

Hope tells the story of her sister Joy.

I'm going to let you into a family secret, but you have to promise you won't tell anybody.

Are you ready? Here it goes:

My sister is not human. She's an alien.

A superior race of aliens sent Joy to this planet to demoralize all human women with her accomplishments, so we can't resist their invasion.

Okay, I admit it; that's never been confirmed. It's just an ongoing joke I tease her with. But bear with me and be the judge of whether she's normal or not.

An MD degree and a medical specialty were *not enough* for Joy. She had to have *two* medical specialties—Internal Medicine and Psychiatry. And then she had to do *a subspecialty*—Pain Management. Also an extra master's degree in something I don't even remember. And then she decided to re-invent medicine by launching a new branch of body-mind-spirit care.

Oh, but that was *not* enough! While she was going through brutal medical training, she had to *have babies* at the same time. She even made sure to have *twins*. *TWINS!*

You know, because *popping the kids out one at a time was too easy for her*.

Good thing she's a lousy drinker; that's my consolation. Joy is such a lightweight that I swear one time she got drunk from having a tablespoon of rum cake. But that's pretty much it. Drinking is the only thing I can do better than her.

I've rolled my eyes at her ridiculous perfection so many times it's a miracle my eyeballs haven't dislocated. Joy is the woman who once took a dancing class and put the teacher to shame with her grace and skills. She's the woman who alphabetizes her bookcase and organizes her closet in color gradations. She's the woman who got her figure back fifteen freaking minutes after having a baby.

Yes, my sister is the woman we, all other women on the planet, wish we could hate. Unfortunately, we can't because she's *too darn sweet*.

Joy compensates for her intimidating list of accomplishments with an honest cluelessness that makes people take into her quickly, wanting to protect her. She's completely unaware of her own abnormality and thinks everybody else is more interesting than she is.

She's also gifted with the ability of seeing the best in the person in front of her. More than one success story in her career as a psychiatrist has come from not giving up on people. She believes in the good in us so strongly we eventually start believing in it ourselves.

I attribute much of my self-confidence to growing up with Joy as a substitute mother. She makes everybody feel as if they're a gift to civilization and destined for great things. No macaroni necklace I ever made was worthy of less than a museum pedestal. I may have turned out to be a little

too self-assured—some would say I border on megalomania—but that has been precisely my key to success in life.

It's a pity she never had someone doing the same for her. Joy is the person who's always willing to cut people slack and give them the benefit of the doubt, *except to herself*.

Nothing Joy does is good enough for herself, and if someone ever tried to tell her she'd accomplished something admirable, she'd be quick to remind them of someone else who did it better.

And I feel bad about it sometimes. I had a great advantage in life she didn't; I had *her*.

It's hard to believe that my “substitute mother” is only 11 months older than me. But Joy grew up too fast. When our mother was diagnosed with breast cancer for the first time, I was six years old, and Joy was seven. That year made a huge difference in our ability to understand what was happening.

Joy learned to rub our mother's back while she threw up and to hand her nausea and pain pills when she was barely old enough to do math. Then, after our mother died two years later, our father withdrew psychologically. He sought refuge in workaholic behavior and let go of his health. Joy turned to take care of him. She spent the rest of her childhood holding his hand and being his cheerleader, trying to lift him up from his depression. He barely noticed her, reinforcing the impression that she was invisible and throwing her into an obsession for straight-A grades. Through good grades, she desperately strived to earn his approval, or at least his attention.

Yes, Joy has her own version of “The Clayton Sisters’ Curse.” The only man's love she ever knew was *being ignored*. She may say she wants men's attention, but the truth is that she can't handle it and hides from it.

So that's my theory on how Joy ended up becoming a physician. Taking care of our mother, then our father and me, she developed an addiction to caregiving.

And that's also my theory on how she ended up married to *Michael O'Hara*.

Ugh! Here I have to make an effort not to gag. Michael O'Hara was the pride of Fort Sunshine. The youngest state senator in the history of Florida and, at the time of his death, a congressman so charismatic, rumor was he'd someday become the president of the United States.

The camera loved Michael, with his always-perfect blond hair and his movie-star smile. The public loved Michael, with his soft-spoken manners and “commitment to old-fashioned family values.” He always made sure to pose for the press with his beautiful and successful wife by his arm—flaunting a belief in feminism I know he didn't have.

I couldn't stand Michael. When Joy started dating him in high school, at age fifteen, our father

was at the bottom of his deterioration. I know what attracted Joy to Michael was that he had the same depressive air our father had and the same tendency to look through her as if she were invisible.

I didn't like the way he constantly put her down with “innocent jokes.” He treated her as if he were doing her a favor for being with her. But I never expected him to stick around for long. After all, he was Joy's very first boyfriend—even her first kiss.

But then, it happened. Our father died suddenly of a heart attack. As our world was shaken for the second time in six years, my sister, fifteen, and I, fourteen, coped in very different ways. I got a tattoo, pierced my nose and my bellybutton, learned to drink and joined an all-boy rock band as their bass player.

Joy? She sought refuge in spirituality. She decided to save the whole world, and the first person she decided to save was Michael.

As we were forced to leave our house and our neighborhood to go live with our aunt Sally after Dad's death, Joy clung to Michael as one of the few things in her life that wasn't changing. She needed a constant face to call family. I guess it was unavoidable that she'd eventually marry him.

Michael checked all the boxes for “the perfect husband” in the eyes of society—handsome, rich, from a good family, with a bright future. They had the perfect wedding. Joy was the perfect, gorgeous bride. They soon rushed to start their perfect little family...Yet my sister-instinct told me something wasn't right. I could sense she wasn't happy; only years later did I find out the full extent of what was hiding under that façade of perfection.

Michael wasn't right in the head; that's all I can tell you. Joy, the ultimate shrink, can write a twelve-volume textbook on what was wrong with him. I've heard her mention terms such as “bipolar,” “narcissistic” and “paranoid something.” I know she spent the years of their marriage begging him to seek professional help, lifting him up from suicidal depression and hiding his explosions from the public eye.

His death took us all by surprise. First, they said it had been a car accident. Then the police and the FBI got involved, suggesting a suspicion for sabotage and murder. Eventually, things seemed to quiet down.

I've learned not to talk about Michael's accident. Every time I touch the subject, Joy gets so unraveled that I sometimes wonder if she had something to do with his death. Or at least if she knows something she hasn't told me.

But I may be imagining things because deep inside, I sometimes considered murdering Michael myself.

It's a joke.

But it's not.

No one messes with my sister without hearing from me.

I admit that I feel deeply relieved that Michael is out of Joy's life. Almost two years after his death, she's barely starting to be herself again. I wish she'd follow my advice and start dating again, but she's paralyzed, frozen. I don't blame her. If the first man you ever had in your life was a basket case like that, of course you'd be gun-shy.

It's going to take a very special man to climb the electrified fence Joy has built around her heart. I wish so much she could meet someone who makes her as happy as T.J. makes me. Someone who would take care of her for the first time in her life, instead of someone she has to take care of. A rock-steady, reliable, Good Guy. Someone who sees that inner beauty I see and is able to convince her for once that she's not invisible.

But the rest of the time I wonder if that's not the right solution. I was ready for T.J. in my life because I'd done it all and was ready to settle down. I'd had enough heartbreaks to appreciate what a stable, nice man could bring into my life. Joy? I think she still needs one big adventure in her life before settling. She needs to give herself permission to do something crazy for the first time. She needs to fall head over heels for a heartthrob Bad Boy who makes her finally disconnect her brain, free that self-restraint and stop trying to be perfect.

But, hey! Knowing my overachiever sister, she may end up doing both things at the same time—finding the one guy who can be both.

I'm telling you; it's going to take one very special man.

Find out more about Dr. Joy Clayton and Special Agent Richard Fields in the next title in this series: [“Just for Joy: Beyond Achievement.”](#)

Or read the story about Michael O'Hara's murder investigation in the optional prequel [“Beyond Physical: A Mystery Romance.”](#)

The Deleted Scene: What Really Happened in Insanity Night.

The moonless night provided the perfect level of darkness for an underwear race.

Holding their clothes, Hope and Tom sprinted across the pool area to the hotel lobby. Once there, they tiptoed to the staircase, avoiding the night manager dozing at his desk near the elevator. They ran up the two flights of stairs and raced across the long hallway to room 352.

Wheezing in laughter, Hope fished her card-key from her handbag and struggled to open the door with clumsy fingers. The card reader finally worked, and they rushed inside the room, slamming the door behind them. They laughed hysterically, resting their backs on the door.

Fighting the remainders of his laughter, and still catching his breath, Tom said, “That felt great! Skinny dipping in a public pool was a letdown, but running outdoors in my boxers *should* have been on my bucket list!”

“I guess we're really drunk,” she replied, giggling.

He chuckled. “You think?”

Slowly, his panting calmed down, and the realization hit him.

They were inside her hotel room, in their underwear, in the dark.

It was his turn to make the next move. He so wanted it and so dreaded it.

An hour ago, getting in bed with this gorgeous woman, who was galaxies away from his league, was only far-fetched wishful thinking. And now it was about to become a reality. His brain was short-circuiting, sending panic alarms announcing someone had made a mistake.

Did he even remember what to do after being alone for so long?

What if he ruined it?

He looked at her in the partial darkness of the room, scantily illuminated by the hallway light coming from under the door. He could barely guess her dark eyes, or that amazing body he knew was scantily clad. But somehow, he felt he had engraved them, and her, forever in his memory.

Before he could make a move, she jumped on him and kissed him.

The surprise left him unable to react as she dragged him to bed and shoved him onto it. He landed on his back, and his head smacked against the headrest, making him groan in pain. Before he had a chance to rub his sore scalp, she climbed on him. A knee hit his stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

Wait. Is she seducing me or is she attacking me?

She kissed him with rough, clumsy kisses.

I guess she's seducing me.

An elbow sank in his collar bone making him see stars. The knee that had hit his stomach moved again, dangerously close to his groin.

“Whoa! Easy!” he begged, holding her knee.

In a blink, he found himself straddled under her, while she held his arms back.

Is this a sexy move, or a wrestle hold?

She smiled. Her speech was slurred. “Don't you worry; I'll be gentle with you.”

The painful way her mouth bit his lips contradicted her promise.

Releasing his arms, he freed his mouth from hers and caught her hands. “How about we slow down and relax for a moment?”

Laughing, she stumbled out of bed. “Oh, sweetie! You sound so nervous, I feel like I'm about to take away your virtue.”

She teetered toward the room's minibar and opened the fridge, extracting a bottle. “I think you need another drink.”

Even in the daze his own brain was, he knew that was a bad idea.

“Uh...Hope, I think we've had enough to drink for one night.”

She popped open the mini-champagne bottle and poured two clear plastic cups. She took one long sip from one—one large gulp, as if she were having a shot.

She staggered back toward him and offered him the other cup. He shook his head. She insisted,

and he took the cup from her hands but rested it on the nightstand untouched.

Putting a hand on her waist and tilting her head, she said, “Listen, sweetie, I'm obviously not at my sharpest for seduction skills tonight. Would you please stop playing hard-to-get and stop pretending you're clueless? You and I both know you're an experienced seducer.”

Knowing they were alone in the room, he resisted the impulse to look behind himself to make sure she wasn't talking to someone else.

“Experienced seducer?”

She scoffed. “Like if you've never seen yourself in the mirror and noticed how hot you are.”

The statement caught him by surprise. He felt flattered.

She took a step in his direction. “I know a seducer when I see him—and you're one. Don't think I missed for one moment what you were doing onstage. The way your fingers caressed the piano keys and fondled the guitar strings. The way you kiss the sax when you play it. The way your body rocks to the rhythm of the drums you were beating. I knew you were fire the moment I saw you.”

Was this breathtaking, beautiful woman really talking about him? Geeky and prudish T. J. Wagner? Even if he knew it wasn't true, seeing himself through her eyes at that moment felt exhilarating.

She ran her index finger through his lower lip. “You kiss like a professional. You have hands of silk that know how to set a woman on fire. But you and I know that's not it. This is more than physical.” She moved a hand between them. “You and I know there's a strange connection going on here. *I know you* and *you know me* beyond the time since we met. Maybe from a time before our births.”

A chill went down his spine as he had to admit her words sounded true. *Am I drunker than I thought I was?*

“So,” she concluded putting a hand on his chest, “are you going to keep making me work hard? Or are you going to take this bull by its horns and take over? Because I'm telling you—”

He cut her off by holding her face and claiming her mouth.

He kissed her softly. The champagne in her mouth tasted delicious. She tensed up, so he stayed

in her mouth without touching her body until that tension subsided. She kissed him back. When she wasn't trying to knock him down, the chemistry was amazing.

As she relaxed to his touch, he slid his hands from her face to her neck, then slowly down her back. He felt her body tremble. He trembled slightly too. It had been so long!

There was no need for more talk. Without separating her lips from her, he walked her backwards to the bed.

Laying her gently in bed, his hands started exploring her. Hers explored him too, easing up his fear that his body could have forgotten what to do. For a long time, he delighted in the pleasure of defining every texture of her mouth and her skin without any goal.

But as her hands became more daring, desire boiled inside him, and he feared that if they didn't slow down, he'd be done before they got started.

He held her hands and stopped kissing her. With his eyes closed, he breathed deeply, giving himself time to cool down.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

Opening his eyes, he found her looking at him with genuine worry on her face. It touched his heart. He knew it wasn't true, but he gave himself permission to imagine that she really cared for him. He held her face with one hand and stared at her in silence.

“You look so beautiful in the low light I wonder if I'm dreaming.”

A sudden joy he couldn't explain filled his heart. He ran the tip of his index finger down the side of her face. “I just can't believe how perfect you are. You're so beautiful. You're so full of life...so amazing. I guess I just need to freeze this moment in my memory, in case it never happens again”

Her voice broke. “Oh, Tom...you are so...wonderful.”

He kissed her again. It was a sweet and sour kiss, a kiss of surrender. Maybe in the morning he'd regret this. But right now, he'd allow himself to enjoy it.

He felt the taste of tears in his mouth and felt her body shake in a sob. Breaking the kiss, he looked at her worried.

“Baby, what's wrong?”

She cried, hugging him. “You're just so...good to me. You're so kind, so nice...I'm not used to being treated this well.”

He tensed up. Looking at her cry, his first instinct was panic. *Please don't tell me she's another psycho!*

Then he remembered the source of her craziness and felt a profound compassion and a deep shame invade him.

“Oh God, Hope. *You're so drunk!* You don't even know what you're saying or doing!”

He sat back on the bed, feeling terrible. Now that the effects of the alcohol were subsiding in him—but obviously not yet in her—he couldn't believe he'd let things go so far. She was in a terrible state, unable to think clearly, unable to defend herself. What kind of animal was he?

Picking up his pants from the floor, he put them on and reached for his shirt.

“Wait!” she exclaimed, catching his arm from the bed. “Don't go, please! I'm fine now!”

The begging tone in her voice moved him. He sat on the bed next to her and shushed her gently.

“You'll be fine, sweetheart. You're exhausted. If you only stop fighting it a minute, you'll fall asleep.” He kissed her hand. “Thank you for an amazing night. I'll never forget it!”

He tried to get up, but she sat up and hugged him, preventing him from walking away.

“Don't leave, please!”

Shushing her again, he stroked her back, then lay her back in bed. He covered her with the blankets, tucked her in and sat back on the bed running his fingers through her hair, scratching her scalp. Her breathing turned deeper and more regular, and her blinks became longer and longer.

She mumbled, “I had forgotten how good it feels to be put to bed. I was so little when my mother died, I can hardly remember.”

Her words touched his heart, but he didn't answer.

She continued, “How come I feel like if I've known you all my life?” She paused. “Oh, I

remember, now. *You're my soulmate.*”

Within seconds, she was asleep. Her last words resounded in his brain like an echo. Even knowing she didn't have a clue of what she was saying, they felt so true it was frightening.

Grabbing his shirt from the floor, he put it on and fastened a couple of the buttons as he got up from the bed. He then put on his damp, sandy jacket and tried to remember where his shoes had ended up. He checked his pockets and found his wallet.

There it was. His emergency supply of aspirin and Pepcid. It took only a minute to leave ready a glass of water and a couple of notes for her with the pills. He took one last look around the room and walked out.

He found his shoes and socks near the pool lounge chairs and put them on before heading to his motorcycle. It was still dark. He wished he could return to the beach and catch the sunrise, even if alone. But if he hurried now, and managed not to kill himself on the way home, he could still catch a few hours of sleep before picking up his children at noon.

The fantasy was over, and it was time to return to reality.