

# CHAPTER 1

“Where am I?”

The old man murmured as he forced his eyes open, waking abruptly. He looked around but found nothing familiar at all. Nothing—from the thin, rough blanket stamped all over with some kind of pattern, the same pattern spreading onto the shirt and trousers he was wearing: a patient’s outfit. The fabric was coarse, light, and clung to his body—a body burning with heat all over, swollen and bloated, lying heavily on a rusted iron bed. Rust clung to every metal surface in the room, desolate and

lonely. A fierce loneliness struck him suddenly, flooding his mind. His head felt hollow as he struggled to piece together whatever words he could recall, disjointed and fragmented.

The old man thought he could remember some things, but many had faded. Everything before him seemed new, yet alien at the same time—except for the same lamduan tree, blooming with its pale yellow flowers outside the window. The young caregiver seemed to be one of the few things he could remember and recognise.

“Where am I... Manop?” the old man read the connected letters on the name badge pinned near the caregiver’s chest, which the young man adjusted to make it easier for him to see, his blurred vision gradually sharpening.

“You are at Baan Wimangsa, sir.” The gentle voice and warm smile helped the old man breathe a little easier, though not as much as the form of address the young man chose to use for him.

“Sir.” A single word that made the old man’s face tense slightly. He was more familiar with that word than with his own name and surname, which he had already forgotten. It was a word that seemed to lift his frail, bloated body higher than the rusty bed, higher than the nearby wall—higher than Manop and anyone else in the world. It made him feel pleased, and he liked being called that, as if he could remember only those people in his fading memory who addressed him so.

Whoever it was would always bow to him whenever they called him by that word—the same word Manop now spoke with a gentle smile. As he brought his hands together in a wai, his firm hands clasped and shook the old man’s trembling one with unexpected strength, startling him so much he nearly cried out.

“Does it hurt here, sir?” Manop remained polite and smiling as before, though his eyes looked dull and weary. The old man understood. He remembered that this was one of the few duties Manop had to perform

with the worn, rusted body that stiffened every morning. A large needle pierced down into the back of his hand, exactly where Manop intended. Pain was something the old man was already familiar with, so he held his breath tightly in his chest, refusing to cry out and lose face.

“All done, sir. You did very well.” Manop praised him.

The old man was used to such compliments. He listened with ease whenever he had successfully completed something, so that the only other human being in this dull, gloomy room would be satisfied.

“Where am I, Manop?” the old man wanted to ask the same question again, even though he knew he had already asked it.

“At Baan Wimangsa, sir.”

Manop answered the same question calmly as he hung the saline bag on the stand. The strangely pale liquid inside slowly dripped, drop by drop,

into the vein on the back of the old man's left hand... slowly, gently. The burning heat that had filled his body before—something the old man had already forgotten—gradually faded away, leaving him at ease.

“Would you like me to explain again what Baan Wimangsa is, sir?”

The old man nodded faintly, simply and easily, and gave a slight smile, revealing just enough teeth to reassure Manop. At the same time, he was relieved to realise that his own teeth were still mostly intact—only a few missing and some loose, but still there, still usable. Including a stiff-bristled toothbrush and a tube of cheap toothpaste that Manop had prepared for him to brush his teeth in front of the cloudy, cracked mirror before bed last night. It was then that he began to remember that he had asked this same question to someone before—but the old man could not recall what the answer had been. What kind of place was Baan Wimangsa? What was it for?

“Baan Wimangsa is the final residence for prisoners like you, sir...”

Manop answered calmly, wearing the same gentle smile as before, while injecting another strange-coloured substance into the saline bag with practised ease. The diluted liquid, mixed into a new colour, slowly spread relaxation through the bloodstream. The old man found himself smiling faintly as he listened, without interrupting.

“...after the court has sentenced you to life imprisonment. Due to your age and health issues, the authorities have allowed you to stay in this special facility designed as a residence for elderly inmates. The four houses here are named after the Four Noble Truths, to represent the path to success that our generation tries to show society—that people like you still have human worth. The four houses are Dukkha House, Samudaya House, Nirodha House, and Wimangsa House. The court has chosen for you to stay in Wimangsa House, so that you may reflect on and examine the things you have done throughout your life, sir.”

The old man sat silently, stunned, as the strange medicine—prepared according to some formula—continued to flow into him.

The creeping smile faded along with the warmth, but the information Manop had just given was far from reassuring. The old man's face flushed hot. A tight pressure swelled in his chest until it was harder to breathe than when the needle had pierced his skin.

So I am a prisoner?

“Was I a bad person?” the old man asked, his voice trembling.

Manop did not answer. He did not even nod. The old man saw the gentle smile on the young caregiver's face vanish for a brief second—just one second—replaced by a sharp, flickering glint in his eyes, like a match being struck in the dark. That look disappeared just as quickly when the old man happened to recall seeing the same eyes reflected in the cracked, cloudy mirror the previous night while he was forced to brush

his teeth. The same eyes—cold, ruthless—had appeared even as Manop calmly drove the needle in, indifferent to pain. That match-like glint transformed the meaning of that gentle smile into something grotesque. The faint smile that had been resting on the old man's face completely vanished. He finally understood that everything Manop had done was simply duty carried out without feeling.

In that moment, the only other human being in the dull room—and the same lamduan tree outside the window, blooming with pale yellow flowers—seemed to drift further and further away from him. Rust clung tightly to the feeling of guilt in his mind, leaving him in a hollow, desolate loneliness. The sorrow surged in and seized him completely.