

## Chapter 1

### Tessie

I been in trouble all my life. For a seventeen-year-old girl, everybody say I'm pretty bad, everybody but Doc. If he was here now, he'd tell me what to do. He always looking out for me. Doc be like my guardian angel. Ever since I come to this country, when I was three, after they shot my dad in front of my mom, then starved her to death in one of Castro's rat hole prisons.

So some people say I'm bad 'cause I'm a refugee. Some people say I'm retarded. And some people say, "Tessie, you just bad, no good, born that way."

Maybe so, 'cause I ain't never been scared of nobody. Not my aunt Carla, my uncle Hector, not none of my teachers, the cops, nobody. I mean I figure if the cops is going to lock me up, *oye, así es la vida, tú sabes?* That's life, you know? Can't be too different inside the joint than some of the

stuff I done put up with out here, if you know what I mean. Nope. I ain't never been scared of *nada*, not till now anyway.

But some of the shit been going down lately, about that rip-off, about all them plants somebody stole from Raúl, well, it's some pretty freaky shit. And I don't know jack about what happened to them plants. All I know is I don't want to be nowheres around Raúl till he find out who it was. I mean, I been staying at his house on Grinnell Street about six months now—it ain't his home, mind you, his home be up the Keys somewheres, it's just like a office for him. And me and Trixie stay there, his squeeze—I got no idea why she don't stay at his place up the Keys, but maybe it's 'cause his two girls live up there, Valencia and Carlita, and Carlita's baby. Oh, and them two thugs who work for Raúl, Pinky and Carlos, they stay on Grinnell Street, too. Man, I hate them creeps. Pinky with his uncool, slimy mustache and long pinky fingernail, and Carlos with his big, old

bald-head and bald-faced mug. They so full of shit. Lord have mercy, as Carla would say, please.

So right now I'm just crashing at Beebee's place—he's my BFF—and it's only a studio, but he don't mind me sleeping on the couch. I got some clothes here, and I just hang and watch TV till he gets off work at Tropical Rental, the car and bike place where the tourists get their wheels. Then me and Beebee usually head on out to Stock Island, to the Cheeca Tavern.

I mean, maybe I would've been in on that rip-off back when I was doing all that coke, but I don't use no more. All I do is a little weed. Besides, if I'd have kept that up, I'd be dead.

'Course Beebee was way past the coke stage. He was doing *caballo*, heroin. Fact is, the night I met him, I fished him out of Pirates' Alley like a stray cat, more dead than alive, with enough *caballo* in him to turn on a whole city block. But he pulled through, and we been tight ever since, nearly six months. Now he's got a part-time job

cleaning up cars that come back into Tropical Rental, and I found him this studio apartment. I know I'm the only person in Key West who gives a damn about him, but I ain't about to give up on him. He been clean over five months now.

It's almost time for him to get off work, so I'm getting ready, messing with my 'fro a little—I keeps it that way so I don't got to do too much to it. I got my dad's hair. What a drop-dead, gorgeous, black man he was. I seen pictures of him, but I was only two when Castro had him killed, so I don't remember him none. Sometimes I pretend I do, just 'cause. And everybody say I got my mom's eyes. Big, old black Cuban eyes in a little, bitty body. Me and her both, barely five feet tall and skinny as all get out. Doc always say I'm no bigger than a peanut.

Yeah, Doc would be on top of this stuff. Why'd he have to leave Key West and move all the way up to Miami? I know why, 'course. 'Cause of his wife. She didn't never like it here,

and I never could figure out why he married her. But I know she the one made him move, so she could get him away from all his friends and the bars and stuff. Doc be a drinker, big time. And I think sometime he has trouble keeping his pecker in his pocket, if you know what I mean. Anyway, they long gone from my life now. Doc, he stay in touch for a while, but you know how that go.

I hear Beebee running up them stairs now. “Tessie!” he shouts.

“Dude!” I yell back.

He flies in the door, all out of breath, his greasy, long hair stuck in sweaty strings, looking like dreadlocks. “Let’s hit the bricks,” he say.

“Beebee, I think it’d be cool if you took a shower.”

He looks all offended now, his chin sticking up in the air and that big old mole he got on his neck popping out like the eye on a crab. Good looking, Beebee ain’t. “Sure, Tessie. I guess you feel like waiting around some more, huh?”

“Yeah, Beebee,” I go, “I feel like waiting.”

“Hmph.” He takes some clean underwear out of his dresser. “I’ll be quick.”

“Takes your time, dude,” I tell him. “I ain’t got no date.”

“Hey, I forgot to ask you. How’d that last guy I scared up for you work out?”

“Well, you done saw the big old steak I brung home. So that should tell you all you needs to know. Don’t it?”

“Yeah, one damn fine steak it was, too. Square business, Tessie. I sure appreciated it.”

“De nada. You my main man, Beebee. Now that Doc is gone.”

Beebee gets this sorry look on his face. “I know it makes you sad, Tessie. I wish for your sake he was still here.”

“It is what it is, Beebee. One day at a time, right?” I’m always reminding him of stuff like this, that when you kick the habit, you don’t look at the big picture. You got to focus in on just one

day at a time. Sometimes just one hour, you know what I mean?

He nods and heads into the bathroom.

I hope I didn't offend him none. Beebee's one of the nicest people I ever met, but he do get skuzzy sometime.

"Tessie, I been thinking," he go, sticking his head out the bathroom door.

I look away, not taking any chance on seeing that funky body naked. "What about, Beebee?"

"About Raúl and that whole crew. What if they come looking for you at the Cheeca?"

I'm touching up my mascara, using the broken mirror he keeps on the top of his dresser. "Beebee, I ain't worried about them assholes, Pinky and Carlos. And ain't no way Raúl Curry is coming out to the Cheeca. He thinks he got way too much class to darken them doors."

"Okay, Tessie. I won't be but a minute." He shuts the door again.

"Takes your time!" I shout.





## Chapter 2

Seated at his desk in his Miami office the next afternoon, Doc Palmer writes notes about a patient. The gray at his temples marks his progressing age, although his thick eyebrows, his signature feature, are still a deep brown. But the receding hairline, the crow's feet, the slight paunch—all attest to the inexorable march of time. His compensation is his six foot frame that carries the whole package almost as well as when he was in med school.

Just as he's finishing up, his medical supply guy waltzes in. Palmer's surprised. Sheilah, his office girl, usually asks before she sends somebody back.

"I told Sheilah I had some news you'd want to hear, Doc."

Palmer leans back in his chair.

"Remember that little Cuban girl, the one that used to hang out at your free clinic down in

Key West?”

“Tessie?” Palmer asks. “Tessie Sanchez?”

“Yeah, yeah. Tessie. Well, guess what she’s up to now?” He snickers. “I was down there last week and caught her going into one of the dives. What do you think she was doing?” He pauses for effect. “She was—get this, will you?—wheeling and dealing her sweet little ass. Can you believe it? She’s a goddamn hooker now.”

Palmer can’t believe his ears. He stares at the man, paralyzed with shock.

“Well, heh, heh,” the guy laughs, “I guess you might know something about that, hey? You dog, you.” His implication is eminently clear. Either Palmer was screwing her all those years or else preparing her for it.

He leaps from his chair and pushes the guy up against the wall, then punches him in the gut. “Sue me,” he says.

He continues to react of course, lying to Sheilah, telling her to cancel the rest of his

appointments, saying he forgot about a Dengue fever conference in Sarasota he wants to attend. Where he's going and why he's going is nobody's business. It's too scary, too appalling. He's not telling anyone anything until he's seen Tessie.

He goes home to pack a bag, then heads for the airport. Catches the last flight to Key West, noting the date—Friday the 13th. Of course.

Now he stares out the portside window of the plane, chewing his lower lip. The fact that his former supply guy—oh, yeah, former—had the nerve to imply that Palmer's intentions with Tessie are prurient isn't what has him upset. He's dealt with that crap before. What concerns him is the stuff about Tessie.

Two years. That's how long it's been since he's seen her. He's talked to her, and she always seemed fine, but then Tessie doesn't understand trouble until it walks up and slaps her in the face. Whatever made him think she'd be okay?