

Postcards from Havana

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I acknowledge God as the head of my life and without him; I would not be able to do what I enjoy. Second, I like to acknowledge my family for giving me strength and support to keep me going when I want to quit at times. No dream is worth having if you aren't willing to put in the effort. My family enforces my efforts. I must not forget my team of beta readers. They are fantastic and I would be lost without them. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

DISCLAIMER

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Chapter One (Arlene)

I read the letter twice, fan my face with it, and then reread it again. Stuff like this never happens to me. But there it is in bold letters, big print and underscored. I've won an all-expense-paid trip to Havana, Cuba for four, for a week.

Turning in circles, I clutch the letter to my chest as if I've won millions of dollars in the lottery. But it's Cuba. Thanks to President Barack Obama, Americans can now explore this once-forbidden territory. I've never been outside the United States except to visit Canada, and who hasn't done that? This trip is a blessing in disguise, and I'm not snubbing it. The question is who to take with me?

My sister Ashley won't go; she is afraid to fly. Amelia has five kids to juggle and is struggling with a bad marriage. The trip would be perfect for her. Though, I know she won't step foot out of the country leaving Fred to care for the kids.

My only choices left are my best friends: Josie, April, and Mia. The four of us have been thick as thieves since junior high. They are closer to me than my two sisters at times.

I sit down at my desk, spreading the letter out, and reread the opening line again:

Arlene Joy, pack your bags. You are going to Havana, Cuba...

I bask in the gift that has been bestowed upon me. Maybe my time has finally arrived and lady luck is done frowning on me. I don't have a catchy name like my sisters and felt it has marred me socially. Men hear the name Arlene and expect the worst. I thank my mother for the name. Just before I was born, my aunt passed away. My name is to honor her. Why Arlene wasn't chosen as a middle name baffles me. But I'm stuck with the name, and after twenty-nine years there is no need to change it.

I pick up the telephone and call Josie. "Hey, Arlene," she answers.

"Hey, girl, are you sitting down?" I ask her.

"What have you done, Arlene?"

"Dang, Josie; why does this have to be that kind of call?"

"Because you never call my work phone unless you're upset."

The excitement has me so air-lifted I didn't notice which one of her numbers I pressed on my cell. "Crap, I'll make it quick. Meet me at my apartment tonight after work. I have great news. Bring Mia and April."

"Can you give me a hint?"

"Nada. We have to be together when I give this news. I gotta go; lunch and recess are almost over."

I hang up and stand by the door to wait for the noon aide to bring in my students from the playground. I'm counting down the days until summer break. Being a second grade teacher has many rewards, and I've always wanted to be an educator. However, I've had enough and needed the school year over. Throughout the one hundred and eighty days, I've had pink-eye twice, the flu once, my shoes have been vomited on numerously, and I got a skin rash from contact with a child that had ringworm. Yep, I'm over it.

I greet the kids as they arrive in a single-file line, and they are hyped up. They will be this way for the rest of the afternoon, and we have math and spelling to do. Too bad they are too old for naps. I'd let them sleep until the bell rang.

"Hi, Ms. Joy." Tommy Wagner waves as he enters the room.

"Hi, Tommy. Did you have fun at recess?" The question is asked to each child who speaks to me. After they are in the classroom, I instruct them to wash their hands at the sink.

The moaning and groaning will start when I pull out the dreaded orange folder with math handouts. Out of twenty-four students, all but a handful like math, spelling, reading or journal writing. However, they all love art, music, library, and gym.

I take a deep breath, watching the children laugh as they shove each other at the sink. Why I chose to be a teacher when Amelia's five kids send me running when they're around, is beyond me. I guess, at the end of the day, the hugs from each of them, or seeing smiles when they learn something new, makes it worthwhile.

At last, I'm set free. My three-thirty dismissal time is great, and my girls won't be at my place until later. I like that I miss the rush-hour traffic and can hit the grocery store, if needed and be home before they get off work. Once or twice a month I have late nights at the school for events.

I put a bottle of white wine in the fridge to chill, and take out ingredients to prepare spaghetti which doesn't take much effort to make. While the pasta is boiling, I stir the ground beef and other ingredients in the pan. When that is done, I throw it in the crock pot to stay warm.

I look at the clock. "Five fifteen. Great. I have time to put in the garlic bread and change clothes," I say to myself.

The doorbell rings just as I finish in the bedroom. I can hardly contain myself. I hope they are open to going to Cuba. I leave open the door for them once they get off the elevator. I have to check on the food; the garlic bread should be done.

"Arlene, we're here."

"I'm in the kitchen, Josie. Be there in a minute."

Josie enters the kitchen. "Do you need any help? Something sure smells good."

I grab plates from the cabinet and move quickly to the living room. "Nope. Everything is ready. Oh, this is buffet style; y'all fix your own plates," I say as I put the plates on the coffee table.

"Dang, Arlene, the food looks amazing. You read my mind; I'm starving and been craving spaghetti," Mia says. She reaches over everyone to get the first plate.

With plates full, wine in glasses, and music playing, I wait for the questions. Josie is the first to ask. "What's with the music, Arlene? I didn't know you were into Latin music."

If I knew how to cook Cuban food, I would've served that too. "Part of my surprise." I put my plate on the table. "I entered a radio contest and won!"

April sits forward in her chair. "What did you win?"

"Okay, ladies, brace yourselves. I won an all-expense-paid trip to Havana, Cuba."

Josie's green eyes widen. When filled with excitement, the green stands out. Her long blonde hair and tiny figure add to her beauty. Out of the four of us, she is the only white girl. Her sister has accused me of turning her out. What Annie never knew is Josie had a thing for black men long before she knew me.

April, who is busy munching on a piece of garlic bread, stops mid-chew. Her large brown eyes hold that I don't believe you expression. She and I attended the same college after graduating high school.

To describe April is easy. She is tall, beautiful, smart, and born to parents from Trinidad. April does speak little Spanish, because her parents multi-lingual and taught her certain phrases.

Finally, there is Mia. She moved to Dallas after she got married then reconnected with us when she moved back to Cleveland after her divorce. Her career as a registered nurse often keeps her busy and she sometimes misses out on girls' night. She is a single parent to one son. Mia's heart and personality are bigger than her petite body. Short in stature, Mia has light brown eyes and

shoulder-length dark brown hair. Her character makes her an excellent nurse.

April and Josie feel she is overly critical because her ex-husband manipulated her for so long. Suffering such harsh treatment from a man who is supposed to give love unconditionally, has caused her to shy away from men who could be her perfect match. I don't ride her when it comes to dating. I understand where she is coming from after witnessing her claw from rock bottom to where she is now. Her hesitation to enter relationships is warranted.

As I sit and hold them in suspense, I smile. These are the women, who have my back no matter what the situation and they know they have my support too. I wouldn't want to share this gift with anyone other than them.

"Are you going to just stare at us, Arlene? Give up the details," April demands.

"The trip is for four, and right before the new school year begins. August will be about us in Havana, Cuba." I do a little dance in my chair happy with excitement.

"Are—are you serious?" Mia asks. Her cute, chubby face lights up with her smile.

I try not to burst from my joy. "I wouldn't lie to you. I wouldn't cook for you, either. So for me to do this..."

"Oh my God! A trip to Cuba! We don't have to pay for anything?" Mia asks. This time she is standing on her feet, leaning over me.

"Just spending money," I answer. My friends are overjoyed, screaming and pulling me out of my chair.

Mia steps away from me. "The trip is in August? I have plenty of time to lose fifteen pounds."

I take hold of her hands. "Fifteen pounds? Mia, you're beautiful. Embrace those curves, girl."

Mia shakes her head. "For Cleveland, I'm fine. I want to lay on the beach in a barely-there bikini and have Cuban men say sexy stuff to me in Spanish. I need to lose some weight."

"Me too," Josie says as she runs her hands down her slender hips. "We can go to the gym together, Mia."

I shake my head at the both of them. April nudges me. "What is wrong with them? Josie would get tossed like a paper bag in a high wind, and Mia finally looks healthy after losing her lousy two-hundred-pound husband."

Raising my hand, I say, "April, don't get me started. I see now we'll be the two level-headed adults on this trip."

April nods. "Right. Oh, wait. I have to pick out the right outfits to take. It's hot in Cuba in August."

"Me too. I'll call tomorrow about hotel accommodations. Plus, I want to do some research on Cuba. Four American women alone in a foreign country can be dangerous."

April crosses her arms. I see that mischievous grin curl on her lips. She does that whenever she is thinking about a guilty pleasure. "I agree. However, there is good and bad trouble—I'm not

against getting into trouble with a hot Latino.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay. I see I’m going to be the only level headed person on this trip.”

Mia points her finger at me. “Don’t act like you aren’t interested in the same, Arlene. How long has your dry patch been so far?”

I giggle. Mia is correct, deep down I am lying to myself. I nod. “You’re right, Mia; I’m very interested in rubbing elbows with a Latino stud, but not the way you’re thinking; remember I’m celibate.”

Josie laughs. “Screw celibacy. Shoot, Cuba is hot, sexy and the best place to charge a dead engine. I can’t wait to start a new adventure or even begin a new chapter in my dull life,” she says. I love how her voice is full of excitement.

Diverting the attention away from me, I say, “Ladies, we have to agree to keep our fun with any men we meet outside. No bringing them back to the hotel. Are we in agreement?”

Mia looks at the other two and says, “That sounds fair.”

Chapter Two Havana, Cuba (Arlene)

I’m not a fan of flying, but will do short hops. A flight to Europe would never happen. However, I am not mad at the views I’m capturing of the island from the plane. Breathtaking is all I can say.

Mia has a fear of heights. No sooner had we boarded the plane she put on headphones and a sleep mask to block out the plane’s engines. Her fears are so real that I expected her to back out at the last minute.

I nudge her. “Mia, look at what you’re missing. The view is spectacular. I’ve never seen such blue water before.”

“Take a picture or a video, because I’m not looking at anything until we’re safely on the ground.”

I shake my head and resume taking pictures of the vast ocean below. It appears there is nothing but water and skyline from here to eternity. The captain’s voice comes over the intercom announcing we’ll be landing soon. I get excited again at the prospect of having a great vacation that is totally free. I want to try everything Cuba has to offer. From the food to maybe sampling a kiss with a sexy Cubano. I’m not looking to fall in love; that would be impossible since I’m only there a week. But, I made sure to pack enough birth control just in case Josie or April needs it. Mia joked about me, but I’ve been celibate for two years. I plan to stay that way until marriage or hell freezes over.

The flight lands without incident. The warm welcome from the airport staff is refreshing. Everyone is so helpful directing where we need to go. The language barrier isn’t bad since the service people speak English. If we do encounter a language snafu, the girls will expect April or me to translate. We kindly remind them our Spanish is not advanced enough to carry on a full-blown conversation, and to behave. This is not America and the culture is different.

Since the hotel is not far from the airport, I hail a cab to take us there. The short drive through Havana is beautiful, and much like I expected from the pictures I'd seen online. I love how the old structures are mixed with the new modern Cuba.

As the cab pulls up to the four-star hotel, we drool over the modernization of the structure. We expected the interior to be rustic, but the suite is exquisite. It has two-bedrooms and provides every amenity needed.

There are two king-sized beds in both rooms, and a large bathroom we have to share. I open the balcony doors. The weather is perfect in Havana. The warm breeze and the last rays of the setting sun kiss my face as I lean over the railing. Tourists are on the street looking lost and overwhelmed. Americans so want to fit in when visiting a foreign country, when actually we stand out like sore thumbs.

I go back inside to unpack and set up my toiletries on the dresser. I'm an organized person and hate searching for stuff. This way, everything is at hand when I need it. Putting the suitcase on the ottoman, I open it, sorting summer dresses for nightlife and shorts and tops for daytime activities, and last swimming suits.

I'm sharing a room with April. She and I will be more adventurous and will be up and ready to go early in the mornings. Mia and Josie are not morning people and are happy nursing a drink and watching people when we are out. That is until Josie captures the attention of a man, then she becomes the life of the party.

"It will be dark soon. What should we do first?" April asks flopping down on the bed.

"I want to freshen up and change into something cooler. Then maybe we can get some food—I'm a little hungry."

"Me too. The snack I had on the plane has worn off. I'll ask Mia and Josie if they're hungry."

"Okay, I'll be ready in a second," I say to her.

Choosing a bright yellow strapless sundress, I admire my reflection in the mirror. I'm not an unattractive woman. My height is average at five feet, five inches. I probably could do better with my weight, but one hundred thirty pounds isn't fat.

I pull my relaxed hair into a neat ponytail. I underestimated the humidity in Cuba and my curls quickly fell flat. Anyhow, liking what I see, I slip on my cream-colored wedge-heel sandals and exit the bedroom.

Mia and Josie are sitting on the couch relaxing and talking. April had poured herself a drink from the minibar and now sits comfortably in a chair. I draw in a breath looking at them. "Hey, what are you doing? Aren't we going out?"

Josie plays with the ends of her hair and whines, "I'm a little beat from the plane ride. I think I'll order room service and chill. Tomorrow I'll be ready to go out."

"Me too," Mia says. "I've been up since the crack of dawn."

I shake my head. "April, are you backing out too?"

"Nope. Let me finish my drink, and we'll hit the streets of Havana," she says with enthusiasm.

“Great.” My confidence sinks a little when April stands up. The floral romper clings to her model figure, perfectly. It shows off her long shapely legs and toned arms. Whatever she uses on her skin makes it appear so smooth and supple. I do love my friends, but I can’t help wishing I looked as good as April.

Her mahogany skin and natural beauty caught the attention of many modeling agencies. April did a stint as an underwear model for a local designer to pay for college. However, her current job is far less exciting.

April and I decide to walk around the area near the hotel. There are a lot of people out, and plenty of them are tourists. We need to stay in this area until we’re more familiar with our surroundings. The sun has gone down and getting lost on our first night in Cuba is not on my checklist.

We stumble across what looks like a street party. “April, this is awesome,” I say. People are dancing to live music, the smell of food hangs heavily in the air, and there’s just so much laughter.

“Let’s go over and join them,” April suggests.

“We can’t crash their party. They will look at us like we’re crazy.”

“Sure we can. That’s how it’s done in the islands.”

Before I can protest, April takes hold of my hand and we’re crossing the street and entering the area where the party is in full blast. I’m awe-struck watching the way the women move their hips, and how the men lead them flawlessly in twirls and arm holds.

We aren’t at the party more than five minutes when a handsome man comes up to April apparently wanting to dance. April looks at me as if asking permission to dance with him.

His smile is as kind as his eyes. He reaches out his hand and ask, “Quiere bailar?”

April shrugs her shoulders. “Arlene?”

I give her the side-eye. “Go ahead, he asked you to dance not us.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I don’t want to abandon you.”

“I’m fine. We came to have fun... so have fun.”

I sigh and look for a place to sit. Cuba will be no different than any other place I go with April. She’s a stunning woman and men flock to her.

I find a chair at an unoccupied table that is near the street but close enough for me to keep an eye on April. I notice how everything is different here. The cars, for one, are vintage. Some are falling apart and others are restored to showroom quality. The people driving them wear an older style of clothing. Some of the fashion reminds me of the seventies. I don’t know if all of Cuba is like this, but the people at the party are not hung up on fashion labels like Americans.

I watch beautiful people stroll by me, not caring I don’t belong. I see bottles of alcohol on a couple of the tables. I could use a drink, but I’m not ballsy enough to pour myself one. So sipping on the

warm bottle of water I have with me, will have to suffice. Now the smell of grilling food makes my stomach growl. Hopefully, we'll be able to find a restaurant still open after we leave here.

I get a strong smell of cigar smoke behind me. I turn around, and a man is puffing on a cigar and chatting on his phone. Whoever he is talking to on the phone has his full attention. He's speaking Spanish, so I don't know if the conversation is with a man or a woman. I move my eyes over him slyly. He is gorgeous. Tall with a trim waist, broad shoulders and dark hair. But as delicious as he looks, I don't bat an eye.

After suffering through several failed relationships, I convinced myself I don't need a man to remind me that I'm a woman. As much as I would like to have a tawdry fling, I have no intention of falling hard for a Cuban man. Although it can be intimidating for an American girl not to fall in love in Havana.

I drool over him for several more seconds then return my attention to the party. I sense the easy energy drifting off the people and its addicting. Tapping my foot to the music, I continue to watch April and the man dance. He's showing her the proper salsa steps and she's a natural at it. They look so cute dancing together.

The music is lively and I can't help but move my shoulders to the rhythm. I scoot my chair at an angle where no one can see me pathetically dancing in my seat. Perspiration is running down my face. The humidity is oppressive even though the sun has set.

Twenty minutes have passed, and April is still dancing. I'm getting a little annoyed. I'm hungry and want to eat before sunrise. I have a notion to leave, but won't since we have to stick together. I'll give her another minute before I get her, I tell myself.

Just as I push myself up from the chair, the man who was on the phone suddenly is standing in front of me. "Hola, señorita," he says in a deep voice.

An invisible hand takes hold and squeezes my heart. He has to be talking to me, because no one else is at the table. I stumble over my words like an idiot. "Hi. I mean hola." I clearly have no business speaking anything but English.

God, he is more handsome as I thought, as his face comes into full view under the street lights. He is well groomed, with a neat beard and just enough hair on his head to run my fingers through and mess up.

Listen to me getting ahead of myself; all he said was hello.

He gestures to one of the empty chairs at the table. "Disculpe, hay alguien sentado aqui?"

I can't make out everything he said, but enough to answer. "Nadie."

"Puedo?"

I smile and nod, hoping he understands me. "Si. I'm leaving."

"Te vas tan pronto?"

Okay, now I'm stuck. My high school Spanish is failing me miserably. Instead of embarrassing myself, I sit down since he is holding the chair.

As we sit, he taps his foot to the music. That is a language I understand. The music is upbeat and the dancing is outstanding. April is still going at it.

He leans over to me. He smells delicious, like a hint of woody aftershave. His dark eyes penetrate the essence of my soul. Of course, I'm exaggerating, but that is what it feels like.

"Qué estás bebiendo?"

"Nada, es agua." I hold up my empty water bottle, wishing I had more. The warm and humid night has made me thirsty.

"Si. Te gusta ron o taguila?"

I shake my head. "Um, nada. No puedo beber con el estómago vacío." I tell him I can't drink on an empty stomach.

He nods. "Cuales tu nombre?"

Oh man, this is going to be a rough conversation. "My name is Arlene. Cuales tu nombre?"

"Arlene—hermoso nombre." He smiles, and I think I wet myself a little. "Vincenté."

His Spanish is crisp and intimidating me beyond belief. "Gracias. Nice to meet you, Vincenté." I couldn't translate the entire sentence and hope he understood some of it.

"La musica es buena, debemos bailar." *

Arlene Joy never expected to win the five-day trip to Havana, Cuba when she entered a radio contest. However, it appears her friends are enjoying the trip much more than her. That is until she met him.

Vincenté; Martinez had not been to Cuba in years after relocating to the United States. A visit to check on his ailing grandmother, and an accidental meeting at a street party, has him thinking maybe he should stick around Cuba for a little longer.

Author Note: Please be aware this book was once part of Shades of Love Romance. Re-edited to add new content.

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