



AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

A
NIGHT
at the

TROPICANA

A Short Story

CHANEL CLEETON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *NEXT YEAR IN HAVANA*

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Chapter One

Miami, Florida

May 3, 1969

A NIGHT AT THE TROPICANA.
I stare at the sign over the archway leading into the hotel ballroom in Miami, an unexpected wave of nostalgia tugging at me. The bright-green plastic palm fronds are nothing compared to the real thing, of course, and the band is different from the orchestra that was playing that evening. As excited as the crowd is for tonight's hospital fundraiser, it doesn't come close to the electric energy that was opening night at what was to become the most legendary nightclub in Havana.

Still—it transports me back in time, to a night when I sat in the back of the convertible my parents had hired, the gentle breeze blowing my long, dark hair, my sister, Elizabeth, squealing with excitement beside me as we drove through the cabaret's entrance, a night of enchantment awaiting us.

Maybe that same nostalgia inspired me to wear a blue dress for this occasion as well. Thirty years and a lifetime later, the style is different—the waist cut lower, the skirt fuller—and my teens are long since passed, my daughter nearly the age I was when I danced at the cabaret. Thirty years ago, I was eighteen years old, a semester of college behind me, confident that the world lay before me, my future bright. Thirty years ago, I wasn't newly divorced, my husband of nearly three decades moved on with a new wife almost half my age. Since he left, it's been difficult to feel optimistic about anything.

I've never been a great believer in romance, in the notion that you can be so swept away by your emotions that you throw caution to the wind. I had a taste of that—once—but ultimately realized the value of following my head

rather than my heart. Perhaps that's why my husband's betrayal cut so deep. On paper, I did everything I was supposed to. I didn't engage in some whirlwind fantasy; instead, Charles and I dated for two years before we even got engaged. Our families thought we were perfect for each other. As a lawyer, he understood and respected the demands of my career. We had countless conversations about what we wanted out of life, made sure our goals aligned, kept our visions for our future in step. Even after we married, we planned out when we would have children so that it would be as minimal of a disruption to our burgeoning careers and family finances as possible. I worked hard to be a good wife, a responsible partner, and in the end, he fell in love with a coworker as though it was nothing, our years together erased by a flirtation that flamed into something more.

I did everything I thought I was supposed to, and look where it got me.

"We did it, Natalie." Luisa, one of the other doctors, comes to stand beside me. We served on the planning committee together, cutting quite a few of those palm fronds ourselves into the late hours of the evening. I still have the blisters on my fingers to prove it. "Tonight, we're going to raise so much money for the children's wing."

"Let's hope so," I reply.

The other volunteers on the committee chose the theme: an evening filled with nostalgia for the members who had grown up in Cuba and fled after the revolution in 1959. The hospital is filled with doctors and nurses who have found refuge in Miami. The Cuban medical community bands together to help one another find jobs and a place for themselves in an often-hostile exile.

The Tropicana so many of my colleagues remember is different from the one I visited in 1939, an indoor cabaret constructed long after its opening night. Now the legendary nightclub has transformed yet again under Fidel Castro's regime, and like so much in Cuba, I imagine it is changing beyond all our memories. But it's these memories, re-created in exile, that we're left to cling to.

As a second-generation Cuban American who went to the nightclub only once, as a tourist, I don't have the same emotional connection as so many who have been countless times. My ancestors left Cuba during the wars for independence at the end of the nineteenth century, many decades before Castro came to power. But when I mentioned that I, too, had been to the Tropicana—on opening night, no less—I found myself reminiscing right

alongside them. It wasn't called the Tropicana then; it opened as Beau Site and was renamed shortly thereafter.

Luisa squeezes my hand, her voice thick with emotion. "I remember the first time I went. My parents took me for my eighteenth birthday. It was such a special treat. My mother bought me a dress for the occasion, and we had our hair and nails done at the salon beforehand. That evening, Benny Moré was playing with the Trío Matamoros. I danced all night, until my feet ached from the high heels." She laughs. "It was wonderful."

Luisa's parents are still back in Cuba, and she speaks often of how much she misses them, how she regrets that they aren't here to see her children grow up. She prays that eventually Fidel will be removed from power and her family will be united once more. It's a dream for a free Cuba that is echoed in exile circles throughout Miami and beyond.

Like so many of my coworkers, Luisa came to Miami from Cuba on a Freedom Flight, carrying stories of a country that seems so different from the one I visited with my family. The flights, which run twice daily, have brought hundreds of thousands of Cubans to the city, while a greater number wait in Cuba for their chance. Luisa has told me about the price of a Freedom Flight, the cost that comes with the government punishing Cubans for requesting to leave the country—"worms," as Fidel refers to them. Many who want to leave must first endure forced labor in the countryside in return for freedom, at camps filled with all manner of horrors. And when they arrive in Miami, the welcome from those who view refugees as outsiders isn't warm.

Luisa and I have become fast friends since the first shift we worked together—with her good-natured teasing about my fair, at best, Spanish, she's encouraged me to speak the language of my ancestors more. I, in turn, have helped her with her English as she's made a life for herself in the United States.

The exile community in Miami is a close one, and each time a friend or family member arrives from Cuba, there is a tremendous effort to help them find jobs, places to live, anything and everything that can be done to make their transition to this new life somewhat easier.

It's impossible to see so many Cubans flee their homes—the lives they built, their families, forced to start over in the United States as refugees—and not feel anger for the destruction Fidel Castro and his revolution have wrought. I can't help but wonder what it must be like to leave the only home you've ever known under these circumstances, to carry such pain with you.

Though my grandparents left many decades ago, it's heartbreaking that not much has changed, that freedom is still an elusive concept.

"Let's get a drink," Luisa says, gesturing toward the makeshift bar. She glances around the room as if searching for someone. "I hope my cousin makes it this evening. He said he would come if he got off work in time."

Already it's clear that we're going to have a good turnout for the event. The head of the pediatric department is dancing the mambo with his wife. Some of the other doctors "gamble" at the tables we've set up with fake money to re-create the cabaret's infamous casino and raise funds for the construction of the new children's wing.

We've been selling tickets to "A Night at the Tropicana" for weeks. Hopefully the big auction items will draw the funds we need. Everyone is in high spirits this evening. We work long hours, the stresses of our jobs sometimes reaching Herculean proportions. The highs are high, and the lows are low. As much as I love my job, planning tonight's event was a nice distraction that had me pulling out my old photograph album from our trip to Cuba, poring over the images, and remembering the excitement of that night. I even found myself putting on an old record and dancing with my daughter and son until they collapsed on the couch with laughter, declaring me utterly hopeless, my energy spent counting steps rather than enjoying the music.

I can't remember the last time I laughed so much.

"What was it like opening night, seeing history being made like that?" Luisa asks me as we stand in line at the bar.

I smile, memories flooding back to me. "Magic. It was magic."

Chapter Two

Havana, Cuba

December 30, 1939

“Is that that famous singer?” my sister, Elizabeth, hisses, elbowing me in the side.

I swivel my head as quickly as she has, only to see a flash of dark hair and a colorful, elegant gown off in the distance.

It’s too crowded tonight at the cabaret’s opening in Havana to make out much of anything, but given the rumors that this evening’s event is destined to be a star-studded one that will cement the nightclub’s position as the premier entertainment venue in the Caribbean and beyond, I can’t entirely discount the possibility that Elizabeth has just had her first celebrity sighting since we’ve been in Cuba. We’re hardly the only tourists walking around wide-eyed. Even our parents appear to be enchanted by the scene.

It’s a far more exciting way to spend the evening than the Trainer sisters are normally used to, and when our father presented us with the invitations—a gift from our hotel’s concierge—it seemed like the perfect ending to what has been an amazing weeklong vacation. Tomorrow night we’ll be back in Miami, and all of this will feel like a dream.

Ever since we were little girls, my mother has wanted to take us to Cuba. She had never been herself, but her parents had grown up on the island before immigrating to New York during Cuba’s wars for independence, and she had listened to their stories of home, curious about this part of her family’s history she had never experienced. Our grandparents passed away before Elizabeth and I were born, so it always felt like we got to know them through our mother’s memories—and the Cuban heritage she passed down to us.

Elizabeth pinches me. “There’s that actor—you know, the one Mother likes—”

“Ouch. I’m not sure I can take another celebrity sighting if you’re going to keep manhandling me,” I grumble, but Elizabeth ignores me the way younger sisters are wont to do, her excitement palatable.

As much as I’ve tried to contain my own enthusiasm, as soon as our hired convertible passed through the cabaret’s palm-tree-lined entrance, I felt a little spark of magic myself. Truthfully, before this evening I didn’t even know I had the vocabulary to describe an event such as this. Elizabeth has always been the romantic one, dreaming of love and grand adventures. As the eldest, I’ve kept my feet more firmly planted on the ground, eager to indulge my sister in her whims but more content to trust in the tangible. But then again, when faced with the reality of this place, it’s evident there are some corners of the world where such fantasies exist.

I’ve yet to have a celebrity spotting of my own, but it’s impossible not to gawk at the beautiful women sauntering by in their elaborate sequined and feathered costumes. I can only imagine how hard the seamstresses must have worked to create such delicate works of art, and the stunning women wear them proudly.

The blue evening dress that my mother purchased for me at El Encanto, the largest and most famous department store in all of Cuba, is the finest gown I’ve ever owned, and while it’s far from the most glamorous frock here, I can’t stop running my hands over the skirt in wonder over how silky the fabric is. I’ve never been much for fashion, but there’s something about this garden that seems to have altered my nature, at least for the night. It’s like we’re all performers in the pageantry of this evening, and I feel duty-bound to fulfill my role.

Our parents debated whether Elizabeth should be allowed to come to the cabaret—sixteen and going to a nightclub prompted quite a bit of discussion until my father laughed and said, “Let her have a little fun. This will be a night the girls will never forget.”

In the end, my mother acquiesced as she always did, her worries tumbling in the face of my father’s infectious sense of adventure. Even though his ties to the island are through my mother, he’s been vibrating with excitement since the moment we landed in Rancho Boyeros Airport.

My parents’ marriage has always struck me as a love match, and I can’t help but think that my father’s enthusiasm for this trip is tied to his desire to

know this part of my mother, to understand where she comes from and how her Cuban heritage has made her the person she is.

I think my mother wanted to understand where she came from too. How her family's past could twist and turn inside her to define her present. My mother came from people who left their home with the hope that their children would have a better life, and I think she carries that responsibility with her, that need to make their sacrifice worth it.

She is happy in her marriage, no doubt, loves me and Elizabeth a great deal, and yet there is a restlessness inside her, a wish that her life could have amounted to something more, a drive that she has instilled in me to leave my mark on the world.

"What do you think they do if it rains?" Elizabeth asks me, her excitement momentarily diverted from our fellow guests to the setting itself.

I glance at the inky sky, the bright stars twinkling down upon us.

"Go home, probably. Given the hurricanes that threaten the island, I'm sure they're used to the whims of Mother Nature."

It's daring to build an outdoor cabaret, considering how much you're at the mercy of the weather, but with a setting as stunning as this one, you can't blame them for trying. From what our mother has told us about our ancestry and what we've seen for ourselves this week in Havana, it seems that spirit of making the best of a difficult situation is quintessentially Cuban.

Our driver told us a bit about the history of the place on the drive up, clearly proud to be showing off his country to another group of tourists.

Located on the outskirts of Havana, the outdoor cabaret is like nothing I've ever seen before in my life. The smell of fruit—mango, I think—fills my nostrils. Set in the middle of acres of verdant tropical gardens with towering royal palms and manicured greenery nearly too perfect to be real, it feels as though we've left the city behind and entered a magical place where anything and everything is possible.

The strands from the orchestra—reportedly, the largest in Cuba—bring the evening alive with a thrumming sensation that pulsates throughout the crowd.

Elizabeth squeezes my fingers.

"I'm going to the casino," my father interjects, heading inside, his eyes already gleaming with excitement.

"Let's dance," Elizabeth says, tugging impatiently on my hand.

My mother smiles, taking pity on me and my stricken expression.

“Don’t make Natalie dance. You know how she hates it.”

I don’t argue with her; she isn’t wrong.

“I’ll come dance with you,” my mother says to Elizabeth. She turns to me. “Will you be all right?”

I nod, already finding a spot on the outskirts of the dance floor that is perfect for people-watching. I’d much rather stand here and take all this in than throw myself into the fray.

With backward waves, my mother and sister disappear into the crowd.

I watch, a bit in awe of the dancers and their intricate footwork, the way they move their bodies to the beat of the music, looking as though it’s as natural to them as breathing.

What must it be like to let loose like that, to let yourself simply feel, enjoy, without constantly worrying about making a mistake? I’ve never been capable of behaving in such a manner, even if I envy it.

A waiter walks around the cabaret, a tray brimming with drinks balanced on his palm. He hands me a brightly colored cocktail with a red swizzle stick featuring a ballet dancer. I’ve already decided that when I’m finished with my drink, I’ll tuck the stick into my pocket as a reminder of this unforgettable night.

I’ve just taken a sip, the sweet yet also tart liquid a welcome respite from the hot evening, when a voice asks me, “Would you like to dance?”

Chapter Three

The man standing in front of me doesn't look that much older than my fellow students at university. Like so many of the men here, he's dressed in a creamy-white dinner jacket paired with a white dress shirt, black bow tie, and black evening pants.

His black hair is slightly tousled. His eyes are a rich, dark brown.

He holds his hand out to me.

"I'm Antonio," he says.

His voice is smooth and friendly, the sound washing over me and enveloping me.

"Natalie," I respond, my voice faint to my own ears, the warmth of a telltale blush coming on.

While all my friends went to school dances, I contented myself with staying at home reading books, never wondering what I was missing. I'd been to a dance my freshman year of high school, and the lukewarm lemonade and overcrowded gymnasium didn't exactly push me out of my shell enough to want to go to another.

Besides, as my mother so often liked to remind me, there would be plenty of time for dances and the like *after* I became a doctor. It's hard enough being taken seriously as a woman with dreams of practicing medicine these days—better to spend my time studying and preparing as much as possible. It's not enough to be as good as my male peers, my mother tells me. I must do better to have any hope of earning their respect.

"Would you like to dance?" he asks again.

And as much as the answer is *No, I absolutely would not like to dance*, the truth is, for some inexplicable reason, I think I do want to dance with him.

It's as unlike me as it gets, but everything about this night is new and different, and this is an opportunity I'll probably never get again. Call it curiosity, a scientific experiment of sorts, the product of understanding what

happens when you pluck someone out of their usual environment and place them in unfamiliar circumstances.

One dance. One night. Why not?

Maybe it's the towering palms, or the beautiful music from the orchestra, or the cocktail I set down on the table in front of me, or the fact that my mother is busy dancing and can't disapprove—but my hand slides into his like two magnets coming together.

A tiny thrill of rebellion fills me.

He smiles, a lopsided dimple popping out, a gleam in his eyes.

I break eye contact, too nervous to look at anything but my feet and the floor in front of me as he leads me out into the crowd of dancers whirling by us.

Maybe this was a bit *too* ambitious. Surely, he can't expect me to dance like these other couples.

I open my mouth to warn him that whatever he's expecting, he's likely to be disappointed, but before I can speak, he takes me into his arms with a practiced ease just as the orchestra begins another song.

I try to hear the same melody everyone else does, urge my body to conform to the beat of the music, but I'm unable to make sense of the notes, can't follow his footsteps as he attempts to lead me in the dance. It feels like there should be an equation to this, some discernable pattern that everyone follows, but when I try to count the steps (Should I lead with my right or left foot?), I am completely and utterly lost.

"Is this your first time in Cuba?" he asks.

"It is. We came for a weeklong vacation. It's our last night here."

"How have you enjoyed your trip?"

"I've enjoyed it very much. I'm Cuban through my mother's side. Her parents lived in Havana and left before she was born, when Cuba was fighting for its independence from Spain. She always wanted to bring us here, to show us where we come from."

"Do you feel like you got a sense of things in Cuba?" Antonio asks me.

I laugh. "As much as you can in a week, I suppose. I wish I could stay here longer, but my university break is nearly over. The trip was a Christmas present from my parents."

"What are you studying?"

"Chemistry. I want to go to medical school after I graduate."

I say it almost as a test, curious to hear his response. There are many

who think women have no place as doctors, and it feels like a great deal of my time at university is spent convincing men that I belong there beside them.

“What made you want to become a doctor?” His expression is intent, giving me the impression that he isn’t asking to be polite, that he truly cares about my answer.

“You could say it’s the family business. My father is a physician, and growing up I found myself flipping through his old textbooks. They were fascinating—how they explained things, how they provided a guide for how our bodies work. Being a woman—you’re constantly told things are ‘too much’ for your delicate ears, or that certain things aren’t ladylike, and reading his reference books, I felt as though I finally had a chance to see the world differently, to peel back the curtain. And I wondered what it would be like to practice medicine as a woman, to treat my patients as equals rather than shrouding their diagnoses in mystery because of their ‘womanly sensibilities.’ I began reading about other women who were doctors, and I admired what they were able to accomplish, how they were able to help people—not in spite of their gender but because of it.”

I’m nearly breathless when I’ve finished speaking; the words rushed out of me so quickly that I’m sure my cheeks are slightly flushed, my chest rising and falling more rapidly than normal. I’ve stepped on his foot a time or two since he asked the question, and I realize we’ve both stopped dancing and are now standing in the middle of the floor, practically embracing each other.

“I’ve no doubt you’re going to be a wonderful doctor. You’re right—the medical profession needs doctors who respect their patients. Our bedside manner is as important as everything else.”

I catch the *our* as he says it.

“You’re a doctor.”

He grins. “A resident for now. I just graduated from the University of Havana.”

I glance down, breaking eye contact once more, a feverish flush spreading throughout my body.

His palm is warm against the bare skin at my back, the sensation sending a tremor down my spine, and then another.

What is happening to me?

I take a step forward, my legs unsteady, the heel of my sandal connecting with his foot once more.

He stumbles for a moment, and I reach out, gripping him tightly to keep from falling and further embarrassing myself.

“I’m a terrible dancer,” I confess, certain my cheeks are burning red with embarrassment.

He chuckles, his lips inches from my ear as he holds me tighter. “Not terrible . . .”

Even in my state of utter mortification, I can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of his half-hearted defense.

“I do have to ask, though, why do you keep looking down at your feet?”

“I’m trying to count my steps,” I admit. “I thought it might make it easier. And well—I was also trying to avoid stepping on your feet.”

This time his laugh is full-bodied and gorgeous, and considering he strokes my back as he does it, it’s almost worth stepping on his feet to hear such a sound.

“I liked looking into your eyes while we danced,” he confesses, a hint of embarrassment in his voice. “You don’t like dancing very much, do you, though?”

I shake my head. “I—I hate doing things I’m bad at. It’s a failing of mine, I guess. I know they say that practice is supposed to make you better, but I’ve learned quickly that if I’m not good at something from the start, I’m likely to be hopeless at it down the road.”

My father has tried to instill in me the sentiment of doing things because I love them, not because I’m good at them, but when you’re a perfectionist, it’s hard to separate the two.

“What else are you bad at?” he asks.

I laugh. “Do you really expect me to tell you that?”

“I’d be happy with anything you want to tell me about yourself.”

I sneak a glance at him, surprised by the earnestness in his gaze.

“Can I ask you something?” he says.

I nod, feeling my cheeks flush again. I wish I wasn’t so awkward at this. In fact, in this moment, I wish I’d had just a bit more practice, that I’d read fewer books and gone to more parties. Silly, of course. My mother wouldn’t have allowed it.

“If you don’t like to dance, why did you agree to dance with me?”

“I don’t know,” I confess. “I suppose I didn’t want to miss the opportunity. Call it an experiment of sorts. I figured I’d never have the chance to experience a night like this again, so I should make the most of it

while I can. Even if that means doing things that are a little out of character.”

He grins, the dimple reappearing. “Have you seen the rest of the cabaret?”

“No, we just got here a short time ago.”

“Do you want to explore together? I’ll admit, I’ve been curious about it. There’s been a great deal of talk about what they’re trying to build here and the impact it will have on tourism in Cuba.”

“I’d like that,” I reply.

He takes my hand, and we wind our way through the crowd.

“We’ve been through a depression and a revolution in just a few years,” Antonio says. “Tourists aren’t flocking to Cuba like they used to, and the government knows that when the economy suffers, the people become discontented, and their hold on power wanes. After all, politics in Cuba is a dangerous business. Even if some worry we’re letting American gangsters into the country.”

“You sound very interested in politics for someone studying medicine. You could have told me you wanted to be a lawyer and I would have believed you.”

Antonio laughs. “Funny you should say that. My father is a lawyer. His father was a judge. So was *his* father. My uncle is a lawyer, and so is my cousin, and my brother. I come from a long line of lawyers.”

“So, you’re the rebel in the family.”

“In their eyes, yes.”

“What made you choose medicine?”

He hesitates. “My mother. She had polio when I was a child. They sent her to the country, and she was gone for a long time. I was young, and I missed her terribly. Too young to understand why she was gone. I wanted to help. In the end, she survived, and she came home to us, but I’ll never forget feeling as though she was lost to us forever and praying to God to bring her back. I hated that sensation of being helpless.”

Considering how contagious polio is, it’s not surprising they isolated his mother, but I can only imagine how difficult that must have been for her and how scary that must have been for him.

“You want to help people.”

“Yes.”

Neither one of us speaks as an understanding passes between us. I want to ask him about his experiences in medical school, about his practice in

Cuba.

And so the conversation shifts to more familiar ground—our studies, medicine—and away from the dance floor, from this version of me I was trying to be rather than who I am. I find myself loosening up, the blushes appearing less frequently, my confidence blooming with each moment that passes between us, until I realize it's been nearly half an hour that we've been standing here together on the fringes of the dance floor, our heads so close they're nearly touching.

He's easy to talk to, and the thing that strikes me the most is how comfortable I feel with him, considering how ill at ease I often am with strangers. He seems like an old friend somehow, even though every few seconds I feel a flutter in my chest, a dizzying combination that has me leaning even closer to him, reluctant for this evening to come to an end.

"Should we go inside the casino?" Antonio asks me once we reach a pause in the conversation.

"I'd like that."

He holds out his arm to me and I take it, the skirt of my dress brushing against his fine trousers, our bodies grazing each other.

A thrill slides down my spine.

The dining room of the Villa Mina has been converted into a casino. There are several gaming tables spread around the room to cater to those who enjoy cards, dice, a turn of the wheel of fortune. The energy inside the casino is as electric as it was outside among the dancers, and I can't help but wonder how much has been wagered, how much won and lost.

I've never gambled, but there's something heady about watching that roll of the dice, hearing the raucous cheer that goes up in the throng when someone wins, and the accompanying groan when someone else inevitably loses.

I glance around the room, scanning the crowd.

My father stands near the roulette wheel. Our gazes meet, and then his attention shifts to Antonio next to me. My father's brow quirks, a smile playing at his lips, his thoughts as clear as if he'd voiced them aloud.

Life should be about more than studying, Natalie. Live a little. Take some chances.

If my mother saw me now, I doubt she'd be as encouraging. She's always urged me to be more cautious, more circumspect in my behavior. My father is the dreamer, but as a woman, my mother understands the stakes are

higher for us, that we have fewer opportunities for mistakes, and that distractions have more dire consequences.

But tonight feels different—what risk can there be in indulging, just this once?

I shake my head at the knowing look in my father's gaze, ducking my chin, my cheeks burning slightly. There's something undeniably clichéd about a vacation romance, and even though Antonio and I have only enjoyed a dance and are merely standing next to each other, we might as well be holding hands for how close we are.

"Do you gamble?" I ask Antonio.

He shakes his head. "Life feels like enough of a gamble these days. I don't need to add to it. I would ask you if you like to gamble, but I have a feeling I already know the answer."

I grin at his teasing tone. "Am I that transparent?"

"No, but I have a feeling you're a woman of science, that you don't leave much to chance or risk."

"Like you said, life seems risky enough—why play with fire? I like things that are constant, tangible."

"But surely, as a woman of science, you acknowledge that there are things that are unexplainable, phenomena that exist beyond our understanding."

"That sounds terribly romantic," I tease.

"Does it? I confess, I may not be a gambler, but it's hard not to see the romance in science, in life, in the things we do each day. I don't think I could be a doctor if I wasn't a bit enraptured by it."

"I want to gamble," I say, surprising myself.

Just once. I have little more than pocket change to play with, certainly not the fortunes that some are wagering at the tables, but I want to experience the same thrill that the crowd is feeling, even if just for a moment, even if I risk losing it all.

He grins. "By all means, then. Do you have a particular game in mind?"

I scan the various offerings, settling on the roulette wheel my father has since abandoned for one of the card tables. It seems like a game of probabilities, of science: a ball, some numbers, and different colors. Maybe there's chance involved, but there's certainty in the odds too.

"Roulette," I say and take his hand.

We head over to the table, and I place my bet, waiting patiently for the

rest of the guests to do the same, my breath hitching at the turn of the wheel.

It's over far too quickly, the wrong color, the wrong number, a groan going up through the crowd.

I shake my head, a smile playing at my lips despite the loss. "I suppose I should have known better. Wagering money on a game of chance like that."

"Did you enjoy it?" he asks.

I think about his question. "For a moment. While I waited to see where the ball landed. There was this instant where anything seemed possible. I enjoyed that."

"Then perhaps not such a loss."

"No, I guess not, although not necessarily an experience to be repeated either."

We walk on, through the casino, past my father and his curious gaze, making our way back out into the gardens.

The show has started up now, and Antonio and I stand on the fringes of the party, our hands still linked, taking it all in.

When he puts his arm around my waist, it feels as natural as breathing to relax my body into the curve of his. Even though the insistent pounding of my heart sets off a whole host of sensations inside me, there's something easy about being in his presence, a shorthand developing between us that I never imagined possessing with someone who is practically a stranger.

We talk throughout the show, whispered conversation, our faces close together, our lips a breath away. Then, just as the dancers finish their number and people filter out of their seats, just as I've worked up the courage to acknowledge to myself that I don't want the evening to end like this, he asks me, "Can I kiss you?"

He says the question softly, his lips so close to my skin that goose bumps rise over my neck as the words fall from his mouth.

Maybe there are those who would have preferred for him not to ask, would have favored the romance of him knowing it was the right moment, of him reading between the lines and realizing how desperately I wished for my first kiss to be now, with this man. But the fact that he does ask, that he seems to sense how new this is for me, how unsure I am, is perfect.

"Yes," I reply, turning in his arms to face him, tipping my chin so that our lips are inches away before his mouth fuses with mine and his breath becomes my breath, our bodies pressed together, and everything changes.

We kiss under the stars, Havana's finest orchestra playing somewhere in

the background, and if I were a romantic soul, then I would dare to say that a more perfect evening could not have been planned.

It's the roulette wheel feeling all over again, the heady sense of wondering where the ball is going to land, a dizzying combination of emotions that leaves my heart racing, wondering if it's always like this and if I missed some crucial moments all those nights I spent at home learning about the sensations of the human body rather than experiencing them myself.

We break apart reluctantly. With each hour we spend in each other's company, it becomes clear our time together is winding down, that all we were meant to have is this one night together before I go back to my real life and he returns to his.

You can't even call it a vacation romance, just one unforgettable night.

"It seems unfair that we just met each other, only to say goodbye," Antonio whispers under the roar of the music, his words echoing the thoughts racing through my mind.

I can do little more than nod, regret filling me.

Antonio swipes a piece of paper from one of the servers' pads resting on the bar, ripping off the top sheet. He asks the bartender for a pen, and he scribbles his name and address on the lined paper. His handwriting is a doctor's scrawl, impatient and hurried, and I can't help but grin at the thought that he's already well suited for his chosen profession. Mine is neat and precise, the product of the nuns at school drilling endless hours of penmanship into us.

As he hands it to me, our fingers graze, and then curl, hooking on to each other, the slip of paper passing between us like a secret we're both desperate to keep.

"Will you write me?" he asks.

My heart pounds, my head dizzy with the moment, with his crooked smile and the feel of his palm against mine.

I nod, unable to resist the way my own lips curve in return. I feel dazzled by all of this, as though this night belongs to someone else, someone far more exciting and daring than I am.

He releases me, and I take the piece of paper from him, tucking it into the pocket of my dress, my fingers caressing it, as though its touch could anchor me to the fact that this isn't a dream, but real.

Guests begin to trickle out of the cabaret, and I spy my parents and

sister up ahead, scanning the crowd, no doubt looking for me.

“I should go.” I wish I could be impulsive, reckless. That instead of going back to the hotel with my parents, I could see more of Havana with Antonio. “My family appears ready to leave.”

He nods, and then we’re kissing again, and it’s strange how you can learn someone’s body so quickly, how the sum of our parts can become something new and different when fused with another.

“I’ll write to you,” I promise when he releases me again.

I walk away on unsteady legs.

I can’t resist the urge to turn back.

Antonio stands near the club’s entrance, his hands shoved into his trouser pockets, his gaze meeting mine.

It’s silly to feel as though I am losing something. That tug I feel pulling me closer to him, a gossamer thread that connects us through the crowded cabaret. As much as its existence confuses me, as much as I wish it were otherwise, it’s there, joining us together beneath the stars.

I take a deep breath, and then another, the drumbeat echoing the rhythm of my heart.

I turn away, walking those final steps to catch up with my family.

My sister takes my hand, and I can feel her tugging on it insistently now, pulling me back to the present, to reality, but underneath it all, there’s a whisper in my mind.

What if things could be different?

What if we could have more time?

Chapter Four

My eyes flutter open; bright sunlight shines through the crack in the curtains. For a moment, I think I'm in Florida, in the bedroom Elizabeth and I have shared for years.

It comes back to me slowly—in images flashing before me—the sequined dresses, the leafy green trees, the sight of Antonio holding his hand out to me.

I lurch upright in bed in our hotel room in Havana.

My head pounds, all those brightly colored drinks with the swizzle stick dancers clearly taking their toll.

Elizabeth is still asleep in the bed beside mine, soft snores coming from beneath her covers.

No doubt she snuck a few of those brightly colored drinks herself.

I wince slightly as I pull the covers back, rising from the bed.

I've never been the sort of person who holds much stock in romance, nor have I dreamed that one day some handsome man will sweep me off my feet. I have always been a woman of science, my dreams of being a doctor lofty enough, considering how few women are physicians. I see the love my parents have for each other, of course, but I never thought much about having a family myself or spending my life with someone else.

That always seemed like something that would come later, once I had established a place for myself, items to be scheduled in between the progression of my medical career.

Strange how one night can make you look at things so differently.

My fingers drift to my lips, remembering how I kissed Antonio, the passion I felt in his arms, the—

My dress is gone.

I blink, my vision clearing as I stare down at the floor where I remember discarding it the night before.

All that greets me is the patterned carpet.

The slip of paper Antonio wrote his address on was in the pocket of my dress.

I scramble out of bed, racking my brain to remember the events of the evening after we returned from the cabaret. I was dizzy from the drinking, and the magic, and the man.

I remember walking into the room—I open the closet doors, thumbing through the outfits hanging there.

No blue dress.

Tears threaten as I rifle through my suitcase, but it isn't there either.

There's a knock on our bedroom door; then it opens, and my mother strides into the room.

She stops near the foot of Elizabeth's bed, a smile on her face.

"Did you just wake? I checked in on you about an hour ago, and you were both sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to disturb you. Your sister isn't one for early mornings, but I never thought I'd see the day that you hadn't stirred by eight. I confess I was a little worried about you."

"When you came in here earlier—was my dress here?"

She nods. "Elizabeth's too. I sent them off to the hotel laundry to be washed. They should be back soon. I told them we had to leave for the airport in a few hours. I noticed there was a stain on your gown and considering how much you loved it—I didn't want to risk it being ruined."

"Thank you," I croak, tears filling my eyes. I don't have the heart to tell her what was in the pocket. Our mother tries so hard to take care of all of us. It's just like her to do something so thoughtful because she noticed that I liked the dress.

It's silly to feel so upset about it.

"Do you think they would have washed it by now?" I ask.

"I'll check if you like," she says. "Why don't you get dressed and join us for lunch downstairs?"

"Sure," I reply, my voice faint.

She hesitates for a moment. "I emptied out the pockets before I gave the dress over to be laundered." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the plastic swizzle stick.

Relief fills me. "Was there anything else?"

"There was." She takes a deep breath. "I'm sure it was terribly romantic meeting a young man last night. I know how easy it can be to get swept up in

the moment, to feel as though some part of you that was sleeping is now awake. I know the thrill you can feel.”

I flush, too embarrassed to meet her gaze.

“I love your father very much. And I love you and your sister. My life played out the way it was supposed to. But you—you are smarter than I ever was. You have opportunities I never did. Don’t throw away all you have worked for on a distraction. You will meet many young men in your life, and there is plenty of time to fall in love. But this dream you have of being a doctor—that won’t be there forever. Don’t lose sight of it.”

“It was just one night,” I say.

Tears fill my eyes again as she wraps her arms around me, holding me in her embrace. I know what this trip has meant to her, that in coming home after my first semester of university I have crossed some invisible line of demarcation, that I am no longer a child but growing into a new version of myself. I know how big her dreams for me are, how much of my family’s legacy I carry like a mantle on my shoulders.

But last night—meeting Antonio and dancing with him under the stars—I’d felt like maybe there could be more to my life than medical textbooks and long nights of studying.

“What did you do with the piece of paper?” I ask her.

“I threw it away,” she whispers, and something cracks inside my heart.

The cabaret looks different in the light of day, some of the magic worn off, whispers of what it was remaining in the lush garden. I snuck off while my family was packing, telling Elizabeth that I needed to purchase one final souvenir. My mother has no idea that I’ve left the hotel, hailed a taxi, and returned to the club alone.

I’ve no doubt she would be disappointed if she saw how reckless I’m being.

A sequined mask lies discarded in the grass, and I bend down, picking it up and running my fingers over the fuchsia embellishments, stroking the feathered plume at the center.

Tears prick my eyes as I scan the grounds. There are staff members cleaning up from the evening’s frivolities, but the space has been utterly transformed and I realize the foolishness of coming here in the first place.

What did I expect to find?

The orchestra is long gone, the dancers likely abed, Antonio returned to whatever part of Havana he calls home.

I've asked around, but no one remembers him or knows him by name.

The taxi driver waits for me near the cabaret's front entrance. I climb into his car, staring out the window as we drive past the towering palms, leaving the night behind me.

Chapter Five

Miami, Florida

May 3, 1969

The party is in full swing, and there's no doubt about it—"A Night at the Tropicana" is a success. The ballroom looks to be at capacity; the gaming tables are filled with raucous laughter and excitement. The auction will start soon, but already I can tell that the drinks are flowing freely as the guests loosen up, hopefully ready to bid and write checks to charity.

I take a sip of my drink, my fingers gliding over the swizzle stick in the glass, the iconic showgirl's curves encased in plastic. It was a coup to be able to find a good substitute for the drinks this evening, a reminder of the one I've saved from that magical night all those years ago in Havana.

Once again I stand on the outskirts of the party, watching everyone from my perch, pride filling me at how obviously they're enjoying themselves. We worked hard to pull this evening off, and I can't believe it came together as perfectly as it has. I take a step toward the bar, when suddenly, I hear—

"Natalie?"

I turn at the sound of Luisa's familiar voice.

"I wanted to introduce my cousin to you," she says, a smile on her face. "This is Dr. Antonio Corzo. He arrived from Havana recently. I've been helping him adjust to life here in Miami."

I blink, convinced my eyes have deceived me, but there he is standing before me, undeniably older, his dark hair threaded with faint gray at the temples, a few more lines on his face than I remembered back in Havana.

"Antonio?"

He looks as shocked as I am.

"You left Cuba." My heart pounds, the words paling in comparison to

all the things I wish to say, to all the questions I have.

I've often wondered if our paths would ever cross again; the exodus of Cuban doctors leaving Havana for Miami after Fidel's rise to power has made such things possible.

"You've met before?" Luisa asks, surprise filling her eyes.

Antonio nods. "Once. In Havana. Many years ago."

Luisa laughs, the surprise clearing and a gleam entering her gaze as she looks from me to Antonio, then back again.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll leave the two of you to catch up. I think I'm needed at the refreshment table."

Neither one of us says anything as she floats away in the crowd.

"I wasn't going to come tonight," Antonio says. "I confess I haven't been in the mood for parties lately, but when Luisa told me the evening's theme—'A Night at the Tropicana . . .'" He gives a little smile. "Well, how could I resist?"

"I'm sorry," I reply. "For everything you've been through."

"Thank you. It's . . . it's been difficult."

I can see in the expression on Antonio's face that the young man I met that night has been replaced by someone who has seen too much, experienced too much, and lost a great deal.

"Your family—were they able to come with you?" I ask.

"Many of them, yes. Most of them left before I did. They've made good lives for themselves in Miami. They encouraged me to come over for years, but I kept hoping things might change. You could say I'm a hopeless romantic, I suppose, dreaming of a country that has only ever existed in my mind."

In those words, there's a glimpse of the boy he was, of the children we once were—full of dreams and a desire to change the world. I think age has taught me, more than anything, that glory comes from surviving, from enduring, from making the most of the hand you have been dealt and carrying on day by day.

"You never wrote."

I can hear the question in his statement, the hurt that appears to have dimmed little in thirty years.

"I know. I'm sorry. My mother found your address when she was taking our dresses to be laundered. You have to understand—this dream I had of being a doctor was difficult. I think she felt as though a distraction could cost

me everything I had worked so hard for. Everything she wanted for me. She threw the paper away. It wasn't just my dreams at stake—it was all her parents sacrificed when they left Cuba, all the aspirations she had for herself that she passed on to me.” I can feel my cheeks reddening, but I tell him the rest of it because I feel as though I owe him the truth, an explanation for the time that has lapsed between us. “I went back to the cabaret the next day—I don't even know why—I suppose I hoped someone might remember you or that you would have returned or something. But, of course, the place was nearly empty, filled with a few workers cleaning up from the night before. I told myself that maybe it was for the best, that our lives were on different paths, that we had distinct futures ahead of us. I told myself I didn't need the distraction. I told myself a lot of things to try to feel better about my mother discarding that piece of paper.”

He's silent for a moment that stretches on for far too long until I find myself unbearably eager for whatever he has to say next.

“I know what you mean. When you never wrote, like you said you would, I told myself that night must have been a dream. I have not had the same barriers you have had, but I know what it is to carry your family's dreams on your back. To feel responsible for your ancestors' sacrifices. I understand the choices that you can be willing to make chasing an impossible dream.”

I can't speak past the lump in my throat.

“I would have noticed a Dr. Trainer in the hospital directory,” he says.

“It's Dr. Davis now,” I reply absentmindedly, taking in all the changes before me, studying the lines in his face and wondering if he is doing the same to me, cataloging all the ways in which time and circumstance have altered our memories.

He swallows. “Oh, I see. Congratulations.”

It takes me a moment to keep up with the direction the conversation has taken. I'm still stuck on the fact that Antonio is here, standing before me.

“I'm not—I'm not married. Not anymore. I'm divorced.”

“Ah.”

Those flutters are back, after being dormant for decades, and I feel as though I am a young girl again.

“And you?” I ask. “Are you married?”

Part of me can't believe how bold I am being. Since my divorce, I've had no interest in dating, gave up believing romance was even possible after

being so badly burned. But as out of character as it is for me to be so direct with a man, this isn't just anyone, this is *Antonio*, and I've spent so long wondering what might have been if my mother hadn't interfered, if things had ended differently between us, that I must know.

"No. I never married."

My heart pounds.

He shrugs, a smile playing at his lips. "I'd say I never met the right woman, but that wouldn't be entirely true. The problem with being a hopeless romantic is that when you meet the right woman, and you lose her, well—every other date fails to measure up to the one perfect night you spent together. And eventually you tell yourself that there must be something wrong with you because surely your memory can't be as spectacular as it appears to be, and you think that if you crossed paths again, with the benefit of all the life that has passed between you, you would see things differently and you would realize what a fool you'd been to idealize one night so much." He sucks in a deep breath, his gaze holding mine. "It is remarkably gratifying to realize I wasn't wrong, that the reality is every bit as powerful as the memory."

"It's been thirty years."

I can't tell if I am saying it more for my benefit or his, only that I am struggling to keep up with all the twists and turns this evening has taken, with the emotions flooding me, and with the electric crackle that is back between us even though we are no longer as young as we were, even though this hotel ballroom is no match for that magical night in Havana.

He laughs, and the affection in the sound wraps around my shoulders like a warm cloak. "You forget that there is romance in science, Natalie. That there is chemistry, things that are unexplained. That sometimes a patient survives the impossible, that fate can step in and deal an unexpected hand."

It's the same discussion we had that night. And now I see what he meant; I have experienced the magic of my own children's births, have loved my daughter and son with a depth I never thought possible before I became a mother. I've seen the incredible in the little moments, the way your heart can impossibly beat outside of your body.

So thirty years later, I must concede he was right all along—sometimes life is filled with unexplainable magic, and there's nothing wrong with a little romance.

He holds out his hand to me, and I am at once eighteen and forty-eight,

in Havana and in Miami, and we are both where we were that magical night and on the precipice of something new, something I can't wait to explore.

When he asks me—tenderly, gingerly, with a twitch of his lips and a gleam in his eyes, “Would you like to dance?”—I place my hand in his, the feeling of our palms against each other so right, and even though I know that undoubtedly I will stomp on his feet a time or two, I answer:

“Yes.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Chanel Cleeton is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Reese's Book Club pick *Next Year in Havana* and *The Cuban Heiress*, among others. Originally from Florida, Chanel grew up on stories of her family's exodus from Cuba following the Cuban Revolution, which informed her passion for politics and history.

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