

# ***Left For Dead***

*You Should Have Killed Me*

By Erin Wade

# CHAPTER 1

## And so, it Begins

The semi-conscious woman whimpered as her attacker choked her into unconsciousness. Hours later she awoke in the dark deserted alley covered in blood—her blood. Without moving she made a mental check of her body. Blood oozed from a wound in her side and her arms were covered in defensive wounds. Her left eye where he had dealt the first blow had swollen closed and her throat hurt like the devil. Her face felt like it had lost the battle with a cheese grader. The stench of blood emanated from her long dark hair and the palm of her right hand was a mangled mess.

She had fought for her life like a cornered tiger, clawing at the concrete for anything to use against her attacker. Her hand closed around the neck of a broken bottle. She screamed as she wrapped her hand around it and slammed it into her attacker's face, ripping it open from his eye to his chin. He howled and cursed as he choked the life from her.

She could deal with the cuts, the crushed larynx, and the facial disfigurement. He had removed her shoes, unbuckled her leather belt, pulled her jeans down to her ankles and molested her. She was glad she had been unconscious and had not experienced the revulsion of Baird on top of her.

She knew where to find him. He should have killed her because she would hunt him down and slowly destroy him.

She screamed as she tried to sit up and knew he had broken a few of her ribs. Crawling slowly, she inched to the brick wall and clawed her way into a standing position. Broken glass cut her bare feet as she stumbled along the alley wall. A twenty-four-hour emergency clinic was three blocks away. She was determined to reach it, determined to survive, determined to make his life a living hell.

She stumbled through the clinic doors and collapsed in the entrance way. She was aware of gentle hands lifting her onto a gurney before everything slipped into darkness.

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The beeping sound and clean sheets told her she was in a hospital. She tried to open her left eye and whimpered as additional pain shot through her head. The effort was too much, and she let darkness overtake her once more.

She lost all track of time as she drifted in and out of the blackness that helped her cope with the pain. Her head ached as she tried to identify the voices in her room. She listened as two women discussed her condition.

“She is lucky to be alive,” a soft voice said as its owner changed the bag hanging from the IV pole. “She could easily slip into a coma. Someone beat the hell out of her. She has a concussion, broken ribs, and deep cuts in the palm of her hand and side. Her face is a mess. It looks like her assailant carved it up with broken glass.”

“Was she sexually assaulted?” a calm, confident voice asked.

“Yes, but she fought back hard. From the shape she was in when she collapsed inside the emergency room doors, I’m certain her attacker meant to kill her in the end. I’d bet money he left her for dead.”

“Did she have any identification on her?”

“No, nothing. We admitted her to the hospital under Jane Doe. Whoever she is, I hope she has a lot of money because she is going to need extensive reconstructive surgery to make her look human.”

# CHAPTER 2

## Seven Years Later

Hope Ford walked her last customer of the day to the door and closed it behind him. She was glad he was gone. It always made her uneasy when she was the last person left alone with a stranger. She turned off the main library lights leaving on only a few nightlights.

A loud bang echoed throughout the library as a heavy book fell from a shelf. Following protocol, Hope left the entrance doors unlocked and entered the safe room that housed the cameras that covered every row of the shelved books. She scanned each camera to make certain that no one was hiding in the library. For some reason, teenagers thought it was great fun to dare each other to spend the night in the two-story building with all its books.

Her hand covered her mouth as she watched a figure slowly shuffle from the back of the room toward her safe place. It appeared to be an injured woman. Without hesitating, Hope called 911 and requested a policeman and an ambulance.

She retrieved the Kimber .380 pistol from her purse, locked herself in the security room, and watched the stranger pull herself along the shelves of books. She had almost made it to the reading area when she collapsed. Hope fought the urge to run to her but remained in her locked room.

Lieutenant Montgomery (Monty) Masters pushed on the library door and was delighted it was unlocked. *Hope actually followed protocol*, she thought. She carefully surveyed the cavernous room and spotted the body of a woman sprawled between two shelves.

“Hope, are you okay?” She called out to the librarian as she waved at the surveillance camera aimed at the entrance

doors. The lock on the safe room door clicked and Hope poked her head out.

“Monty, thank God it’s you.” She hurried to the Lieutenant and pointed to the woman. “I don’t know who she is or why she was in the back of the room. I discovered her when I checked to make certain everyone had left the library.”

Monty carefully approached the woman and nudged her with her foot. She dropped to her knees when the woman moaned. “She’s alive!”

Monty checked the pockets of the woman’s blazer and found her wallet.

“Her name is Rachel Lancaster. It looks like someone beat the hell out of her.”

“Is she from here?” Hope asked as the EMTs loaded the unconscious woman onto their gurney.

“Her drivers license has an Oklahoma City address.” Monty pulled cards from the victim’s wallet. “There’s a receipt from the Fairfield Inn here in Oklahoma City dated today. If she lives in the city, I wonder why she was staying at the inn. I’ll pay the Fairfield a visit and see what I can find out.”

“Take me with you,” Hope’s eyes sparkled. “I’ve read a thousand books that begin just like this, but I’ve never actually been involved in an attempted murder.”

Monty studied the petite woman for a few seconds. “It never hurts to have the company of a beautiful woman.” She smiled. “Do you mind if we have dinner first? I haven’t eaten all day. I need to call this into the office and let them know I’m going to notify the next of kin after dinner. I also want to know if a missing person’s report has been filed on her.”

“I am hungry,” Hope admitted.

“I’ll need copies of your security video to figure out when she came into the library and if anyone followed her,” Monty said. “May I pick them up in the morning? I’ll also

need to close down the library until our forensic folks do their examination”

“Give me a few minutes and I’ll download today’s video onto a flash drive for you and post a closed sign on the door.”

“Sometimes you are too good to be true, Hope Ford.”

## CHAPTER 3

Monty studied the victim's driver's license as they waited for the server to bring their dinner order. "Lancaster is a very familiar name," she commented.

"You know Bluebaird is running for Governor of Oklahoma."

Monty smiled. She knew Hope was sharing a nickname. "Bluebeard?"

"You know, Baird Lancaster. He has that thick black beard. It is so black it looks blue. He thinks he looks like Abe Lincoln. He was the district attorney who refused to prosecute the criminal that raped that teenager at church camp."

Monty nodded. "I remember, the man claimed the girl begged him to have sex with her."

"Yeah," Hope smirked. "That's what twelve-year-old church kids do."

"I know for a fact that the family withdrew the charges after the rapist paid them off." Monty informed her.

Hope huffed. "I guess even a daughter's virtue has a price now days. Do you think there is any chance Baird will be elected governor?"

"Who knows. Enough money will buy anything. I try to stay out of politics when at all possible."

Monty called her sergeant and informed him that she was following up on the Rachel Lancaster case.

"Something you should know Lieutenant, Rachel Lancaster is the wife of that guy running for Governor."

"Baird Lancaster?"

"Yeah. The press has dubbed him Blackbaird. He comes from old money. He is a womanizer and had a few assault cases in college. It looks like his father paid off people right and left to keep him out of jail."

“I’ll check on Rachel in the hospital then pay Baird Lancaster a visit. I’m assuming he hasn’t reported his wife missing.”

“Not a peep.” Sergeant Bobby Randle replied. “I’ve pulled his rap sheet. I’ll leave it on your desk.”

“Thanks, Bobby. I appreciate that.”

Hope raised a questioning brow as Monty ended her call. “This may be a domestic violence case,” she informed the librarian.

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Beautiful Rachel Lancaster had learned all the makeup secrets used to cover a black eye. She was used to being slapped around and degraded by her powerful husband. She knew he would be furious if he learned she was in the hospital. Sometimes she wished he would kill her and put her out of her misery.

Even before the honeymoon was over, she had learned how unpredictable her new husband’s temper could be. She had been shocked at his demands for rough sex. Something she despised. He seemed to enjoy beating her into submission.

When she had returned home after her honeymoon, she had immediately gone to her parent’s house to tell them she was going to divorce Baird. Both of her parents had been appalled that she would leave the man being groomed for the governor’s job in their state.

“He is abusive,” Rachel had cried. “He has a horrible temper.”

“You must be careful not to irritate him, dear,” her mother had counseled her. “He will be governor one day and you will be the first lady of Oklahoma.”

“I don’t care about any of that. I just want to be safe. I fear for my life, Mother. He is nothing like the image he projects to the public.”



“I’m sure you are overreacting to being a new bride,” Jane Brighton had insisted as she poured her daughter a glass of wine. “Sip this. It will calm you down. You don’t want to do anything drastic. You could cause Daddy to lose his trucking contract with the state. That would be devastating for our company.”

Rachel had resigned herself to living in hell and stayed away from Baird as much as possible. She knew he had affairs with other women, and she was glad. *Better them, than me*, she thought.

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“I’m certain she is awake,” the nurse told Monty. “She refused to allow us to do a rape kit on her.”

Monty and Hope quietly entered Rachel’s room. “Mrs. Lancaster, I’m Lieutenant Monty Masters with the OKC Police Department. May I ask you a few questions?”

Rachel clenched her eyes tightly fighting back the hot tears that threatened to run down her cheeks.

“Here,” a soft hand pressed a tissue into her hand. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Rachel blotted the tears from her eyes then focused on the face of the angel leaning over her. “Who are you?”

“I’m Hope Ford. The librarian you scared to death.” The angel smiled.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know where else to hide.”

“Who were you hiding from?” Monty took over the conversation.

“I am so tired.” Rachel closed her eyes and pretended to fall into a deep sleep.

“The drugs are kicking in,” the nurse explained. “We gave her a sedative.”

Monty nodded and walked out of the room. “What is the extent of her injuries?”

“Black eye, cut lip, broken rib, major blows to the body leaving huge bruises that won’t show. Do you know who did this to her?”

“We’re not sure,” Monty replied.

Hope stood beside the injured woman’s bed wondering how anyone could hurt Rachel Lancaster. *Even in distress, she is lovely*, Hope thought.

Hope jumped as Rachel caught her hand. “Please don’t tell my husband where I am.”

“We won’t,” Hope promised something she wasn’t certain she could deliver.

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“Did she talk to you after I left the room?” Monty asked as they walked to the car.

“Yes, she begged me not to tell her husband where she is.”

Monty nodded. “That is what I expected.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not going to contact Baird tonight. I doubt he is missing her. I am going to visit the Fairfield Inn and see what I can find out.”

“Good. It is late and I am tired. It has been a hellacious day.” Hope yawned.

“The good news is you can sleep late since I’ve locked down the crime scene. Do you want me to drop you off at your car or do you want to go with me to check out her room?”

“I want to go with you, of course.”

“You know we have to notify Baird eventually,” Monty noted. “I found her room card in her wallet so I’m not going to contact the front office. I’m just going to check the room with as little fanfare as possible.”

##

No one was at the front desk of the Fairfield when they entered the lobby. They hurried to the elevator and stopped on the second floor. “It’s room 209,” Monty said as they looked at the direction arrows on the wall.

“It’s on the left,” Hope replied.

The room was spotless. Obviously, housekeeping had cleaned it after Rachel left. Her suitcase and overnight bag were in the closet.

“I’m going to take her luggage,” Hope said. “She will need her personal items when they release her. I’ll drop them by her hospital room tomorrow.”

Monty helped transfer Rachel’s bags from her car to Hope’s vehicle. “What time are you going to see her tomorrow?”

“First thing in the morning.” Hope replied, pulling open the driver’s door of her car. “I’ll keep you informed on anything I find out.”

“You have always been my best source of information,” Monty admitted. “Be careful with her. I think Baird is dangerous.”

Hope saluted, “Aye aye, captain.”

## CHAPTER 4

Hope accepted the ticket from the valet and checked to make certain it had a phone number for her to call when she was ready for her car. She planned to check on Rachel Lancaster then call Monty to join her for lunch.

When Hope entered the hospital room, Rachel was sitting up in her bed watching the local news. She smiled then cringed as her lip reminded her of its cut. She motioned for Hope to sit in the chair beside her bed then muted the news program she was watching.

“How are you feeling today?” Hope asked.

“Like the only piñata at a large birthday party.”

Hope giggled. “I don’t know how you can be so flippant about being mugged. You could have been killed.”

Rachel nodded. “It’s easier to joke about it than to face the cold hard truth.”

“Which is what?” Hope frowned.

“Nothing,” Rachel waved her hand dismissing the discussion. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“I’m fine. I have had a sleepless night worrying about you. Does your husband know you are in the hospital?”

Fear flashed in Rachel’s eyes before she turned away from Hope. “I was watching the morning news to see if he has reported me missing. He hasn’t.”

“Did he beat you up?”

Rachel faced Hope. “I have a feeling you already know the answer to your question.”

“Does this happen often?”

“Only when he wants to hit something.” Rachel replied. “I left the house and checked into a hotel, but he found me, assaulted me, and told me I’d better be home when he finished his meetings. I hid in your library. I didn’t mean to involve you in my problems. I just needed time to develop a plan to get away from him.”

“Do you have a place to go, a friend, family?”

“No one wants to anger him,” Rachel explained. “Especially my parents.”

Hope furrowed her brow as she tried to think of a way to help the woman. She ignored the warning from the intelligent side of her brain and blurted, “You can hide out at my place.”

“You are very kind,” Rachel replied, “but I would never put you in harms way and believe me, Baird would find a way to punish you for helping me.”

“He doesn’t even know we are acquainted with each other.”

“Did your friend file a police report on me?”

“I don’t know. I can find out.”

“My clothes are at the hotel,” Rachel said.

“I tagged along with Monty last night and we picked up your belongings from the hotel. I have them in my car.”

“Please help me get out of here,” Rachel pleaded. “I need to disappear before he finds me.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes, I’ve suffered worse beatings than this then attended fundraisers with him.”

Hope cringed as she thought about Baird assaulting his wife.

“Would you help me dress. Perhaps I can spend the night at your place then vanish into thin air.”

Hope nodded knowing she would help Rachel Lancaster vanish from the face of the earth. She quickly helped the brunette dress.

“The hospital has video security on all the hallways and in the elevators,” Hope said. “We need to get out of here without anyone seeing me otherwise they will know I took you.”

Rachel ran the tip of her tongue along her lips. “Help me put my hair into a bun at the back of my neck then see if you

can steal a doctor's jacket. Give me your glasses. Do you need them to walk?"

Hope laughed. "No, just for distance."

"They make you look beautifully intelligent," Rachel complimented making Hope blush.

Hope checked out the nurses' station as she walked toward the cold drink machine. Everyone was hurrying to a room that was flashing a code red. She ducked into the small room behind the station and grabbed a white doctor's jacket, stuffed it under her blouse, and flattened it as much as possible. She continued to the cold drink machine, purchased a Dr Pepper and headed back to Rachel.

Rachel was dressed and ready to go. "There is a parking garage across from the hospital Hope informed her. Go inside it and take the elevator to the very top level. I'll get my car from the valet, drive around the block and then into the garage to pick you up."

"Thank you," Rachel murmured.

## CHAPTER 5

Monty raised her head to look out the window at the officers in the bull pen. Their silence had caught her attention. She walked to her door and opened it. The most gorgeous creature she had ever seen was standing just inside the room looking around. Her gaze landed on Monty.

“Are you Captain Masters?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m Assistant District Attorney Shay Steel.” The woman held out her hand and Monty shook it. Shay had a good, firm grip and the greenest eyes Monty had ever seen.

“Come in,” Monty waved her through the door in front of her and admired her perfect figure as she followed her into the office.

“DA Bren Anthony is very pleased to get you from the Houston DA’s office. What made you decide to become an Okie.” Monty pulled Shay’s file from the small stack on her desk and opened it. *Her photo doesn’t do her justice*, she thought.

Shay looked around the office avoiding Monty’s piercing gaze. “I had a misogynistic creep for a boss. I had two choices transfer or shoot him.”

Monty laughed. “I’m glad you chose a transfer. I noticed you have done a lot of cyber fraud prosecutions, and you have worked on several cyber bullying cases. Do you like cyber work?”

“I love working cyber cases. Computers are like an extension of my mind. Everything about them comes easy for me.”

“When I ran the background check on you, I noticed that you worked for the Houston police force before joining the DA’s office. You have several letters of accommodation in your file for your undercover work. You were obviously very good at covert operations.”

“I liked short term undercover work. You know, playing a prostitute to catch a john or a pimp, or a druggie to make a buy for a drug bust. That sort of thing. I’m not fond of deep cover assignments. I was almost killed on a two-year deep cover job.”

“I read that in your file, but you did bring down a huge drug ring.”

“Yes, but not before a thug stomped my hand. I’m still doing exercises to keep the scar tissue from building up.”

“Your right hand,” Monty noted. “I also see you are extremely proficient on the firing range using your left hand.”

“After hours of practice, but the good news is I’m now ninety-nine percent proficient with either hand.”

“It’s the end results that matter,” Monty encouraged her. “We are delighted to have you in OKC. Bren asked me to give you a desk here while they complete remodeling the Leadership Square offices. I’ve put you in your own private office. I think you could be a distraction to the officers in the bull pen. They’re not creeps but they are human.”

Shay smiled. “Point me to my desk, I’m ready to get to work.”

Hope’s face popped onto Monty’s cellphone screen as she pulled the office key from her desk drawer and handed it to Shay. She let the call go to voicemail. “Your office is next to mine. Make yourself at home. You aren’t on the payroll until tomorrow so make the most of it.”

“I have nothing special to do. Maybe we could go to lunch, and you can tell me all the things you love about Oklahoma City.”

Hope called again and Monty answered. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, we are fine. We’d like to go out for lunch. Do you think that is safe?”

“I’ll pick you up at noon. I don’t want you to go out alone. We still haven’t heard from Baird.”



“Sounds like you already have lunch plans,” Shay shrugged.

“You can join us. I’ll fill you in on the case as we drive to Hope’s home.”

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“Baird Lancaster,” Shay repeated the name. “He’s been to Houston for fundraisers. Word is he will be Oklahoma’s next governor.”

“That’s the rumor. Personally, I think he is a criminal. I’d love to put him behind bars for what he has done to his wife,” Monty grumbled. “But rich guys seldom pay for abusing their wives. A slick lawyer would get him off.”

“He’s a wife beater,” Shay repeated the information Monty had just given her. “How long can you keep her in protective custody?”

“As long as we need to. He hasn’t filed a missing person’s report on her.” Monty pulled her sedan into Hope’s driveway. “This is Hope’s home. She is the chief librarian. She smuggled Rachel out of the hospital to protect her from Baird.

Shay followed Monty to the door and waited patiently for Hope to open it.

“You are right on time,” Hope smiled. “Rachel is almost ready.”

Monty stepped into the house and Hope caught her breath as Shay stepped into view. “Who are you?”

“Our new Assistant District Attorney Shay Steel, this is Hope Ford our chief librarian.” Monty made the introductions”

Shay’s amber eyes seemed to gleam as the overhead light reflected in them. She held out her hand.

“Close your mouth and shake her hand,” Monty teased Hope.

Shay held Hope's hand a little longer than necessary. It was soft and cool. She instantly liked the petite brunette with her thousand-watt smile.

"This is Rachel Lancaster," Monty announced as a statuesque dark-haired woman entered the room. "Rachel this is our new ADA Shay Steel."

Shay tilted her head sideways and smiled as she scrutinized Rachel. She didn't look like she had been beaten.

As if reading her mind Rachel pulled up her blouse and turned her back to Shay. It was black and blue from her waist to her shoulders.

Shay wanted to reach out and touch her—to make her feel better. "I am so sorry," she whispered.

"Not your fault," Rachel mumbled.

"He belongs in prison, not the governor's mansion," Shay replied.

"We all know that won't happen," Hope declared.

"Enough about my abusive husband," Rachel exclaimed, "Hope promised to feed me."

For some inexplicable reason Shay felt at ease with the three women as if she had known them all her life. They all believed in the same things: law and order and divine retribution.

##

"That was delicious," Shay exclaimed as she finished her dessert. "The best peach cobbler I've ever eaten."

"How are you feeling?" Monty asked Rachel.

"Surprisingly well. I think I just need to move around and work out the soreness in my body. Shay, have you seen the OKC National Memorial to the one hundred sixty-eight innocents that died in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building?"

"Isn't that the building Timothy McVeigh parked a Ryder truck filled with explosives in front of?" Shay replied.

Rachel nodded.

“I haven’t seen the memorial, but I’ve heard many good things about it. I would love to see it.”

Monty checked her watch. “I have a meeting this afternoon. Hope can you take them?”

“I’m interviewing two people for the assistant librarian’s job in half an hour,” Hope scowled. “I’d love to take you otherwise.”

“I’ll drop Hope back at her house and take you two to the police station where you can get Shay’s car.” Monty suggested.

“That works for me,” Shay exclaimed. “Is it okay with you, Rachel.”

“I’d enjoy the outing,” Rachel agreed.

## CHAPTER 6

Rachel and Shay spent the afternoon visiting the memorial and the museum. It was almost sundown when they left the monument.

“I hope I haven’t tired you,” Shay commented as they walked to her car.

“No, I can’t remember the last time I felt so free and happy.”

“Would you like to go to dinner?” Shay asked wanting to spend more time with the beautiful woman.

“I would like that. Do you prefer a truly good restaurant or a fast food?”

“Something elegantly relaxed where the tables aren’t shoved against each other.” Shay requested.

“If you like a good steak, great service, and incredible ambiance we should go to the Stock and Bond. It is expensive, but so worth it. No one stands over your table hurrying you so they can seat the next customers.”

“Sounds like a perfect place to dine with a lovely lady,” Shay blushed at her own forwardness.

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Shay perused the menu of the Stock and Bond restaurant. “It all looks good. I don’t know where to start. Do you have a favorite?”

“The small filet, cooked medium, with the broccoli and rice casserole,” Rachel suggested.

“Perfect, I’ll have that,” Shay told the server, “and iced tea.”

“I will have the same,” Rachel added.

Rachel studied her blonde dining partner. Shay’s golden hair and amber eyes seemed to glow against the dark paneling of the wall behind her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen

eyes the color of yours,” she complimented, “they are disconcerting, almost hypnotizing,”

Shay laughed softly. “I do believe my eyes can take the credit for most of my prosecutorial wins. Some convicts have even gone so far as to say they were hypnotized into confessing.”

Rachel joined her laughter. “I could see that happening.”

“I like to think I build a strong case against them without using any parlor tricks,” Shay insisted. “Enough about my eyes. How long have you been married to Baird Lancaster?”

“Too long,” Rachel replied.

“Seriously, how long?”

“Three years,” Rachel answered. “Three fear-filled years.”

“Why don’t you leave him?”

“He would find a way to smear me and my parents. If I filed for a divorce, he would have his cronies swear I’d slept with all of them.”

Shay raised her brows questioningly.

“I have not slept with anyone but Baird.”

“I wasn’t questioning that,” Shay insisted. “I was wondering about your parents.”

“My family owns a large trucking company. Baird makes certain my father gets million-dollar contracts every year. The state of Oklahoma is Daddy’s largest client now. My mother pleads with me to stay with Baird so Daddy can be successful. You might say we’ve sold our souls to the devil.”

“A difficult pact to get out of,” Shay agreed.

A rowdy group of men and women followed the hostess into the restaurant. They acted as if they owned the place, talking loudly and guffawing at everything one man said.

“Don’t look now,” Shay whispered, “but I believe your husband and his entourage just entered the room.”

Rachel stiffened and inhaled deeply.

Shay watched as Baird pulled out the chair for a busty blonde then leaned down to kiss her on the cheek then the exposed top of her breasts. Shay's eyes popped open then reduced to slits as she watched him fondle the woman while everyone hooted. Shay was recording his antics on her cellphone.

She played the video for Rachel. "Who is she?"

"A high-priced prostitute. I'm certain Baird keeps her in a townhouse somewhere. Has he noticed us?"

"No, he's too busy showing off for his buddies. I can't believe people are drawn to him. I've never seen a beard like his. It is almost so black it has a blue hue."

"That is why his detractors call him Bluebeard. They have no idea how close to the truth that name is for him. If he had a locked room in our house, I certainly wouldn't open it."

"I know we just met today, and I don't mean to get into your business, but I have to ask, what are you going to do?"

Rachel looked down at her hands and sighed. "I don't know. It's okay you asked. I feel as if I've known you for ages. You are easy to be with, Shay."

They ordered a bottle of wine and talked quietly as Baird's crowd grew rowdier.

"You know all about me," Rachel said. "What about you? Is there a Mr. Steel in your life? Kids?"

"No, I've been too driven for a family. I am hoping this will be my home forever. I've almost reached my goal."

"Which is?"

"To be the States Attorney General."

"Um, lofty goal, but I'm sure you will attain it. All you have to do is prosecute and win one high profile case."

The server brought their check then delivered a check to Baird for his table. "Does he usually pick up the check for everyone?" Shay asked.

"How else would he have so many 'friends' and lackies to do his bidding. His family is from old oil money. He has

a very generous trust fund. The succubi that hang onto him would abandon him in a heartbeat if he wasn't picking up the tab for everything."

Shay placed her credit card on top of the bill. "I can pay my own way," Rachel declared, opening her purse.

"Please allow me just this once. You have been a marvelous tour guide and interesting dining partner." She pulled her cellphone from her pocket and scrolled through her messages then fumbled with her apps. "May I have your phone number?"

"I was hoping you would ask." Rachel smiled as she reached for Shay's phone and called her own number. "There, now we have each other's numbers."

"What do you mean it was declined?" Baird bellowed as he stood up to face down the server.

"The card was declined, sir. I ran it three times."

"That is impossible. It is a Black Card. Black Cards are never declined." Baird fumed. "I want to speak to the manager."

"Yes, sir." The server scurried away from the belligerent man.

Soon a distinguished-looking man who looked more like a six-foot-six football tackle than a restaurant manager joined them. "What seems to be the problem, Mr. Lancaster?"

"Your credit card machine is malfunctioning," Baird howled. "It declined my Black Card."

"Let me try it again on another machine," the manager offered. "I apologize for the inconvenience.

Baird tossed the card to him and slumped back into his chair. "This place is going downhill," he exclaimed loudly.

Shay was recording the exchange on her cellphone. She wanted to know the people who were hanging around Baird Lancaster.

One by one Baird's friends made excuses to leave while he waited for the manager to return.

“Mr. Lancaster, I called the credit card company and there is a problem with your card,” the manager returned his card. “Could you give me another card?”

Baird’s face turned dark red, and Shay expected him to explode. “I only carry that one card.”

“It is unacceptable,” the manager said firmly. “Perhaps your lady friend has a card you can use until you get this straightened out.”

“Kitty, do you have a credit card?”

“Of course. Kitty pulled her card from her purse as the manager handed her the bill. “Holy crap! This bill is over five-thousand dollars,” she squealed. “My max is three thousand. That’s all you allow me.”

“Sir, perhaps you can call your father for a different card number,” the manager suggested.

Baird clenched his teeth. “I’m a forty-two-year-old adult. I don’t need to run to Daddy to pay my bills. I’ll sign an ‘I owe you’ and return tomorrow to pay it.”

“Very good, sir.” The manager shoved the pen and check to him. “Simply write ‘I owe you’ on the back and sign it.”

Baird signed the note then tossed the pen onto the table. “Come on Kitty, let’s get out of this dump.”

Shay watched the pair leave, still recording them as they departed. “He is a real piece of work. How did you ever get mixed up with him?”

“It’s a long story,” Rachel exhaled slowly. “A conversation we can save for another time.”

Shay smiled and nodded pleased to know there would be another time with the beautiful dark-haired woman.

As they walked toward the front of the restaurant, Hope called out to them. “Shay, Rachel, what are you to doing here?”

“Watching Baird crash and burn,” Rachel giggled.

“He stomped by us cussing on his way out the door,” Monty remarked. “What’s going on?”



“I’m sending both of you the video,” Shay said softly. “We just finished dining, and I am taking Rachel back to Hope’s house. I’m afraid I’ve worn her out. She gave me the grand tour of the Memorial today. It is magnificent.”

“We will be home soon,” Hope informed them. “We’re just waiting for our check. I wish we had known you were here. We could have dined together.”

Shay smiled. “I’ll stay with Rachel until you two arrive.”

# CHAPTER 7

## Jane Doe

She had followed Baird Lancaster for a third of her life striving to get into a position where she could make his life one hell day after another. *It's finally beginning to work*, she thought as she stepped into the shower.

A shiver ran through her body as she recalled crawling through the alley after he had beaten her and left her for dead. Both of them had graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He had cast his hat into the political ring while she had continued her education in computer science.

Her senior year at MIT she had developed a game application that sold for \$3.99. After paying all the platform companies and middlemen that made it possible to get her app to market, she had cleared one dollar per sale. The app's sales had long ago topped out at four million downloads. She was set for life.

She frowned at her reflection in the mirror realizing her natural color was growing out. *Time to dye the roots*, she thought.

She gently touched her face. The face Baird Lancaster had scarred beyond recognition. She no longer resembled the innocent young girl Lancaster had ravaged. She had missed a year of college while reconstructive surgeons had put her face back together and broken bones in her body had healed. An entire year to plan her vengeance on the man who still terrorized her nightmares.

*Oh, Baird, you have no idea what I have planned for you.*

##

Ensley Flynn's eyes opened wide as she watched the video from Humpty Dumpty. It showed governor wannabe

Baird Lancaster in an altercation with the owner of one of OKC's four-star restaurants over the payment of a dinner tab. Humpty Dumpty had always been one of her best sources of anonymous news tips. She watched the video two more times wondering if Lancaster had kept his word and paid the bill.

She had met the Lancasters at a charity ball and had been enthralled by Rachel Lancaster. She was a lady's lady. Baird on the other hand was a spoiled brat flouting his white privilege. Ensley wondered what his wife saw in the boring braggart.

She decided to have lunch at the Stock and Bond. A lunch salad at the expensive restaurant wouldn't break her budget. She wanted to do her own investigation before posting anything negative on her podcast about the litigious Lancasters.

Her podcast, *The Flynn Factor* had amassed over two million followers growing from an audio podcast to a video production on You Tube. She had been picked up by Spotify and Apple. She was even bringing in a substantial amount of advertising revenue. She had to admit that tips from Humpty Dumpty had provided her best stories.

She had used every trick she knew to identify Humpty Dumpty but had failed. Whoever it was, they knew how to hide behind VPNs.

Ensley called her best friend to join her. "Hope, how would you like to go to lunch at the Stock and Bond?"

"It depends on who is paying," Hope replied.

"My treat," Ensley promised.

"I can't get out of here until my new assistant returns from lunch. I'll call you when I leave, and we can meet at the restaurant."

"Works for me," Ensley agreed.

##

Ensley requested a table close to the kitchen entrance hoping to hear staff gossip from the other side of the swinging doors as the servers waited for their orders to come up.

“May I take your drink order?” An attractive butch waitress asked.

“I’m waiting for a friend and would like to see what she wants before I order,” Ensley explained as she read her name tag. “Thank you, Denny.”

“I will check back when she joins you.” Denny smiled.

Ensley smiled as Hope appeared at the hostess stand. *She is the cutest little thing I’ve ever seen*, she thought. The room seemed to get brighter as the five-foot-five-inch brunette chatted with the hostess on her way to the table.

“I was delightfully surprised to hear from you today,” Hope enthused as she joined Ensley. “You must be searching for dirt on someone.”

“Busted,” Ensley faked embarrassment. “You know me too well. Let’s order lunch, then I want to pick your brain.”

They placed their orders and Ensley introduced Hope to Denny then waited for the server to walk away. Ensley pulled her phone from her pocket, queued up the Lancaster video and handed it to Hope. “Watch this. It is a hoot.”

Hope frowned as she watched the replay of the scene she had witnessed. It was the recording Shay had made and forwarded to all their phones. “Where did you get this?”

“I wish I knew,” Ensley said softly. “I’ve tried to track the sender, but it bounced all over the world before it landed on my phone. Whoever it is, they know how to mask their IP address.” Hope briefly wondered which one of her friends had sent the video to Ensley: Rachel, Monty, or Shay.

“Do you know anyone who works here?” Ensley asked.

“No, this place is definitely above my pay scale,” Hope admitted. “I wouldn’t know them unless they frequent the library.”

As they dined Denny kept their drink glasses filled and brought extra bread. "I think she likes you," Hope whispered to Ensley."

Against all odds, Ensley asked Denny if she knew who Baird Lancaster was.

"Yeah, he's the creep that stiffed my dad last week."

"Gave him a hot check?" Ensley asked innocently.

"No, his credit card was declined so he gave Dad an IOU for a five-thousand-dollar dinner bill.

"I'm sure he returned and took care of the bill," Ensley guessed.

"Nope and he won't take our calls."

"Why don't you turn it over to the authorities?" Ensley asked.

"He's a good customer. Comes in here at least once a week with his groupies and picks up the tab. Dad thinks he will be good for it."

"I certainly hope so," Ensley sympathized. "It takes a lot of customers to make up for a bill that size."

##

Hope and Ensley chatted as they walked to the restaurant's parking lot. "Are you going to put the video on your podcast?" Hope asked.

"I'm considering airing it on our *What Happened in OKC This Week* segment," Ensley confided. "I won't comment on it so I can't be sued."

"That would serve Baird right," Hope agreed. She didn't tell her friend that Rachel Lancaster was in protective custody to shield her from Baird Lancaster. "I watch your podcast every day but give me a heads up when you are going to run it."

"I will," Ensley promised.

##

Hope was showing her new assistant where the oldest books in the library were shelved in a climate-controlled area when her phone rang.

“Hope, this is Ensley. I’ve finished taping my segment on Baird. I spoke with Denny, and she said he still hasn’t taken care of the bill at their restaurant. I’m going to air it tonight.”

“All hell will break loose,” Hope reminded her. “The Lancasters won’t be happy.”

“I know. I ran it by my attorney, and he said they wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if they tried to sue me.”

“I will let Monty know so she can watch it.” Hope laughed. “We may have a watch party.”

Ensley laughed. “If you do, may I come over after the show?”

“I’d like that,” Hope replied.

## CHAPTER 8

### The Gathering

Hope placed the fruit and crackers charcuterie boards on the kitchen island beside the crockpot of simmering beef stew. Dishes and flatware were placed beside iced tea glasses. Everything was ready for her friends to gather around the television and watch Ensley's production of *What Happened in OKC This Week?*

She jumped as the door chimes announced the arrival of a guest. "Shay, I'm so glad you could make it," Hope greeted her new friend. "You are the first to arrive. Make yourself at home. There is iced tea, coffee, and the beer is in the fridge."

Another announcement from her doorbell produced Monty and Rachel.

"Is Ensley going to join us?" Monty asked as she popped the top off a cold beer.

"She is on her way. I promised we would wait until she arrived to watch the podcast on You Tube. She wants to get our feedback as we watch it." Hope replied.

"Isn't she airing the video I took then forwarded a copy to all of you?" Shay asked.

"Yes," Hope replied.

Shay looked from face to face. "Which one of you sent that video to Ensley?"

The women shook their heads and denied sending the embarrassing video to the podcaster.

Shay's gaze rested on Rachel.

"I know I would seem to be the likely culprit," Rachel admitted, "but honestly I never heard of *The Flynn Factor* until Monty started talking about it."

Shay smiled. Somehow she knew the beautiful woman wouldn't do anything to incur the wrath of her husband. She

wondered if Rachel would come to her senses and divorce Baird before he killed her in a fit of rage.

“It’s obvious Baird is keeping company with a prostitute,” Shay continued. “Will that embarrass you when it airs for all the world to see?”

“Baird is an embarrassment all by himself,” Rachel huffed. “One more prostitute won’t make a difference. His father will race around town cleaning up his mess. Like my own father, Mr. Lancaster wants someone he can control running our state government. Believe me, he wants Baird to be the Governor of Oklahoma.”

The door chimes heralded the arrival of Ensley. “Welcome,” Hope greeted her. “Everyone is here. Do you know Rachel Lancaster?”

Ensley shyly smiled at Rachel. “I hope this isn’t hurtful to you.”

“It isn’t.” Rachel shrugged. “It is good to see someone exposing Baird for the creep he is.”

“I have placed TV trays by all the chairs in the video room,” Hope informed them. “Everyone, serve yourself, and let’s get this show on the road.”

They chattered as they filled bowls and collected their drinks. Shay grabbed a chair beside Rachel who blushed when the DA smiled at her.

*She has no idea how gorgeous she is,* Shay thought. She wondered how anyone could harm a woman as magnificent as Rachel. She also wondered if Rachel was married to Baird because she preferred men.

“It looks like the gathering of the Fantastic Five is complete,” Hope declared as she clicked the play icon to begin the video. Everyone watched in silence as Baird Lancaster tried to bully his way out of the restaurant.

“I checked with the restaurant owner’s daughter, and she said Baird hasn’t paid his bill and won’t return their phone calls,” Ensley informed them as the video ended.



“Tell her to file a complaint with the police department,” Monty advised.

“They will just blow her off,” Ensley replied. “You know they are too busy fighting serious crime to bother with an unpaid dinner tab.”

Monty handed Ensley her business card. “Have her contact me. I promise someone will follow up on the case if her father is willing to press charges.”

## CHAPTER 9

Baird was livid when he finished watching the pathetic excuse for a news show. He had never heard of *The Flynn Factor* until his father texted him the link to it. He inhaled deeply as his father's face appeared on his phone. He dreaded the conversation they were about to have.

"Are you crazy?" David Lancaster screamed into the phone when his son answered. "If you must screw around with a prostitute, at least have the good sense to take her to some dark dump to dine, not the most popular restaurant in the city. I never want to see her face associated with you again. Do I make myself clear?"

"The credit card company declined the charge on my black card," Baird whined. "Did you cancel my card?"

"Hell no! Why would I do that? Have you called the card company to find out what happened? Please tell me you have made things right with the restaurant. We meet other important people there all the time. You can't afford to be refused service. And get rid of the prostitute."

"I'll take care of everything. Don't worry." Baird disconnected the call and pulled his wallet from his pocket.

He called the credit card company and asked for customer service. He asked why his card had been declined.

"We never decline a black card, sir" the service representative said. May I have your card number and the transaction date?

Baird provided the information she needed and waited.

"I don't show a refusal on your record. I don't even show any attempts to use it on that date. There must have been a glitch in our system, sir. I am so sorry."

"I need your name and a direct line to you," Baird demanded. "I'm going to return to the restaurant and pay the bill. If I have a problem, I will call you."

“I will be happy to assist you in any way I can,” the woman assured him providing the information he requested.

Baird’s phone rang and he let it go to voicemail. The message from Kitty was short and sweet. “Your Kitty needs some stroking,” the prostitute drawled. “You need to come take care of this pussy cat.”

He decided to pay Kitty a visit on his way to The Stock and Bond. He would have one last romp with her then tell her they were over. He knew his father was right. He was too well known to be consorting with prostitutes right now. He wondered where Rachel was. She had run from the house after he hit her. Maybe he hit her more than once. He couldn’t remember. *Probably hiding at her parents.*

He grabbed his checkbook just in case his card was declined again.

##

As he drove to Kitty’s apartment, Baird wondered who had videoed him in The Stock and Bond. He hadn’t noticed anyone in the restaurant, but he was high as a kite and paying attention to Kitty.

He pulled his car into the apartment’s parking garage and dialed his wife’s phone. *She needs to come home*, he thought as the call went to voicemail. He began talking as the phone invited him to leave a message. “Rachel, I need to talk to you. I expect you home tonight. Don’t disappoint me. We have several public appearances we must make together to further my political aspirations.”

As usual Kitty met him at the door wearing only a dressing gown. “Do you want a drink?” she asked.

“No, I only want you.” He grinned as she slid the gown down her shoulders and let it drop to the floor.

##

Kitty always made him forget about everything else. He rolled off her and lay on his back, panting like a big dog. “You are something else, Kitty.”

“I hope I please you, Baird,” she murmured as she straddled him.

He shoved her off him. “We need to talk,” he gasped still trying to catch his breath.

“The four most dreaded words in the English language,” Kitty drawled. “What has Daddy decreed now?”

“He says I must stop seeing you. We are getting close to the primary and I can’t take a chance on being seen with you. It would be bad for my image.”

“So, you must be seen with your perfect society wife,” Kitty snorted.

“Yeah. Rachel is good for my reputation.”

Kitty began massaging his manhood. “Couldn’t we just be extra careful to keep me your dirty little secret. You know, avoid the public—never go out together. I’ll just be here whenever you need me.”

“You would be willing to do that for me?” Baird asked.

“As long as you pay my rent and continue giving me my generous monthly allowance, I will do anything you need. I have no qualms about being a kept woman.”

Baird laughed as he slipped between her legs. “I always know where I stand with you. You don’t play games.”

“What your Daddy doesn’t know won’t hurt us,” Kitty hummed wrapping her legs around his waist.

## CHAPTER 10

Monty pulled the popcorn from the microwave as Rachel got cold drinks from the fridge. “You will love this movie,” she said. “It is a romantic comedy.”

Rachel smiled then frowned as her cellphone announced, “Baird calling.” She let it go to voicemail then played it back so Monty could hear the message reminding her they had social commitments.

“You aren’t returning to him, are you?” Monty exclaimed. “You should file assault charges against him.”

“You know the DA won’t charge him.”

“No, but the new ADA will.” Monty replied.

“I don’t want to put Shay in harm’s way. You know what happened to the last ADA that tried to investigate him. Can you protect her?”

“I have a feeling Shay Steel can protect herself,” Monty replied. “She always wears a gun, and she has the authority to use it. She is a hundred percent accurate with both hands.”

“Even if you arrest him, the judge will release him on bail. He is dangerous, and extremely vindictive. I don’t want anyone else to pay for my bad decision to marry him.”

“Have you spoken with Shay since our viewing of *The Flynn Factor*.”

“No, I’ve been helping Hope at the library. They closed the library in Edmond and moved everything to her building. I’m helping her shelve the books properly. I don’t know what I’d do without the two of you. You make me feel safe at night and she hovers over me like a mama bird in the daytime. The two of you keep me sane.”

“Have you seen Ensley since we viewed her podcast together?”

“Oh, yes. She drops by the library at least once a day. Sometimes she brings lunch, and we eat in Hope’s office.

Hope helps her with the research for her podcast. Hope is incredibly knowledgeable. She is brilliant.”

“I have always found her to be a fountain of information,” Monty agreed with Rachel’s assessment of the perky librarian.

Monty started the movie and was unusually quiet during the video. When it ended, she turned off the television and began gathering the glasses and popcorn bowls from the coffee table.

“Is something bothering you?” Rachel inquired.

“No, not really.”

Rachel smiled. “It has always been my experience that ‘No, not really,’ means yes.”

“All the women in the world and I get a human lie detector,” Monty joked.

“Seriously, what is wrong?”

“I’m probably way out of line, but I have to ask you, are Hope and Ensley dating?”

“Oooh,” Rachel breathed. “Is that what is going on? I never suspected that Hope might prefer women. That explains why Ensley dances around her.”

“Do they go out together?” Monty reiterated.

“No, I’m certain they don’t.”

“How do you know?”

“While you are out all hours of the night keeping OKC safe, Hope and I usually go to dinner then she drops me back at your house. I’m certain she goes straight home because she always texts me that she is home safely. We watch out for each other.”

Rachel observed Monty’s shoulders relaxing and she smiled. “You like her, don’t you?”

“Very much,” Monty admitted.

“Does she know. I mean have you ever told her. Do the two of you date?”

“We attend a lot of city functions together,” Monty admitted, “but I’ve never actually asked her out on a date.”

“What makes you think she dates women?”

“She was with a woman when we met. They broke up and the woman moved to Arkansas.”

“How do you know this?”

“The woman was one of my officers. That is how I met Hope. She brought Hope to a police Christmas party.” Monty replied.

“Ah.” Rachel nodded. “How long ago was that?”

“Three years.” Monty mumbled.

“And you have never asked Hope out?” Rachel scoffed.

Monty shrugged. “She’s never given me any indication that she might want to date me. We’ve just become close friends that do things together.”

Rachel dragged her hands down her face. “Trust me, she cares for you. You are all she talks about. I’ve heard about every case you have ever solved.”

Monty blushed. “Don’t pacify me. I’m a big girl. I can back off if she is cozying up to Ensley.”

“She isn’t cozying up to Ensley, but I’m sure Ensley would like to be more than friends with Hope. Don’t wait until it is too late.”

“As long as we are baring our souls,” Monty said, “why did you marry Baird Lancaster?”

“He joined our church and seemed like a good Christian man. He was thoughtful and attentive—a real Jekyll and Hyde. The face he shows to the world is definitely a pretty mask that he wears. He is cruel and abusive.”

“You know he won’t change,” Monty said. “He will only get worse because you let him get away with it. Do you love him?”

“I thought I did, until I married him. Now, I hate him.”

“You must leave him,” Monty encouraged.

“Where would I go? My parents wouldn’t support me divorcing him. I don’t have a job. He won’t let me work.”

“You can live here as long as you need to,” Monty offered. “As you said, I am rarely home. We wouldn’t be in each other’s way.”

Rachel’s phone rang announcing a second call from Baird. “Dammit, Rachel, call me. I just spoke to your mother, and she hasn’t seen you either. If you are hiding, I will find you.”

Baird hung up and Rachel’s mother called. She answered the phone and put it on the speaker so Monty could hear what she was up against.

“Rachel, dear, this is Mom. Please call me or Baird. He is worried sick about you. I don’t know why you keep running away. He loves you.”

“Mom, I don’t run away from him. I checked myself into a hospital until I recovered from the last beating, he gave me.”

“Anyway, dear please call him and let him know where you are. He is concerned about you. Don’t let Daddy down, Rachel.”

The line went dead as Rachel raised haunted eyes to look into Monty’s eyes.

“As I said, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like.” Monty said softly.

##

Ensley’s phone rang and she recognized the phone number of The Stock and Bond. She was pleasantly surprised to hear Denny’s voice

“Hey, I wanted to thank you for the expo you did on Baird Lancaster stiffing us on his dinner check,” Denny bubbled. “He just came in and paid the bill. His card cleared.”

“That is great,” Ensley exclaimed. “I’m glad something good came out of it.”

“Dad said to invite you for a dinner on the house. We owe you.”



“Thanks, I may take you up on that. Will it be okay if I bring a date? I will be delighted to pay for her dinner.”

“Sure, just make your reservations and ask for me when you arrive. I’ll take good care of you.”

Ensley disconnected the call and sent a text message to her four friends telling them that Baird had paid his bill.

# CHAPTER 11

## Jane Doe

Jane read the text again. She wondered when Baird had paid the bill. *Too bad I can't mess with his head she thought. But I'm certain I'll have ample opportunity to drive him mad. He has no idea what I have planned for him.*

She noted on her cellphone calendar the June gubernatorial primary date. She decided she would watch him work his ass off to win the primary then when it was almost certain he would be elected governor, she would unleash the hounds of hell on him.

A text dinged into her cellphone, and she smiled as she read it. "Hey, we're all going out to dinner tonight. Unless you have someone else to celebrate Valentines Day with, please join us."

"I can't think of anyone I'd rather spend Valentines Day with," she responded. "Where should I meet you?"

"We're meeting in the library. The author of the new bestseller, *The Dead Don't Tell Secrets*, is giving a reading at the library then we are all heading to the OKC Grill for drinks and dinner."

##

Rachel relaxed as the visiting author read her new book. For the first time since her marriage to Baird she was beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel. It was fun and felt safe to be a member of the Fantastic Five. They were friends she could count on.

She didn't move as Shay's shoulder rested against hers. It felt warm and protective. The ADA had talked with her about getting a restraining order against Baird, but she knew it would be useless and only infuriate him. Still, she didn't

want to return to his house. She knew she wouldn't be safe with him.

The author concluded her reading and fans lined up to have her autograph their book. Her entourage floated around the library waiting for her.

“Are they going to dinner with us?” Rachel asked Hope.

“No, just the five of us.” Hope winked and smiled.

The five of them began putting away the cushioned folding chairs as the last book buyer left the room. Hope thanked the author for coming and walked her and her friends to the front of the library.

Rachel's phone rang as Hope's face appeared on her screen. “Get into the saferoom,” Hope commanded. “Hurry, Baird is heading into the library.”

Rachel didn't hesitate. Her stomach turned over as she ran into the room and locked the door. She watched the cameras as her friends glared at Baird.

“I was told my wife was in here,” he said loudly. “I need to pick her up and take her home.”

“She left a few minutes ago,” Hope lied as she entered the room. “I'm surprised you didn't pass her on your way in.”

Baird sauntered around the room as Hope and her friends finished straightening the reading area. He pulled a pack of Marlboros from his jacket pocket and lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply then blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

Hope pointed to the huge “No Smoking” sign on the wall behind her desk. “I must ask you to put that out. This is a no smoking area.”

He took a drag off the cigarette and grinned maliciously. “Which one of you ladies is going to make me?” he hissed.

Monty pulled back her blazer exposing her badge and gun. “I will if it is necessary,” she growled.

Baird glared at her as he ground out his cigarette into the surface of Hope's mahogany desk. “You really should keep an ashtray on your desk, dear.”

“You need to leave before I arrest you for destroying city property,” Monty moved toward him hoping he would give her an excuse to pistol whip him.

He held up his hands as he backed away from her. “I’m leaving. If any of you see my wife, tell her I’m looking for her. The poll-watch party begins in the morning, and I need her by my side. I will win by a landside and want her to stand by me when I give my humble thank you speech?”

Hope and Monty followed him to the front door and locked it behind him. “Nothing would please me more than jailing that clown and throwing away the key,” Monty said.

Hope nodded. “I am so thankful you are here. You were magnificent. I loved the way you stood up to him.”

“As did you.” Monty laughed. “And you’re a little thing without a gun or a badge. That took true courage.”

They returned to the main room and knocked on the saferoom door. “You can come out,” Monty declared.

Rachel slowly opened the door. “I am so sorry to put all of you in danger,” she sobbed. “I feel so cowardly.”

Shay slipped her arm around Rachel’s shoulders. “Nonsense. Everyone is fine and that brute is off to bully someone else.”

“He may be sitting in front of the building waiting to catch us leaving,” Rachel commented.

“He can spend the night there,” Hope snickered. “We’re taking the service elevator to the parking garage that opens onto the street two blocks away.”

Everyone laughed as Hope dimmed the library lights and set the alarm. Shay hugged Rachel’s shoulders then stepped away from her.

“There is safety in numbers, Monty noted. “Let’s all pile into my suburban. The windows are tinted black so no one can see inside. If Baird is watching for us, he will be looking for more than one vehicle.”

“Do all law enforcement officers think like criminals,” Hope teased as they pushed the button on the freight elevator.

“Just the good ones,” Monty quipped.

Rachel sandwiched between Hope and Shay as they climbed into the backseat and Ensley and Monty rode in front. Hope leaned over Shay and asked Rachel, “Are you going to show up for Baird’s watch party?”

“No, I’m going to file a restraining order against him if you will help me, Shay.”

“Of course, I will help you. I will present the order to the judge myself. I’ll pick you up from Monty’s on my way into the office in the morning. We will handle it first thing. Then I can drop you by the library. It might be nice to grab breakfast on our way in.”

“I’d like that.” Rachel snuggled into Shay’s side finding comfort in the blonde’s warm strength. She fought the desire to lean her head against Shay’s shoulder.

## CHAPTER 12

A light snow was falling as Hope pulled into the parking garage. She pulled her car into the spot marked *Librarian* and listened to the morning newswoman report that early ballots were showing Baird Lancaster was destined to be the new Governor of Oklahoma. If he won the primary, he would win the general election. His party had run the state for the past twelve years, so his win was almost guaranteed.

She turned off the engine and pulled her laptop bag into her lap. She had a nagging headache. *We should not have partied so hard last night, she thought. But it was the nicest Valentines Day I've experienced in a long time.*

She groaned as the service elevator jerked to a stop on the main floor of the library. She was still furious that rat bastard Baird Lancaster had marred the surface of her new desk with his cigarette. *He belongs in a cage not the governor's office, she thought.*

She unlocked the library doors, disarmed the alarm, and turned on all the lights in the cavernous room. The lights made the library look warm and welcoming but in the dark, it was cold and ominous. She walked to the storeroom to get a dust cloth and furniture polish. *Maybe I can rub out the burned place on my desk.* She carefully scooped Baird's cigarette into a Ziplock baggie just in case Monty needed it for anything. She dropped the baggie into her lap drawer.

Hope smiled as a teacher brought her class into her domain. She loved it when educators taught their students how to use the library. She frowned when she thought about the way history was constantly rewritten on the internet to please whatever political party was in control of the government. Printed books were the only true source of factual history.

A fashionably dressed woman who looked like an older version of Rachel Lancaster entered the library and looked around as if searching for someone.

“May I help you.” Hope smiled as she approached the woman.

“I was told my daughter works here,” the woman nervously replied.

“I have several employees,” Hope noted. “What is your daughter’s name?”

The woman fidgeted with the handle of her purse. “Rachel Lancaster,” Jane Brighton replied.

“And you are?”

“Her mother, Jane Brighton. Please it is extremely important that I speak with her.”

“She isn’t here,” Hope said.

“Does she work here?” Jane insisted.

“Yes.”

“May I wait for her? I will sit at a table out of the way. You won’t even know I’m here.”

“She is taking care of personal business,” Hope informed her. “I’m not sure she will be in today. May I give her a message and have her call you?”

“I will just sit at that table in the corner and read a book,” Jane persisted.

##

“I can’t believe the process was so simple,” Rachel exclaimed as she and Shay walked from the courtroom.

“It helped that Monty smoothed the way for us,” Shay shared the credit for their success.

Rachel linked her arm through Shay’s. “Do you have a favorite breakfast place?”

“Not really,” Shay answered. “I’ve only been here a short time. I haven’t staked out favorite places yet.”

“There is a family-owned restaurant about two blocks from the library. The Brunch House, they have the best breakfast in town and their coffee is beyond wonderful.”

“Sounds like the place I’ve been searching for,” Shay agreed.

Snow had covered Shay’s vehicle, and she brushed the white layer from the window with her gloved hand before opening Rachel’s door. She quickly started the car and cranked up the heater. “It will warm up in a minute,” she promised.

They rode in silence to the Brunch House, each of them keeping their thoughts to themselves.

##

“This is nice,” Shay commented as she looked around the restaurant. “It is pristine. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a restaurant so clean.”

“It is always this way,” Rachel assured her.

They ordered coffee and the Bunch House Breakfast. Shay addressed the elephant in the booth with them. “Why are you so quiet?”

“I am wondering if I did the right thing. Baird will go ballistic when they serve him the restraining order.”

“Are you going to divorce him?” Shay asked.

“Yes. But he will go after anyone he finds out helped me. I’m concerned about you and Monty.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Shay assured her. “We have dealt with much worse than Baird Lancaster. Let’s enjoy our breakfast then head to the library. You know Hope is dying to find out what happened in court.”

“I’ll bet you a dollar that Monty has already told her,” Rachel predicted.

“I’d be a fool to take that bet.” Shay laughed.

“May I ask you a personal question?” Rachel said softly.

“Sure, as long as you will understand if I don’t answer it.”



“Fair enough.” Rachel shrugged. “Are Monty and Hope dating?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Shay answered. “Why do you ask?”

“They constantly flirt with each other.”

“Both of them are extremely attractive,” Shay pointed out. “I don’t know about their sexual preferences.”

Rachel nodded. “What is yours?”

“I’ve been too busy with my career and my goals in life to give that question much thought,” Shay replied. “Since you married Baird, I’m assuming you prefer men.”

“Not really.” Rachel held her gaze for a long time as if she wanted to say more, then looked away.

As they finished their breakfast, Shay’s phone announced a call from Hope. “Good morning,” she answered cheerfully then frowned as she listened to Hope.

“Shay, are you with Rachel?”

“Yes, we just finished breakfast and are heading your way now.”

“She should know her mother is here wanting to talk to her.” Hope informed her.

“Ah, okay. I’ll text you and let you know what she is going to do.”

Shay disconnected the call and gave Rachel the information. Rachel inhaled deeply and pulled back her shoulders. “I must go face the dragon,” the brunette muttered.

“I will be right beside you,” Shay assured her.

Rachel placed her hand on top of Shay’s. “Thank you for all your support. It means a lot to me.”

Shay didn’t move. She was surprised at the warmth spreading through her body generated by the touch of Rachel’s hand.

## CHAPTER 13

Hope put on her headphones and watched her desktop monitor as the primary election results flashed across the bottom of the news program. Baird was leading by a large margin.

Her cellphone flashed calling her attention to a text from Shay. “We are in the parking garage. Will be there soon.”

Hope removed her headset and prepared herself for the meeting between Rachel and her mother. She sent a quick text to Monty. She always felt safer when the Lieutenant was present.

Jane Lancaster stood as her daughter entered the room. She briefly glanced at the beautiful woman beside her. “Darling, I’ve been waiting all morning for you. Baird insisted that I bring you to the campaign headquarters so you can be there when they announce that he has won the primary and will officially be running for governor.”

“Mother, it is good to see you,” Rachel hugged her mother then backed away from her to stand beside Shay before announcing, “I am not going to the campaign headquarters. I am tired of this charade and am going to divorce Baird.”

Jane Brighton staggered and grabbed the corner of the desk to keep from falling. Shay shoved a chair behind her and gently guided her into the seat. Rachel didn’t move, she was used to her mother’s theatrics.

Hope brought Jane a cup of water. She slowly sipped the water watching her daughter through squinted eyes. “Baird needs you at his side,” Jane insisted.

“Mrs. Brighton, I am Assistant District Attorney Shay Steel, the judge has issued a restraining order on Baird Lancaster. He cannot make any contact with your daughter.”

Jane clutched at her heart and sucked air as if she would faint. Rachel grabbed Shay's arm. "She is okay. That is her signature move when things don't go to suit her."

Jane glared at her daughter. "Rachel, you know how important this is to Daddy and me."

"Yes, it is more important than my life," Rachel scoffed.

"Where is your lady's restroom?" Jane asked Hope.

Hope gestured to a door on the far side of the room and Jane stomped toward it. When she returned she was in a better mood and smiled at everyone.

"I'm sorry you had to witness our little family tête-à-tête. We don't normally air our grievances in public."

"Are you believing that scoundrel Lancaster is killing it in the polls?" Ensley announced as she entered the library.

"Ens, this is Rachel's mother Jane Brighton," Hope made the introductions hoping to stop Ensley's diatribe.

Ensley smiled at Jane, not sure if she should continue her critical discourse about Baird. She ambled toward Hope and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "What's going on?"

"Rachel's mother is trying to make her go to Baird's campaign headquarters and stand at the podium with him when he accepts the party's nomination for governor."

Jane sat back down in her chair. "I'll just wait here until you are ready to go," she smiled.

"Mother, I'm not going with you." Rachel huffed in exasperation.

"No, you will go with me," Baird declared as he swaggered into the room.

"It's getting crowded in here," Ensley mumbled.

Baird reached for Rachel's arm, but Shay pushed his hand away. "I don't think she wants to go with you."

"Who asked you?" He snarled. "Whoever you are, this is none of your business."

"How convenient is this?" Monty strode into the room holding out a manilla envelope toward Baird. "Baird Lancaster I am serving you. This is a restraining order for

you to stay away from Rachel Lancaster. If you try to talk to her or get within a thousand feet of her, you will be arrested and placed in jail. Do you understand?"

Baird pulled the order from the envelope, glanced at it, then threw it on the floor and stomped it. "Do you have any idea who I am?" He snarled as he got into Monty's face.

In one quick move Monty twisted his arm behind his back and handcuffing it as she pulled his other arm behind him and snapped the cuffs closed on it. "You are a man I am arresting." She motioned for two uniform officers to take the man to jail.

Jane began to wail as Baird was hauled away. "This is awful. How can you do this to your own husband?" She yelled at Rachel then ran from the room screaming, "Don't worry Baird, I'm calling your father."

"I got it all," Ensley grinned as she previewed her video on her cellphone. "This is going to be great on my podcast. I'm going to produce it right now so it can air before the polls close. Do you all want to meet at the OKC Grill around eight?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Monty, I'm so glad you showed up when you did," Shay said.

"Hope sent me a text to come to the library," Monty explained smiling at the petite brunette. "I'd better get back to the office. I'm sure all hell is breaking loose, and I'll hear about it." She picked up the restraining order by the corner noting that it had Baird's shoe print in the middle of it. She carefully slid it back into the envelope. "His fingerprints on the order are as good as his signature," she said.

Shay opened her lap drawer and pulled out the baggie containing Baird's cigarette. "Do you need this cigarette Baird ground into my desk?"

"No, I have all I need to justify arresting him," Monty replied as Hope dropped the baggie back into the drawer.

## CHAPTER 14

Shay was the first to arrive at the OKC Grill. She claimed a semi-circular booth in the corner where the five of them could talk without screaming over the other customers. Monty joined her.

“Where are the girls?” Shay asked.”

“Hope just texted me. They are on their way.” She turned her attention to the large television on the wall. “I’ll be darn.”

Shay followed Monty’s gaze and watched as the nation’s top cable news show began running Ensley’s podcast of the fiasco in the library and followed it with the podcast of Baird and Kitty Rea in *The Stock and Bond*. They switched to a live interview with their friend. The newswoman asked Ensley about the restraining order.

“I honestly don’t know the situation,” Ensley replied. “You will have to contact Lieutenant Montgomery Masters for the details.”

“Thanks for throwing me under the bus, Ensley,” Monty mumbled into her drink.

“I guess they will be interviewing you next,” Shay forecasted.

“No, that’s the job of our public relations department. They will give their usual reply, no comment. At least I’ll be off the hook.”

Wolf whistles and offers of free drinks alerted them that Hope and Rachel had arrived. “Men can be so uncouth,” Shay grumped as Hope slid into the booth beside her.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Hope giggled. “It is kinda’ flattering to know others notice you in a crowd.” She cut her eyes toward Monty and wrinkled her nose.

Shay laughed. “You truly are cute, and you know it.”

“Yes, I do,” Hope grinned. “So, are you going to offer me a drink?”

A server placed Hope's favorite drink in front of her and she raised her brows questioningly. "I ordered it when you walked through the door," Monty explained.

"Why don't you trade places with me, Shay," Hope said sliding out of the booth so Shay could leave her place beside Monty. Shay walked to the other side and sat down beside Rachel.

"This is where I want to be anyway," she said softly to Rachel.

The brunette slid her hand onto Shay's thigh igniting the fire that was smoldering in the blonde.

"I hope the rest of your day was more pleasant than this morning," Shay said fighting the urge to lean over and kiss Rachel.

"It had to get better," Rachel admitted. "It was nice and quiet." Her cellphone rang and she let it go to voicemail. "My father. He is furious with me. He has left me several texts about how destitute he and mother will be because of me."

Shay placed her hand on top of Rachel's as it continued resting on her leg. "I am so sorry you are going through this."

"It is nice to have friends. The four of you make it easier. Where is Ensley?"

Shay gestured toward the television as Ensley's video began. Rachel clutched Shay's leg as she watched her drama payout on the evening news for the world to see.

"I'm betting a lot of voters are wishing they could get a do over about now," Shay forecasted.

"Ensley just texted," Hope announced. "She is on her way."

"Good, I am starving," Monty said. "Anyone want an appetizer while we wait for Ensley?"

"I'm in," Shay replied pulling the menu in front of them. "What would you like?"

"Stuffed mushrooms," Rachel said.

The TV scene switched to Baird's campaign headquarters where reporters were trying to grill him about the prostitute and the scene in the library. Ensley slid into the booth beside Hope. "It looks like I've opened a giant can of worms for the man who would be governor." She flashed a grin.

"You should be immensely pleased with yourself, Hope declared. "You have single handedly taken down the Lancaster crime family."

"It sounds ominous when you put it that way," Ensley replied. "After all, he is still walking around a free man."

"His attorney got him out on bail around 4:30 p.m." Monty volunteered. "He will probably win the primary and find some way to clear his name before the general election."

They watched the news, dined, and drank more than they should have. "I hate to be a party pooper," Monty said, "but I've got to be in a meeting with the captain at 7:00 a.m. tomorrow."

"Wow! Why so early," Hope slurred leaning heavily against the auburn-haired beauty.

"So, he can chew my rear off before the rest of the troops get to work." Monty mumbled.

"I'm sorry," Hope snuggled closer to her. "I shouldn't have called you."

"Nonsense don't ever hesitate to call me when you are in danger. Speaking of danger, I don't think you should be driving tonight. You are a little drunk."

"I'm a lotta' drunk." Hope giggled. "You should drive me home."

"Go ahead," Rachel encouraged Monty, "Shay can drive me to your house."

"You really do need to get your own car," Hope suggested. "I know Baird has all your finances tied up, but we can help you get a lease car to use until all this mess settles down."

“I will try to do that this weekend,” Rachel agreed. “I am so appreciative to you for the job in the library.”

“You are just what I needed,” Hope declared. “You are the perfect person for the finance manager of the library. The best part is you help shelve books after you finish your accounting duties. I’ve had two before you and both informed me that shelving books was not in their job description.”

Monty laughed. “I’m sure that is why they no longer work for you.”

“You’ve got that right, babe,” Hope hugged Monty’s arm.

Monty blushed and looked down. “I should get you home.”

Ensley tossed back the rest of her drink and stood. “I’m off to put together tomorrow’s podcast,” she said, tossing more than enough cash onto the table to cover her share of the bill.

Shay and Rachel ordered coffee and stayed to watch the coverage of the primary until the newscasters called the contest for Baird.

##

Baird Lancaster motioned for his staff to follow him on stage as he made his acceptance speech and thanked everyone for all their hard work.

“Where is your wife,” a television cameraman yelled from the crowd and Baird ignored him.

“Who is Kitty Ray,” a news woman screamed.

Baird refused to acknowledge them and quickly left the stage. His campaign manager took over the microphone as Baird sneaked out the back door. He didn’t want to talk to his father. He knew David was furious with him. Damn, that stupid podcast woman. He needed a good stiff drink and Kitty’s mouth on him.



He touched his key fob to unlock his car door as a grip of iron wrapped around his bicep. “Where are you going?” David Lancaster asked his son.

“Home,” Baird choked.

“That podcaster made a fool of you tonight,” David noted. “What’s this about Rachel getting a restraining order against you? Are you two separated. Where is she living?”

Baird slumped against the fender of his care. “I hit her, and she put a restraining order against me,” he admitted. “She wants a divorce. I don’t know where she is staying. She is working at the public library.”

“You know the video of you fondling that prostitute and having a row with The Stock and Bond owner will be all over the news and internet tomorrow along with the announcement of your primary victory. Couple that with the policewoman giving you the restraining order and you can kiss your political career goodbye. I don’t mind telling you that you are a total disappointment to me and your mother.”

“What do you want me to do?” Baird asked.

“Did you get rid of the prostitute?”

“Yes.” Baird lied.

“You must make things right with Rachel. She is the best thing you have going for you. You are such a fool. I don’t blame her for leaving you. If you ever lay a hand on her again, I will kill you myself. And for God’s sake stay away from that podcaster.” David turned on his heel and walked away.

Baird got into his Mercedes and drove to Kitty’s apartment. She greeted him with open arms and tolerated his rough lovemaking as he worked off the tensions and disappointments of the day.

“You’re going to be governor,” she told him as he lay panting beside her. “No one can stop you now.”

Baird grunted, to spent to talk. She walked to the kitchen and brought him back a bottle of cold water. He gulped it down then leaned back against the headboard of the bed.

“Dad says I must stop seeing you,” Baird mumbled.

“Why? What have I done?”

“You’re a known prostitute.”

“I haven’t been with anyone but you for the past three years,” Kitty reminded him.

“I know, but before me you were with several of Dad’s friends. I must stay away from you, or he will refuse to finance my campaign. I don’t like it any more than you do.”

Kitty was furious that he would dump her just because his old man told him to. “He won’t keep you warm on a cold night,” she screamed. “You will regret this.”

It was after midnight when he finished with Kitty.

## CHAPTER 15

Monty pulled the plastic sheet from the victim's face. "Jesus, her face looks like it has been run through a meat grinder," she exclaimed. "Do we know who she is?"

"I ran her fingerprints on the mobile biometrics scanner," Medical Examiner Patricia (Pattie) Chambers replied. "Her name is Kitty Ray."

Monty frowned. "Is she that prostitute involved with Baird Lancaster?"

"Yeah," Pattie affirmed. "The apartment super is in the other room. He said Baird pays her rent every month."

Monty shook her head. "Whatever Kitty Ray was, she didn't deserve to die like this."

"My money's on Baird," Pattie commented. "I'll run every fluid and print test I have. The bedroom is covered in semen and blood. There will be tons of evidence there. She has some bruises developing on her upper arms. I'm betting money that Baird's fingerprints will be all over her."

"Can you give me a good guess at the time of death?" Monty asked.

"Between 2:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. when her maid came to clean the apartment. The super said Baird buzzed in around midnight, but he has no idea when he left."

"She had a maid?" Monty repeated.

"Yeah, the super said Baird took real good care of Kitty."

"Until he didn't," Monty grumbled. "Has the news media gotten hold of this yet?"

"No, We have the maid in an empty apartment the super let us use. I can hold her until you interview her if you want me to."

"I noticed cameras in the hallway. Do they work?"

"No, the super said Baird disconnected them." Patty said.

“Of course he did.” Monty flipped her notebook closed. “I’m going to have Sergeant Bobby Randle take over the case. I’m too close to it. I’ve had Baird’s wife in protective custody since he beat her so badly she ended up in the hospital.”

“I noticed she wasn’t on the stage with him last night when he announced his win in the primaries.” Pattie motioned for her assistant to remove Kitty’s body. “I’ll give you a call and fax over my findings as soon as possible.”

“Do everything you can to keep this out of the news cycle until we arrest Baird,” Monty requested. “I’m positive you will have his semen. Right now, that is all I need.”

##

Monty rapped her knuckles on the open door of Shay Steel’s office. “Gotta minute?”

Shay grinned. “For you, always.”

Monty closed the door behind her and slumped down in the chair across from Shay. “Someone brutally murdered Baird Lancaster’s girlfriend last night.”

“Kitty Ray?” Shay raised a perfectly arched brow.

“Yep.”

“Please tell me Baird did it?” Shay pleaded.

“It looks that way. I won’t know until I get Pattie Chambers’ final report. I’ve turned the case over to Sergeant Bobby Randle. He will pick him up for questioning as a person of interest.”

“Does Rachel know?”

“Not yet. I’ll go to the library when I leave here. I wanted to give you a heads up first.”

“I appreciate that. May I accompany you to the library?” Shay asked.

“Sure. Why don’t we pick up Hope and Rachel and go to lunch. I haven’t even had a cup of coffee today.”

Shay nodded then advised her secretary that she was going to lunch while Monty called Hope.

##

Monty pulled her sedan to the curb in front of the library. Hope and Rachel hopped into the car laughing and talking.

“What’s so funny?” Monty asked as Hope settled into the front passenger’s seat.

“Ensley just called and said the police are looking for Baird,” Hope announced.

Shay laced her fingers through Rachel’s and pulled her hand into her lap. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“Is it true?” Rachel gasped. “What did he do?”

“His favorite pastime with women,” Monty answered. “Only this time it got out of hand and Kitty Ray is dead.”

“How did Ensley find out about it?” Monty scowled. “We are supposed to be keeping it quiet until we have Baird in custody.”

“She has spies in all branches of the government,” Hope proclaimed. “She is well connected.”

“Um, that isn’t what I wanted to hear,” Monty mumbled.

“Are you working the case?” Hope asked.

“Are you one of Ensley’s spies?” Monty countered.

Hope wrinkled her nose in that maddening, but loveable way and shrugged. “I would never share information you gave me. You know that.”

Monty nodded. “I know. This case is making me paranoid. It seems Ensley is always one step ahead of us.”

“She does hate Baird.” Rachel agreed.

“Everyone who know Baird well, hates him,” Shay defended their friend.

“Anyway, she is joining us at the restaurant,” Hope announced.