

A Tamarind Tale

1998

School wasn't to start for another three days, but students had already moved into the dorms. And that's how Will Krause and Sonia Martinez met. They were the only two using the dorm's (A renovated Holiday Inn) swimming pool that blistering amber day in late August. The sky above was a soft-blue garden with baby's breath clouds. William had been swimming in walking shorts because his trunks were still in a box in his dorm room...somewhere. Sonia had been sunning on one of the chairs in a red gingham one-piece. The white and scarlet checks were especially striking against her bronzed skin and onyx hair that tumbled passed her shoulders. Her smoldering appeal still beckoned even though her cleavage and midriff were covered.

"Hi," William had said, rising out of the pool, dripping and smiling shyly. His German ancestry was obvious: six feet of ivory skin, splotched with carnation; yellow hair that dusted his shoulders. Puberty had barely tapped him. He was very thin at eighteen-and-a-half, like a stretched boy. The only weighty masculinity he possessed was a heavy brow over his cyan eyes.

Sonia had raised her sunglasses on top of her head and squinted at him. "Hi." From then on, the conversation rolled like a well-tuned car. They introduced themselves, stated their majors, home towns. She was a Radio, Television, and Film major from Dallas; he was a Computer Science major from Houston. Will noticed Sonia had a dog tooth on the left side of her mouth when she smiled, which he found mad cute. That imperfection cooled her smoky Aztecan quality about ten degrees, made her attractiveness not so intimidating.

There had been mutual attraction that day at the pool, but as the semester got into full swing, the two stayed at friendship. Will answered Sonia's computer questions, and she brought him back tamales and a huge bag of Mexican candy after Christmas break. The spicy and chewy tamarind candy was his favorite. She had also brought him chile rellenos sometimes whenever she returned home for the weekend. Will was appreciative yet envious. Sonia was so close to her culture, and Will had never even tried sauerkraut or worn lederhosen. The closest he'd come to imbibing his culture was drinking German beer.

Sonia had been walking Will to the door when it happened. Her roommate was at a Baptist retreat, so they had her dorm room to themselves that misty Saturday night. They kissed each other goodnight. But Will didn't leave after that. They kissed again with fever, and began to undress each other. Sonia moaned in Spanglish; Will grunted softly. When it was over, they lay on Sonia's narrow bed holding each other, and staring up at the ceiling.

"Wow," Sonia sighed, "I didn't plan on this happening tonight."

"Me neither," Will said, his heart still drumming in his thin chest, "But I'm glad it did."

Sonia turned to him, smiled that imperfect smile that never failed to melt him down to his very hair follicles, and kissed his forehead and mouth. They then fell asleep in each others' arms. For some reason, Will dreamed of being a boy again at an Easter egg hunt. When he opened the plastic eggs, there was tamarind candy inside.

Sonia gave Will a square cake for his nineteenth birthday, decorated to look like a computer disk. He took her to the movies, and blew all the money his folks sent him in

care packages on snacks for them. She gave him conditioner that smelled of a tropical vacation to soften his long, yellow locks. He gave her hair accessories and key chains with flowers because she told him Latinas loved *floras*.

After being with her about six weeks, Will entered his dorm room one evening to find his roommate and his roommate's running buddy sneering. Chad, his roommate, had spoken first. "Do you smell that?" he croaked, sniffing the air in evil exaggeration, "Smells like refried beans." His friend snickered, unhooked one of his hands from the beer bottle he had been holding, waved Chad's comment away, and retorted, "Naw. Smells like *Mex-crement*." They then broke up laughing. Will had said nothing, but had turned on his heel and left the room with a reverberating door slam. He went walking around campus to cool off. Fucking Chad. He had nerve! Chad, who stepped out of skid-marked underwear, and left them right where he had removed them; sometimes for days. Chad, who popped his pimples, and left the bathroom mirror dotted with constellations of little pus buttons. Will didn't come back to the room that night until he had completely squashed the urge to strangle Chad in his sleep.

Chad had apologized the next morning, blaming most of the ugliness on alcohol. "It's just that my parents would flip if I brought home a *Meskin*." But it had put a behemoth bug in Will's ear. Even though his family worked with people of color, they were never invited to their home. Everyone in Will's family was optic-white, and had married other optic-white people. Hell, there was hardly even a brunette or brown-eye in his family tree; it was dominated by blonds and red-heads, and sometimes strawberry blonds. What *would* his parents say?

The following Friday night lived in Will's memory like other terrible memories that you're responsible for.

Like forgetting a loved one's milestone birthday.

Like creating a fatal car accident because you ran a red light.

Like losing or breaking a prized possession because you were careless.

Will was stiff and laconic. "What's wrong?" Sonia had asked. Her roommate was gone again, and they were sitting on her bed, watching *Full House*.

"Nothing," he mumbled without looking at her.

She turned off the TV. "Will, look at me. What's wrong?"

He still couldn't. He looked down at his lap, spoke in a low tone. "I can't do this. Let's just be friends again."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know."

"You *do*. Just tell me." Sonia's cracking voice was like sandpaper grating his heart.

"I really don't. I just want to be friends again."

Will was about to get off the bed and leave. Then *whump!* A soft, yet forceful impact knocked him sideways on the bed. Sonia had stood, grabbed a pillow, and knocked him in the side of the head with it. He had looked up at her tear-streaked face, slack-jawed. "Get out!" she half-hissed, half-growled. It was like a storm goddess had quietly slipped into that tight little room. Her teeth were bared, her brown skin was flushed, and her dark eyes were flashing. Will remembered how beautiful she looked in her fury, and considered recanting. But when Will didn't move fast enough, she hit him

with the pillow again, cursing and and sobbing in English and Spanish. Will caught one word: *el Diablo*. He left Sonia's room silently, keeping his head low the whole time he walked back to his room, feeling wholly like the devil Sonia said he was.

The next month sans Sonia was slow and terrible. Some of the candy she had given him was still on his desk. The mango-smelling conditioner was in the shower, its bottle still half-full. Her rose-scented body mist seemed to stay in Will's nostrils no matter where he was. Even though the choice had been his, Will hated his roommate Chad with hatred that seeped into all five senses. The hatred tasted of vinegar. It felt like fire ants biting his skin. It smelled of steaming dog crap. It looked like a haze of red every time he looked at that pimply, dingleberry-butt boy. It sounded of a piercing shriek that Chad would probably funnel from his mouth when Will kicked him in the balls a million times in his mind's eye. Chad, sensing the tension, offered to order them a pizza one night. "No thanks," Will growled and scowled. He and Chad rarely spoke after that.

When the longing bubbled over the top, Will called her.

"Hola. I mean, hello," she had answered with carbonation in her voice.

"Sonia? It's Will. Could I come over and talk?"

"Oh, not now. I'm on the other line. I'll call you back."

"Uh. Ok."

Click.

Will sat holding the phone to his ear for a full thirty seconds before cradling it. She never did call back. And he never called her again.

Will saw Sonia a week later. He was on his way to class and she was walking in the direction of their dorm. With someone. The guy was slightly taller than her, muscular

in a bull doggish way. It was a cold day, and they were hugged up together as they walked. She looked like a winter princess doll in a purple knit cap with a pom-pom on top and a matching scarf looped around her neck. The guy took a gloved hand, moved hair away from Sonia's ear, and whispered something into it. She smiled and swatted at him playfully, showing that tooth that never failed to hook Will's heart by all four ventricles. Sonia looked forward, and caught Will's eye. "Hi, Will!" she called. There was no malice in her voice, simple happiness. Will could only smile tightly and nod. "Zup, man?" her guy greeted him too. He exuded confidence, but not arrogance. Will was beyond words at that, too, and again could only nod.

He went into the building's bathroom, and studied his reflection. He was pale as paper with flashing crimson on his cheeks, even though the light had tinted him hazel under its weak fluorescent glare. Was it the cold, or the encounter? Will figured both. He splashed warm water on his face, and trudged to class, his heart sick and sad. It was that way until they graduated: Will sometimes saw Sonia alone or with someone – in the TV room, walking across campus, in the student union. She always spoke; sometimes she approached him and chatted about safe things: the weather, her class load that semester. Will dated other girls here and there, but they never came close to Sonia's lamb-like sweetness, sprinkled with exotic embers.

Will was two years out of college when he saw her on TV. It was a saccharin-cheesy sitcom about a group of young people, struggling to make ends meet while working at a pizza place in LA. Sonia's character played a traditional Latina spit-fire. The zippy lines and laugh track had all seemed like background noise when she stepped on-screen. She had cut her hair into a choppy bob above her shoulders and

had gotten her tooth fixed. It was her, but not her without that lovable imperfection. But Will had watched the whole show – only once – barely remembering what it was about.

2008

Will married a loud, big-boned woman. Barbara. She ran their house with an efficient hand, right down to scheduling all doctor's appointments and filing their taxes. Will simply had to sit in the marriage's back seat and let her drive. The only thing he resented was how nearly elephantine and flabby Barbara had grown after their son was born.

Will was in the checkout line at the supermarket one day when saw he Sonia again. She was on the cover of a women's magazine, looking glossy-radiant and trim. ACTRESS SONIA MARTINEZ SPILLS HER BEST BEAUTY SECRETS, the cover said. Will set down the diapers and cereal and milk on the checkout line's conveyor belt and picked up the magazine with unsteady hands. He bought it, paying for it separately because he didn't want Barbara to see a woman's magazine on the receipt with the other items.

Will smuggled the book into the house, half-way under the back of his shirt and halfway down his pants. He gave Barbara a quick peck on the cheek, headed straight to the bathroom, and locked the door behind him. Will undressed, picked up the magazine off the sink counter, and stared at Sonia's sexy smirk. After a moment, he turned on the shower, and stepped into it with the book, his back to the hot spray. He didn't want to get it wet. Will jumped when there was a thudding knock at the door. "Don't be in there too long. Dinner is almost ready," Barbara yelled through the bathroom door. "Shut up,"

Will muttered, as he kept his eyes on the magazine's slick cover while he rapidly stroked himself in the rising steam.