



Chapter Two

Pulling down the street where Sandi's mother lived, Nick Thomas cringed. He wanted to be at home already. Turn up the Miles Davis, pull out his bass, and maybe tinker for a while. Probably be too late when he got home after the baseball game. The upstairs neighbor threw a fit when he played after ten, threatened to call the cops on him. Even though she knew he was the cops. Hell, his bass skills weren't great but they weren't bad either. Or maybe they were.

His sister, Gina, had invited him to dinner at her house. But he'd probably have to miss that, too. What

with two sisters and a married brother all within a ten-mile radius, Nick ate at home only one night a week as it was. And that one night was takeout. He had even less talent for cooking than for playing bass.

He looked up at the Walters house. The houses on the block were cookie-cutter styles built in the fifties: aluminum siding with chipping paint in white, yellow, and gray. Each had two windows in its ranch front. A set of shutters on the outside would have broken the monotony had someone taken the time. Even he, with no decorating sense, could have suggested that. The dandelion-pocked grass formed perfect rectangles in front, only the shades of brown differed. Each house seemed to come with three cars. Garage doors open, cars set up on blocks in each driveway. The town of Danville had very affluent pockets, but this wasn't one of them. His beat-up Honda would certainly go unnoticed.

He would've preferred company for his visit to the family, but Sam was spending her day pulling records from the Charlie Sloan murders and following up on every person who had been involved, even peripherally, in the case. It was a task he didn't envy. Paperwork had never been his forte. In comparison, interviewing Sandi's mother ought to be quick, at least.

Other than the endless paperwork, interviewing a victim's family was the worst part of any investigation. A grieving family and he had to give them the third degree. But he knew it was a necessary step. Eighty percent of the time, families knew the killer, even if they didn't realize it. The family was a solid place to start an investigation. Still, he hated the response he always got. Guilty or not, the family inevitably stared at him like he was a cockroach.

Shaking off the thought, Nick tucked his car keys under the mat, as he always did. Otherwise he had a tendency to lose them. With a deep breath, he pulled himself out of the car and straightened his tie. He felt the comforting weight of the gun resting beneath his left arm as he approached the house. At least he wasn't there to break the news of Sandi's death. Her family had already been informed. Pulling back the screen door, he knocked firmly on the door's surface.

"Who is it?" called a haggard voice from inside.

"Detective Thomas from the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department," he called back.

Murmured words were exchanged, and Nick heard the sliding of locks as the door creaked open. The little girl who opened the door had to be Molly. Nick knew Sandi and her husband had only one child. But beyond deduction, Nick could see the resemblance. Molly had her mother's tiny, straight nose and thin lips. Molly's hair was brown, probably her mother's natural color.

"I'm Detective Thomas. Is your grandma or dad home?"

Big, sad eyes stared at him without a response. Then someone called from the background, "Let them in, Molly."

Molly stepped back quickly and let the door swing open.

"In here," the voice called and Nick walked inside to see the woman he assumed was Molly's grandmother sitting in a worn olive-green Lazy Boy. The room was a blue-gray haze of cigarette smoke. He took a last deep breath of clean air and approached her. She had the look of a basset hound, a droopy face with heavy jowls. Large, wary brown eyes studied him.

"I'm afraid I can't get up," the woman apologized.

"No need." Nick stepped forward and shook her hand. "I'm Detective Nick Thomas of the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department. I'm very sorry for your loss, but I need to ask you a few questions."

The woman pointed to Molly. "Get to your room, child. And shut the door."

Molly stared at him and then back at her grandmother.

"Now," the woman bellowed.

Molly jumped slightly and ran, her bare feet slapping against the stairs.

The grandmother shifted her considerable weight in the chair and pointed to the couch. "Feel free to sit."

"Thank you." The couch looked deep and worn, and Nick picked a stiff chair instead. The ability to move from a spot quickly had saved him on more than one occasion. A deep couch made that nearly impossible. He pulled out his pad,

watching with his peripheral vision for someone else to appear. With his pen poised, he said, "I'd like to ask some questions about your daughter if I may, Ms.--"

"Wendy. Wendy Mayes. Ask away," she said, as though he was taking a poll on her choice of gasoline.

"Can you tell me about when you last saw your daughter?"

The woman cast a look over her shoulder. Nick followed her gaze but saw nothing. Only a nail in the center of a wall papered in dingy blue stripes. The paper was yellowed around an area of about a square foot where a picture must have been hung. He wondered briefly when the picture had been removed and what it was.

"I was looking after Molly," Wendy Mayes told him. "Sandi was off, and I told her I'd stay with the child."

He studied her face, the thick wrinkles in her skin coming as much from extra weight as from age. "Did your daughter tell you where she was going?"

"Never. And I didn't ask," she said without raising an eyebrow. "Sometimes it's work, sometimes it ain't."

He glanced at her hands crossed on her lap, remembering Sandi's resting pose. The two women had the same hands--long fingers with thick blue veins and large, square nails. "Where did Mrs. Walters work?"

"Weren't never married, those two."

"Excuse me?"

"Sandi and Mick weren't never married."

Nick glanced at his notes. "Sandi's last name on her driver's license was Walters."

The woman harrumphed. "They weren't married. Changed her name at the drop of a hat, she did--like there was something wrong with Mayes." She shook her head.

Nick made a note to check for priors under other names. "Where did your daughter work, Ms. Mayes?"

"Denny's in Antioch." She shot the response out like a bullet.

He nodded. "How long had she been working there?"

The woman shrugged. "Five, six months, maybe."

"And before that?"

The woman sighed. "Detective, my daughter held a lot of jobs. You really expect me to keep track of 'em all?"

Nick looked at the woman, wondering how hard it could have been. "What about friends that your daughter spent time with?"

"Didn't have no female friends. None that I know of, anyway."

"Male friends?" Nick asked.

The woman laughed. "Detective, I couldn't even keep up with her jobs. I don't have a clue who she went around with."

"What about men living in the house?"

"Been a few," she said.

"Do you know their names?"

"Mick's one. They've been off and on since Molly. He moved out about four months ago, I think. There might have been someone else. I don't know."

"Mick's last name is Walters?"

"Same as Molly's," she said without answering his question.

Nick kept his temper under his vest. "Mick is Molly's father?"

The woman nodded like he was a moron.

"Is Mick here now?"

She shook her head.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Been a couple days," she said.

"He hasn't been here in a couple of days?" Nick repeated.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "That's what I just said."

"You know anyone who would want to hurt your daughter?" he asked.

"No."

"Did she ever talk about any fights or threats?"

"We didn't talk, Detective."

Nick pushed himself to his feet. Opening his jacket, he pulled out a business card and laid it on the table. "You think of anything, you give me a call, would you?"

The woman didn't answer.

Nick started toward the door and turned back, glancing again at her unstained fingertips. Patting his jacket, he asked, "You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette, would you, Ms. Mayes? I'm fresh out."

"Not a one, Detective."

Taking a last look at the blue haze of the room, Nick nodded. "Are you a smoker, Ms. Mayes?"

"I wouldn't say either way."

Nick let it go for the time being. "Thank you for your time." As he opened the door, Nick noticed Molly sitting at the top of the stairs staring down at him.

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Nick tossed the ball to the umpire and returned to his post beside first. It was the bottom of the ninth, two outs, and the score was tied one to one. Rob Austin, Sam's nephew, was at bat.

Rob selected a bat from the pile and swung it lightly in a small semicircle as he approached the plate. Austin was a natural ballplayer. Nick had known him and his brother, Derek, since they joined one of the Little League teams coached by local police officers almost seven years ago.

Unfortunately, with a pin in his left hip and a growing disparity in the lengths of his legs, Derek hadn't lasted long. Despite their identical genes, Nick thought, the two boys were as different as night and day. Where Rob was open and loud, Derek was shy and quiet. Rob loved sports, Derek music. Rob was active and had a hard hit and a strong throw. Derek could name every rock song recorded between 1960 and 2000, and he knew the artist and album on more of them than Nick could believe.

Even their appearances were far from identical. Though both were almost six feet tall, Rob was stocky, with broad shoulders and skin bronzed to match the scatter of freckles across his cheeks, while Derek was thin and slightly hunched over, his freckles a sharp contrast with his light skin tone.

Sam was on the sidelines with Derek, and Nick forced himself to greet her casually and then walk away. Every time he saw her, he pictured her that night. It was the first time he'd seen her as more than just a colleague, and maybe a friend. It had been one flash of what was underneath the hard exterior--one fleeting glimpse. Keeping it all business while working the case side by side with her would be hard enough. Even now, after he should be used to it, he was surprised how much of Sam he saw in the boys. The short blond curls. The bright blue eyes, slightly rounder than their aunt's green ones.

The coach was talking to the other team's pitcher, and Nick paced along the edge of the field, wishing the man would hurry up and get off the mound. The smoke in Wendy Mayes' home kept sweeping across his mind, making him wonder why she would have lied to him, if she had lied. Maybe she simply hadn't wanted to offer him a cigarette. But her creamy white fingertips and unstained teeth suggested otherwise. If she wasn't a smoker, then who had been puffing away in that room? Not little Molly, he hoped.

Nick thought about Molly Walters. She had been one of Sam's cases. Sam had prosecuted Sandi on charges of child abuse but had failed to get them to stick.

He'd heard her voice her frustration about the judge more than once during the case. Despite X-rays showing multiple fractures in Molly's right arm, despite the girl's own tearful testimony, the judge had sent Molly back to live with her mother. Sam's insistent appeals to the judge had gotten her kicked out of court.

It wasn't strange that Sam had been involved with the case against Sandi Walters. As a special agent with the Department of Justice, Sam's caseload was mostly abuse cases. So what about this case that was bothering him so much?

Nick stopped pacing as the other coach left the field. Rob approached the plate and raised his arm to the ump to signal time out while he scraped the dirt in the batter's box with his cleats and planted his back foot comfortably. After settling into his stance, he swung his bat in slow motions, finishing each swing with the bat pointed at the pitcher in an attempt at intimidation.

The other team's pitcher had the best arm in the league. With a full windup, the first pitch came fast and straight. Rob swung and connected for a hard line drive down the left field line, but the ball hooked left and landed in foul territory.

"Strike one."

"Come on. They're coming straight and hard," Nick said under his breath. "Consistent pitch. Just straighten it out, Austin."

The next throw was a high fastball and Rob swung a moment too late. Nick heard the ball smack the catcher's mitt.

"Strike two."

"Come on," Nick whispered again.

Rob steadied his arm and furrowed his brow as he set his eyes on the pitcher's hand. He had to make contact and keep the ball in play.

The ball came, again straight and hard. Rob swung, making clean contact. The hit was a long fly ball that sent the left fielder backpedaling. Then, realizing the ball was going too far, the player spun around and ran. Both benches jumped up screaming. Rob was running the bases, legs pumping as he watched over his shoulder for the ball to come back.

Nick screamed at Rob to make the turn and run for home. The shortstop threw hard and fast to the catcher, who was poised at home for the play, his mask thrown off to the side.

Nick cringed as the ball neared home plate. "Come on!"

Rob instinctively dropped into a hook slide, his left leg extended, and scraped the surface of home plate just as the catcher fielded the ball and swept his mitt home, missing him by inches. With a horizontal wave of his arms, the umpire called Rob safe.

"Yes!" Nick screamed, jumping up.

The kids piled off the bench and ran for the players crossing home plate. Nick leaned back and watched them hoist Rob victoriously onto their shoulders. He laughed.

"Nice game, coach."

Nick turned to see Sam smiling at him. He touched her shoulder, relieved when she didn't flinch. "Glad you're here."

"Any progress on the case?"

He shook his head. "Sandi's mother wasn't much help."

Sam nodded. "I remember her from the pretrial hearing in Molly's case. Not a real easy woman."

"Are any women easy?"

With a warning look, half play, half serious, Sam gave him a little shove.

"Watch it."

"How about you? Find anything from the old case?" he asked.

Sam shook her head. "I got a complete list of involved parties to the sheriff's department by about noon today. The clerk I talked to recognized a few of the names from the list who are still in the area, a couple in the department and one working local security. He's running the other names through the computer. Once we locate everyone, we can pick out the people we need to talk to. I've also got someone following up on anyone Charlie Sloan knew in prison who was recently released."

Nick watched the boys celebrate as a thought circled his brain like a stallion gaining speed. "Sloan could probably have paid someone pretty generously to get him off by making it look like he wasn't the killer. Be hard to prove he committed another murder from death row. Maybe he was hoping to get a stay of execution."

"It'd be a little late for that now."

Nick shrugged. "Maybe he had it planned earlier."

"But why go through with it now? Why bother if Sloan's been dead more than a year?" She shook her head. It didn't make sense. "Maybe the family would want to try to clear his name, but I checked around to locate members of Sloan's family still in the area and didn't find any. His wife declared bankruptcy, leaving upwards of a hundred and fifty thou in unpaid legal fees, and then left the country. She's originally from France."

Nick pictured Charlie Sloan's smiling face, his starched white shirts with his initials on the left cuff, a Hermes tie and a dark suit. He looked more like Michael Milken than Charles Manson. "I can't make sense of it."

Derek reached the group and they cut the shoptalk.

"I found the Exile on Main Street album at Adobe Records," Nick told him.

Derek's eyes widened. "That's the only Stones one I'm missing."

Nick shook his head. "Not anymore."

"Really?"

Nick nodded.

"Wow. That's so cool!"

Rob came running up and threw an arm around Nick. Nick returned the embrace. "Nice playing, kid."

"Yeah. Good game," Sam added.

Rob was panting. "Man, I thought I was going to strike out and lose the game."

"So did the kid in left field. You sure showed him. Nice going."

Rob gave him a grin.

"Good game," Derek agreed.

"Thanks, Der," Rob said.

Trying not to stare, Nick watched the boy move as they all headed to the car. Despite the weekly physical therapy and the shoes to correct the two-inch disparity in his legs, Derek seemed to be limping worse than ever. They crossed the street and headed up the small hill to the parking lot. Nick waved to several of the parents.

Rob turned to Sam. "What'd you think?"

Sam nodded. "Thought it was great."

Nick watched Rob search her face. He could tell Rob was disappointed with her reaction. He sensed the tension between them and knew immediately that they hadn't addressed the previous night's missed curfew. Sam was angry. And rightly so. He just would have handled it a little more openly.

He made a fist to gain control. It wasn't his to deal with. This was between them. Sam's family, not his. "She's right, Rob. It was great," he added, hoping to distract Rob from Sam's less than boisterous reaction.

"Thanks." He turned back to Sam. "Can we go to Chevy's to celebrate? I'm starved."

"I don't think--" she started to say.

"My treat," Nick suggested.

Sam shot him a look, but Nick winked in response. "Give me a chance to bug your aunt here about some business," he added.

Sam looked at Nick and then at Rob. "I don't know. Maybe we should just head home. It's pretty late and after last night, Rob, I'm not sure you deserve--"

Rob stopped and spun around, his eyes narrow. "I was half an hour late."

Sam watched him with a sour face. "Curfew is curfew. It means home by midnight. That's plenty late, Rob. You're only sixteen."

"It's summer."

"It doesn't matter. Midnight is the rule."

Rob looked to Nick for backup.

Nick shook his head and turned away. He couldn't intervene. It wasn't his place. Still, every bit of teenage friction around him made him wish he'd had a chance at parenthood.

"That's ridiculous," Rob snapped.

Sam grabbed Rob's shoulder as he started to turn away from her. Her voice low, her face inches from his, she was nothing if not intimidating. "It's not ridiculous. It's a rule. You've got to be home by curfew. You hear me?"

Rob pulled away.

"She's right, Rob," Nick added. "It's important to obey your aunt."

Sam didn't even look at him. Her eyes were set on Rob, waiting for his agreement. He didn't give it. She straightened her spine and turned toward the car. "I think we should go home."

"I was half an hour late," Rob repeated. "Jesus Christ, I'm not one of your damn prisoners."

Several people passed them and Sam remained silent.

Nick felt his cheeks burn as he awaited her reaction.

Sam lowered her voice and aimed her glare at Rob. "I don't care if it's a minute or an hour. I set a curfew and you're home. Don't you dare make a scene about it, Rob. This isn't my fault. It's yours."

"Bullshit. It's always about you! You and your goddamn rules."

Sam's jaw set at the tone of his voice. "That's it, Rob. For the next week, you go to work and practice and that's all. You're grounded. Any more of that language and it'll be longer. Another slipup and I'll sell that damn bike. Are we clear?"

Rob waved her off. "That's not fair. I don't have to live by your rules."

Derek slumped back. If Nick didn't know better, he would have thought Derek was afraid.

"Rob," Nick warned.

"No, it's true," Rob insisted. "She runs the place like it's the military."

Sam stared at Rob as though he had turned into an alien. "Why are you so angry?"

He shrugged in a hard motion. "You don't know crap."

"Watch it," Sam warned.

"Crap is not a swear word."

"It's getting close."

"Jesus, it's like I'm in jail. You don't know anything about me, you don't care."

"I do care and I'd like to understand, Rob," Sam said, clearly frustrated.

"You don't give a damn."

She snapped back. "That's not true, Rob. I do care--I care a lot. I'm here busting my butt trying to help you, so don't try to twist this around. You're at fault here, not me."

"Of course your aunt cares," Nick interjected.

Sam threw him a look that told him to stay out of it. Then turning to the boys, she said, "That's it. We're going home. We've got leftovers."

"I'm not going with you," Rob screamed. "You're a bitch!"

Nick grabbed the boy's arm. "Rob!"

Rob pulled away. "She doesn't give a shit about me."

"That's not true."

Rob pointed to his aunt, who had turned her back and was walking to the car. "Look at her."

"Sam," Nick called after her, "Let's talk about this."

"You're out of line, Rob," she called back. "We're going home now. And you're grounded for a month. One more tirade and the bike is gone. I'm done with this acting out."

Rob didn't move.

"You shouldn't have said that to your aunt," Nick chastised. "It wasn't fair and you didn't mean it."

"Yes, I did. I hate her."

Nick shook his head, wishing he could do more. "You don't hate her. You'd better go on, Rob."

Rob started to stomp toward the car.

"And apologize," Nick called after him.

Derek followed them in silence, and Nick could tell all three were miserable.

He watched as they moved toward Sam's Caprice, trying to think of a way to make amends. He knew it would do no good, though. Sam didn't want his advice

on parenting, and Rob didn't have control over his own emotions. They needed to work things out on their own. And as much as he had started to care more than he should, it wasn't his business. He watched the few stragglers head to their cars, then sat on the curb under the darkening sky and rubbed his hands over his face.

He should concentrate on things he could fix, things he had control over. Concentrate on work, he told himself. It's a lot less exhausting. He thought back to Sandi Walters' death and how little he had learned from her mother. He knew his captain would want better answers than he could provide. Captain Cintrello was reporting directly to the undersheriff. A screw up on this case could put a hitch in both of their careers.

The undersheriff hadn't hesitated to call in the Department of Justice. With departments usually battling to keep others out of cases, the undersheriff's quick decision to open the case to another department let Nick know exactly how concerned he was about Sandi Walters' murder. The fact that someone had strangled this victim and left her with eucalyptus leaves behind each ear had made them all uneasy.

If Charlie Sloan didn't have a partner, it meant someone with inside information was the killer--D.A., the M.E.'s office, or a cop. If that wasn't the case, then someone sure as hell wanted it to look like it was an inside job.