

Chapter 1

Sandy Norris took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and concentrated. A large brown envelope was on the table in front of her. Her right hand moved lightly over it. Little by little, her breathing slowed.

Detective Sam Kennedy sat across from her. He leaned forward, watching her closely.

Sandy suddenly slumped forward. Her hand continued to make a circular motion over the envelope. Only the movement of her hand told Sam that she was still awake.

The small room they were in was bare. One thing broke up the monotony of the décor. It was a large mirror on the far wall. Behind the one-way mirror stood a man in

a dark suit. He gazed fixedly at the curly-haired young woman.

Sandy suddenly gasped. "I'm in the country," she said. A slight frown drew her eyebrows together. She tilted her head to one side. "I'm in the foothills, not on a main highway. I see a dirt road leading into this place. Dry grass. A fence is falling down. There's a barn with big holes in the roof. No one's been in this place for a long time."

Her hand began to move faster. Her breathing speeded up. "I'm going into the barn."

Then she paused again, frowning. Her face crumpled. Tears began to trickle out from under her lashes. "I'm so scared," Sandy said in a strange, high voice. She sounded like a frightened child. "Oh, please help me. I'm so scared. There's a"—Sandy gulped—"snake!" she cried. "I see it."

Sam's lips drew back over his gritted teeth.

Sandy huddled down in the chair. “It’s too dark in here. I’m scared,” she said in the childish voice. “I’m so tired. Mommy? Where are you? Daddy, why did you leave me here alone? Mommy? Daddy? Help me!”

“Good work, Sandy,” Sam said. “Now tell me where you are.”

Sandy groaned. She straightened up in her chair. A moment later she opened her eyes. She blinked. Then she shook her head and gazed at Sam. “I need a map.”

Sam opened a laptop. He pulled up Google Earth. Then he put the computer in front of her. She typed on the keyboard. *Click. Click.* Again she closed her eyes. Her hand hovered over the screen. Then her finger pointed directly to a spot on the map.

Sam leaned over the table. She opened her eyes. He took a closer look at the map. “Hmm,” he said. “Carson Meadows. Look at the satellite image. There was a ranch here fifty years ago.”

“You’d better hurry,” Sandy said softly. “I think the little girl is in or near a building. But there are snakes. And she’s scared.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Sam called over his shoulder. He bolted out of the room. She sighed in relief. Then she leaned back in her chair. She closed her eyes.

A moment later Sam returned. He handed her a glass of water. “How do you feel?” he asked.

Sandy opened one eye. She grinned and reached out for the glass. “I feel like someone just dropped me off a ten-story building,” she said.

“Huh!” Sam said. “If you fell off a building, you wouldn’t feel a thing. You’d be giving violin lessons to the angels.”

Sandy laughed. “Thanks for the support, Sam. You’ve always been my cheering section.”

The detective grinned. But then he grew serious.

“The search party has been contacted. They were told what you’d come up with. They’re on it.”

“How long has that child been missing?” Sandy asked.

Sam’s red face got a bit redder. He was a seasoned detective. He’d hunted for many missing children. The worry never stopped. Would a lost child be found alive?

“Just a few hours,” Sam said. “She was on a hiking trip with her family. The little girl wandered off after lunch.”

“How old is she?” Sandy asked.

“Six,” Sam said quietly. He glanced over at the wall clock. “It’ll be dark in fifteen minutes,” he said. “We’d better not lose any time. The temperature has dropped. It’s been below freezing the last couple of nights.”

Sandy shivered. Then she was again overwhelmed by the child’s feelings. She felt wave after wave of fear and loneliness. And

something else. She struggled to identify the last powerful emotion.

Anger! The child was angry. Her father had left her alone on the hillside. The little girl hadn't accidentally wandered away. She'd been deliberately left behind. Sam wasn't telling her the truth.