

Chapter 1

It was fourteen minutes past two in the morning when the phone rang. Attorney Sabre Brown was startled by the blaring sound of the ring tone by the Goo Goo Dolls. She turned over and forced her eyes open. Confusion filled her mind for a second, quickly replaced by fear. Phone calls in the middle of the night never brought good news. She reached for her cell phone on the nightstand, not bothering to turn on the lamp.

“Blocked Number” glowed on her phone. Sabre slid the bar over on the touchscreen.

“Hello,” she squeaked. She cleared her throat. “Hello,” she said again.

“Sabre,” the male voice said softly.

Sabre sat up in one jerky motion. She was shocked at the voice she heard on the other end of the line. Her heart pounded and her hands shook. “Ron?” she said louder than she intended. “Is that you?”

“It’s me,” he whispered.

Sabre hesitated. She so desperately wanted it to be her brother, but she didn’t trust that it was really him. Ron had been gone so long, over seven years. What if it was a trick? But that deep, baritone voice was tough to duplicate.

“What was the name of our childhood pet?” Sabre asked, remembering a code they had once created.

“Patches,” he answered without hesitation. “Sabre, it’s really me and I don’t have much time. I need you to get Mom and leave town. Now!”

“Why?”

“I don’t have time to explain.”

“Ron, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry, but you’re not safe. Please, just go.”

“Where?” Sabre stood up and pulled her pajama bottoms off as she continued the conversation. She grabbed a pair of jeans and slipped one leg into them.

“Anywhere,” Ron said.

“I...I’ll go to....”

“No! Don’t tell me,” he interrupted. “They may be listening.”

“To you or to me?”

“To you.”

She sat on the bed and slipped the other leg into her jeans. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, for now, but I’m worried about you and Mom.”

“How will I reach you?”

“You can’t. Listen very carefully to my next words. You can’t tell anyone where you are.”

Sabre thought of the help her private investigator friend, JP, could provide. “No one?”

“Look, you can tell that butthead, O’Brien, but no one else. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“I mean it, Sabre. No one else,” he raised his voice, emphasizing the word “no.”

“Okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” she said reluctantly.

“And wherever you go, go alone—except for Mom, of course. Do you have any cash?”

“Yes, some. I always keep a little on hand.”

“Take it with you. Do not use your credit or debit card. They may be able to track it.”

“Where will you be?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure it’ll be the ultimate place.”

“What do you mean, ‘the ultimate place.’”

“You know what I mean. I’ll contact you as soon as I can. Just go.” The phone went dead.

Sabre shook as she zipped her size five, New Religion jeans. She felt exhilarated from hearing her brother’s voice and frightened by his message. But she feared less for herself than she did her mother and her brother. She grabbed her running shoes from her closet and a long-sleeved shirt. She pulled the shirt over her head and then picked up a small

bag from the floor of her closet in which she placed three more shirts. She moved quickly to her dresser, removed another pair of jeans, and threw them in along with several pairs of socks and a handful of underwear. When she reached the bathroom she flung open a drawer, grabbed her brush, makeup bag, toothbrush and toothpaste, and tossed them all into her bag. From there she went into her spare bedroom that she used for an office, opened a software box on the shelf that read "Family Tree Maker," and retrieved the five hundred dollars she had stashed there.

Back in her bedroom, Sabre grabbed her cell phone and charger cord and stuck them in her pocket. Then she sat down on the little rocker and quickly put on her socks and shoes, slipped her sweatshirt over her head, and grabbed a warm jacket in her closet. She also pulled the stack of hatboxes off the shelf above her clothes. The top three toppled to the floor and just missed her head, leaving only one in her hand, which she tossed onto her bed. Two hats fell out of the boxes that she had dropped. One was a black fedora with a zipper that went halfway around the top of the brim. She placed it on her head, picked up her bag, and looked around trying to determine if she needed anything else.

She started toward the door and then turned, stepped back to her nightstand, opened the drawer, removed a can of pepper spray, and stuck it in her pocket. When she did, she spotted her red, tattered notebook. She picked it up and tossed it in her bag, zipped up the bag, and threw the strap over her shoulder. One look at her messy room made her want to stop and put things away. She wondered when she had become so compulsive.

She raced downstairs and out the door to the garage. She opened the trunk, placed her bag inside, removed her hat, and tossed it inside on top of her bag.

As Sabre moved north on I-15 toward her mother's house, she reached for her phone to call her. She thought about what Ron had said about someone listening in on her phone and she laid it back onto the passenger seat. It took nearly an hour to get to her mom's during the day, but at this time of the morning there was very little traffic.

The speedometer read 79 mph. Sabre slowed down to 70, still five miles over the speed limit. Getting stopped would only put her further behind. Her mind raced with the speed of the car as she traveled past Miramar Air Base. Pomerado Road was quickly approaching so she concentrated on seeing her turnoff. After turning onto Pomerado and sailing through Scripps Ranch, she hit the occasional red light.

Her thoughts jumped between Ron's safety and her mother's. She didn't know enough about Ron's situation to know what to do except to take her mother away from San Diego. Sabre tried to think about other things: all the things she should have taken with her, getting her court cases covered, and hoping to hear from Ron again. She glanced down. The speedometer read 70. Way too fast for this road. She dropped back to 60 and turned on cruise control.

She wanted to call JP, an ex-cop who was injured on the job many years ago. A couple of years ago, he became her private investigator, but he was way more than that to her now. He was a good friend and someone she had recently started dating, or at least they were planning to date. They just hadn't been able to coordinate their schedules yet. She trusted him and he made her feel safe, but she didn't dare call him. Ron had been emphatic about not telling anyone else except Butthead O'Brien. Sabre chuckled for a second at his words. When they were kids, Ron was big on codes. He used them at first to keep Sabre from knowing what he was doing. When she got a little older, she started figuring them out until they were both using them to deceive their parents. It never occurred to her then that the codes might come in handy as adults.

Finally, she reached the little town of Ramona. She slowed down as she passed the Pyramid Vineyard and then turned left after the Shell station. Sabre thought about how she would approach her mother. She had a key so she wouldn't have to ring the doorbell, but even so she knew she would startle her. Two more turns and she'd be on her street. She hadn't passed a moving car since she left Main Street. She pulled into the driveway. The house was dark and still as she exited her car.

Sabre looked around to make sure no one had followed her. Then she walked up to the front door, put her key into the lock, and slowly opened the door. As she pushed the door open and stepped inside, she could see a tiny stream of light coming from her mother's bedroom. Walking towards the room, she heard voices. Sabre felt the hair lifting on the nape of her neck and her arms. She reached into her pocket for the pepper spray. She held it in front of her as she stealthily moved down the hallway.

Light crept out through the crack in the door. Sabre passed the door and stood with her back against the wall like she had seen in the movies. She had no idea what she was going to do but she had to make sure her mother was safe. With her foot, she nudged the door. It creaked as it opened a little more. She waited. Then she did it again. She could hear better now, but she still couldn't make out the voices. She saw the light flicker. She pushed on the door again and when she did she could see the light from the television. Humphrey Bogart was watching the plane disappear into the cloudy sky in the final scene of Casablanca. She breathed a sigh of relief, placed the pepper spray back into her pocket, opened the door further, and walked into the bedroom. Her mother looked so peaceful while she slept, the remote by her side.

Sabre leaned over her mother and gently tapped her on the shoulder. "Mom, it's me. Sabre."

"What?" she jerked. "Sabre?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm sorry to startle you." Sabre turned on the light on the nightstand.

"What's wrong?" She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed as she reached for her glasses.

Sabre hesitated for a second and then blurted, “Ron called.”

“Ron? Really? Is he okay?”

“For now, but he wants us to leave here. He’s afraid we’re in danger.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. It was a short conversation, but we need to do what he says.”

Sabre’s mom stood up. “You sure it was him?”

“Yes, it was Ron. You get dressed and I’ll pack a few things for you.”

“What kind of danger?”

“I don’t know,” Sabre said with a bit of irritation in her voice. “I’m sorry, Mom. He didn’t explain anything. We just need to go.”

Sabre’s mom went into the bathroom and Sabre took a small suitcase from her closet. She put in what she thought her mom would need, calling out when she had a question. “Are you taking any meds?”

Her mom returned to the bedroom and finished dressing. “Just my red rice yeast for cholesterol. It’s in the corner cupboard in the kitchen just to the left of the sink.”

Sabre retrieved the bottle. When she returned, her mother was pacing from the dresser to the closet and back with nothing in her hands. Sabre shook her head, re-entered the bedroom, and placed one hand on each shoulder. “Mom, it’s going to be alright. Now, please get your underwear and a comfortable pair of shoes. I have pants and shirts for you. I’m not sure where we’ll end up, but it could be cold anywhere this time of year. Make sure you have a warm jacket.”

“Okay.” Her mother grabbed a few more things, put on her shoes, and took her coat from her closet.

“Make sure you have your phone, charger, and if you have any cash, bring that.”

“I have the phone and charger but I only have a couple hundred dollars in cash. I don’t like to keep a lot around.”

Sabre picked up her bag. “Get your purse. We need to go.”

Her mom looked around the room, followed Sabre to the car, and they drove away.