

“I solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of California, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of an attorney and counselor at law to the best of my knowledge and ability. As an officer of the court, I will strive to conduct myself at all times with dignity, courtesy, and integrity.”

The Advocate’s Oath

Chapter 1

Saturday early afternoon

The glow of the Nash residence was a stark contrast to the grim faces that approached its grand double doors. A fortress of wealth, with manicured lawns and elaborate water features, it now played host to a tragedy. The urgency in the air was unmistakable as investigators—badges flashing under the afternoon sun—converged on the scene of affluence-turned-crime.

On the fringe of the chaos, Attorney Sabre Brown watched, cataloging every detail in the yard and on the front porch. She felt a little uncomfortable in her jeans and sweatshirt. Normally, she’d be dressed in a suit and heels, and would fit in better at a place like this, but today was Saturday and she came as soon as she got the call, wearing her comfy clothes with her hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Sabre had been here before, amidst the wealthy and their secrets. It was never her favorite place to be. This time she’d been summoned by Forest Nash, her father’s long-time

employer. He'd done a lot for her mother when her dad passed away. Sabre was repaying a debt. *Funny*, she thought, *how the wealthy always seemed to collect.*

"Mr. Nash." An officer who appeared to be in his sixties, introduced himself as Detective Inman. "Where were you at the time of your wife's death?"

Forest Nash, silver-haired and stoic, stood like a statue among his treasures. "I was at the office," he replied. "I have witnesses."

Beside him, Hudson, his sixteen-year-old son, scowled, arms crossed. The boy wore his privilege like an ill-fitting suit.

"And you, Hudson?" a younger cop prodded, notepad poised.

"That's me, Hudson Nash, best quarterback ever to attend La Jolla High."

"You're the one who found her?"

"I did," Hudson said, his gaze darting away. "She was just lying there, at the bottom of the stairs."

Sabre stepped forward and put her hand on Hudson's shoulder.

"Who are you?" Detective Inman asked.

"Sabre Brown, Hudson's attorney."

"So, the kid already has a mouthpiece," he said. "I wonder why."

"No need to wonder, detective. This young man has the same rights you do. Having an attorney does not make him guilty of anything."

"Whatever," he grumbled, then walked away.

Sabre wondered where this case was going to end up. JP walked up, interrupting her thoughts, with Detective DuBois just steps behind him.

"Keep your distance, McCloud," Detective DuBois commanded, his voice gruff but not unkind.

The men had worked together for some time and knew each other well enough to use nicknames. DuBois had given JP that nickname when he first came on the force. Standing a little apart, JP, adorned in his distinctive cowboy boots and black Stetson hat, nodded once. His handsome face was tanned, his eyes sharp beneath the brim.

"Wouldn't dream of interfering," JP said. But his eyes betrayed his true intent; they were studying the movements of the cops and the body language of the Nash men.

"Son," Forest's voice broke through again, now directed at Hudson. "Tell them what you told me."

Hudson's jaw set. "I didn't do anything," he muttered, his earlier bravado gone. Under the scrutiny of the law, he seemed nervous.

Sabre moved forward. "My client has made his statement." She locked eyes with the detective. "Any further questions will be addressed through me."

DuBois nodded. "Of course, Ms. Brown." His eyes lingered on JP for a moment, a silent warning between friends.

"Let's give them some room." Sabre gestured for JP to follow her a few steps away. They exchanged a glance that spoke volumes.

JP shifted. "You know Hudson is trouble. That kid wears arrogance like armor."

"I can see that."

Sabre and JP followed DuBois inside. He had asked to speak with Hudson and Sabre in the study. As they walked through the house, DuBois' voice cut through the hum of activity,

sharp and commanding. "Photos of every angle—don't miss a single detail," he ordered. The forensic team moved with practiced precision, cameras clicking as they documented the spot where Linda Nash's life had ended.

"Bag the glass shards. And check for fibers." DuBois pointed to the shattered remains of an elegant vase. Gloved technicians obeyed, delicately securing fragments that might provide insight into the perpetrator's identity.

Sabre moved into the doorway of the den where Forest Nash stood rigid, his tailored suit a harsh contradiction to the surrounding chaos. Sweat beaded on his upper lip as Detective Inman peppered him with questions. "I told you. I was at the office when it happened," he insisted.

"Sure you were," Detective Inman drawled, flipping through his notes. "And your son? Where was he?"

Forest's eyes flitted toward the closed door where Hudson was waiting to be interrogated, anxiety etched deep in his furrowed brow. "He was at football practice."

Sabre observed from the doorway, her mind churning with each response.

When JP approached, Sabre said, "I'm going into the study to wait with Hudson until DuBois gets in there to question him. Want to stay here and see what else you can see?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Sabre entered the study and took a seat. Hudson sat across from her projecting a veneer of teenage indifference, arms crossed. She noted the slight twitch under his eye, the only crack in his façade. She reviewed a couple of things with Hudson and reminded him to be truthful. "If you didn't kill her, you have nothing to hide."

Shortly after Sabre reached the den, DuBois entered, his footsteps echoing on the marble floor. He locked eyes with Sabre, the unspoken message clear: This case was tightening around her young client. "Hudson, I understand you were the one to find Linda, your stepmother. Is that correct?"

"Me? No, no. I mean, yes. But I didn't ..." Hudson's words tangled as he glanced up at Sabre, seeking an anchor in the tumultuous sea of accusation.

"Answer clearly, Hudson," Sabre interjected before the boy could spiral further. "Remember what we discussed. Just tell the truth."

"Right." Hudson cleared his throat, straightened. "Yes, I found her. But I didn't do anything."

"Let's go over it again, son," DuBois said, tapping the table rhythmically. "From the top." Sabre's eyes remained fixed on Hudson, probing for truth amidst his nervousness. The boy shifted under her scrutiny, the weight of his father's legacy pressing down on him.

"Fine." Hudson exhaled, resigned. "I came home, and she was just lying there. It was like a horror movie."

"Where did you come home from?"

"I was at football practice. I dropped off my friend, Urban, at his house, then came here."

DuBois continued with questions, getting specifics on time, etc. until Hudson was giving the same answers for a second and third time. Sabre didn't know if Hudson was telling the truth or not, but he was so flippant and arrogant that he wasn't scoring any points with DuBois. She decided it was time to end the interrogation.

"I think he has answered all your questions, Detective."

DuBois thanked her and moved out to the living room along with Sabre and Hudson. JP joined them. Sabre could hear the ticking clock melding with the beat of the technicians' camera shutters, each second drawing tighter, and closer to Hudson.

As officers scoured the house, the air thickened with suspicion. Forest Nash avoided eye contact, retreating behind legal counsel, directing anything he didn't want to answer toward Sabre. Hudson, young and cornered, faced it head-on, defiant but with fear in his eyes.

JP leaned against the cold marble of the Nash foyer, tracking the investigators' moves.

When JP got a little too close, DuBois said without looking up from the evidence bag he was sealing, "Watch yourself, McCloud. Don't contaminate my scene."

"I'm not touching a thing."

"Found something," a technician called out.

Sabre's attention snapped to the man kneeling beside the grand staircase. In his latex-gloved hand, he held a crumpled piece of paper—its significance yet unknown but its potential to wound, undeniable.

"Let's see it," DuBois demanded, striding over. The technician handed him the paper, and as DuBois unfolded it, a hush fell upon the room.

Sabre moved closer. Hudson's face flickered with a trace of fear. It was a look Sabre knew well—the realization that his world was collapsing inward, the ground giving way beneath his feet.

"Whose writing is this?" DuBois asked, holding the note aloft.

"That—that's not mine," Hudson stammered.

DuBois walked it over to Mr. Nash. "That's Linda's handwriting," Forest said, his expression unreadable. "What does it say?"

DuBois read aloud, "If anything happens to me, consider my stepson."

The accusation was stark, chilling, and pointed directly at Hudson.

"Why would she say that? I didn't kill her," Hudson said.

"Looks like we need to talk more, son," DuBois said. He locked eyes on Hudson.

"DuBois," JP said. "Look at the edge of that note."

The detective looked at it again. "Way to go, McCloud. It's torn. There may have been more to the message." He turned to his team. "Keep looking. See if you can find the rest of the note."

The investigators began to scour the floor, crawling on their hands and knees, searching in every nook and cranny.

Chapter 2

Saturday afternoon

JP found the opulence unsettling, but he had a job to do. Forest Nash stood unwavering in the lavish foyer, closely observing as the detectives sifted through his family's history. The air was thick with tension, punctuated by the soft clicks of camera shutters and the rustle of evidence bags. Forest's jaw clenched each time they unearthed another potential clue, another piece of his world to dissect.

With a deliberate stride, Detective DuBois approached. "Mr. Nash, we understand this is difficult for you, but your cooperation is paramount."

"Cooperation?" Forest's voice was a low growl. "You're treating my son like a common criminal."

In a placating gesture, DuBois held out his hands. "Simply following the evidence, sir. It led us here."

"Led you to—?" Forest cut himself off, sweeping a hand through his hair in frustration. "Hudson is just a boy. A good boy with good grades and an athletic scholarship in his future."

The detective nodded, his eyes betraying nothing. "Which is why we need to look closer."

JP watched the team move from room to room with meticulous precision. Latex gloves brushed over bookshelves, feeling for hidden compartments, and dusted delicate picture frames for fingerprints, their brushes whispering accusations with every stroke. The very air

seemed to hold its breath, the silence broken only by the occasional command or the scratch of a pen on a notepad.

In the study, an officer lifted a cushion, revealing a forgotten letter. He read the contents, his brow furrowing.

“Find something?” DuBois asked, materializing behind him.

“Maybe nothing. But it looks like a love note.” The officer slid the letter into an evidence bag.

JP saw the tormented look on Forest’s face as he stood nearby watching as every item was cataloged, every drawer opened, peeling away layers of privacy he’d obviously never intended to surrender.

“Dammit,” he muttered under his breath. “This isn’t how it was supposed to be.”

“What do you mean?” JP asked.

“Nothing,” Forest replied, too quickly. “Just thinking aloud.”

“You may want to be careful what you say.”

“You’re right.” Forest’s gaze drifted to where Hudson had been interrogated, to the chair that now sat empty. “How easily the mighty fell within these walls, the legacy of the Nash name threatened by scandal.”

“I’m sure you’re pretty shocked by it all.”

“Nothing shocks me anymore, Mr. Torn. There isn’t much I haven’t seen. I always knew my empire was built on sand—a foundation vulnerable to the relentless tide of truth that now laps at its doorstep.” Suddenly, his poetic tone changed. “Careful with that!” Forest snapped as a technician examined a family portrait, her fingers probing the edges for hidden devices.

“Standard procedure, Mr. Nash,” DuBois interjected. “We leave no stone unturned.”

“Even if you destroy everything in the process,” Forest shot back, his words bitter.

“Only what’s necessary,” DuBois countered, turning away to oversee the search, leaving Forest Nash to observe helplessly as his domain was dissected, piece by piece.

It was late in the day when they packed up, leaving police tape behind and giving the Nash men orders to stay out of the home until further notice.

“Are you making an arrest?” Sabre asked.

“Not today,” DuBois said. “Not sure yet if it’s an accident or murder. Unless you know something you’d care to share with me.”

“Looks like an accident to me,” Sabre said glibly.

“I’m sure it does.” DuBois rolled his eyes. “Don’t let your client get too far away, Ms. Brown.”

When the detective walked away, Sabre turned to Hudson and said sternly, “Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t answer any questions. Don’t volunteer anything. Just keep your mouth shut until we talk again. Do you understand me?”

“Whatever,” Hudson muttered.