



**storm**



surge

rene gut

A black and white photograph of palm trees against a cloudy sky. The palm trees are silhouetted against the sky, and their fronds are blowing in the wind. The sky is filled with large, soft clouds. The overall mood is serene and tropical.

# teridge



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# prologue

Vietnam 1967

**S**top talking so loud.”  
“I feel like I’m going to vomit.”  
“Take a deep breath. I’m not going to be able to help you unless I understand what the matter is.”  
“You’re acting like you don’t know.”  
“Shhh. Talk quieter.”  
“Don’t you know?”  
“Know what?”  
“He’s a . . . a . . .”  
“Who?”  
“You know who.”  
“You’re scaring me, man.”  
“You should be scared, Jefferson. We should be.”  
“Come over here. Shhh. Quieter. Around this tree. Now. Tell me.”  
“You haven’t noticed how crazy he’s been acting?”  
“Are you talking about—?”  
“Don’t say his name!”  
“Shhh!”  
“Just don’t say his name. He knows things. He knows a lot of things, things he shouldn’t.”  
“What kinds of things? What?”  
“He knows things about me. He told me so.”  
“What kinds of things?”  
“Things that shouldn’t be spoken of.”

“Tell me.”

“It doesn’t matter. He knows things about you too.”

“Now you’re talking crazy.”

“I think there’s something wrong with him. He’s making stupid decisions. Anyone can see that.”

“We have to trust him.”

“No, we don’t have to trust him. We don’t. I don’t.”

“What are you saying?”

“Let’s speak to . . .”

“To who?”

“Shhh.”

“What?”

“Shut up. He’s—”

“What the—?”

“Sir!”



## chapter one

**October 9, 1996**

**T**hrough the window of a second-story room in the Dallas courthouse, Sammy Earle studied a cluster of green oak leaves refusing to turn their natural orange color and drop to the ground. Spread against the grass below was a fiery lake, circling the tree with near precision, untouched by children wading through it.

“It’s time,” said Doyle Clarkson from the doorway. In the past week, the man who had promised him freedom a year ago had grown distant, fashioning a stoic face whenever they met. Sammy had hired Doyle Clarkson because of his famed reputation as a criminal defense attorney. It had cost him every dime he had.

Three days ago, Doyle had come to the jail, dressed down in a casual silk shirt and dark khakis. Sammy could barely look at him. He knew every trick in the book. Doyle’s choice of dress was meant to make Sammy forget about his high price tag, forget that what had already cost him so much was probably going to cost him even more.

“You should prepare for whatever happens,” Doyle had said. It was not the first indication Doyle had given that he was slowly growing hopeless.

Sammy no longer owned a home or a car. He’d kept

three good suits and some stock. So by “prepare” Sammy could only assume that Doyle was talking in a spiritual sense.

Sammy fingered the brown handkerchief that poked from the breast pocket of his suit. Turning, he met Doyle’s eyes. The man was striking, with shiny silver hair, transparent gray eyes, and a natural tan to his skin. He’d always looked good on TV.

Doyle smiled meekly. Next to him was Maureen, his lovely assistant, carrying a hard, leather briefcase by her side. She’d chosen a conservative navy suit. Maureen avoided Sammy’s eyes. From the beginning, he’d sensed that she never believed in his innocence. It hadn’t mattered much. She was simply eye candy.

Doyle said to Maureen, “Tell the others we’ll be out shortly,” and then he approached Sammy. “How are you feeling?”

“I don’t understand this,” Sammy whispered. It was all he could say. His knees felt weak, as if they were barely able to hold the weight that had piled onto his shoulders.

For weeks and weeks, he’d held his head high, believing in the justice system that he had worshiped for decades. Even the statistics were in his favor. The chances of a white, upper-class male being wrongly convicted of a crime were nearly zero. Yet it had happened.

It had been one nightmarish day after another. Doyle and his team had combed the evidence, assuring Sammy that it was at best circumstantial. The trial was complicated. His ex-girlfriend, Taylor Franks, had tried to set him up, faking a kidnapping to try to bring him down. Unfortunately, that had brought out some less-than-pleasant facts about him, including how he’d maliciously ruined her credit. That despicable relationship was probably going to cost him his life.



He'd spent hours in jail, lying flat on his back, staring at a musty, stale ceiling, trying to figure out how it all connected. The assistant DA who was working the supposed kidnapping case had been murdered. That night Sammy had been beckoned to his house by a strange note. His fingerprints were everywhere. His footprint was on a patch of dirt. He immediately became the one and only suspect.

Even Doyle had expressed problems with Sammy's theory that he'd been set up. The note that had summoned him to ADA Stephen Fiscall's house, the note that Sammy said proved he was set up, was the prosecution's weapon, showing motive. The ex-girlfriend who started the whole fiasco with the stunt she pulled was the prosecution's star witness—pretty, vulnerable, and full of seedy details about what kind of man Sammy Earle was.

So the prosecution had connected the dots—too easily, Sammy thought—one by one. Taylor Franks was so “scared” of what a horrible person Sammy Earle was that she faked her own kidnapping. Sammy, afraid of information that the DA had learned about the kidnapping case and that he was about to become the primary suspect, murdered the DA.

“Quite sloppily murdered the DA,” Sammy had pointed out to Doyle at one of their first meetings. “Don't you think,” Sammy said, “that if I was going to murder a district attorney, being a criminal defense lawyer myself, I might be more careful about it?”

Doyle had agreed, though he thought the prosecution would probably try to show Sammy as a drunk, erratic man with an infamous temper. And to their credit, they painted that portrait nicely.

The irony had never been lost on Sammy Earle. He'd defended many criminals whose money and fame some-

times were an asset and sometimes a detriment. He'd stared across the table at high-powered people. Once in a while he'd had to prepare them for the fact that all their money and connections and fame were not going to get them out of the trouble they'd caused. More often than not, Sammy would smile and shake their hands, graciously accepting the hefty pats on the back and the occasional, sentient hug. He'd seen grown men cry when their verdicts were read.

But he'd always failed to grapple the emotionality of the entire judicial process from the point of view of a defendant.

"Sam, you look sick. Are you okay?"

With those few words, Sammy began weeping. Uncontrollable bursts of sorrow and dismay seized every muscle in his body, and he collapsed into a nearby chair, hiding his face with his hands, slumping to try to hide his soul.

He heard Doyle walk to the door and close it softly.

"I'm innocent!" Sammy wailed. "This can't be happening! I'm innocent! I'm innocent!"

Doyle stood several feet away, wordlessly expressing his horror. His calm demeanor turned rigid, and through teary eyes Sammy could see Doyle contemplating how he was going to get his client to the courtroom to hear his sentence.

The word *guilty* had nearly collapsed him days before. Doyle's finely rehearsed speech to Sammy about getting his things in order had not helped his confidence, though Doyle had ended the short meeting with a thumbs-up and a wink, gestures he was known for. Every newspaper picture or piece of video of the man always showed his famous, politician-style wave or that stupid duet of winking and thumbing it. The public ate it up.

No matter what the outcome was today, Sammy knew

the drill. Doyle would walk down the front steps of the courthouse, greet the reporters, and tell the world that he will fight for Samuel Earle.

But the money had run out. And if he was going to face the death penalty, it wasn't going to be with Doyle Clarkson. It was going to be with a public defender with an alcohol problem to rival his.

He could really use a drink right now.

"Sam, stand up," Doyle instructed.

Sammy pathetically obeyed, his shoulders slouched as he drew his frame erect.

Doyle slid his hands across Sammy's shoulders, from both sides of his neck and out, as if he could flick away the enormous burden Sammy was about to face. "It is in the judge's hands now," Doyle said, adjusting Sammy's brown handkerchief.

Sammy knew he admired the color choice. Doyle's own handkerchief was a muted burgundy. Not so long ago, Sammy really believed that the color of a suit and the style of hair made a difference in how the jury perceived you. But walking into that courtroom in a few minutes, he might as well be naked, because that's how he felt.

"There's nothing else we can do except hope for the best."

Sammy stared out the window again. The cluster of leaves was still clinging for dear life, as if believing it had a chance against Old Man Winter.

"It'll be okay," Doyle said softly.

Sammy looked at him. For the first time, he heard compassion and genuine concern.

Sammy walked to the door. Doyle opened it for him. That gesture might be the last nice thing done for him. If ordered to be executed, he would have ten years of worthless appeals processes . . . ten years of wretched existence

before dying an honorless death. If sentenced to life, he was sure he would serve out his sentence wishing he were dead.

His bones quivered.

The legal team that had failed so miserably stood in the hallway, stealing glances as Sammy walked past. It felt as if he were walking on the air, weightless and numb. The shiny, fluorescent-lit hallway stretched before him like an endless tunnel. Around him, the conversations muddled against the fearful and desperate screams that filled his head.

How could a man walk to his own death? Is that the last decent thing a criminal could do? Carry himself to his own death?

But he was no criminal. Not a saint, by any means. But not a murderer. *Not a murderer.*

Somebody, somewhere, was a murderer. The problem was, Sammy had made so many enemies in his lifetime that he could not even begin to guess who might've done it.

But whoever it was, he was out there enjoying the land of the free.