



## Prologue

June 26, 1993  
Walnut Creek, California

Sam Chase left the house at 6:50 A.M. for her three-mile loop. The run was the single part of her day that remained consistent, five days a week. Twenty-four minutes later she would be home again. Twenty-four long, torturous minutes that she would spend cursing the fact that she could never find a rhythm.

She'd met runners, people who loved to run and talked about the high they got from it like it was a drug. Sam had never understood that. For her, it was all pain from start to finish. She did it because she had to and that was it. Five days a week, three miles each time. Then she could settle into bed at night with a bowl of ice cream and a book and not feel guilty.

One mile in, she passed John Muir Elementary School and waved hello to another runner she often saw on her loop. He wore yellow nylon shorts, the kind with the slits up the sides that, in his case, exposed sinewy legs. As he moved forward, his legs created tall, staccato arches, the motion graceful and smooth, unlike the shuffling, flat shape of her own strides.

Through the row of sycamore trees that lined the schoolyard, Sam could make out a few summer school kids just starting to sprinkle onto the playground. Their brightly colored outfits contrasted with the dull gray pavement of the yard. On the far side, a pack of them stood beside the fence. Their parents dropped them off as early as seven o'clock and could pick them up as late as six whenever school was in session. It was a great service for the parents, but it had to be hard on the kids to be at school for so long. Still, they were shouting and playing kickball and hanging upside down from the jungle gym with the energy that only children could have at such an early hour--and without the help of caffeine.

Sam ran by, noting the slow progression of cars heading toward the freeways. She thought about the upcoming day and her meetings. Anything to avoid thinking about the ache in her side and the numbing pain in her thighs. She reached the halfway mark and picked up the pace on her way back, eager to be home. As she did every morning, she'd set the timer on the coffee machine before

she left, and she looked forward to the smell of freshly brewed Mocha Java as she walked in the front door.

The wind picked up, and she could smell eucalyptus and lemon verbena, their scents intensifying as the temperature rose. June in Walnut Creek was hot, this June hotter than usual. August and September, the months of Indian summer in Northern California, would be scorching. Hot was fine by Sam. The heat cleared her head. And the arid heat cleared memories of the damp, miserable South of her youth.

Rounding the corner by the school, Sam caught sight of an adult standing on the edge of the playground where the kids were gathered. The prickle of adrenaline spiked in her neck and shoulders. She took two steps forward and changed her course. Something about the khaki coat and the hunched form of the shoulders was suspicious. Silent alarms rang in her head as she pushed herself further, faster. She heard a child's high-pitched scream and shot forward.

She could see the kids staring at the man with looks of horror. What had he done?

"You!" she screamed when she was within thirty feet.

The man spun around and Sam could see his pale nakedness beneath the coat. He quickly shut his coat and ran. He was six-two, maybe six-three, Caucasian with scraggly black curly hair that hung just over the collar of his coat. The shadow on his face suggested he hadn't shaved in a while, and she cursed herself for not spotting him sooner.

He wore clunky work boots and between the shoes and holding himself through his coat, she was on him before he reached the other side of the street. She grasped his shoulders and swung him around, tripping him and landing him on the ground, face up. Before he could move, she rolled him onto his face, brought his right hand behind his back, and jerked it up toward his head. He yelped.

He smelled like chocolate and cologne and she knew he'd had candy to offer the kids. All the good perverts kept treats. "Don't move, you sick bastard. What's your name?"

"I don't--I don't know--"

She jerked his arm harder. "What's your goddamn name?"

"Gerry. Gerry Hecht."

"You been arrested before, Gerry?"

"Uh, no. No, I--"

Trapping his arm under her knee, she grabbed his hair and pulled his head back. "I'm a fucking cop. Don't lie to me. Have you been arrested before?"

"Yeah, yeah," he grunted. "A couple of times."  
Sam let his hair go and smiled. "Then this time makes three."

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After an hour of waiting for the proper authorities to show up and answering questions and completing paperwork, Sam walked in her front door just as the phone started to ring.

The woman said, "Samantha Jean Everett?"

The sound of that name, her old name, rose like thick tar in her throat. She hadn't used the name since she left the South. It had been almost twelve years. "Who is this?" she asked, hearing terror behind the harshness in her own voice.

"My name is Francis Mason. I'm with Child Protection Services in Jackson, Mississippi."

Sam stared at the phone, trying to remember a case--any case--that had involved someone in Mississippi. There hadn't been one. She would have remembered. Just the word "Mississippi" burned like flaming crosses in her mind. "What do you want?"

The woman cleared her throat. "I'm calling on behalf of Polly Ann Austin."  
Sam gripped the phone with terror. "What's happened?"

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The constant buzz and whir of planes overhead, mixed with the booming loudspeaker calling out passengers and flights, made it difficult for Sam to think. Behind her she could hear a voice welcoming passengers to San Francisco International Airport and directing them to baggage claim and ground transportation. Families swarmed around her, reuniting in a dance as foreign to her as the apprehension knotted in her gut. College students returning home for the summer, siblings and cousins, aunts and uncles visiting. Even after all these years, the low drawl of Southern accents in the crowd made her slightly nauseated.

Only yesterday everything had been normal. Curled in the navy flannel sheets that covered her bed year-round to fight off a constant chill, Sam had cut herself off from reality with a book, the way she loved to do when she could find an evening away from work. Last night she had been in the middle of Joyce Carol Oates' Black Water, a modern re-creation of the Chappaquiddick incident with a Kelly instead of Mary Jo. Sam read, feeling her grip on the book tense as the senator

pressed Kelly down, killing her to free himself. Sam knew what that felt like. She'd felt Kelly's fear. The only difference was, it hadn't killed her.

Her focus back in the present, Sam found Gate 31 and waited as the people moved off the plane. She stood off to one side, the squeals of families barely audible over the pounding of her heart in her ears.

She felt the familiar support of her gun under her arm and wished she was on a case, wished she was knee-deep in anything but this.

A woman stepped out of the jetway and raised a rectangular placard with the words "Samantha Chase" written in thick black ink. Sam forced herself into the throng of people. She barely glanced at the woman, instead studying the eight-year old twin blond boys who stood on either side of her.

They were so much like Polly Ann that Sam reeled back, but not before the woman had caught her eye. The boys were tiny images of Sam's sister and, she knew, of herself. Sam saw Polly's bright blue eyes and oval face, her blondish-brown hair, wavy like the pattern the ocean left on the Southern shore.

The woman pushed the boys in her direction. One was walking with crutches. The woman had told her about that on the phone. The surgeons had put a pin in his hip after the car accident. The conversation swept past her again, flitting only long enough for her to feel her own confusion. She was inheriting her nephews, she reminded herself. Polly was dead and Sam had been appointed guardian. For some reason she couldn't get the idea to stick.

"Are you Samantha Jean?" the woman asked.

Sam continued to stare at the boys, unable to speak.

"Ma'am?" she repeated. "You are Samantha Jean Everett--I mean, Chase?"

Sam cringed. "Yes, that's me--that was me. I'm Sam Chase."

"May I see some I.D., please?" the woman asked, as though Sam was going to write a bad check for the boys. Sam presented her driver's license and the woman presented the boys. A neat exchange.

"Mrs. Chase, then," she said. "As we discussed on the phone, Polly Ann Austin was killed in a car accident. In her will, you are named guardian of the children."

Sam blinked hard. "Polly Ann."

"Austin," the woman repeated, glancing at a piece of paper she held in her fist. "Relationship says sister. This should have all been discussed on the phone."

Sam nodded.

The woman pushed the children forward, and Sam focused in on their wide blue eyes--Polly's eyes. How in the world could she ever protect them from people like Gerry Hecht?