

## JUST FOR JOY: Beyond Achievement

### Prologue

*October 2016*

Joy Clayton's heart raced as the taxi approached the white-trimmed yellow cottage, but she couldn't ask the driver to stop there—God forbid the FBI was tracking his GPS. Instead, she asked to be dropped off two houses down. She paid in cash and, after adjusting her blond wig, beach hat, and large sunglasses, she hung her weekend bag from her shoulder and exited the car.

She waited until the taxi had disappeared down the road before heading to her real destination. As she walked toward the cottage, she wondered one more time how on earth she had ended up there.

Never before had she done something this wild and crazy. She'd been the best-behaved little girl in the world—the teacher's pet, the model citizen, the exemplary physician, and, of course, the perfect lady. This was the closest thing to a crime she'd ever committed.

Shivering in spite of the steamy temperature, she rang the bell. Abruptly, the door opened. Her breath stole away, her heart jumped in her chest, and all second-guessing disappeared from her mind.

There he was, standing at the door. Special Agent Richard Fields. Six foot, three inches of self-assurance and wits. Two hundred luscious pounds of temptation. There he was, with his gorgeous laugh lines framing his hazel eyes, and that elusive daredevil smile she always longed to see break through.

In a flash, he pulled her by the hand into the house, closed the door behind her and clasped her in his strong arms. He made eye contact for a second before kissing her ravenously, his eagerness only matched by her own.

Freeing her from her glasses, hat and wig, he let the brunette waves cascade down her back, then ran his fingers through it. Her knees threatened to buckle.

“You’re sure no one followed you, right?” he asked in between kisses. His hot breath smelled of wine, but his mouth tasted of paradise.

“Yes, I changed cabs at the coffee shop and had the second taxi circle town before heading here, like you told me,” she mumbled in a hoarse voice while nibbling at his lower lip. He claimed her mouth again, deepening the kiss, and she trembled.

This three-day trip to a borrowed vacation house was exceptional. For Joy and Richard, a date usually meant a secret passionate encounter in the middle of the day, stolen during a lunch hour. With luck, “dining out” meant having takeout in his fenced backyard, under the stars. “Going dancing” meant playing ballroom music on her phone while she gave him dance lessons in the bedroom.

They couldn’t risk being seen together in public—always afraid that someone would recognize them and notify the FBI of Richard’s unforgivable fault: Getting involved with one of his murder suspects.

She realized he was walking her somewhere and assumed he’d take her to the bedroom first, as usual. Instead, he opened a back door and, holding her hand, guided her to the backyard.

Beaming, he said, “You’re just in time! The show’s starting.”

His hand pointed to the west and she turned speechless. In front of them, the sunset painted the sky with fire, and the boundless Indian River lagoon was an iridescent mixture of gold, orange, and mauve.

He guided her to sit on a blanket he’d laid on the grass and sat behind her, rubbing her shoulders. As he massaged away the aching tension from the past hours, he engaged her in light conversation to help her relax.

“I have the most amazing weekend planned,” he said sending her into a trance with his skillful fingers. “Tonight after dinner, we’ll ride our bicycles to the beach to watch the full moon rise. Tomorrow, if you’d like, we’ll go snorkeling and kayaking. It will be great to spend time outdoors after so much seclusion.”

She couldn’t help teasing him with their usual inside joke. “It beats jumping off a running truck and racing through the woods chased by gunmen.”

He laughed. “How to forget our delightful fifth date?”

“For the hundredth time, sweetie,” she tittered, “that was *not* a date.”

“Of course it was a date.” Without stopping his massage, he wrapped his long legs around her and whispered in her ear. “It was the first time we slept together.”

She gasped. “We *fell asleep* next to each other—in an ambulance! That doesn’t count as sleeping together!”

His thumbs massaged circles down her back. “Surviving a brush with death is the ultimate orgasmic experience. Plus, I sprayed you with my blood when you gave me first aid for my stab wound. I’m counting that as *unprotected sex*.”

Joy threw her head back and laughed wholeheartedly. In a flash, the world was all right, and they were no longer forbidden lovers hiding from the FBI, but just a man and a woman in love, enjoying a Florida sunset in their shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops.

After months of terrifying nightmares, the fact that she could now joke about that night—the night when the *Lords of the Universe* tried to eliminate her as a potential witness—was testimony to how healing Richard had been in her life. That was Richard’s greatest gift, the ability to pull her out of her brain and back into her body.

And suddenly the joy was too much to bear, and the fear of losing him soon washed over her soul sending her into a near panic.

Covering his hands with hers to stop the massage, she turned slightly to face him. “Did you talk to your bosses already?”

His fingers stiffened. “Angel, it’s complicated.”

Disappointment pierced her heart. She felt the last of her energy leak out with her sharp exhale. “Why should it be? They caught the real murderer. Michael’s case is closed! Isn’t it?”

He didn’t answer. She didn’t expect him to—his job would always come with secrets. She rotated to sit facing him. “I’m not asking for much. All I want is for us to have a date without constantly having to look over our shoulders. All I want is being able to call my man to ask about his day—without fearing someone bugged our phones.”

He seemed torn. When he didn’t answer again, she avoided his eyes. “I don’t mean to be difficult—” her voice cracked. Even years after her husband Michael’s death, she still couldn’t help apologizing constantly.

The usual playfulness had disappeared from his expression. “You’re not. Angel, you’re the lowest maintenance woman I’ve ever met.”

He guided her to sit on his lap and cradled her in his arms. “There’s more at risk than losing my job. There’s more than you know going on. But I’m working on it. You have to trust me, angel.”

Could she trust him? This was the man who’d entered her life wrapped in a fake identity—undercover—and lied to her for months.

But this was also the man who’d saved her life. And the man who healed her soul every day with his patience, with amazing tenderness he hid under a stern façade.

Swallowing through the lump in her throat and her chest, she moved away from his chest to look in his eyes. “If you want me to trust you, you can’t keep dodging my questions about your transfer.”

His jaw clenched. “Let’s worry about it on Monday.”

With an impatient sigh, she untangled herself from his arms to sit on the grass, facing him. “There’s no way we can keep a relationship going when you’re in New York, and I’m here in Florida. Not if we’re not allowed to talk on the phone, video-chat or email—always afraid the FBI is watching us.” She discreetly wiped a tear from her eye, but soon more followed. All her psychiatry knowledge couldn’t help her against the heartbreak she knew was coming.

He held her hand. “Angel, I’m not giving up on us. I promise.”

*People break promises all the time.* Didn’t Joy know that? She’d learned it at age nine, when her mother had promised her she wouldn’t die. The pain in her chest tightened and more tears appeared.

He ran his thumb over a tear trail on her cheek. His voice softened. “In the meantime we can get back together, we’ll make it work. I have it all planned. We’ll have a secret code to text each other from disposable phones. I’ll call you from random payphones. And the best part, we’ll write letters.” With forced enthusiasm, he continued. “I’ll get a PO Box address with a fake ID. We’ll send each other old-fashioned snail mail letters. It will be exciting.”

She nodded without answering. He hugged her and she closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of his chest and inhaling his smell—the smell of heaven. She had no doubt she’d have a rude awakening soon, but for now, she gave herself permission to enjoy the dream.

## Chapter 1

*March 2017*

The upbeat sound of Abba's song "Dancing Queen" wouldn't stop playing. Rousing from the deepest sleep, it took a disoriented Joy a moment to remember it was her ringtone. Since pestering reporters had forced her to change her numbers her phone rarely rang.

Mumbling into the pillow, she noted the clock read 4:44 a.m. as her clumsy hands fumbled to grasp her phone from the nightstand. "Hello?"

"Dr. Clayton, I have a gun in my hand and I'm about to shoot myself."

Joy's heart dropped and she stilled in bed. A trickle of adrenaline in her blood kicked up her heart rate and she was suddenly fully awake. She finally recognized the name on the caller ID as one of her VIP concierge patients.

*No need to panic.*

She kept her voice calm. "Lucía, you have to hang up the phone and call nine-one-one right now."

The woman sobbed. "They can't help me! You're the only person in the world who can lift me up when I'm this down."

Joy imagined her love for Lucía flowing from her heart through the cell phone, traveling across town to the woman's phone and wrapping her as a protective power field.

As a psychiatrist specializing in the most severe grief cases, Joy knew the drill. She needed to keep Lucía distracted while she called the police on her landline and sent them to Baker-Act her—order an involuntary hospital admission.

“What’s wrong, tell me,” she asked Lucía in a soothing voice, while throwing off the covers and jumping out of her queen bed. The cold air made her shiver in contrast to her cozy blankets—March was so unpredictable.

As she walked across the large bedroom, listening to the woman vent, Joy glanced at the thermostat. Sixty-one degrees! That was arctic temperature for Central Florida! She wished she could turn on the heat or rush to her sleeping kids’ rooms to cover them with extra blankets, but she first had a suicide to stop.

It was hard to get a word in edgewise as Lucía vented about losing her husband and having another fight with her daughter. Taking a seat at her desk, shivering in the dark, Joy put the phone on speaker and logged into the electronic medical record system on her laptop. She needed the woman’s address to give the police.

“I hear you, sweetie, but you have to remember all your reasons to stay alive.” Joy recalled that Lucía Caro-Parker was a wealthy, retired actress, recently widowed. The records reminded her of her daughter’s name. “Think about your daughter Mary Jo.”

The intensity of the sobbing increased. “She hates me! She’s not talking to me anymore.”

*Darn it. Wrong move.*

Desperately searching for another distraction, Joy blurted out, “Sweetie, I want you to list for me all of your favorite smells in the world. I’ll help you get started. My favorite smells are lime peel, bread baking, and fresh coffee grounds. Your turn.”

Her mind added one item: *The scent of the ocean on Richard’s skin when he returned from surfing.*

She felt a punch in her stomach and a wave of nostalgia rose from her chest, tightening her throat. Pushing the sadness away, she dialed nine-one-one.

The next minutes were a blur. While Joy used the landline and half her brain to give information to the nine-one-one operator, she used her cell on speakerphone and her other brain-half to continue giving Lucía her pep talk. She succeeded at stalling her from pulling the trigger until the police arrived. She listened to the knocks on the door and gently coaxed Lucía to open it for them. She heard the murmurs of calm conversation and stayed on the line until a policeman picked up and confirmed they'd taken the gun away. Exploding in relief, she thanked him, and hung up the phone.

But her work wasn't finished. She now had a long list of admission steps to take care of. While on hold with the ER triage, Joy turned on the heater, started coffee and got ready for work.

As the aroma of coffee filled the house, her thoughts returned to Richard. He made the best coffee in the world. And he always left the coffee maker ready for her before leaving, to make her hectic mornings easier. He was the only person in the world who used to take care of her, instead of asking her to take care of him.

Her heart aching, she walked into her large closet and searched in the secret compartment under her jewelry box for the only picture of him she'd allowed herself to keep, a printout from online news. It was the press conference after Michael's murderer was caught.

He looked so handsome in his dark business suit. She'd been dreaming of that same image when the phone awakened her. Richard Fields, the man who'd healed her wounded heart just to shoot it point blank shortly after. The man she'd been trying to forget for the past six months.

The voice of the emergency room doctor on her cell's speaker brought her back and she put the photo away.

As she gave the ER doctor the report about Lucía, she chose the dress of the day from the long racks organized by color gradation in her walk-in closet. Today she'd wear

purple with her jade and amethyst jewelry. While on hold to speak with the on-call psychiatrist, she worked on her hair and makeup.

Almost three years after her husband Michael's death, whenever Joy looked in the mirror, she heard his voice criticizing her. Strangely, his words now mixed with Richard's. The same mouth Michael used to say was too big for her narrow face and small, dark-brown eyes, Richard had described as irresistibly plump and sensual. The body Michael reminded her wasn't the same as before having children, Richard used to describe as the body of a goddess. *The pleasures of loving a professional liar.*

But she was now committed to follow the advice she gave and cut herself some slack.

Holding the phone to her ear, she looked in the mirror and repeated the daily exercise her mentor Carl Andrews assigned her years ago.

"My name is Joy, and I'm a compulsive overachiever. It has been three days since my last bout of self-flagellation."

A little hand on her back got her attention. It was her seven-year-old, Arthur.

She bent over to kiss his cheek. "Good morning, sweetie. Did I wake you up?"

Half asleep and silent, the chubby brunette boy rubbed his puffy green eyes. Pulling her by the hand, he took off and she followed him through the hallway, kitchen and spacious family room.

As they approached a bedroom, Joy could hear a thumping sound getting louder. Opening the door, she confirmed her dreadful suspicion.

*Shoot.* The twins were up.

Three-year-old blond Edward jumped on the bed. His brunette twin, Alex, had found the box of watercolors Joy had hidden from them, and sat on the floor, painting a

polychromatic art-piece on the wall. His face stained with paint, he batted his eyelashes and gave her the most adorable, guilty smile.

Joy sighed. *Let the real juggling begin.*

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The traffic and sirens in the background reminded Richard where he was before his eyes opened—his dreadful, shoebox-sized apartment in Brooklyn. The nightstand clock displayed the lit numbers 4:44 a.m. *Damn insomnia.* He closed his eyes again, but it was pointless to try to fall back to sleep.

He felt as if he'd swallowed a handful of pins—and he was breathing them too, in each inhale of the excruciatingly dry air. His parched skin was so itchy he wanted to rip it off. *Stupid old furnace. I can't wait to turn it off.*

Six months! He'd arrived in New York City in October and suffered through nearly six months of flaky skin, ridiculously short, freezing days, and gray skies.

Had he ever really complained about Florida's humid heat? He'd give anything right now for some of it.

He tried to get up, but his muscles refused to obey, devoid of any energy. Even shaving was lately too ambitious for him. The returns he was getting from his disciplined weight lifting seemed limited to the mirror.

There was a time in his life when going to work was fun. FBI undercover jobs with dangerous drug dealers and hitman gangs, when any minute he could feel a cold gun muzzle against his forehead. *Those were the good old days.* That damn leak to the press after the O'Hara case, when his picture made it into every single news website, had been the death of undercover work for him. Now he was a bureaucrat, filing paper work at a desk.

Richard's phone rang.

*Who the hell is calling at this hour?*

He grabbed the phone from the nightstand. It was his ex-wife.

A wave of fear washed over him. Ever since his fourteen-year-old son got homesick in New York and insisted on going back to his mother in Florida, Richard had had no peace. Richard didn't trust his volatile ex watching him, but he still had a bad taste in his mouth from the one useless attempt to challenge the custody agreement in court.

He picked up. "Sandy? Is Ray okay?"

The voice on the other side of the line broke in sobs. "I have a handful of Percocet and Xanax and I'm about to commit suicide by taking them all."

Richard sighed deeply. It was just another of Sandy's fake suicidal threats.

Rolling his eyes, he spoke calmly. "Listen, drama queen. The best part of divorcing you was not having to deal with crap like this. If you want to kill yourself, be my guest. There's no shortage of humans on the planet."

The woman gasped. "How can you be so insensitive?"

He dragged himself out of bed and shuffled across his tiny bedroom's carpeted floor, which still smelled of cigarette smoke and cat urine from the previous tenant. He peered through a window, but all he could see was a neighbor's fire escape.

"Just a small suggestion, Sandy," he commented. "The next time you try to kill yourself do something more efficient than taking a few pills or nicking your wrist. How about you jump in the middle of the highway and let an eighteen-wheeler run you over? No, wait. That would be inconsiderate for the people who'll have to clean behind you. I have a better idea, carbon monoxide. Go to your garage and—"

A high-pitched wail threatened to pierce his eardrum. “I’m the mother of your son! Don’t you care if Ray loses me?”

“He’ll get over it. Paying for therapy for him will be cheaper than your alimony.” Richard moved to disconnect the call, then had second thoughts. *Damn it.* He knew she was bluffing, seeking attention. She was too self-centered to really attempt anything serious against herself. Still...

He held the phone to his ear. “Sandy, do me a favor before you kill yourself. Last time I was there, I hid an envelope stuffed with cash for Ray in your kitchen. Would you leave it on his bed, so he has a way to get around for a while—you know, after you’re dead?”

Her voice cheered up. “Where is it?”

*Ha! She bought it.* “I can’t remember. It’s somewhere in your kitchen cabinets or the pantry. If you don’t want to look for it, it’s fine, just leave him a note—”

“No, no! It’s okay. I’ll find it.”

“Thank you. See you in the afterlife.”

Shaking his head, he disconnected the call. *Not the brightest woman in the world.* What was he thinking the day he married her?

Oh wait, he wasn’t. Her father was pointing a gun at him for knocking her up. *I guess I wasn’t the brightest back then, either.*

He quickly texted Sandy’s sister and the neighborhood’s patrolman asking them to keep an eye on her.

Richard sneered at himself. Who was this soft man he'd become lately, entertaining feelings of compassion for his witch of an ex-wife?

In the pocket of the Bronx where Richard had grown up, there was no room for sensitivity. His mother's survival motto had been, "Never make eye contact with anyone. And if you see someone lying on the ground, never stop to help them. It's probably a scam and you'll get your skull smashed."

Richard had learned to hit back before he'd learned to walk, to defend himself from his older brother's aggression. He'd learned to lie and act before he learned how to read, to defend himself from his unstable mother's unpredictable beatings. Those skills had come in handy as an undercover agent for the FBI.

And if he had any faith in humanity left, Sandy the vampire had finished it, giving him the seven most miserable years of his life. No wonder he'd sworn never to get married again.

*Well... Except for that one time when you considered it.*

A faint wave of pain rose in Richard's heart. He imagined himself crushing it into a tiny ball until it was pulverized, then putting the remains away in a bottle, and shoving a cork in it.

After using the ancient bathroom, he returned to his miniature bedroom and sat on the smelly carpet, in a half-lotus position for his morning meditation.

God forbid any of his friends at the FBI saw him now; they'd tease him for the rest of his life. He closed his eyes, inhaling and exhaling deeply, repeating his mantra.

Richard wondered how had he changed so much in such a short time. He'd spent most of his twenties as a hard-ass policeman for the NYPD and his thirties so far as a federal agent.

How and when had he become this quartz-stone-rubbing hippie practicing meditation?

He blamed it on Carl Andrews.

When Richard agreed to immerse himself in Carl's New Age Spirituality teachings for his last investigation, he didn't realize he'd been signing up for brainwashing and submitting himself to involuntary psychotherapy.

*Empty your mind*, he scolded himself.

Breathing in and out, he tried to get back in mediation mode.

## Chapter 2

As if waking up to a suicide threat and devilish little twins was not challenging enough, Joy had barely dropped Arthur off at school when she got a text from Donna, the nanny.

*“My daughter went into labor one week early. I have to leave immediately. Sorry. Can you send someone to replace me or should I drop the twins at your office?”*

A Niagara Falls of adrenaline rushed through Joy’s bloodstream. Her heart rate jumped, her face flushed, her hands turned into ice.

*No, please!* She’d take a root canal, an IRS audit, a bleeding ulcer, all three together... *anything* before finding herself without childcare. The employee’s daycare had recently closed due to lack of funding.

Joy quickly texted her backup babysitter. She still hadn’t gotten a response by the time she arrived at work, but she put her personal crisis on hold to tend to her patients—God knew they had more problems than she did. With a double specialty in medicine-psychiatry and a subspecialty in pain management, Joy spent her mornings working at the Fort Sunshine Hospice House and her afternoons at “The Center for Mental and Spiritual Healing,” or CeMeSH, a concierge body-mind-spirit practice specialized in the effects of grief and depression on the physical health. She often felt like the cheerleader of the uncheerable.

So, what did Joy do when she was stressed to the max and had no energy left to cheer up her patients? She invited one of them to dance.

In her childhood, dancing had been Joy’s favorite escape. She wished she hadn’t quit dancing lessons but taking care of a depressed father and a rebellious younger sister had forced her to prioritize her time. Now, the moment Joy arrived at the Hospice House, she invited Malcolm, the oldest of the residents, to tango. Used to the routine, Ava the

office manager let the music play through the speakers. Delighted, the shrunken old man twirled her, and skillfully maneuvered her to the garden courtyard.

The morning still lingered in the balmy high sixties, a treasured reprieve from the usual Florida blast furnace. Around the large courtyard, flanked by the three wings of the building complex, residents gathered in small groups engaged in crafts, chatting and sharing breakfast. Everyone cheered the arrival of the dancers. The staff and patients loved it when Joy and Malcolm danced, seeing their serious doctor turned into a lighthearted, goofy performer. Joy liked it even more—she often felt she was nothing but a five-year-old ballerina pretending to be a serious doctor.

As Malcolm finished the dance with a dip, Joy saw an upside-down scowling face over her. It was her business partner, Dr. Lori Harris.

Immediately, Ava turned off the music and the cheerful groups dispersed.

Carrying an eternally offended expression on her face, tall and mannish Lori towered over her. “There’s something really wrong with you,” Lori complained as she slicked her short, strawberry-blond hair. “*Nobody* enjoys hospice work this much. When are you going to understand this place is a waste of time and we should focus on the private center, where the money is?”

Joy glanced at her phone—*Darn it*. No reply yet from her babysitter. “It’s not about money. Allison, my therapist, says this job helps me heal my main childhood trauma, and suits my addiction to caregiving.” Allison had a point. Joy had learned to take care of her sick mother when she was too young to take care of herself. She’d then taken care of her father, her sister, and later on Michael’s psychological instability. Michael had called Joy’s caregiving nature, “Your annoying habit of rescuing people.” Richard had called it a divine gift.

As a pain management specialist rather than a psychologist, Lori stared at Joy blankly. “It must suck walking around knowing every little trauma of your own screwed-up psyche.”

*You have no idea.* Leaning toward her, Joy whispered, “The bad part is that you know it all, but that never stops you from making the same mistakes again.” With a last smile, Joy walked into her office.

The truth? The Hospice House was her *fun job*. The hospice patients—dealing with physical pain, yet at peace about the end of life—were easy to take care of compared to the severely depressed, wealthy people she saw in the afternoon—dealing with *spiritual* pain and unable to be happy in spite of all they had. The best example? Contrasting her dancing partner Malcolm, with Lucía, the suicidal patient she’d Baker-Acted earlier.

Between two jobs and three kids, Joy imagined herself constantly juggling five balls at a time. People had no idea what a mess she felt like on the inside. If there was something she craved in her life, it was predictability.

A text message from her back up babysitter chimed on her phone. “*Sorry. Out of town. Can’t help today.*”

The imaginary balls she was balancing in the air fell, smacking her on her head one by one.

She frantically texted her friend Fe.

*“Emergency! Donna has to leave and Glennys is out of town. Any chance your mom or your grandma could watch my twins and pick up Arthur from school today?”*

The answer came in the form of a FaceTime call.

On the screen, Fe sat on a yoga ball, bouncing two giggling small children, one on each knee. Next to her, an older kid used a foam noodle to hit her again and again, while another kid shot bubbles at her from a toy gun. Apparently, Fe’s group speech therapy session had already started.

“Hi, honey!” Fe seemed unaffected by the chaos around her. “Can Donna drop the twins off at my house with Abuela?”

Joy hesitated. Fe’s house was quite out of the way.

Fe waved her hand. “Never mind. I forgot how hectic your mornings are. I’ll call Donna myself to coordinate.”

Joy felt grateful tears welling up inside. That was Fe. Despite working two speech therapy jobs and supporting two kids and two adults—her mother and her grandmother—she never failed to come through.

“You’re the best friend in the universe.”

“And good-looking, too!” Fe joked. “Oh, and I’ll make sure to book Grandma for Friday night also. I’m counting the days until our happy hour! Even though you’re the worst drinking buddy in the world.” A teasing sparkle shone in Fe’s honey-colored eyes before she disconnected the call.

Joy considered arguing back by text, but Fe was right. Joy had to be the most lightweight drinker on Earth—to the point she seriously suspected she had a medical condition that prevented her from metabolizing alcohol. Richard used to joke, “If I ever want to get you drunk, I just have to kiss you after *I* have a drink.”

*Darn it.* Now she’d be thinking about his mouth all day.

Still rattled, she returned to her office. As always happened when stress got the best of her, she heard Michael’s voice mocking her, “You should just quit work and stay home with the kids. After all, it’s not like you’re a *real* doctor. You spend your mornings taking care of hospice patients—who are going to die no matter what you do. Then you spend your afternoons taking care of crazy people—who have nothing wrong with them but it’s all in their minds. *You never save anybody.*”

*Ouch.* That was Michael O’Hara *on a good day.*

Thank God for her childlike imagination! It had allowed Joy to disconnect her brain as needed to survive so many years with him.

That was how her old hobby of writing crime stories was born—the hobby that replaced dancing, before her life got too busy and hobbies became extinct. Back then, her guilty pleasure was staring at the ceiling at night, imagining plots to murder Michael and make it look like natural causes.

The guilt and shame had nearly crushed her later on, when he was murdered for real.

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“Raise your hand and be honest. Have you ever hated someone so much you wished they died—maybe even fantasized about murdering them?”

On the twenty-third floor of the 26 Federal Plaza building, a deafening silence fell over the conference room. Visiting agents from out of town filled the New York FBI Field Office, attending Richard’s briefing. They stared at him in shock. Some of them had guilty expressions. Pleased, Richard held a smile. He’d succeeded at his goal of waking them up.

Slowly, he raised his own hand. “I have. My ex-wife. Every single day of our marriage and at least twice a month for the eight years we’ve been divorced.”

The crowd roared with laughter. They were now awake.

He continued. “Now, don’t be shy. Anybody else? Your own ex? Your ex’s lawyer? Your old, mean gym teacher?”

A few brave people lifted their hands. Richard nodded. “Now, let’s push that. Have you ever fantasized about killing someone because you thought the world would be a better place without them?” He paused. “Maybe a corrupt politician? A child molester? A terrorist?” A larger number of hands slipped up. Richard had their attention now.

Pacing around the room, he said, “Now imagine you were convinced that you’d been *appointed by God* with the mission of eradicating evil people from the planet. You’ve been gifted with special powers. You have complete immunity and license to kill—no lengthy trials or evidence needed. And, the best part, you could kill people in ways undetectable by autopsy. How would that feel?”

The audience seemed hypnotized. Richard gave them a few seconds and concluded, “Well, you just took a peek inside of the mind of *The Lords of the Universe*.”

He turned the projector on and started his official presentation. The first slide was a picture of a golden medallion engraved with Greek and Sanskrit characters.

“The *Lords of the Universe*, or LOTU, are a sect of fanatical New Age Spirituality thinkers spread all over the country. Their typical crime is murder as moral punishment for ‘sins’ committed by their victims. Their specialty is using medical means to kill their victims, so their autopsies are negative.”

He advanced slides. “The LOTU members’ most common traits are narcissism, righteousness, overachievement, and fanatical commitment toward a cause. To understand their psychology, think about a pendulum swinging from rigid self-control, to blatant antisocial behavior. One typical example would be the celebrated preacher who’s later on implicated in a sexual scandal. Or the philanthropist who’s later on found out to beat his wife.”

The next slide was a picture of a handsome blond man boasting a toothy politician’s grin. Michael O’Hara’s annoying baby face was so familiar to Richard it was hard to believe he’d never met him. But the man had been dead for a year and a half by the time he’d become Richard’s concern. He’d heard many times he had to be thankful to that man for catapulting his career forward. But he now knew the scum O’Hara had been and felt glad that someone had rid the planet of his presence.

A flicker of memories of Joy threatened to awaken. While he bottled them up, he focused on the view of the city buildings through the conference room window. It was

snowing—again. He inhaled sharply, and his oversensitive sense of smell detected the subway stench that had clung to all of their suits.

“The LOTU were confirmed to have plotted the murder of Congressman Michael O’Hara in Florida and are accused of murdering three other politicians in different states, including Senator Marcia Flowers here in New York. A few months ago, our tip line received an anonymous message implicating the LOTU leadership in a dozen other deaths. The means used to kill the victims wasn’t listed. The few who had an autopsy showed no evidence of having been murdered—consistent with the LOTU *modus operandi*.”

A freckled redheaded agent lifted his hand. Short and wiry, he struck Richard as barely older than his own fourteen-year-old son. He introduced himself, “John Holland. It’s a great honor to be here with you, sir. Who were those victims? Also politicians?”

Richard was still getting used to the starry-eyed vows of admiration coming from the rookies. Apparently, he was now an authority at the FBI. How had that happened? Not that long ago, he was locking horns with his senior agents and showing up to work hiding a hangover behind sunglasses after weekend-long parties.

He answered with a twisted smile, “The victims were mostly unlikable people, under investigation for different charges. Drug money laundering, sexual and racial harassment, exploitation of minors... It’s hard not to cheer for the LOTU.”

The audience chortled.

He resumed pacing. “Unfortunately, the search for LOTU members here in New York has been unproductive. Extrapolating from the O’Hara case, we know we are searching for a political mastermind. We suspected Albert Miller, a close adviser of Senator Flowers who retired from politics and moved to Florida shortly after her death. Unfortunately, the man had a massive stroke last year that left him practically brain dead.”

As he said the words, he made a mental note to check his messages. The previous day, he'd sent a query to find out whatever had happened to Albert Miller. He'd never received a notification of his death.

“As a result, the case has been stuck for months. Our most recent lead ended up being a false alarm.”

“What happened?” Holland asked.

He shrugged. “An elderly woman contacted us claiming her husband had been murdered through some plot to leave him with a clean autopsy. We confirmed the man died from misusing Viagra, mixing it with his heart medication. His wife was shocked, swore he'd never taken that drug. She maintains he'd told her that even at seventy-eight—” He cleared his throat. “His potency was *all natural*.”

The audience roared again.

*I have bad news for you, Mrs. Caro-Parker—sometimes, men lie.*

A gray-haired agent sitting near Richard snorted. “Well, Fields, you know what I say, it's *your* fault the case is stuck. You're the one who shot the Florida LOTU leader—losing us a key informant.”

If it was intended as a joke, no one dared to laugh.

Richard smirked at Gordon, the Special Agent in Charge. “An annoying boss told me once I have to learn to control my hot head and my trigger-happy finger. Oh wait!” He narrowed his eyes. “That was you.”

Gordon guffawed, and only then did the audience dare to laugh along.

Richard would gladly take the heat rather than revealing what had really happened that night.

He hadn't pulled the trigger against the LOTU leader. He'd taken the blame, claiming self-defense, to protect the man who had done it to save his life. It seemed a great idea at the time, in the exhilaration of surviving a brush with death.

Unfortunately, it had required lying under oath in his deposition. If it ever came out, that charitable impulse could cost Richard his career—and his freedom.

The young agent raised his hand again. "Is it true that the witness you personally rescued during that operation was Michael O'Hara's widow?"

Richard froze. A heavy silence filled the room. Slowly, he turned to face Holland scowling. The young man shrunk under the intensity of that harsh, stern look.

"That question is not relevant to this presentation. Please hold any other questions until the end."