

Chapter 1

Sabre Brown stood on the stage next to the magician dressed in black tails, white gloves, and a tall hat, his face painted half white and half kelly green, the trademark of the Great Silent Thunder. The magician's assistant had tied both the magician's and Sabre's hands in front of them.

Sabre had been chosen from the audience after her boyfriend JP had declined to participate in the trick. She stepped inside the box, and the magician followed. The assistant closed the door behind them. A scrambling noise and pounding against the wall came from the box and then silence.

The audience was very still. Nearly a minute passed without any movement on stage. The audience began to murmur. Another minute, still nothing.

"What's taking so long?" JP said to his friend Bob, sitting next to him.

"It's a show," Bob said. "The longer he makes the audience wait, the more the anticipation builds."

Another minute passed, and JP shifted in his seat as if he was going to stand.

"Where are you going?"

"On stage, to see what's going on. This is taking way too long."

"You're going to ruin the trick."

"I'm supposed to care?"

Bob glanced at a huge security guard standing near the exit. He nodded toward him. "You may want to care about *him*?"

JP shot a quick glimpse his way. "If he wants a fight, he better pack a lunch and bring a flashlight."

Just as JP started to stand, the assistant walked to the opposite end of the stage toward the Great Silent Thunder, who was sitting on the wall by the steps. Surprise emanated from the crowd followed by loud applause.

The magician stood up and looked around. He stretched his hands out in a swooping motion and then scanned the audience. He looked back at the stage and out into the audience again.

"Where is Sabre?" JP asked.

"Will you relax? She's going to pop up any minute now."

The magician swooped his arms out again. The spotlight scanned the room. The assistant moved back toward the box, but before she got there, JP had run up the six steps and onto the stage.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Getting my girlfriend."

"Stop. You'll ruin the trick."

"Does it always take this long?"

"No, but we were told to just wait."

"Then you do that," JP said and opened the door of the box.

Lying on the floor was Sabre with her hands still tied together.

Three Weeks Earlier...

Chapter 2

Attorney Sabre Brown received a disturbing phone call. She hung up and called Steve Matzel, the social worker who had worked with her on the Parker case.

"I just got a call from Sarah Parker," Sabre said. "She told me her house is so filthy she can't stand it."

"That case has been closed less than six months," Steve said. "She really had to work at it to get it unlivable in that short a time."

"I know."

"Did she say if her mother was using drugs again?"

"No, but she said her little brother was sick and there was something else I needed to know. She wouldn't say what, so it's probably drugs. She said I'd find out when I got there."

"The mother doesn't have to let you in, you know."

"I know, but she does have to let *you* in. Are you coming with me?"

"Of course. It must be pretty awful if Sarah's calling for help."

"That's what I thought. Remember how she fought foster care?"

"She ran away four times, until we finally detained her with her father, and then *he* blew it, and she ended up back in foster care," Steve said. "I'll meet you there in about twenty minutes."

"I'll be waiting outside when you get there."

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Sabre sat outside the small duplex in National City, waiting for the social worker. She phoned JP to let him know she was going to be late.

"Okay, darlin'," JP said in his slight Texas accent. "Just let me know when you're headed this way."

She sat there thinking about JP, which brought a smile to her face. She pictured him with his handsome face, his black Stetson hat, and his western boots. The two of them had been dating for over six months, and he had been her friend and private investigator for several years before that. She was cautious because she didn't have a good track record with men. Her first love in high school, the team quarterback, was caught on video with a more popular girl. A teenage prankster managed to have the video shown on the screen during a film in a student assembly. It took several minutes before the school staff could get it stopped. Sabre was humiliated, but it seemed to boost the popularity of her beau and the other girl. A few days later, her ex came to school with a black eye. He made up some lame excuse for it, and although her brother Ron never admitted it, she was pretty certain he had something to do with the injury.

There were several more losers in her repertoire, not the least of which was her last guy, who turned out to be a mobster. She had dated some nice guys too, but they all seemed to get too serious too fast, and Sabre would bail. But JP was different. He was smart, handsome, and very protective of her, like the cowboy that he was. Sabre had discovered new interests with him and deepened her appreciation for country music. Even though JP had a bit of a jealous streak, especially when they were on a dance floor, he never smothered her like some men had in the past. He didn't need to go everywhere she did and be with her every minute. She had her interests and he had his, and he was quick to try new experiences with her—at least once, as long as they didn't include eating broccoli.

Sabre often wondered what the future held. She would be thirty-one years old in October,

and her mother was hoping for grandchildren. They had all pretty much given up on her brother having any children, but Sabre knew she wasn't ready, and maybe never would be. She liked things the way they were and was glad that JP wasn't pushing for more. Besides, JP was eighteen years older than her, a fact that bothered him way more than her, and he might not be interested in being a parent. They had never discussed it.

Sabre jumped when Matzel tapped on her window. She exited her car.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked.

"Let's do it."

The duplex sat close to the sidewalk with approximately five feet of dirt and weeds leading up to the front door.

"It doesn't look bad out here, except the weeds could use some mowing," Sabre said.

When Matzel couldn't find a doorbell, he knocked. "It could be the neighbors keep up the yard," he said.

"Or maybe the Parkers don't spend enough time out here to get it dirty."

No one answered the door, so he knocked louder this time. They heard a woman yell, "Sarah, get the door."

About thirty seconds later, the door opened and a horrible stench escaped. Sarah, a nine-year-old girl with cinnamon-colored braids and a button nose covered in freckles, stood there. She swallowed uncomfortably and said, "Come in."

"Who is it?" her mother yelled from the sofa.

Sarah turned toward her. "Uh..."

The social worker stepped inside, and Sabre followed. The curtains were all closed, keeping much of the sunlight out of the room, but there was enough light to see that the floor was covered with debris and trash. The smell of urine and sewer permeated the air.

"It's Steve Matzel, Department of Social Services," he said as he stepped toward the sofa.

"What the ...?" Sarah's mother, Ellesse Parker, said.

Matzel interrupted her. "We received a report that your children are in danger, and we're here to investigate."

Ellesse threw a shirt onto the coffee table in an obvious attempt to cover something, but not before Sabre and Steve saw the drug paraphernalia, some of it still exposed. Ellesse straightened the shirt, trying to hide the rest.

"Get out of here," she said. "My case is closed."

Steve ignored her comments. "What's that awful smell?"

"The toilet is backed up again."

"Did you call the landlord?"

"I called him about the rats and the roaches before, but he won't do nothing. He blames me for not keeping my house clean enough."

"How long has the toilet not worked?"

"About a month," Sarah said.

"Shut up, Sarah," the mother yelled. "It's been on and off for about a month, but it's only been completely clogged for a few days."

Sarah lowered her head and remained silent.

Sabre noticed that although Ellesse was still thin, she looked like she had gained some weight, but when her eyes adjusted to the light and Ellesse turned a little to the side, Sabre understood why. "Where's your brother Denny?" Sabre asked Sarah.

"He's in the bedroom."

"Please show me."

"You can't go in there," Ellesse yelled.

"Yes, she can," Steve said. "We need to see if Denny is okay."

Sarah led Sabre to the bedroom, the stench increasing as they neared the bathroom. Sabre was glad the bathroom door was closed. The smell in the bedroom wasn't much better. A small

wastebasket stood near the closet overflowing with dirty diapers. The pile of soiled diapers next to it was almost as tall as the wastebasket itself.

"Sarah, is your mom pregnant?" Sabre had to speak louder than she intended in order to be heard over Ellesse, who was still yelling at the social worker.

"Yes, and she's using drugs again. I know that's not good for the baby. And she's saying all kinds of crazy things."

Sabre tiptoed to the unmade bed where Denny was sleeping, afraid of what she might step in, and trying to avoid the trash on the floor. Dirty clothes were strewn about the room. The sheet on the bed was covered with urine and feces stains. Denny's face and hands were dirty, his hair looked like it hadn't been washed or even combed in weeks, and mucus was caked below his nose and on his cheeks. She watched him for a few seconds as he breathed rhythmically in his sleep.

"She can't take care of a new baby," Sarah said with wet eyes. "She can't even take care of us. And Denny's not getting enough to eat. Look at this house. I tried to keep it clean at first, but I couldn't keep up, and then when the toilet overflowed, I didn't know what to do."

"You did the right thing calling me," Sabre said. "We'll let Denny sleep for now. Are you okay?"

"I'm hungry."

"We'll get you something to eat as soon as we leave here."

"Are you taking us to Polinsky?" Sarah said, her lips quivering.

"I'm afraid so," Sabre said. She had gotten very attached to Sarah the last time the case was in the system, and wished she could take these kids home with her, but that wasn't practical. The best she could do was get them to a safe place, and Polinsky Receiving Home was a secure and comfortable temporary placement. She knew Sarah actually preferred it over foster care. "You can't live like this, and your mom needs some help for that baby."

Sarah's head dropped. "I know."

"Why don't you get a few things together that you want to take with you."

Sabre walked back to the living room, holding her breath as she passed the bathroom. When she reached the living room, Matzel was trying to calm Ellesse who had stood up and was yelling in his face. There was a knock on the door.

Matzel answered the door and let in two police officers, a male and a female.

"You called the cops?" Ellesse yelled.

"Yes, you said you weren't going to let me take the children. You know I have to."

Ellesse took two quick steps toward Matzel and started swinging at him. The policeman grabbed her arms and pulled them behind her.

"Be careful," Steve said. "She's pregnant."

"Alright," Ellesse said, a little calmer. Then she started to cry.

Steve and Sabre walked into the kitchen. Sabre gagged when she saw the weeks of dirty dishes and the moldy and rotting food with maggots and flies all over it. Cockroaches scattered as they neared the sink.

"Sorry," she said and turned to go. "I've seen enough."