





# PROLOGUE

The sun's arrival just as it cleared the horizon had always marked my favorite time of day. It wasn't unusual to find me at dawn on the Carolina shore gazing to the east in anticipation, the ocean breeze softly brushing my face. The fleeting moments when the first rays of sunlight painted an explosion of color were more than enough to leave me knowing I was fortunate having witnessed it. Those, those were my favorite mornings and anything that followed was a bit less complicated, easier to handle.

I found myself in desperate need of such a morning.

But today there would be only cold concrete.

For the past five days my sunrise had been a sliver of light crawling across the floor of my jail cell.

At first, I'd looked forward to it, but on the third day I realized I'd need a lot more to get me through the day, otherwise, that mere slice of new day would soon be pushing me into the icy grip of depression.

I'd quickly learned jail had a way of ushering in melancholy, even for the most optimistic. Most everyone inside, even the guards, were simply miserable.

My bail hearing had been a waste of everyone's time. Accused murders don't get bail with their first request, sometimes not on the second, if at all. The fact I'm a lawyer wasn't helping. The last thing a judge wants to do is give the impression that a lawyer, particularly a criminal attorney like me, is entitled to special treatment.

Things change fast. Days earlier, my life, while not perfect, had been good.

I'd taken my girlfriend to the airport to catch a late-night flight to Chicago. She'd recently relocated to Charleston, but was wrapping up her ties to Chicago.

After returning from the airport, I turned on ESPN, eager to hear what the talking heads had to say about the South Carolina Gamecock's next football game. As was the case for most Gamecock fans, their football season sanity ebbed or flowed on the team's weekly performance.

It was a cool fall night and the windows were open as I watched TV from bed, my dog at my feet. Both he and I looked up as we heard a car outside – odd for that time of night in our quiet neighborhood.





The sound of the doorbell was even more unexpected, so much so I didn't immediately get up. Rarely did anyone just drop by, especially near midnight. The second ring was immediately followed by a knock. I got out of bed, pulled on jeans and a t-shirt and went down the stairs. Austin, my Australian Shepherd, was barking and jumping beside me as I unlocked the door. He sat on my command.

I opened the door to the sight of a tall black man in plain clothes with a Charleston Police Department badge on his belt. Three uniformed Charleston County deputy sheriffs flanked him. Three police cars occupied my drive. An unmarked cruiser in the cul-de-sac completed the scene. Thankfully none had their lights on. I shifted my gaze back to the officers. Not a smile among them.

This couldn't be good, I remember thinking.

"Noah, how about I come in?" Emmett Gabriel said. He looked me straight in the eyes. We were the same height, just under six feet tall, but the lack of a smile, his badge and the deputies that flanked him made him feel bigger and much stronger than me.

I'd heard his voice many times before. At the Courthouse, at the police station, in his backyard, over a meal, on my back deck, other times through the years but never near midnight with other police officers standing on my front porch.

"Since when have you ever asked permission to come in the house? What's wrong?"

"Noah, let's talk inside?"

I just stood in the doorway. Silent and motionless.

One of the officers behind him coughed, jarring me back to reality.

I stepped to the side. "Sorry, certainly, come in."

"Wait outside," Gabriel said to the deputies.

We walked down the short hallway into my living room in silence.

"Where's Anna Beth?"

A feeling of panic ran through me as he asked about my girlfriend.

"Is she okay?"

"As far as I know. She not here?"

"No, Chicago trip."

The feeling of panic faded to one of wonder, wondering why at midnight a detective I knew was standing, unannounced, in my living room while three other anxious officers were







staged on my front porch. I asked why he was here. Wonder quickly faded with the next words I heard.

"The officers outside have a warrant for your arrest."

Having never been one to miss the obvious, I remember uttering my insightful reply, "A warrant?"

"Yes, for the murder of Andrew Stephens."

