

PROLOGUE

The night they arrest Tuki Aparecio, she is not picturing *Shawshank Redemption*; more like *Dead Man Walking*. Two cops escort her into the Barnstable County lockup in handcuffs. A dozen men are hanging on the bars of their cells hooting and shouting, grabbing their crotches, licking their index fingers. It smells like cigarettes and the burning scent of ammonia masking something worse.

With death grips on her upper arms, the cops rush her down the corridor, swinging their billy sticks at the outstretched hands, rapping the bars of the men's cages.

"Back off, outlaws!"

She still has on her makeup and a little black spandex dress from Frederick's. Five gold tummy bracelets encircle her waist. White lace pantyhose go with her red rhinestone box-toed pumps. The guys are foaming at the mouth. But what else would you expect? The police took her down the second she came off stage.

"Come to daddy, baby girl." One of the inmates has his face to his bars, his tongue flicking in and out of cracked, bloody lips.

A guard presiding over the scene rolls his eyes and spits.

"How about we just leave you with these tomcats, lollypop?"

But he's not serious. He's just having a little fun with her. When he gets her in an empty cell at the far end of lockup, he looks her up and down, stares at her hips. Finally, his eyes drift back up to her breasts. Stares some more.

She wants him to go away. Wants to close her eyes and make tonight end. But she is too afraid of what he might do when she is not looking. So she watches him with dead eyes, nails ready to claw.

"Shoes and chains, doll face!" He holds out his hands, waiting.

She feels like she's being strip-searched. This is all part of the scene, right? Brandy and Delta have told her: First they snare you,

then they treat you like *klong* water. When you are no longer an amusement for them, they send you off to the death camp.

Suddenly he turns, seems to vanish in the bright light of the jail. The iron gate slams shut on her.

“Sweet dreams.”

She does not sleep or eat. Some thing—some force—just takes over there in the cell. The next thing she knows her nails are digging a half-inch deep into both of her wrists. Blood is spurting all over the place, and she is screaming at the top of her lungs in Thai. Maybe a man’s name. The wail sounds like some kind of wildfire.

Bridgewater State Mental Hospital. August 2. Alone in a pink terrycloth robe, Tuki sits on the ledge of a window with a chain-link screen across the opening.

Her knees are pulled up under her chin, and her dark hair falls in a thousand wild braids and ringlets over her shoulders and arms. Her hair veils everything but her lashes, nose, lips, and chin. The room is in shadows so she is little more than a silhouette against the blazing summer sun outside. Her skin looks dark. It is not just from the lighting. The bandages on her wrists give off a silvery glow. Yesterday she turned twenty-nine.

She is not a woman like the others in the ward, the ones who shuffle around like shadows, the ones who drool or mutter or shriek at Jesus. There is something unexpectedly strong and slender about that left leg that has worked its way loose from the folds in the robe. And that face. Lashes like you cannot buy from L’Oreal. Lips of plum. The chin forms a vee with the cheeks ... the effect is a little catlike. Imperial even. But now, backlit by the sun, she could be a child.

She is watching a tractor mowing the lawn outside, wondering when the monsoon rains will truly begin. Suddenly up walks a man. A real man in this boneyard of women, trailing the scent of Canoe. He is middle height, late twenties or early thirties. His dark, razor-cut hair and shadow of a beard remind her a bit of Tom Cruise, but

not Tom Cruise. He is too Latin, the hair too wavy, maybe even curly if it were longer. He is carrying a leather brief case and wearing a gray summer suit. His white shirt is loose at the collar. His pale pink lips are pursed. Something is bothering him.

He sits down in a chair facing her and says, "This must all feel like a nightmare."

She just stares down at him from the window ledge, can hardly believe he is talking to her. She wants to say something, but she has suddenly forgotten her English.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

She leans toward him.

He opens his mouth, but now no words come out. He just stares at her. She is a magnificent freak of God's and her own invention. The best-looking person he has ever seen. A siren and a killer. He knows those warm, dark eyes mask ten thousand secrets. Everything inside his head tells him to run as far and as fast from her as he can. But he stays, and doesn't know why.

She gives him a shy smile. She has found some words to break the screech of the lawn mower outside. "Tiger got your tongue too, la?"

"I guess so." The words catch in his throat. He rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands.

"Look ... I don't know exactly how to ..."

She slides her legs off the windowsill. They are right at his eye level. The columns of skin between her knees and ankles look made from honey. She puts her hands on her knees, bends down until she is face-to-face with him. When she has eye contact, she speaks.

"Buddha says it is not possible for you to make a mistake, if you speak from the heart."

He shifts in his seat, straightens his shoulders. Maybe he is getting his balance back.

"What would you like to be called?" He unzips the briefcase on his lap.

"Tuki. Always Tuki, la. You know, like TOO KEY?"

"It says 'Dung' here in your file."

She gives him a sad little look. He only makes eye contact for

an instant. Still, she can see something—nerves maybe—clouding those gentle brown eyes. He does not want to be here. That must be it.

She sighs, pulls her knees up under her chin as before, stares out the window, thinks that any second the rain will come and turn the whole world to smooth, dark mud.

“Why does it say Dung? Who is Dung?”

“Dung? Dung is my long lost brother. If you know what I mean, detective.”

He pictures a little kid with dark curly hair, golden skin. His body jerks a little, a shock running up his spine. He bites the inside of his lip, tastes the blood. Tries to refocus. Damn. He is screwing this all up. Find a common ground, establish a rapport, pal. You know the attorney-client routine. What the hell is wrong with him? He has not even introduced himself.

“I’m not the police, Tuki. I’m Michael Decastro. I’m your court-appointed attorney. It’s the law. You get an attorney. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” An edge creeps into that soft voice of hers. “You are sorry it’s the law? You are sorry you are my lawyer? I do not understand.”

He waves his hands in front of him, trying to stop a runaway train.

“No, no, NO! I’m sorry for this confusion. I’m sorry for your troubles. Really. I’m here to help. Let me help you.” Sweat is starting to run down his temples. “Arson and murder. These are pretty scary charges.”

She buries her face in the pink robe covering her raised knees. Suddenly there are tears in her voice.

“Please, PLEASE, do not let them send me back to Thailand. I swear I did not kill anybody. I swear to Buddha!”

He wants to reach over to her, touch her hand the way his mother always does when someone has a problem. But then he wonders whether this would be appropriate. He holds back. She is not Filipa after all. Not even a little like his fiancée.

When the sobs stop, he clears his throat.

She is still on the windowsill, drying her eyes with the hem of her robe. Now she lifts her head and looks at him, sees the nerves burning in those brown eyes again.

“One other thing you should know,” he says as if he is at Saturday evening confession. “I’m an experienced public defender. I’ve had murder cases before. I think I’m pretty good at my job. But you’re my first—”

A little chirp escapes her throat. Suddenly she is grinning. Huge. It is an odd grin. Kind of inappropriate, coming out of the blue at this awkward moment the way it does. But it is quite a pretty grin. It starts with her plum lips and straight white teeth, then spreads to her proud chin. Two little dimples bloom on her cheeks as her eyes light up full of discovery. From a radio somewhere in the distance, Paul Simon sings about diamonds on the soles of her shoes.

“You have never met a girl like me, have you?”

He shakes his head no. Hell no.

The next time they meet at Bridgewater, Tuki sees a stormy look in Decastro's eyes. As soon as he sits down facing her on that window ledge again, the words just explode from somewhere inside his chest.

"Help me out here, Tuki. What the hell happened in Thailand?"

His voice sounds ripped. She feels afraid, does not like his swearing. She just wants a little bit of kindness. A little respect. A friend, maybe.

"What's wrong, Michael?" She cannot believe she has called him by his first name. She means no disrespect. The name just popped out of her mouth.

It catches him by surprise. Almost nobody calls him Michael except Filipa. Most people call him Castro. His family calls him Mo. He has to take a deep breath, collect himself.

"I got a message on my answering machine this morning from a guy who says he's with the Royal Thai Police. Says he's been looking for you for over five years. You want to tell me about it?"

"You not a bastard, not freak. Your mother always say you very special baby. Holyholy child," says Brandy. "Never forget, la! You holyholy child like Buddha. Love child." She and Delta are Saigon queens, the ones who took Tuki, a toddler then, on the boat from Vietnam to Thailand. The ones who raised her in Bangkok. As always, they speak to her in the rough English they learned in Saigon's bars. They want her to look to her future. Learn this strange tongue. They tell her English is the one language everyone must know to survive the curry of races and nationalities in places like Bangkok's Patpong. New York City.

"When you get U. S., you tell people your daddy, U. S. Marine," sniffs Delta. Her voice gets loud and husky the way it always does when

she is trying to be strong. "You tell people *Semper Fi, la!* He marry you mother. All legal. We had license. We had you birth certificate, Cho Ray Hospital. Tell them look up record. You American girl. American people keep good record. You tell them. They see!"

She thinks about the people in the refugee camp who stole her papers so long ago and wonders if they hated her because her daddy came from the U. S. With those papers she could have an American passport. American citizenship. She could go to America on the Orderly Departure Program for the children like her, the ones the GIs left behind. No shaky Thai passport. No problem with Immigration and green card. Maybe she can even find her father.

She remembers the end of the film *M Butterfly* when *Butterfly* appears for the first time as a man—so thin and sad and pale. Now she is that boy ... in the picture for her fake passport and here dripping sweat outside the airport. No makeup, man's suit and tie, long, curly hair tied back. Brandy and Delta think they are doing the right thing when they have her dress like this for the picture, and for the trip. They say she must match a boy's face to a boy's body ... because in places like Thailand, strip searches at border crossings are not out of the question. The passport even has her male Vietnamese name. "Dung"—courage. "Aparecio, Dung Tuki" it says on the passport, "male." But where is the boy in the picture? He does not even exist, except for this journey.

"You worry too much," says Delta. She is reading Tuki's mind. "We teach you have big dreams. We teach you be free. We teach you trust self, love self, count on own self to be happy. No wait for some man in big car. We teach you be princess. You pretty. You sing. You dance. You make lots of people happy. We teach you how fly. Remember that?"

"Now we push you out of nest," says Brandy. "Everything decided. No time left in Bangkok. You go before we have more trouble. This place finished for you."

She hands over an envelope with a ticket to New York on China Airlines. With it is the address and phone number of a drag restaurant in the city. The owner is an old friend of Delta's. He used to run a club in Saigon.

"It no theater—no sing and dance like here—but it something. It

fresh start. No Bridge Over River Kwai Death Camp for you," says Delta. The makeup runs down her cheeks in little streams.

And all the while Gladys Knight is singing a song in Tuki's head about leaving. About midnight trains to Georgia. She has not the faintest idea where that is, but it sounds like someone's home.