

Chapter 1

“Scary Larry is dead,” her best friend, Bob Clark, told Sabre as he approached her in the parking lot of San Diego Juvenile Court. Sabre had just opened her trunk to remove her briefcase.

She turned abruptly, her shoulder-length brown hair dusting across her face as she swung around. “Oh no! What happened?”

“Hit and run. Right here at the courthouse.” He pointed south. “Back there where the judges park. He was hit walking to his car and left there to die.”

“Did anyone see it?”

“I heard it was almost six o’clock before he left and nearly everyone was gone. It’s kind of secluded back there. I guess a man found him when he went for a walk with his dog. He called 9-1-1, but the judge didn’t make it.”

Sabre removed her briefcase, closed the trunk, and started to walk with Bob toward the courthouse. The blood had drained from her face, leaving it void of color, and her petite body appeared unsteady as she took her first step. Bob took her briefcase, reached over, and put his arm around her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She stopped. “I’m not sure.”

“I didn’t expect you to be so upset over that crazy, old coot. He was a nice enough guy, but he was totally whacked. I’m sorry he’s dead, but you seem overly affected. What is it?”

“He called me into his chambers yesterday afternoon.”

“And?”

“And he wanted to tell me something about a case we’re on.” Sabre took a deep breath.

“So, what did he tell you?”

“Nothing, really. The other attorneys weren’t there and I was uncomfortable having an ex parte hearing.”

“Did he tell you what case it was?”

“No, we never got that far. I saw Cosby in the hallway and invited him in, but Judge Mitchell flipped out and bellowed at us to get out. And then he said I was on my own.”

“What do you mean? What exactly did he say?”

“He said, ‘You’re on your own,’” Sabre said, pronouncing each word slowly and deliberately. “So Cosby and I left. I don’t know what he meant, but like you said, ‘He’s whacked.’ It could’ve been anything.”

“Or it could have been something that got him killed.”

“Oh no! Do you think if I had listened to him he wouldn’t be dead now?”

“No. What could you have possibly done?”

“Told the police, maybe.”

“*He* could have done that.”

“He seemed afraid of something, but he’s such an odd duck, I didn’t really give it that much thought.”

They stopped talking when they stepped through the courthouse door. After dropping their files on the metal detector belt, they walked through.

“I wonder who’s covering Judge Mitchell’s cases today,” Sabre said, as she picked up her files.

“They have a pro-tem in the dependency court, and they’ve disbursed the few delinquency cases he had among the other judges.”

“He shouldn’t have too many of those since he was easing out of delinquency. He didn’t seem too happy to be spending his time in dependency court.”

“Naw, he pretty much hated it. I think the presiding judge wanted to get rid of him. Maybe he thought Scary Larry would leave if he was unhappy enough.”

“I don’t think he could afford to retire. He has too much alimony to pay. What was he on? Wife Number Six?”

“Five or Six, I’ve lost track, but who cares. He’s dead now. I guess his ex-wives will all have to find another cash cow.” Bob paused. “And did you know we have a new County Counsel in Mitchell’s department?”

“No, I didn’t hear anything about that. Who is it?”

“It’s Marge Benson.”

“Are you kidding me? She’s back?” Sabre frowned. “But she stayed with the DA’s office when they made the conversion. What’s she doing with County Counsel?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she missed us.”

“Right,” Sabre said sarcastically. “She liked us about as much as we liked her.” Sabre wrinkled her nose. “It’s been so nice around here and now it’s going to be miserable.”

“It’ll be fine. We were newbies back then. Now we’re the king and queen of juvenile court, remember?”

Sabre smiled. He was right. Benson was difficult to work with because she never compromised, but they could beat her on some of the legal issues. They both had a lot more experience now. She wouldn’t be able to push them around like she did when they first came here. Even back then, they beat her on their first jurisdictional trial together. Benson hated losing to a couple of rookies and made their lives miserable the remainder of the time she was there.

But what bothered Sabre the most was that it would be more difficult for the clients. Benson was so bent on protecting children from physical abuse that she often didn’t see the emotional damage that it caused. Sometimes providing services to keep a family together resulted in a better solution than ripping the families apart. But Benson was a bulldozer, tearing everything up and trying to build something new when a little refurbishing may have been a better way to go.

“Sobs?” Bob said. His nickname for her came from her initials, Sabre Orin Brown, his little S.O.B.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about life at juvenile court with Marge Benson,” Sabre said. “What’s up?”

“Sobs, I think you should call JP and tell him about your ex-parte hearing with Scary Larry. Maybe have him look at the cases you two have—or had—in common. It could be the judge was trying to warn you.”

“I could, but JP’s on vacation.” Sabre emphasized the word “vacation.” “What’s that about anyway? He never takes a vacation.”

“That’s right. I forgot.” Bob looked away.

“What is it?”

“He has company...from Texas.”

“Who?”

“His ex-wife.”

“His what?” Sabre’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry, Sobs. I’m sure it’s nothing. They’re probably just friends.”

“Who would be friends with an ex-wife?” Sabre flipped one hand up in a gesture of dismissal. “It doesn’t matter. He can see whomever he wants.”

Bob raised his eyebrow and tilted his head to one side. His full head of wavy hair was graying prematurely. “Honey, this is Bob you’re talking to. I know you have feelings for him, no matter how hard you try to fight it. You two need to quit dancing around and sit down and talk this out.”

Sabre shook her head and cleared her throat. “There’s nothing to talk out. It could never work. Someone would end up getting hurt, and I would lose a perfectly good private investigator. I can’t afford to do that now. I have too many cases that really need some serious work, not the least of which is the Durham case this afternoon.”

“Is JP working on that?”

“Yes, he started before he went on ‘vacation.’ He left me a message this morning and said he would bring me a report before the hearing this afternoon. He said he had something that might help me with the 707 hearing.”

“Sorry, I don’t speak delinquency. Wait, I know, that’s where the DA is trying to have him tried as an adult, right?”

“That’s it. Stick with me and you’ll have the language down in no time.” Sabre pursed her lips as if she were thinking. “Here’s the thing: Judge Mitchell presided over that case. Everyone believed he would rule against my client and send him downtown for the trial.”

“Maybe Durham had him snuffed.”

“Don’t be silly. How could he do that? Besides, my client’s just a kid.”

“Yeah, a kid who’s charged with a double homicide—a gruesome, bloody, double homicide.”