

# FOOL HER ONCE by Joanna Elm

## EXCERPT

### Chapter Four

*Week One: Friday Morning*

The buzzing of the intercom startled Jenna as she waited for the Bialetti to stop gurgling. Her head felt heavy, but her Fitbit told her she'd gotten almost six hours' sleep since Ryan had left the apartment. She moved the moka pot off the flames and walked into the hallway to the intercom.

It was Oscar, the day doorman. "Miss Sinclair, police here to see you. Coming up now."

She sat down abruptly on the narrow hallway bench. Dollie. Something had happened to Dollie. She felt ice cold as she opened the door to wait for the elevator to discharge the cops, who turned out to be plainclothes detectives. She tried to recall what someone—probably Lola, her best friend who knew all about law enforcement—had once told her about cops always going in threes, not twos, to inform next of kin when there was a fatality. Was that still true? Maybe they'd downsized because of budget cuts. Or maybe the "three" rule did not apply in New York City.

Her heart was pounding, thudding against her chest, the blood roaring in her ears, as she beckoned them into the apartment. She barely heard as the taller, younger one said: "Miss Sinclair, we're sorry to disturb you, but we're wondering if you could answer some questions about yesterday evening? We're looking into an incident involving Mr. Ryan McAllister."

It took her more than a moment to refocus, and for the pounding of her heart to slow a little. They weren't here about Dollie.

"Incident?" She repeated the word, frowning.

They looked at each other. The taller, younger one was black with a shaved head and soft brown eyes. He introduced himself as Detective Jim Martins. His partner was older and shorter, with thinning hair. His face was slicked with perspiration, as if he'd walked up the three flights to her apartment rather than taking the elevator. Jenna immediately forgot his name.

Martins took a notebook out of his hip pocket but didn't look at it when he replied: "Mr. McAllister was found in the street, early this morning."

"What do you mean 'found'?" Her voice rose shrilly. "Is he dead?"

"No."

"Where was he found?" Jenna's heart was pounding again even as the memory from just a few hours ago flashed through her mind.

They had strolled back from Neary's; had stopped on the corner of her street while Ryan fished around for a loose bill to hand over to the homeless guy who hung out there.

She'd linked her arm through his as they walked into her building and to the elevator. They'd barely crossed the threshold into her apartment when Ryan had nudged her back against the door and brought his mouth to her lips, working down to the hollow of her throat, his fingers tugging at the straps of her cami. All thoughts of waiting, doing the right thing had evaporated in a millisecond. Instead, she had responded, clinging to him, thrilling to the thought that he wanted her.

They had moved as one into the living room, onto the couch, then down onto the hand-knotted wool Jaipur rug, Ryan pushing down her jeans and panties and flinging them over the couch.

"No. Wait." Jenna had sat up abruptly. "I can't."

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The detective's reply jolted her back into the conversation. "Just a couple of hundred yards down the street from this building. You had dinner with him last night."

Jenna focused on Martins. He didn't sound as if he was asking. "Did Ryan tell you that?" She paused and repeated her first question. "What do you mean 'found'?" Jenna wished she could take a long gulp of espresso to get her brain working again.

"Let us ask the questions, Miss Sinclair, okay? We're just trying to figure out what happened."

Jenna didn't like the abrupt change in tone, and suddenly the detective's eyes didn't look so soft either. Did he think she'd done something wrong? She realized she sounded a little defensive. That was stupid.

There was nothing to hide.

"Yes, we had dinner," she said.

The other detective nodded, and she followed his gaze across the floor into the living area to where her white jeans lay crumpled under the chair. “We’re just trying to establish a timeline,” he said. “We’d appreciate it if you could help us out. Give us some idea of what time he left here?”

“I don’t remember when he left.”

“He couldn’t help us with the timing either.”

Not hard to believe. The events of the night were wrapped in a mist floating around her head, but she remembered Ryan guiding her to the bed, sliding in beside her and holding her. “We don’t have to rush,” he’d said. “We don’t have to do anything tonight. It’s okay. We have all the time in the world.”

“We don’t know how long he was lying in the street,” Martins mentioned casually. “He couldn’t tell the paramedics what happened.”

“Oh my God.” The words came out as a whisper. The image of Ryan swaying drunkenly flashed before her eyes. “What happened? Did he fall? Did he pass out?”

“We don’t know exactly.”

“Is he injured?”

“We don’t know the full extent of his injuries. They’re checking him out now. He’s at Lenox Hill Hospital.”

Jenna had the feeling they weren’t telling her everything. Why would detectives be investigating someone falling down drunk in the street?

Had he been hit by a car?

“Miss Sinclair? Can you give us an approximate time when you last saw him?”

She nodded quickly. “Sure, I’ll try.” She knew they could get a time from Nando, the night doorman, and she didn’t want to appear uncooperative. “We had dinner at Neary’s, round the corner,” she said. “We came back here for a nightcap. We were discussing some writing projects I’m working on. I just finished one for his magazine.”

“His magazine?”

Jenna nodded. “He’s the publisher of *CityMagazine*. He bought the exposé I just wrote on restaurants in the Hamptons. We planned on working on some others together . . . I mean there were a couple of projects we discussed. We were talking, we lost track of time.” She knew she was babbling.

God only knew why she felt so guilty. She and Ryan had done nothing wrong. "It was probably around three." She paused. "I'm sorry. Yes, around three, maybe three thirty. That's when I saw him out."

"Did you part on friendly terms?"

Jenna stared at Martins. Had they already spoken to Nando? Had he told them he'd seen Jenna following Ryan down the street?

Just before leaving, Ryan had told her Teddi was returning, flying into La Guardia, and he had to go home, shower and change before picking her up. Jenna had been furious as she listened to the elevator carry Ryan down to the lobby.

She'd grabbed a T-shirt and sweatpants and headed for the stairs, arriving in the lobby in time to see Ryan walking out of the building, a little unsteady on his feet. She'd let him get to the corner before calling after him to stop.

"Miss Sinclair, did you have a fight?" Martins persisted.

"God, no!" Jenna's reply burst from her lips. No, Nando could not have seen her push Ryan. She was surely already out of the doorman's line of vision when she'd caught up with him.

"Okay." The detective gave her a curt nod and handed her his business card. "If you remember anything else, please call me." His partner opened the front door out into the hallway.

"You said he's at Lenox Hill?"

Martins looked over her shoulder and appeared to be staring at something in her living room. She hoped it was not at her discarded white jeans. "Yes. Lenox Hill." He nodded. "His wife is probably with him by now." He paused in the open doorway. "They have Mr. McAllister in the ICU," he added as he followed his partner to the front door.

The intensive care unit? It had to be serious.

"Did you say ICU?" She aimed the question at their backs, but the door had already closed.

Jenna returned to the kitchen. She was so parched it was making her dizzy. She stood at the faucet, cold water running into the sink as she cupped her hands and swigged from them, not caring that half of it was landing on the kitchen floor.

She poured herself a double espresso, carried the mug into the living room and sank into an armchair, looking around for her cell phone. Her eyes flickered round the room, noticing the mess the way the detectives would have seen it from the hallway. Through the door into the bedroom, she saw the empty glasses, the empty bottle of Jameson's on the nightstand. Blood rose to her face, she felt hot

and cold and then hot again as she caught sight of her scrunched-up, bright white panties hanging off the middle shelf of her bookcase, where Ryan had tossed them.

She took a couple of deep breaths. The cops probably thought they had the whole picture: cheating husband, wife returning from a trip, girlfriend gets jealous, doesn't want to let him go. They'd questioned her as if they thought she was the one who'd hurt him badly enough to put him into intensive care in the hospital.

She closed her eyes and tried to recall exactly what had happened when she'd finally caught up with Ryan.