

# The Advocate's Labyrinth

## Chapter 1

### *Sunday Morning*

"The ambulance"—Goldie struggled to speak—"on its way."

"Don't try to talk." Sabre Brown put her aunt on speaker phone, so her boyfriend, JP, could hear. "I'll meet you at the hospital."

"No," Goldie said sounding riled. "I need you ... to do something ... for me."

Sabre was already on her feet, keys in hand. JP Torn, who was also her private investigator, followed.

"I'll drive," JP said softly as they walked to his truck.

Sabre spoke into the phone. "Auntie, what happened?"

"Chest pain ... stomach." She breathed heavily. "Listen to me."

"First tell me, will they take you to Sharp Grossmont? That's the closest hospital, right?"

"Yes." Goldie took a deep breath. "Come ... my house ... change code on garage door. Code is ... 4746."

"What should I change it to?"

"Anything ... just change it. People know ... or could figure it out."

"I'll meet you at the hospital, then I'll go do it."

"No," Goldie insisted. "Do it now. When I'm gone, it won't be safe."

"Auntie—"

Goldie cut her off. "Please, now"—she breathed heavily—"before it's too late."

Sabre heard sirens in the background as the first responders pulled up to her aunt's home.

"They're here." Goldie sighed. "Promise me ... take care of it and take care ... *duly*."

Sabre climbed in the truck. "I'm on my way. And I promise I'll do it right after." Still not sure what her aunt meant, Sabre asked, "Is that what you meant by *duly*?"

The line was silent.

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Sabre and JP parked near the emergency room entrance at Sharp Grossmont Hospital. An ambulance pulled in behind them.

"Maybe that's her," JP said.

"I'll find out." Sabre jumped out of the truck. "Go change the code. It's 4746."

"Do you really think we should do that?"

"Yes." Sabre was adamant. "I promised her."

"Okay."

Sabre ran over to the ambulance as they pulled out the gurney with her Aunt Goldie, who was lying very still.

"You need to step back," an EMT said in a strong voice.

"Is she alive?" Sabre asked.

"Yes. Now move."

She complied as another EMT asked, "You wouldn't be Sabre Brown, would you?"

"I am," Sabre said, a little surprised. "She's my aunt."

"She wanted to make sure someone reached you." He pushed the gurney toward the entrance. "I'm glad they did. She kept saying your name over and over. Now please go wait inside."

Sabre retreated, but followed them into the hospital. She was soon left behind when the guard stopped her from entering the swinging doors that led to the emergency room. "You need to check in." The large, African American guard spoke in a soft, understanding voice. "If they can, they'll call you back there."

Sabre walked to the counter, provided her aunt's details, then took a seat and waited. She called her brother, Ron, to let him know about their aunt. She and her brother were very close, and she knew he'd be concerned. Of the two, Ron was more sensitive, but if their aunt didn't make it, they'd be there to comfort each other. Sabre wanted to call her mother, but she was out of the country, so she would wait until she knew more.

Forty-five minutes later, JP walked in. "Heard anything yet?"

"Nothing," Sabre said. "I've checked in a couple of times, but I couldn't really get any information."

JP sat down and took her hand. "I'm sorry, baby."

"She doesn't deserve this. She's still young."

"I know."

They sat quietly for two hours, watching as people came in. Only a few left. A doctor finally came out and spoke to the guard, who pointed toward Sabre. The solemn-looking doctor approached, carrying a manila envelope.

"I don't like the look on his face," Sabre said.

"They're never smiling when they come out," JP said. "Don't jump to conclusions."

The doctor stopped in front of them. "Who are you here for?"

"Goldie Forney," Sabre said.

"Are you Sabre Brown?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any identification?"

Sabre reached in her pocket for her driver's license, then showed it to him. "Why do you need to see my ID? I've never been asked for it before at a hospital. Is there something wrong?"

He glanced at her ID photo, then at her. "You're an attorney?"

"Yes."

"I have strict instructions from your aunt to only talk to you. I don't know why, but that's my patient's right, so I will honor it." He paused for a second. "I'm so sorry, but she didn't make it."

*No!* Sabre tried to be strong, but her eyes filled with tears. The doctor was still talking, but she heard little of what he said. When he held out the manila envelope, JP tried to take it, but the doctor wouldn't give it to him. Sabre looked at the inscription. Written in big, black

letters across the front was: *GIVE TO SABRE BROWN ONLY!* She took a deep breath, cleared her throat, and held back the tears.

"Your aunt said to give you this if she passed."

"Thank you, doctor."

He handed her a plastic baggie with a necklace in it. "She was wearing this when she came in."

"Thank you." Sabre shoved it into her jeans pocket. She was not ready for any of this.

"Do you know if she made arrangements for a funeral home?" the doctor asked.

"I don't know."

Sabre tried to compose herself. She wasn't sure what the doctor had already said, so she asked, "Was it a heart attack?"

"Yes, but we think she might have had some food poisoning as well. We're running lab tests. Do you know what she had to eat today?"

Sabre shook her head. "I didn't see her until she was brought in."

"Do you have any other questions?" the doctor asked.

"Can I see her?"

"Yes. I'll take you to her."

## Chapter 2

### *Sunday Afternoon*

Sabre held her aunt's beautifully manicured hand. Her skin was already starting to feel cold. Sabre stared at Goldie's face and thought how beautiful she still was. She remembered the thin woman she'd met as a child, and how she was enamored by her beauty and her flaxen, stylish hair. Aunt Goldie had gained a lot of weight since then, but Sabre could see her inner beauty, which never changed. Her hair was still blonde but weaved with silver strands. A lock hung over her aunt's eyebrow. Sabre brushed it back where it belonged, knowing Aunt Goldie would want that. She was no longer crying, but she felt an ache in her chest. Sabre sat in silence for a few minutes, then stood and kissed Goldie's cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Auntie. I love you, and I'll miss you."

She stepped out and joined JP, who waited for her in the hall. They walked in silence to the truck, his arm wrapped lightly around her shoulder. The only sound was the clicking of JP's western boots on the concrete.

Once inside the vehicle, Sabre said, "She called me yesterday, but I didn't answer, and then I forgot to call her back. I can't help but think it might have made a difference."

“You have to let that go. More than likely, it had nothing to do with her heart attack today.”

“I’ll never know,” Sabre said. “You got the code changed for her, didn’t you?”

“Yes, of course.” JP paused. “When were you last at her house?”

“I can’t remember if I’ve ever been there, not at the house where she last lived. We usually just met for lunch. Why?”

“Something struck me as odd. The yard looks great. The lawn was manicured, and the plants around the grass were beautiful. She has a little flower garden on one side of the yard and more flowers under the windows in front. The fence is freshly painted, and I think the house is too.” He paused and scowled. “But when I opened the garage door to reset the code, it was packed full of boxes and junk. There’s only a narrow path between the overhead door and the one that goes into the house.”

“That’s probably where she stored everything.”

“I guess, but the house is so cute when you drive up. I just found it a little strange. Did Goldie like gardening?”

“She loved it and talked about her flowers all the time. She’d even bring our family a bouquet now and then. She was very meticulous about things. When she would bring Christmas presents, each package was beautifully wrapped and adorned with a huge, gorgeous bow. She made them herself.”

JP started the truck. “Where to?”

“Let’s go by her house just to double check the code.” She glanced at the envelope in her lap. “Wait. Let’s stay here while I see what’s in this” she said, holding it up.

JP shut off the engine as Sabre opened the package. She pulled out a key with a red and white plastic tag. It read *HOME* in her aunt’s perfect script.

“It must be the key to her house.” Sabre felt a little foolish for stating the obvious, but her thoughts were jumbled.

“Is there anything else in there?” JP asked.

She reached inside and pulled out a three-page handwritten note on bright pink paper. Sabre took a deep breath, then read it aloud.

*My Dear Sabre,*

*If you’re reading this, I must have passed on, hopefully to a better place than this earthly one afforded me.*

*I’m sorry to put this on you, but you are the only one I trust to take care of things, and the only one who won’t judge me. You are the only one who ever saw me for who I am. You never expected or demanded anything of me. You have always been like that, even as a small child. You made me feel so special and welcome in your family. I realized as you grew, and I got to know you, that you were like that to everyone. That it came directly from your heart, not from anything I did or was, but I felt your love just the same. And for that, I will always be eternally grateful.*

*So, where do I begin? With my children, I suppose. You must notify them. I would like to tell you not to and just wait to see how long it takes them to discover I’m gone. That would be fun for me, but it would only make it harder on you, and since I won’t be there to see it, you may as well tell them. But before you do—and I can’t stress the importance of this enough—I need you to go to my house and take photos of everything,*

*the walls, the floors, the furniture, everything in every room. You need to have a record for when the vultures come—and they will come. Also, please change all the locks on my house and the storage units. I don't think any of my children have keys, but I can't be certain. Hopefully, you can get that done in a day or two and then call them. They'll be mad that you didn't call them immediately, but they'd be mad even if you did, so it doesn't matter. Oh, and give them a chance to see my body before it's cremated, in case they want to make sure I'm really dead.*

"Are her kids that bad?" JP cut in.

"I haven't seen them in years, so I don't really know any of them as adults." Sabre went back to reading the note.

*Then get that envelope I gave you when we met for lunch a few months ago. It will lead you to what you need in order to handle the legal matters.*

"What envelope?" JP asked.

The memory was still vivid. "In June, Aunt Goldie asked me to join her for lunch at a restaurant in La Jolla."

"Did you go?"

"Yes, and it was nice." Sabre paused. "For the most part."

"What wasn't nice?"

"I don't know exactly." Sabre struggled to put her feelings into words. "Aunt Goldie kept saying how proud she was of me and how she wished she had a daughter like me. I felt so sorry for her. She said her kids were all a mess, and she couldn't trust any of them. It's been years since I've seen any of my cousins, but I'd heard there were some problems."

"That probably explains some things. I suspect she chose you to take care of business that she didn't trust her kids to handle."

"Like what? Funeral arrangements maybe? I doubt if she has much of an estate. As far as I know, she didn't work much. She certainly didn't get a windfall from my Uncle Bill, and from what I understand, her last husband didn't have anything to speak of."

"It's probably more personal than that." JP squeezed Sabre's hand. "She liked you and wanted you to make sure she had a good ending."

"Maybe." Sabre sighed. "Aunt Goldie gave me a small envelope at lunch that day and asked me not to open it unless something happened to her. I was afraid she had cancer or some other terminal illness, or maybe was contemplating suicide. But she assured me everything was fine and that it was no big deal."

"So, where is it?"

"In my briefcase at my office. It's just a business-sized envelope. I left it there because I thought it was as good a place as any."

"You usually bring your briefcase home." JP gave her a puzzled look.

"I didn't bring any files either," Sabre said. "Remember? We were planning a completely non-work weekend with the kids." JP's niece and nephew were living with him while their parents were in prison.

"So much for our plans." JP nodded at the letter Sabre was still holding. "Sorry for interrupting."

She went back to reading.

*I hope you don't mind doing this for me. I know that even if you do mind, you wouldn't say so, because that's who you are. I don't mean to take advantage of your good nature, but I'm convinced you are the only one in the family who will carry out my wishes. I could have another attorney handle it, but they wouldn't have your heart. And this task needs someone with a big heart and your skill set.*

*I've made all my funeral arrangements so that won't be an issue for you. If the kids don't like it, too bad. They'll be happy to know that everything is already paid for, and they don't have to dish out a dime. They also won't get to fight about any of it because I've taken care of it all. Every detail.*

"So, she doesn't need you to make the arrangements," JP said, "but possibly to see that they get carried out as she wished. She clearly doesn't have any confidence in her children."

Sabre continued reading.

*I still expect some squabbling. Those five have never been able to agree on anything. Don't let them get to you. They'll try, but you have the power. They have none.*

*This will be a long, arduous journey for you. I know you are up to the task, but I hope, in the end, that it doesn't destroy your love for me. It will change what you think about me. I know that. Because I am far less and far more than what you knew. When you're done, you will know my intimate thoughts like no one else ever has. I trust you with them. I trust no other. I can only hope and pray that you won't judge me.*

*Your favorite aunt, Goldie*

*P.S. Don't forget to take pictures of the house, and please don't be too shocked at what you see. I lived the only way I knew how.*

Sabre folded the letter and choked back tears. Then she removed the last item from the envelope.

"What's that?"

Sabre glanced over the page. "It's a notarized legal document giving me power of attorney over her health, burial, finances, and every other decision that might need to be made in her stead."

JP started the truck again. "Where to?" he asked.

"Let's go take some photos."