

PROLOGUE

Smoke never rises without fire.

~ Haitian proverb

I SUPPOSE I'VE ALWAYS HAD A YEN for the unusual, the bizarre, the edge-of-the-knife experience. When word came that a job in Haiti turned up, out of the blue, one cold day in northern New York state, why, there was no question of not going. My life at the time consisted of long days at a worn writing table, pecking away at the yellow Smith-Corona typewriter, a relic from my college years, seeking to place meaning on thin sheets of 16-weight paper without tearing the delicate matrix.

At the time, all I knew about Haiti I'd learned from Graham Greene's morality tale, *The Comedians*. Banned in Haiti, now a dog-eared Penguin version buried between half a dozen Caribbean cookbooks in my luggage. You see, Papa Doc Duvalier took Greene's words personally and even wrote a pamphlet attacking Greene's moral turpitude, labeling him with every degenerate trait imaginable. "Graham Greene *Demasqué*." I smuggled in *The Comedians* to remind myself of what I was getting into once I boarded the plane in Miami for the hour-and-a-half flight to Port-au-Prince.

Port-au-Prince, I could see it from the vantage point of the tiny airplane window, the crescent shape of the Bay of Gonâve outlining the contours of the sprawling city, curved like a child sleeping in its cradle. Although I'd traveled widely throughout the Caribbean and Central

America, those experiences failed to prepare me for the blast of heat and moisture-soaked air, the fumes of burnt charcoal hanging in the air. I hesitated for a moment at the top of the stairway leading to the tarmac below, watching the crowd milling about on the other side of the rickety wire fence. Nudged by the person behind me, I started down the steps, noticing four men swathed in dark blue denim, aviator sunglasses glinting in the noonday sun, rifles slung over rippling shoulders.

Tontons Macoutes!

They paid no attention to me, but a loud scream behind me acted as a signal. As one, the men grabbed the stairway railing and plunged upward, knocking me to the side. I raced down the steps and ran toward the terminal. Then, fool-heartedly, I stood and watched, wondering what might happen next. In seconds, down they came again, a weeping man gripped on either side, dragging him by his arms across the smoldering tarmac to a Jeep spewing dark oily smoke from its rusty tailpipe.

I walked through the smudged glass doors of the airport, expecting a blast of cool air. If anything, the inside air blistered my lungs, hotter than that outside. I glanced behind me. The weeping, blubbering man disappeared into the Jeep as the Macoutes swung into the back of the Jeep, pounding the man with their rifle butts, over and over again.

I thought then of my copy of *The Comedians*. Praying that an illiterate customs official would not see Greene's name on the smuggled book, so engrossed he would be by the colorful photographs on the cookbook covers. Hope-

MANGOES & ROOSTERS

fully, he would wink at me and, with a wave of his hand, drone, “*Bienvenue à Haiti*,” tugging at the collar of his frayed airline uniform.

“Welcome to Haiti.”

And to tragedy, not comedy.

