

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 ribcage 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.

Chapter 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 candleholder 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 candleholder 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.

* * *

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