

CHAPTER 1

"If I knew he were dead, maybe then I could let go." Sabre Brown's fingers slid up and down the side of her Styrofoam cup as she and her best friend, Bob, walked away from the coffee cart in front of the Juvenile Division of the San Diego Superior Court.

He put his arm around her tiny waist and pulled her closer to him. "I know how much you miss him."

"Not knowing is the worst part. You'd think after five years, I'd quit expecting him to return." She sighed and her voice softened. "The last time I talked to him, he called to wish me a happy birthday. He called me the night before because his plane was leaving early in the morning and he didn't want to wake me. I teased him about growing up, since waking me in the middle of the night would generally bring him great pleasure."

They stood in silence for a moment. Sabre turned to Bob. "You're a lot like him, you know . . . the same crazy sense of humor, only you're less of a prankster. Once he came to my office with silly putty or something hanging out of his nose, like a booger." Sabre swallowed and cleared her throat. "I don't know what I'd have done without you the past few years. You make it a little easier, you know." She glanced at her watch.

"We have a few minutes yet before the vultures start to circle," Bob said. "By the way, Happy Birthday."

She attempted a smile. "You remembered."

"Sure, kid. I couldn't forget such an important day."

"I wish I could."

"I know." He slipped his arm in hers. "We better get into court." They walked arm in arm past the metal detector just as a teenage boy placed his belt on the conveyor, grabbing for his baggy pants as they fell to his knees, displaying his Taz boxer shorts and his warthog tattoo. They chuckled as they entered the crowded hallway.

"I need to talk to my 'methamphetamine gazelle' over there." Bob nodded his head toward a woman with stringy, uncombed hair framing a face with skin spread thinly over her bones. Her missing teeth added a slight whistle to her high pitched voice. She paced up and down the short hallway, rubbing her hands together and complaining to anyone who would listen.

Sabre continued through the crowd in her well-pressed suit, J. Garcia tie, and Ariat shoes past one client after another, each with his or her own sad tale. Gang members, druggies of all ages, and men and women charged with all forms of child abuse filled the halls, many of them touched by poverty, others from gated communities. From wherever they hailed, the stories remained the same; only the package differed.

She spotted a client about twenty feet ahead in a clown suit. Her stomach gave a queasy twinge when she saw him. He had the perfect profession for his pedophilia and he flaunted it by wearing his clown costume whenever he came to court, red nose and all. *Not today*, she thought. Sabre squeezed her petite body through the crowd, ducked between two bikers, avoided eye contact with the clown, and stepped into a courtroom where he couldn't follow.

By 11:30 a.m., Sabre had completed her morning calendar. As she stepped out into the hallway, she heard Bob call from across the room. "Hey, Sobs. Come here."

Sobs, his nickname for her, came from Sabre Orin Brown. He had a lot of fun with her initials. When he wasn't calling her Sobs, he called her his little S.O.B. They had started working at juvenile court about the same time and had had their first trial together. Neither of them knew exactly what they were doing, but together they figured it out.

Their first case had involved a five-year-old, who had what appeared to be five cigarette burns evenly placed around one of her ankles. Sabre represented the mother and Bob the father. The

parents, adamant they had not hurt their little girl, could not offer good explanations for the little round, infected areas. The attorneys were unable to reconcile the fact that the burns were so evenly placed on the ankle. Neither the attorneys nor the judge bought the testimony from a medical expert who stated a five-year-old child could hold still for five perfectly placed cigarette burns, but no other explanation had been proffered.

After some serious research and investigation and a little luck, Bob found an article about flea bites and how the fleas get under elastic and leave a row of bites which are often in a perfect line. The little girl had been playing in a sandbox and had been wearing anklets with tight elastic at the top. With some help from a couple of medical professionals, he determined fleas had been the most likely cause of the infected area, not cigarette burns. The little girl had scratched them to the point of infection.

They had won their first jurisdictional case in juvenile court, a difficult feat even for a seasoned attorney, as they soon discovered. That began a beautiful friendship and their reign at "Kiddie Court." There had never been anything romantic between them. He remained her best friend and confidante. They enjoyed each other's company and completely trusted one another. Inseparable at court, and on the rare occasion when Sabre socialized, she usually did it with Bob and his wife, Marilee.

Sabre walked toward Bob, standing near the appointment desk. "Hi, honey. What's up?"

"The clerk has a pretty nasty case—an eight-month-old baby with broken ribs, a broken femur, and a subdural hematoma. She's tried to give the case away, but no one will take it. She said if we take it, she'll give us one of those easy domestic violence cases," Bob said.

"But I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry."

"All right, let's get it over with. I have the cards."

Sabre removed three playing cards from her briefcase: a king, a queen, and a joker. "We don't need the joker. Public Defender has the minor."

Sabre put the joker back, shuffled the king and queen, and laid them face down on the table. Bob reached down, drew a card, and turned over the queen. "Sorry, Sobs, it looks like you got the dad. From what I've read, he's the most likely perpetrator."

"I'm sure he's a real peach. What do I care anyway, except it'll be more time consuming."

"Well, you can have the minors on the domestic violence case. You're better with the kids than I am anyway."

Sabre went to find her new client, the child beater. She always struggled with this type of case. She found it difficult to understand how someone could beat up an innocent little baby. *Maybe my client's not the bad guy*, although the information she'd received from Bob indicated otherwise.

She counseled her client and explained his rights and the court process. She looked at the scared, young man, who appeared so innocent, and thought how different he must have been when he used his baby as a punching bag.

After the hearing, Sabre gathered her files and went into Department Four to wait for the other attorneys on the domestic violence case. It had been an easy morning so far with mostly old review cases. Just that new domestic violence case and she could go eat.

Bob came into the courtroom. He and Sabre seated themselves at the table. Another attorney sauntered in, followed by his client, Peggy Smith, an attractive, young, pregnant woman with a bandage on the left side of her forehead. They took a seat on the right side of the table next to Sabre and Bob.

The door opened and the Public Defender entered with Gaylord Murdock, a tall man with sandy blond hair and cutting blue eyes. Murdock stared at Peggy with an intensity that made Sabre shiver. Peggy's face tightened and she squirmed in her seat, unable to tear herself away from his gaze. After about three seconds, Murdock's face softened and his lip curled up in a smile. No sign of remorse or shame emanated from him as he glided to his seat with his broad shoulders straight and

his head held high.

Sabre watched their interaction and wondered what she failed to see.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Murdock said, in a strong southern accent as he squeezed between the railing and Sabre's chair. She studied him for a moment. In spite of his obvious good manners, she perceived a hardness about him.

She thumbed through the file and read he had been born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. She hated when her calendar was so full she didn't have time to read the reports prior to the hearing. This wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last, that she had to read and listen at the same time.

"In the matter of Alexis Murdock and Jamie Smith . . ." The court officer called the last case on the morning calendar.

Sabre glanced at each page in the report to determine the most pertinent information. Her client, a ten-year-old girl named Alexis, lived with her father and Jamie, the two-year-old son of her father's pregnant girlfriend. According to the detention report, a neighbor had heard loud voices, a woman screaming, and what sounded like furniture breaking, so she called the police. When the police arrived they spoke with a very pregnant Peggy Smith, who told them her boyfriend, Gaylord Murdock, had hit her and split her head open.

As Sabre read, she heard the attorneys introduce themselves. When her turn approached, she stood up. "Attorney Sabre Brown appearing on behalf of the minors." She sat back down and continued reading the police report.

Peggy Smith is a white female, 24 years of age, light brown hair, dark brown eyes, about 5' 4" tall, weighing about 135 lbs., and approximately eight-and-one-half-months pregnant. Smith had some redness and swelling on her right eye and an inch-long laceration that was bleeding and appeared to need stitches. Smith stated her boyfriend became angry because dinner wasn't ready fast enough and he hit her in the face with his fist.

The case continued, with each attorney making statements for the record. Sabre had done this so often she had become quite adept at listening and reading at the same time. It appeared to be a typical domestic violence case. She continued reading.

We talked to the ten-year-old girl, Alexis Murdock, who said her father came home from work and he and Peggy started yelling at each other. She said her dad was real angry but he didn't hit Peggy. She fell and hit her head on the coffee table. Gaylord Murdock gave a similar version of events, but because of Smith's pregnancy, her lacerations and her earlier statements of physical violence, we took Murdock in for questioning. Officer Jacobs called an ambulance for Smith. By the time the ambulance arrived, Smith had changed her story and said she had fallen and hit her head on the coffee table. We proceeded to take Murdock downtown for questioning and the minors, Alexis and Jamie, to Jordan Receiving Home.

". . . so even though my client vehemently denies the allegations, he's willing to attend the programs the social worker is suggesting. In the interim, we'd request the court detain the child, Alexis Murdock, with her father, pending the next hearing," Mr. Murdock's attorney finished his request to the court.

Sabre took her cue. She stopped reading and responded with words she had stated so many times they rolled off her tongue void of any conscious thought. "Your Honor, I'd ask, if the court is so inclined, it only be done with my concurrence. I'd like to speak with the children and see what they have to say."

"Very well," Judge Cheney said. "The social worker has discretion to return the children to their parents under the following conditions: the criminal charges are dropped; the parents are living separately; any other criminal check comes back unblemished; and minor's attorney is in agreement with their return." He hit his gavel on the block. "That ends the morning calendar."

Before Sabre could stand up, Mr. Murdock appeared at her side waiting to pull her chair out for

her. As she rose, he stepped forward and opened the gate for her and the social worker to pass through. Sabre thanked him, though skeptical of his southern gentleman manners, something she rarely saw in southern California.

Bob and Sabre walked out of the courtroom together into the hallway. "The social worker seems to like both of the parents, especially the father. This case should settle at the next hearing with a voluntary agreement," Bob said.

"Well, I'm anxious to see what the kids have to say. I'm going over there now. We could stop at In-n-Out Burger for a quick bite on the way. Do you have anyone to see at Jordan?" Lunch together was a daily ritual, limited to a few select restaurants due to Bob's unwillingness to experiment with his taste buds.

"That works for me. In fact, I do have a kid I need to see in Teen Housing. I'll be right with you," Bob said, as he walked across the room toward a client who stood talking to one of the bailiffs.

Peggy and her attorney walked outside, followed by Sabre. Just as they stepped out, a woman flung the courthouse door open, nudging Sabre's arm.

"Mother Fucker," the woman screamed as she stomped out waving her arms in the air. "Supervised visitation, my ass. I'll see my kids when I damn well please. Fuck that." Bob followed her out. He and Sabre watched while the bailiff escorted her to the bus stop.

"One of yours?"

Bob nodded. "Charming, isn't she?" He removed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, took one out, and lit it up. "Let's go eat. I'm buying."

Just then, Gaylord Murdock walked out of the courthouse. He looked toward his girlfriend, and once again Sabre spotted a glare from him. She watched the muscles tense up in Peggy's face and then her shoulders slump, as her body tightened into itself.