



Love Irresistibly (FBI/US Attorney Book 4)

By Julie James

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A former football star and one of Chicago's top prosecutors, Assistant U.S. Attorney Cade Morgan will do anything to nail a corrupt state senator, which means he needs Brooke Parker's help. As general counsel for a restaurant company, she can get a bug to the senator's table at one of her five-star restaurants so the FBI can eavesdrop on him. All Cade has to do is convince Brooke to cooperate—and he's not afraid to use a little charm, or the power of his office, to do just that.

AND WHAT HE WANTS IS HER

A savvy businesswoman, Brooke knows she needs to play ball with the U.S. Attorney's office—even if it means working with Cade. No doubt there's a sizzling attraction beneath all their sarcastic quips, but Brooke is determined to keep things casual. Cade agrees—until a surprising turn of events throws his life into turmoil, and he realizes that he wants more than just a good time from the one woman with whom he could fall terrifyingly, irresistibly in love. . .

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Editorial Review

Review

"[T]he best book yet in her FBI/U.S. Attorney series."-*The Washington Post*

About the Author

After graduating from the University of Illinois College of Law, **Julie James** clerked for the United States Court of Appeals in Jacksonville, Florida. She then practiced law with one of the nation's largest law firms for several years until she began writing screenplays. Her books have been included on the American Library Association's Reading List for Top Genre Novels and *Booklist's* Top 10 Romances of the Year, and featured as a *Cosmopolitan* magazine Red Hot Read. Julie lives in Chicago with her family, where she is working on her next book.

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Special Excerpt from *Suddenly One Summer*

BROOKE PARKER STEPPED up to the bar at The Shore restaurant, ready to place her lunch order. The bartender, however, beat her to the punch.

“Hey, it’s my favorite customer—Chicken Tacos, Extra Pico.” He flashed her a grin. “That’s my nickname for you.”

Yes, she got that. “I suppose I’ve been called worse,” Brooke said as the bartender moved to the cash register to ring her up. She was indeed a regular, and she took pride in that. The restaurant was only two blocks from her office, right on Oak Street Beach, which made it the perfect midday escape. And it had the best chicken tacos in the city. Not that she was biased.

Okay, maybe she was a *little* biased.

She handed over a twenty-dollar bill. “I’ll take a strawberry-mango smoothie, too.”

“Ooh, a smoothie. Getting a little crazy today, are we?” In his early twenties, with blond hair and a tanned face, the bartender had the look of a recent college grad who planned to spend a lot of time playing beach volleyball this summer.

He called Brooke’s order back to the kitchen, and then looked her over. “I’m starting to feel like I should know more about you, Chicken Tacos, Extra Pico.” He winked. “Since we’ve been seeing each other on a weekly basis for nearly a month now.” He took in the tailored gray suit she wore. “I’m thinking that you are a . . . lawyer.”

“Good guess.”

“I knew it. I bet you’re one of those ballbuster types in court.”

Brooke fought back a smile. Really, she should just spare the poor guy the embarrassment, but this was kind of fun. “Actually, I’m not a trial lawyer.” She decided to give him a hint. “I’m general counsel for a company based here in Chicago.”

He made a big show of being impressed. “Look at you, Ms. Thing. What kind of company?”

“Restaurants and bars.”

“What a coincidence. We’re both in the restaurant business.” He leaned his elbows on the bar, giving her a smoldering, sexy look that likely helped him rake in big tips with the female clientele. “It’s Kismet.”

Or . . . maybe not so much. Brooke raised an eyebrow. “Are you supposed to be flirting with the customers?”

He brushed this off with an oh-so-cool smile. “Probably not. But for you, Chicken Tacos, Extra Pico, I’ll break the rules. Just don’t tell any of those stiff in corporate.”

Brooke had to bite her lip to hold back a smile at that one. Aw, she definitely couldn’t clue the poor guy in now. Then a voice called her name.

“Playing hooky for the afternoon, Ms. Parker?”

Brooke turned and saw Kurt McGregor, one of the managers of The Shore. “Unfortunately, no. Just sneaking out for a quick break.”

Kurt gestured to the bartender. “I hope Ryan here is treating you well.”

“Ryan has been most charming,” she assured him.

The bartender pointed between them. “You two know each other?”

Kurt chuckled at that. “You could say that. Ryan, this is Brooke Parker from corporate. She’s general counsel of Sterling.”

The grin on the bartender’s face froze, replaced by a look of panic. “Oh, shit. Sterling Restaurants. As in, the people who sign my paychecks?”

“The one and only,” Brooke said.

The bartender looked like he’d swallowed a bug. “I just called you a stiff.”

“And Ms. Thing.”

“Please don’t fire me,” he whispered.

Brooke pretended to think about that. “It’s tempting. But firing someone involves a *lot* of paperwork. Not something I want to do on a Friday afternoon. I’ll hold off until Monday instead.” She saw his eyes widen. “I’m kidding, Ryan.”

Kurt cleared his throat pointedly. “Ryan, maybe this would be a good time to check on Ms. Parker’s order?”

The bartender straightened up, clearly relieved to be dismissed. “Good idea. One order for Chicken Tac—uh, Ms. Parker—coming right up.” With that, he bolted for the kitchen.

Kurt turned to her after the bartender left. “Okay, seriously. Should I fire him?”

“Nah. He sneaks me extra pico on the side. He’s a keeper.”

Kurt chuckled at that, then gestured to the terrace. “Are you sticking around? I’m sure I can finagle you a table with a view of the lake if you want to eat in.”

Brooke looked out at the umbrella-covered tables on the sunny terrace, tempted by the idea. It was a

gorgeous June day, and the view from the terrace was undeniably one of the best in Chicago: skyscrapers towering majestically against the shimmering blue of Lake Michigan. Today, however, duty called.

Actually, duty called every day. Duty had her on speed dial.

“Wish I could. But I’ve got a conference call in”—Brooke checked her watch—“yikes, twenty minutes.”

Ryan the bartender came out of the kitchen with a carryout bag and a smoothie. With a sheepish look, he set both on the bar in front of Brooke and scurried off.

“By any chance would this conference call have anything to do with a certain deal you’re negotiating with the Staples Center?” Kurt asked in a sly tone after Ryan disappeared.

Brooke’s face gave nothing away. “I can neither confirm nor deny the existence of any such deal.”

“Spoken like a true lawyer.”

Brooke winked as she grabbed her smoothie and tacos and headed for the door. “Always.”

* * *

BROOKE BRISKLY WALKED the two blocks from Oak Street Beach to the elegant eight-story building on Michigan Avenue that was home to Sterling’s corporate offices. Tacos and smoothie in hand, she pushed through the revolving doors and waved hello to Mac, a retired Chicago police officer who manned the front security desk, as she passed through the lobby and headed toward the elevators.

When Ian Sterling, CEO of Sterling Restaurants, had approached her two years ago about coming on board as general counsel—or “GC” as the position was commonly called—he’d been very candid about his vision and plans. He’d started the company with one restaurant, an American bistro in the heart of downtown Chicago, and within eight years had opened six more restaurants that ran the spectrum from summer hot spot The Shore, to an Irish pub on the south side of the city, to Sogna, the company’s “crown jewel” that had just this year earned a coveted three-star Michelin rating.

Many restaurateurs would’ve been satisfied there, but not Ian Sterling. He was aggressive, he was driven, and he had plans. Big plans.

A friend of a friend knew the owner of the Chicago Cubs, and Ian convinced the owner to consider letting Sterling Restaurants take over the food and beverage service for the Stadium Club and skyboxes at Wrigley Field.

“Should you choose to accept the position,” Ian had said to Brooke, à la *Mission Impossible*, on the evening he’d formally offered her the job over dinner at Sogna, “your first task as GC will be to close the Wrigley Field deal.”

“And then what?” Brooke had asked.

“You’ll be part of a team that will build an entire sports and entertainment division of Sterling,” he’d said. “Ballparks. Arenas. Stadiums.”

Brooke had to admit, she’d been impressed with his ambition. She’d been working at a law firm at the time, in the corporate department, and had been the associate with primary responsibility over Sterling Restaurants’ non-litigation matters. Having known Ian for several years by that point, she’d been aware that

he'd contemplated hiring an in-house attorney. What she hadn't realized, however, was that he'd planned to ask *her* to fill the position. "You're not concerned that I only have five years' experience?"

"I've seen you in action many times, Brooke. You're tough when you need to be, and you can charm the pants off men who have three times your experience."

"Well, yes. Although I try not to take advantage of that too often. Very awkward negotiating with people who are sitting around in their underwear."

Ian had grinned. "I like your style—and just as important, I like you. So the better question is, do *you* think you can handle the job?"

A direct question. Luckily, Brooke had never been one to mince words, either, and Ian's enthusiasm and drive were infectious. It was an opportunity to take a chance, to get involved with a young company that was on the rise. So in answer to Ian's question, she'd looked him right in the eyes. "Absolutely."

Because Brooke Parker was a woman who was going places. She'd made that promise to herself a long time ago.

Two years later, she had zero regrets about taking a chance with Sterling. The company had grown steadily since she'd come on board as GC, most notably in their sports and entertainment division. After finalizing negotiations with Wrigley Field, Brooke and the other two members of Ian's "dream team"—the VP of sales and the VP of operations—had spent a lot of time schmoozing and wining and dining prospective clients. And when they'd landed a contract to take over the food service at the United Center—home of the Chicago Bulls and Blackhawks and the fifth-most-profitable sports venue in North America—they'd all partied like it was 1999 at the Sterling corporate office.

A few months after that, they'd headed down to Dallas, where Brooke and the two VPs had given their best sales pitch and negotiated a deal with the Cowboys. A short while later, they landed the contract for Dodger Stadium, too.

During the Dodger negotiations, the general counsel, a woman with whom Brooke had formed a friendly relationship, just so happened to let it slip that she'd heard whispers that the folks at L.A. Arena Company—who owned the Staples Center, aka home to the Los Angeles Lakers, Clippers, Kings, and Sparks—were also unhappy with their food and beverage vendor and looking to make a change as soon as their current contract expired.

So the dream team had struck while the iron was hot.

And now, assuming there were no hiccups in the deal Brooke was finalizing today with the lawyers representing L.A. Arena Company, Sterling Restaurants would soon be adding the Staples Center, the number-one most profitable sports venue in the country, to their roster.

In a word, they were hot.

Sterling was an exciting, demanding, absolutely exhausting place to work. Sure, that meant long hours for Brooke, but she believed in the company and her role there. Whether negotiating a multimillion dollar contract with the GC of the Dallas Cowboys, or investigating an internal complaint that one of their pastry chefs had a problem playing grab-ass with the waitresses, there was never, ever a dull moment.

After exiting the elevator at the third floor, Brooke turned down the hallway that would take her to Sterling's

offices. She pushed through the frosted-glass doors and said hello to the receptionist. According to the clock on the wall, she still had fifteen minutes to eat lunch before her conference call. Plenty of time.

“I’m back,” she told Lindsey, her assistant, who sat at the desk outside Brooke’s office.

“A couple of calls came in while you were out,” Lindsey said. “The first one was from Justin. He asked that you call him back as soon as you get in.”

The message took Brooke somewhat by surprise. She and Justin, aka the Hot OB, had been dating for a little over four months now, and she could count on one hand the number of times she’d talked to him at the office. Both of them were always so busy during the day, it was simply easier to e-mail or text him on her way home from work. “Uh-oh. I hope he’s not calling to cancel tonight. We’ve got reservations at Rustic House,” she said, referring to a nearly-impossible-to-get-into restaurant on the north side that was *not* in the Sterling family.

“Traitor,” Lindsey said with a grin. She handed Brooke a piece of paper with a phone number on it. “And you also received a call from Cade Morgan at the U.S. Attorney’s Office.”

Now that got Brooke’s attention.

Just about anyone who followed the local news knew who Cade Morgan was. One of the top assistant U.S. attorneys in Chicago, he’d made a name for himself by prosecuting several high-profile government corruption cases—and, a little over a year ago, the famous “Twitter Terrorist” case that had garnered international attention. He had a reputation of being smart, disarmingly charming in front of judges and juries, and tough as nails against opposing counsel.

And what he might possibly want from Brooke, she had no clue.

“Did he say what this was in regards to?” Brooke asked.

“No. Only that he’d like you to call him back as soon as possible. He was very firm about that.”

This unexpected message from the U.S. Attorney’s Office had Brooke feeling a bit . . . uneasy. Cade Morgan was a prosecutor who handled big cases that got a lot of media attention. Whatever this was, it wasn’t a social call. And as general counsel for Sterling Restaurants, her hackles were up.

“Thanks, Lindsey.” Brooke went into her office and shut the door behind her, trying not to get too rattled by Morgan’s message. She didn’t know what he wanted, she reminded herself, so there wasn’t anything worth worrying about. Yet.

Never a dull moment, she thought again to herself as she settled in at her desk and unwrapped one of the tacos. Double-tasking per usual, she took a bite while dialing Justin’s number on speakerphone.

“Hey there,” she said when he answered his cell phone. “I wasn’t sure I’d actually catch you.” She could picture him looking cute in his scrubs right then—an easy image to conjure up since she’d seen him wearing them a few times late at night after one of his shifts.

“I stepped out of the office for a short break,” Justin said. His obstetrics practice was located a few blocks from Brooke’s office, which was nice if they wanted to meet for lunch. Although come to think of it, they’d only met for lunch once, back when they’d first started dating.

He sounded apologetic. “I just sent one of my patients to the hospital to be induced. She’s only a half-

centimeter dilated, but she's forty-one weeks with gestational diabetes. Since it's her first baby, this could be a long night. Sorry to have to cancel on you like this."

"Darn babies. Somebody needs to explain to them about date night," Brooke said jokingly. While she was disappointed not to see Justin tonight, she understood that work conflicts sometimes came up. Heck, she'd had to reschedule two dates so far this month because of last-minute emergencies she'd needed to handle at the office.

"Yeah. Right." He cleared his throat as if hesitant about whatever it was he wanted to say next. "You and I sure seem to be missing each other a lot these days."

Aw, the Hot OB missed her. And he was right; it had been a busy month. She'd been in Los Angeles for nearly a week, working on the Staples Center deal, and then had been swamped trying to catch up with everything at work after that. Lately, it seemed the only times she and Justin were both free was between eleven P.M. and five A.M. "So let's not miss each other tonight, even if we can't do dinner," she suggested. "Why don't you text me when you're finished at the hospital and come over to my place?"

"That'll probably be around two A.M."

"I know. But since that's the only time we both seem to be available, it's either that or nothing," Brooke said.

"Yes, that certainly does seem to be how it works with us. Heaven forbid we ever go on an actual date."

When she heard the frustration in his voice, Brooke got a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Not again.

She tried to smooth things over. "Look, I know that things have been crazy for me with these back-to-back deals in Los Angeles. You're a doctor, you know how it is—your schedule is just as bad." Admittedly, she was feeling a bit defensive right then, and felt the need to note that for the record.

He sighed. "I know. Tonight is my fault. And then next time, something will come up for you."

"We talked about this when we first met." Given her less-than-successful track record with relationships, she'd been up front with him from the beginning about the demands of her job.

"You're right, we did," he said. "And frankly, back then I thought I'd hit the jackpot. It was great that you never got mad when I had to cancel plans, or when I forgot to call. And you never complain that I don't take you out enough. Hell, in some ways it's like dating a guy."

Alrighty, then. "I don't need to be wined and dined, Justin. I can walk into eight restaurants in this city and have every employee practically tripping over themselves to make sure I'm happy."

"I'm sorry, Brooke," he said contritely. "But this . . . doesn't work for me anymore. I like you. You're a great girl, and you have awesome Cubs skybox tickets. I love it when they bring that dessert cart around."

Glad she scored high when it came to the important things in life. "But?"

"But you seem to be really focused on your career right now—which, don't get me wrong, is totally fine—except, well, I'm thirty-four years old. I'm starting to think about getting married, having kids, the big picture. And I guess what I'm trying to say is . . . I don't see a woman like you in that big picture."

Brooke blinked. Wow.

A woman like you.

That stung.

“Fuck, that came out harsh,” Justin said. “I just meant that you’re so independent, and I don’t even know if you want to get married or have kids, and half the time I think you just like having a warm body to cuddle up with every now and then—”

“Hold on. This is the *non-harsh* version?”

“Sorry,” he said, sounding sheepish. “I just think we’re looking for different things. I want—”

“A big-picture girl,” Brooke interrupted. “I got it.” She definitely didn’t need to have it spelled out for her any clearer than that.

When both of them fell awkwardly silent, Brooke glanced at the clock on her phone. “I hate to say this, since it’s apparently what makes me a *small*-picture kind of girl, but I have to go. I’ve got a conference call with a bunch of other lawyers in Los Angeles that can’t be rescheduled.”

“I understand. You do your thing. Good-bye, Brooke.”

After hanging up, Brooke stared at the phone for a long moment.

Another one bites the dust.

That was her third breakup since starting at Sterling. She seemed to be in a pattern with her relationships, where everything was great in the beginning, and then somewhere around the four-month mark things just kind of fizzled out. The men would give her some speech about not getting to the “next level,” or about wanting “more” than hot sex at midnight after a long workday.

“Hold on. A *guy* said this to you?” Her best friend, Ford, had looked both shocked and appalled by this when they’d met for drinks after Breakup Number Two. “As in, someone with an actual penis?”

“Two guys now,” Brooke had said, her pride admittedly wounded at being dumped again. “I don’t get it. I don’t put any pressure on these men, I’m happy to give them all the space they want, and the sex is good enough. What else could your gender possibly want in a relationship?”

“Beer and nachos in bed?”

“This is the advice you offer, your sage insight into the male perspective? Beer and nachos in bed?”

Ford had flashed her an easy grin. “You know I’m not good at the relationship stuff. Even other people’s relationship stuff.”

And, judging from today’s turn of events with Justin, Brooke wasn’t all that much better.

I don’t see a woman like you in that big picture.

The intercom on Brooke’s phone buzzed, interrupting her thoughts.

“I have Jim Schwartz, Eric Keller, and Paul Fielding on the phone for you,” her secretary said, referring to L.A. Arena’s in-house counsel and the two outside attorneys who represented them. “Can I put them through?”

Right. Back to work—no time for a pity party. As Brooke shoved her now-cold tacos back into the bag and reached for her phone, she spotted the note on her desk and belatedly remembered the call from the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Well, Cade Morgan would just have to wait.

She told her secretary to put the call through and forced a cheerful note into her voice. “How are my three favorite Los Angeles lawyers today?” she asked.

As they said in Hollywood, the show must go on.

CADE STRODE UP to the lobby desk and presented his U.S. attorney ID to the security guard.

“Cade Morgan, along with Special Agents Seth Huxley and Vaughn Roberts,” he said, gesturing to the two men in suits who stood behind him. “We’re here to see Brooke Parker with Sterling Restaurants.”

The security guard reached for his guest list.

“She’s not expecting us,” Cade said.

“O-kay . . .” The guard shifted uncertainly as he looked at all three men. Cade waited unconcernedly, knowing exactly how this would turn out. As he’d come to realize during the eight years he’d been an assistant U.S. attorney, there were very few places a man flanked by two armed FBI agents couldn’t get into.

After a moment, the guard gestured to the guest book sitting on top of the gray marble desk. “I just need you to sign in.”

“Of course.” Cade grabbed the pen and quickly scribbled his name. “Cade Morgan. Plus two.” After he set the pen down, he noticed that the guard stared at him curiously. He was familiar with that look of recognition; his was a name many people in this city recognized—often because of the high-profile criminal cases he’d prosecuted. Although, not infrequently, people still remembered him for his other claim to fame.

The guard pointed. “Cade Morgan. Quarterback at Northwestern, right?”

Bingo.

“That’s right,” he said.

“What was that, twelve years ago?” the guard asked. “I remember watching your last game.” He grinned. “It’s not like Northwestern goes to the Rose Bowl every year, right? You carried those guys there.”

Cade brushed this off modestly. “It was a good team. We ran a really strong spread offense that year.”

The guard gestured excitedly. “That last play was beautiful. Probably one of the best moments I’ve seen in college football. Really a shame about your shoulder, though. They said you would’ve gone pro.”

This was true. Cade very well may have gone on to play professional football, if a two-hundred-and-thirty-

pound linebacker hadn't taken him down hard in an attempted sack just a half second after he'd released the ball. When they'd hit the ground, the linebacker's full weight had come down on Cade's right shoulder, his throwing arm, and he'd known immediately that the situation was bad. A couple of hours later, after being rushed to the emergency room, X-rays had confirmed he'd suffered both a broken collarbone and a torn rotator cuff.

A career-ending injury, as it turned out.

Cade nodded in the direction of the elevators. "Which floor for Sterling?" he asked the guard.

"Oh. Right. Third floor. Offices are on the north side of the building, at the end of the hall."

After thanking the guard, Cade and the two FBI agents made their way to the elevators. Agent Roberts waited until the elevator doors closed. "How old does that get?"

Cade shrugged. "It's one of those sports moments people like to talk about." He eyed the Starbucks cup that Vaughn carried, deliberately changing the subject. "Did you get another chance to flash your badge at the cute barista?"

He and Vaughn had known each other for seven years, ever since they'd worked on their first case together, a simple single-defendant bank robbery trial. It'd been the first time both of them had been in front of a jury—Cade as the prosecutor and Vaughn as the testifying agent—and for the most part, neither of them had any clue what they were doing. Still, they'd somehow managed to get a guilty verdict, and afterward they'd gone out for celebratory drinks and had spent most of the time making fun of each other's courtroom screwups. They'd been good friends ever since.

In response to Cade's question, Vaughn shot a look at Agent Huxley, who'd been his partner in the white-collar crime division for the past year. "You told him about that?"

"Of course I told him about that. It was one of the least suave pickup moves I've ever seen." Huxley pulled out his badge, pretending to be Vaughn. "I'll pay for that skinny vanilla latte with my Starbucks card, which—well, look at that—just so happens to be right here next to my *FBI* badge."

"That's not how it went down. I told you, she *asked* to see the badge."

"How'd she know that you're an agent?" Cade asked.

"I may have mentioned it at some point." Vaughn grinned innocently. "What? The job impresses the ladies."

The elevator arrived at the third floor. "Right. I'm sure she thought you were a real badass with your skinny vanilla latte." Cade stepped out of the elevator, leading the other two men as they headed down the hallway. Quickly, the dynamic between them turned more businesslike as they approached Sterling's offices.

"How do you think Brooke Parker is going to react?" Huxley asked Cade.

Well, if Cade were a betting man, he'd hazard a guess that the general counsel of Sterling was going to be a wee bit ticked off at the sudden and unexpected appearance of an assistant U.S. attorney and two FBI agents on her office doorstep.

Actually, this was probably something that most people would not enjoy.

But unfortunately, time was of the essence. They had barely more than forty-eight hours to pull everything

together, and he needed to speak with Brooke Parker before she left work for the weekend. He'd had no choice but to take things up a notch. "Once I explain the situation, I'm sure that Ms. Parker will see the value in cooperating with us."

Huxley raised an eyebrow. "And if she doesn't?"

"Then I'll explain it again."

Granted, Cade knew that what they were asking of Ms. Parker was a bit . . . unusual. For that reason, he had every intention of being gracious and polite during this meeting. At the end of the day, however, he harbored little doubt that she would agree to play ball with them. Some of this confidence stemmed from the fact that he generally believed—and maybe this was simply the idealistic prosecutor in him—that reasonable, law-abiding citizens understood the value of doing their civic duty when called to action.

And the more practical, cynical side of him said that even unreasonable people knew not to get on the bad side of the U.S. Attorney's and FBI offices.

Cade pushed through the glass door etched with Sterling Restaurants' name, and stepped into the office. It was a sophisticated space, modern and airy with cream marble floors and lots of natural light streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. In front of him, a receptionist sat behind a frosted-glass desk, waiting expectantly. Presumably, the lobby guard had alerted her that they were on their way up.

"You must be Cade Morgan." Her gaze shifted as Agents Huxley and Roberts followed him into the office. "And there's the plus two." She picked up the telephone on her desk. "I'll let Ms. Parker know you're here."

Cade nodded. "Thank you."

The three men headed over to the waiting area, where Huxley and Vaughn took seats in adjacent cream leather chairs. Cade remained standing, hands tucked casually in his pants pockets. Catching sight of a row of framed photographs on the wall, he moved closer and saw that they were interior shots of Sterling's eight restaurants.

His eyes skimmed over the photographs until he found the one taken at Sogna, Sterling's flagship five-star restaurant located in the very building in which Cade stood, just one floor below the company's offices. Assuming all went according to plan, it was at that restaurant that he would get the last of the evidence he needed to nail a dirty politician's ass to the wall.

Last winter, the FBI had received a tip that Illinois State Senator Alec Sanderson had been accepting bribes in exchange for political favors. Given the politically sensitive nature of the allegations, the FBI had brought the matter to the U.S. Attorney's Office, and Cade had been assigned as lead prosecutor.

During a five-month investigation, Cade and the FBI had determined that the informant had indeed been correct. They'd gathered evidence that Senator Sanderson had accepted over six hundred thousand dollars in bribes, which he'd hidden via a shell company, in exchange for a virtual buffet of corrupt services: sponsoring or supporting legislation that would benefit various businesses, directing state monies to advance the interests of certain lobbyists, and lobbying other state senators and officials.

Cade was all set to bring the case to the grand jury—as soon as he and the FBI locked down one final piece of the investigation.

Via the wiretap the FBI had placed on Sanderson's phones, they'd learned that the senator had been in

discussions with Charles Torino, CEO of Parkpoint Hospital on the west side of the city, who was extremely concerned that Parkpoint was on a short list of medical facilities that potentially were about to be closed by the state. During their discussions, Torino had suggested that the senator find a possible alternative to the hospital's closure, something that could "mutually benefit" them both. Then, last night, the FBI had intercepted another call between Torino and Sanderson, during which Torino had offered to take the senator to dinner on Sunday at Sogna restaurant to discuss the details of their "potential arrangement" in person.

Cade had a feeling he knew exactly what "potential arrangement" the senator and hospital CEO were going to discuss during that dinner. And he wanted *in* on that conversation.

One person—Brooke Parker—could help him with that.

Vaughn got up and moved to Cade's side to examine the interior photograph of Sogna. "Nice restaurant. A place like that is going to have security cameras." He kept his voice low so the receptionist didn't overhear them.

Cade was in synch with the agent's line of thought. "It'd be great if we could get the meeting on video." Even the smoothest-talking politicians couldn't talk their way out of a conviction when they'd been caught accepting bribes on camera.

Vaughn thought about that. "Depends on where the cameras are. We'll have to ask the GC."

"Assuming she ever shows up." Cade checked his watch and saw that Brooke Parker had kept them waiting for ten minutes. Fortunately for her, he'd planned to lay on the nice-guy routine real thick; otherwise he'd tell Vaughn to start flashing his FBI badge to get things moving.

Just then, he heard Vaughn speak under his breath.

"Oh, man . . . if we're doing good cop/bad cop as part of this, I so want to be the good cop this time."

Hearing his friend's appreciative tone, Cade turned around and got his first look at Brooke Parker.

Hmm.

Wearing a slim-cut gray skirt, cream silk shirt, and knockout black heels, she strode confidently past the reception desk. Her hair, which she wore in a sophisticated knot, was the color of deep, burnished gold, and her stunning light green eyes were fixed directly on Cade as she walked toward him.

"Mr. Morgan," she said warmly as she held out her hand. "I could've saved you the trip over. I just wrapped up a three-hour conference call, and you were the next item on my agenda."

"It's no trouble at all," Cade replied, just as smoothly, as his hand clasped hers. "It's actually better that we meet in person." He gestured to Vaughn and Huxley, both of whom had stepped forward, seemingly very eager to make the acquaintance of Ms. Brooke Parker of Sterling Restaurants and the Gorgeous Green Eyes. "This is Special Agent Roberts and Special Agent Huxley with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. If this is a good time, we'd like to speak with you for a few minutes. In private."

She shook hands with both agents, without so much as batting an eye over the request. "Of course. If you gentlemen will follow me, we can talk in my office."

She led them past the reception desk, down the hallway to a corner office. Brooke stood by the door and gestured for the three men to step inside. "Please make yourselves comfortable."

Cade walked in and immediately was struck by office envy. A large, rich mahogany executive desk stood in the center of the office, flanked by matching bookshelves. Being a corner office, there were floor-to-ceiling windows along two walls that overlooked Michigan Avenue and, beyond that, the sparkling blue water of Lake Michigan.

“Nice view,” he said, taking a seat in one of the chairs in front of Brooke’s desk. Vaughn slid a chair over from the small marble table in the corner of the room and sat on Cade’s right while Huxley took the chair on Cade’s left.

“Thank you.” Brooke shut the office door and sat across from the three men, behind her impressive mahogany desk.

She folded her hands. “So, Mr. Morgan, now that it’s just the four of us, let’s dispense with the formalities. You clearly wanted to make a statement by showing up at my office with two FBI agents in tow. Whatever this is about, I’m guessing it’s urgent.” She got right to the point. “Is Sterling Restaurants in some kind of trouble?”

Hell, Cade had barely gotten comfortable in his chair before she opened with that salvo. Not that he denied her accusation—yes, he had wanted to make a statement. He could’ve asked only one of the agents to join him in this meeting, but had thought that bringing both along would help underscore the exigency, one might say, of the situation.

Or, one might also say, he was making a power move.

The clock was ticking on this sting operation, and Cade wasn’t afraid to flex a little U.S. Attorney’s Office muscle to make things move faster. He answered Brooke’s question with a similarly straightforward answer. “Sterling Restaurants isn’t in any trouble.”

A flicker of relief crossed her face. “Okay. Good.” Then she cocked her head, as if something had just occurred to her. “Am *I* in trouble?”

Something about the way she had blown in like a storm with her knockout heels and take-charge attitude made Cade unable to resist one small joke. “I don’t know,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “Is there something you’d like to tell us, Ms. Parker?”

She glared at him.

Perhaps he should’ve tried a little harder to resist.

“It’s been a long day, Mr. Morgan,” she said. “Maybe we could fast-forward through the prosecutorial banter portion of this meeting?”

“But that’s my favorite part.”

She sighed. “So much for that suggestion.”

Cade fought back a smile. He decided to skip the rest of the pleasantries—which weren’t really going over so well, anyway—and cut to the chase. “We’re here because we need your help.”

This surprised her. “My help?” As the knowledge sunk in that no one from Sterling was about to be hauled out of the office in handcuffs, she relaxed a bit. “All right,” she said, still maintaining a slightly cautious tone. “Tell me how I can help you.”

“There are two men who will be having dinner at Sogna this Sunday evening,” Cade said. “We’re anticipating that their conversation will be relevant to an ongoing investigation. With your assistance, we’d like to listen in.”

Brooke looked confused. “I’m not sure I’m following.”

“We want to bug their table,” Cade said simply.

“Oh.” Her lips curved at the edges in amusement. “I thought you guys only did that kind of stuff on TV.”

“We’re the FBI, Ms. Parker,” Vaughn interjected. “We have all sorts of tricks up our sleeves.”

“Of course. And how would this particular trick work, should I choose to assist you?”

Vaughn, along with Huxley, was in charge of the technical aspects of the sting operation. But when it came to dealing with lawyers, as the AUSA handling the case, Cade generally called the shots. Thus, the agent shot him a quick look, looking for the go-ahead signal before he proceeded.

Cade nodded.

Vaughn leaned forward in his chair as he explained. “You would need to give us access to the restaurant during a time when it’s closed. We’ll set up the bugs underneath the table, nothing that would ever be noticed by any of your servers or patrons. Then on Sunday evening, you’ll just have to make sure that the targets are seated there.”

“In addition, we’d like to station two undercover FBI agents at a nearby table, who will be there simply to make sure that everything proceeds smoothly,” Huxley added. “I’ll handle that, along with a female agent. We’ll look like an ordinary couple out on a date—no one will ever be the wiser.”

Brooke stared at them for a moment. “You’re actually serious about this.”

“Dead serious,” Vaughn said.

“As part of some mysterious investigation, you want to bug one of the tables at Sogna, arguably the most exclusive restaurant in Chicago, and then you want me, the general counsel of the company, to make sure that these ‘targets’—who I’m guessing are up to some very shady stuff—are seated there.”

Cade, Vaughn, and Huxley looked at each other. Yep, that pretty much covered it.

Huxley held up a finger. “Oh, one other thing. You need to make sure that the female undercover agent and myself are seated nearby.”

“Right. Wouldn’t want to forget that part.”

“The trickiest part will be getting the party to the table that’s bugged,” Vaughn said. “You should tell the hostess where to seat them, but without letting her know why. This operation has to be kept confidential. You tell the wrong person what’s going on, and our whole cover could be blown.”

Brooke leaned back in her chair, saying nothing for a long moment. “This is a lot to ask someone at—” she checked her watch—“four thirty on a Friday, don’t you think?”

Cade sensed that it was time for him to jump back into the conversation. “We apologize for the

inconvenience, Ms. Parker. We just learned of this opportunity last night. Although I do note that I tried to contact you earlier this afternoon.”

Her gaze turned to him, and from the savvy gleam in her eyes, Cade knew that Huxley and Vaughn’s part in this discussion was over. From this point on, he and Brooke Parker of Sterling Restaurants would have to lawyer it out.

Game on.

“DO YOU HAVE a court order to do this?” Brooke asked.

“No.” Seated across the desk from her, flanked by the two FBI agents, Cade appeared unconcerned with such pesky details. “But I can get one, if necessary.”

From his self-assured tone, Brooke had a feeling that Assistant U.S. Attorney Cade Morgan was a man who was used to getting his way. He certainly looked the part, with his strong jaw, dark brown hair, athletic build, and cobalt blue eyes. He was remarkably good-looking—she would have to be a fool not to notice that—and had no doubt that this played very well for him both inside and outside the courtroom.

“You probably could get an emergency judge to grant you an order allowing you to plant a few bugs in the restaurant,” she conceded. “But you would still need someone on the inside to make sure your target sits at the right table.”

“True,” he acknowledged. “It would be very difficult for us to pull this off without your help.”

At least he could admit that much. “Before I’d even consider agreeing to this, I’d need to know who the target is and what that person or persons are being investigated for.”

Cade shook his head. “I’m afraid the nature of the investigation is confidential. As for the identity of the target, *after* we have your agreement to cooperate, we’ll provide you with that information at the appropriate time so that you know who to seat at the bugged table.”

For Brooke, however, this point was not up for debate. “I have a responsibility to protect Sterling’s interests, Mr. Morgan, and that includes the safety of its employees and customers. For all I know, the person you’re after is an organized crime boss, a drug kingpin, or some other sort of dangerous criminal. What if these two men discover that the table is bugged? What if they identify Agent Huxley and his fake date as undercover agents and pull out guns and start shooting people? Can you imagine the liability I’d be exposing the company to if someone got hurt and I’d had advance notice that there was a potentially dangerous sting operation going down in one of our restaurants during regular business hours?”

Cade considered this point. “I can’t reveal the nature of our investigation,” he finally said. “But I can assure you that neither of the two men who will be at Sogna on Sunday night are considered dangerous. Nobody’s pulling out guns and causing a shoot-out in the middle of your restaurant. This isn’t the O.K. Corral.”

“I’d still like the names.”

His blue eyes held hers boldly. “You drive a hard bargain, Ms. Parker.”

“I wouldn’t be doing my job if I wasn’t.”

“Hmm.” He stretched out in the chair, looking effortlessly handsome and every inch the successful trial lawyer in his tailored navy pinstripe suit. “Now, normally, this would be the point when I’d have to give you the tough-guy speech about how, if you were to reveal to anyone the confidential nature of the information I’m about to give you, you could be charged with obstruction of justice and face a possible felony conviction and imprisonment.” He flashed her a dashing grin. “Luckily, though, since you’re a lawyer and obviously know that already, we can skip over the tough-guy stuff. Which is nice, because that part of the conversation can get really awkward.”

Maybe it was the fact that Brooke, admittedly, was having a bad day. She’d been dumped by the Hot OB, had just spent three hours on the phone haggling with the Staples Center lawyers over every tiny, miniscule part of their food service contract, and had done it all on two measly bites of a chicken taco and a melted strawberry-mango smoothie. She was tired, hungry, and, up until ten minutes ago, had been looking forward to the first Sunday in a long time when she did *not* have to work. So, yes—she was, perhaps, feeling extra-cranky because of circumstances that had nothing to do with anyone sitting in that office right then.

But Cade Morgan was seriously beginning to piss her off.

He’d come here, to *her* office, to ask for *her* help. Now he was threatening her with obstruction of justice charges—and most annoyingly, he was doing it with a smile.

So she returned the favor. “That is nice, Mr. Morgan. Because in response to your tough-guy speech, I, in turn, would’ve had to give you my tough-*girl* speech, about where, exactly, federal prosecutors who come to my office looking for assistance can stick their obstruction of justice threats.” She smiled ever so charmingly. “So I’m glad we were able to sidestep that whole ugly business. Whew.”

Although her attention was focused on Cade, out of the corner of her eye, Brooke could see Agents Huxley and Roberts looking at the wall and ceiling, seemingly trying to hide their smiles.

Cade looked momentarily caught off guard, the first time since he’d waltzed into her office, then his eyes flashed with something else entirely. Amusement, perhaps.

That annoyed her even more.

“Point taken, Ms. Parker.” Then he clapped his hands, moving on. “All right. Here’s what I can tell you. The reservation is for seven thirty, under the name Charles Torino.”

Charles Torino.

Nope, Brooke had no clue who that was.

“I’ll save you the Google search,” Cade said, as if reading her mind. “He’s the CEO of a hospital here in Chicago.”

“And the other man?”

“State Senator Alec Sanderson.”

Ah. Now Brooke was beginning to see what all the fuss was about. Based on the bits and pieces of information she had—the special agents from the white-collar crime division, the fact that Cade had previously prosecuted several high-profile corruption cases—Brooke would hazard a guess that the state of Illinois had yet another dirty politician on its hands.

Only one thing to say in response to that.

“I can get you into Sogna at seven A.M. on Sunday morning,” she told them. “I realize that’s early, but some of the kitchen staff will be arriving at ten o’clock, when deliveries for the dinner service start coming in. You’ll obviously want to be done before then.”

“That’ll be fine,” Vaughn said, appearing pleased with this arrangement. “After working for the FBI for seven years, a seven A.M. start feels like sleeping in.”

“I think you can stop telling her that you work for the FBI, Roberts,” Huxley muttered under his breath. “She’s got it.”

Brooke was trying to hold back a smile, thinking she rather liked these two special agents, when Mr. Obstruction of Justice had to chime back in.

“What about the other part of the deal?” Cade asked.

Brooke looked over. “Getting Torino, Sanderson, and the undercover agents to the right tables, you mean?” She shrugged. “I’ll make it clear to the hostess where I want those two parties seated. I’m sure she’ll be suspicious, but she won’t say anything.”

“You seem awfully certain of that.”

“I’m the general counsel of this company, Mr. Morgan. If I ask an employee to keep something confidential, she will. Nevertheless, I’ll plan to stick around the restaurant on Sunday evening, just to make sure there aren’t any problems.”

“Thank you,” he said. “On behalf of both the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, let me say how much we appreciate your assistance in this matter.”

“You’re welcome.” Brooke locked eyes with him, to underscore the significance of her next words. “And I trust that the U.S. Attorney’s Office will remember that appreciation, should Sterling Restaurants ever need a favor in return.”

Cade cocked his head at that, regarding her with sudden suspicion. “What kind of favor?”

Brooke sweetly threw his earlier words back at him. “Let’s just say that I’ll provide you with that information at the appropriate time.” She rested her elbows on the table, ready to get down to the nitty-gritty details of the upcoming task. “So. What else do you guys need from me?” she asked Vaughn and Huxley.

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