



## Suddenly One Summer (FBI/US Attorney)

By Julie James

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**From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *It Happened One Wedding* comes a novel about a man and a woman whose summer is about to get very, very hot...**

Divorce lawyer Victoria Slade has seen enough unhappy endings to swear off marriage forever. That doesn't mean she's opposed to casual dating—just not with her cocky new neighbor, who is as gorgeous and tempting as he is off-limits. But once she agrees to take on his sister's case, she's as determined to win as ever—even if that means teaming up with Ford...

Investigative journalist Ford Dixon is bent on finding the man who got his sister pregnant and left her high and dry. He's willing to partner with Victoria, despite the fact that the beautiful brunette gets under his skin like no other woman. He might not be looking to settle down, but there's no denying the scorching attraction between them. Still, the more time he spends with Victoria, the more he realizes that the one woman as skeptical about love as he is might be the only woman he could really fall for...

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## **Suddenly One Summer (FBI/US Attorney) By Julie James Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

### Review

#### **PRAISE FOR *SUDDENLY ONE SUMMER*:**

"James' trademark mix of bright humor, emotional perceptiveness, and sizzling sexual tension make this a radiant winner." --*Kirkus Reviews*

"Another JJ delight packed full of her signature wit and sophistication that provide laugh-out-loud fun juxtaposed with moments that will twist your heart....A hot, sexy read packed full of humor and high jinks as Victoria and Ford take tentative steps into romance...I love Julie James' voice, and it's easy to see why her books have such wide appeal, *Suddenly One Summer* is another jewel added to her basket of treasures... If you need a great read to throw in your beach bag, make sure *Suddenly One Summer* is one of your choices." --*USA Today*

#### **PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING JULIE JAMES**

"An addictively readable combination of sharp humor, sizzlingly sexy romance, and a generous measure of nail-biting suspense."

—*Chicago Tribune*

"Sexy fun. Romance fans will pop their corks over this one."—*Library Journal*

"Witty banter and an amazing chemistry."—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Julie James writes books I can't put down."—Nalini Singh, *New York Times* bestselling author

### About the Author

After graduating from law school, *New York Times* bestselling author **Julie James** clerked for the United States Court of Appeals. She then practiced law with one of the nation's largest firms for several years until she began writing screenplays. After Hollywood producers optioned two of her scripts, she decided to leave the practice of law to write full-time. Julie's books have been listed on the American Library Association's Reading List for Top Genre Novels, Booklist's Top 10 Romances of the Year, and have been featured as one of *Cosmopolitan* magazine's Red Hot Reads. Julie's books have been translated into sixteen languages, and her most recent novels are *It Happened One Wedding*, *Love Irresistibly*, and *About That Night*. Julie lives with her husband and two children in Chicago, where she is currently working on her next book.

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### Acknowledgments

### Prologue

ALTHOUGH PEOPLE OFTEN said that divorce was an ugly business, Victoria Slade had a different perspective. Typically, by the time clients arrived on her office doorstep, it was the *marriage* that had gotten ugly. Divorce was simply the part where the truth came out.

In a cab on the way to her town house on Chicago's north side, Victoria leaned her head against the seat and thought about the case she'd wrapped up today. Her client, a forty-five-year-old stay-at-home mom, had been blindsided three months ago after being served with a divorce petition by her husband of fourteen years. According to the terms of the couple's prenuptial agreement, Victoria's client was not entitled to receive any portion of the sizable business empire her husband had amassed, throughout the course of their marriage, as one of the most successful celebrity chefs in Chicago. The three lucrative restaurants, the bestselling cookbooks, and the income derived from his Food Network cooking show had all been designated "separate assets" per the prenup and thus untouchable by his wife in the event of a divorce.

Unless, of course, Mr. Celebrity Chef violated the no-cheating clause in the couple's prenup, thereby rendering the entire agreement invalid.

Knowing this, Victoria naturally had done a little digging.

She would say this for Mr. Celebrity Chef: he'd covered his tracks better than most cheating spouses she'd come across—and that was coming from someone who'd made virtually a cottage industry out of the unfaithfully wed. Most got caught after leaving a text message or e-mail trail, others because of suspicious activity on their credit card or bank statements. But this guy had been smart: he'd bought his twenty-six-year-old mistress a one-bedroom condo in the Ritz-Carlton Residences via a limited liability company that he'd created under false pretenses—supposedly a "food supply" company—to which his restaurants had made bimonthly payments in the amount of twenty thousand dollars.

Unfortunately for him, however, the forensic accountant Victoria had hired to comb through Mr. Celebrity Chef's books was even smarter.

And the rest was history.

Because of the diligent work of Victoria Slade & Associates, their client had walked out of this afternoon's settlement conference with significantly more money than the maintenance award she would have received had they not busted her husband with his hands in the metaphorical cookie jar. So to celebrate, Victoria had taken all six of her associates—and Will, her assistant and right-hand man—out for a well-earned evening of dinner and drinks.

*Lots* of drinks, judging from the tab Victoria had signed off on when leaving the restaurant.

She, herself, was basically sober when the cab pulled up in front of her three-story townhome. She enjoyed a good bourbon on the rocks as much as the next girl, but tonight she'd been wearing her Badass Boss hat, and as far as she was concerned, badass bosses didn't get falling-down drunk in front of their employees.

She tipped the driver an extra twenty when the taxi came to a stop. "Would you mind waiting until I get inside before you drive off?" She was playing it safe, of course, given the recent string of burglaries in the Lincoln Park and Lakeview neighborhoods. Not to mention the fact that it was one o'clock in the morning.

He nodded. "Sure. No problem."

After getting out of the cab, she crossed the sidewalk and headed up the front steps of the brick town house she'd lived in for the last ten months. Her first home. In truth, she probably could've afforded to buy the

place a couple of years earlier given the success of her firm. But with childhood memories of “Notice of Foreclosure” dancing in her head, she’d wanted to be confident she wasn’t biting off more than she could chew with the mortgage.

Victoria unlocked the front door, triggering the warning beep of her security system, and immediately punched her code into the keypad. When the alarm went silent, she turned around and waved to the cabdriver.

All clear.

She brought in the mail, deposited it on the kitchen counter, and headed upstairs. After rearming the security system from the keypad in her bedroom, she changed into a T-shirt and shorts, quickly scrubbed the makeup off her face, brushed her teeth, then climbed into bed. She debated whether to return some work e-mails, then decided—*nah*—that she’d earned a few hours off given the success of today’s settlement conference.

With a satisfied smile, she snuggled into the covers and began to drift off.

\* \* \*

*BEEEEEEP.*

Victoria shot up in bed when she heard the warning signal from her security system that the front door had been opened.

She heard the door shut downstairs, followed by the sound of footsteps.

Oh my God. Someone was in her house.

She slid out of bed and grabbed her cell phone from the nightstand. The alarm signal stopped, and the house fell silent again.

Her heart started thumping in her chest when she heard a man’s voice downstairs.

“We’re good to go,” he said.

Victoria moved silently into her walk-in closet, a space almost as large as her bathroom. Her laundry hamper was tucked between the wall and a row of long dresses. Sliding past the clothes, she crouched down and hid behind the hamper.

Her hand was trembling as she dialed 9-1-1 on her phone.

A woman’s voice. “9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

Victoria whispered, her words coming out in a rush. “My name’s Victoria Slade. I live at 1116 North Garner. Someone’s broken into my house.”

“Is the intruder in your home right now, ma’am?”

“Yes, I think there are two of them. I’m hiding in a closet upstairs and—” She paused, hearing something that made her palms sweat. “Someone’s coming up the stairs. I can’t talk—they’ll hear.”

“Ma’am, I’ll stay on the li—”

Victoria turned the volume on the phone all the way down and covered the speaker with her hand. Through a small space in between the hamper and the wall, she could see the closet doorway.

She held her breath as the footsteps on the hardwood floors grew louder.

A man dressed in dark clothing came into view in front of the closet. He paused, and then reached for his hip and pulled out a gun.

“You sure she hasn’t been home?” he called out to someone, in a gruff voice.

Another guy stepped in front of the closet. “Yeah, I’m sure. Why?”

“The bed’s been slept in.”

“So? You make your bed every fucking day? Come on, let’s get to work.”

She heard the second guy walk out of her bedroom, but the man with the gruff voice stayed where he was, gun in hand. From behind the laundry hamper, she watched as he moved toward the master bathroom across from the closet and turned on the light. He paused in the bathroom doorway, and then headed for the closet.

He reached in and flipped the switch that turned on the light.

As light flooded the small room, Victoria saw that he wore a black mask with openings at his eyes and mouth. He stepped inside the closet.

Her heart began to beat so hard against her rib cage she was afraid he might actually be able to hear it.

She stayed absolutely still, praying he didn’t see her through the gap between the hamper and the wall.

A soft whirring sound came from the other side of the closet.

The man spun around, pointing his gun. Then he relaxed when he spotted a brown case, her automatic watch winder, sitting on a shelf. Tucking the gun into the holster at his hip, he walked over, opened the front of the case, and picked up her watch. He examined it for several moments, flipping it over in his hand, and then pulled a medium-sized cloth bag out of the front pocket of his black hoodie. After dropping the watch inside, he moved on to the jewelry box that sat next to the watch winder.

With his back to Victoria, he spent what felt like an eternity rifling through the jewelry box, then picked it up and dumped the entire contents into his bag. Something fell to the floor with a *clink* against the hardwood floors, and he crouched down to pick it up.

There was a loud crash downstairs.

Victoria started at the sound at the same moment the masked man shot up to a standing position. He shouted to his partner, “What the fuck was that?”

She heard a loud commotion downstairs. Someone shouted, “*Police!*” and then—

A gunshot.

Instantly, the intruder was out of the closet. Suddenly remembering the cell phone in her hand, Victoria put it to her ear. “Hello?”

“It’s okay, Victoria. I’m still here. Help is on the way,” the 9-1-1 operator said.

The unwanted memory washed over her with the force of a tidal wave, carrying her back to a stranger’s voice on the other end of a phone line, all those years ago.

*Hang in there, Victoria. Help is coming, I promise.*

Suddenly, she felt . . . off. The space between her and the hamper began to contract, closing in on her. The air seemed stifling hot, and she felt dizzy.

“Victoria? Are you there?”

The voice sounded faint, far away, and she couldn’t tell if it was real or in her head. Past and present blurred together.

“Are you okay, Victoria?” the voice repeated, more urgently.

As her vision narrowed and darkness closed in, her last thought was *of course* she was okay. Victoria Slade could handle anything. She was tough, she was strong, she—

—was blacking out from her first-ever panic attack.

One

A month later

“THOUGH I WALK through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me . . .”

As the priest wrapped up his homily, Ford Dixon’s eyes fell once again on the photograph of his father that rested on a stand in front of the casket.

They’d gotten lucky with the photo. As he, his mother, and his sister, Nicole, had realized when preparing for this memorial service, John Dixon had posed for very few pictures by himself, particularly in recent years. Fortunately, they’d been able to crop a photograph taken just four months ago, one of him holding his granddaughter, Ford’s niece, in the hospital after she’d been born. It wasn’t a professional-quality photo—Ford had taken it with his phone—but his father looked happy and proud.

It was a good memory, one that he and his mother and sister could look back on without the uneasiness that clouded many others.

Any moment now, it would be his turn to deliver the eulogy. Never having given a eulogy before, the investigative journalist in him naturally had done his research. He was supposed to keep his remarks brief, but personal, and he was supposed to focus on a particular quality of his father that he’d admired, or share a story that illustrated something his father had enjoying doing.

Most of the people attending the funeral service knew that, in truth, there had been two John Dixons: the larger-than-life, gregarious man always up for a good time—who, sure, rarely had been seen without a beer in his hand—and the moody, angry drunk he could become when he’d had one, or four, drinks too many. Ford could wax poetic for hours about the first John Dixon, because that man had been his hero, the father who’d spent hours playing catch with him on weekends in the field next to their townhome subdivision. The

man who used to make up funny bedtime stories with different voices for the characters. The man who'd organized water balloon fights for the kids at family barbecues, the cool dad who'd let him have his first sip of beer at a Cubs game, the guy always getting a laugh out of the crowd of parents sitting on the bleachers during one of Ford's Little League games.

But the other John Dixon?

That guy was a lot harder to warm up to.

*Get away from me, kid. Don't you have any damn friends you can annoy?*

Ford cleared his throat just as the priest looked in his direction.

"I think Ford, John's son, has some remarks he'd like to share with us today."

Ford stood and walked to the lectern located to the right of the altar. He looked out at the decent-sized crowd and saw a lot of familiar faces, a mixture of family acquaintances, relatives, and close friends of his and his sister who'd come to offer their condolences.

With a reassuring glance at his mother and sister, who sat in the front pew, Ford rested his hands on the sides of the lectern. He hadn't written any notes, planning instead to rely on the innate storytelling instincts possessed by all good journalists—instincts he'd inherited from the man who lay in the casket behind him, a man who, once upon a time, had woven epic tales about Ford's stuffed animals while tucking him in at night.

Today, that was the John Dixon he chose to remember.

"The Fourth of July when I was eleven years old, my father decided we had to have the biggest, most elaborate fireworks display in the neighborhood. Ah, I see some of you out there smiling already . . . You know exactly where this story is going."

\* \* \*

AFTER THE FUNERAL service and subsequent lunch, Ford drove his mom back to his parents' house in Glenwood, a suburb north of the city. His parents lived—or now, he supposed he should say his *mom* lived—in a subdivision nicknamed "the Quads" because each square-shaped building contained four small townhome units stacked back-to-back. Although Glenwood was well known as a very affluent town—one of the ten richest in the U.S., according to *Forbes*—the particular neighborhood in which he'd grown up was decidedly blue collar, mostly families with two working parents who'd specifically chosen the subdivision because of its access to public schools ranked among the best in the state.

"I'm worried about your sister," his mother said as they drove along Sheridan Road, past the tree-lined side streets and multimillion-dollar mansions that, while technically part of his hometown, had always felt like a different world.

Ford glanced over, feeling a mixture of admiration, amusement, and frustration. The comment was so typical of his mother. She'd just buried her husband of thirty-six years, and of course here she was, thinking about someone else.

He reached over and squeezed her hand. "Nicole will be fine, Mom."

She gave him a no-nonsense look. "Don't *you* start giving me the grieving-widow platitudes. There've been enough of those these past few days."

That got a slight smile out of him. Fair enough. Unlike his father, with his wild mood swings, Maria Dixon had always been grounded and down-to-earth. “Fine. I’m worried about Nicole, too,” he admitted, despite being firmly of the belief that his mother didn’t need to be thinking about this today.

It wasn’t exactly a secret that his twenty-five-year-old sister, Nicole, had been struggling as a single mom ever since giving birth to her daughter, Zoe, four months ago. As a part-time actress and a full-time instructor at a local children’s theater, she worked days, evenings, and some weekends, yet still barely made enough to support herself in the city. Ford had talked to her about seeking child support from Zoe’s father—some musician Nicole had dated for a few months last year—but apparently the guy had freaked out when he’d found out Nicole was pregnant, and had packed his bags for L.A. without leaving her a forwarding address.

Ford hadn’t met the shithead, but his jaw clenched every time he thought about the way the guy had left his sister high and dry.

“I’ve tried talking to her, but she’s so hard to get a hold of these days,” his mother said. “I’d been planning to visit her at work this week, but then your father . . .” Her lower lip trembled as her voice trailed off.

Oh, *man*. It killed him to see his mother fighting back tears. No doubt, they were all reeling from the surprise of his father’s death. And while there was nothing he could do to change the past—a fact that ate away at him given the way things between him and his father had ended—there was, at least, something he could do in this situation.

So when his car pulled to a stop at a red light, he turned and looked his grieving mother in the eyes.

“I’ll make sure both Nicole and Zoe are all right, Mom. I promise.”

\* \* \*

A FEW HOURS later, Ford pulled into the parking garage of his loft condo building in Chicago’s Wicker Park neighborhood. He’d distracted himself with music during the drive home, but once he turned the car off, there was nothing but silence.

This was the moment he’d been dreading for the last few days, when the deluge of funeral arrangements subsided and he no longer had to be “on,” nodding and making small talk and graciously thanking everyone for their sympathies. The moment when he was finally alone, with nothing but his thoughts to keep him company.

A man stepped in front of Ford’s car and waved. “Hey, Ford.”

Or . . . maybe this wasn’t that moment.

Ford got out of his car to greet Owen, the guy who owned the condo next to his. “Sorry. Didn’t see you walking over.”

With a sympathetic expression, Owen shook his hand in greeting. “How’d everything go today?”

Ford appreciated that Owen had taken the time to drop by the wake yesterday. The two of them had been neighbors for four years, and had hung out occasionally. Less so recently, ever since Owen had moved in with his girlfriend and put his condo on the market. “It was a nice service, thanks.” He was quick to move off the topic. “What brings you back to the old hood?”

“Just came by to pick up my mail.” Owen gestured to the stack of magazines and letters he carried. “I saw

you and thought I should mention that my real estate agent rented my place for the summer.”

“You’re renting?” Now that was a surprise.

“I know. Not my first choice.” Owen shrugged. “But in this market, I wasn’t getting any offers anywhere close to my asking price. So we thought we’d rent it for a few months, and maybe put it back on the market in the fall. Figured I should give you a heads-up in case you see a stranger coming out of my front door.”

“Right.” Ford nodded. A silence fell between them, and he realized he was probably supposed to say more.

“Her name’s Victoria,” Owen went on, “and she’s some big divorce lawyer or something. I haven’t met her, but from what I hear she just bought a condo in River North and needed a place to live until the sale closes at the end of August. Apparently, she was really eager to get out of her current home. Not sure what the story is there.”

This was all interesting information, and Ford knew that Owen was just trying to be friendly. But these last few days of making polite conversation were starting to wear on him. “Thanks for letting me know.” He gestured to the door that led inside the condo building. “Unfortunately, there’s some stuff I need to take care of . . .”

“Oh! Of course,” Owen said quickly. “Don’t let me keep you.”

After promising to stay in touch, and assuring Owen that he would let him know if he needed anything—only the hundred-and-thirtieth time he’d made that pledge this week—Ford escaped and got into the elevator.

He exhaled as the elevator began to rise toward the fourth floor, and prayed that he wouldn’t bump into any other neighbors—past, current, or future—before he got to his loft.

He got lucky.

His hallway was empty. He walked quietly to unit 4F, the loft all the way at the end. Key already in hand, he unlocked the door and let himself in.

In his bedroom, he yanked off the tie and black suit jacket he’d worn for the funeral. Pacing in his bedroom, he thought about these past few days and felt a stab of emotion.

This was not how things between him and his father were supposed to end.

Granted, their relationship had been complicated for a long time. But he’d always held on to a small hope that something would happen to bridge the chasm between them. Rehab would work one of these times, or there would be some sort of health scare—nothing too serious—that would inspire his dad to give up drinking for good.

Obviously, that had been wishful thinking.

The last time he’d seen his father had been two weeks ago, at his cousin’s college graduation party. There’d been plenty of beer at the party, of which his father had consumed too much, and Ford had kept his distance, not wanting to deal with one of his dad’s moods on what was supposed to be a happy occasion.

He couldn’t remember what he and his dad had talked about that day. Certainly nothing of significance, none of the things Ford would’ve said if he’d known then that his mother would call ten days later, crying, to tell

him that his father had dropped dead in the kitchen after suffering a massive heart attack while she was out grocery shopping. There'd been no warning. The doctors said there was nothing anyone could have done; his father's heart muscles had been significantly weakened, likely the result of years of excessive drinking.

So many things left unsaid. And now . . . that could never change.

*Fuck.*

All of the emotion Ford had been holding back suddenly boiled over. Without thinking, he grabbed the glass-and-cast-iron candle holder on his dresser and whipped it at the wall opposite him.

Seeing the glass smash into pieces was oddly cathartic.

There was, however, one small problem. Apparently, the iron candle holder had been a little heavier than he'd thought. At least, judging from the eight-inch *hole* he'd just put in his bedroom wall.

He surveyed the damage.

Well. At least this was one problem he could actually fix.

Two

BRIGHT AND EARLY the following Thursday morning, Victoria walked into the lobby of her downtown office building. She took an elevator up to the thirty-third floor, which her firm shared with two other tenants, a small consulting group and an engineering firm.

Back when she'd been looking for a place to hang her shingle, she'd been attracted to this particular office space because of its clean, modern lines, and great use of natural light. The bright, open feel of the place was reassuring to her clients, who were going through a difficult time in their lives. *You're going to be okay after this divorce. Victoria Slade & Associates will make sure of it*, said the sunlit, sophisticated décor.

After unlocking the fogged glass doors that bore her firm's name, she turned on the lights to the reception area. She liked being in before everyone else, so she could soak in those few moments when the office was quiet and just hers.

Her office had two walls of windows that framed a picturesque view of the city and the Chicago River. She settled in behind her desk and checked her e-mail while sipping the coffee that she'd picked up on the way in. About a half hour later, she heard her four associates trickle in, followed by Will, her assistant.

She heard a knock and saw Will standing in the doorway.

"Give it to me straight. How bad are they?" he asked, touching the rim of his new wire-frame glasses. He'd turned forty years old earlier in the year and, much to his displeasure, had been told by his eye doctor that he needed reading glasses.

"Ooh . . . I like them," Victoria said approvingly. "Very Gregory Peck."

"*Hmph*" was Will's sole response, although she noticed he seemed to have a little swagger in his step as he took a seat in front of her desk.

“Tomorrow’s the big day. Is there anything else you need me to take care of?” he asked.

She smiled, knowing this was pretty much a rhetorical question. If there was anything else that needed to be taken care of, Will already would’ve thought of it himself. The man was a god when it came to organizing these types of things. “I think we’re all set.”

Tomorrow she would move into her temporary home, a loft condo in a converted warehouse in Wicker Park. She hadn’t lived in an apartment or condo building since law school—her place before the townhome had been a duplex—and, as a relatively private person, she wasn’t overly enthused to suddenly be sharing common space with a bunch of strangers. But this was her life now, at least for the foreseeable future, so she supposed she would just have to get used to it.

Ever since the break-in, she’d hadn’t gotten more than three or four hours of sleep each night. Instead, she would lie awake in her bed, listening for any strange sounds and repeatedly getting up to check her security system—not that her security system had kept the burglars at bay before.

Scary thought.

From what she’d learned from the police—who, thankfully, had arrived quickly on the scene because of the 9-1-1 dispatcher—the masked men had staked out her place for most of the night, with the exception of a short break when the man with the gruff voice needed to use the bathroom at a convenience store a few blocks away because the White Castle sliders they’d grabbed earlier hadn’t agreed with him.

Nice.

Apparently, his partner was a former employee of a home security company, and thus knew how to bypass certain types of alarm systems—including hers. The police had caught both men, one of whom had foolishly fired his gun at the cops and thus earned an attempted murder charge, along with a charge of home invasion. During questioning, they admitted being responsible for the string of burglaries in the neighborhood, and were expected to be in prison for a good, long time.

Victoria knew she should consider herself fortunate, at least as far as scary-ass home invasions by masked men with *guns* went. But when the two weeks of not sleeping stretched into three, and after Will walked in on her dozing off at her desk, startling her and making her face-plant against her open laptop, she’d decided it was time to face facts.

She wasn’t comfortable living in a place that had more than one level.

She couldn’t relax in her townhome, and feared she would always be tense at night, waiting for that *beep* of the alarm, and listening for the sound of footsteps on her stairs.

Once she’d come to terms with that, she’d immediately put her townhome on the market and spent a weekend condo hunting with Audrey and Rachel, her two best friends. She decided on a two-bedroom place in the Trump Tower, telling herself that the burglars hadn’t *really* gotten the best of her if she was moving to a place with its own indoor pool and health club.

*And it even has a spa, dickheads.*

In her head, she had all sorts of sassy one-liners for the scary-ass armed men who’d broken into her place.

But there was one problem: the current owner of the Trump Tower condo couldn’t close on the sale until late August. She’d been about to walk away from the deal—she needed to get out of her townhome ASAP before

she made some sloppy mistake at work in her sleep-deprived state—but then her friend had saved the day. Rachel knew a real estate agent who was trying to rent her client’s condo for the summer, and the place was available to move into immediately. Victoria signed the three-month lease the moment the agent faxed it over, Will found a company that would send in a team to pack up all of her stuff (she didn’t even want to ask how much *that* cost her), and thus tonight would be her last night in the town house she’d proudly purchased as her first home.

Yes, she was pissed. She’d been chased out of her own place by the Burglar Dickheads, essentially, and that didn’t sit well with her. On top of that, she’d just bought the townhome ten months ago, so she probably would have to sell it at a loss. But she needed to be practical here—she was a busy woman, the head of her firm, and she needed to be at the top of her game when it came to work.

And oh my God, she couldn’t wait to finally get some darn *sleep*.

\* \* \*

SHORTLY BEFORE NOON, Victoria waved at Will as she passed by his desk on her way out of the office.

On the phone, he covered the receiver with his hand and whispered, “Good luck.”

She felt a twinge of guilt, because this was the first time in the five years she and Will had been working together that she’d lied to him. She’d told him she would be unreachable for the next hour because she had a dentist appointment, when in truth she had something else to take care of.

Not a big deal. Just this . . . teeny, tiny problem she’d been having ever since the break-in.

Her research into these types of teeny, tiny problems had led her to Dr. Aaron Metzel, supposedly one of the top cognitive-behavioral psychologists in the city. His office was located in the Gold Coast neighborhood, a quick cab ride from downtown.

Victoria adjusted the lapel of her jacket as she rode the elevator up to Dr. Metzel’s floor. She wasn’t quite sure what to expect from this appointment—it had been over twenty years since she’d last seen a psychologist—but she’d deliberately worn her favorite gray tailored suit and snakeskin heels. It was a suit that made her feel particularly put-together and confident.

There was a small, private waiting room adjacent to Dr. Metzel’s office, with a sign on the interior door that said “Please make yourself comfortable.” Thinking that “comfortable” was a bit ambitious—she was here only out of necessity—she took a seat in one of the empty chairs and distracted herself by checking e-mail on her phone.

A few moments after she sat down, the interior door opened. A balding, fortysomething man dressed in a blazer, khakis, and button-down shirt smiled at her.

“Victoria?” He held out his hand as she approached. “Aaron Metzel. Nice to meet you.” He gestured to the adjacent room. “Come on in. Have a seat wherever you like.”

“Thanks.” She looked around curiously as she entered his office. The blinds were pulled down, but angled open, allowing a good amount of natural light to come in. It wasn’t a massive office, but enough to accommodate a desk and bookshelf in front of the windows, a couch along one wall, and two leather armchairs in the center of the room. She chose the armchair closest to the door and took seat. Not sure where to put her purse, she set it on the floor.

She watched as Dr. Metzel—or was she supposed to call him Aaron?—grabbed a notepad and pen from his desk. They made brief small talk—Yes, she’d found the office just fine; No, thanks, she didn’t need anything to drink—before getting down to brass tacks.

Seated across from her, Dr. Metzel crossed one leg, settling into his chair. “Let’s talk about what brings you here. I know from our telephone conversation that you’re having some issues with panic attacks.”

*Whoa, whoa.* It sounded like somebody was getting a little ahead of himself here. “Actually, there’s been just the *one* panic attack, the night my home was broken into.” She felt it was important to emphasize this.

He clicked his pen open. “Tell me about that experience.”

“Well, I remember suddenly feeling very light-headed, and hot, and then I guess I just fainted.”

“Has that ever happened to you before? A loss of consciousness?”

“No.”

“What happened when you came to?” he asked.

“There were two police officers hovering over me, asking if I had a medical condition. And it took me a moment to answer them, because at first I didn’t know who or where I was.” She took a deep breath. “But then, after a few seconds, everything came back to me.”

“Does it make you uncomfortable, thinking back to that experience?”

“Of course,” Victoria said, thinking this would be self-evident.

“In what way?” he asked.

“For starters, it was embarrassing, lying there on the floor like that. And scary. Like I said, I’ve never blacked out before. But I understand why it happened. My heart rate was escalated, I had a decreased oxygen intake, and I was under intense emotional stress.”

Dr. Metzel’s lips curved. “Somebody’s been doing some research.”

Heck, yes, she’d done her research. And she’d also quickly learned that looking up symptoms on the Internet was the quickest way to convince herself that she had *every medical condition in existence*. “Logically, I understand that I fainted during the break-in because of the extreme circumstances.”

He waited. “But . . . ?”

“But ever since that incident, occasionally I’ll find myself in some sort of situation—a normal situation—and I’ll start to worry about having another panic attack.”

Dr. Metzel wrote something on his notepad and then looked up. “Can you give me an example?”

She nodded. “So the first time it happened, I was riding the subway, heading home from work. The subway was packed, and it was warm and stuffy. You know how it gets. And the stuffy air reminded me of that night in my closet when I fainted, and, thinking back to that, I suddenly began to feel . . . off.”

“Off in what way?”

“Nervous. Dizzy. My heart started racing, like the time in the closet.”

“What was going through your head during that moment? Do you remember what you were thinking?”

“I was thinking that there had to be at least twenty people between me and the exit door, and that if I *did* have another panic attack right there on the train, it was going to cause a huge scene.”

More note taking.

“So what did you do?” Dr. Metzel asked.

Victoria shrugged. “I basically said, ‘Screw it.’ At the next stop, I bulldozed my way to the door, got off the train, and took a cab the rest of the way home.”

“Have you ridden the subway since then?”

She tried to downplay this with a smile. “A nice air-conditioned cab ride home isn’t all that expensive. I figured why bother with the subway while it’s so hot?”

From the way Dr. Metzel furiously scribbled something down on his notepad, she had a feeling she’d failed that question.

Crap.

She shifted uneasily in her chair, not enjoying the feeling of being so . . . scrutinized.

“Any other incidents?” Dr. Metzel asked.

“Well, I also walked out of an exercise class the other day.” She blushed, a little embarrassed to admit these things. Not to toot her own horn or anything, but as a lawyer, she had a reputation for being fearless and tenacious in the courtroom. Heck, she’d been called a “ballbuster” by more than one irritated male opposing counsel. Yet here she sat, admitting she couldn’t ride the subway or take an exercise class.

Dr. Metzel cocked his head. “What happened in the exercise class?”

She shrugged. “Basically the same thing that happened in the subway. About twenty minutes in, I noticed how hot the room was getting and everything just spiraled from there. I kept thinking, ‘Uh-oh, am I feeling a little light-headed?’ And, ‘Oh, crap, what if I faint in the middle of this class, because that’s going to look really weird and cause a scene.’ That kind of thing.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Have you been back to the exercise class since that experience?”

“If I say no, are you going to start scribbling on your notepad again?”

Indeed, apparently he was.

When Dr. Metzel was done writing, he looked at her. “What if you *had* fainted? Dropped right there in the middle of the class and everyone saw. Would that be such a terrible thing?”

Victoria shuddered at the mere thought. “I don’t think anyone wants to cause a scene like that, do they?”

He acknowledged this with a nod. “Probably not. But I notice that you keep talking about ‘causing a scene’

and looking ‘weird.’ Is that something you consider important, how other people view you?”

Well.

That seemed like a bit of a loaded question.

“Um . . . maybe, I guess,” she said, not sure how this particular line of questioning was relevant.

“Can you expand on that?” Dr. Metzel asked.

*Do I have to?* “I suppose I try to present myself a certain way in front of other people. But doesn’t everyone do that? The point is, Doctor”—when he didn’t correct her, she assumed it was okay to call him that—“I run a successful law practice and have a professional reputation to maintain. I can’t be running out of the courtroom because I’m suddenly feeling woozy or worried about having another panic attack.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

Good. Now they were getting somewhere. “I fully recognize that these lingering . . . fears”—she hesitated over the word, debating whether it was too extreme—“are obviously all in my head. And I’m sure they’ll go away as more time passes from the burglary. But since they’re kind of, well, annoying, I was hoping you might have some tricks to help speed up the process. You know, breathing techniques, relaxation exercises, things of that nature.” She went for a joke. “Feel free to order me to visit a spa or get weekly massages as part of my treatment.”

Dr. Metzel chuckled. “I’m not sure about the spa part, but certainly both relaxation and imagery techniques can be very helpful in the treatment of panic disorder. Now, one thing I’d—”

Wait. “Did you say ‘panic *disorder*’?” she interrupted.

“Yes. Panic disorder.”

She sat back in her chair. But . . . she didn’t have a *disorder*. She was just having a few small panic *issues*. Clearly, the good doctor here needed to get with the program.

Then she realized what was going on. “Ah. Sorry, I should’ve mentioned this up front. I’m not fishing around for some kind of diagnosis in order to get insurance coverage. I’m fine paying out of pocket for these sessions.”

“That’s good to know,” he said. “And, admittedly, this is just an initial assessment. But based on what you’re telling me, I’m comfortable diagnosing panic disorder at this time.”

Huh.

Having deposed and cross-examined several psychologists, her lawyerly instincts took over. “If you don’t mind my asking, what, exactly, are you basing that diagnosis on?”

“I don’t mind at all,” Dr. Metzel said patiently. “In a nutshell, panic disorder is the fear of having a panic attack. Your fear of causing a scene, or looking ‘weird,’ and the changes you’ve made in your behavior—no longer riding the subway and stopping your exercise class—are all very classic symptoms.”

Completely caught off guard, Victoria tried to process this. “But . . . I don’t have any history of anxiety.” Not that Dr. Metzel would know this—because she hadn’t intended, and still didn’t intend, for these sessions to

be an all-access pass into certain things from her past, but she was about as mentally steady as they came. *She* was the rock. Hell, ever since she was ten years old, she'd made a point of demonstrating just how unflappable she was.

"In your case, the break-in was the catalyst for your initial panic attack," Dr. Metzel said. "And as you said, that's not a wholly atypical physiological response, given the extreme stress you were under at the time. But as for why that incident has now brought on your fear of having additional panic attacks . . . well, that's something we'll want to explore in therapy."

Therapy.

Aw, *criminy*.

Once upon a time, after The Incident, Victoria had gone through therapy at her mother's insistence. Two years of it, in fact, "just in case" there was anything she wanted to talk about. So she had a pretty good idea what to expect: all the talking, and the dissecting of her every thought and emotion.

Going through that ordeal again sounded about as much fun as stapling her tongue to the carpet.

"Can't you just patch me up with some breathing techniques and send me on my way?" she asked, trying to charm her way out of this.

Dr. Metzel returned the smile and clicked his pen. "Are weekends better for you? I have an opening for Saturdays at one P.M."

She took that as a no.

Three

"IT'S ME—YOU know what to do at the beep."

At the sound of the familiar greeting, Ford grumbled under his breath. Per the promise he'd made to his mother, this was the second time in three days that he'd called to check up on his sister and Zoe. Both times, his call had gone straight to voice mail.

"Hey, Nic. Just checking in to see how everything's going. I thought I might swing by sometime this weekend—maybe take you and Zoe out to lunch. Call me." After hanging up, he looked at the phone for a moment, and then turned back to his computer.

A week had passed since his father's funeral and at times, it felt a little surreal how most things just went back to normal. He'd taken a couple of days off from work to help his mother go through his father's things, a process that had hit him harder than he'd expected. But he'd buried his emotions down deep and had stayed focused on the tasks at hand—both for his mother's sake and, admittedly, his own. He felt better when he stayed busy. Doing something, anything, felt good and productive.

Especially when the alternative—sitting around his loft and ruminating—resulted in an eight-inch hole in his bedroom wall.

Not his finest moment.

Fortunately, right then, he had work to distract him. It was a typical Friday afternoon in the *Chicago Tribune* newsroom, mostly quiet except for the sound of clicking keyboards and occasional conversation as people got up to get coffee. The newsroom was large and open, with no walls separating the desks, and the air pulsed with a feverish beat as everyone raced against the clock to make their deadlines.

Today, he was finishing up a piece that was part of a series in which he'd exposed a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving a city transportation official and the company that had won a contract to supply Chicago with its red-light cameras. He'd worked for over a year on this particular series, and the corruption scandal was now the subject of an FBI investigation. He took particular pride in that—like many investigative journalists, he enjoyed seeing that his work had actual impact, and contributed to rectifying a wrongdoing or injustice.

After wrapping up the red-light piece and e-mailing it off, he met with his managing editor, Marty, to discuss an idea for a new story he'd been developing over the last couple of weeks.

"The April Johnson murder? You're a little late to the party, Dixon. We covered that three weeks ago."

"Not from this angle," Ford said. Last month, April Johnson, a seventeen-year-old honors student and artist, had been shot and killed by a gang member a block away from her high school grounds. Because the girl had recently visited the White House and met the First Lady as part of her school's successful participation in the Department of Education's "Turnaround Arts" program, her killing had been widely covered in all the Chicago media.

Mostly, the press coverage had focused on the victim—rightfully so, given the tragic circumstances. But Ford had done a little digging, and wanted to explore another aspect of the crime. "Everyone's focused on how Johnson's death is a symbol of this city's problem with gang violence, or using it as a platform to discuss gun control. But I've been looking into the nineteen-year-old shooter, Darryl Moore. Apparently, a year ago, he'd been arrested and sentenced to two years probation for illegally carrying a firearm. And get this—a criminal records check shows that the guy got arrested *three* more times after that. Did the probation department even know about the arrests? Did they know, but fail to take any action? I'm thinking somebody dropped the ball there."

Marty considered this. "Might be worth checking out what's in the probation department's records on Moore."

"Glad you think so." Ford grinned. "Especially since I requested the file yesterday."

Marty shook his head. "Of course you did. All right, run with it."

Ford worked on the new story for the rest of the afternoon, getting lost in his research. He called it quits for the day at five thirty, and then took a cab from the *Tribune* building to Home Depot, where he picked up the remaining supplies he needed for his weekend project. He planned to patch the hole in his bedroom wall, and also had decided to mount some bookshelves. Working with his hands would hopefully burn off some of the restless energy he'd been feeling since the funeral.

He checked his phone during the cab ride home. His friends clearly were in Check-On-Ford mode—a coordinated effort, he suspected, seeing how Charlie and Tucker wanted to get together tonight, and Brooke for dinner on Saturday. He texted them all back with a yes, appreciating the gesture and the not-so-subtle attempts to keep him company.

When the taxi pulled up in front of Ford's building, he spotted a large moving truck.

Ah, right. He remembered now that today was the day his temporary next-door neighbor, Victoria the Divorce Lawyer or Something, was moving in. Seeing that she'd reserved the elevator for the movers, he lugged the two bags of supplies he'd bought at Home Depot, along with his messenger bag, up the four flights of stairs.

When he spotted her open front door, he figured he should do the neighborly thing and introduce himself.

"Hello?" Not getting an answer, he stepped inside and found two movers in the dining area of the loft, carefully lowering a round, expensive-looking table to the floor. "Sorry, I was walking by and thought I'd pop in. I live next door." Still holding the bags of supplies, he gestured awkwardly in the direction of his place. "Is Victoria around?"

One of the movers shook his head, brushing off his hands after setting down the table. "She just left to make a run back to her old place."

"I'll catch her later, then. Thanks." On his way out, Ford stole a glance around the loft and saw that the rest of his new neighbor's furniture looked as expensive as the dining table. Judging from the elegant cream sofa with its many accent pillows, her taste was sophisticated and decidedly feminine. And he also immediately concluded that she was single.

No man could ever get comfortable watching Monday Night Football with all those damn throw pillows.

\* \* \*

"SO, I'M THINKING I'll go with a barn theme for this new project. Instead of chairs, everyone will sit on bales of hay, and we'll bring in actual livestock—cows, pigs, maybe a few chickens—that can roam free in the restaurant while people eat. You know, really emphasize the farm-to-table aspect of the menu."

Victoria jerked her eyes open, having just caught what Audrey was saying. "Wait. You want to have *chickens* walking around the restaurant?"

When both Audrey and Rachel smiled, she caught on. "All right, all right, you got me." So she'd closed her eyes for just a second. In her defense, she hadn't slept for more than four hours a night in over a month. Not to mention, the bar they were in was filled with cozy, ambient candlelight that practically invited a girl to curl up in one of these big leather chairs and catch a few quick winks . . .

She sat up straight and gave herself a mental face-slap.

"You're exhausted, Vic. Maybe we should call it a night," Rachel suggested.

"Nope, I'm good. I promised you guys drinks in exchange for helping me unpack, so drinks we will have." Victoria grabbed her cocktail—an old-fashioned, the specialty of the house—and tipped it in gratitude. "And by the way, thank you again for that."

Her friends had been amazing today, coming over to help unpack her stuff. Audrey and Rachel had tackled the living and dining area, the movers had handled the kitchen, and she had taken on her bedroom and bathroom. Between the team of people in her condo, they'd had everything unpacked by eight o'clock with the exception of a few boxes of odds and ends that would probably just go into storage for the summer.

To show her appreciation, she'd insisted on taking her friends out for drinks. They'd chosen The Violet Hour, *the* place to be on a Friday night in Wicker Park—at least according to Will, who, naturally, already had done the research for her. Located just a couple of blocks from her loft and described as a modern-day

speakeasy, the bar had a fun, *Alice in Wonderland*-like feel, with handmade cocktails poured by bartenders dressed in bow ties and suspenders, dramatic floor-to-ceiling velvet curtains, and high-backed blue leather chairs grouped around cocktail tables.

Determined not to be sidelined by a little drowsiness on her first night out in her new neighborhood, Victoria chatted with her friends for a while about work. Audrey, an interior designer, told them about the pitch she was planning for a new restaurant scheduled to open next spring, and Rachel, who owned a boutique clothing store, had just found out that her shop was going to be featured in *Chicago* magazine.

Rachel was momentarily distracted by something to Victoria's left, and then she leaned in conspiratorially. "Okay, I found a good one for you tonight," she said to Victoria, with a challenging gleam in her eye. "The hottie at your nine o'clock. Dark hair, navy shirt. He was checking you out, by the way. Let's say his name is . . . Carter."

It was a game they'd been playing for the last few years, ever since Victoria had told Rachel and Audrey during a mutual friend's bachelorette party that she didn't see herself ever getting married. Rachel, a staunch believer in happily-ever-after, would find some guy at a bar and make up an elaborate backstory about him, trying to convince Victoria that her Mr. Right might be out there.

"All right. Let's hear about Carter," Victoria said.

Rachel thought for a moment. "He's a firefighter."

"Rescues people. Love it."

"He grew up with three sisters, and he calls each of them once a week just to see how they're doing. He gets along with his parents, particularly his mother, who he adores," Rachel continued. "Has a dog that he rescued from a shelter—"

"Of course."

"—named after some poet. Like . . . Emerson," Rachel said.

Victoria raised an eyebrow. Somebody was laying it on a little thick tonight.

"His last serious relationship was three years ago, which ended amicably when he and his ex realized they were better off as friends. And he has *no* commitment issues," Rachel added, with a flourish.

Audrey laughed. "That's cheating."

Rachel looked at Victoria daringly. "So. Husband material or not? But before you answer, you really should look at the man in question."

"Which guy are we talking about?" Audrey asked.

"Dark hair, blue shirt," Rachel said.

Audrey angled in her chair, then her eyes widened. "Holy smokes, that is one good-looking man. Vic, you have to check him out."

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