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I. My friend Allison: An interesting specimen.

There's a word I didn't know existed until I met my friend Allison. It's the word "Misandric," which means, "Person who practices hatred or prejudice against the male gender." That's the opposite equivalent to the more common word "Misogynist" (a person who hates the female gender). Yes. My friend Allison is a *misandric*.

Allison is nationally infamous for her disdain for men. She wrote a number one bestseller on the topic of how to send them all to hell and become a self-fulfilled, something-something, yadda-yadda, independent woman. I love an independent woman as much as the next girl. But what concerns *me* is that Allison takes her feminism a little too far.

With her blond hair, big boobs and long legs, Allison gets tons of male attention when we go out together. But if any man ever dares to approach her, he gets a sour disappointment.

Without moving a facial muscle, Allison shoots him "the glacial glare." It's that icy stare where she slowly slides her eyes up and down the guy and sends him a telepathic message that says something like this (imagine me speaking in a low-pitched, calm, hypnotic voice).

"Your gender is responsible for millennia of oppression of women. You are a *worm*, and deserve nothing but for me to step on you, squashing you. But I won't, because I pity you. I can read every screwed-up trauma of your childhood, and see through your *façade* of bragging behavior to compensate for your small penis."

And then the poor guy shrinks, gets flashbacks of every childhood scolding he ever received from a severe, female authority figure, and walks away from the table slouching and dragging his feet. Actually, I suspect guys go straight home to cry under their blankets, sucking their thumbs.

I bet right now you're rolling your eyes and thinking that I'm exaggerating. But I swear I'm not.

I admit that when I met Allison, I didn't like her very much. The first time I met her, she had come to my friend Joy's house for an emergency therapy session in the middle of the night. She was pretty harsh, reprimanding Joy for a setback in her recovery after a heartbreak. For a while, I thought she was mean and cold. And even after I figured

out she really cared for Joy and was doing the best she could to help her, I was still a little scared of her. But lately, I've gotten to know her better and my opinion has changed.

People say I'm too optimistic and see saving graces where there are none. But I have the feeling Allison's a softy deep inside. Even when she keeps reprimanding me about my "over-the-top body language," (I have no idea what she's talking about), and rolling her eyes about Joy's tendency to hug everybody, and Hope's double-entendre jokes, I know she loves us.

And now I've started learning more about her history and seeing through her multiple layers. Take her obsession with Botox, for example. I've learned recently that Allison started using Botox like a decade ago, in her early 20's, *to make herself look older!* She was trying to gain a name, counseling women, and nobody took her seriously because of her youth. By using Botox she didn't need, and stretching some truths on her CV, she made people believe she was older, and only *appeared* young. And after that, hiding under the Botox to conceal her emotions from the world became an addiction to her.

I don't mean she *lied* on her CV. She claimed back then that she'd been "helping women for over ten years" and it was true. She has volunteered at various Women's shelters since her teen years—long before getting her degree in Social Work and her PhD in psychology. She calls it her way to pay it forward for the help she, her mother and sister received after escaping her stepfather when Allison was little. By the way, Allison would kill me if she knew I was telling you this. She keeps her volunteer work hidden so it doesn't affect her reputation as a ball-busting, evil witch.

And yes, you read that right: since her teen years. That was Allison's main problem: she had to grow up too fast. Her mother had always been a big child who never learned to stand on her two feet. Escaping her abusive husband—Allison's stepfather—was the only burst of courage she ever showed. After him, there was a parade of good-for-nothing men and bad relationships putting her mother in a perennial emotional rollercoaster—unable to be there consistently for her girls. Allison learned to cook her own meals when she was still too short to reach the stove without a stool. She had to take over managing the household's money when she was barely old enough to know what money was. I once heard that when she was only eight, she had to start hiding the car

keys from her mother so she wouldn't drive drunk. Yup, Allison learned early in life she better take care of herself, so she never relied on anyone to help her.

Ever since I learned about her difficult childhood, I cut Allison slack. I no longer get annoyed for her refusal to let people hug her—though I still jokingly call her *the unhuggable porcupine*. No wonder she jumps at physical touch, when she had to constantly protect herself from an abusive stepfather. No wonder she mistrusts all men and refuses to depend on them. Allison is the only woman I know who never had a crush or boyfriend in her teenage years. She dated some in college, but her first official “boyfriend” was that gay colleague she agreed to fake-marry to provide him with a “beard” in exchange for him helping her in her career as a therapist.

Speaking of different types of beards. My mother used to say, “God gives the best beard to those who have a small jaw.” It's supposed to mean that if you're lacking some skills, God gives you a different set of gifts to compensate, and you end up better off than anyone else. Well, Allison is an example of that. The worse she treats men, the more they gravitate toward her—I suspect some men like to be treated *bad*. And the less pretty she tries to make herself, the more she shines.

Like the diva of fashion, hair and makeup I am, it kills me! Allison tries *very hard* to look plain and ugly—which is a lost cause, because she has one of the prettiest faces I've ever seen. I so envy her flawless, porcelain skin and delicate features. Her lustrous golden hair doesn't need all the keratin, hair dryers and hot ironing mine needs. (But, of course, nobody is happy with what we got and she keeps talking about how much she envies my curly hair.)

And with those unrealistic long legs and narrow hips, which are the obsession of designers everywhere, Allison could be the queen of fashion! But no. If you open Allison's closet all you will find is a collection of *business suits* (yuck!).

But I suspect she's putting on an act and she does care about how she looks. First, because she appreciates a designer stiletto—her feet are always stunning compared to her drab suits. And if you snoop in her closet (which she knows I have) well-hidden behind the gray, navy and black suits, you'll find a handful of light blue dress-suits, which bring out her eyes very nicely. Lately, as she has softened up a little and has started to take fashion advice from me, I've learned the trick. If I want to get an inch away from her

comfort zone and accept trying on, say, a sundress, I just have to make sure it is light blue.

Sorry, I get carried away talking about fashion and looks. My point is that in the same way she pretends not to care about looks but I know she does, I suspect that deep inside she also exaggerates her disdain for men. I think that after seeing how happy Hope, Joy and I are with our guys, her conviction about the hopelessness of men has weakened. Whenever I try to bring it up, she scoffs at us and rolls her eyes. She claims she's happy by herself and she doesn't need male company to have a great life. She says she sends flowers to herself regularly, goes out to fancy dinners on her own, and is always talking about taking beach-side hotel weekends or touring Europe alone—the trip plans are all a bluff; she works too hard and never takes time off.

I wish Allison could find a good guy to prove to her not all men are evil. One who could help her find the joys of childhood again—that childhood she had to give up too soon, to take care of herself. But it's going to take a very special man. One who doesn't take no for an answer. One self-confident enough—or crazy enough—to be immune to the effects of the “glacial glare.”

It sounds impossible, but hey! I'm the eternal optimist, right?

II. Shawn tells the story of his friend Jay.

Did you know that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (the DMS-V), clearly states that for a behavior to be considered pathological, “it needs to interfere with the person’s functioning or interactions?” Jay is one of the happiest, most successful men I know; so I’m holding onto that not to diagnose him with some psychiatric condition.

Jay is the crazy guy who shows up to your birthday party wearing little more than his birthday suit. And trust me, with all those ridiculous muscles he has, no straight man wants to look at *that*. Then, when you ask him what on earth was he thinking, he answers something crazy like, “Today is the national day to protest women’s objectification. As the proud feminist I am, I’m wearing only my Speedo, to show my support for the cause—today I’m letting women objectify *me*.”

Jay is the man who’d show up to a doctor’s appointment riding *a horse*. I know that because it took days to clean the mess his last ride left in front of my medical office building. And then when you ask him, “What the feck is this about?” he shoots you a suspiciously innocent look and answers, “My skateboard is broken.”

The funniest part is that he acts as if whatever weird behavior he’s showing was the most natural thing in the world and, before you know it, he’s brainwashing you to believe that, maybe it’s not that *he* is crazy—but the rest of the world is taking life too seriously.

But most of the time, his eccentricities are related to his work. Jay is a self-proclaimed entrepreneur and life-coach. I can’t help from rolling my eyes at the title. I don’t care how many gazillions of followers he has on YouTube and social media; when you show up at my house dressed like a Roman gladiator, you can’t expect me to respect you.

He’s in the fitness business, and the premise of his work is that people can only stick to exercise if the program engages their inner child—in other words, if it’s *really fun*. So he has a bunch of custom-made programs where men get to dress up like their favorite characters from science fiction movies, history and legend. I sneered at the idea the first time I heard it, but I have to admit I’ve never had so much fun working out than that day he challenged me to a light-saber duel.

And that's Jay's biggest merit: He's found a way to make a living doing what he does best, which is *being a big kid*. Jay never grew up. I mean, he has grown up responsibilities; he owns properties, he pays taxes, he employs a bunch of people... Gee, some months he makes more money than *I* make as a doctor (as an entrepreneur, his income is unpredictable). But he somehow has managed to never lose his childlike enthusiasm about life.

Jay finds everything fascinating. He can entertain himself for hours studying bugs and snails in my backyard, or looking at the mineral layers in a rock. He's always happy to play catch with a stranger's dog, chase doves and seagulls, or climb a tree. His expensive collection of action figures is the envy of all his friends—including *me*.

In spite of his scary looks—he's a six-foot-five giant made of solid muscle—he's the most pacifist man in the world. He never messes with other people. So no, he does *not* fit the criteria for a psychiatric patient—that's my theory, and I'm sticking to it.

Okay, he has done *some* things that could be questionable—like the time he stalked his first girlfriend. But, hey, you have to cut the guy some slack. I think he was a teenager when they dated, and ever since they broke up he regresses from time to time into the delusion that she was the only woman who could've made him happy. Did I just say the word “delusion?” Maybe that's too strong of a word. Let's say “disproportionately strong conviction.”

Jay never has trouble finding short-term female company, but no woman seems to stick around for long. Women see this man with his ridiculously bulky arms and chest, and washboard abs, and they immediately assume he's going to be a bad-boy romance novel hero. Good-hearted women take one glance at him and write him off as out of their league—or worse, assume he's dumb and a playboy—and avoid him. Most women who approach him are the ones who are looking for a quick adventure—fulfilling a fantasy with the archetypal romance-novel cover model. They fall right at his feet and in his bed. And then when they find out he's an incurable romantic and sweet guy, and when they get a taste of his childlike attitude, they feel disappointed and dump him. So his heart has been broken more than once.

But I don't believe him when he says he's devastated about that. I suspect that he uses his fixation with his first girlfriend as an excuse to never commit. From time to time

he becomes obsessed with other women—usually tall blondes, who remind him of his tomboyish first girlfriend. But the truth is that if anyone gives any sign of wanting something durable, he quickly loses interest.

A long time ago, I gave up any hope that Jay is going to settle down and behave like a grown up. The only time he tried—in an effort to please his powerful businessman of a father—it almost killed him. But I do hope that he finds a good-hearted woman who's finally willing to see through his muscles and glimpse his soul. I hope he finds a woman who realizes the catch he is, grabs him and doesn't let him go.

III. Deleted scenes: (Believe it or not, this is just a fraction of them.)

Note. Bold color indicated where the deleted segment starts.

I- Shawn and Richard remember when Shawn saved Richard's life in the ICU.

“Sonova Beach, you’re still alive?” Shawn teased. “I must’ve done a good job gluing your pieces together in the ICU back then, *Agent Fields*.”

Richard smirked. “Drop the formalities, Shawn. Don’t expect me to call you *Dr. McDevitt* just for the trivial fact that you ripped me from the hands of death three times.”

Shawn looked at Richard, puzzled. “Wait...*three* times?” Trying to recall, he counted on his fingers. “The day you had the tension pneumothorax and I stuck the emergency chest tube in you. The day you extubated yourself and I re-intubated you...What was the third one?”

“The day you caught the nurse about to give me an injection that belonged to another patient, which would’ve dropped my blood pressure and killed me.”

Shawn frowned. “Geez, I have no recollection of that one. I must’ve been half asleep.”

Richard eyed him, frowning. “I was trusting you with my life that day—and you were sleeping on the job?”

With a chuckle, Shawn clarified, “Some people talk in their sleep. Some people sleep-walk. Me? I *sleep-diagnose*. But hey, don’t complain! I didn’t do such a bad job after all, did I?” Smiling, he wagged his eyebrows. “You should see me in action when I’m awake!”

(Later on, Shawn would repeat that last sentence to Fe whenever they talked about their first night together).

2- Halloween night: Richard and Shawn talk about how it feels to have found "The One."

[Fe and Shawn finish their conversation about Aidan]. "The experts may've been wrong altogether about his diagnosis. For all we know, he might be just a regular, quirky kid—like Diego, confused in a bilingual household."

A rush of excitement rose in him but it died quickly, drawn by a terrifying fear of raising his hopes and then becoming disappointed, if proven wrong.

Joy entered the house from the front porch. "Fe, the twins are falling asleep. I got Aidan and Diego in your car and I'm going to head home."

Fe composed herself. "Thanks Joy. We're heading home, too." She didn't let go of Shawn's hand as she turned to look at him. "You go to sleep right now, understood? Don't make me come back and beat you unconscious." With a faint smile, she squeezed his hand one more time before releasing it, and walked out.

Shawn felt her absence from the room as if gravity had increased in strength. But he was too numb, and confused from the sleep deprivation and the events of the night, to have the strength to stop her from leaving.

Richard came back in and Joy addressed him. "We'll wait for you in the car, sweetie."

"I'm almost done."

They kissed briefly, and then she walked away. Richard seemed hypnotized as his eyes followed her every step.

Next to him, Shawn teased. "Keith's right. You're *so* whipped, man."

Richard's laughter surprised Shawn. Dang it that man was happy. With a smirk, he answered, "Yup, Shawn. I'm whipped. And you envy me so much for that!"

Shawn processed the words. After a moment in silence, he asked, "Richard, how does it feel to know you're with the last woman you want to be with in your life?"

Richard erased the smugness from his face. He turned to make sure Joy was out of earshot, and then moved closer to Shawn. "Do you remember in the old days, before digital cable, and streaming and even TiVo or DVR? Do you remember sitting in front of the TV changing channels constantly, never finding anything to watch that held your

attention? And even if you did find something half-interesting, you couldn't help keep flipping channels, afraid of missing something better playing elsewhere?"

Shawn nodded.

Richard made a *voila* gesture with his hand. "That was my life before."

"And now?" asked Shawn.

He smiled. "And now life is like finding a never ending-supply of your ultimate favorite TV program that you can stream all the time. You don't care what's playing on the other channels. You never want it to end. You have to force yourself to pause to sleep, or eat, or go to work."

Shawn felt a pang in his heart. He completely understood what Richard meant. If he could've ever convinced Fe to give him a try, he'd feel the same way.

3- *T.J.'s deleted scene.*

Note from the author: Tom (T.J.) Wagner—musical genius with an accountant day job, and self-proclaimed beta-male who domesticated Hope—is one of my favorite characters. I try to bring him back for some guest appearance in every new book in the series. Unfortunately, when the time to cut words arrives, his scenes are the first to go because they're written for my enjoyment and don't necessarily advance the plot. Here is one of his deleted scenes from Faith is Fearless—the day the girls counseled Fe after the night Gabriela was sick:

"Men love to be released from the stress of having to make the first move." [Hope said.]

Allison bobbed her head. "I disagree. Men are psychologically wired to want to be the hunter. That comes with their tiny Neanderthal brains. And if you want a man in your life, you have to learn to play dumb, make them believe they're the ones seducing you. I hate that game and that's why I'm alone."

Fe turned to Joy, still sitting on the couch, as the tiebreaker. She shrugged. "I'm against generalizations. I like to give men the benefit of the doubt that they're not all the same."

“Gosh!” Fe sighed. “It’s a pity that my three brothers are such a disaster of retro machismo. I wish I had a male consultant to ask questions like this.”

At that moment, Hope’s fiancée Tom arrived to pick her up. Hope rushed to greet him with a kiss. “Perfect timing! Sweetie, Fe wanted to ask for your male opinion on something.”

He turned to Fe, smiling. “How can I help you?”

Fe always felt awkward around Tom. He was such a nice guy, yet Hope had shared so many inappropriate stories about their steamy sex life Fe felt embarrassed in front of him. “Well, T.J., Hope says that men like it when women take the initiative seducing them. Is that true?”

He turned to Hope. “Well, if my beautiful fiancée says so, then it must be true. Hope is *always* right.”

He kissed Hope on the cheek. Joy and Fe couldn’t help the *Awww* from escaping them. Darn it, that guy was the Nobel Prize of boyfriends.

Allison rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on, Wagner! You don’t fool me for one minute! You’re all syrupy with Hope, making her think she has you under her control. But the truth is that you guys invariably end up doing whatever *you* want, and you always make her believe it was her idea.”

He turned to Hope. “Baby, do you think that’s true?”

Hope huffed. “Of course not!”

He turned to Allison, smiling. “Then, if Hope says it’s not true, it must not be true. Hope is always right.” A spark of naughtiness shone in his baby blue eyes, making him look like a mischievous kid.

Fe held a chuckle. Yup. Hope had found her match.

4- *Shawn's expanded introduction:*

As a physician working with the sickest of the sick —the patients in the intensive care unit —Dr. Shawn McDevitt had a very strict set of rules. The first one was “Always expect the worst and prepare for it.” The second one was “Patients often seem to improve right before taking a turn for the worse.” In other words, “If things are looking bad, worry. But if things start looking better, *worry even more.*” The third and strongest rule was “Patients are often kept alive by the sheer mental power of their physicians. If you stop fretting about them for just one minute, they might die.”

Okay, his scientific brain knew that the last rule was starting to enter the realm of superstition, but still, the weight of the evidence was there. Every time he'd taken a day off as a resident rotating in the ICU, one of his patients had died. So now, in his scant days off, he constantly checked on his patients from his home computer—if anything, to send them the telepathic message of holding onto life.

Unavoidably, those rules had taken over other aspects of his life: He now suspected that if he stopped obsessing about the finances of his practice just one minute, the numbers would collapse. If he stopped fretting about the Health-care reform for just one second, the government would screw it up. He admitted he was now entering the realm of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. If he were his own patient, he would've put himself on medication. But by now adrenaline was so second nature, it didn't bother him anymore.

The fact was, if someone could've summarized Shawn's philosophy of work—and life—in one sentence, that sentence would be. *“Never stop worrying.”*

5- *Too-clinical deleted scene (too much scientific information about autism):
Shawn meets with Dr. Luqman:*

The late-middle age doctor sitting across the desk in front of Shawn had a nice baritone, clear voice. Still, Shawn had a hard time assimilating his words. “Dr. McDevitt, I’m afraid that the second opinion evaluation also led to the same conclusion. Your son is on the autism spectrum.”

A breathless silence fell in the small, neat office enveloping Shawn and the doctor. At that moment, he felt he deeply hated Dr. Luqman, this lifeless developmental pediatrician who seemed to find pleasure in breaking bad news to him. But Shawn knew it was only the syndrome of shooting the messenger. He, himself, had been the innocent bystander of loads of anger from heart-broken relatives of patients, looking for a scapegoat to blame for the loss of their loved ones.

Dr. Luqman continued. “The team at the Smith’s Center was more specific than me. In their evaluation Aidan scores more than just on the spectrum. He scores as autism with substantial to severe impairment in communication and social skills.”

Shawn felt the pain rise inside. For the past week he’d been on a state of denial, hoping that this second opinion evaluation would dismiss Dr. Luqman’s impression. “I disagree. He’s not the most affectionate kid, but I’ve seen him smile and laugh. And I think he’s made some improvement talking since I started him on speech therapy.” Shawn was lying to himself, trying to be optimistic. Aidan had shown no progress and showed zero interest in interacting with the two speech therapists he’d taken him to see so far.

Dr. Luqman rubbed a hand on his shiny forehead, increasingly exposed by a receding hairline. Shawn didn’t like his condescending tone. “Contrary to popular belief, kids in the autistic spectrum can smile and laugh, and even be affectionate. But you’re a physician; you must’ve noticed the signs. It’s beyond his speech delay. It’s his inability to tolerate any changes in his routine. It’s his melting down under strong sensory stimulation. It’s his inappropriate play for age.”

Shawn dared to look at Aidan, sitting on the office’s carpeted floor, for the first time since the meeting started. His blue eyes—just a shade bluer than his father’s blue-

green ones—deviated immediately, avoiding his Dad’s gaze as if it had burned him. Otherwise an auburn-haired miniature copy of his father, he sat engrossed, spinning the wheels of the car over and over again, making no effort to engage in pretend play. Shawn had bought so many toys in the past three months since recovering him, yet all Aidan did with them was put them in and out of his toy chest and move them from one toy chest to the other one, showing no other interest in playing with them. Shawn felt his heart crack in pain.

“I don’t understand!” he said now fighting the knot in his throat. “He was perfectly fine before his mother took him away. He was calling me ‘Dada,’ he was starting to talk in short sentences. This has to be related to the trauma of whatever he saw during that year away!”

Dr. Luqman’s eyes were loaded with pity. Shawn hated it. “Dr. McDevitt, that’s typical for autism. The kids seem to be developing well, then some time between eighteen and thirty months they start regressing and losing vocabulary. The regression was probably starting when you got separated from him and you just hadn’t noticed. The time away was probably only a coincidence.”

Shawn knew that was plausible. The months preceding Tara’s disappearance he’d been caught up between the drama of the relationship demise and the usual chaos at work and had not really been present for Aidan. He wondered now if things would’ve been different if he had.

Covering his face with his hands, he breathed deeply, trying to regain his composure and not crash in front of the doctor. “What’s next?”

“I’m afraid we’ve lost quite a bit of time,” Dr. Luqman answered. “Most studies suggest that the best results from speech and developmental therapy happen if treatment is started early, before the age of three.”

Shawn felt his anger for the doctor rise again. Yup, this man found pleasure in breaking bad news to him.

The man adjusted his thick glasses. “But if there was any chance for improvement it would be enrolling him in an intense program of speech, occupational and developmental therapy. I’m talking about as many hours a day as he could tolerate.”

“You just tell me what to do. I’ll do it,” Shawn replied, raising his hands. “I don’t care how much it costs. Where should I take him?”

Dr. Luqman adjusted the lapels of his yellowish-white coat. “The Smith Center, where you just took him to have his second opinion evaluation, is the best in the state for its intense programs.”

Shawn felt a spark of hope rise inside him. “So how do I get him enrolled? Should I contact the same doctor who evaluated him?”

“No, you need to make an appointment with the multidisciplinary team for a different type of evaluation to determine his individualized needs.”

More evaluations?

The doctor continued, “The last time I checked, they had a three month wait for an appointment to see the multidisciplinary team and a six month wait to start the program.”

Shawn felt he hated the man again. “You just told me I have wasted too much time. And now you are telling me to wait nine months to start anything?”

The doctor lifted his hands in an apologetic gesture. “If I were you, I’d put Aidan on the waiting list for the Smith Center, and in the meantime get him private speech therapy. As much as he can tolerate. Unfortunately, being over age three, he’s no longer eligible for the Early Intervention State Programs. Once he turns four and enters VPK the school system can provide some help in a special education classroom.”

Shawn cringed. For an overachiever like him, a special education classroom sounded like the worst thing that could ever happen to his son. This had to be a nightmare.

Suddenly every other problem bothering him earlier seemed to shrink in comparison. *His kid wasn't normal.* He may never be able to care for himself. Why was he so upset about that little dent on his car door earlier? Why had he made such a big deal about that insurance denial for a bronchoscopy yesterday?

The doctor searched for something in one of the drawers of his desk, then handed Shawn a few brochures. “These are some of the private providers my patients have used in the past.” He separated one of the brochures from the rest. “Now this particular provider would be my top recommendation. The owner used to run the Smith Center, then left to start her own private place. Per my understanding, she’s in the process of retiring, but perhaps you could convince her to take over this case. Her business card is attached to the brochure.”

Shawn read the card. “Marla Desmonds, Speech Pathology and Developmental Therapy. Rainbows Child Services.”

6- Too-sexy deleted scene: After Shawn and Fe fell into the pool.

Wrapped in Shawn’s bulky terry-robe while her clothes dried, her hair wet and curly from the dive in the pool, Fe felt the least glamorous she’d ever felt. The shorts Shawn had lent her were too big for her and kept falling down, yet his shirt didn’t cover enough to be worn as a decent dress. Not only that, it was too thin to be worn without underwear. She wished she’d been able to wear the shirt, though. It was the softest, most delicious fabric she’d ever touched. Shawn had explained that even his most casual shirts had cashmere or silk blended into the cotton. Scrubs aside, he refused to buy clothes that “didn’t feel exquisite against his skin.” The man might be a gloomy workaholic, but he did know how to enjoy the good parts of being rich.

Now the babysitter had taken Aidan for lunch and nap, and it was time for the Saturday teaching session.

“Today we're going to talk about chores,” she said. “It's important for Aidan's future independence that you get him involved in them early on. And knowing how much he enjoys putting things in bins and sorting, he may enjoy some cleaning activities. Make sure you have him with you, watching, when you load the dishwasher or run laundry.”

The lost look in Shawn's eyes told her they'd crashed into a wall again.

“Everything okay, Shawn?”

He shrank in his chair. “I...I've never washed laundry in my life.”

Fe was shocked. “You're kidding me. When you were a kid your parents never gave you chores to do?”

His expression was apologetic. “We had a maid and a laundry service.”

Fe stared at him blankly. “Of course you did.” She rolled her eyes. “Okay, then the first step is going to be to teach *you* how to do laundry, so you can pass the torch to the new generation.” Holding together the edges of her robe, she walked to the laundry room and he followed her. “Where's your hamper?”

“The laundry service must have picked it up recently. But come with me, I'm sure we can find some dirty clothes.”

They went up to Aidan's room and he collected a few little socks and t-shirts lying on the floor for her to put in an empty pillowcase. It wasn't much to fill a load so he had her follow him to his bedroom.

Being in Shawn's master suite with him felt strangely intimate. Wrinkled sheets still covered the bed where he'd slept the night before. She could see the shower and the jetted tub in the adjacent master bath. Her mind offered images of him in all those places and she felt blood rush to her face and to her lower body.

He handed her a small pile of clothes he'd gotten from the bathroom floor, pajamas and a couple of T-shirts. She could hardly believe how soft all his T-shirts were. He wasn't kidding about the silk and cashmere blends. But the clothes' softness was only the beginning. They were saturated with his smell—a wonderful scent she couldn't identify. She had to fight the impulse to stand there, like an idiot, smelling his used T-shirts. She stuffed them into the empty pillowcase.

He approached with a second small pile of clothes in his arms and took the pillowcase from her hands. "I'll take care of these. I won't make you touch my underwear." He dropped a handful of boxer briefs in the pillowcase. His eyes were playful when they searched for hers with a smile. "Unless you want to."

The image of her touching the underwear he was currently wearing crossed her mind and she had to get a grip on herself to close her own mouth.

Wait. Is he flirting with me?

Before she could answer the question, he'd walked into the closet, signaling her to follow him.

Shaking herself from her thoughts, she joined him in. The giant closet was the size of her current bedroom. It was lined with cedar and smelled wonderfully. So that was part of the smell in his clothes she loved so much!

Only half the closet was filled with his clothes. The other side was empty, as if inviting her.

As he unsuccessfully looked for dirty clothes, she couldn't resist the temptation of glancing around. He had so many shirts he could probably wear a different one every day for months. Jeans and casual shirts hung from a separate rod. Scrubs in a different section. A cedar dresser probably stored underwear and socks.

"I spilled some coffee on this shirt earlier, I guess we'll get it washed too."

Fe couldn't believe it when he took his shirt off in front of her, with no signs of modesty, and handed it to her.

He's doing this on purpose. He knows how much it rattled me seeing him shirtless in the pool.

She tried unsuccessfully to keep her eyes off his chest. "Have you been...working out or something?"

He smiled. "My friend Jay makes me do pushups and sit-ups every time I can." He looked down. "Now that I think about it, these pants could use a wash too."

He reached for his pants button and she held her breath. He went as far as unbuttoning them and sliding down the zipper, but then stopped and looked at her with a teasing smile. "Gotcha!"

She forced a nervous laugh. "Very funny, Shawn."

His laughter sounded much more sincere than hers. He walked toward her slowly and rested his hand on the empty closet wall behind her, corralling her with his body. She was very aware of the fact that he was shirtless and his pants were unbuttoned and unzipped, teetering over his hips as if about to fall any moment. She was also deeply aware of the fact that she was naked under the bathrobe.

"You could probably drop that robe, too, right now and make yourself comfortable, Fe," he said. "You and I are past the time for shyness. We've bared our souls to each other so many times that seeing each other's bare bodies would be nothing. Don't you think so?"

The intensity in his gaze agitated her. She swallowed. "No. Baring souls and bodies is not the same."

He nodded. "You're right." Slowly, he moved his face toward her.

She held her breath, her heart racing, anticipating a kiss. But instead she felt his warm breath in her ear as he whispered. "It didn't hurt to ask."

Before she knew what had happened, he'd moved away, slipped on a new shirt, and walked out of the closet.

7- Deleted scene from Thanksgiving (and the answer to the question, why was Shawn carrying an inhaler with him the day Gabriela got sick):

Hours later they'd talked about everything. From her summers in the DR, which taught her perspective about what poverty was, to his one childhood trip to Ireland, where he met distant cousins who taught him cuss words in Gaelic.

She was surprised to hear he spent many days in the hospital as a child, affected by asthma. No wonder he'd felt inspired to become a lung specialist. She now understood his love for bike riding. He'd been the weak kid in the family, and bike riding was the only athletic activity he'd proudly mastered. Luckily, he'd mostly outgrown his asthma, but he still had some symptoms once in a blue moon, and hence carried an inhaler in his car constantly, just in case.

The party was coming to an end. Happy to be allowed up way past their bedtime, the kids sat at their little table, resting and snacking after a long game of tag.

Aidan seemed transformed into the perfect little kid. Sitting at the low kiddie table, he imitated Diego as he took sips from his chocolate milk carton. Fe and Shawn watched them from the outdoor wicker sofa.

"Wow. He seems to be learning more from the other kids than from me!" Fe said. "We should introduce a Play Group therapy session and I'll only charge you half the usual price those days."

"Deal!" He sighed and let himself drop back, reclining on the couch. "I'm exhausted! I can't wait to go to bed and sleep in tomorrow."

She chuckled. "Lucky you. I'm not sleeping much tonight. Glennys and I are camping out in front of the superstore to take advantage of the Black Friday door-buster deals."

He held a chuckle. He was used to Fe's money-saving schemes. She always bought her Halloween decorations on November first, and her Christmas decorations on

January second. Her garage was full of storage containers and he teased her that her desire to save a couple of dollars would cost her having to buy a new car—when hers rusted from parking on the street.

As if assuming judgment in his gaze, she sighed. “Yes, I know, Black Friday crowds are a pain. But I’m making sure I start my Christmas shopping early this year.” She plucked a grape from the fruit platter on the coffee table. “I take Christmas shopping very seriously. I’m the Queen of finding the perfect gift for everybody.”

Chuckling, he took a pineapple wedge with a toothpick. “You’re lucky I’m not on your Christmas list. Everybody says I’m impossible to shop for.” He ate the pineapple.

She stopped halfway through picking a strawberry and looked at him raising her eyebrows. “First of all, who says you’re not on my list? And second, you’re not impossible to shop for. I bet I can find a gift for you.”

“Not one I need, want or don’t have already!” He challenged.

She deadpanned, “Socks for Aidan.”

His smile vanished. She was right; he really needed those. They seemed to disappear in the laundry constantly.

“See?” She smirked. “I told you I could find something you did need! I bet you fifty cents I can find you a present that will blow your mind away. The best gifts don’t cost that much money. And they’re usually something you didn’t even know you wanted until you got it.”

She sucked on the strawberry, and his eyes fixated on her thick lips and the pink tip of tongue making a brief appearance from time to time. He knew exactly what he wanted. And no, it would not cost her any money.

He made an effort to turn his eyes away and grunted. “Well...get me more hours in the day. That’s what I need.” He left himself drop back on the couch again. “I’m so dreading starting the ICU rotation again!”

“Whatever happened to the hospital’s promise to hire new ICU doctors?” she asked.

He took a sip of his *Cuba Libre*. “They keep saying they’re interviewing candidates, but nothing happens.”

She groaned. “And nothing is going to happen as long as Dr. Jones and you keep putting up with it, keeping the place afloat. I bet the minute you guys threaten to walk away, they’ll hire somebody.”

“It’s not that easy.” He shook his head. “We can’t just walk away and abandon the patients.”

“And the hospital knows it and takes advantage of you for that.” She stopped abruptly, as if reprimanding herself. “Sorry, it’s not my business.” She took a sip from her drink. He knew she was thinking again about her workaholic ex.

“Some times I wish I could quit the hospital, cut down my work hours, or get a business partner and split the work and income with them,” he said. “But it’s scary. This house’s mortgage is huge. I’m the only provider for Aidan. I have to make sure I’ve saved enough money for his future in case something happens to me. And I also admit that I have expensive tastes. I’m not sure I’d deal well with a drastic drop in my income.”

“It feels scary at the time, but you’d be surprised how quickly you get used to it,” she commented, plucking another grape. “Especially if the extra income came with a giant price tag of peace of mind attached to it.”

He observed her, interested. It was the first time she’d hinted at the topic. It must’ve been a big change in her life going from the wife of a rich surgeon to the struggling single mother trying to make ends meet. “How was that transition for *you*?” he probed.

She chuckled. “Well, let’s see. I used to drive a brand new Mercedes and now I drive an ancient Honda.” She made a dismissive wave. “Getting used to the stiffer shift stick and the less smooth pedals took a whole *five days*. Now I barely notice the

difference.” Her smile grew. “And do you know what? My old Mercedes was that ugly gray color I always hated. I like the color of my light blue Honda so much more.”

He smiled, “I agree.”

She continued. “Getting used to the smaller size of the rooms and closets in my house took me all of a week and a half. After that, I’m just thankful for the smaller space to clean. I used to live in a gated luxury neighborhood, loaded with artificial lakes, so every house had a view. But I was so lost in my dark, unhappy thoughts I rarely ever looked through the windows. The neighborhood was built around private parks, and full of jogging and biking trails. But I was so depressed I rarely ever got to use them. Now I live in a much less distinguished neighborhood, but I feel so much happier I have the energy to drive a few miles to the closest bike path. And I’ve made a point to drive across town to make it to the ocean at least once a month. That view is free, and it beats the artificial lakes any day.”

He nodded. “You really know how to be happy in any circumstance, don’t you?”

Her blinding smile faltered for a moment, but then returned. “Do you know what the secret recipe for happiness is? We have to learn to throw a party in the middle of the ruins of our broken dreams. Life has thrown me a few curve balls in the past few years: the scare with Diego, Gabriela, my father’s death, my divorce... Some of those curve balls have hit me on the head and knocked me down for a while, but I now know that the trick is getting up from the floor and dusting it off every time that happens. Otherwise, you miss the fun of the rest of the game. And...” She raised her eyebrows. “If you get up, you get to walk to first base.”

Wanting to challenge her more, he offered one more argument. “How about shopping for clothes, shoes and jewelry? Don’t you must miss the times when you didn’t have such a tight budget?”

She considered it for a moment. “Do you know what? Shopping for clothes at luxury boutiques wasn’t as fun as the scavenger hunt of exploring consignment stores and clearance racks—where you never know what you’re going to find.” She smiled softly

before concluding. “And I feel much less guilty about shopping when you can’t feed a starving family for a month on the price of one dress.”

He smiled. “Guilt? *Now* you’re speaking my language.” Smiling, they clicked their glasses in a toast.

8- The unabridged version of Richard and Allison’s confrontation. (The night Joy and Richard got engaged).

“For goodness sake, Fields! Will you cut the act?” Getting up from her chair, Allison turned to Fe. “You don’t need a man’s brain insider—there’s not much inside their brains. *I will tell you!*”

Pacing around, Allison ranted, “You give men so much more credit than they deserve. Yes, Fields is right in one thing: Men are much simpler than you think. They’re nothing but sex-obsessed creatures, slaves of their testosterone. If your man seems to be cranky, or if he’s getting remotely complicated, the answer is easy: *he needs food or sex.*”

Richard studied Allison, suppressing an amused chortle.

“Allison, that’s an unfair generalization,” Joy intervened, frowning.

He raised a hand. “Actually, angel, Connors has a point. If you make sure your man gets some regularly, you’ll have a simpler human being to deal with. Not to mention one in a much better mood.”

Joy shook her head. “But you guys are making it sound as if sex was something to be used in a reward system—like a treat you give your dog to teach him a trick. No. Sex is an expression of *love*.”

Allison grunted. “Wake up, Joy. For men sex has nothing to do with love.”

Hope turned to look at Richard. “Is that true?”

He narrowed his eyes, as if thinking hard. “Well, I’d say there are two separate compartments in a man’s brain for love and for sex.” He turned to Joy. “Don’t take this the wrong way, angel. I’m obviously in love with you. *Disgustingly* in love with you.” He

rolled his eyes. “If I would’ve known a few years ago that a woman would have me wrapped around her little finger the way you have me now, I probably would’ve put a bullet through my own head.”

Joy’s eyes fluttered. “I’m sorry, your point is...?”

“The fact that I am in love with you—ridiculously, embarrassingly and sickeningly in love with you—has very little to do with the fact that I want to screw your brains out every time I see you.”

Allison clapped and pointed at him with an open hand. “Exactly! If anything, I bet being in love with you is an inconvenience for him in that regard: it makes it harder for him to objectify you.”

(...)

He leaned [toward Fe], an expression of dead-serious paternal concern in his eyes. “Girl, trust me. You women need men to talk to you, and be nice to you, and woo you in order to want to have sex. But men are the opposite: only *after* we have sex can we open up, and be vulnerable, and be in the right condition to woo you the way you deserve.”

Fe digested his words. *Is he serious?* After all this was the man who’d made Diego and Arthur believe that the FBI could make drones drop bombs on misbehaving kids’ beds with the tap of an app.

9- After Fe and Shawn’s big fight, Allison tries to talk Fe into talking to him.

[Fe] turned to Allison. “Hey, you’ll finally get someone to support your book theories and make the argument even. Joy and Hope will be the pro-relationship side, and you and I will be the ‘all men in the world suck’ side. Isn’t that great?”

Allison studied Fe for a long time before answering, “My theories are bullshit.”

Fe, Joy and Hope jerked in surprise.

“What?” asked Fe.

With a grunt, Allison raised her hands. “Do you think that I’d be working this hard trying to be happy by myself if I had another choice? Wake up! Yes, it is possible to be happy alone, but God it’s *exhausting!*”

Confused, Fe stammered. “B-but...didn’t you say it’s wonderful to be free, and not having to respond to anybody? Free to travel at any time...and having all the time to read and meditate?”

“If this was a perfect world and I had found a man worth a rotten potato, I would have someone to talk to on my horrendously lonely nights.” Allison rolled her eyes. “Then maybe I would not need so much reading, so much traveling and so much freakingly annoying meditation!”

Allison got up from her chair. A transformation seemed to wash over her. She was...frowning. Her Botox had somehow stopped working and her eyes had expression for the first time since Fe met her. “I envy you so much, Fe! You do a job you love. Your business is thriving. You may not have a salary as big as mine, but you are richer than I’ll ever be. Starting with the fact that you manage to dress better than me on a fraction of the income.” She rolled her eyes. “But on top of everything, when I’m done with my work day I go back to a cold, empty apartment, and you go back to a house full of people. Your mother, your grandmother, your children, your cousins, your dogs and cats...and then us, your friends, who love you. You have all the love and support a human being can ever want. I have no idea why you would want to put up with a man in your life.”

Fe was going to answer, but Allison raised a hand. “But it doesn't matter what I think. My new growth challenge is to accept that the people I care for will want to be happy in ways different than me.”

Allison paced around the porch. Her voice had more passion in it than Fe had ever heard. “The only thing I hate more than moronic men is *absurdity*. I despise illogical thinking and scoff at nonsense. And it seems clear to me that you and Shawn are behaving like two brainless teenagers in a head-lock.” She took Fe by the shoulders and shook her. “You want him. He wants you. Damn it, stop acting like idiots and go talk to him!”

10- Miscellaneous questions:

a- Why did the elderly lady chase Fe with her oxygen tank?

The poor demented patient didn't understand Fe was the speech therapist doing her swallow evaluation. She thought Fe was her husband's mistress trying to poison her.

b- If Shawn was so unhappy with the rumors about him in Fort Sunshine, how come he didn't just move away?

He tried. Shawn was unable to sell his house until Tara, his wife, was officially declared dead. Shortly after she was, he found out about Aidan's diagnosis and he was ready to move wherever in Florida they had the best special education opportunities for children on the autistic spectrum. To his surprise, the top place for autism in the state was the Smith Center in Fort Sunshine, Florida.

c- How did Shawn end up in Fort Sunshine to begin with?

When Shawn graduated from his residency and fellowship training at University of Miami, his father Dr. Seamus McDevitt was still working at Pineapple Beach, in Central Florida. Shawn wanted to be close to his family but not too close, so he chose Fort Sunshine, a town that was one-hour north of Pineapple Beach.

d- Why is it that Fe doesn't like Chihuahuas?

When Fe was a kid and came back to New York with an accent after living in the Dominican Republic for a year, her classmates teased her accent by imitating the Taco Bell Chihuahua famous for saying, "*Yo quiero Taco Bell.*"

e- Don't Fe and her family own any pets?

In a previous version of the book, Fe owned two cats and a huge English shepherd called "Marshall." Marshall was supposed to be Gabriela's service dog, but he never did anything and spent all the time lying on the floor sleeping, causing people to constantly trip over him. The only proof that Marshall was alive was that the food in his bowl disappeared regularly, but nobody had ever seen him eat—or awake at all.

f- What ever happened to Taco the psycho Chihuahua?

In a previous version of the book, Taco escaped the moving truck on the way to Colorado and found his way back to Fe's house. Later on, Fe realized he was only chasing her because he loved the smell of Abuela's food in her clothes. Fe's mother and grandmother ended up adopting Taco, and he lived happily ever after, yapping and nipping at Marshall's tail, who slept through it without even noticing the attacks.