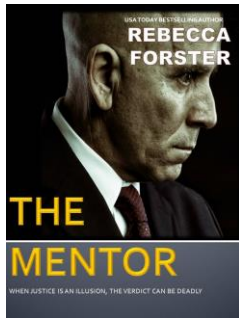


THE MENTOR



Novice federal prosecutor, Lauren Kingsley, has just been handed the opportunity of a lifetime - prosecuting a militia terrorist responsible for the devastating bombing of an IRS building. To Lauren, this case is her chance to prove to her longtime friend and mentor, Judge Wilson Caufeld, that she's got what it takes to succeed in the high-stakes world of criminal justice. But when Caufeld is found shot to death, Lauren is suddenly in over her head, trapped in a maze of conspiracy, corruption, and secrets leading right up to the U.S. Supreme Court. Caught in the middle of a fierce tug-of-war between an FBI agent with his own agenda and a colleague whose loyalty is questionable, Lauren must decide who she can trust before she becomes the next mark of a vicious killer.

PREVIEW CHAPTER

Prologue

"Girlfriend, it is time to go!"

She talked to herself, gripped the edge of her chair and looked around the empty office. Deserted desks, silent phones, blinds closed in front and something going on behind the emergency exit to the alley were making her jumpy. Outside wasn't going to be much better than in, but outside, in front, she'd see that boyfriend of hers coming. She would jump in that car and they would hightail it out of downtown before he had time to stop. If he ever came of course.

She looked at her watch, the sixth time since she'd heard the last skittery noises in that alley, twice since she first heard voices. Barely ten minutes had passed and now the urgent whispers were starting again. That's when she decided; outside was where she wanted to go.

Quietly she eased her desk drawer out and got her purse. Keeping her eye on the closed, locked and bolted back door she hunkered down and checked the wall clock. Eight-thirteen. Slowly she raised her wrist. Eight-fifteen by her watch. On alert under the overhead lights that made everyone feel sickly, she froze and listened hard. Suddenly there was silence. *Oh, Lord above.*

Holding her purse close, she sidestepped across the floor and pushed through the little gate that separated the IRS workers from a generally crazed public. How a little swinging gate was going to protect any of them was beyond her. But now that gate was her ticket to freedom. She backed through it, bumped up against the door, groped with her free hand and pushed the lever. It opened only to slam shut and lock behind her as she stumbled out into the surprisingly cool night.

"Hey. Hey."

She shrieked, spun around and dropped her purse. Oh, God! A drunken bum had touched her. She shivered and snatched up her purse. Shaking, she clutched it to her breast, never taking her eyes off his milky right eye and the left that looked everywhere except at her. When he shuffled on, her shoulders slumped. Her looks-like-silk rayon dress was damp under the arms. It had been a bum, back there behind the building. A stupid bum scaring the living daylights out of her. How goddamn stupid could she be? Now she was stuck out here in the dark, alone on an all-but-deserted street. A sitting duck. She was beginning to hate her boyfriend, her job and Los Angeles in that order. She was starting

to cry as she prayed in her head. *Sweet Jesus please let it be eight-thirty.* She cocked her wrist to check the time once more but, to her amazement, her watch was gone.

In that split second of surprise, she heard the deafening explosion behind her and felt the hot-cold sear of flame at her back. Her looks-like-silk-rayon dress melted against skin that was already curling away from the bone. In a blink she was caught in a maelstrom of wood and glass; suddenly she was starring in a heavy-metal music video, a big budget disaster movie without benefit of lights and cameras. And, in that seemingly endless second before a shard of glass pierced her throat and another took off half her scalp, there was time to consider something else. Her watch wasn't the only thing that was missing—so was her hand.

Someone pushed him, kind of slapped him on the back. He turned all the way around when that happened. He heard the roar of the explosion at the same time and half lost his balance because the earth bucked beneath him. He held his hands up against the wave of junk that rolled his way and squinted at the blaze of fire leaping out of the building a block behind. When he could, he looked to see who had tried to get his attention—like anyone needed to tell him that all hell had broken loose—but no one was there.

At his feet there was a hand with nobody attached. Lord above, this was it. Fire, brimstone and body parts. The dead were rising, the world was ending. Falling to his knees, clasping his hands over his chest, the drunken bum raised his face and waited for the ground to open and spew forth wrathful spirits from its evil molten bowels. Lord in heaven. When none of that happened he focused his milky white eye on a Chevy Camaro blowing down the street, the driver at the wheel looking damned surprised. That's when he heard the squeal of tires behind him and looked to see a pickup cutting through the night like a bat out of hell.

Damn right.

Hell.

Officer Readmore belched and reached inside his car for the radio. Half the restaurant had followed him to check out what was happening.

He looked cool, so no one could tell, but Jimmy Readmore was thrilled at the sight of the fire a mile away. He was sick of this beat. L.A. downtown from two to midnight was shit work. Readmore wished he knew what he'd done, or who he'd ticked off, to pull this kind of duty. Whoever it was still wanted him punished because the dispatcher was telling him to stay put even though half the city's fire units were on the scene.

Frustrated, he chased everyone back to their cold meals, got in his car and convinced himself that he really had better things to do anyway. Still, as he patrolled the streets, he thought about the fire. Could be a gas explosion or a bum's fire crackling out of control. Messy stuff that. There'd be bodies. Nothing worse than a burned bum. So, a bored Jimmy Readmore was chuckling about his alliteration when he noticed a blue pickup heading for the 405. Jimmy wouldn't normally have given the truck a second look, but something had run afoul of his antennae. Nothing major. Just enough to make him do a double take on the truck that was so conscientiously following the speed limit even though there wasn't another car in sight and half a city block was on fire not more than a mile away.

He turned on the lights and gave the siren a once-over. The truck picked up speed for an instant, then pulled over before Readmore could get too excited. He took inventory as he rolled up politely behind it.

Blue Chevy pickup.

California plates. Riverside dealership.

A bumper sticker: *Take Back America*. The guy was a Republican. Otherwise the truck was real, real clean. His eyes flickered to the back window. This big boy had been to the Grand Canyon. There was a gun rack in the cab but no gun. The bed was covered.

Holding his flashlight high as he approached, Officer Jimmy Readmore's boredom blew away with the cool breeze. He shined his mighty light on the driver and smiled at the handsome blond boy behind the wheel. The kid couldn't meet his eye. Jimmy bent down and scoped the passenger sitting on the other side. Same hair and eyes only this guy was fleshier. Had to be the kid's dad. He didn't have any problem focusing. Dad looked Jimmy Readmore right in the eye.

"Evening, sir. Son. Think I could get you to step out here?"

Jimmy smiled his best public-servant smile. He stepped away as the older man opened the passenger door and got out of the truck.

Officer Readmore moved back toward the truck bed, letting his eyes flicker away long enough to check it out. He lifted a corner of the bed cover.

That was his second mistake.

His first was stopping them at all.

"Turn it off."

"No." She breathed the word out along with a cloud of smoke.

"You're a pain in the ass."

"Even if I am, you need me." She never took her eyes off the television set.

"Yeah? What do I need you for?" His voice was clear as a young boy's still thrilled by the possibility of seduction rather than the inevitability of sex.

Eddie was glad her back was to him so he wouldn't see how much she adored the sound of his laugh. She swiveled her head when he stopped, her jaw slicing dark hair swinging over one eye. The other one was black as coal; the look she gave him cold as ice. She'd practiced it because he liked it. Allan grinned at her, proving her point. Eddie, he believed, was an equal-opportunity woman. Equal satisfaction, equal cravings, equally decisive and independent. That was his Eddie. Eddie, on the other hand, knew the truth.

While Allan Lassiter would never love her, he often wanted her and that meant something to Eddie Williams. She pushed the left side of her hair behind her ear, holding her cigarette away so that it wouldn't singe, but close enough so that her squint looked almost nasty. He unwound one arm from behind his head and touched her breast: small for a tall woman, naked, excellent.

"Oh, you need me to fill in when the darling of the day bores you." She took another drag and shook back her hair. She exhaled leisurely, thinking of all the nubile young things that had probably been in this bed before her. None had lasted as long as she. "You need me to convince you it isn't your fault when you can't get the one you want."

"Never happens." He laughed again and this time she was looking right at him.

Generous to a fault, Lassiter reserved his affection for himself—and maybe the old man. There had never been another man made like him: one who physically lacked for nothing yet needed so much. It was a need she understood.

"Lauren hasn't got the time of day for you," Edie reminded him flatly. He colored. Edie lowered her eyes. She hadn't meant to hit so hard, but sometimes hitting below the belt was the only way she knew how to get his attention. She covered her discomfort with something typical, a comment he would expect from her. "Lassiter, your lust is as transparent as your ambition."

"And your ambition is as unfulfilled as your libido," he shot back. That was the kind of relationship they had. That wasn't the kind Edie wanted, but there was the rub.

"I'd rather you help me take care of the ambition, Allan." She took another drag of her cigarette. This time her eyes teared. It was probably from the smoke. "I can always handle the libido on my own. Most women can, you know."

The bantering was tiring, so Edie turned away. The flickering images on television held more allure for her at the moment than even Allan. Channel Two had their cameras trained on an IRS annex that was burning downtown. It was a wonderful fire that threatened the entire shabby block. But there was even something more intriguing. Edie recognized Mark Jackson and two of his FBI cohorts, before the cameras closed in on a beautiful Asian newsreader obliterating the rest of the scene.

"...Just eight-thirty when the explosion occurred. One woman is confirmed dead, a man is severely injured and in critical condition at USC Medical Center. Fire units were on the scene within minutes and it appears that they have the fire under control; A fire department spokesperson refused to comment on how long it will take to determine the cause of the explosion, but speculation is running high that this might, indeed, be linked to the rash of bombings that have plagued government offices across the country in the last eighteen months. Witnesses say..."

The set went black. Edie's prayers had been answered. Here was the key to her quite modest ambition. She tried not to think that this opportunity would lead to any spectacular change in her position, for to do so would be to tempt fate. She'd learned a long time ago you only fooled with Fate when it was a sure thing she would take the bait.

Edie tossed the remote on the bedside table and leaned after it. Her cigarette was stubbed in a crystal ashtray she liked to think Allan kept there for her. The brass lamp was switched off. She climbed atop Allan Lassiter. The room was warm and her imagination on fire. He was ready and she lowered herself carefully before angling her body over his.

In the dark of Allan Lassiter's immense condominium high above Century City, Edie Williams, Chief of Special Prosecutions for the U.S. Attorney's Office of Los Angeles, whispered.

"You know what I want?" She lowered her head toward his chest, lips parted. Allan sighed beneath her, his hands roaming over her back. He didn't bother to ask what it was she wanted. Edie answered anyway.

"I want just a little more than I've got."

Lauren Kingsley was foaming at the mouth. She brushed her teeth the same way she talked: with vitality, style and a great sense that she knew exactly what she was doing. Tonight she walked and talked while she brushed her teeth so that the words were garbled and the

toothpaste foamed into big, blue gel bubbles. She went back and forth between her bedroom and bathroom practicing her closing arguments.

"Forgery is the altering ..." a quick up-and-down on those two front teeth, "... legally significant instrument..." to the back teeth, "... intent to defraud ... no one disputes ... the defendant must ..." a final flourish along the gums, "Your Honor!"

She paused in the bathroom doorway, her toothbrush resting on a molar as she considered the intent, content and inflection of the argument. All of it was passable, but passable wasn't good enough. Her argument needed to be perfect. Perfect. Up and down that brush went as she envisioned the word perfection in her mind. And while Lauren was considering just how to reach such a goal she couldn't help but notice the news on the television. In the dark bedroom it flickered like a nickelodeon. Fire, cops and more fire. The sound was down but she knew there weren't many script choices. The anchor was either lamenting the fact that they didn't have any details, was trying to make up details or was speculating that a downtown fire was just a prelude to a riot that would tear the city apart. Of course, everyone would find out in the morning that the fire was nothing more than a faulty electrical connection. A drop of blue foamy gel falling at her feet reminded Lauren that she had bigger things to worry about.

She rushed to the bathroom and turned on the water. Bending over the sink, she rinsed her mouth. Lauren had a cup but couldn't quite remember where she'd put it—probably in the dishwasher waiting until there were enough dishes to actually run a load. She was too busy to find it, too busy to cook, too busy doing what she'd been called to do. It didn't matter that she hadn't named this wondrous goal. It was personal, it was out there, it was waiting for her and she'd know what to do when the time came.

Raising her head, Lauren looked at herself just long enough to see that everything that needed to be done was done. She turned off the bathroom light, cleaned the toothpaste off the carpet, slipped off her watch and put it on the bedside table as she climbed under the down comforter and turned on her side. The television still flickered, so one of Lauren's arms snaked out, grabbed the remote and shut it off. She missed the shot that Edie had seen. Lauren didn't know that the FBI was on the scene or that the destroyed building was an IRS annex. That would have given her pause. But now it was dark, and the apartment was silent save for the sound of Lauren Kingsley's voice. She practiced her closing arguments over again not knowing that what she was really doing was talking herself to sleep, finding elusive comfort in the sound of her own voice.

BUY NOW

www.RebeccaForster.com