it can do things he otherwise only experienced in his dirty dreams,” she says with a wink.

I chuckle. “Well, clearly you never talked to my Brownie, because she—”

“Don’t you finish that sentence. You’re forgetting you’re talking about my little sister.”

Alisha giggles. “Oh, don’t be such a baby, Nick. From what Emma told

us, you're quite the experimental man with whipped cream."

Nick wiggles his eyebrows and grins. "Jealous?"

"You wish. You two got nothing on my man." She touches Cole's chest. "He's one massive sexy bulk of muscles who can play the piano."

If compliments could make you grow instantly, our bulky friend wouldn't fit through the door. He bends his head, and when he whispers something in her ear, she licks her lips.

"Okay, you two. Keep the hanky-panky until after Amanda and I are married. Speaking of her, how is my soon-to-be wife doing?"

Alisha beams. "She is stunning and excited. And Martha and John are having a blast with their grandchildren at the house. Didn't you see the photo Martha sent you?"

I groan. "My phone. It's still in the bedroom." I dash up the stairs and there it is, lying on the bed where I had left it after saying good morning to my love.

I pick it up and see two missed calls and a text. I open the message first, and a photo of my son sitting with Liam and Charlotte on the couch pops up. Adorable! I save it to my Chase album, which is already bursting at the seams with hundreds of pictures.

Then, as I walk downstairs, I listen to the voicemail and fear takes over, replacing the confidence that had been coursing through me moments before.

"Brian? What's wrong?" Cole questions as my two friends rush toward me. Nick places a hand on my shoulder. "Why is your skin pale? Is it your heart? Do we need to call an ambulance?" he asks anxiously.

I shake my head, replying in a quiet voice, "The result is in."

Cole frowns, asking with confusion, "Result?"

Alisha interjects, understanding immediately what I meant as she stops next to her husband. "Oh my God, he means the results of the genetic test. So what did he say?"

My legs turn to jelly as I sit down on the stairs and lack of breath sets in. When someone says you have to call them ASAP, it's rarely good news. My chest tightens as I struggle to find enough air.

"Hey, buddy, take it easy. Just keep breathing in and out."

Suddenly, Brownie's comforting voice envelops us.

"I'm okay, but Brian needs you."

I glance up at Alisha and she offers me her phone.

"Speak to her."

“Brian, what’s wrong?” she asks in a distressed tone.

I take the handset and speak. “Doc Wilson called. The results are in,” I say, my voice trembling. She stays quiet for a moment, and my stomach churns from anticipating the outcome.

“Okay, come to the house right now. We’re going to call him back before we get married.”

“But—”

She interrupts me, “No buts, Brian. I love you. Now Nick and Cole, get him in the car and come home right away. That’s an order.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Cole grins and nods. Amanda hangs up the phone.

Alisha slaps her hands together excitedly. “Well, what are you waiting for? The bride has spoken! Let’s move it. Come on, Brian, let’s go!”

Locked in an internal conflict, I make my way to the car. As we drive to the destination, I’m torn between the hope of a positive outcome and the fear of the worst. One second hope is surging, but the next, doubt creeps in and erases these feelings with appalling visions of what could be. As we stop in front of the house and I get out of the car, I’m drowning in a sea of uncertainty. Amanda stands in the doorway wearing a white robe, her gaze locked on me as I approach. I try to smile, but my lips can’t quite manage it. When I arrive in front of her, she pulls me into her embrace, the warm scent of her calming my racing thoughts.

“Take a deep breath,” she whispers. “I’m here. We’re doing this together. We’ve been waiting for this moment.”

We break apart when a loud wail catches my attention. Martha strides our way, cradling a crying Chase.

“He misses his dad.” She smiles and hands him to me. “You two need each other right now.”

I take him and rock him back and forth, speaking softly. “Hey, bud. What’s wrong? Daddy’s here now.”

His cries settle to a soft whimper when I kiss his forehead. As my voice calms him, his unique baby scent soothes my raging nerves, and I pray to the entire universe.

*Please, let him be okay.*

“I cleared the living room for you,” Martha says.

“Thanks, Mom,” Amanda responds appreciatively.

“Okay, let’s go,” Martha says, motioning for the others to follow her. “Grab some coffee and cake with me, everyone.”

The others vanish into the other room while Amanda and I walk to the living room. We take a seat on the couch as she softly caresses my cheek with her hand.

“Do you want me to take Chase while you make the call?” I nod and after passing my son off to his mom, I dial the number and put it on speakerphone.

To my amazement, Doc answers right away. “Good morning, Brian. I was awaiting your call.”

Amanda takes my hand.

“Did you get the results?” I utter in an anxious voice.

“Yes, I got them this morning. Normally, I’d make you come to my office, but in this case, I’m making an exception.”

My heart trembles inside my chest as I ask the question that has weighed on me for months.

“Does he have Brugada, Doc?” I look at my son, whose eyes are wandering around.

“The test was negative, Brian.”

Amanda gasps as my lungs shrink to the size of peas and my heart shrieks in sadness. I stand up and close my eyes as tears sting them.

“Shit. I knew it was too hopeful.”

“Listen to me, Brian,” Doc speaks louder. “A negative result means they couldn’t find any signs of Brugada Syndrome in his genes.”

My mind tries to comprehend the words, but it cannot, so I seek an explanation while staring at the phone. “What?”

“Chase doesn’t have the gene you and your father have. Your son is healthy, Brian.”

I gasp for breath. “H-He’s healthy?”

The enthusiasm in Wilson’s voice is palpable as he answers, “Yes. There are no signs or markers that suggest Brugada Syndrome.”

I keep blinking as the information finally registers through the veil of fear that had been occupying my mind for months.

“Thank you for calling,” Amanda said, drying her tears. “This is the best wedding gift we could have asked for.”

“Congratulations. I’m so glad I had something wonderful to tell you on your special day. Have a great time and I’ll see you at your next appointment.”

As the line goes silent, I stumble onto the couch next to Amanda and let out uncontrollable sobs from the depths of my being. The pile of tension and



dread that I've been holding while waiting on this phone call dissolves away.

He's healthy. I didn't pass him the gene.

Amanda wraps her arm around me and leans her head onto my shoulder. "Just let it out, babe," she whispers. Time passes as I cry and allow a sense of relief to wash over me as I release the enormous weight of fear, worry, and guilt that had been consuming me. I didn't pass the genes. We would have dealt with the result either way by making sure Chase has the best life possible but damned if this isn't the result I prayed for. As I turn my gaze to the two wonders in my life, Amanda places my son in my arms.

"You're Daddy's and Mommy's miracle, Chase."

He opens his eyes and reaches for my face with his tiny fingers. His gaze penetrates my soul as I smile at him. "I love you so much, buddy."

My eyes widen in shock as his lips curl up into a smile and make their way up to his eyes.

"Oh my goodness," Amanda whispers, "he's smiling at you. That's his first smile!" She wraps her arms around my neck as I turn toward her, connecting our lips together in a kiss.

"This is already the best day of our lives," she says as she pulls away from me.

"Let's break the good news to the others," she says, taking Chase from me and walking out of the living room. As soon as we step into the kitchen, all conversation stops. The only sound is the laughter of Charlotte, Liam, and Samantha playing outside. All eyes are on us, waiting for a reaction.

Alisha is the first to ask, "And?"

I swallow hard. "He doesn't have Brugada," I say in one breath.

The women shriek in joy while Nick and Cole yell out a triumphant, "Yes!"

Martha and John are the first to reach me, and Martha throws her arms around me. "Oh, Brian, you sweet boy. I'm so glad he's okay."

John pats my back. "You've been through enough; you can now focus on raising our grandbaby into a great young man like his father."

I look at them both with teary eyes. "Thank you both so much. Your kindness and understanding remind me of my parents."

Martha touches my cheek and smiles warmly. "We are proud to call you our son-in-law," she said.

I wipe away a tear with a nod of appreciation.

Nick and Cole enter and both embrace me.

“We couldn’t be happier for you,” they say in unison.

“Thanks. Now let’s get this wedding underway,” I respond, turning back to Amanda. “I guess I’m getting myself a wife.”

She looks into my eyes, the mischief palpable in her chocolate pupils. After handing off Chase to her mother, she takes a step toward me and speaks softly in my ear. “I’m not wearing any panties under this robe, Mr. Fox,” she whispers, her voice like velvet.

Fire ignites in my gut as I gaze upon the smooth fabric. Before I can grab her, she pulls away from me and orders her ladies-in-waiting. “Girls, it’s time to get moving. The wedding is in two hours and the guests can start arriving at any moment, so let’s do this.”

“Hell yeah,” Alisha says with a clap, and the women follow Amanda out of the room.

TWO HOURS and fifteen minutes later, I’m standing in front of the tent, trying not to be too obvious about wiping my sweaty palms on my pants.

My two best friends snicker.

“In total control, huh?” Cole whispers.

“Didn’t he say he would stay calm and collected?” Nick adds, smirking.

I shoot them both a glare to let them know what I think of their comments. But they’re right: I’m anything but calm and collected right now.

I’m overwhelmed with anticipation as the tent flap opens, and Charlotte and Liam come down the aisle in a riot of flower petals. Liam is flipping his basket upside down and letting the blossoms pile up on the ground.

“Liam! You’re doing it wrong,” Charlotte mutters. “Auntie Amanda won’t give you cake if you make a mess.”

He only shrugs, picking up what his sister drops and stuffing it back into his basket—which earns him a round of laughter from our guests.

Then, one by one, the girls step into the tent looking radiant. When the music changes to a beautiful, melodic tune, my heart pounds in my chest as a vision of elegance and style makes her way to me on her father’s arm. The blush-colored lace dress fits her body like a second skin, complementing her skin tone and making her brown irises look like pools of molten warmth. She’s absolutely stunning—like a goddess in full bloom. I let out an awed sigh before taking her hand in mine and placing a kiss on the back.

“You look breathtaking, Brownie.”

Her eyes glitter, and her beaming smile provokes a torrent of passionate desire in me. I can't wait to have her alone.

As we listen to the minister speaking, I feel a wave of gratitude as the delicate scent of my mother's perfume caresses me—a sign that they are here, witnessing their son marry the woman of his dreams.

When the minister asks for the rings, Charlotte comes bounding up to us and hands us our rings before returning to her seat.

“Brian and Amanda, you both have made your vows. So, Brian, you may now go first.”

I take Amanda's hands in mine.

“Some people say that love gives them wings, but you, my sweet Amanda, you ground me. You're my foundation. From the first time we met, you had an incredible impact on me. My mom once said, there will be dozens of girls who will take your breath away, but the one who reminds you to breathe is the one you should keep. You do both for me—you're my rock and my love all at once. Even in my darkest moments, you are my beacon of light, inspiring me and reminding me when to take a step back and catch my breath.”

I move closer, and her eyes widen with anticipation as I place her hand on my chest. “You've taught me what it means to love, and now I vow to be your loyal knight and Prince Charming from this day forward.”

I turn to the minister, take the ring, and place it at the tip of Amanda's finger.

“This ring is my precious gift to you, as a sign that from this day forward, my love will surround and encircle you.”

Amanda's soft eyes pierce mine, and her clear voice floats straight into my soul.

“The first time I saw you in that bar, my heart whispered, ‘he's the one.’ And even though our relationship started off rocky, my intuition was right. You are my million dreams and prayers come true. You acknowledge my strengths and accept my flaws. You see and nurture all that is me, but,” she says, placing her hand back on my chest, “the absolute best part about you is your kind heart. Despite all that life put in front of you, you faced it and dealt with it in ways that made me love and respect you even more. From this day forward, I promise to always love you and never leave. This, my almost-husband, is the start of our eternal relationship: an eternity of kisses, rom-com movie nights, love, and being inseparable,” she says as she slides the

ring onto the tip of my finger.

“This ring is a token of my endless and abiding love. Just as this circle is without end, my love for you is eternal.”

The minister speaks his words of blessing as we gaze into each other’s eyes. “By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Brian, you may kiss your bride.”

Without wasting a split second, I move closer and cup her face in my hands. Her bright beaming eyes sparkle as I give her my Fox smile and whisper.

“You’re mine now, Goddess.”

The instant my mouth connects with hers, a sense of coming home washes over me, and when she brushes her tongue over my lips, a surge of intense, irresistible desire erupts from within.

“Hello, husband,” she murmurs against my lips.

“Hi there, my gorgeous wife. I can’t wait until I can do naughty, delicious things to you.”

We both turn to the onlookers, who are clapping and hollering and heading in our direction.

THE DAY PASSES in a whirlwind of activities. After a photoshoot in the park where I used to go with my parents, dinner was prepared by my Six-Pack’s kitchen staff. Now everyone is dancing, talking, and having the time of their lives on the dance floor of my very own business; my dream come true. A live band plays music for us and a DJ will take over later.

“Welcome to married life,” my two best friends say as they join me at the bar.

“This is amazing. Look at my folks.” Nick points out as Martha and John move along to the beats. “Even they are joining in the fun before returning home to watch their grandkids.”

My gaze shifts to the beauty I married a few hours ago. She’s laughing and dancing with her best friends, her loose brown hair swaying with her movements.

“Excuse me,” I say as I make my way over to her. “I have to dance with my wife.”

“Great idea. Show her your Foxy dance moves,” Cole jokes.

I stop by the band and ask them to play a special song.

As I walk up to Amanda, my eyes can't help but drink in her show-stopping outfit. She had changed into a dress that was sure to make all the husbands in the room jealous. The silky, form-fitting garment shows off her curves and has a deep plunging back line.

"Mrs. Fox, it's time for our dance," I say when I reach her. She looks up at me and places her hand in mine.

"Our dance?" she asks, raising an eyebrow.

At that moment, the lead singer of the band announces us.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please clear a space for the bride and groom to have their first dance together as husband and wife."

Our guests form a circle around us. When the music begins, I can see tears in Amanda's eyes as she recognizes the song we both fell in love with when we heard it on the radio. I take her into my arms and sway to the music while looking into her eyes.

"I love you, Brownie," I whisper.

"You better or else I'm going to sit your bare butt on a cactus!" she teases.

God, she is my perfect match. One of my hands slides around her waist while the other grazes her bottom as I murmur into her ear, "Let's make beautiful Fox family memories and love each other for the rest of our lives."

"Only if you promise to always add some of your Foxy charm to the mix," she replies with a coy smile.

"What do I get in return?"

A sly smile appears on her lips. "If you do, I'll be yours for life and promise to keep surprising you with new lingerie sets each time a new shipment arrives."

"Deal, Amanda Fox; you belong to me for eternity."

Our lips connect and my once so fearful heart bursts into a song of love as contentment and serenity settle into my core.

I have found where I belong, a joy that I never thought I would be lucky enough to experience. Guess miracles do come true, and I will cherish this one for the rest of my life.

— END —

## THANK YOU

I hope you loved the story of Brian and Amanda. If you did, please feel free to leave an enthusiastic review for ***Beyond Friendship*** at your favored online bookstore.

Don't want to miss a new book? The next book? Sign up for my newsletter on my website: [www.marlynlovebooks.com](http://www.marlynlovebooks.com)

If you haven't read the story of Nick and Emma - *Simply Irresistible*, or of Cole and Alisha - *Unbreakable Bonds* - make sure you do.

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To all of you - thank you from the bottom of my heart!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marlyn Love is a Dutch-based author who brings a personal touch to her contemporary romance novels, drawing from her own experiences and passions in life.

With a loving family and a cherished daughter, Marlyn understands the intricacies of relationships, and her writing reflects the depth of emotions she experiences in her own life. As a romantic soul at heart, she believes in the power of love and infuses her stories with a sense of genuine affection that resonates with her readers.

When she isn't crafting captivating love stories, Marlyn can be found indulging in her favorite pastime: reading romance books. Her love for the genre is evident in her writing, as she immerses herself in the captivating tales of other authors, drawing inspiration from the magic of their words.

For Marlyn, the most cherished moments come from spending time with her family. Whether it's a fun-filled day of activities or a quiet evening at home, their presence fills her heart with joy. Additionally, she treasures her friendship with her best friend, and they share the delight of regular dinner get-togethers, where laughter and heartfelt conversations are a constant.

With her personal touch, Marlyn Love's books transcend beyond being mere stories; they become heartfelt journeys through the intricacies of romance and the essence of human connections. Her writing invites readers to not only immerse themselves in passionate tales of love but also to glimpse the depth of her own soul and the beauty of the world she so ardently envisions.

Embark on an unforgettable adventure within the pages of Marlyn Love's books, where love blooms, passion ignites, and desires are fearlessly explored.

