

Grasping for Grace. Index of Bonus Material

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I. Longing For Love Exclusive Teaser (This is not a scene in the book, but a glimpse at the past year only available to Newsletter subscribers).

My Favorite Patient (Ethan's last hospital admission)

When Dr. Emery Love saw the next name on her list of patients, her stomach clenched. A flash of joy inside her overlapped with a pang of fear.

Ethan Cadman. The strongest hero she'd ever met and, at the same time, a fragile glass vase she'd been carrying around in her shaky hands for months, terrified of seeing it drop and shatter.

What terrible complication of chemotherapy brought him back to her ICU this time?

Surrounded by a small crowd of nurses and ancillary staff during rounds, Emery didn't have much time to ruminate on her thoughts. She braced herself for a repetition of the image of him that was still burned into her memory: unconscious, his frail body

attached to monitors and the ventilator. Inhaling deeply, she straightened the white coat she wore over her mint-colored scrubs and stepped into the small ICU room.

When she found Ethan awake, sitting on the narrow bed and talking on his cell, an avalanche of relief hit her.

Thank you, God! She had no doubt that what had kept him alive for the past six months had been ten percent medical skills and ninety percent her prayers.

Following their usual routine, she looked up at the ceiling and grunted with mock annoyance. “Please! Not *you* again!” The twitch in her lips urging to curve revealed her joking intent.

The young, bald man’s ghostly pale face lit up. He disconnected his call. “Yes, Dr. Love, I can’t keep out of the hospital for long! I miss the tasteless Jell-O and the nurses waking me up every hour.”

She clicked her tongue repeatedly and shook her head. “I’m starting to suspect you time your admissions to make sure they happen when I’m on call.”

He winked. “You got me! I have informants texting me updates on the call schedule. I hold on to my white blood cells and don’t let them drop until it’s your turn to round.” His deep blue eyes twinkled. “I can’t pass up the chance to see the most beautiful doctor in this hospital.”

Emery crossed her arms narrowing her green eyes further. “You’re my hero, Ethan. You’re fighting lymphoma, flattened by chemo and walking around with half the blood of an average human—yet you *still* have the stamina to flirt?”

He gave her his signature blinding smile—the one that made the recipient forget about the ashy color of his skin. “I have to give my best effort now, before you put me on the ventilator again, Dr. Love. It’s hard enough to charm a lady when you’ve lost forty pounds and all your hair—but when you put the tube in my mouth and tape all over my face, that definitely ruins my looks.”

She shook her head, suppressing a chuckle. Ethan had certainly seen better days, but beyond the aftermath of six months of intense chemotherapy, Emery could tell he’d been quite an attractive man. His blue eyes held a lively spark in that compensated for the blurring of the facial features caused by months of high-dose steroid treatments. But even

more than his appearance, he had an air of self-confidence around the female ICU staff that spoke of a man who'd once been used to tons of women's attention.

Emery turned to the laptop on wheels the nurse behind her had been pushing around. "Let's see why you're here today." It was their wordless agreement that, no matter how sick he was or how dangerous the reason for his admission, they'd joke about it and minimize it. "Febrile neutropenia again? But that's nothing for you! That's your *good day!*"

He rolled his eyes. "I know! I can probably treat myself by now." He snapped his fingers and gave his voice a dramatic tone. "Start me on piperacillin, vancomycin and filgrastim. *Stat!*"

She chuckled at the accuracy of his prescription. Ethan's work had nothing to do with medicine—it was something in real estate, if she remembered right—but he found solace for his powerless situation by constantly keeping notes and blurting out mouthfuls of medical terms. "You look too good to be in the ICU. How come you're not on the oncology floor instead?"

He made a dismissive wave. "My blood pressure was low in the ER and the doctor panicked. Just because I went into septic shock once or twice before, they always think I'm going to do it again."

She glanced at his labs and her chest tightened. No wonder the ER doctor was scared. His labs suggested he was on early metabolic acidosis—a potential sign of poor tissue oxygenation, heralding shock. Was he about to crash on her again?

Please, stay with me, Ethan. You're almost done with treatment, you can't die on me now.

As her eyes rushed through the electronic records, verifying that the admitting doctor had taken all the right steps—blood cultures, antibiotics, ID consult, IV fluids—she forced herself to calm down. She couldn't allow her face to show any fear. Ethan was alive and in remission thanks to his unbeatable positive attitude. No matter how grim things were, she had to do everything in her power to help him keep it.

She turned to the tall, brawny male nurse next to her. "Steve, we don't have a lactic acid level back yet?"

Steve shook his shaven head. “The lab got the order but not the sample. The ER must’ve forgotten to draw it or lost it.”

“Please get one stat and also an ABG.”

Ethan groaned. “I hate the arterial blood gases! Do we really need them?”

Approaching the bed, she started her physical examination by looking in his eyes with a pocket flashlight and teased, “Ethan, you’ve had two bone marrow biopsies and a bunch of spinal taps since I met you. Are you *seriously* going to complain about a needle stick?”

“At least for the bone marrow and the spinal taps the IR guys put me to sleep,” he mumbled.

She looked in his throat with the flashlight, then felt the glands around his neck while asking him questions about symptoms, rushing through her review of systems.

“Any sore throat, trouble swallowing, cough, trouble breathing...”

His answer was always no. Ethan refused to complain no matter how sick he felt. He bragged that he could talk himself out of anything, from the chemotherapy-induced nausea to the bone pain after growth factor injections, by denying the symptoms. She thought for the hundredth time that he put to shame all the whiners and hypochondriacs of the world—starting with her fiancé Ken. Ethan was such a refreshing breath of air in the ICU, where almost every other patient was a depressing, hopeless case.

While asking him the questions, she rushed through most of the physical exam, leaving the auscultation for last, so he could talk until the end. As a pulmonary specialist, she took extra time listening to his lungs.

When she was done, she took off the stethoscope and hung it around her neck. “Well, Ethan, your blood pressure is better after the IV fluids, but we’ll watch you here for a little longer before sending you to a regular floor. You know the routine; your neutrophil count has to be above five hundred before we even talk about letting you go home.”

He nodded. “It’s going to take a few days. I can tell.”

Emery couldn’t help smiling. Ethan claimed to be so in touch with his body that he could feel when the blood counts were coming up. The freaky part was that he was usually right.

Emery went over the rest of the labs and x-rays and gave a few more orders. The team was wrapping up and moving to the next patient's room when Ethan called out.

"Hey, doc!"

She turned around. "Oh, sorry. Do you have any questions?"

There was a short silence. Ethan looked at her so intently it almost gave her a chill.

"Are you doing alright, Dr. Love? You seem a little down today."

Sometimes Ethan's intuition scared Emery.

The truth was that she was putting on an act that day to smile at the patients. She'd had a horrible fight with Ken the night before. She'd considered breaking their engagement more than once, but with the wedding date only weeks away—and her biological clock screaming at her—she couldn't afford to indulge in cold feet.

The rest of the staff had already exited the room and they were alone. Ethan kept looking in her eyes. The kindness and warmth of that brave old soul enveloped her, inviting her to open up. Gosh! Here was a man fighting for his life against a lethal cancer with weapons that were beating him up as much as the cancer itself—and he was worrying *about her*? She felt a clamp in her throat. For a moment, she felt like letting the tears flow.

But she couldn't.

She had no doubt that the survivor in front of her, whom she admired and respected deeply, had invaluable wisdom and solace to offer to her wounded soul. But sharing anything about her personal life would be crossing the lines of appropriateness between patient and doctor. The roles were clearly defined. She was there to take care of *him*, not the other way around.

She shrugged. "I'm fine. Just the usual stuff, you know. Too much stress at work...plain life."

He nodded. But something in his expression hinted he knew she lied. Respectful of the boundaries of their roles, he didn't press the issue.

He smiled weakly. "If you ever need a dose of *perspective*, just let me know."

Emery laughed. She knew he was changing the strategy to humor.

Having overheard the last sentence, Steve the nurse rushed back in to the room. “Wait! I want my dose of perspective. I dig those!”

Ethan’s smile widened to a grin. He clapped his hands once and held both palms up, flexing and extending the fingers. “Bring it up, big guy!”

Steve lifted a finger. “I just found out that my stupid credit card company has been hitting me with hidden charges and raised my interest rate without me knowing it. It cost me hundreds of dollars on my bill.”

Ethan scoffed. “You want to talk about credit card bills? After six months of vacations in this *luxury hotel*—” he moved his hand around him, indicating the ICU room, “—my out-of-pocket hospital bills are so large I’m going to need to sell my organs to get out of debt. I actually tried! I went to *sell-your-organs-on-the-black-market-dot-com* and tried to sell a kidney, a cornea and half my liver.” He rolled his eyes. “Nobody wants them! Just because I went into multi-organ failure a time or two they say my organs aren’t good enough for them!”

Emery and Steve laughed. She resisted the temptation to be the buzzkill and remind them that no transplant recipient in the world would ever take an organ from a donor with history of cancer. A few other members of the staff were rushing back in to take part in the comedy improv routine.

Steve continued. “An a-hole policeman gave me a ticket for driving five miles over the speed limit. Five freaking miles!”

Ethan groaned. “I wish I got a speeding ticket! *That would mean I’m driving!* My neurotic neurologist refuses to clear me for that.” He rolled his eyes, then fake-sobbed. “The closest thing to driving I’ve done in months is sit on a stretcher while they transport me to x-rays, and twirl the bedpan in my hands, pretending it’s a steering wheel.”

The staff laughed.

Steve charged again. “My girlfriend dumped me last month and I haven’t gotten any action since.”

Ethan grunted. “The closest thing to action *I*’ve had in the past six months is a nurse shoving a urinary catheter down my—”

“Whoa, whoa!” Emery waved her hands while laughing. “I think we all get it, Ethan. Compared to you, we should *not* complain.”

He joined his hands up in a victory gesture. “I’m the ultimate winner of the suckiest-life award! ”

The whole staff mock-cheered. In the middle of the laughter, Emery wanted to cry.

He’s my hero.

Why couldn’t she be more like Ethan? Strong and resilient, able to laugh at himself and joke about his worst tragedies. Her mother’s daughter, Emery’d spent her life feeding on small drama. Facing an iron-strong survivor like him made her feel ashamed of herself.

His deep blue eyes met hers again across the room and a strange flutter overtook her heart. She reprimanded herself and looked away. He was her patient. He was her ultimate inspirational story. She could never allow herself to see him as more than that.

“Wait, doc!” he called her out again before she walked out. As usual, he seemed reluctant to let her go.

“Do you have any questions?” she repeated, in a hurry to get back to her rounds.

A hint of eagerness flashed in his expression; his voice sounded tentative and apologetic. “You forgot your line.” He fluttered his uneven eyelashes, giving her the begging puppy eyes she was now familiar with.

Silence fell between them. Emery wasn’t in the mood to perform their little banter routine today. And she acknowledged that sometimes they pushed the physician-doctor boundary.

But she would do anything to make Ethan smile—and he knew it.

With a theatrical gasp and mock-indignation, she recited her lines. “Ethan! Do you have any idea how hard I’ve worked to keep you alive?” Flipping her long auburn hair, she put a hand on her hip, squared her shoulders and stamped a foot on the floor. “*If you die now, I’m going to kill you!*”

Ethan burst into laughter—that clear and beautiful laugh she relished so much because it was an unquestionable sign that he was doing better.

Yes. She was blurring the lines of doctor and patient. But if that made Ethan forget about his struggle for a moment and smile like that, she’d gladly bend the rules.

II. Deleted Scenes Grasping for Grace

1. Deleted Original Prologue: Cowlick and Grace.

Jake's little best friend in the world was hugging him and he felt just a bit less sad and scared.

"Everything's going to be okay," Grace mumbled, stroking his back. Her arms were surprisingly strong for a girl, making him feel safe.

After the most confusing week of his life, with everyone around him acting so strange, it felt good to hold on to one thread of his life that was still pleasant and unchanged.

Little Jake knew something was really wrong when adults started kneeling down to his eye level when talking to him. He hadn't liked what he saw in their faces. Fear. Powerlessness. Pity.

They all seemed determined to speak in code, using vague words. The town's pastor said that his mother had "gone back home," that she'd grown wings and was now invisible, following him around and spying on him. Mr. Nelson, the convenience store owner, said that he was a poor, unlucky child and was getting only his first taste of how hard life was. Ms. Tanner, the next-door neighbor, said nothing; but the commiseration in her teary eyes had made him feel worse than any words anyone else had said. She'd brought him home with her "in the meantime"—he didn't know what that meant. But she was allergic to dogs, and Ginger had been sent to another neighbor's house. Being separated from Ginger had hurt almost as much as his mother's absence in the past week. He was still numb and confused and had not yet processed what people meant about him not being able to see his mom anymore.

But now everything felt normal again. Grace was there, holding him in her arms. At age eight, he was innocent, still free from the cruel domination of adult hormones. But

he somehow intuited that there was a not-yet-born part of him longing for a not-yet-born part of her.

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do, Cowlick,” Grace declared in her usual self-confident voice, piercing him with her sky-blue eyes. “Tomorrow early morning, we’ll get Ginger and we’ll go find your mom. We’ll give Ginger one of your mom’s sweaters to smell, and she will guide us to her.”

His heart filled with hope. Of course! Like on TV! Grace was a genius! If someone could help him out of this mess and make things normal again, it was her.

“Yes! Let’s do that!” He answered with a weak voice, holding her hands tightly.

Grace continued. “Grownups are gonna try to stop us, so we’ll have to run away. Pack a bag tonight and don’t tell anybody.”

“Okay! I’ll also pack a sheet so we can make a camping tent. We’ll need to learn how to make fire.”

It didn’t occur to him to wonder what they would eat. He wasn’t scared anymore. Grace could figure out anything and he was safe with her. They agreed to meet at his house, in front of the tire swing, at sunrise.

That night he re-packed the bag that Ms. Tanner had made for him when she brought him to her house: a toothbrush, a couple of changes of clothes, some clean socks and underwear. He’d pack the pajamas and the sheet the next morning.

But he never made it to bed. Ms. Tanner came into the room with shaking hands and pitying eyes, now tinged with morbid curiosity, and announced, “Your father is here to get you.”

The word “father” sounded alien to his ears. Before he could process it, she dragged him by the hand and brought him out of the house where a large black car

awaited at the driveway. The tallest man he'd ever seen stood next to the car. His face was so far up he couldn't see it in the darkness.

The man leaned forward and he was finally able to see his face. It seemed familiar and strange at the same time. But it wasn't the shape of that long face what got him; nor the features, or the hazel eyes so similar to his. What would be burned into his memory forever were the feelings he could breathe in when looking at that face:

Guilt.

Shame.

Embarrassment.

Before he knew what was happening, the car took off, driving him away from Port Popsicle. Away from home. Away from Ginger.

Away from Grace.

2. Censored Scenes from Allison and Jay's first "date." (Too sexy or too creepy? You decide).

a. The questions game during the car ride to the restaurant.

The drive south on A1A to where Jay wanted to eat took about twenty minutes. He proposed to pass the time playing a car game where they would take turns asking each other questions.

"Okay, my turn again," she said. "Why on earth is a grownup man riding a skateboard?"

He half-shrugged. "The usual reasons. Exercise, fun, and eco-friendly transportation."

She frowned. "Why don't you get a bike then? I'm sure it is much less dangerous."

"I have a bike. It just doesn't fit in my luggage. It would wrinkle my suits."

Ah. He must be in town on business travel. “Wait, business suits? ”Didn’t you say you’re a personal trainer?”

He gave a suspiciously innocent smile and an under-the-eyelashes look. “They’re not exactly *business suits*? They’re more like...gladiator costumes.”

She shot him a mistrusting glance. *What the heck?*

“But you just asked me three questions in a row, so now I get to ask you three!” he said.

Resigned, she sighed. “Okay, shoot.”

“Question number one: what is your favorite color?”

That was easy. “Sky blue.”

“Good. Question number two: what’s your favorite fast-food?”

Easy again. “Pizza.”

“Great. Question number three: would you let a man blindfold you in bed?”

Allison almost rear-ended the car in front of her. She hit the brakes and came to a complete stop, then turned to glower at him. “No. Not only am I not into kinky stuff, I’ve made a career out of rejecting the idea of male domination.”

He lifted a hand. “I’m not talking about ropes or gags; just a soft, silk blindfold. And I’m not talking about a game of domination, I’m talking about an act of surrendering, and trusting—and training the ability to receive pleasure.”

She shot him her most icy glare. “You’re violating our agreement to stay away from inappropriate conversation.”

“This is a scientific question.” He shook his head with a serious expression. “I have an interest in the topic of pleasure and I’ve always wanted to discuss this with a psychotherapist.”

She drove off. “Yeah, right. It’s all scientific interest.”

He nodded. “If you need an explanation, I’m interested on studying how limiting the visual input intensifies the other senses. And also, the effects of the element of surprise on enjoyment.” She felt caressed by his silky voice. “Imagine yourself blindfolded, trying to guess what I’ll be doing next. Will I be stroking your body with a feather—or will I be gently scratching your back with my nails? Will I be feeding you a strawberry—or giving you champagne to drink from my own mouth? Will the next

strawberry I feed you be covered in whipped cream—or will I instead be licking that whipped cream from your body?”

The hot flashes started again in Allison. *Darn it, I walked myself into this trap.*

“And you really don’t see anything inappropriate in the way you’re talking right now?” she asked coldly, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Of course not,” he answered in a matter-of-fact voice as she stopped at a red light. “Because if the situation was reversed and *you* were the one asking *me* what I’d be willing to try in bed or not, I’d be delighted to answer any questions for you.” After a pause, he leaned closer and added, “But I’ll save us some time; the answer is *yes to everything.*”

The intensity of his gaze could’ve put a hundred different images in Allison’s mind—except that her sexual repertoire didn’t support much variety.

She tried to give her voice a sarcastic tone, but instead, it sounded weak.

“Everything?”

He nodded. “Any pleasure seeking activity you can think of, I’m willing to try it—twice. But chances are I’ve already done it.”

She stared at him in disbelief. This time he didn’t seem to be joking.

As the light turned green, she took a hold on herself to keep driving and snickered. “So, basically, you’re bragging that you’ve done it all.”

He lifted his index finger. “Except sleeping with another guy or someone from a different species.” He stopped, and his eyes seemed to get lost for a moment. “At least not that I can recall. There are a couple of unaccounted days from my first week in college after my first fraternity party.” He glanced back, as if making sure nobody was eavesdropping from the car’s backseat and lowered his voice. “And that’s the same answer I give when anyone asks me if I’ve ever committed murder.”

Okay. Now she knew he was kidding.

b. At the Restaurant

They’d apparently arrived at their destination and Allison was surprised to realize this wasn’t a restaurant but a park.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“This is the Sebastian Inlet. A point where the Indian River meets the Atlantic Ocean.”

It felt strange that she'd lived in the area for so long and someone from out of town had to educate her on local tourist spots. He guided her to park in front of a two-story building and she turned the car off. “Is here where we are having dinner?”

“Yes. There's a snack bar on the top floor I like to visit. The food isn't great, but the view is worth it.”

She hopped out of the car before he had a chance to open her door, and headed toward the entrance. As they approached the stairs, he held her arm and she jerked it away. “What are you doing?”

“I am holding your arm for support, of course. I can't allow my date to trip and fall as we climb the stairs.”

She gave him a stern look. “This is not a date.”

“We're having dinner together on a Friday night. What can be more a date than that?”

He indicated at the stairs for her to go first and then followed her.

The moment Allison arrived at the deck on top of the staircase her breath stole away. He was right; the view was amazing. They had the ocean on one side and the bridges going over the river on the other, for 270 degrees of water view. As a waitress guided them to their table, she stayed quiet, taking it all in. Noticing she needed some time, he didn't talk.

He'd also been right about the lack of greatness in the menu; they mostly served fast food. He recommended a pomegranate and berry smoothie—which she appreciated as it was a non-alcoholic drink—and ordered a slice of “Rainbow Veggie Pizza,” so she asked for the same.

They'd hardly had time for a couple more rounds of the questions game when the waitress was back with two gigantic pizza slices.

He'd claimed to be starving, but he chewed slowly, with his eyes closed, savoring the pizza as if it were the finest gourmet meal. A part of her envied his enjoyment.

As she used her fork to peel the cheese from the pizza, he frowned at her. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to skip the pizza crust to cut down on the carbs.”

He held her wrist. “But that’s profaning the pizza.”

What the heck? She stared at him blankly.

He continued, “Trust me, I’m totally on your page about watching calories. But if you decide to let go of caution for one day and eat a slice of pizza, go all the way and enjoy it!”

“That’s easy for you to say! Men get away with a bigger calorie allowance. Specially one as tall and muscular as you.” She rolled her eyes with a growl.

He shook his head. “I’d rather see you cut your slice in half or not order it at all. See, a slice of pizza is *a sensual experience*. You can’t have it half-heartedly.”

Okay, he’s officially insane. “A slice of pizza is *a sensual experience*?”

He looked at her as if *she* was crazy. “Of course! It is a juxtaposition of flavors and textures designed to treat all senses at once. Look.”

He held his slice up. “First, admire it. Can you see those beautiful, bright colors?”

She focused on her pizza slice and understood why it was called a rainbow pizza. The veggies on top were arranged in lanes. Green peppers, onions, tomatoes, black olives, mushrooms and a row of corn.

He continued. “Look at the bright red in the tomatoes and the green in the peppers, contrasting with the pale mozzarella. Isn’t that gorgeous?”

She shot him a mistrusting onceover. “Are you on drugs?”

He gave her an innocent smile. “Not *recently*.”

Before she could process his answer, he continued. “Then, after you delight in its beauty, smell it.” He sniffed with his eyes closed while moving his head from the left end of the pizza to the right. “Wow! That’s like reading a book of smells with your nose! You can catch the separate scent of each layer! Try it!”

Feeling like an idiot, she closed her eyes and imitated him, moving her head from one end of the pizza to the other end as she was smelling. She got nothing. “Sorry. All I smell is the cheese.”

He nodded. “That’s okay. It takes practice to re-educate the senses.”

At that time the direction of the wind shifted and the scent of his sweaty body hit her. It was weirdly arousing, putting in her mind other ideas for a “sensual experience.”

He continued his demonstration. “Then the next step is to bite in. The first bite is always the best, so make sure to savor it slowly. Feel the crunchiness of the crust contrasting with the softness of the melted cheese. It’s a treat for both the taste and the touch receptors in the mouth. Then you’ll notice that every bite you take makes a sound. Sometimes it’s crispy, sometimes it’s squishy. Then you repeat the process. It’s a multi-sensory pleasure experience to treasure.” He took a bite of his pizza and closed his eyes. The expression on his face was of absolute delight.

She watched him eat mesmerized. He moaned while chewing, stretching the cheese strings, then catching them with his tongue, then licking his lips and his fingers. She imagined that tongue on her body and the hot flashes restarted.

She was about to excuse herself to hide in the restroom for a while when he put the slice down and pointed at the sky.

“You have to see this.”

It took her a few seconds to understand what he was talking about. She finally looked up and gasped. The sun was setting over the river, dyeing the surrounding clouds pink and orange.

It was the most impressive sunset she’d ever seen. Even the clouds over the ocean, to the east, reflected the colors of the setting sun for a wrap-around effect of orange and pink sky.

“This...this is amazing!”

“See what I meant that the view was worth it?”

He helped her move her chair to his side of the table so she could watch the sunset while taking bites of her dinner. Long after the sun sank into the water, the clouds continued to reflect flaming colors, intensifying every minute as darkness approached. She kept her eyes glued to the sky, no longer eating. She felt so overwhelmed by the beauty she hardly noticed, and didn’t protest, when he casually held her hand.

Distracted, she heard him say. “You were right. Sight seems to be your favorite sense.”

She turned to face him. He had turned golden and copper, bathed by the light, in a way that made him look surreal. She had the feeling he’d been looking at the light on her skin as much as at the sky.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered, tightening the grip on her hand. “By the time I’m done with you, you’ll also love the sense of touch.”

His thumb caressed circles in her hand and a bolt of electricity shot from her palm to the core of her lower body.

c. Morning After (Allison wakes up in Jay’s hotel room)

Allison had been dreaming of fireflies in a glass jar and music playing. She was seven years old and wore an old, floor-length dress and ancient high heels she’d pulled from an old chest in some attic. She danced. During the few seconds between waking up and opening her eyes, she had no recollection of where she was, yet had the vivid knowledge that something wonderful had happened. She felt more relaxed and joyful than she’d felt in years.

She slowly opened her eyes and took in her surroundings, remembering the luxurious hotel suite. It was already morning. She lifted herself up on her elbows and realized she was alone in bed.

She let herself fall back again, her body aching deliciously. She closed her eyes, letting her mind relive her favorite scenes from the night before. The shared bubble bath. Jay wrapping her in the soft terry robe to carry her out of the tub. Warming each other up under the blankets, skin against skin. The soft music in the background. The smell of the lavender scented lotion while he worked it over her body, taking his time, relaxing her before changing his touch to more ardent caresses. Above and beyond the amazing sex, the night had been a multi-sensory experience.

She noticed a blank page on the pillow next to her and picked it up. Next to the signature, it read in print. “J.J. Johnson.” A sticky note on it read, “For your lawyer.”

Underneath there was another page that read, “I had to rush to the airport and you looked so beautiful sleeping I didn’t dare to wake you up. Last night exceeded my wildest dreams. Can’t wait to repeat it. Please call me.”

It was signed “J.” The next lines were two phone numbers and an email address, and under them a PS.

“Take all the time you need, my darling; the room is paid for one more night.”

She wrapped herself in the terry robe by the foot of the bed and walked to pull back the window curtains, noticing for the first time a balcony facing the beach.

She sat on the balcony and enjoyed the ocean view. She couldn’t believe how relaxed she felt and the good mood she was in. It was as if someone had pushed the re-boot button on her brain. Suddenly, all her problems seemed to have shrunk. The vocational crisis previously filling her brain was now a distant yelp in a small corner of her mind. It was the first morning in ages when she didn’t care checking the sales reports of her last book.

Note to self: Maybe I’ve been too harsh to judge my clients when they stay in hopeless relationships just because the physical part is great. Maybe there is something more to sex than I’ve previously observed.

Suddenly, panic possessed her.

“What have I done?” She was the therapist who taught other women to never need men and to take control of their hormones. What would her clients and readers think if they knew she’d gone home with a man she’d barely met—a man of questionable sanity—only because there was brainless physical chemistry between them.

She returned to the bed. Nobody in the world could ever find out about this or her reputation would be in danger. Frantic, she tore the page with his contact numbers into a hundred pieces, and let them fall into the trashcan.

3. Abandoning the Girlfriends (The girls tease Allison when she starts dating Jay.)

(Allison, Hope, Joy and Fe are having dinner at their favorite restaurant)

Allison's phone chimed with a text from Jay and she held her breath in anticipation. He'd been sending her jokes against marriage three times a day since their last encounter Thursday night.

She eagerly opened the message. He had used Photoshop to lay a picture of a wedding chapel next to one of a veterinary clinic, so they seemed as one building. In front of the door a sign read, "Neuter services."

Allison cracked up.

She texted him back. *"That's funny!"*

She kept her eyes on the screen as the three dots indicated he was typing a reply. His text came in. *"I liked the one you sent me yesterday. The jewelry store selling ball-and-chains next to the engagement rings."*

She texted back, *"Not as good as the one with the brain-eating zombie dressed in a wedding gown."*

As she hit send, she realized her friends were staring at her, frowning. She erased the grin from her face and typed. *"Sorry, Jay. Gotta go."*

"Wait!" A new message from him popped in. *"I just checked into my hotel and I'm ordering room service. Want to come over?"*

Her eyes darted to her friends. Hope and Fe crossed her arms with a stern frown while Joy drummed her fingers on the table, eyeing the time on her cell.

Allison texted. *"Give me a minute."*

She cleared her throat. "You know, girls...uh. Jay was out of town and just made it back and...uh. He was wondering if I could join him."

She braced herself for a reprimand from her friends.

Her arms crossed, Hope squinted at her. "Allison, do you remember how much you used to complain about Joy missing our dinners together to spend time with Richard?"

Shoot. Hope was right. "Well. Uh. I—"

"Yes!" Joy added. "You used to say, 'It's a pity, the minute a woman finds a man she neglects her girlfriends.'"

Allison swallowed hard. "Right. Uh. I—"

Fe pointed at her cell. “And you used to criticize me so much because I was always on the phone with Shawn when we started dating, ‘stealing away’ the time with you guys.”

Shoot. I guess I deserve this.

Allison sighed, pressed a hand to her forehead and mumbled, “You’re absolutely right, girls. I should not do the same thing I used to criticize in other women. I should call Jay and tell him I won’t be able to meet him tonight because I’m spending time with my girlfriends.” Feeling disappointed, she looked at her three friends. “After all, sisterhood time is sacred. Right?”

Silence fell. Hope, Joy and Fe kept glowering at Allison with a scowl.

Suddenly Joy burst into giggles. “Sorry, girls, I tried. I just can’t!”

Hope and Fe burst into laughter too. Allison stared at them, confused.

Wiping a tear from her eye corner. Hope slapped Allison’s arm. “Of course we’re just pulling your leg, woman! Why are you wasting time? Go with him! Go!”

Relieved, Allison almost felt like hugging her girlfriends. She sent them a weak smile and a thank you with her eyes, picked up her purse and ran out of the restaurant.

4. The weekend before the LA trip. (After Chapter 26)

The weekend had been a boot camp of sensory experiences. On Friday, Jay had introduced Allison to decongestant nasal spray to open up her sense of smell, which by itself was a boost to her sense of taste. He surprised her with a collection of aromatic lotions they rubbed on each other, changing every time their sense of smell got used to a scent. They started with almond, then switched to lavender, then citrus, then mint. He choreographed the sequence of smells with a different massage. More than foreplay, it was a celebration in itself, and an exercise in enjoying touch and letting go of her inhibitions.

Then on Saturday, he brought a collection of syrups to lick off each other’s bodies—but it didn’t go well. Sensuality soon turned into comedy, as she proved more ticklish than expected and couldn’t bear the feeling of stickiness on her skin. They ended up canceling the game to get her a laughter-filled emergency shower.

Over dinner at the restaurant that night, he taught her how to make “virgin, calorie-free shots” by squeezing lime wedges into a shot glass of diet ginger ale. Drinking the sweet-and-sour mixture made her grimace and shudder as much as any real shot had ever done. They laughed so hard, she was sure that the people at the nearby tables thought they were completely drunk—but they hadn’t had one drop of alcohol all weekend.

That’s how the days felt with him: drunkenness without alcohol. If he really was insane, his craziness was certainly contagious.

And she wouldn’t have it any other way.

Sunday afternoon, they’d been walking on the beach for a while when she asked, “You were not kidding when you said you had insomnia. I don’t think I’ve seen you sleep all weekend—or ever. Why don’t you just get your doctor to prescribe a sleeping aid?”

His smile decreased. “I got worried that I was relying too much on drugs at one point in my life. One to fall asleep, one to wake up, one to take away the side effect from the other one...It got scary; I decided to quit them all.”

She eyed him with curiosity, getting the idea that some of those drugs may not have been legal.

“I even tried hypnosis,” he added. “That’s how my interest in the topic started and how I started applying it to my seminars.”

Allison was interested. “How did hypnosis go for you?”

He chuckled. “I loved it! It didn’t help my insomnia much, but it was worth it just for the side effects.”

“What side effects?”

“Those hypnosis sessions made me remember scenes from childhood so vividly it was freaky in an awesome way. I’d recall an image with as much detail as if I was there. The bright-colored furniture in my grandma’s house; the old-fashioned clothes people were wearing, the smells...”

“Give me an example.”

He thought for a moment. “I’m evoking the image of my first school playground with tiny yellow see-saws and a red and gray metal slide with such sharp edges and rusty nails it would never pass an inspection nowadays.”

She gasped, then laughed. “I had completely forgotten about that type of playground!”

He continued. “Now I’m seeing my kindergarten teacher’s car parked in front of the school, and it’s a gigantic old white Chevy, with black vinyl seats and a bench seat in the front.”

She laughed again. “Gosh! You could’ve been describing a car I rode in!”

He continued. “Now, all the children in the neighborhood are gathering to see the fancy new color TV that the rich kid on the street got and it’s this three-foot-thick box with two small antennas on the top and the commercial playing is an old Coca-Cola ad.” He started humming a song from an almost three-decades-old commercial she’d completely forgotten about.

Gaping at him, she halted and held his arm, making him stop too. “Jay, now seriously. How old are you?”

He seemed to be fighting a smile. “I told you: I’m *exactly* your age.”

She eyed him warily. “You’re also twenty-nine?”

He almost split his side laughing. “Oh, darling. As young and beautiful as you are, I *know* you’re not twenty-nine.”

“Seriously, Jay, you confuse me. Going by the memories you’re describing, you seem to be around my age. But you have to be younger than me to have the stamina you have. And if I go by your stories of re-inventing yourself again and again, there’s no way you could be younger than...” she squinted. “A hundred and five?”

The smirk he’d been trying to repress broke free. “I told you, you and I are exactly the same age. We even share our birthday.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Which is...?”

There was a short silence until he finally answered. “The day we kissed for the first time. That’s the day we both were born.”

She chuckled. “Nice save!”

5. Questions and Answers. Deleted scenes that can help explain some of the unclear parts of the story.

i. What did Jay study in college in between tequila-shot drinking contests?

Following his fascination for Greek mythology and Roman gladiators, Jay got a Classics degree from University of Michigan in Ann Arbor (a language and literature bachelor's degree with a concentration in Greek ancient literature). After that, he gave in to Conan's pressure and signed up for a master's in business administration (MBA) at Northwestern University, but ended up quitting after the first semester (therefore the \$20,538 Conan threw in his face years later).

ii. How did Jay have time to have so many adventures in his life?

Jay and Conan's first big fight happened as a result of Jay quitting his MBA program. After that, Jay took off with his car, a backpack and a hundred dollars in his pocket and his family didn't see him again for years.

In his own words, from a previous draft of the book, Jay related the story to Allison. "For years I became a gypsy traveling all over the country. I made a little money here and then, usually by teaching karate classes or tutoring high-school kids online in English and History—the rest of the time by taking any possible job you can think of. Sometimes I found myself eating in soup kitchens and sleeping in my car when I ran out of money.

"But that was one of the happiest incarnations of my life. I visited every city I ever dreamed of seeing. I spent most of my days hiking and trying new experiences, and most of my nights partying, working only when I felt like it. I'm still not sure how I was able to survive, let alone afford my adventures, but my good luck always caught me in the end. And I loved tutoring students online. I loved passing on to younger kids the love of reading, the magic of symbolism and the message of archetypes, especially those hidden in my favorite stories of Greek and Roman tragedy. I was very happy."

That incarnation came to an end when he got a message from Regina that Conan had had his first heart attack. He returned to Chicago to make peace with him, and that was how he ended up becoming the CEO in Conan's company.

iii. What happened to Grace after she lost touch with Cowlick (Jake)?

As it's briefly mentioned in the book, Grace kept coming back to the tire swing and riding her pink bike all over town, looking for Cowlick and Ginger. After two weeks not finding them, she lost her temper at home, yelled at her stepfather (Jim) to stop bullying her mom, and that was the day he hit her on the face, causing her facial palsy. Hours later, her mother woke her up abruptly in the middle of the night to escape in a taxi to the Greyhound bus station and the three of them (Allison, her mother and younger sister) escaped Port Popsicle to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There, they ended up in a women's shelter for a while until her mother got a job (therefore Allison's commitment to help as much as she can at the women's shelter, to pay forward the help they received). That's the explanation for why Jay couldn't find her when, a year later and many times after that, he convinced his father to bring him back from Chicago to his old town.

After escaping her abusive second husband, Allison/Grace's mother went through a chain of good-for-nothing partners that reinforced young Grace's poor opinion of men. When Grace was a sophomore in high school, her mother took back her ex (Jim, the abusive stepfather), and his domestic abuse re-started, until she finally convinced her mother to leave him again by her senior year. To make sure her mother wouldn't get back with him again, the minute Grace turned eighteen she went to the police with proof of Jim's drug dealing activities, helping them put him in jail.

iv. So, how many exes does Tiffany have?

Tiffany's first husband was Tim Donovan, Gracie's father, whom she married at age 19 and divorced at age 21. He later on died from a drug overdose—therefore the will where he appointed Jay as Gracie's tutor.

After a chain of heartbreaks in between, she married her second husband, George Carlson (whom Gracie refers to as "Mr. George") at 23. He was another unstable celebrity, with two children from a previous marriage and an identity crisis. In a previous draft of the book, he's briefly mentioned as now being a cross-dresser and uncommitted transgender considering whether to have a sex-change operation. Tiffany divorced George at age 25 and, after another emotionally unavailable boyfriend ("Joel," with a

drinking and gambling problem), she married Jordan Blanche at age 26, her third (and current) husband. Jordan is a former teen band singer with a drug problem and a videogame addiction.

v. Why do Wayne Nash and Allison hate each other so much?

Wayne used to bring Allison on his show, humiliate her in front of the cameras and then flirt with her afterward, inviting her to join him on his yacht. The first time (of many) that Allison put him in his place, he started the rumor that the reason why she was so tall was because she'd previously been a man and had had a gender change.

vi. Why was it that Allison hated Richard Fields so much? And what was he talking about when he said he'd once sent the FBI to hunt her?

If you don't know the answer to this question, it means you need to read my earlier book:

[Just for Joy. https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07C4M3G98](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07C4M3G98) ☺