

Chapter 1

When the phone rang at four o'clock in the morning Sabre knew it could only mean trouble, but she was used to trouble. "Who screwed up now?" she mumbled, forgetting for a second Luke lying in bed next to her.

"Umm...," Luke groaned.

Sabre savored the smell of clean sweat and faint cologne, reliving the touch of his mouth on the nape of her neck and his hard body holding her, making love to her for the first time. It had been a long time coming. She struggled to find the phone on the nightstand, knocking over a glass of wine. "Damn it," she mumbled. When she put the phone to her ear, she heard her friend Betty breathing heavily and stammering over her words as she tried to speak. Sabre's heart quivered in her chest.

"He's d..dead. John's dead," Betty cried.

"Betty, where are you?" Sabre's heart beat faster. She felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"At home. Th...there's so much blood."

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"I'll be right there." Sabre's arm felt weak. She dropped the phone to her chest and lay there for a second, her body still and in shock. Luke reached his arm around her waist and pulled her shapely naked body close to him, nibbling on her earlobe. Sabre yanked away, throwing his arm off her and slamming the phone into the cradle. "Not now," she said curtly, but with no anger in her voice. She stood up and flipped on the light.

"What is it?" Luke asked, scratching his head as he sat up.

"John's dead." She snapped, sounding more like a question than a statement, propelling Luke from the bed. "I'm going to help Betty." She stepped into her jeans, wrestling with her sweatshirt as she pulled it over her head, twisted her shoulder-length, brown hair up on top of her head, and stuck a clip in it.

Luke had his shirt on before she finished speaking, looking around for his pants and shoes. "I'm going with you." He reached for her arm, squeezing it lightly. "I'm so sorry, Sabre."

Tears filled her dark brown eyes. John and Betty were her friends, and although Sabre was about thirty years their junior, they had grown very close. They were extended family, more like an aunt and uncle to her. They had been there for her during her turmoil last year, and now John was dead and Betty needed her.

The summer morning air felt cool on Sabre's tear-filled face as she ran to the car. "Put your keys away. I'm driving," Luke said. Sabre's hand shook as she opened the door to Luke's silver metallic BMW Z4 Roadster.

Luke drove east on I-8 at speeds above eighty. Sabre didn't complain about the speed as she would have under normal circumstances. She didn't even notice. She watched as the buildings passed her window, most of them barely visible without their lights on. Only a few cars on the freeway, but too many she thought. *Where were they going? How many were going to help a friend whose husband had just died? Why John?* It felt like losing her father all over again, and a piece of her brother, Ron, as well. Ron had introduced her to John and Betty just a few months before his disappearance. The couple had been such a great help to her, consoling her and always trying to keep her hopes up. John reminded her so much of her father—the same lighthearted strength that is so hard to find in a man, and a deep, resonant voice that always brought her comfort. She'd never hear that voice call her "Sparky" again. He tagged her with that nickname the first day they met, and

he never called her anything else. Sabre remembered that day. The couple was always holding hands, only letting go when Betty went to get John a cup of coffee – before he ever asked – or when John went to check the gas in Betty's car. They took care of each other.

Luke and Sabre drove for about two minutes without speaking. Luke broke the silence. "What happened? Do you know?"

"No, she didn't say, just that he was dead...and there was blood." Sabre shook her head. "What will Betty do without him? She loved him so much. She used to say, 'I'd like you to find someone just like my John, but there's no one quite like him.' That's why she tried so hard to get us together, you know."

"I know." Luke squeezed her hand. "I'm glad she did."

Within fifteen minutes of the call, they had driven into the motor home park and pulled up in front of space number twelve, a thirty-five foot, twenty-year-old trailer, the only home in the park with lights on. As they stepped out of the car, the lights went on next door. No light illuminated Betty's porch. Luke took Sabre's hand as they went up the short, dark walkway. She couldn't see much, but she could smell the gardenias along the path. Just as they reached the door, the porch light went on and Sabre heard the click of the door unlocking. She felt an ache in her stomach when she saw Betty's puffy eyes with black liner smeared down her face, her usual perfectly spiked, fire-red hair flat on one side and the rest sticking out in clumps, and the deep lines of confusion on her forehead. What had once been white kittens on the side of her pale blue pajama top were now soaked red with blood. When Sabre hugged her friend's plump body, it felt listless and tears dampened Betty's cheeks.

"Where is he?" Luke asked.

"In there." Betty pointed to the bedroom.

Luke walked to the back of the trailer, his body tall and straight. Sabre could see the muscles strain on the back of his neck as she and Betty followed. Sabre noticed Betty held a rosary. As far as she knew, Betty wasn't Catholic. She stopped and put her arm around Betty's shoulder. "Were you praying?" she asked motioning toward the rosary.

Betty slipped it in her pocket and said, "It belonged to J...John. The only thing he had from his childhood."

They walked into the bedroom, Luke several steps ahead. "Oh..." Sabre covered her mouth to stifle her cry. John lay on his back, the blankets pulled up to his waist. His right arm hung over the edge of the bed, the left side of his chest covered in blood. Sabre suddenly longed for her strong, energetic friend, John. She wanted him to comfort her. This wasn't him. A lifeless, slaughtered body laid in his bed, no longer the man who gave her fatherly advice or comforted her when she needed to feel like a child.

Luke put his arm around Sabre. He reached down and touched John's arm. "He's cold," he said.

"Have you called the police?" Sabre asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

Betty started to sob, "I didn't know what to do. So, I called you."

Sabre walked over to where Betty stood in the doorway, her voice low and undemanding. "Betty, what happened?"

"I...I don't know."

Sabre reached out and took Betty's hand. "Tell me, what did you do when you left us at Viejas?"

"I came straight home and went to bed."

"You just crawled into bed next to John?"

"I thought he was sleeping, so I kept very quiet." She gulped. "I didn't even turn on the light in the bedroom. I just put my pajamas on and slipped into bed beside him." Sabre nodded encouragement. "I went right to sleep because he wasn't snoring." Betty stopped to catch her breath and shook her head from side to side. "He always snores. Why didn't I know there was something

wrong?" She sobbed. "I was so thankful he wasn't snoring, I didn't even check on him."

Sabre squeezed her hand a little tighter. "Betty, when did you know there was something wrong?"

"When I got up to go to the bathroom, I felt my wet, sticky pajamas. I turned on the light and saw it was bl...blood. Then I saw John." Betty's chest throbbed as she continued to sob. "He just lay there all covered with blood."

"Betty, we need to call the police."

"W...would you?" Betty took a step forward, then back, then stood there rocking, confused.

"Of course."

Sabre called 9-1-1, and within minutes three squad cars arrived, plus two detectives in an unmarked car and an ambulance followed by a coroner. The dawn broke as neighbors exited their mobile homes to catch a glimpse of the show, many of them watching from their porches, others edging closer and forming a crowd near Betty's and John's trailer. They stretched their necks to see. Some asked questions of the officers, others relayed what they saw and what they speculated, but all buzzed with curiosity as the police put up the yellow and black ribbon partitioning off the area.

One man wandered onto the green rock lawn. "Please step back," a short, young man in uniform said curtly. "Please stay behind the police line."

A police officer entered the motor home, glanced around, and started spouting orders like he was reading from a bad script. "I need everyone to step outside. This is a crime scene. Please don't touch anything."

"Sabre, what are you doing here?" Detective Gregory Nelson asked, as he walked up to the mobile home while pulling on his tie.

"These are friends of mine. Betty called me."

"I'll want to talk to you, but first I need to go inside. Please wait out here."

Betty stumbled to a folding chair outside near the door and sat down. With one elbow on the arm of the chair, she lay her head in her hand and wept. Sabre approached her and put a hand on her shoulder, but she didn't know what to say. Betty continued to cry. Sabre looked back and saw Luke standing with his hands in his pockets by the pink geranium bush, watching her from a distance.

When Detective Nelson came out, he asked Betty for her name and the name of the victim, about what she had seen, and when. He wiggled the knot on his tie. "Sabre, would you mind getting Betty some clothes? We'll need the pajamas."

"Greg, is she a suspect?"

"Not at this point, but we need the pajamas. They have blood on them, and they may be evidence." He turned to an officer standing at the door. "Please escort Ms. Brown inside. She needs to get a change of clothes for the victim's wife."

As Sabre entered the trailer she focused on two policemen walking around the living room with kits and brushes, dusting for fingerprints. She saw an officer pick up a knife from the sink, put it into a bag, and zip the bag closed. She watched as they opened drawers and cupboards, invading her friends' home. She walked past the kitchen table containing the ceramic rooster, two placemats, and a deck of cards. She scanned the room for answers but saw only a worn, dark green sofa with two pillows, an end table next to it with a stack of loose newspapers and a pair of reading glasses, and Betty's sketch book. A small desk across from the sofa housed a laptop computer. Only one picture adorned the wall, a drawing Betty had done of an old cabin in the woods, and except for the shelf with a small collection of salt and pepper shakers, the room contained very few mementos, an observation Sabre hadn't made until now.

When they approached the bedroom, Sabre could see an officer taking photos. It hit her that something was missing. She looked around and saw only a few picture frames with photos, and none of them photos of Betty or John. She wondered how she had missed that before, and if it mattered.

Sabre continued to observe the officers as she gathered up Betty's things. She looked around, processing every detail of each officer's task. She watched as they bagged evidence—the pink rug with the blood stain, the book of matches from a Las Vegas casino, and the Viagra bottle by the side of the bed. It didn't seem real. Never in her twenty-nine years of life, including her six years of practicing law, had Sabre seen anything so gruesome. She had dealt with many crime scenes in court, but she'd never seen an actual murdered body or the officers at work gathering the information on a crime. This was a corpse, not her friend whom she had known for five plus years and to whom she had grown very close. Emotions confused her—sadness for her friend John, concern for Betty, and fascination at the process she observed.

When she brought the clothes out to Betty, Detective Nelson approached her. "Sabre, will you and your friend....Lucas, is it?"

"Yes sir, Lucas, Luke Rahm," Luke said.

"Will you two please meet me down at the station? I'd like to speak to each of you. I'll take Betty with me."

Up until this point, Sabre had been there as Betty's friend, but Betty was a suspect, regardless of what Nelson said. Sabre realized she should be treating her like a client and advising her accordingly. She took a deep breath and cleared her head. She needed to think like an attorney. She didn't have the luxury of being just a friend.

Sabre touched Betty gently on the shoulder. "Betty, you ride with Detective Nelson to the police station. I'll be right behind you. Here are your clothes. And listen carefully to what I'm about to say. You do not talk to him," she said, pointing at Nelson, "or to anyone else until I get there. Don't say a word. Understand?"

"Do I have to go?"

"I'm afraid so. If you don't, it'll only be worse."

"Sabre, I'm scared. I don't want to go," she pleaded. Sabre felt physical pain for her friend. Betty had been there for her so many times. She had held her when she cried for her missing brother. She had become family to her, an aunt she could confide in when she couldn't talk to her mother. Simple yet worldly, Betty didn't talk much about her past, but Sabre knew she had experienced some pretty rough times.

Sabre put one hand on each of Betty's shoulders, looked her directly in the eye, and said, "I'm sorry, but they'll take you one way or the other. Just go with Nelson, and please don't say anything. Just tell them you're waiting for me. Understand?"

"Okay," Betty said, her chin buried in her chest as she walked to the car.

Sabre turned to Detective Nelson, "Greg, don't question her without me. I'm her friend, but I'm also her attorney," Sabre said sternly.

"We're not arresting her," he said.

"I know, but I'm shaken up about all this and about losing John, and I haven't been thinking clearly either. Just give me a little time to get my act together here, too. A crime appears to have been committed. Betty and John are my friends and I don't want anything to go wrong."

"Your call. I'll see you there in a few."

Luke and Sabre maintained silence on the way to the station. With his left hand on the wheel, Luke reached with his right and put it on Sabre's knee. She took a deep breath and sighed. She looked at Luke, his face solemn. She hadn't really thought about the effect this had on him, but John and Betty were his friends, too. She squeezed his hand.

Sabre's mind drifted back two months to when she first met Luke at a barbecue at Betty's. Betty claimed she hadn't been trying to set them up, but Sabre knew differently. When she arrived at their house, Betty sent Luke out to her car to help her bring in the ice. Sabre was smitten the moment she looked into his dark, bedroom eyes. He apparently felt the same because, after a few hours together that afternoon, he asked for her phone number. He called the next day, and within a few weeks they were exclusive.

A feeling of warmth came over her as she remembered that afternoon. John leaned over the barbeque to flip a burger. Betty brought him a beer. They both looked at Sabre and Luke, chuckled a little, and when Betty walked away, John tapped her lightly on the butt. Betty lunged forward a little.

"Oof," she said.

Sabre and Luke had driven on surface streets about five miles from the police station when Luke asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just trying to process everything." She shifted in her seat. "Not such a great way to end the evening, our first time making love and all."

"I know, baby, but I'm glad I was there with you." He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed it, holding it there for several seconds.

"Me, too." She sighed. "I just feel so bad about John, and I'm so worried about Betty."

"You don't think she had anything to do with this, do you?"

Sabre responded with indignation that he would even ask. "Of course not. She wouldn't hurt anyone, certainly not John. You know how much she loved him." She looked at Luke, eyebrow raised. "Why, do you?"

"No...no, I don't think so, either," Luke said as he looked out the window, his voice trailing off.

"Besides, he must've been killed while Betty was with us. We're her witnesses. We can vouch for her."

"True." Luke cleared his throat. "At least you can. I wasn't with her the whole time. I was playing blackjack for a couple of hours while you two were off doing whatever it was you were doing. You were together, right?"

"Not the whole time. We went to play bingo, but then Betty decided she wanted to play the slots, so I stayed and she went to play the machines." Sabre shifted in her seat and took a deep breath. "But she was there. I know she was there. I saw her about ten-thirty on the slots, and she told me she'd be leaving shortly."

Silence filled the car the rest of the way to the police station.