

Bonus Material. Just for Joy.

(At the end, please don't forget to return to the book or Amazon to leave a review)

My friend Fe.

Have you ever had a friend that makes you think, “Oh, my God, I hit the lottery of girlfriends!” That’s my friend Fe. If girlfriends were rated on a scale from one to a hundred, Fe would score around the seventeen-thousand mark.

I’ll never forget the day I met Fe. At first, I thought she was a paranoid patient who’d wandered out of the psych unit. She squatted under one of the desks at the nurses’ station and shushed me, saying, “I’m hiding from the yellow man who’s chasing me.”

As a psychiatrist—and someone addicted to rescuing people—I felt obligated to help her.

“Tell me more about this yellow man chasing you,” I asked.

She explained in a whisper, “I was doing a swallow evaluation on an old guy with yellow skin, and out of the blue, he started yelling that I was trying to poison him. He chased me all over the unit, flapping like a seal and trying to hit me with his food tray.”

I was about to change my diagnosis from “paranoia” to “mythomania”—pathological lying—when two security guards came looking for Fe to let her know they’d caught the patient and it was safe to come out. It turned out she was telling the truth: the yellow man was a jaundiced patient, disoriented from liver encephalopathy.

As I helped her get from under the desk, noticing her scrubs and hospital ID showing she was a speech therapist, I felt embarrassed for having doubted her. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that, miss,” I said.

And then, Fe flashed me a blinding grin I've since named "Fe's mega-watt smile." She showed me a gold hoop earring and announced, "But look! While I was hiding under the desk I found the earring I lost last month! My favorite earring! Isn't that great?"

And that illustrates Fe's most inspiring trait. Fe is a relentless optimist. She has the weirdest luck in the world. At first sight it seems as if she has terrible luck, but she always finds a way to turn it around at the last minute and get something good out of it. One of Fe's multiple sayings is, "Good luck is nothing but bad luck combined with stubbornness."

Fe has the most magnetic, contagious smile I've seen in my life. It charges you like a zap of energy and makes you instantly feel better. I seriously wish I could bottle that smile and give it as medication to my depressed patients. That grin alone would be enough for me to want to hang with her all the time—but there's more. So much more.

What's your definition of the perfect girlfriend? The best shopping companion in the world? Check! I've never met someone with a better radar for bargains. Fe has insiders on the staff at all the wholesale stores, calling to alert her about new deliveries and upcoming clearance sales. She knows about the best-kept-secret consignment stores, where you can buy designer clothes and accessories for pennies on the dollar. That's how she can afford all those gorgeous outfits on the salary of a speech therapist (while also supporting two kids and two adults by herself.) Fe always looks like she jumped from the pages of a fashion magazine. But she claims that the ultimate secret to scoring the best deals—the best tip I ever learned from her—is this: "Only buy things that make you gasp—things that make your heart skip a beat."

Is your definition of the perfect girlfriend someone who gives you the best makeovers? Check! Fe has a bunch of aunts and cousins who are hairdressers. She grew up working in their salons in the summers, learning all their tricks. She can make the frizziest

hair straight and shiny with her magical flat iron, and turn the limpest hair voluminous and bouncy with the scientific use of curling rollers and hairspray. Her own hair is chameleonic. In the years I've known her, Fe has changed her hair color so many times, the fact that it hasn't all fallen out is proof of her skills. Lately, she has settled for honey blond—a color that goes surprisingly well with her golden skin and accentuates her honey-colored eyes.

Maybe your definition of the ideal girlfriend is the one who babysits your kids for you constantly, without charging you and with minimal notice? Check! Fe's always willing to take my kids on the spot—even overnight—or lend me her adorable mother or grandmother for the task. What's more, she's a certified speech therapist with training on behavioral issues. She works with the most difficult cases of special needs kids other therapists have refused—so a regular bratty kid is nothing for her. My terrible twins have never behaved better than when she's in charge.

But what is *my* definition of the best girlfriend ever? For me, she's the one who's there for you in good and bad. The one who goes the extra mile to cheer you up when you're down. Even more: *the one that tortures the man who makes you suffer.*

When Fe and I first became friends, my late husband Michael wouldn't allow me to leave the house (long story, he had some paranoid jealousy issues), so I started inviting her to come over. It took Fe only two minutes in the same room with Michael to see through his facade of insincere charm and recognize the signs of the emotional abuse he was subjecting me to. She gently probed me about it and I was shocked to hear myself venting to her about the nightmare of my life behind the scenes. Ever since then, Fe became the friend I would call when I thought I was losing it, and who would remind me that the problem wasn't me—*it was him.*

Back then I was still too shell-shocked to do anything about it. I wasn't ready to

leave Michael. And Fe didn't rush me. In the process of leaving her ex herself, she used to tell me, "We're only ready when we're ready." Yet, from the moment she knew, she made my load much lighter to carry by devoting herself in body, mind and soul to the relentless task of *annoying Michael*.

Yes, I feel guilty to confess it here. I know, it was immature. It was passive-aggressive. But I admit that I deeply enjoyed it. Fe was the only person in the world who'd goad tight-ass Michael to lose his temper in public. She'd make innocent comments about his hair gel or his latest TV ad. And every time he'd turn deep red in controlled rage, I felt a little more vindicated for the mistreatment he was subjecting me to.

And it was just small details! For example, Michael was racist and xenophobic. In spite of her last name, Hernandez, Fe was born and raised in the US and has no accent. Yet, on purpose, Fe would fake a thick Hispanic accent when talking to him—just to irritate him. One time, she showed up wearing a poncho, just to make him cringe. That's funny on many levels. Not only because Fe is not Mexican—Fe's family is Dominican—but also because Fe is the ultimate diva of glamour and fashion and would never wear something that wasn't fabulous. Of course, now that I think about it, even that poncho was pretty stylish.

But don't let Fe's obsession with looks—or her apparent air-head disposition—fool you into believing she's superficial. You have to learn to see her depth through her eccentricities. What is the best example? Her resilience.

Someday I hope to write a book called, "Things that only happen to my friend Fe." But I still don't know if the book will be comic or tragic. Anybody I know would have gone crazy with half the things that have happened to Fe in the past few years. Some are just silly things, like the Chihuahua that reappears in her life every so often to torture her. Some are more serious like her father's sudden death, leaving her the only provider for her mother and

grandmother. Or her daughter's serious health issues. Or her divorce.

Ugh, her divorce!

Fe pushes through with her mega-watt smile, and swears she's thankful for the lessons learned. But I know it broke her heart that the man she sacrificed her career plans for betrayed her like that. And I don't mean he cheated on her (not that we know, anyway). What I mean is that he made her promises he never kept—promises to support her in continuing her education after she had supported his. Promises to be there for her. During the years they were married, he abandoned her and her kids emotionally, becoming a workaholic. He took her for granted in the worst of ways. He ignored her pleas for love and time, and silenced her objections with diamonds and luxury. And then the clueless man was shocked and bewildered, unable to understand why she left him.

After that, his ego hurt, he did everything possible to punish her for leaving. Fe kept telling me that the peace of mind she was gaining for leaving that toxic relationship made it all worth it. She dusted herself off, and kept going.

It's no wonder Fe has declared she'll never, ever fall in love with a doctor again.

And now she's much more gun-shy about men than she admits. She claims she wants to meet someone, yet finds excuses to push men away.

I pray Fe finds the love she deserves. But for that, she's going to need to open her mind a little and let go of some of her deal-breakers. I hope someday she learns the same lesson she taught me that changed my life, "When the dress makes you gasp, and the shoes make your heart skip a beat, then they are worth paying full price."

## Richard's Last Letter.

*There's no such thing as an un-hackable computer.* Richard had to remind himself of this as he shredded and threw away the fifth page that night—his latest failed attempt to put feelings on paper. The cursor blinking on his laptop taunted him. It would've been easier if he could've used his laptop instead of writing by hand. But the fear of the FBI—or even worse, someone from the press—intercepting his documents was too much to risk.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, fearing a migraine, he ordered himself to calm down and avoid panicking.

But how not to panic?

How to remain calm when this letter could determine their destiny as a couple? And how to make it different this time? How to ensure this time she wouldn't return it to him torn into pieces, or ignore it? In his last letter he'd even done the unthinkable: He'd dared to put in writing the words, "I love you." The words that had forever eluded his mouth. Not even that had moved her. What else could he say in this letter?

*Why is it that it's so easy to lie, but so difficult to tell the truth?* That had been his biggest handicap in their frustrated love story.

And hers? *Her* biggest block was that she was the expert counseling others through their problems—but was unable to help herself.

An idea sparked in his mind. He needed to tap into the therapist part of her brain to bypass her wounded female ego. He needed to write a letter that spoke about her in third person. As if he were talking about someone else, and needed her counsel.

Looking for inspiration, he poked through the recycling bin file on his computer, searching for some notes he'd drafted for FBI reports while investigating her. Then, he got ready to write.

December 2016

Dear Dr. Clayton:

I need advice for a worrisome problem: I'm in love with a woman who's way out of my league. She's an undercover angel working for the forces of light. Her name is Joy Clayton.

Dr. Joy Clayton should come with her own warning label about addictive potential. She has an energy that draws you in, even before you get to know her and understand why. It's no wonder she's building a fortune with her counseling practice. Poor, unsuspecting patients arrive to her spiderweb and soon are wrapped in the awe-inspiring experience of unconditional love and complete acceptance. She will hypnotize you to believe that you are lovable, and the proof is that she loves you. She makes you feel as if you were a gift to civilization, and you walk away feeling ten feet tall and sure that you're destined for great things. The scariest part of all: she's not faking it. For the time you are with her, she is really, truly seeing you through the eyes of love. I still can't understand how she does that. Maybe she has mastered the superhuman power of loving at will.

Once you have seen yourself through her loving eyes, you have two options: either you run away terrified, not ready for the revelation—or you are hooked, addicted, doomed, transformed into just one more of the pathetic beings I call 'The Joy-junkies.' If you are a fat-wallet customer at her clinic, you can rest assured that, for as long as you are willing to

keep paying her gatekeepers, you have your fix guaranteed. But what happens when you are nothing but a man in love?

Yet in spite of her outer sweetness, she's the the strongest soul you'll ever meet and the fiercest debate opponent you'll ever find. Debating with her is a pleasure only comparable to the perfect match of tennis or racquetball, when every single ball you hit gets hit back to you with such perfection you don't mind not winning the game. With her I could fully open the floodgates and let my mind run. I sometimes wished she was a guy so I could count her among my friends—But unfortunately, she was a woman. And a gorgeous one. The amount of intellectual chemistry between us distracted me just long enough to silence that fact for a while—but not for long.

Yes, there was no thrill in the world equal to having her smart conversation challenge my mind.

Oh well, I stand corrected, there was. It was the thrill of having her body in my arms.

The last time I was with her I was an idiot. I raised my voice, I said things I didn't mean, I left slamming the door. Every minute of my life after that I've regretted it.

All I want now is a chance to make it up to her. To remind her of how good we were together and how happy we used to make each other, effortlessly.

If there's any advice you can give me on how to approach this woman and ask her to forgive me, please let me know. I would forever be in debt to you.

Sincerely,

You know who.

Richard Fields meets T.J. Wagner (The night of the break-in at the Hospice House).

The accountant went over the files in his home office in Winter Park, looking for the sealed envelope Miller had mailed him among his tax reports. Richard couldn't take his eyes off the man.

Richard's photographic memory never forgot a face—well, except for Blair's drunken night. He'd interviewed T.J. Wagner five years back in a case involving drug-money laundering. Back then Wagner worked at a private IRS firm specializing in the wealthy.

But the blondish guy in front of him now looked very different from the man he remembered. He looked younger. Even...good-looking. Nothing like the geeky man he'd met before. His glasses were gone and he had a better haircut, but none of those small details fully explained the transformation.

Every time he found an image he couldn't explain, his well-trained brain raised an alarm. *Could this be an impostor? Should I fingerprint him?* He also looked bulkier than before, but that could have something to do with the fact that he wore a black T-shirt that was too small for him.

On second thought, that was actually a woman's T-shirt.

And now thinking about it, he was wearing it inside out and backward—the label in front. This man must've gotten dressed in a hurry.

*Oh!*

*I caught him red handed!*

That explained that long delay in answering when he'd rung the bell. It would also explain his breathlessness and flush when he rushed to open the door.

“Here it is!” Wagner said, triumphantly. “I never misplace a file!”

The moment the man extended the file to Richard, his text-message alert sounded. Wagner read the message and blushed, and then chuckled.

“Would you excuse me for a minute?”

He disappeared into a door connecting the office to his bedroom. Richard could hear some giggling and chuckling. Then silence. Then soft moaning. Then some more giggling. When the man reappeared he wore a more appropriately sized blue T-shirt and a goofy smile.

Richard had seen that idiotic smile before. And also those glassy eyes and that blissful expression.

That was the face of *a whipped man*. The man who was a disgrace to his gender. The man who had a woman pulling his strings like a puppet—and was happy about it.

He'd seen that face in the mirror months ago.

That was the face of a man who knew exactly where he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

Against his will, jealousy rose in him and he felt he hated that man for his good luck.

The instant message rang at the same time on both his phone and the man's. He could hear a third notification going off on some other cell phone in the bedroom nearby. That was a strange coincidence.

He glanced at his phone. The first line read, "This is not a joke. Help." He didn't recognize the number, so he ignored it.

Wagner read his message and frowned. "I'm really sorry again, Agent Fields." He knocked on the bedroom door and peeked in. "Hope? Baby, would you mind calling your sister and making sure she's fine? She sent me the strangest message."

A petite brunette came out of the room wearing the black T-shirt Wagner had been wearing earlier, paired with inside-out shorts. Richard's heart jumped. Was he hallucinating, seeing Joy's face everywhere? Even with shorter, highlighted hair, that woman's resemblance to Joy was bewildering.

She held a phone to her ear. "She's not answering. You're right. That was a strange message. Joy wouldn't joke about something like that, would she?"

The sound of the name caused the blood to rush from his brain. He grabbed his phone, opened the message and his heart dropped to the floor.

## The First Night Together (Joy's Version)

Some time ago, my sister Hope told me, “It’s like you’re a virgin all over again.” She was right. I was a “thirty-five-year-old *virgin mother of three*.”

And that night, *I knew* that the fine male specimen in front of me was determined to put an end to my virginity.

Lying in his bed, Richard’s hazel gaze burned mine as he held up the blankets beside him. “Come join me, angel. I promise I won’t try any tricks. I’m just dying to hold you in my arms.”

The sudden jolt when switching from *doctor mode* to a *turned-on woman* almost made my brain trip out of my skull. A minute before, I was the physician examining Richard’s groin stab wound in his bedroom after it suddenly started hurting so much we had to cancel our dinner plans. Now, it was taking all of my medical training to peel my eyes off his muscular legs and his tight and extremely brief, black underwear.

He kept holding the blankets up, his eyes inviting me and hypnotizing me at once.

Did he think I was *that* naïve? Even someone with such little dating experience as I’d had knew that getting under the blankets with the man you’ve recently started dating—and to whom you’re insanely attracted to—is playing with fire.

And that’s not even mentioning that this is the man who’d been lying to me since the moment we met. He claimed he was just doing his job—lying comes with being an undercover FBI agent—but still.

This was the man with whom I’d been secretly in love with for months, yet I no longer knew if he really existed.

The news that Richard had been pretending to be someone else all that time hit me

barely two weeks back. It's difficult to conceive that our budding friendship, our intellectual chemistry, our stimulating debates, our unwelcome physical attraction over the past six months—all had been part of his investigation. He was searching for evidence that I'd killed my husband, Michael, two years before.

How could I trust this man ever again?

At the same time, I would trust—I *had* trusted—this man with my life. Literally.

The guilt of knowing he'd been so close to dying while rescuing me last week—the wound I'd just examined providing proof of it—still haunts me. Nightmares, reliving the moment the warm blood splashed my face—the blood from the man he killed inches away from me to save my life—still wake me up.

“Come on, angel.” He smiled weakly. “I promise I'll behave better than Friday—I'm in too much pain to try to seduce you tonight.”

His words brought another rush of guilt. Two nights before, we'd engaged in mind-numbing making out on his couch, and he tried to move things to the next level several times; but I didn't allow it. I accepted his passionate kisses and his sweet words whispered in my ear, yet I fiercely fought his attempts to undress me and stopped his hands short every time they'd wandered to forbidden places.

I knew it wasn't fair. We're adults, not high school kids. He had needs, and so did I. Yet, I couldn't give him what he wanted or needed. I just wasn't ready. And I didn't know how long it would take me to be.

My first time—with Michael on our wedding night—was horrible, traumatic. It was the first proof I ever had of his instability. Honestly, it didn't get much better after that. When the first, and only, man you knew in your life spent more than a decade chipping away your self-esteem and damaging your ability to trust yourself, it's difficult to open up again. Being a psychiatrist didn't help at all.

The sincerity in Richard's eyes was tempting. In that moment, I convinced myself that what moved me was the inexpressive mask on his face and his irregular breathing, giving away that he was making an effort to not show how much pain he was really in.

But maybe, in that critical moment of my life where I had to choose one path in that fork in the road, a part of me which had survived the years of psychological damage with Michael gave me the nod to do what my soul really wanted to do.

Reluctantly, I joined him under the covers.

Finding myself surrounded by his arms felt wonderful. The warmth of his chest was delicious against my skin, which was already turning cold from the glacial temperature he keeps his AC set at. My tension relaxed.

He moaned. "I needed this so much. Your arms are so soothing. I could do this all night." He kissed the top of my head, making my body relax more. He kissed my face again and again.

*How many pairs of hands does this man have?* It must have taken more than one pair to knead the sore muscles in my back and waist in the delightful way he was doing it. Yet another hand ran through my hair, caressing my scalp. His warm mouth left a trail of kisses on my neck, sending shivers all over my body. I closed my eyes, losing myself into the pleasure of his caresses.

Scared by my own desire, I tried to get out of the bed. He groaned in pain.

"Are you okay?" I asked, worried. His eyes were tightly closed. He breathed deeply, waves of nausea and pain alternately crossing his face. I tried to sit up, but his arms held me firmly in place.

"Is there anything I can do?"

He shook his head. "The peak is passing."

I remained still, letting him hold me.

Suddenly, he let go of me and sat up in the bed, panting. “I feel hot. I’m burning up.” He unbuttoned his shirt.

My first thought was one of worry. A minute ago he’d been shivering and needed to get under the blankets. Now he complained of feeling hot. Did he have a fever? Had I missed an infection in his wound?

My hand reached out to feel the temperature of his skin; but at that moment, he shed his shirt on the floor. I stopped midair, gasping at the view of his muscular, shirtless torso.

My jaw dropped. I’d guessed about those muscles many times before, when he’d held me in his arms, but nothing had prepared me for what I was seeing.

Before I had a chance to react, he turned off the nightstand light, took me in his arms again and lay down.

In the darkness, I was suddenly deeply aware of the fact that he was wearing nothing but his briefs. Now his chaste kisses and caresses took a new level of meaning. His hard thighs pressed against mine, separated only by the thin fabric of my jersey dress, and they rubbed skin against skin in those areas where my skirt rode up. He kissed my neck, melting me away. Then his mouth was on mine, gentle, non-demanding, nibbling on my lips.

A hunger for more rose inside me by the second, but then he stopped kissing me and turned me around, spooning me—my back against his chest. My brain was relieved, yet my body cried in protest.

A comfortable silence grew between us. For a while, the only sound was his deep breathing, either fighting the pain or fighting his desire.

“I want to apologize about Friday,” he said. “I was still under the high of the rescue

operation. I was so relieved that we were alive—I wasn't thinking. I know I was pressuring you. I'm sorry."

"Please don't," I said. "I'm the one who has to apologize. I'm always pulling the rug out from under your feet. And I'm sorry. I can't help it."

"*I know.*" His breath against my neck, his arms holding me tight as he spooned me, he whispered, "I know you've never been with another man but Michael."

His words startled me.

How did he know? I didn't want to ask. He and the FBI had bugged my house, spied on my telephone conversations, and even recorded video footage of my most private family moments. It was scary to wonder how much he knew about my deepest secrets, especially considering how little I knew about his real self.

His mouth kissed the back of my ear, sending goose bumps all over my body. His voice was soft as he said, "I know that all this is new for you—dating, progressing physical contact, the idea of intimacy with someone who's almost a stranger . . ." He left a path of kisses down my neck and shoulders, his left hand stroking my back. "And knowing what a bastard Michael was—how cruel he was to you over the years—I know you're scared to open up again. If he's the only thing you ever knew as a man, I can understand your fear."

Tears formed in my eyes.

"At an intellectual level, I know," he said. "Forgive me if sometimes, in the height of passion, I forget. I just want you to know that I understand—and I'm willing to wait."

His words brought me huge relief. Could this man really be this wonderful?

"I want you to know that I'm willing to wait for as long as you need," he said. "I've been dreaming of the moment when you're finally mine for months. More than that. I think

I've been dreaming of you all my life. It's no big deal if I have to wait a little longer."

I felt so deeply thankful for his understanding that I turned around and kissed him. I let my lips communicate my love, my gratitude, and my debt. His body tensed, and he mirrored my passion with deeper and demanding kisses.

My hands took a life of their own and started tracing his hard body. Following my lead, the caresses of his hands on my body and his mouth on my neck turned more and more ardent. I didn't fight it. I felt reassured by the fact that he made no attempt to take off my dress.

I thought my self-restraint was strong enough for the two of us. But I should've known better. I can't even remember who moved first. Next thing I knew, my center was against his, and I could feel his growing arousal through the thin layers separating us.

And then my brain melted away. I'm still not sure exactly what happened after that. I have hazy memories of his hands and mouth all over me—and mine all over him. He was kissing me senseless, touching me and teasing me.

Then *I* was begging him to take me.

And he gladly obliged.

My mind evaporated in a cloud of light and pleasure, and it didn't take long for him to follow after.

Later, still shaking in his arms, barely understanding what had just happened, I sent a prayer of thanks to The Universe. I'd feared that moment terribly—and now we were past it. I felt relieved, and also surprised, that it had been so enjoyable. I also felt one step closer to freeing myself completely from Michael's ghost. I no longer belonged to him; I was Richard's.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was so used to being in trouble with Michael, apologizing was the only thing that came to my mind.

He held me tightly. “Sorry for what, angel?”

I didn’t even know. For making him wait so long? For the time we’d wasted? For having doubted him, not realizing he wasn’t Michael? For having enjoyed myself so much I forgot about his pleasure?

I heard my own voice saying, “I’m sorry if I wasn’t the best lover today. I promise I’ll get better.”

He went silent for a moment. “You’re talking nonsense. There’s no way in the world that could have been improved.” He kissed my head.

Bliss, peace, and gratitude filled me. I knew I was safe now. I knew I could trust him.

*Could I?*

Slowly, an idea crept into my mind and came into focus in the form of a question:  
*How come his leg was no longer hurting?*

I lifted myself up on my elbow to look at his face. His eyes were closed; he was still catching his breath.

Holding his face, my voice was almost a whisper. “Did you . . . did you lie to me about being in pain?”

He gasped, and then laughed. “What? No! How can you think something like that?”

Rolling to his side, he looked in my eyes. “Angel, do you have any idea how hard it was to get you to trust me, and how close I was to losing you? Do you think I could ever be so stupid to ruin it?” Now it was his turn to hold my face with his hands. His eyes pierced

my soul. “Baby, *you are my life*. I know I don’t deserve you. But the gift you gave me tonight—the gift of your trust—is something I’ll never risk losing by lying to you ever again.”

Brushing his lips on mine one more time, he made me lay my head on his chest again, kissed my hair, and closed his eyes. I looked up to his face.

*Wait. Is that a repressed smile twisting his lips?*

*Is that facial expression bliss . . . or is it smugness?*

The relaxed rhythm of his breathing soon announced that he’d fallen asleep. But I stayed awake in his arms for a long time, wondering.

*Am I the luckiest woman in the world?*

*Or am I a fool?*

The First Night Together (Richard's Version).

*Don't believe what Joy says! I wasn't the seducer our first night—she was.*

What can you do when the woman you're crazy about asks you to take off your pants and lie in bed?

At first I thought I'd misunderstood.

"Angel, you don't have to worry. I'm fine."

Yes, the stab wound in my groin was hurting some, but I wasn't a stranger to pain. I could manage.

She didn't want to hear it. "Come on. Take your pain pills and let me examine you."

Yup, she drugged me too!

There was nothing to examine and she knew it. The wound had healed the same day it happened, as if miraculously—well, literally miraculously. If it hurt from time to time it was in the same fashion as when an old war wound barks out or an old scar hurts when it's going to rain—I have tons of those.

With the same determined sweetness I'd seen her use to reprimand a patient for not taking the medication she prescribed, she ordered me into bed; she made me take the pills; she ordered me to strip down my pants. Then she proceeded to stare at me in my underwear.

Frowning, as if it were a great effort just to look, she fixed her eyes on the area where a knife tip had once nicked my artery. It was barely larger than a catheter entry site. What could she possibly be staring at for so long?

I felt her eyes burn me as they wandered from the area of clinical interest to the bulge under my underwear— already threatening to grow just from the weight of her gaze. Then I felt her cold fingers brushing around the skin where my thighs met my abdomen.

I held my breath. *Is it possible that this woman is so innocent she doesn't realize what she's doing to me?*

*Or is she a natural temptress, enjoying the process of torturing me?*

Her eyes, which had been perusing me discreetly, lifted up and met mine. The moment we locked gazes, the air in the room grew thicker. After an eternity of mutual gazing, her eyes slid to the empty space next to me in bed, then back to mine.

*Am I missing a cue here?*

*Does she want me to ask her to join me in bed?*

Without thinking, I lifted a corner of the blankets and let my eyes extend the invitation.

The sudden pallor in her face startled me.

*Uh-oh. Maybe I'd misinterpreted her.*

What if she ran away again, as she'd done so many times before?

A sudden fear of losing her invaded me and I felt a strong urge to wrap her in my arms, so she couldn't leave me.

“Come join me, Angel.” I asked doing my best at faking coolness. “I promise I won't try any tricks on you. I'm just dying to hold you in my arms.”

The mixture of feelings crossing her eyes was eloquent.

Mistrust. Longing. Fear. Desire. Caution.

Her eyes would flick back and forth to my scantily clad lower body. I'd have given anything to witness the inner battle going on in her mind at that moment.

“Come on, Angel.” I encouraged her with sincerity. “I promise I'll behave better than Friday—I'm in too much pain to try to seduce you tonight.”

Okay. I may have played up my pain level a little bit. But I swear I was just trying to reassure her. I had no intention to risk losing her trust.

I'd learned my lesson not to push things with her barely two nights ago, making out on my couch. She had kissed me without restraint, touched me without hesitation, tempted me senseless—yet she fiercely fought my attempts to undress her and stopped my hands short again and again, torturing me, not allowing me to touch her too. She was killing me!

After she left that night and I nursed my case of blue-balls, I made a commitment not to let things get that far again until she started it.

I knew she was wounded. I knew I was privileged to have been granted access to her heart. Who cared if I had to wait a little longer to be granted access to her body?

So that night, holding her eyes while lifting the corners of the blankets, I sent her the telepathic message. *You can trust me.*

And, reluctantly, she joined me under the covers.

Her soft, warm body felt as wonderful as ever in my arms. Words escaped my mouth against my will. “I needed this so much. Your arms are so soothing. I could do this all

night.” I couldn’t help but kiss the top of her head, then her face again, and again.

I swear I wasn’t trying to be smart. My hands took a life of their own. They were like puppies greeting a master who arrives home after a long absence.

I love that woman so much—and I admit I’m bad at saying it. I couldn’t have enough of her. Her touch. Her smell. Her energy. My body craved her, although not nearly as much as my soul did. But then I heard her moan, and as it usually happens when I’m with her, soon the switch in my brain flipped from “adoration” to “desire” and yearning clouded my mind.

She tried to wiggle her way out of the bed, and unknowingly rubbed against me, firing bullets of desire through my body and increasing my arousal.

I groaned, in tortured pleasure.

“Are you okay?” she asked, worried. I closed my eyes tightly and breathed deeply, hoping to conceal from her the state of lust she’d put me in. Waves of heat came crashing over me. My arms held her firmly in place, afraid she’d leave me.

“Is there anything I can do?”

My mind offered many images of things she could do to me right at that moment. With her hands, with her mouth, with her whole body—God, I’d settle for her to keep rubbing herself against me. Anything.

I shook my head. “The peak is passing.” The peak of my last lust wave, I meant. I kept holding her, trying to breathe through the temptation.

Then I suddenly felt suffocated in heat by my own shirt.

“I feel hot. I’m burning up.” I didn’t think much of it. I unbuttoned my shirt and took

it off. Then, I turned off the nightstand light, took her in my arms again and lay down.

In the darkness, I started calming down. I tried to reassure her with gentle, non-demanding little kisses in her neck and in her lips. But the chemistry between us is such that even the most chaste kisses threatened to unsettle me again. Before that shifted to more, I turned her around, spooning her—her back against my chest. We stayed that way in silence for a while.

“I want to apologize about Friday,” I said, sincerely. “I was still under the high of the rescue operation. I was so relieved that we were alive—I wasn’t thinking. I know I was pressuring you. I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t,” she said. “I’m the one who has to apologize. I’m always pulling the rug out from under your feet. And I’m sorry. I can’t help it.”

“*I know.*” If she only suspected how much I knew. “I know that you’ve never been with another man but Michael.”

My words startled her. With reverence, I kissed the back of her ear. “I know that all this is new for you—dating, progressing physical contact, the idea of intimacy with someone who’s almost a stranger...” Against my will, my lips left a path of kisses down her neck and shoulders, and my free hand stroked her back. “And knowing what a bastard Michael was—how cruel he was to you over the years—I know you’re scared to open up again. If he’s the only thing you ever knew as a man, I can understand your fear.”

She didn’t answer so I continued, “At an intellectual level, I know. Forgive me if sometimes, in the height of passion, I forget. I just want you know that I understand—and I’m willing to wait.”

I could feel the tension leave her body.

“I want you to know that I’m willing to wait for as long as you need,” I went on. “I’ve been dreaming of the moment when you’re finally mine for months. More than that. I think I’ve been dreaming of you all my life. It’s no big deal if I have to wait a little longer.”

She turned around and kissed me, this time with much deeper and demanding kisses. I mirrored her passion and followed her lead, staying behind her—letting her tell me how far to go with my caresses.

But then the switch flipped again in my brain. And I barely remember what happened after that.

That night, she was the closest thing to a virgin I ever had. She trembled at my lightest touch, as if any caress was new to her. She was pushing me away and pulling me closer at the same time. She begged me to stop one second, then begged me to continue the next. When she finally asked me to take her, I touched heaven. After wanting her for so long, I’d prepared myself for a possible disappointment. On the contrary, having her was above and beyond my wildest fantasies.

Later on, lying in each others’ arms, when I could hardly think, I heard her apologize and promise ‘she’d do better the next time.’ I was so blown away, I could hardly comprehend what she meant. I couldn’t believe that what we’d just done could ever be improved.

She was a perfectionist and an overachiever. She soon proved me wrong.