



## Chapter One

June 25, 2001  
Walnut Creek, California

"Chase," the voice said when Sam mumbled "hello" into the receiver. "It's Thomas. I'm in the Diablo foothills. You'd better come."

Sam sat up straight and fumbled for the clock on the bedside table, tilting it until the red numbers came into focus: 2:15 A.M. Blinking, she surveyed the room for a sign of something wrong. "What is it? Has something happened to Rob?" Her throat had the gritty

texture of sandpaper as she spoke.

"I sure as hell hope not. Rob's supposed to be with you. It's the middle of the night. You want to check his room?"

"I'll look when we're done. Why are you calling?"

"We found Walters."

The tone of Detective Thomas' voice let Sam know this was business, and the business was that a child was dead. Not a fun business to be in. A victim of child abuse, Molly Walters had been removed from her mother's home more than once in her seven years. Sam wished she had been able to keep her away for good. She sighed, rubbing the back of her hand over her eyes to clear the fog of sleep from her brain. "Damn."

"Uh, it's not the one you're thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not Molly."

"Nick, for God's sake, say it in English. What the hell are you talking about?"

"You need to come up here."

"The boys are still asleep. I'll come to the station house later."

"No," Thomas insisted. "The boys are sixteen years old, Sam. They'll be fine. You need to come to the scene now."

At the tone of his voice, Sam set her feet on the floor and focused on the far walls of her dark room. Her head swam, sleep pulling her eyelids closed like a wet cloth. "Why? What's going on?"

"There's something you should see."

Sam swallowed hard. She'd dealt with abuse and death since she left homicide, but rarely face-to-face. She handled perpetrators. It was mostly bullshit with them--trying to push their buttons and act tough. She could do that. She could be tougher than any gang of criminals, but the victims she left to someone else. It was a routine she wanted to maintain. She hesitated. "I don't know, Thomas."

"Get your ass out of bed," he said, his tone urgent but not angry.

"Watch it." If Molly wasn't dead, though, what was going on? "You picked up the mother?" she asked.

"The mother's not going anywhere--ever. You coming or what?"

Sam pushed the warm covers off her legs and was instantly cold. Unmoving, she tried to sort it out, unclear why she needed to see the dead Walters woman unless the police suspected that seven-year-old Molly was the killer. Doubtful. "I'll be there."

"Good. And come with an empty stomach."

Despite the ache in her gut, Sam tried to joke it off. "Doesn't sound pretty."

"It's not. Take 680 to El Cerro. Head east until El Cerro becomes Diablo Boulevard. A mile later, take a left at the sign for Diablo Country Club. We're about a mile and a half up on the left in the wooded lot across from the pasture. You'll see the cars." As he rattled off his location, Sam committed it to memory. "You write that down?" he asked.

"Never. See you in a few." Switching on her bedside light, Sam blinked yellow flashes until her vision cleared. She crossed the room and found a pair of jeans and a cotton turtleneck and sweater from the night before and dressed quickly, thankful for the no-nonsense ease of her short hair and her taste for no makeup. It defied everything she'd ever known for the first eighteen years of her life. Even twenty years later, it still felt great.

Pulling the holster from its post at the back of her closet, she strapped on her gun and hurried down the hall, pushing open the door to the first bedroom. Posters of Cal Ripken, hands raised to the crowd, at his record-breaking 2,131st game and Mark McGuire hitting his 70th homer, covered the two walls above the single bed. Several days worth of clothes were scattered across the floor, creating patterns of gray that played in the shadows of the room. Despite the mess, she exhaled at the sight of sheets pulled loose and strewn across Rob's body. He'd missed curfew again last night. At least he'd made it home. She watched the steady rise and fall of his chest as he slept. She would deal with him later.

Closing his door, she moved to the next one and opened it. "Derek," she whispered.

The sleepy boy shifted slightly, his blond hair covering his eyes. "Huh," he grumbled, his arm falling out of the covers and dangling toward the floor. Above his head hung a poster of the constellations, beside it a Bruce Springsteen poster from Darkness on the Edge of Town, an album that had come out while Sam was in college. His books were carefully stacked on the desk, clothes put in their place, only the most recent Grisham novel spread-eagled on the floor.

"I've got to go to a scene. I'll be back before you're up. If you need me, page me."

"Uh-huh," the sixteen-year-old mumbled back.

She moved into the room. "Derek," she whispered a little louder.

He opened his eyes and blinked hard, squinting as he pushed the hair from his face. "I heard you--you're out, page you if Rob sets the house on fire."

She smiled and winked. "If you're up before I'm back, remind him he needs to clean that sty. And tell him not to go anywhere until we've talked. He missed curfew again. You know what time he got home?"

Derek shook his head, turning away from her and tucking the covers under his chin.

Sam had a feeling Derek knew exactly when his brother had come home, but she respected him for not ratting. She would talk with Rob herself. Something had to be done before it got out of hand. "Remind him about the room."

"I'll tell him, but he won't do it."

She waved him off. "I'll bug him later."

"Won't help," Derek said, his face deep in his pillow again.

Sam looked around the neat room and shook her head. She definitely needed to have a talk with Rob.

"Shut the door," Derek groaned as she left.

#

Sam fought off chills as she stepped from her car and walked toward the group up ahead. Thick fog drifted over the tops of the half-dozen parked cars. The cool night air in Diablo seeped under the collar of her parka and through the cotton of her turtleneck and sweater like long, icy fingers. The headlights of police cars reflected off the fog, casting muted shadows across the trees. The smell of

damp eucalyptus hung in her nose, a single comforting sensation among the foreign ones.

It had been eight years since she'd been at the scene of a murder. When the boys came, she had left the sheriff's department to go to the Department of Justice to get away from the death. The immunity she'd built up in her days as a homicide detective had eroded since she'd been with the Department of Justice, leaving more than one chink in her armor.

She still had no idea what she was doing at the scene, but she was determined to stay calm and handle whatever was thrown her way. She'd spent enough time in male-dominated situations to know what it required to keep her reputation as one of the boys. Throwing up at the sight of blood was grounds for permanent weenie status.

"I'm glad you could make it," Nick said as he approached. He was tall, six-three to Sam's five-six, and lean. "It's been a long time, eh?" His voice was low and raspy, and she realized he'd been awakened from sleep too. The tone of his voice was like an old record, scratchy and deep, and she caught the gold flecks in his brown eyes and forced her gaze away.

She looked around the darkness and nodded. "Not long enough. Why am I here?"

He turned her toward the scene with an arm over her shoulder.

She stared at the arm and gave Nick a sideways glance.

He looked at his arm as though it didn't belong to him and dropped it back to his side. "We still on for my birthday dinner?"

"You didn't call me up here to discuss your birthday, I hope."

Nick shook his head without comment.

She motioned to the police, still hovering in a small circle around the body. Their voices mixed with the low rustle of the wind in the trees, and she wished they were louder, closer. She wanted to talk about the job. Shoptalk would be a huge relief. That she could handle. Everything else was the problem. "Walters?"

Nick studied her a moment longer than he needed to, then turned away to face the scene. "Yep--Sandi."

Sam let the breath she'd been holding out through her teeth as she started to relax. At least it wasn't the girl. "She O.D.?"

Nick didn't answer, his eyes evasive.

Sam looked over his shoulder. A flashbulb shot off in the distance, and Sam caught a glimpse of skin against the dark ground. Not healthy, glowing skin but

skin infused with the whitish-blue tint that came with death. She looked back at Nick. "Why call me up here?"

"Remember the serial killer you had as your last case in homicide--the one they got a conviction on right about the time when I finally got the balls to ask you out?"

"Nick," she started to protest. "If this is some sort of sick fantasy, calling me out here with cases that remind you of how we--"

"Slow down and listen," he retorted. "What do you remember about the victimology?"

She shook her head and reviewed her mental notes. "Six victims; all Caucasian females from the Berkeley Hills, all between the ages of thirty-five and forty-seven with blond or light brown hair and light eyes. Two were prostitutes, three were all-night-diner employees, and one was a convenience store clerk.

"Killed by manual ligature, a eucalyptus branch with six leaves tucked over each ear. Charlie Sloan, a San Francisco stockbroker and local swim coach, was arrested and charged; convicted almost three years ago and went to the chair for the murder of the six women."

"And all that without your notes," Nick added.

"So what's the point?"

"He's dead, right?"

She ground her teeth. "Killed on death row, Nick--February 5 of last year."

"You're sure?"

Sam turned to get back in the car. She was too tired for this shit.

"I'm not joking around," Nick said.

She glanced back and the look in his eyes confirmed that there was nothing humorous about what was going on.

He nodded toward the scene and started walking back.

Sam zipped up her coat beneath her chin and shoved her hands in her pockets, heading after him. Nick carved a path through the police officers. As she stepped closer, the flash of cameras glared in her eyes and she blinked hard to clear the black spots from her vision.

When her eyesight sharpened again, she took two steps forward and gazed into the vacant stare of a stick-thin woman in her forties. In life Sandi Walters had never looked so calm. Simple white briefs were all she wore. Her straight bottle-blond hair hung limply over her shoulders, the twig of a eucalyptus tree tucked behind each ear. She was propped against a tree, one knee up and her salon-tanned

arms flung to her sides. Her legs were parted slightly, like she'd passed out. Sam could see why Nick had called her. It was familiar.

Cheap bracelets lined her right wrist. A thin silver ring with a knot, the kind sold at street fairs, circled her thumb. Track marks still showed blue in the creases of her elbow.

Sam blinked hard and forced back the pictures that entered her head. Death always brought a litany of snapshots of her own youth. She saw her father with a cigarette hanging off his lip, her mother nursing a third G&T that was mostly 'G', her sister cowering in a corner trying to stay out of the way.

Sam stepped forward and inspected the twig tucked behind Walters' left ear.

"Maybe Molly's father killed her in a moment of rage and made it look like a copycat."

"How could it be copycat? No one ever had the information on the eucalyptus. It was never released to the media."

"It was during the trial."

"Not the detail about how many leaves."

She shook her head. "That we know of. It's probably in some new serial killer book by now. That stuff just leaks. I say you look at the dad."

"Dad's got an airtight alibi."

Sam shook her head. "They always have an airtight alibi."

"He's been in county on a DUI for the past twenty-four hours. According to our guy's estimate, Sandi here's been dead around five."

"Who else is in the household? Just Molly, Sandi, and Sandi's mother, right?"

"Molly's grandma uses a walker. No way she got the body up here by herself."

Sam nodded, remembering.

"Plus, look at those twigs. Recognize them?" Nick asked.

Without looking away from the body, Sam nodded noncommittally. "I agree it's familiar."

"It's more than that."

She raised an eyebrow at Nick. "It's a couple of twigs, Nick, not a tattoo. It could be a coincidence."

He raised an eyebrow back at her. He had an angular jaw and large brown eyes with flecks of green and gold. His mother was black and his father was white, and Nick had the warmest color skin Sam had ever seen. It contrasted with his broad shoulders and lean frame to keep him from looking too hard.

She knew cops weren't supposed to believe in coincidences, but Sloan was dead. She looked at the twig again. Six leaves, just like the others.

Sam shook her head. "It's got to be a coincidence. Sloan's dead. This is something else. Maybe the eucalyptus symbolizes something else."

Nick nodded. "There's the c-word again. It worries me."

Fighting off the chill, Sam turned and peered over at the other twig. "Damn. You're saying Sloan wasn't our killer? The wrong guy was executed?"

Nick shrugged. "Maybe he had a partner."

Sam surveyed the area. It wasn't possible. Sloan had been alone. They'd worked eighteen months to nail him and almost six years to get him convicted and sentenced to death row. He'd never confessed, but he'd done it. The evidence had proved it. She could not accept that the system had killed the wrong man. "What else have you got?"

"Signs of sexual intercourse," Nick added.

Sam frowned. "Semen?"

"Oh, yeah. First guess is postmortem."

"Charlie Sloan never had sex with his victims."

Nick met her gaze. "Okay, not identical."

Sam found herself coming back to someone Sandi knew. "What about other relatives in the area? A new boyfriend?"

"The girl was staying with her grandmother. Dad and Grandma are it."

Sam noticed an odd pattern in the dirt by Sandi's foot. It was the faintest rectangular shape, and Sam wondered what had caused it. On her knees, she searched for evidence. She found it on the instep of Sandi's left foot. "You see this?"

Nick knelt beside her. Using his pen, he pushed on the woman's toes, shining his light on the bottom of her foot.

A gum wrapper was stuck to the arch of Sandi's foot. It was silver and Sam recognized it as Extra. She put her nose to it. Spearmint. Her favorite.

Sam studied the wrapper. "Someone left you a clue." She stood up and brushed off her jeans. "Looks like you've got a new killer on your hands--one with some inside info on our old cases."

Nick shook his head. "Not me, Sam. We. You're working this one, too."