

The Advocate's Phantom

Chapter 1

Tuesday late morning

Sabre leaned forward, her gaze fixed on the anxious face of lanky, sixteen-year-old Maverick McLaughlin. The light in Maverick's room cast a harsh glow on his disheveled hair and the dark circles under his eyes. He fidgeted with his sleeve, avoiding eye contact.

"Tell me exactly what happened, Maverick." Sabre urged, using a blend of warmth and sternness designed to coax the truth from troubled young people.

Maverick's legs bounced restlessly. "I was playing a video game, and then..." He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. "Then my phone rang, and a voice on the other end said to look out the window. Just then I heard the sound of a muffled scream, so I ran to my window."

"Take your time."

The boy drew in a shaky breath. "I looked out the window, and there was this guy—just wailing on a woman. He had something in his hand, like a pipe or bat, and he kept hitting the woman over the head. It was awful. I've never seen anything like that."

His voice trembled, as if reliving the violence scared him even more. Sabre reached across and placed a steadying hand atop his jittery one. The gesture seemed to anchor him back to the present, away from the grisly memory.

"Could you see him clearly?" she asked.

"Not their faces because their backs were to me." Maverick locked eyes with her for the first time. His pupils were dilated with fear—or truth. Sabre couldn't yet tell. "It was raining," the boy continued, "but I saw them. The streetlight was right there, shining down on them like some messed-up spotlight."

"Did you recognize the attacker, or the victim? Did anything about them look familiar?"

"No. They were both strangers. But I'm telling you, it really happened."

"All right, Maverick." Sabre gave his hand a reassuring squeeze before letting go and sitting back. "I believe you saw something. We're going to figure this out together."

The rhythmic tapping of rain against the window provided a stark counterpoint to the tense silence that filled the room. Sabre leaned forward, her gaze fixed on Maverick. She had been representing him since he came into the system seven years ago. It was a classic drug case, father had been gone for years, mother a heavy drug user. When she died of an overdose, the kids were living on the streets, and he and his sister were raising themselves. Maverick hopped around from one foster home to another until Sabre finally got him in this home with the Venables. That was almost three years ago and he had become part of the family.

"Tell me about the lighting again," she prompted. "How much could you really see through the downpour?"

Maverick swallowed hard, his fingers gripping the edge of the table. "It was pouring, yeah, but the streetlamp... it was like it was there just for that moment. It lit up everything—the attacker, the weapon in his hand."

"Was there any fog? Mist from the rain that might have obscured your view?"

"No mist." A touch of impatience crept into his voice. "It was clear underneath the light. I saw it all happen, Sabre."

"Okay. But the police found no evidence at the scene. No weapon, no blood. How do you explain that?"

His voice cracked. "I don't know! But I'm not lying! I can't unsee it. The beating keeps playing in my head over and over."

Sabre watched him closely, raw emotion etched into his youthful features. The quiver in his voice cut through her with a reminder of the stakes at play—not just a case, but a boy thrust into an adult world of violence and skepticism.

"Okay, Maverick," she said softly. "We'll get to the bottom of it."

He nodded, his expression conveying gratitude and reliance on her commitment.

With meticulous care, Sabre jotted down the information on her notepad, the page soon filling with details. "Was it streetlighting only, or did something else add to it?"

"Streetlight only, I think."

"Any cars passing by?"

"I don't think so."

"How far away were you from the incident?"

"Maybe thirty feet? From my window to the wall. I didn't measure it."

"You were in this room?"

"Yes."

"Show me where you were." Sabre said.

"I was sitting on my bed playing a game." He pointed at the narrow bed. "Then my phone rang. I didn't hear it at first, because I had the sound turned down. It was late, and I didn't want to wake my foster parents. But I saw the screen light up, so I answered it, and the voice said, 'Look out the window.'"

"Tell me what you did next."

"I got up and went over there." Maverick motioned toward the window.

"Show me exactly where you were standing."

As the teenager walked over, Sabre followed.

"I looked out and saw them, about five feet from that streetlight."

"On your property or the sidewalk?"

"On our lawn, against the block wall near that bush."

"I can't see much."

"I know. It seemed brighter last night."

"What exactly did you see?"

"I saw a man in a long, dark coat. I couldn't see his face." Maverick shuddered. "But the way he swung that —whatever —was deliberate, heavy."

"Could you describe the weapon?"

"It glinted, like a metal pipe or bat."

"Good." Sabre penned *metal pipe or bat* with a question mark. No evidence had been found; no traces of violence left behind. The vividness of Maverick's testimony clashed against the clean slate of the crime scene.

"Was there anything else? Any detail you haven't mentioned that stuck with you?" she prodded.

"Nothing." Maverick let out a breath, then walked away from the window.

"All right." Sabre closed her notepad with a soft snap. She tried to give him a reassuring smile, but her mind whirred with skepticism and theories. "Picture it for me again, Maverick," Sabre prompted, her voice calm and even. "The rain—was it heavy?"

"Like sheets." Maverick fidgeted with a button on his jacket. "It was pounding on the sidewalk."

"Could you see clearly through the downpour?"

"Kinda blurry, but yeah." He squinted, as if trying to peer once more into that rainy abyss. "The streetlamps were doing this weird flickering thing, but I saw him—the guy with the weapon."

Sabre noted *streetlight flicker* alongside the previous details on her notepad.

"Other than the rain and the streetlights, was there anything else that might have affected what you saw? Or obstructed your view?"

"Nothing."

"Maverick, were you alone, or was there someone else who might have witnessed what you did?"

He paused, brow furrowing then lifted his eyes to meet hers. "No. I was here alone."

"Except for your foster parents?"

"They were asleep, I think."

"But if there was someone else, even just passing by, it's important that you tell me."

Maverick shifted, a sign that he balanced on the edge of disclosure.

"Nobody." He finally exhaled.

Sabre detected a quiver in his voice. Whether it was borne of evasion or a memory too fragile to disturb, she couldn't be sure. But she did know one thing—her pursuit of the truth had just become more enigmatic. Sabre capped her pen with a decisive click. "Look, Maverick," she said, "anything you remember, anyone you might've mentioned this to—could help us."

He chewed the inside of his cheek, a habit she'd come to recognize. "I texted Darius," he finally admitted, the name tumbling out like an afterthought.

"Darius?" Sabre echoed, her mind was racing with the implications. She scribbled the name in her notebook, underlining it twice. "Is this a friend?"

"Yeah," Maverick mumbled. "He didn't believe me at first. Thought I was just messing around. But I swear I wasn't, I—"

"Hey," Sabre interrupted gently, reaching across the space to still his fidgeting hands. "I believe you're telling me what you saw. Now, about Darius. How did he react when you told him?"

Maverick shrugged. "He kinda freaked out and said we should keep quiet. That nobody would believe a couple of teenagers anyway."

"But you didn't, right? I mean, you called the police."

"I told Mr. Venable this morning as soon as I got up, and he called. The cops came, looked around and then left."

"And they found no evidence of a crime?"

"They said they didn't."

"I'll reach out to the police today."

"But they don't believe me. What if they say I'm making it up, like before?"

What? This was new. "What do you mean?"

"About a month ago, the same exact thing happened."

"You witnessed an earlier assault?" She sounded skeptical—because she was.

"It's the second time he was here. I'm pretty sure it was the same man, but I don't know if it was the same woman, but she looked the same. They both had red hair."

"You didn't mention that before."

He shrugged. "I guess I didn't think of it, but it was definitely reddish. I only saw it for a few seconds, but I saw the color in a flash, a light reddish-blonde."

Sabre gave him a puzzled look.

"It was raining then too, and the man hit the woman with the same kind of weapon. I know it sounds crazy, but I saw it."

"Why didn't you call me last time?"

"Because nothing came of it. The cops came out, found nothing, and left. I never heard from them again. This time, Mr. Venable told me to call you, or he was going to."

"You did the right thing."

Maverick looked at Sabre with wet eyes. "I'm not making this up."

Chapter 2

Tuesday afternoon

Sabre sat at her desk in her office, working on a difficult case. The faint scent of leather and aftershave made her look up. JP Torn entered the room, his black Stetson tilted at a jaunty angle. He closed the door with a soft click and took the chair opposite her.

"Hi darlin'." JP planted a quick kiss on her lips.

"Thanks for coming here."

"You said it was urgent. So, I moved as fast as small-town gossip."

Sabre pulled her notepad from her briefcase. "This is everything Maverick told me, the details of what he claims he saw."

"Walk me through it." JP leaned forward, his attention fixed on her.

Sabre recounted the alleged assaults with methodical precision.

"Did he see the actual assault?"

"According to Maverick, yes. He saw the blows to the head and the victim drop to the ground."

"Any chance he'd seen either of those folks before? Maybe hanging around the neighborhood?" JP's brow furrowed in concentration.

"No. Neither looked familiar to him, but he didn't see their faces at all. Maverick has never seen anyone like that in the neighborhood, but he's a teenager, I don't know how much attention he pays to the people around him."

"I'll need to visit the property, see the lay of the land myself. Might jog something loose if we retrace the kid's steps."

"Agreed." Sabre folded her hands neatly on the desk. "We need to find something concrete, or the police will never believe him."

"Do you believe him?"

"I think he saw something. I'm just not sure what."

"But the same murder twice?"

"I've spent hours with Maverick," she said, her voice carrying the weight of conviction. "I've heard his story, seen the fear in his eyes. It's not just some tale he's spun for attention. He's scared, and I believe him. He's convinced he saw someone get killed."

JP leaned back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the armrest, unable to conceal his skepticism. "Sabre, you know as well as I do that memory can be a tricky thing. And this is the second time the kid claims to have seen a similar assault?"

"Exactly," she affirmed. "And it's that repetition that makes me think there's more to it. Maverick isn't one to seek the spotlight; he's been trying to keep a low profile. He's had some problems in the past, mostly fights with other foster kids and not getting along with foster parents. But in all fairness, he was in some homes that offered conditional love, and he tested the boundaries. He hasn't had any trouble since he came to this home. And why would he make up the same story again?"

"Let's say I'm willing to entertain the idea that Maverick stumbled on something real—twice—which is pretty farfetched. What do you want me to do?"

“Just get me evidence that proves something—one way or the other, and go to the scene as soon as you can and have a look around.”

JP stood, adjusting the brim of his black Stetson with a practiced motion. “I’ll put some feelers out, talk to DuBois in homicide. He’ll be straight with me.” JP paused. “What kind of background does this kid have? Any history of telling tall tales? Any drug use?”

“His history sucks. He was born to a drug-addicted mother who died of an overdose when he was only five. When he was picked up, he and his sister had been living on the streets, but she took off and they only got Maverick. He bounced from foster home to foster home, not so much because of his problems, just circumstances, which made his situation worse. He never knew his father, but caseworkers later found his older half-sister in the system and placed them together when he was eight and she was twelve. They were only together a few months when she was murdered in a cheap hotel. Maverick had a bit of a breakdown then, but nothing that required institutionalization.”

“That’s a lousy start to life.”

“Yes, it is. On a brighter side, he’s been with these foster parents for about three years, and they seem to really love him. He has no history of drug abuse, or theft, or of telling lies. He’s basically a good kid, with emotional baggage, of course.”

“All right,” JP said. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

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JP slid behind the wheel of his pickup truck. He fished his cell phone from the pocket of his worn jeans and called his detective friend.

The connection rang only once before a gruff voice said, "What's up, McCloud?" DuBois gave JP that nickname when they were on the force together. He called him that because he wore a cowboy hat like the character on an old TV series.

"Got time for a meet?"

"Depends," DuBois replied, his tone cautious. "What's this about?"

"Something I'm working on for Sabre. Kid claims he's seen a murder. Twice." His engine roared to life as JP turned the key.

"Is that the McLaughlin kid?"

"Right."

"Might've known you'd be involved in that crazy case, McCloud."

"I don't pick 'em. I just work 'em."

"All right. Swing by the precinct. But make it quick."

"Thanks. I'll be there in twenty."

The call ended, and JP maneuvered the truck out of the parking space, glancing around with an investigator's keen observation. He knew the conversation ahead would be a tough sell. Maverick's story was farfetched, but something in Sabre's conviction had lit a spark of curiosity in him.

After clearing security at San Diego's main police department, JP found DuBois leaning against a desk cluttered with case files and coffee cups.

The detective stood to greet him, his face lined with years of service, eyes sharp beneath graying brows.

"DuBois." JP tipped his hat. "Appreciate you seeing me on short notice."

"Let's hear it," DuBois said, folding his arms.

"As you know, the kid's name is Maverick McLaughlin. Claims he witnessed a murder or at least an assault, not once, but twice—same perp, different days. Says no one believes him."

DuBois snorted. "Yeah, we looked into it. He's got more imagination than sense. We didn't find squat—no body, no evidence, nothing."

"Could be," JP conceded, scratching his stubbled chin. "But Sabre's putting her neck out for this boy. He's her client in a dependency case, and she's convinced there's truth to his claim."

DuBois sighed, rubbing his temples. "The kid probably just wants attention, cooking up stories. You know how troubled teens can be."

"Maybe so, but what if he's not just spinning yarns? What if someone's smart enough to cover their tracks? We could be dealing with a meticulous killer."

DuBois' skepticism hung heavy in the air, but the crease in his forehead deepened, a sign that JP's words were finding purchase.

"I'll give it another look, but I'm telling you, it's a wild goose chase."

"Fair enough," JP replied. "I just don't want to miss a beat if the kid's actually onto something."

"I'll see what I can find out. But don't get your hopes up."

"Wasn't planning on it." JP pushed himself up from the chair. "Thanks. Keep me posted."

"Listen here," DuBois added with a pointed finger, "if we get called out again with this story and we find squat, we'll have to charge McLaughlin with making false accusations. We can't have the department chasing phantoms because some kid cries wolf."

"Understood." JP turned to leave. "You won't hear from us unless there's solid ground to stand on."

"Make sure of it," DuBois warned. As JP strode toward the door, a reluctant respect hung between them – the kind forged in the fires of countless cases, some won, many lost.

On JP's way home, he stopped by Maverick's house and looked around. He found no evidence that supported Maverick's claims.