

Chapter 1:

Monday afternoon, 3:45 pm

"Mateo Alvarez never arrived at the Venables' foster home." Filippa, the social worker, sounded young and worried on the phone.

Sabre Orin Brown, Mateo's juvenile dependency attorney, stopped walking.

"What do you mean?" Sabre asked. "He should've been there two hours ago."

She stood in the narrow hall outside Department Three, files tucked under one arm. She heard a bailiff laugh at something someone had said.

"I don't know," the social worker said. "The Venables called and said he wasn't there at two. They waited. They called again at three, and again a few minutes ago. Still nothing."

"Who transported him?"

A pause, while papers rustled. The sound of someone looking for an answer instead of knowing it.

"County transport," Filippa said. "Routine transfer."

Routine. Sabre hated that word. "Which vehicle?"

"I'll have to check."

"You should already know," Sabre kept her voice level. "Was he picked up?"

"Yes," the social worker said quickly. "He was logged out of Polinsky at one-fifteen."

"But not logged in at the Venables'?"

Another pause. "That's correct."

Sabre shifted the files against her hip and turned toward the stairwell. "Did you contact the transport company?"

"Yes. I called dispatch."

"And?"

"I didn't get an answer."

Sabre stopped at the top of the stairs. "It's three-forty-five. This isn't after hours."

"I know," the woman said. "I left a message and sent an email."

“When?”

“About twenty minutes ago.”

“You waited twenty more minutes to call me?” Sabre didn’t try to mask her irritation.

“I thought it might be traffic,” the social worker said. “Or a wrong turn. These things happen.”

“No. They don’t. I want the transport log pulled now,” Sabre said. “Vehicle number, driver name, route, and timestamps. Do not mark this as a delay.”

“Sabre—”

“Now.” She ended the call and pushed through the stairwell door.

Mateo Alvarez was fifteen. Quiet. Smart in a watchful way. He’d learned early that attention could be dangerous, but invisibility was worse. Sabre had met with him on numerous occasions. The last time was after a prior placement collapsed under the weight of promises the system couldn’t keep. He hadn’t cried. He hadn’t complained. He’d asked one question. “Where am I going next?”

She hadn’t known the answer then.

By the time Sabre reached the parking structure, her phone was vibrating again.

“I pulled the vehicle ID,” Filippa said. “Unit 417.”

“Who was the driver?” Sabre asked.

“It’s a contracted company. County-approved.”

Of course it was. “Have you heard back from dispatch?” Sabre asked.

“No.”

“Still no one answering?”

“No.”

Sabre stopped beside her car. “Where is the vehicle now?”

A pause. “It’s not showing,” the social worker said. “The GPS went offline about twenty minutes into the route.”

Sabre briefly closed her eyes. “Offline how?”

“I don’t know. It just dropped.” Some panic in her voice now.

“Vehicles don’t just drop,” Sabre countered. “What route was logged?”

“The standard freeway, southbound. Exit at Valencia.”

“That’s ten minutes from the Venables’,” Sabre said. “Where was the last ping?”

“Near the frontage road.”

Sabre opened her car door but didn’t get in.

“Call the police,” Sabre commanded. “Tell them we have a missing minor during transport and a contractor who isn’t answering the phone.”

There was a long hesitation on the other end. “Sabre—”

“Never mind. I’ll call. You start checking local hospitals.”

She ended the call, got into her car, and started the engine.

Missing during transfer didn’t happen without some kind of noise. And not without someone responding when the phone rang. Mateo Alvarez hadn’t arrived because either the vehicle had been in an accident or someone had taken him somewhere else.