

Chapter 1

Monday morning

Some cases landed like whispers. This one hit Sabre Brown like a siren.

At first glance, she didn't look like the kind of woman who'd battle courts and Chapter 25

Wednesday late afternoon

Sabre was pacing the living room when JP walked in, his face grim. He'd called her with the news, and she'd been frantic since.

"I can't believe they beat up Nico's grandmother!" she said as soon as he closed the door.

He nodded, setting his keys on the counter. "I found her on the floor. Took a pretty bad hit to the head."

JP hugged her hard. "Rosa is stable. But scared. She said they were looking for something Nico had. I don't know what it is yet. But apparently, it's enough to rough up an old woman."

Sabre's worry intensified. "Which means they're willing to go through anyone to get it. Including Kai."

JP just nodded.

Sabre stepped away and grabbed her phone. "I'm calling the court. He needs more protection."

"It's after hours—"

"I know who's on call." Within minutes, Sabre had Judge Merrick on the line.

She stood by the kitchen window as she spoke, JP next to her. She had the speaker on, and she spoke in a tone that was urgent but composed. "Your Honor, I wouldn't call unless I believed it was serious. One of my clients is currently in Juvenile Hall. He's not just a witness to a potential cybercrime, he's a target."

Judge Merrick's voice came through low and tired but sharp. "Ms. Brown, you're aware the minor is being detained pending the hearing. If there's a safety issue, that's a matter for facility staff. Why are you calling me directly?"

"Yes, I understand he's being held in detention. But circumstances have changed. The grandmother of a known associate was attacked this evening. Police believe the assault is

connected to something her grandson had in his possession, something connected to the data breach. And last week, one of Kai's associates was murdered."

There was a pause, then Merrick said, "That's alarming, but at this point it's speculation. Do you have confirmation the threat extends to your client?"

Sabre's jaw tightened. "With all due respect, Your Honor, the issue is that the people after him are not in custody. I'm not asking for release. I'm asking for protective placement within the facility. I want separate housing, and I want staff to know about the threat. Maybe even a security review. If Kai gets hurt because we failed to act... "

She let the words hang in the air.

Judge Merrick sighed, the rustle of papers audible over the line. "All right, Counselor. You've made your point. I'll contact the duty supervisor at Juvenile Hall and instruct them to move your client to protective housing until further review. He will not be isolated unless behavior warrants it, but he will be monitored. You'll need to file a formal motion first thing in the morning."

"I will. Thank you, Your Honor."

"And Ms. Brown," Merrick added, his tone softening just slightly, "you were right to call. I'd rather overreact than read about a dead child in tomorrow's paper."

Sabre hung up, exhaling hard.

She turned to JP. "You heard him, the judge says he'll request that Kai be transferred to a separate unit with protective measures. Not quite solitary, but away from the general population. Just for now."

JP crossed his arms. "Think he'll do it?"

"Merrick is cautious, but he's not heartless. And I've seen him go to bat for kids in danger. He'll do the right thing."

JP took a Pepsi out of the refrigerator, then sat down near Sabre.

"So, what now?" she asked.

"I'm going to relax for a bit, then go see Rosa in the hospital. Do you want to go along?"

"I would, but I have too much to do."

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The hospital was quiet, no screams in the ER, no running gurneys, just the dull hum of fluorescent lights and the rhythmic beeping of machines.

JP stopped at the nurses' station, gave Rosa's name, and followed the directions to Room 313. The hall smelled of antiseptic and lemon-scented floor wax, and he braced for what he might find.

When he reached the room, the door was partially open, and he saw Rosa lying in the hospital bed, a bandage over one eye and an IV in her arm. Beside her, in a chair pulled close, was a young man with dark curly hair and a compass tattoo on his arm.

JP pushed the door open. "Nico?"

The teenager jumped up.

"Don't run," JP said gently. "I'm not the police, and I'm not here to hurt you. I just want to talk."

Nico looked at Rosa, then back at JP. His eyes were hollow, tired. "I was gonna turn myself in. I swear. I didn't know where to go, but I needed to see my abuela first to make sure she was all right."

JP stepped inside and closed the curtain door behind him. "Then this is a good start."

Nico sat back down, his hand resting on Rosa's.

"How'd you know she was in the hospital?"

Nico exhaled slowly. "I was trying to stay away, but I needed to see my abuela, just for a minute. I hung out across the street and waited to make sure no one was around. I saw you go inside, and I didn't know who you were, so I just watched."

His jaw tightened, like the next part was still stuck in his throat.

"Then I saw the ambulance pull up. Lights off, quiet. No siren. I knew right away it was her. I saw the paramedics come out with a stretcher, and one of them said her name, Rosa Vasquez. I heard it clear as day."

He looked back at her, then down at the pale blanket drawn up to her chest.

"I followed the ambulance on my bike. Kept back enough not to be seen. Waited outside the ER for almost an hour before I got a nurse to tell me what room she was in."

JP's voice was quiet. "You've been here ever since?"

Nico nodded. "Sleeping in the chair when I can. I don't want her to wake up alone."

JP waited for him to go on.

“I didn’t do anything bad,” Nico said. “I know there’s a detective looking for me, because he’s been asking questions. It doesn’t take long for word to get around on the streets. I swear I haven’t done anything like what they’re saying.”

JP pulled up a chair and dropped into it, keeping his tone casual. “Tell me what happened. Start at the beginning.”

Nico took a breath. “Devon was the real hacker. He got into this online group, some invite-only chat server. I don’t even know the name. But it was all *reputation-building* crap. The guys in the group said if Devon helped them, they’d boost him, make him look like a legend.”

“Help them how?”

“By showing he could breach the juvenile court system. Dev didn’t know exactly what they wanted, just that it had to be sealed stuff that was private and deep.”

*So much to unpack.* “So, how does Kai fit in?”

“Devon fed him code. He told Kai it was a backdoor script that would *probe* the system and get harmless data. But it wasn’t. It was a custom-designed script. It looked clean, but once Kai ran it, the script bypassed the system’s normal tripwires.”

*That matched with what Kai had told them.* “Did Devon create the code?”

Nico shook his head. “He got it from his online hacker friends, the ones he hooked Kai up with.”

“And you?”

“I just played games, man,” Nico said, voice cracking. “I didn’t even know what they were doing at first. I thought they were just messing with stupid stuff like rerouting traffic and fake logins. Then Devon said something about a sealed file that could ruin someone powerful.”

“Did he say who?”

Nico shook his head. “Just that it was ‘some politician.’ He said it was gonna blow up everything.”

“Did you see any files?”

“No,” Nico said quickly. “But Devon had a flash drive he carried everywhere. He said it had the payload, and the files, and a backtrace log. He called it *insurance*.”

“And now it’s missing?”

Nico nodded. “They think I have it, but I don’t. I never even seen where Devon kept it, other than when he was carrying it with him. He just bragged about it all the time, called it his ticket out if he needed it.”

JP studied Nico carefully. The boy looked and sounded sincere. “The hacker guys. Did they attack Rosa?”

“It had to be. They tore the place up looking for the drive. She didn’t even know what they were talking about.” He hung his head in shame.

JP looked at Rosa, unconscious and bruised. “Did you tell anyone else what you just told me?”

“No.”

“We need to keep you safe,” JP said. “Come with me. I’ll talk to the detective in charge about getting you protective custody.”

Nico stood. “I don’t care what happens to me. I just want my abuela to be okay.”

Rosa stirred in her hospital bed, her unbandaged eye fluttering open. She blinked slowly, trying to focus.

“Abuela?” Nico’s voice was anguished.

Rosa turned toward the sound, and the corners of her mouth trembled, pulling into a fragile smile.

“Nico,” she rasped, reaching weakly toward him.

He gently clasped her hand, careful not to press too hard. Her fingers closed around his. “I thought—” Rosa swallowed. “I was afraid you were gone. That they—”

“I’m okay,” Nico said. “I’ve been hiding.”

She let out a shaky breath of relief, then turned her attention to JP. “Señor Torn, thank you for finding him.”

“I didn’t find him. He came to see you on his own.” JP smiled. “I’m just glad he came back to you.”

Rosa squeezed Nico’s hand as she turned back to him. “Mijo, you shouldn’t have come here. What if they followed you?”

“I had to know you were okay.”

Her eyes welled again. “You need help now. Real help.” She looked back at JP, urgency sharpening her expression. “Please protect him. He’s a good boy. He gets into trouble sometimes, but he’s not like those other boys. He’s not a criminal.”

“I believe you,” JP said. “He’s going to talk to the police. We’ll get him some protection.”

She gave a faint nod, and her voice grew firmer. “Make sure the police know he didn’t do this. He didn’t hurt anyone. I raised him better than that.”

“I know,” JP said. “And I promise you, I’ll make sure someone listens.”

Nico wiped at his eyes with the sleeve of his hoodie. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen,” he said. “I just wish I could go back and stop Devon.”

“You can’t go back,” Rosa said, her voice hoarse but wise. “But you can do what’s right now.”

JP stood. “Let’s get moving. The sooner we talk to DuBois, the sooner we can get you somewhere safe.”

After Nico kissed her goodbye, Rosa’s voice came again, low but insistent. “Take care of him, Señor Torn. He’s all I have left.”

JP met her gaze. “I’ll do everything I can for him.”

bureaucracy for a living. In her early thirties, with shoulder-length brown hair clipped into a professional sweep, Sabre gave off an aura of understated authority. She wore a simple suit paired with low heels and a bag that carried everything from legal briefs to emergency granola bars. She waited in a cramped, windowless interview room tucked between Department Four and the stairwell, her posture upright despite the hard plastic chair beneath her. The plexiglass divider between her and the young client distorted the light overhead, making everything look bleached and tired, but Sabre remained composed, her usual blend of calm precision and quiet fire.

On the other side of the glass sat a fourteen-year-old boy, his face half-hidden under a mop of black hair. His posture was tight, guarded but not aggressive, more foxhole than fortress.

“I’m Sabre Brown,” she said gently. “I’m your court-appointed attorney. You’re Kai Rosales, right?”

He nodded.

“I only have a few minutes before your detention hearing, so I need to ask some quick questions. I’ll be with you throughout the process, and I promise to listen. But first, do you know why you’re here?”

Kai hesitated, then lifted his eyes to hers. “They think I hacked something. That I broke into the county system.”

“Did you?”

He shrugged, then shifted in his chair. “I tried to look at my file. I wanted to know why my mom gave me up. Or if she really did. But I didn’t mean to look at anything else.”

Sabre blinked, leaning in slightly. “What do you mean by *anything else*?”

Kai lowered his voice. “Stuff popped up I didn’t ask for. A lot of it. Then everything locked. Next thing I know, cops are dragging me out of my foster home.”

She jotted a few notes on her legal pad. The court petition had sounded like overkill. He was charged with cyberterrorism and breach of sealed records. But kids didn’t usually underplay things when facing these kinds of charges. They were more likely to brag. Something felt off.

“I’ll do what I can,” she said. “For now, just answer what the judge asks you. And don’t talk to anyone else about this, not staff, not other kids. Just me, okay?”

He nodded again, more slowly this time. “Okay.”

Sabre stood, pressed her hand against the plexiglass, then said, “I’m going into court now. They’ll bring you in shortly. Do you have any questions?”

“No.”

Sabre gave him a reassuring smile, but Kai didn’t respond. As she walked toward the delinquency courtroom, her thoughts were moving faster than her steps. A kid looking for his own file didn’t usually land a felony petition before breakfast.

Inside Department Three, the courtroom buzzed with quiet movement, attorneys gathering files, clerks arranging the docket, the bailiff checking the schedule. Sabre slid into her seat.

The moment Judge Harold Nance took the bench, the energy in the room shifted from routine to rigid. Nance was known for being tough, but this morning, he was flint.

As the bailiff called the case of *The People vs. Kai Rosales*, Sabre stood, file in hand, eyes on her client.

The prosecutor adjusted her blazer and stepped forward. “Jessica Langston for the People, Your Honor.”

Sabre said, “Sabre Brown, for the minor.”

“Kai Rosales is charged with violating Penal Code 502(c), subsections 2 and 3: unauthorized access of a government computer system, with intent to defraud. Charges of cyberterrorism,” the prosecutor announced crisply. “The People are asking for detention in juvenile hall pending further investigation.”

Langston was young, sharp, and ambitious. Sabre had seen her take firm stances before, but she’d never heard her utter the word *cyberterrorism* before.

“Mr. Rosales intentionally accessed highly sensitive and confidential juvenile records,” Langston said. “This wasn’t mere curiosity. It was a calculated breach involving sealed dependency files and sealed abuse reports. Over four hundred case files, Your Honor. Many of them involving minors still active in the system. The county is still assessing the scope of the breach.”

Sabre kept her expression calm. “My client is fourteen, in foster care, with no prior record. He accessed the system to find his own records, using a public computer, not a high-level breach. He’s a foster youth who’s been moved over a dozen times. If this was unauthorized, it was out of desperation, not criminal intent. He deserves to remain in placement during this process.”

Judge Nance peered over his glasses. His voice was clipped, precise. “These are serious allegations. We’re not dealing with petty vandalism here, Ms. Brown.” Nance didn’t blink. “Four hundred records is not desperation, Counselor. That’s methodical intrusion.” He paused, scanning the incident report. “Preliminary forensic review shows structured search activity. He was file sorting by flag codes, placement history, risk assessment tags. He wasn’t browsing; he was targeting.”

Sabre glanced at Kai, who kept his head down.

The judge turned to his monitor. “Based on the petition and the People’s statements, I find good cause to detain. The minor will remain at East Mesa Juvenile Facility until the pretrial hearing next Monday.”

The gavel hit once, sharp and final.

As the courtroom emptied, Sabre gathered her file. Before she could leave, a man approached. He had a badge clipped to his belt and carried a court-issued laptop under one arm.

“Ms. Brown?” He extended a hand. “Lucas Dorman. I’m the digital security consultant for the court. I’ve been asked to prepare a forensic analysis for the case.”



He looked mid-forties, clean-cut, approachable. His handshake was firm but friendly, his smile easy.

“I just wanted to introduce myself. I know we’ll be on opposite sides of this, but if you have questions about the tech side of things, feel free to reach out. I’ll provide my reports through official channels, of course.”

“Appreciated,” Sabre said, surprised by his warmth. She made a mental note to watch him, because she watched *everyone* in these cases. But he didn’t give her reason for suspicion. Not yet.

As he left the courtroom, she followed. Out in the hallway, Sabre sat beside JP Torn on the worn bench outside the department. JP was her partner and investigator, and, despite his easy smile, he carried the weight of a man who’d seen too much. He was big, broad-shouldered, handsome, and always looked like he could’ve walked out of a bull riding contest without a scratch. His jaw was perpetually shadowed with stubble, and his uniform always included jeans, cowboy boots, and a black Stetson. But his mind was sharp and his loyalty, unshakeable. His protective streak for Sabre was quiet, constant, and fierce.

Sabre flipped open the file clipped to the front of the report from the tech consultant and read a few lines aloud.

*Access to the juvenile case file server originated from a public library computer terminal. Login credentials appear to have been spoofed using a token assigned to Kai Rosales’ school account.*

*Activity logs show the user navigated directly to sealed dependency folders, including those labeled CLASSIFIED-SOC and CODE-RED. Accessed files were opened, reviewed, and downloaded in batches, consistent with intentional targeting.*

*The breach occurred over approximately 11 minutes. No sign of brute force intrusion. It suggests familiarity with county database structure. Recommending further investigation into possible collusion or external instruction.*

Sabre narrowed her eyes. “This makes it sound like Kai had a blueprint for the entire system.”

JP frowned. “The kid’s smart, sure. But structured targeting in eleven minutes? With no password cracking, no bounce IPs? That’s professional-level technique.”

Sabre laughed. “Do you even know what that means?”

“I don’t have a clue. But it looked good on paper, so I thought I’d try to impress you.”

She shook her head. "Dorman's wording is clever. He's not saying Kai acted alone, but he's not denying it either."

JP leaned back. "You think the kid is covering for someone?"

"I don't know. Maybe Dorman's just trying to look like the expert they pay him to be. But I don't like how this is framed. No mention of whether those files were actually *leaked*. Just *accessed and downloaded*. That's a leap."

"And the judge?"

Sabre sighed. "Nance is furious. More than usual. That bit about 'structured activity'? That came from him, not the DA. He's got a personal edge on this one."

JP looked thoughtful. "Which means the judge either knows something, or he's protecting something. Isn't that quite a leap?"

"I suppose, but this whole thing stinks." Sabre closed the file. "Either way, this doesn't feel like a kid trying to find his file and stumbling into trouble."

"You think someone put him there?"

"It doesn't fit. The incident could be a minor breach with a massive charge, and sealed abuse reports that someone wanted buried."

"Or maybe a smart kid who's looking for more than his own background."

"Why?"

JP shrugged. "A big pay-off maybe?"

Sabre shook her head. She didn't know what Kai had really stumbled into, or intentionally opened, but someone clearly didn't want him to find it.

"How about you interview Kai and see what you can find out?" she asked.