

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 rathole 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, asi 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 ripoff, 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 nowhere 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 Beebee and me usually head on out to Stock Island, to the Cheeca Tavern.

I mean, maybe I would've been in on that ripoff 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 says.

"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 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, Alex, 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, his shock so enormous he's paralyzed.

“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? She is so bloody naïve.

Hmph, not always. His mind travels to an incident eight years before.

* * * *

“A shark! Doc, there’s a shark!” Her skinny, nine-year-old arms and legs flailed away toward shore, her overgrown afro looking as if it would weigh her down and drown her at any moment.

“Come on, Tessie,” Palmer cajoled, adjusting his diving mask. His heavy, dark eyebrows are obscured by the rubber lining. “We’re only in five feet of water.” It never ceased to amaze him how excitable she was. Part of her charm, sure, but sometimes her need for attention made her look just plain stupid. And if there was one thing Tesoro Sanchez should know about, it was sharks. She’d spent almost her whole life on the rock.

“Shit,” she gasped, still pumping away for shore, “I . . . ain’t . . . even . . . five . . . feet . . . tall!”

“I’m not,” he corrected. When Tessie came within range, he reached out, grabbed one of her pummeling arms, and pulled her up. “You can stand here,” he said. “I moved in some.” He spoke with limitless patience. “Come on, look at me. See?”

“I’m not kidding,” she gasped, alighting onto the tips of her flippers. Her mask was askew, threatening to fall off completely, but now the end of her snub-nose caught it and held it precariously as she yelled into the cavity, muffling her words. “Imtellig shue, smaresa sharrp!”

“Tessie, I can’t understand you,” he laughed, pulling the mask down around her neck beside her snorkel.

“It’s there, Doc, it’s right there! I’m telling you, a shark—a big one! I’m not kidding, Doc. I saw it, I did!” Her tiny, golden-brown finger trembled as she aimed at a point about twenty feet away.

“Okay, Tessie.” Hard as he tried, Palmer couldn’t stifle his grin. “Tell you what. You stay right here and don’t move—remember, you never move when a shark’s around—and I’ll swim

over there real slow so I don't disturb him, and if I see anything at all, we'll get the hell out of here, okay?"

She stared at him as if he'd gone bonkers, her black eyes as big as sand dollars. A shower of water fell from her afro as a tremor coursed through her, and she gulped down her fear so loudly he could hear it. But finally, she nodded.

Palmer pulled on his mask, bit down on his snorkel, and dove.

The sun streamed through the water and lit up the lustrous pink of a conch shell she must have tipped over scrambling back, and he thought about how gorgeous the sea life was here, how bloody gorgeous, just a few feet off shore.

When he approached the spot she pointed to, he thought about taking off one of his flippers and swimming back with the tip of it sticking up just above the surface like a shark. He stifled a chuckle. He couldn't really do it, of course. Tessie was so serious right now she'd probably pass out.

And that's when he saw it, moving right up beside him, about two yards away—something dark and thick with meat and almost *twelve feet long*. He couldn't move, couldn't even remember how to breathe through his snorkel.

But the shark didn't seem to notice him as it continued to glide past. Palmer hung in the water alongside it like a corpse. Only his eyes moved, following the mass of flesh out of sheer instinct. Finally, the shark merged with the gray of the deep, the last of its tail fin slithering into the nether regions, and Palmer leaped from the water, nearly clearing the surface.

"It's a shark!" he cried. He tried to run, but his flippers held him in place. "Tessie, go back!" he yelled. He stripped off his fins and looked over his shoulder to see if it was returning.

He'd blown it, of course, riled up the water, so the only thing to do now was to go for speed. His toes dug into the sand as he fought against the tide. It was like trying to run in molasses.

Tessie stood rooted in place, looking catatonic.

When he finally reached her, Palmer grabbed her around the waist and jerked her up like a weed. "Will you come on!" he gasped. He dragged her with him as he plowed his way to shallow water, then let go of her and turned around. "Jesus, you weren't kidding, were you?" His eyes scanned the area they'd just fled.

Tessie was silent a moment. "Well," she said, "it was only a nurse shark." Her voice wore its judicious tone. "And I know they ain't even supposed to bite, but I don't care. I'm afraid of sharks, period."

He pulled his eyes from the water and stared down at her. Was she serious? Did she actually know what *species* it was?

Oblivious to him, Tessie bent down and removed her flippers. Stacking her gear in her arms, she said, "Anyway, I ain't going back in there today."

Palmer stared after her as she marched toward shore. She outclassed him again.

* * * *

The announcement that they are about to land startles him from his reminiscing. He looks out and spots Key West, the last in a long line of islands stretching from Miami to the Caribbean. In a matter of hours, he'll see her. The rock is pretty small. His heart rate speeds up.

As he steps from the plane, the heat attacks him, smacking the breath clean out of his lungs. It's like a bloody kiln. At least it will cool off a little after sunset.

Welcome to the Conch Republic a sign reads. Conchs are the natives, and Palmer remembers how people hooted with laughter the first time he pronounced it like it's spelled, instead of the "konk" way. Conch Republic, bullshit. It's all part of the hype. Buy a piece of the rock, get your Conch certificate—even the Governor has one—yada, yada, yada.

Bag in hand, he stands outside looking for his rental car. Robin at Tropical Rental agreed to have it sent over with a driver, saving him time.

It's not long before he sees a young guy in a white Corolla wave to some freaks on the Boulevard with no shirts or shoes. The guy parks and gets out, and they form a circle. Then the driver retrieves something from a pocket of his jeans, takes something in return.

A dope deal, Palmer figures and watches them do fist bumps all around. Right across from the airport no less. With the parking lot nearly empty—not many rentals around in the middle of a sweltering summer—the overpass to the departure building functions like a view-finder, and the driver and his cronies are dead-center in his cross-hairs. What a bloody idiot.

Now the guy gets back in the car and cruises down the airport drive. He pulls up in front of Palmer and lowers the passenger window less than an inch. As he leans over to yell through the crack, a large mole pops out from under his chin. "You the good doctor?" he asks.

Of course, my driver. Without a word, Palmer opens the rear door, heaves his suitcase onto the seat, and slams it shut again. Then he opens the one in front and slides in, stabbing the button to lower his window.

"Hey, dude," the driver says, "this thing's air-conditioned."

"Let's get moving," Palmer snaps. He's pissed because he didn't save any time after all. "Smells like a pot farm in here."

Caught, the driver says no more and opens his window as well, but he peels away from the terminal with a screech of hot rubber. A rolled up hunter's handkerchief holds back his matted, stringy hair, but strays whip about his face in the hot wind. He has a quarter-inch beard that makes him look like he's coming off a three-day drunk. Perspiration pours down his face, rings the neck of his tee shirt, and underscores his armpits. Palmer feels a pang of remorse and relents, raising his window. He puts the air on high.

The driver looks over, eyebrows arched in surprise. He grins and raises his window as well. "Yo. Stevens the name. Beebee Stevens. On vacation, Doc? Come down to fish? They're taking in some sails, I hear."

"I'm here on business," Palmer lies.

"Where you from?"

"Rental office is corner of United and Duval streets, right?"

"Right you are, Doc." Taking the hint, the driver says no more.

* * * *

Palmer rents the car just for the weekend. That's all the time he has.

He heads down Duval Street and turns right on Truman, trying to decide where to look for a room. As he passes Garrison Bight and the charter boats, he checks for the Sea Dream, wondering if Burston is booked for a tarpon run that night.

Bloody hell, he thinks now. What difference does it make if Burston is working or not? He can't drag Nate Burston along while he combs the dives for Tessie. The thought of Burston or anyone else looking at her askance—or at himself, for that matter, at how badly he's failed—is

more than he can bear. All that time and energy he's put into helping her . . . since she was what, three? And why? So she could end up like this, ruining her life? No. He can't talk to Nate Burston or anyone else until he's straightened it out with Tessie.

He heads back to the south side of the island, deciding to book a room in some cheap motel where he won't see anyone he knows.

Straighten it out with Tessie how? At seventeen, she's sure to think she knows what she's doing. Would she even listen to him anymore? The last time he talked to her, she said she was moving out of her aunt Carla's—he should have suspected something then—but she never called back with a number or address . . .

That should have been the tipoff, of course. It isn't like Tessie to keep him in the dark, to move without telling him where she's going, without giving him a number or some way to reach her. Why doesn't she want him to know? What the hell kind of place is she living in?

On an impulse, he changes up and heads for the Mallory Square parking lot, leaves the rental, and goes into La Bodega on Duval Street for a quick one. It's a small, neighborhood tavern that's become a refuge of sorts as the Duval Street strip expanded around it. Palmer's clinic used to be right around the corner, and he came in here every day, but tonight he doesn't recognize anyone. He wonders how the faces could change so fast.

It's not a place the kids frequent, of course. No band or DJ, just some cool jazz on a stereo behind the bar, and you can still get a good drink for a fair price. The extent of the decorating scheme consists of flocked wallpaper with black and gold curlicues and a long bar mirror. Booths cover the wall across from the bar with the restrooms at the end of the corridor. That's it.

The clientele is sparse: a young couple holding hands; in another booth, two gay men side by side, also holding hands; and two middle-aged, tourist couples, the men in Bermuda shorts,

the women in Capri pants and pounds of jewelry. At the far end of the bar sit two businessmen in suits and ties, engrossed in conversation.

Palmer stares at his reflection in the bar mirror, nursing a V.O. and water. Maybe nobody recognizes him anymore either. His hair keeps moving farther back, but all in all, he assesses, not bad. In fact, he still catches women eyeballing him now and then.

Bloody hell. After three divorces you'd think he could get off that trip. *Fat chance,* he muses. Palmer likes women almost as much as he likes his V.O.

It was a good thing he never had kids. Especially considering the fact that he has all he can handle with Tessie. Obviously *more* than he can handle, he reflects. As he waits for his whiskey and water, he remembers the day he first laid eyes on her.