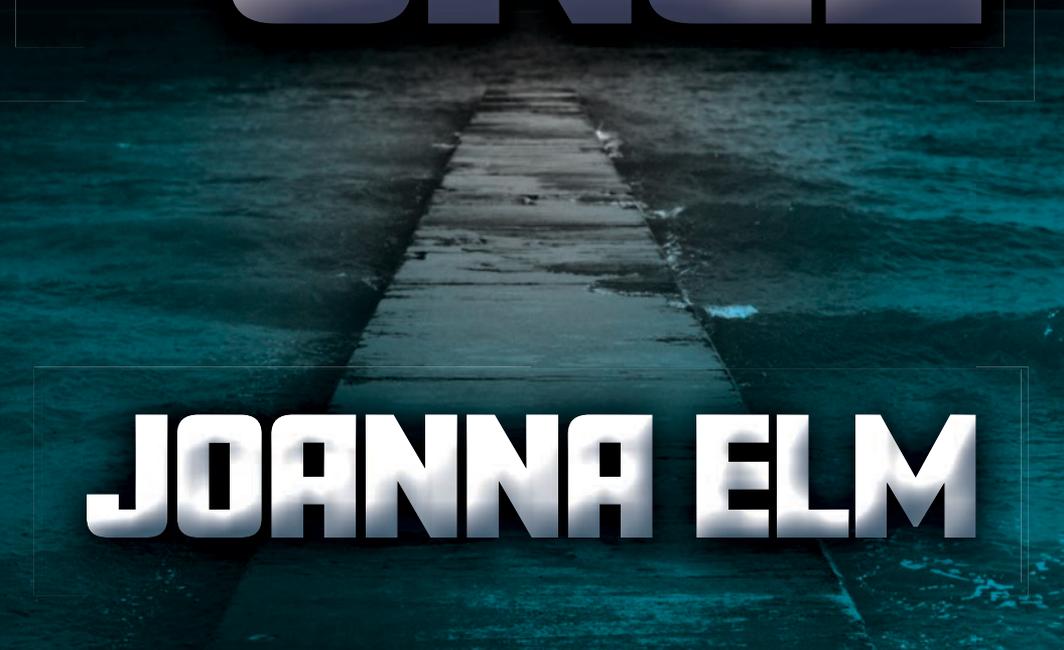




**FOOL**

A NOVEL

**HER  
ONCE**



**JOANNA ELM**

**FOOL**  
**A NOVEL** **HER**  
**ONCE**

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**ONCE**

**JOANNA ELM**





*For my husband, Joe and my son, Daniel.  
Always and forever, front and center in my thoughts.*





New York

Hudson River

New Jersey

Manhattan

Queens

Nassau

Kings  
Brooklyn

Great Sou

Connecticut

*Long Island Sound*

*Black Island Sound*

*North Fork*

Orient

Greenport

Shelter Island

Cutchogue

Sag Harbor

Montauk

Riverhead

Robins Island

East Hampton

Suffolk

Southampton

Shinnecock Bay

th Bay

*South Fork*

*Atlantic Ocean*





# PART ONE



## Chapter One

*June 2019*

*Week One: Thursday*

It took him four minutes to circle the block. He drove slowly, looking for a parking space on Jenna's street while keeping one eye out for surveillance cameras. He'd read somewhere that Midtown had more security cameras per block than any other neighborhood in the city. It made sense to know where they were located.

On his second go-round, he noticed the lights were still off in her apartment. He figured she'd have a light on if she was home. It wasn't dark out, but it was dark enough for a third-floor apartment in the shadow of the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge. For sure, she wasn't sleeping. Not this early. Not in Manhattan.

It was only just coming up on nine.

Most likely she was out. Celebrating her big exposé in *City-Magazine* about uptown eateries in the Hamptons, the summer playground for the rich and famous. All in a tizzy now because of Jenna Sinclair's revelations of farm-to-table frauds like restaurants claiming their overpriced oysters were locally harvested, when in fact they'd been flown in from the Gulf. It was a big deal. She'd even been on TV talking about it. For sure, she'd come a long way from her rookie reporter days.

Deep in thought, he almost sailed past a spot opening up right across from her apartment building. But he slowed just in time and backed in, executing a perfect parallel park. He killed the engine, leaned back in his seat, and pushed his baseball cap around on his head. No one paid him the slightest attention. There were hardly any pedestrians around. This stretch of Sutton Place wasn't exactly busy since the Food Emporium on the corner had closed its doors.

That was good. He didn't want any witnesses when he confronted Jenna. He knew she wasn't going to like him turning up in her life like this. She wasn't going to like what he'd come to tell her. He hoped she wouldn't make a scene. He hoped things wouldn't get ugly. He really, truly, hoped not.



## Chapter Two

Jenna Sinclair ignored the flashing neon-orange numbers of the crosswalk timer and picked up her pace across four lanes of traffic on Fifty-Seventh to arrive at Neary's feeling hot and sticky. Ryan was already seated at a corner table. His collar was open, his hair ruffled. He looked charmingly boyish—nothing like the distinguished, respected publisher he had become running *City-Magazine*. More like the Ryan she remembered from the old days. A Scotch sat on the table in front of him and he was scrolling through his iPhone. As she got closer, she noticed he was frowning. She hoped it wasn't because she was late. Her meeting at *My World* magazine had run longer than expected, and the Jimmy Choos she'd worn to

impress the editors at her pitch session—*See guys, I'm going to fit right in with that swanky Monte Carlo crowd!*—had slowed her down as she raced across town. But it wouldn't hurt for Ryan to see her wearing killer heels—something to draw attention away from the hint of a muffin-top that had materialized when she'd pulled on her favorite skinny jeans this morning. *Nothing that couldn't be fixed*, she thought. Walking everywhere would melt those extra pounds right off. The energy of the city would work its magic.

Her cell phone rang as she arrived at the table. She recognized Zack's ringtone but she had no intention of answering. She was not going to let her husband—sorry, correction—her lying, cheating, soon-to-be ex-husband intrude on what had been a perfect day. She reached into her purse to mute the phone, but the sound had already caught Ryan's attention.

"Have you been waiting long?" she asked as he looked up, his frown turning instantly into a grin.

"Long enough—I'm trying to make up for lost time." He stood and reached for her hand, his fingers twining around hers as he drew her to sit beside him. "Work agrees with you, Sinclair. You're glowing."

"It's sweat," she laughed as a glass of chilled pinot grigio appeared in front of her. "I ran most of the way here." A slight exaggeration. She'd speed-walked, and only for the last couple of blocks, terrified that a heel would get stuck in a crack and send her sprawling facedown on the sidewalk.

Ryan was right, though. She was enjoying herself, setting up interviews and pitching to editors around town. Maybe reviving her reporting career was not going to be as difficult as she'd feared, what with everyone buzzing about her Hamptons restaurant exposé.

She sipped her wine and filled Ryan in on the highlights of her pitch session. "Gordon's very enthusiastic about the interview in

Monte Carlo. He says he'll try to get some advance expenses for me so I can spend a few days there."

"Well, I'm sure he can swing a couple of grand." Ryan grinned. "Your article is tailor-made for his magazine: glitz, glamor, dysfunctional families, the murder of the richest woman on the French Riviera. Her son-in-law has been convicted for conspiracy to murder, and you've landed an interview with his wife. What's not to love?"

Jenna nodded. It was Ryan who'd suggested she contact Gordon, the articles editor of *My World*, a publication that spread its net wider than Ryan's *CityMagazine*. But she was only half listening as Ryan's earlier greeting bounced around in her head.

Trying to make up for lost time. What did that mean? Lost time? Was he trying to tell her he'd made a mistake all those years ago when he'd let Teddi Conroy, the skinny, rich, blonde reporter-wannabe step—slither, one should say—into Jenna's shoes?

This was the third time Jenna and Ryan had met since her move back to the city. The *New York Post* had mentioned their first lunch as a one-line Sightings item. Only in New York City, and maybe L.A, Jenna had reflected, were the comings and goings of writers and editors and TV producers considered to be of any interest to the general public. Secretly, she was thrilled to see her name on Page Six. She hoped Zack had seen it too. It wouldn't hurt for him to think that she'd wasted no time in getting back together with her former lover.

At their second lunch, Ryan had told her he didn't care about gossip either. (Of course he didn't, otherwise he wouldn't have taken her to a restaurant where they would be noticed.) He and Teddi were separated, just like Zack and Jenna. Teddi had spent the past five months in Palm Beach generating gossip of her own.

Jenna knew all that. She'd heard it around town even before Ryan confirmed it for her.

Tonight, she wanted to hear more. She wanted to know what had happened between them. She wanted to know why he was wining and dining her at expensive restaurants. Was it just business because he saw her as a source for future articles?

Or was it more personal?

His greeting just now suggested it was the latter, but if he and Teddi were really through, why hadn't Ryan moved out of the townhouse they shared? Supposedly, he was living in the garden apartment of the townhouse and paying rent, but still. Why stick so close to an estranged wife?

However, as soon as the waitress placed their broiled lamb chop entrees in front of them, it was Ryan who jumped in with the questions. "What about the girl?" he asked. "How's she doing? Is she coming to live with you in the city?"

Jenna wondered why Ryan couldn't remember her daughter's name, and why, despite his apparent interest in Dollie, it sounded more as if he wanted to know how long he'd have Jenna to himself.

"Dollie's spending the summer in Maine," Jenna replied, aware of Ryan's thigh resting firmly against hers. She didn't move away. It felt good to be this close to him again.

"Maine?" Ryan arched an eyebrow. "That's a long way to go for summer camp, isn't it?"

She shrugged off the question. Ryan didn't need to hear about the difficulties of finding a summer camp for teenagers like Dollie. Then, she continued as if Ryan hadn't spoken. "It's good for her to be away from home. Zack and I need time to sort things out. I'm going to have to find a lawyer. . ."

"A divorce lawyer?"

"Yes."

"Because of . . ."

Jenna had mentioned the other woman's name at lunch two days before, but she certainly didn't expect Ryan to remember that name.

"Bethany," Jenna filled in the blank. "Bethany, the intern from the Culinary Institute. The one he took all the way to Maine when he was dropping off Dollie at summer camp."

"He's serious about her, then?"

"I guess he is." She shrugged. She really didn't know the answer. All she knew was that her husband had cheated on her with a woman who looked—and probably was—half Jenna's age.

But Ryan didn't appear to be waiting for any further explanation. He set down his knife and fork and sipped his Scotch. "Well, I'm really happy you're back, Sinclair," he said. "You don't belong all the way out there in the wilds of Long Island." He made a face she couldn't quite decipher, then said, "You were the best reporter the *Sun* ever had. You should never have quit."

Jenna shook her head abruptly to stop him from pursuing the subject. "You know why I couldn't stay."

"You weren't to blame for what happened, Sinclair. I told you a long time ago. You reported the facts, that's all."

*Yeah, and a woman and her unborn baby died because of it.* Jenna wanted to contradict but caught herself in time. She was not going to rehash old issues. She wasn't going to change Ryan's mind on this, just as he wasn't going to change hers. She regretted Ryan had raised the subject.

Apparently, so did Ryan. He swirled the ice cubes in his glass and looked around the room as if he was about to order another drink while she finished eating. "Another?" He gestured at her glass. "Or shall we finish with a nightcap at your place?"

Jenna's heart thudded against her rib cage. Ryan's suggestion of a nightcap at her apartment was how they had tumbled into bed

together the very first time. Is that what he had in mind, now? For a moment she reveled in the thought that after all these years he still wanted her. It eased the hurt of Zack's betrayal and made her feel more desirable than she'd felt in a while.

But she wasn't going to jump into bed with Ryan just to get back at Zack. Was she? It had to mean more. If she and Ryan were going to revive their relationship, there was Dollie to think about, too. Her daughter might be forgiving of her father's philandering, but she would turn on Jenna in a heartbeat if she saw tweets or Snapchat messages about her mother cavorting with a former lover. Mothers had to be perfect.

She took a deep breath as Ryan signaled for a check, then put his arm around her, evidently taking her silence as consent. She checked her phone for any more missed calls or texts from Zack. But there was nothing.

"Are we good to go?" Ryan threw her a quizzical look.

"We're good." Leaving her phone muted, she dropped it into her purse as Ryan, hand at the small of her back, steered her out into the drizzle that was just starting to fall over Midtown.



## Chapter Three

### *Week One: Late Thursday Night*

He was afraid he'd doze off and miss her, but he was wide awake when she eventually strolled into view. With him. Arm in arm. Her and him. Together. Everything he had come to say to her suddenly vanished from his thoughts, evaporating in a haze of fury. The swig of water he'd taken a moment before they rounded the corner caught in his throat and he sputtered, the water dribbling down his chin.

He recognized McAllister immediately. He was the big-shot: the publisher, the editor-in-chief, the owner—whatever—of the magazine that had published her big exposé. The bastard's photo was in the gossip columns often enough these days.

Why was he surprised they were together? They were a team.

Again. Just like the old days: digging up dirt, ruining lives.

He reached for his cell phone from the dashboard and held the camera on the pair of them trying to calm himself as they stood on the corner, talking to some scruffy guy pushing a shopping cart. Then he tossed the phone onto the passenger seat as they continued down the street toward her apartment building. He switched on the engine and prepared to pull out.

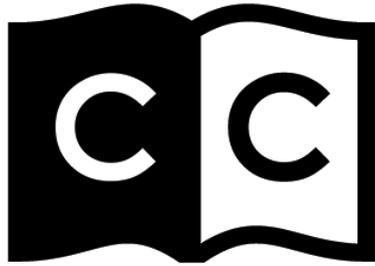
If he gunned it, the car would rocket toward them. It wouldn't take more than split seconds to slam into them before veering wildly away with screeching tires carrying him onto First Avenue and away before anyone realized what had happened. The surveillance camera below the building awning was fixed, pointing at the steps into the lobby. He'd had the last few hours to figure that one out. And there weren't any other pedestrians around for the moment. Just the building doorman, who wasn't paying attention, and the scruffy guy, who seemed to be mumbling to himself as he crossed the street.

His hands felt clammy on the wheel. A little voice at the back of his head was telling him to take it easy, to calm down, take a deep breath, count to ten—all the usual advice for moments of rage like this one. Besides, this really wasn't why he'd come this evening.

McAllister had changed the equation. Now he wanted to kill both of them.

He fixed his eyes on the traffic ahead on First Avenue. It was moving smoothly. Any moment, the lights would change in his favor, and if he timed it right, he could hit them and speed into the turn onto First, merging into the flow of traffic in seconds.

If he accelerated now. Right now.



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# SOME KILLERS ARE BORN. OTHERS ARE MADE.

**A**s a rookie tabloid reporter, Jenna Sinclair outed Denny Dennison, the illegitimate son of a serial killer. Running from the fallout, Jenna escapes the city and hides behind her marriage and motherhood. Now, decades later, betrayed by her husband, Jenna decides to resurrect her career.

When her former lover is brutally assaulted, Jenna fears that Denny has inherited his father's psychopath gene and is out for revenge. When no one believes her, she must track him down before harms his next target, her daughter.

From New York City to the remote North Fork of Long Island and the murky waters surrounding it, Jenna rushes to uncover a terrible truth. Will her investigation save or destroy her family?



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