

CHAPTER 1

THE CUBAN DIARIES

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The month of November brings a lot of rain to Singapore. Humidity increases, and everything is wet and sticky. I prefer the summer months, when everything is bright and even the most mundane tasks seem welcoming.

It does feel depressing when lying on the bed—you get a glimpse of the dark grey sky through the little gap in the curtains, and you hear the constant drizzle making a seemingly never-ending sound as the drops of rain, slanted due to the light breeze, fall on the windowpane. Today was one such day. It did not help that I had only one therapy session to keep myself occupied. I finished the session and headed straight to the hotel. The sound of pleasing music, which I instantly recognised as the selection of Beethoven classics that I had ordered some days earlier, gave me an instant energy boost.

Our family owns the Sandpiper group of hotels, which has branches in Singapore and Malaysia. The lovely Michelle was

at the reception desk, and she gave a warm smile while greeting me.

‘Good evening, ma’am,’ she said with a gentle bow of her head.

I reciprocated warmly. ‘Very good evening, Michelle. How are you today?’

‘Very well, ma’am,’ she responded with her smile intact.

Michelle had joined the hotel a couple of weeks ago, and I was instantly drawn to her smile. I walked to the lounge and sat on my favourite couch right in front of the big Sandpiper logo.

‘Ma’am, can I get a drink for you?’ Michelle enquired from behind the reception.

My mood was already better just by being there, but who could refuse a nice cup of Darjeeling tea?

‘Could you ask for some tea please?’ I answered.

As she picked up the house telephone to place the order, my attention was drawn to the television across the room from where I was sitting. CNN was broadcasting the news. While the presenter was sharing some facts about the world economy, my eyes were riveted to the bottom of the screen and the scrolling message ‘Fidel Castro dead’.

I blinked a few times to confirm that I was indeed reading the message correctly, and there it was again.

Since I could not increase the volume of the television in the lobby, I asked Michelle to give me the key to one of the rooms which we would always keep as an emergency spare for any special guest whom we might need to accommodate. My mind was racing as I took the elevator to the second floor and opened room 210.

I switched on the television, and it seemed like an eternity before it came on. I browsed through the channel list before I found CNN.

'Ex-president of Cuba Fidel Castro died in the early hours of the morning' was the headline that immediately greeted me.

As if on cue, the presenter turned to the news item that had caught my attention.

'Cuban state television announced that Fidel Castro, the former president of Cuba, died last night. The cause of death is not disclosed to the media. His brother, President Raul Castro, confirmed the news in a brief speech ...'

There was a knock on the door. I realised that the door was still open. It was Salim with my cup of tea. He greeted me, but I barely acknowledged him, as my eyes and ears were still glued to the television, listening to every word being spoken.

Back home later that night, I had an early dinner and retired to my bedroom. I relaxed on my bed and picked up the book I had been reading. I removed the lovely bookmark with the image of a Sandpiper, opening to the page which I had been reading the previous night. As I stared at the page, my mind raced back to the time when I was a resident of Cuba, back in 1989. I could not believe that twenty-seven years had already passed. At that time, my husband was stationed in Havana for a couple of years as a guest of the Cuban government. Images of our lovely villa, with its foyer overlooking the garden, the beautiful Varadero Beach, the many diplomatic dinners that we had hosted, the couple of meetings with Papa Castro (as he was fondly called in Cuba), and Albert.

Albert. Why did I suddenly remember Albert? I thought to myself as the images of a handsome young man flashed in my mind, as if they were a part of my life just a few days ago.

Albert ...

He was so different from my other clients. He was tall, almost six feet, but his slim frame made him seem taller. He had a pleasing personality and was always well groomed. What

was striking about him were his deep eyes. I could see them staring at me.

The sound of the door opening brought me back to the present. It was my husband, Pankaj.

‘Still awake?’ he enquired.

‘Just about to end the day,’ I muttered as I kept the book aside and put off the reading lamp next to my bedside with the images of Cuba still occupying my thoughts.

There was water all around me. I could see very clearly for miles as the water merged with the sky. I felt like a fish swimming along with the beautiful marine life around me. Little fishes were talking to me, telling me their tales. I could touch the corals. I felt like a child playing with a new toy.

It was 1989. My first experience of scuba diving on my own. Pankaj and I had landed in Havana a month earlier. The initial days were spent in finding the ‘perfect’ house. Since then, with time at my disposal, I started exploring the island. I fell in love with Varadero Beach and the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean Sea.

As I was lazing on the beach, the charming Diego lured me into taking a lesson in scuba diving, and I took to it just like a fish to water. I got my licence within a week, and here I was, all on my own. I did not want the hour to end, but the loud voice of Diego reminded me that it was time to go back to the real world.

I quickly changed and made my way to Cubalise, a diplomatic store where we did most of our grocery shopping. I had planned a dinner for a few of the Cuban ministers and some dignitaries the next day. This is a protocol I had to follow once every month during my stay in that country.

My maid, Benita, did our grocery shopping, but I wanted the dinner to be perfect in every sense and had decided to

select the main ingredients. My maid had suggested a Cuban dish, *ropa vieja*, which is a lovely blend of shredded flank steak in tomato sauce, black beans, yellow rice, plantains, and fried yuca, with beer. I decided to add lobster and shrimp, which were my favourites. I made my way to the seafood section. There was a lot of variety on offer.

It was at this point that I saw him.

He was standing next to me, and I could see his reflection in the glass wall ahead of me. He had strikingly good looks, and I guessed he would definitely make heads turn when he walked into a room. After a moment, our eyes met the reflection of the other and paused. When realisation dawned, I quickly shifted my gaze and moved ahead. As I walked, I turned my head, and he was still there, probably still undecided on his selection.

I went ahead and picked up the other ingredients and made my way to the cash counter. As I passed the seafood aisle, my head turned almost involuntarily, and there he was, still standing by the seafood counter.

I was now intrigued for more reasons than one. He appeared to be an Indian. There were only a thousand Indians in Cuba. His appearance seemed so charming, almost like a movie star. Finally, seeing his almost stolid presence at the seafood counter, I decided to act. Walking up to him, I initiated a conversation.

‘Hello, sir. May I help you?’ I enquired politely.

He seemed a bit startled at the sudden sound of a voice which seemed to be directed at him. He turned around to face me with an enquiring look on his face.

‘Ahh’ was all he could mutter.

I suddenly sensed that my approach may have been too sudden, but I decided to continue, having already made the move.