

The Advocate's Quandary

Chapter 1

Monday morning

Attorney Sabre Brown stood before Judge Hekman in the San Diego Superior Court, Juvenile Division, feeling determined.

"Your Honor." Sabre's voice sliced through the stillness. "This young girl—a child who has known more hardship than hope—her future hangs in the balance."

The judge, an austere woman framed by the imposing backdrop of the mahogany bench, peered down at her through spectacles. Her gaze was probing, but Sabre met it with the steel of her conviction.

"The decision made here today will shape my client's life," she continued.

Around her, the courtroom was a tableau of anticipation. Lawyers with leather-bound briefs and parents clutching their secrets sat at the counsel table. But it was the child who captivated Sabre's thoughts as she remembered the frightened eyes that had looked to her for salvation.

"We have the power to ignite hope or to extinguish it entirely," Sabre said. "My client deserves a stable, loving home. She can't get that from her parents. Her grandmother has proven that she can provide a home for her without fear. Imagine a world where uncertainty is the only certainty. This is the world my client has been forced to navigate, a world no child should ever know. The parents have had more than a year to complete the programs they were

ordered to do and to stay drug free. They have done neither. It's time to stop the chaos in this child's life and give her stability. I ask that the court grant a guardianship for this child with the paternal grandmother."

Judge Hekman called for a brief recess, granting Sabre a moment of respite. She gathered her papers with meticulous care, betraying none of the adrenaline that pulsed beneath her professional facade.

As Sabre turned to leave, Judge Hekman's voice, laced with a sense of urgency, cut through the hum of conversation. "Ms. Brown, I'd like to talk to you a moment about another matter."

Sabre approached the bench.

The judge leaned forward, eyes intense. "I have a matter that requires a strong advocate."

Sabre nodded, her mind already shifting gears, ready to tackle whatever challenge lay ahead.

"I'd like you to take the Winters' case. You'd be representing the children, Eli, Garrett, and Storm. Their case has been in our system for a year now, and their attorney can no longer serve. They need someone of your caliber to unravel this... complex situation."

"I'll review the files immediately, Your Honor."

"Good. You can get the file from my clerk, and Bob Clark represents the father. I'm sure he'll give you a quick review. We're on calendar this morning, and I'll assign you to the case," Judge Hekman said. "And Sabre? They're not easy, these children, but they deserve a fair shot."

"Understood."

Sabre stopped at the clerk's desk before exiting the courtroom. She scanned the hallway and spotted her friend Bob Clark leaning casually against a wall, a file tucked under his arm. His prematurely gray hair and thick glasses framed a face that was all sharp intelligence and dry humor, a beacon of familiarity amidst the thrum of courthouse activity.

"Bob," she called out, as she closed the distance between them.

"Ah, the indomitable Sabre Brown." Bob pushed off from the wall with a playful smirk. "How did our legal gladiator fare today?"

"Still standing." Sabre matched his tone. Then, without pause, she delved into the reason for their impromptu meeting. "Hekman just handed me a new case—three minors: Eli Winters and his siblings."

"Ah, the Winters kids." Bob's smile faded into a more somber expression. "Tough break for those kids."

"You represent the father, right?"

"Guilty as charged." He scratched his beard. "Not an easy man to defend, but you know how it is. We don't get to pick our clients."

"Or their pasts," Sabre added.

"Indeed." Bob sighed. "This case is a mess. Lots of different social workers, lots of placements all over the map. You may need a chart to figure out the players. But hey, if anyone can handle this tangled web, it's you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Sabre's mind churned with the challenges ahead. "Let's sit for a minute so you can catch me up."

"Lead the way." Bob gestured, falling into step beside her as they strode toward an empty bench.

Sabre flipped open the first manila folder. The papers were a testament to neglect, each page a chapter of the Winters' ordeal. Eli's file was thick, Storm's equally so. Garrett's was thinner but no less harrowing.

"Bonnie, the four-year-old, was the lucky one." Bob pushed his glasses up as he leaned over her shoulder. "Placed in a permanent home. In fact, it looks like an adoptive placement."

A fourth child? Why hadn't the girl been assigned to her? "But the parental rights haven't been terminated, have they?"

"No. And if my client had any interest in this case, I would've been fighting it. When they do get around to actually filing the two-six hearing, I'll have to fight that, but until then, there's no point."

"Just the youngest one placed in an adoptive home?"

"Yup."

"Cherry-picking through tragedy," Sabre murmured.

"Hardly the first time," Bob replied. "Foster parents favor young kids."

"Leaving the older ones to fend for themselves." She glanced at their ages. Storm, fifteen; Eli, thirteen; and Garrett; ten. Sabre closed the folder with a snap, the echo louder than intended. "I see the mother died of an overdose. What about Dad?"

Bob shook his head. "Their dad, he's... got issues. Frankly, I don't see him coming around. He shows up occasionally though."

"Just enough to give them hope and disrupt their lives?"

"Pretty much. But that wouldn't be my argument in court." He smirked.

"Of course not." Sabre smiled back. Bob was good at his job, maybe too good. But then, so was she. "You know me. My focus is on those kids. Eli, Garrett, and Storm need more than empty promises."

Bob nodded, the playful spark in his eyes dimmed by the gravity of their conversation. "I would expect nothing less. But you know that if he shows up and wants to fight, I'll put up one."

"And that's exactly what I'd expect of you." Sabre stood and tucked the file under her arm.

"Then let's get to it." Bob got up too, and they headed for Judge Hekman's courtroom.

Chapter 2

Monday afternoon

Sabre parked in front of a modest suburban home in Spring Valley. As she walked up, her eyes took in the peeling paint and overgrown lawn. She raised her hand to knock, and the door creaked open, revealing a middle-aged couple who seemed to wear their exhaustion like an additional layer of clothing.

"Mrs. Albay? Mr. Albay?" Sabre extended her hand. "I'm Sabre. Thank you for allowing me to come by."

"Of course. But please call me Fran." Mrs. Albay forced a smile, her voice betraying the strain of sleepless nights. "And my husband is Hugh."

He shook her hand as well. "Eli's been told you'd be visiting."

Sabre stepped over the threshold, absorbing the details of the cluttered entryway. She promised to not take up too much time, and they directed her toward the living room in the back of the house.

The scent of stale coffee lingered in the air as Sabre made her way down the narrow hall, her sensible shoes quiet on the carpet. She emerged into a cramped, yet comfortable, space dominated by a large leather couch. On it sat a young teenage boy, his attention riveted to the colorful pages of a graphic novel.

"Hello, Eli."

His shoulders stiffened, a subtle twitch of muscles that spoke volumes. When he looked up, Sabre caught a glimpse of his deep blue eyes—twin pools reflecting a turbulent sea. His

messy, dark brown hair fell forward. Without a word, he turned his graphic novel over on his lap, leaving it open to save his place.

"Mind if I sit?" Sabre motioned toward the opposite end of the couch.

"Free country," Eli muttered.

Sabre settled onto the cushion, maintaining a respectful distance. She crossed her legs, her posture relaxed but attentive—a signal that she was here on his terms. Silence stretched between them. Outside, the sounds of the city hummed.

Sabre extended her hand, an offer of peace in a world Eli had learned to view with suspicion. "I'm Sabre Brown, the new attorney assigned to your case."

Eli's gaze flitted to her hand, then away. "What do you want?"

"I just want to know how you're settling in here." She folded her hands into her lap, respecting his space. "And if there's anything on your mind you feel like sharing."

"Settling?" A bitter chuckle escaped him, a reaction too old for his young psyche. "You mean, how I'm adapting to being shuffled around like a deck of cards?"

Sabre kept her expression composed, but her heart clenched. Eli's pain was intense, etched in the lines of his lean face. "I understand it's tough," she said softly. "The system isn't perfect, but I'm here to help you navigate through it."

"Help, huh?" Eli leaned back against the threadbare cushions, arms crossed. "Seems everyone wants to *help* but all they do is talk. Are you any different?"

"Talking is where we start, Eli." She chose her words carefully. "But actions speak louder. I'm here to advocate for you, to be your voice in court."

He repeated the phrase like tasting something sour. "Like that'll change anything. They split me from Storm, Garrett, and little Bonnie almost a year ago. After saying it'd be temporary."

As he spoke their names, she sensed a softening around the edges of his hardened demeanor. This was more than a case; it was a boy's fractured world.

"They promised we'd stay together. But promises don't mean much, do they?" His eyes, those deep blue wells of sorrow and defiance, met hers for a charged moment.

"Sometimes people let us down, Eli. But I promise you this: I'll fight for you and your siblings at every step."

"Sure," he muttered, looking away. But Sabre saw a flicker of hope, a small victory in what she knew would be a long battle.

She leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees as she watched Eli's gaze drift to the window. She recognized the look in his eyes—the distant stare of a young soul caught in the grip of uncertainty.

"Your siblings," Sabre said gently, "Storm, Garrett, and Bonnie... Can you tell me more about them? Where they are now?"

Eli's jaw tightened, and he turned back. His fingers creased the edge of his book, the pages bending under the pressure. "What's it matter?" His voice cracked with emotion.

"Because keeping families together is important. You all deserve that chance," Sabre replied softly. "I can find out from the social worker, but I hoped you would tell me. I need to know where they are if I'm going to help."

Eli glanced at Sabre, perhaps measuring her sincerity, then looked down at his hands. "Storm's somewhere in North Park, at least that's what I've been told. I don't know if it's a group home or a foster home. Garrett's with a family in Poway... and Bonnie is with another family in La Mesa." Again, he spoke each name with a tremor.

"When did you last see them?"

"Not since shortly after we came into the system."

"Did you all go to different homes then?"

"No. We were all together at first, but then they took Bonnie away, then Storm, then Garrett."

"And you haven't even had a visit?"

"Not once."

"That must be hard," Sabre murmured, "being apart from them."

"Yeah, life's hard," Eli snapped back. He swallowed thickly. "I just wanna see them, you know? Make sure they're okay. But I'm stuck here. What if they forget me? What if we never get back together?"

His raw fear cut through the space between them and tangled in Sabre's chest. She felt a surge of protectiveness for this boy and his scattered siblings. Suddenly, they weren't just a case file or a court docket number—they were children torn from each other, adrift in a system too overwhelmed to hold them together.

"Nobody's forgetting anyone on my watch," Sabre said firmly. "You've been strong for them, Eli. Now let me be strong for you."

The boy held her gaze, searching, assessing.

Sabre leaned forward, bridging the space between them. "I can't imagine how tough this has been for you," she said. "But I want you to know—I'm here to fight for you. To bring you and your siblings back together."

He eyed her warily, but didn't respond.

"Here's what we'll do." She outlined the process with the precision of someone who'd navigated these waters before. "I'll file petitions on your behalf, speak with your caseworkers, and if need be, we'll take this to court. We'll gather evidence, show the judge the importance of keeping you and your siblings connected."

Eli's posture relaxed. "Have you done this before?" he asked, his tone less combative.

"More times than I can count." Sabre reflected on the faces of children she'd seen in similar seats. "And while I won't lie and say it's easy or quick, I've seen families come back together. It takes time and grit—but I've got plenty of both."

Eli nodded, almost imperceptibly, and Sabre understood it as the first step toward alliance in their shared battle against the odds.

"There was a girl, much like you," Sabre said. "Her name was Lila. She and her brother had been separated for two years. Everyone thought it was a lost cause." Sabre paused. "Everyone but me. We fought, hard and long, and it took nearly a year. But I'll never forget the day they were reunited in the courtroom."

Eli's book lay forgotten beside him, his hands idly picked at the worn fabric of the couch. His voice, when it came, was hesitant but hopeful. "So, it can really happen?"

"It can. I can't guarantee the outcome because there are so many variables, but I can guarantee that I'll fight with everything I've got." A surge of determination welled up within her, as it always did when a child's future was on the line. "That I promise."

For a moment, he was silent, then Eli asked, "What happens now?"

"First, I'll request your case files and review them thoroughly. I need to understand every decision that's been made about you and your siblings."

Eli's hands tightened around his book.

"Then," Sabre continued, "I'll reach out to your caseworkers, the foster parents, and anyone else involved. It's important to get a complete picture and to let them know we're advocating for reunification." She met his eyes, willing him to see her sincerity.

"Will they even listen to you?" Eli's voice was laced with doubt.

"They will," Sabre replied with quiet confidence. "I've been in this field long enough to make them listen. And if they don't ..." She paused, a hint of steel in her tone. "They'll answer to the court. That's where I can bring the full force of the law to support our case."

He nodded, looking hopeful.

"Throughout this process," she said, "I'll keep you updated. Every step of the way, you'll know what's happening."

"Okay." The word hung between them like a fragile truce.

"Okay." Sabre smiled and stood.

"Mrs. Dawson... she tried, you know?" His voice was quieter now. "She cared. But then she left, and we got a new social worker."

“That happens sometimes. They make a lot of changes in the department, and they move workers around a lot.”

“I think it was more than that. Can you check on her?”

“Sure. But why do you say that?”

“Why would she just leave us? I think something bad happened, and no one is telling me.”