

*This book is a series of poems, memories, and short stories based on truth and historical events involving fictional characters, tragedies, and triumphs, and dramatic family and personal life situations.*

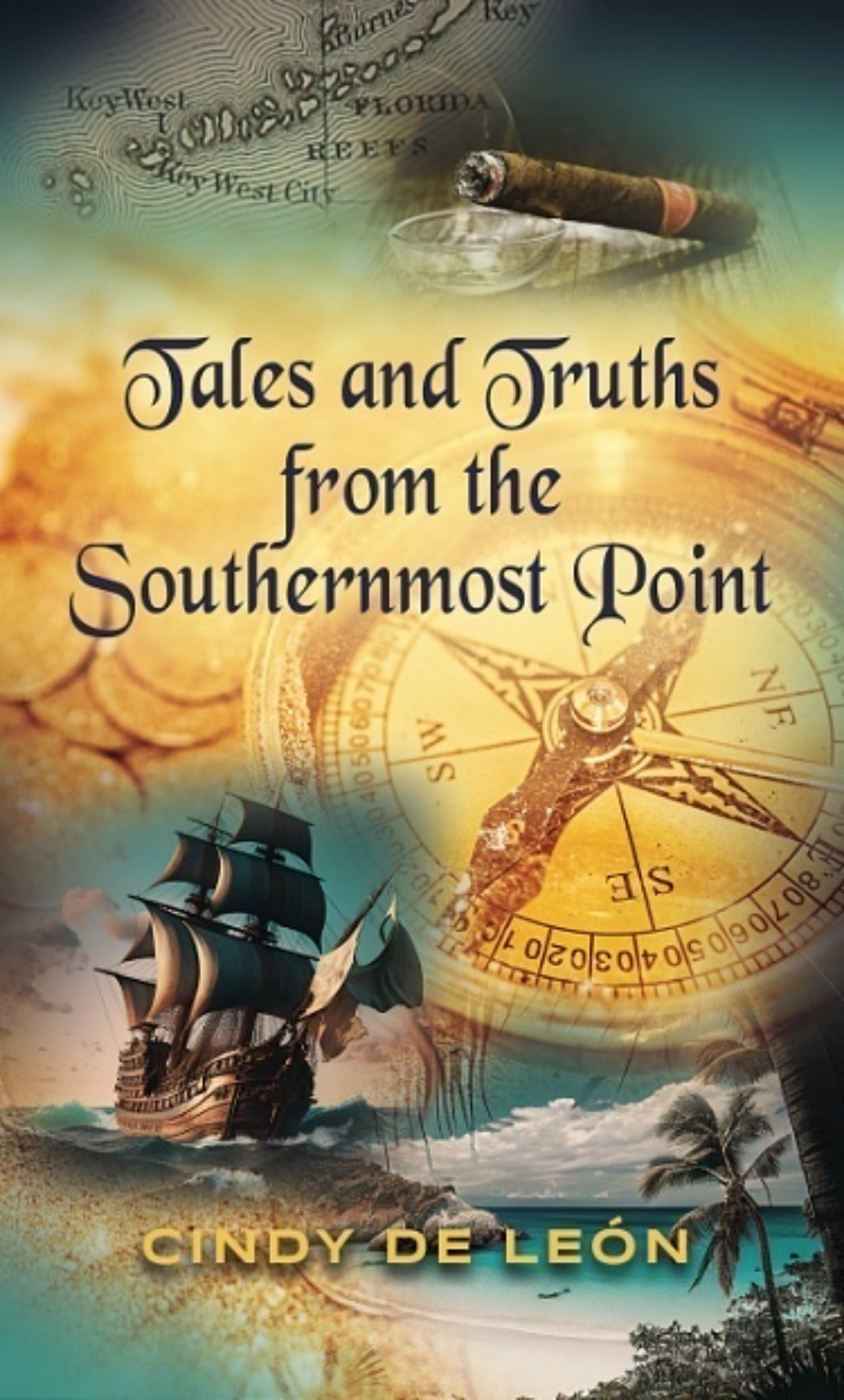
## **Tales and Truths From The Southernmost Point**

By Cindy de Leon

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The background is a collage of nautical and historical elements. At the top, a map of Florida is visible with labels for 'Key West', 'Key West City', 'FLORIDA REEF', and 'Key'. To the right, a cigar rests on a glass ashtray. In the center, a large, detailed compass rose is shown with cardinal directions 'N', 'E', 'S', 'W' and intermediate directions 'NE', 'SE', 'SW', 'NW'. The compass face has degree markings. In the bottom left, a three-masted sailing ship with dark sails is shown on a choppy sea. The bottom right corner features a tropical beach scene with a palm tree and turquoise water. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by yellows, oranges, and browns, with some teal and blue accents from the sea and sky.

Tales and Truths  
from the  
Southernmost Point

CINDY DE LEÓN

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

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## CHAPTER 1: “THE SPANIARD”

*In memory of an islander and prior to the telling of my tale, I would like to address famous events and other comments about what took place in Key West around the turn of the century and early 1900s. I am giving details of the story as it was told to me. Please know that any misinformation is unintentional. This writing is me making a point about a very hateful world that I long would change. This is my part in favor of that change. Evil in the world as we know it today is unbearable and there are things and attitudes or beliefs that make it worse. If we can only see truth through fresh eyes. Notwithstanding, the event I write of involves stories I heard from my grandmother about the lynching of Manuel “El Isleño” Cabeza and the attack on his life by the Ku Klux Klan. This is a tragic true story of hatred and where it can lead. It is also a famous story from the early 1900s and many generations have heard it told over and over again. My grandparents were very young and starting their own families at the time. My parents had not even been born when it occurred. But it is my understanding that my maternal great grandfather was a friend of Cabeza and what happened to him hit the heart and soul of many Conchs. What happened to his friend actually caused my great grandfather to flee the*

*island himself and go to the only place he could go, Cuba. My grandmother never saw her father again and he died suddenly from cancer. My mother said she quietly and pathetically wept for days while continuing in her daily chores. It broke my maternal grandmother's heart and the telling of that tale broke mine too. The hatred bestowed on my great grandfather's friend bitterly touched all around him and within his circle of influence. This kind of evil touches everyone.*

*The Islander, in Spanish, "El Isleño," was born in Key West and even fought bravely in World War I. Why was he hunted down and killed like an animal? Despite this, he fought back until they finally killed him. Why did he fight back against those who preyed upon him? His love for a multi-racial woman. At the time, and still today, they are familiarly known and referred to by many as "mulattos." These people are the children that come from the union of a white parent and a black parent. El Isleño loved and lived with this woman and because of that, members of the hate group sought him out, tarred and feathered him, eventually hung and shot him. His father pursued the ones that were meaning to kill his son, but he was too late. One of the darkest sides of the history of the Southernmost Point was that hatred, prejudice, and bigotry were very prevalent. Not everyone from the island agreed with this mentality, but many did. Still, there were those that fought against it, like "El Isleño." Another story I was told about involving good and honorable men that believed in equality, was about the*

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*Honorable James Dean, who is said to be the first black judge to be admitted to a judicial office in 1888, after slavery was abolished in the South. Judge Dean was yanked from his office as a Monroe County Judge in Key West, after being accused of performing a marriage ceremony for an interracial couple. Unfortunately, Judge Dean died a pauper because of his removal and never saw the day where he would be honored, and his office restored. A tragic end for a man who believed in equality and believed that if a man and a woman loved each other, they should be allowed to be legally wed. The Bible speaks of many tribes and peoples but basically only describes one race, the Human race, mankind. This writer wishes to tell this tale depicting a story of a man and a woman who fell in love and decided to marry and raise a family. Hatred must stop. We must evolve and yet go back to the knowledge of creation and know that mankind was created in God's image. The two greatest of all commandments are Love God, and Love Others.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The Spaniard had a full head of hot white hair, his skin was bronzed from the sun and his eyes were green. He wasn't very tall, but his character made him a giant. The Spaniard had been highly successful for many years in the running of his business which involved the transport and sale of liquor, silver and later tobacco between Spain, Cuba, and Key West. He had acquired the tobacco transacting business as he travelled more frequently to Havana from his home, off the Spanish Coast. It is not particularly important to know where

he was from exactly, but he was a very wealthy and charismatic businessman who knew many ports and travelled often. The Spaniard was married in his country, but it is said that his wife was extremely ill, and she could never have any children. The heartbreak of his dismal marriage situation led him to work hard to provide for her care. It was unbearable and lonely for him, so his travels gave him something to look forward to. During one of his many trips to Cuba, he met Amaryllis.

Amaryllis was a Black-Creole woman who made her living on the streets of Havana. She was well known, friendly, and uniquely beautiful. Her skin glistened, even at night, and her hair was trimmed close to her head. Having a way with words and the way that she moved, the Spaniard was struck with such love sickness that he returned to the island again and again. It got to the point that she would never entertain another caller, only the Spaniard. The Spaniard's wife continued to slip away by an illness that eventually killed her. He later received word of his wife's passing and went back to the small town off the Spanish Coast, a place he kept very secret because of the pain it caused him. After putting his past and his household in order, he returned to Havana and took Amaryllis away with him; they traveled to "*Cayo Hueso*, the island of bones. He had promised her time and time again that he would take her away from the streets and suitors. Because of her reputation, they would have to leave Cuba. The location had to have little nightlife, a small town, and of course, it had to be near the ocean. Amaryllis



loved the sea, and she went there to pray and cry for the mistakes she had made and the life she had chosen for such a long time. She was deeply in love with a man, for once, and she would stop at nothing to follow and obey him. She would do everything she could do to change her stars and with God's and her "*Oshun's*" help, she knew she could. The Virgin of Charity, known as the Yoruba goddess, *Oshun*, was her guardian saint. At an early age, Amaryllis' mother had dedicated her baby to this spiritual entity for protection and favor. She had always been taught to pay tribute and adore this entity and the oracle had been consulted many times for reassurance that she would eventually leave Cuba by way of a rich foreign man who came through the ocean. This man would secure her future and that of her children.

The islanders in Key West would always welcome wealthy businessmen and the Spaniard acquired a large two-story house near Olivia Street. Downstairs, he employed local laborers to build him a storefront that would sell his cigars and his liquor. Supplies for travelers could also be had such as soap and other sundries. Once again, his golden touch made his local business flourish. The second floor of the wooden house was dedicated solely to the home he made with Amaryllis, even though he told everyone she was his maid. Being wealthy, it wasn't questioned, at first. In those days near the turn of the century it wasn't looked well upon for a couple of different skin colors to be together in a common law relationship or marriage. What's worse, the Ku Klux Klan was alive and well in Key West. They didn't like

blacks, they didn't like Cubans, and if you weren't what they considered to be white, you didn't have any rights – again, in their eyes. And, if you were white and you had a black lover or spouse, you were considered the dregs of the earth. Of course, slavery had been abolished, but the hatred lived on. You can make changes, pass new laws, but the hearts of men are not always cleansed of the sin of hatred.

Race wasn't the only thing that would cause rumors to run rampant on the island. If a woman had been a prostitute and then decided to change her lifestyle, repent of it, and become an honorable wife and mother, it would be extremely difficult to live down her past especially if people on the island knew and decided she would never be free of such a reputation. She would always be considered one of those types of women. Honorable, church going folks, the types of people that usually rule society, would always remind women like that about their past, not always with words but with attitudes and alienation. A woman like that could never be part of a church group or even a local society group. How could that sort of woman be trusted to live and participate in the community? How could her children be included and play with other children in the school playground or at Sunday school events? A common law marriage with a woman of a different skin color would never be accepted or even acknowledged.

In Amaryllis's case, she had two strikes and more against her, she was black, and she had been a prostitute.

Additionally, she was considered to be a practitioner of the occult arts, voodoo and spiritism. Considering all of these things, the Spaniard and his common law wife lead a very lonely life. They were the topic of conversation, and the gossip grew and enveloped them in a hatred you could cut with a knife.

As years went by, children with light brown skin emerged from the home when Amaryllis went shopping for meat, fish, and other household supplies. They had three children, two boys and one girl and they did not dress like a poor maid's children. On Sundays, the Spaniard would give her a ride on his horse and carriage, her children would laugh and play with him, and people began to talk. The Spaniard went around town inquiring about a possible tutor for the children. She did not want them to be illiterate, like she was. There was talk that she was able to travel to Cuba often and each time she came back with beautiful things, silk garments and gold jewelry. Sometimes, she would come downstairs and some of the men would stare and make suggestive comments in hopes of having her for themselves. Not officially, of course, but in discretion – in secret. They would ask The Spaniard if they could pay for her to sleep with them. He would avoid their questions, yell at her, and tell her to go upstairs. Sometimes the look of desperation was so apparent, the men would joke with him and say, "*what's wrong, she's only your maid!*"

The young woman's only crime was the way she looked and the choices she had made in seeking a means to live and survive in the past. Amaryllis had changed her life and honored the Spaniard in every way. It sickened her that she was still some sort of commodity in the eyes of the men that desired her. All in all, the Spaniard traveled less and less and eventually, the children were sent back to Cuba to live with Amaryllis' family. It was too difficult for them on the island. A happy and carefree life for a child to live and go to school did not seem possible for these children who were the product of an interracial union. Amaryllis stayed because everyone knew her in Havana and her children would suffer at the hand and the commentaries of those who knew her. Additionally, she loved her man, but they were not lawfully wed. This was something she wanted with all her heart and so did he. They wondered how it could be. After all, it was close to the end of the last century, when a very brave man who had been elected as the first black judge in the post-Reconstruction South, performed a marriage of an interracial couple and subsequently, he was formally removed from office. The judge did not win the fight to retain his position. It was a very tragic and sad ending for a man who believed in the right of men and women to marry despite the color of their skin. He died a pauper, and it destroyed him. The whole town knew it. The Spaniard and Amaryllis knew the general social repercussions. More importantly, what it would mean to their children. They could go to Spain, but that would mean travel and time away from each other. The Spaniard was getting older, and he could not stand the lifestyle and the stress of

constant travel. There seemed to be no positive solution for their situation at that time.

The hot breeze blew each day and the humid, muggy air at night made it difficult to sleep. The days were long, the nights longer and time was just time. The people woke each day, washed, and went to work. A piping tin of Cuban coffee with evaporated or condensed milk sustained them and gave them the energy they needed for the endless workdays. Children without parents would work at the tobacco factories, at the small grocery stores or even at the docks to make a small wage and survive anyway they could. Amaryllis knew she was blessed and believed that her goddess had made it possible for her to at least live properly and enable her to go see and provide money to her babies in Cuba. It could have been worse, she thought. Sometimes her ancestral spirits would instruct her and her belief in the occult arts was very strong. The people of Key West had little knowledge of those things in those days, and their way was to go and light a candle at *St. Mary's Church*. They would pray to St. Mary, St. Joseph, and kneel to the statue of the baby Jesus, making their petitions known. The Virgin of Charity was acknowledged by the Catholic faith as a version of the virgin Mary. Amaryllis believed many of the women of prayer at the Catholic church would pray to see someone like her go back to Cuba, never to return with her "dirty" children who were conceived in sin and *bastards* with no name. She wondered about sin and there were other churches on the island where she would pass and hear singing. They

were churches where blacks like her would go, but dare she go in and sit to listen to the angelic voices? Was she ‘dirty’ there too? No one ever reached out to her, so she assumed she was not welcome. It was a very lonely life for her. The Spaniard was lonely too. He was a friendly and social man. He loved to entertain friends and have long talks over a wonderful dinner and a full-bodied cigar. That life became impossible for him because of his woman. There were no friends, no one to trust. She was too young, too beautiful, very few women on the island were as appealing to the opposite sex. How could he entertain friends? The men wanted her, and the women hated her. The Spaniard knew he was along in years and his age showed as his spirit sank within him. He was depressed and could no longer function as a husband should. This condition only made Amaryllis think he no longer loved her and that he was growing increasingly ashamed of their life together. Unfortunately, she knew the way she had lived, and her former lifestyle was a threat to her life with the Spaniard and the horrible people that lived on this island. Cuba was such a happy and prosperous place, she dreamed of going off to the country and riding her horse with the Spaniard. They had had wonderful times there. They drank, they ate, and lived their love with so much intensity that she longed for those times. If they lived there together again, they could be with their children and give them the love they so longed to give them. “*My Cuba,*” she pondered tearfully. There, a woman could give herself to the man she loved, and nothing could be wrong. The island of Cuba was large, and they could live wherever they wanted

to, and no one would have to know her past. Not only that, but she also had to support her elderly mother, and her family.

The Spaniard called Amaryllis from downstairs. *“Hey – Amaryllis, come here, I need you down here!”* Amaryllis hurried downstairs in response to his cry out to her. The Spaniard told her she had to clean up the store, he needed her help. Some of the kids from the neighborhood had been in the store and brought their muddy shoes with them. She agreed and began to clean up, sweeping the dirt outside and arranging the goods in the store. They were alone and he saw the opportunity to speak with her. *“I love you, my darling. You know that, right?”* She again started to cry, she knew he loved her, but what could be done about this love? Love didn’t seem to solve anything. The Spaniard continued and told her he loved her again and that she had to believe that. Despite his love, he knew she wasn’t happy, and neither was he. It was an impossible situation. Worse yet, he felt that they might be in danger. He realized and feared for her life more than his. The Spaniard knew he didn’t have much time. He felt it in his body, in his head. If something were to happen to him, what would become of her? She had no right to anything on the property. Amaryllis heard him say the words she feared he would one day say. She would have to return to Cuba to be with the children. He would continue to care for her, and she could take whatever she wanted with her. The Spaniard purchased a house for her on the outskirts of Havana. It was a grand house with several bedrooms, and she

would be safe there. He promised to visit often and send her the money she needed for herself and the children. Further, he had spoken to a Cuban doctor who was visiting Key West and the doctor knew of a good private school where the kids could go. Everything was set, he just needed her to agree, and he fashioned the explanation of his plan as gently as he could. Amaryllis dropped the broom and ran upstairs to her bedroom. She cried for what seemed like days until her swollen eyelids forced her to sleep. That night he came to her and held her in his arms, and he wept bitterly. There was no other way for them. Again, he told her of his love for her and that love had to be unselfish. Keeping her with him could only end tragically for her and he could not live with that. Amaryllis kissed his mouth tenderly and whispered that she loved him too and that she was not afraid to stay. He would have to be the one to send her away, if she left, it would be because he wanted it that way. They fell asleep together.

The morning came and soon the preparations were underway. Their choice was inevitable. The Spaniard took down several large trunks he had used in his travels for his wife to use. Yes, his wife! She was his wife, his friend, and the meaning of life for him! He stumbled over the trunk, sat, and buried his head in his large hands in anguish. She could not see him this way. Upstairs, Amaryllis looked through her things, they seemed so meaningless. She knew that she had to take what she could, and she knew that as long as he could, the Spaniard would provide for her. It was hard for her to focus and to believe she was really leaving. That same



afternoon, she boarded the ferry that took her to Havana. She knew it was the last time she would see him.

There are times in life when you find someone you love more than life itself. Mostly, those types of love come with an expensive price tag and extreme consequences. You can have everything and nothing at the same time. Many times, you wonder why we are born, why we love, why do we have to suffer, and why do beautiful things end. It means nothing, the color of one's skin or where they are from. Even in what seems like perfection, there is mishap and failure, but mostly, there is pain in the longing for that one love that can change everything. Now, back in Cuba, Amaryllis questioned herself in silence. Was it worth it to love a man that could never, ever truly be hers. She knew their bond was stronger than most marriages and yet it was cheapened by the opinions of many that perhaps had never had the opportunity to love that way. It was sad, very sad. She glanced over at the statue she prayed to, a hard plaster version of a beautiful virgin appearing to three desperate men who were in peril on the sea. There was such emptiness in the image that sat on her dresser. The statue wasn't God, it felt nothing, it heard nothing, it spoke nothing, it gave nothing. The image stood there, a stone figure with a painted face. It couldn't hold her and give her comfort. She realized only a good God and the man he had given to her could do that. She looked out of her balcony and saw the countryside where her home was away from the city of Havana. She felt a change in her heart. For the first time, she believed and wanted to go after that change. She would find

*Cindy de León*

a nice church to learn about the new spirit that lived within her, and she would teach that to her children, and they would carry on, remembering their father. She laid down and stared at the ceiling, remembering the Spaniard and how difficult, yet beautiful, her life had been with him. Instead of sadness, she had a sincere hope for a future without him.

## CHAPTER 4: “BETRAYAL”

*“The Ocean...dressed in blue skies and clouds, she is profound, mysterious, and a sedative for an anxious soul. Just breathe in and exhale and you are instantaneously rejuvenated; the sense that anything is possible, becomes your tainted reality. My love, you have captured me, given feeling to my being and yet, you have first lifted then destroyed my heart. Why did I allow this, or did I even have a say? I must part from you now or perish. I will never be the same, my thirst will last forever because I drank not knowing that the water was not clean and pure, its poison burns and destroys me because I do not belong to that world.”*

No one chooses love, it chooses you. The worst part about this is when you are so “*in love*” and the love goes wrong, it almost kills you or ruins your life. Benito was a simple man who worked very hard. One day, he took the advice of friends and decided to take a short trip to rest and have some fun. That is what men do sometimes. He never dreamed that his short trip would lead him into a labyrinth of obsessive love and tragedy. At times, this happens to a man when his life has no balance and everyone around him has opinions and appear to being doing life as it should be. It is good to take advice but not so good when you do not know

yourself enough and you do not make the conscious decision not to fall for the wrong person. Sometimes you do not see the wrong person coming. Benito never thought it was possible for him to find love. That was for his brothers or some of his friends. He did not imagine how hungry and thirsty he was for love.

It was the forties and after the second World War, it was a trend for men of proper age to travel between Havana from Key West via airplane. The short trip would get a gentleman to Havana for about ten dollars, and he would be ready for all the excitement and nightlife the "*Pearl of the Caribbean*" had to offer. Upon arrival, Benito suddenly felt invigorated with the sights and sounds of the colorful and happy city. It was lively and exciting; the people were elegantly dressed, and the women were incredibly beautiful. Music and fine food were everywhere, and their essence was intoxicating. He walked several blocks and asked for directions to a small rooming house where he would rent a room for three nights. He could not stay away from work for more than that and he knew he had enough money for the three nights, for food, and for some entertainment. He had also gotten some extra money from playing "*bolita*." Lady luck was with him the week before and he had won a hundred dollars playing the numbers. His brother-in-law had brought him his winnings with a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill. He looked over his room, it was clean and neat, so he put down his bags, checked himself in the mirror of a shared bathroom at the rooming house, and he was off to his first fun-filled evening. There

was a club that people spoke to him about in Marianao, known as *El Tropicana*. It was a fairly new club, but it was very popular for shows. Benito had never seen a show. He waived a car down and asked the driver to take him there. The driver couldn't stop talking about the beautiful dancers and the amazing shows at the modern nightclub. Benito became nervous and wondered how much it would cost but he believed he would have enough because most of his friends had given him advice on how much to carry. He was quiet about the money he had because they had also told him not to brag about money or amounts, he was carrying. The driver was friendly enough but did not feel good about talking openly to him, this wasn't *Cayo Hueso* and he didn't know anyone.

Benito climbed out of the cab after paying the driver and was greeted by porters who showed him the entrance into the club. It was a magnificent, modern structure with crystal arches. The nightclub was jumping. Benito had never seen so many people in one place. He was led to a small table for two and a waiter immediately came to the table and asked if he would be dining or if he was there just for the show and drinks. Benito asked what was the "special" and what they had to drink; the waiter gave him a peculiar look and asked if it was his first time at the club. Benito nodded and the waiter told him he would bring him a menu to review. When Benito received the menu, he looked up at the waiter hoping he would suggest something on the menu because Benito was unable to read the menu. He felt ashamed that he had a

limited education and could not understand what was on the menu card. He looked down at the card and pretended to give it a glance. He looked up once again at the waiter and asked him for their steak dinner and the waiter realized that Benito would need some help. The waiter offered a suggestion of their *Delmonico* steak with new potatoes and a salad. The waiter continued and offered to bring him the option of their house table wine. Benito happily nodded, they smiled at each other, and the waiter disappeared amongst the crowd.

Suddenly the band began to play, and Benito jumped in his seat at the onset of the music. The dancers appeared from all around the room and mingled temporarily with the crowd making their way to the stage. Before he knew it, his dinner had been served and most of the wine in the bottle was gone. It was a magical night and he felt like a king. Eventually, the show ended, and the guests began to fill the dance floor! Benito did not know how to dance but watching was just as much fun. He had never imagined that women could look so beautiful and so graceful. Finding a girl for himself that looked like any one of the ladies he saw was almost unheard of. They were happy and graceful; their hairstyles were perfect, and their lips were full and red. Eventually, his waiter asked if he was ready to pay the bill and he was so happy, it didn't even matter, he pulled some small bills out of his pocket and gave them to the waiter to pay for the meal and a healthy gratuity. The waiter thanked him, and Benito lifted himself from the chair and floated out of the hall where a porter had anticipated his coming and obtained a cab for the

evening ride to the rooming house. He woke when the cab driver yelled out that they had arrived at his destination. Benito dragged himself upstairs to his room, took off his clothes and laid face down on the bed.

A strong *café con leche* always does the trick, Benito thought. His first night in Havana had been spent soaking in the sights and sounds of the city nightlife. He walked downstairs and the lady of the house spotted Benito in the common area. She immediately carried out her tray with fresh Cuban coffee and some pastries. Benito sat down at the large table off to the side of the common living area of the house. He thankfully consumed the small meal and thought about what he would do that day and later in the evening. He wanted to meet someone; he was hopeful in this area. He found it easy to talk to women at the stores, at work, or in his neighborhood but that was because he knew them most of his life. This would be more difficult. Especially, he thought it would be difficult because the women appeared more sophisticated, and he was limited in his education and topics of conversation. As he finished eating, he rose, said thank you and goodbye to the lady of the rooming house and headed out. It was a nice day and as in the night, the city was full of color and lively people. He passed by a group of old men smoking their cigars and complaining about their wives. Children ran and played in the streets, and women picked tropical fruits and vegetables for their meals from the local produce street vendors. Havana was spectacular and he loved it. Benito strolled along the bustling streets and passed the

shops and cafés along the way. You could get anything in Havana. There were dress boutiques and shoe shops, photographers, children's clothing shops, jewelry, and banks. Musicians and dancers would perform for money and kids played and laughed in the park while their mothers looked on and gossiped amongst themselves. He wandered by a shop with a large window and through that window he spotted the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Her hair was the color of cinnamon, and her lips were scarlet red, she was very fair with dark eyes. She was trying to choose the perfect embroidered handkerchief and as Benito strolled into the shop, the girl commented that she liked the blue flower detail, but the yellow was also beautiful. Benito interrupted the conversation between the girl and the salesclerk. "*And, how much are they?*" The handkerchiefs were a specialty item and one of a kind, hand embroidered silk. Each of them had a cost of five dollars. The girl blushed and said that they were too expensive, and she could not take them. Benito told the salesclerk that they were, in fact, very beautiful and of good quality. He asked the girl if this was something that a young lady would like to receive from her beau, and she immediately told him that it was. Benito asked the clerk to wrap the handkerchiefs and put them in a decorative bag because it was going to be a gift. He paid for his purchase as the girl stood by watching intently. Benito turned to her and asked her name. It was Claudia. "*Claudia,*" he said and smiled, "*I would like to offer you this gift if you would agree to go out with me tonight?*" The salesclerk



smirked and turned pretending not to be interested in the conversation. Claudia hesitantly agreed, accepted his gift, and asked Benito to meet her around seven right in front of the shop. She left the shop. The salesclerk asked Benito if he knew the girl and he told her no, it was the first time he met her. The salesclerk then asked if he was from Havana and Benito said no. She smiled politely and told him to have a good time but to be very careful on his date, one never knows and even the look of innocence can be misleading. Such an odd comment, he thought, returned an awkward smile, and left the shop.

Seven o'clock could not come soon enough for Benito. He had made his way back to the rooming house, washed and put on fresh clothes. He wasn't one to use grooming products, so he asked the mistress of the rooming house if she had any tonics or shave lotions. She told him there was a bottle of hair tonic under the sink leftover from a former patron of the rooming house. It smelled good enough, so he put some on his head, some around his face and brushed back his wavy black hair. He scurried out the door and walked a few blocks to a main street where he hailed down a cab. Benito then checked his side pocket and took out his faux alligator wallet that had been a Christmas gift from one of his sisters. He checked his cash because he remembered what he had spent the night before at *El Tropicana*. Benito had forgotten the street where the shop was and looked at the receipt from the purchase of the handkerchiefs to give the driver the address. It was close to seven and he was running late. He wondered

if Claudia would wait for him, if she had gotten tired of waiting, or even if she had forgotten. No, she was standing in front of the shop, as they had agreed, and Benito sighed with relief. The cab driver asked if that was the lady he would be taking out for the evening and told Benito he was a lucky man. Benito smiled but ignored the driver and concentrated on the beauty before his eyes. She wore a dark green swing velvet dress, low cut to just above her breast area. He noticed her small waist, her full legs, and her beauty was beyond belief. Her hair was up in a soft but coiffed style, and she carried a small bag. She smiled as he climbed out of the cab and held the door open for her to get in. He climbed back in after her and told the driver to take them to "*El Tropicana.*" The driver mentioned that there was no show that evening because it was a weeknight, but the dinner and dancing were still the rage. The couple arrived at the nightclub and once again the porters escorted them into the main dining room area. There were a considerable number of diners but nowhere near the number of people there the previous night. They were seated and immediately, a waiter approached them and asked if they would like drinks before dinner and if not, if they wished to see the menu. Claudia told Benito she was starving and preferred to order their drinks and proceed with dinner. He asked her what she wanted, and she confidently asked for the wine list, ordered a *Roma* sherry, and the *chateaubriand* for two. Benito was very impressed, and she told him that she was sure her selection would please him. It did. The meal was exquisite, and they spoke together for hours, ordering additional drinks. Claudia told him that

she would have preferred the *Hotel Nacional*, but his choice was a good one. They would have a chance to go other places while he was in Cuba. She beguiled him and before he knew it, they were riding to her apartment, caught in each other's arms, and sharing their first night together like a whirlwind. The next morning, she bathed and asked him to do the same. He put on his shirt and just his slacks and belt, she dressed, and they spent the day together site sightseeing. Claudia showed him Havana and this time he saw it differently. They went to more intimate parts of the city, the neighborhoods and to *El Vedado*. Cuba had beautiful beaches. There were really no beaches in Key West. You would have to go up the Keyes a ways to get a good beach. But the ocean surrounded the island and Benito longed for home as they strolled along *El Malecon*. It was his last evening in Havana and Claudia told him she had other obligations and would have to say her goodbyes before night fall. Benito asked where he could reach her and she gave him an address where he could write her letters. She liked him. He fell in love instantly.

Unfortunately, obsession comes when one person is more interested than the other in a love relationship. Benito wrote to Claudia often. Actually, he had his sister-in-law, Milagro, write to her for him. He confided in Milagro the love he had developed for Claudia and his plans to ask her to be his wife. Milagro worried about the arrangement and the fact that this "Claudia" was very mysterious and secretive. At least once a month, he made his way to Havana, and they would be together for one or two days and he would return to

Key West. Claudia was always available, she told him that she lived alone in Havana and that she was an orphan with no family. She worked at a restaurant in the evenings. It seemed that she was never working when he was there, and he liked that. On one occasion, Claudia did not meet him at the airport like she had done before. He waited and she did not arrive for him. A boy at the airport came up to him and asked if he was “Benito,” surprised, he said yes. There was a message from Claudia. She was called to work that night. That he should go to her apartment at 9 pm and she would be there. Benito had to kill time before going to Claudia’s place. He went to the shop where he first met her in hopes of buying her a small gift. The same saleslady was there, and he greeted her. He asked what they had in the way of a small gift for a lady. “*The same girl?*” She asked and he smiled and nodded. “*So, you are still seeing Claudia? My, it must be love and you must be a perfect fool,*” she teased. Benito was puzzled and tried to ignore the comments. She showed him a nice gold toned compact. It was a very nice gift and could be engraved with her initials if he so desired. The young lady wrapped the gift and placed it in one of their nice bags, he excused himself and thanked her for her help with the gift.

The afternoon lingered and Benito sat on a bench across the street from Claudia’s apartment. It was early evening, and he was very hungry. He walked over to a nearby café and ordered a small meal to pass the time. He thought about what he would say to her. It was time for him to tell her, again, how he felt about her and where he wanted to take their

relationship. He wanted to marry her and take her back to Key West. Meeting Claudia was the single best thing that had ever happened to him, and he wanted to make her his wife. Before he knew it, it was nine in the evening. He knew because there was a large clock tower near to the small park bench where he continued to wait for her. She didn't arrive at nine. He began to worry and then it was nine-thirty and then it was ten! Finally, at about ten after ten in the evening, he saw her walking towards the entrance of her apartment building. Benito called out to her, and Claudia turned swiftly pretending to be surprised. She ran towards him and hugged him as she apologized for being so late. They went up to her apartment together and they entered the small space. He asked her why she was so late, and she told him that there were so many customers in the restaurant where she was a hostess. It was impossible for her to leave on time because diners stayed longer than usual after dinner, having coffee and dessert. He understood that because he had to work overtime many times to cater to people who wanted to take their time to enjoy their meal. He kissed her passionately and told her it didn't matter and that he had brought her a gift. She squealed with excitement as she took the gift and began to unwrap it. Benito was so relieved that she liked it. Then, he asked if she had eaten, and she told him she had. All she wanted to do was take a bath and get to bed because she was so tired. He noticed that she did not even ask if he had eaten or how his trip had been, but he ignored it because he was happy to have her with him once again. He told her that he was anxious to speak with her about something. Claudia

quickly dismissed his request, began to undress, went into the bathroom, and proceeded to take a long bath. Benito undressed, hung up his clothes, put aside his bag and began to wash up in the sink located in the small kitchen area. He sat in a small chair next to the bed and watched Claudia as she prepared for bed. She was the most beautiful being he had ever seen. To him, she was almost unreal. She smiled at him and tapped the bed beside her which signaled that he should climb into bed with her. He did without hesitation. There was no interest in making love, she kissed him on the forehead and turned over indicating that she wanted to sleep. Benito did not insist. He was happy just to be near her. Usually, when they had been apart for long periods of time, she appeared anxious to make love. On this night, she was different, and he was afraid to force the subject. It bothered him, but soon he was fast asleep.

The faint aroma of fresh Cuban coffee woke Benito as Claudia washed her cup and saucer. Already fully dressed for the day, she walked over to him and sat down on the bed beside him. She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. Benito told her that he wanted to speak with her. He rose from the bed, washed his face, and brushed his teeth. Benito was not hungry, but he poured himself some coffee and sat down at the small table by the kitchenette area.

*“I’m happy you’re here. Of course, we can talk,”* she said.

Benito hesitated and began, *“I’m feeling that me coming here to see you may not have been such a good idea, you don’t seem to be happy to see me.”*

Claudia smirked and told him he was being sensitive again. She had had a very bad day and she was tired. Of course, she was happy to see him, she told him in a soft voice. Walking towards him with a flirtatious look she hugged his head to her breasts and then she kissed him sweetly on the mouth. She explained to him that she had to take care of herself because she was her sole support. It was expensive making her own way in the city and truthfully, there was no one she really had to depend on but herself. That is the very thing he wanted to speak to her about. It was his opportunity to broach the subject of her becoming his wife! It was perfect and he immediately blurted it out,

*“I understand, Claudia. That is exactly what I want to talk to you about! I want you to marry me and come live with me in Key West. I want you to be my wife. You wouldn’t have to worry about anything, ever again!”*

Claudia pretended to be surprised. A proposal was something she had received before, but those proposals had not been backed up with any action. It was exactly what she was expecting to hear and as she had carefully planned. Marrying Benito was something she wanted for her life because currently things had not been going as smoothly as she had wanted. The truth was that more than working at a

restaurant, she had several suitors but none from the United States. There had been a few men she had met from the states, but they were just there for fun, nothing more. Soon, she would be turning twenty-five and before she knew it, she would end up an old maid without a future. Yes, she had slept with many men and yes, they gave her gifts and money for her favors. It was easy but eventually, she knew that her charms would diminish. Benito was a good man and she liked him. It was not love; it could not be. Love was dangerous and love would destroy her. This was perfect and she immediately jumped on his lap, kissed him feverishly and said, yes, she would marry him!

There was much to do. It was amazing how Claudia's mind worked and how she thought of everything. She told Benito she was going to call her employer to quit her job at the restaurant. Then, he would have to pay for the remaining week due for her apartment and give her land lady notice. They would go down to the local official and marry immediately. After that, he could arrange and pay for her passage to Key West at the end of the week. Of course, she would need some time to pack, make some purchases, and prepare for the trip. He could go back first and arrange where they were going to live in Key West. Once she arrived on the island, they could buy what was needed for their new little home. Everything went as planned, that very afternoon after they married, he gave her the money she requested, and he was happily on his way back to *Cayo Hueso*. Claudia knew that she had to use some wisdom in her new life. She had



heard that Key West was a simple, sleepy town and that the people would be quick to judge a single girl from Havana. Her purchases of some simple dresses and shoes for every day did not make her happy but they were necessary. Now, she would have to be a faithful wife and look the part. She sold some of her nicer dresses and shoes and used the money from the sale of her items to make the purchases she told him she needed. Benito didn't have to know that she kept most of the money he gave her. Besides, if for some reason it did not work out, she would need money. She stashed the money given to her by Benito in American dollars. She was smart and she was a survivor.

Benito could not contain his excitement upon his arrival on the island. He immediately went around to tell all his brothers and Milagro that he was now a married man. His wife would arrive at the end of the week, and it was important to find a small house. The room that he rented for himself was not enough. He wanted a real house, with a porch and a small yard. It had to be close to family and close enough to the restaurant where he worked. Benito did not have a car, but he did not believe they needed one. But, a house, yes, he needed to find a house. Milagro tried hard to smile and be happy for him as he told her all about his new bride. She knew it was important to him but there was something that gave her a strange stirring in her gut. Something did not seem right, and the news had come so fast. Despite that, she committed to helping him find a place and making sure that they had what they needed a table with chairs, a bed, a

dresser, linens, and things like that. Naturally, it would only be the basics because a woman likes to furnish and fashion her own house. There was a small bungalow between Truman and Amelia Street. The rent was modest, and it was very clean. The good thing was that it included the basic furnishings. They could put the mattress outside in the sun to air out, and once it had fresh linens, it was perfect for the couple to use. Milagro walked around the small dwelling, it had a lot of windows, a small porch, and a simple bathroom with a tub. The kitchen was open and there was a gas stove and a small ice box. At the back of the small house, outside the backdoor that led to the kitchen there was a washing tub and a manual wringer under a metal shed and further on into the small backyard, there was a clothesline. Benito was delighted and hugged Milagro. He asked her if she could negotiate the rental for him and she agreed.

Friday came quickly and Benito went to the airport to pick up his new bride. He watched as she stepped out of the plane and made her way across the runway to meet him. She was carrying a small bag and as usual, she was breathtakingly beautiful. He told her first about the house that he was able to rent with Milagro's help and the fact that they were invited to dinner so that she could meet his brother and his wife. The couple waited for the bags, Benito had a taxi waiting for them and they would go directly to the small house. She was anxious to see their new place so that she could plan and begin to make it her own. This was a new experience for Claudia, she would now be the lady of the house and a wife.

Her first thought was that the house was small. She went inside and began to look around. Benito was a little nervous because she was usually very expressive, yet she said nothing. The house would have to do, for now. She said the house was fine. Benito was not convinced but they put down her things and left the small house to walk down the street to dinner at his brother's house.

The family came to accept Claudia, even though they were not convinced she was the wife he wanted and needed her to be. Milagro did her best to make Claudia feel like part of the family, but Milagro was busy with the kids, the house, washing and ironing she did for some paying customers. Times were good but the extra money came in handy. The days and the months went by quickly and Claudia grew restless and bored with the sleepy little island, the same old people, the gossip, and the critical looks. Benito was always working, and she had nothing to do. She would go to the corner store to buy some things; she would go to the *botica* for soap and sundries. Benito would bring home food for their evening meal from the small diner that he worked at and she would sit alone on the porch sometimes seeing the children play on the street. She could not stand the thought of being a mother to one of those little brats or cleaning their nasty little faces. She laughed as one little boy stuck up his middle finger at her as he rode by on his bicycle. It was the same little pest who would walk through the side of her house looking in the window to see if he could see her dressing. Men never grew up, she thought. They all want the same

thing, no matter how young they are. She laughed harder at him as he turned and rode back past the little house. Walking to the *bodega* she could see some old women whispering to each other as they pretended to sweep the dirt off their steps. The houses were so close together, you could hear the old men snoring in their beds through the open window in the middle of the night. Sometimes, she would leave their bedroom and sit on the porch, in the dark and watch the cats romance each other on the picket fences, or one of the husbands, coming home late from visiting a lover. She longed for her life in Havana. She felt alive then and dead now. Benito was a good man, she thought. A good man is good for only one thing. Like her, she was only good for one thing.

Claudia woke on a hot August morning, there was no breeze at all. There was no air and she felt like she could not breathe. Sweat rolled from her breasts to her thighs as she looked at herself in a full-length mirror. Her skin was still supple and tight. She quickly brushed her hair back. Claudia took a fresh pair of nylon panties from her dresser, put on a dress, and slipped into her kitten heels. As she strolled out the door with her bag, she grabbed a parasol she had brought from Havana to give her shade from the beating sun. There were a couple of small shops she had heard about on Duval Street, and it was a good day to see what they had to sell. Coming up upon Duval Street, she headed West but not too far because that was closer to the restaurant where Benito was working. She bought herself an ice cream from *Carmona's*

and continued eating it while she strolled down Duval. Two Cuban men were standing on the corner talking and smoking their cigars. She noticed they were both young and good looking, but one was more dashing, and she caught his dark stare and followed his eyes intentionally as she passed him on the sidewalk. He tapped his friend on the arm, threw down his cigar and followed Claudia.

*“The ice cream looks good and very refreshing,”* he said. She did not understand him because he spoke to her in English.

*“No se lo que me dices...,”* she replied even though she didn’t understand him.

He continued walking by her side and now he spoke to her in Spanish, because he knew both languages very well. His name was Ricardo, and he was exactly what she was looking for, fun. Love affairs come quickly to lonely women married to simple men with no malice. A woman’s heart can be fickle if left alone too long and especially so, if she was used to roaming or that had been a former lifestyle. Claudia’s affair with Ricardo led to other affairs, although he had become her favorite. Keeping Benito occupied with work and understanding that she was now happy, was easy. Unfortunately, her affairs were not private, the entire island knew.

She continued to see Ricardo, soon after her husband would leave in the early morning hours to open his shop. Everyone knew and they told the man. He denied the rumors and even became angry with friends and even family who told him it was a mistake bringing that woman back with him. It was even more so because he made her his wife.

Milagro had not seen Benito and Claudia for some time, and she was so preoccupied with her life and responsibilities, she had no time for the gossip in the streets. But Armando knew, he asked Milagro to visit Claudia to make sure she was getting along alright. Milagro decided to visit early after the kids were off to school. She thought they could sit and have some coffee together and get to know each other a bit more. Despite the continuing hot weather, Milagro noticed that the windows of the house were still closed, the door was shut, and it was locked. She opened the screen door and knocked. There was no answer, so she immediately left. Later, after Benito left the restaurant, he decided to stop by Armando's house to bring Milagro some fresh yellowtail. He had saved it for her because he knew the kids loved Milagro's fried fish. Armando was home but Milagro had not arrived yet.

*"I think we need to talk,"* Armando told him.

*"Sure, I can stay a minute, just make sure you put this fish on some ice since Milagro is not home. It will be nice for your dinner, okay?"*

“*Gracias, hermano.*” Armando thanked his brother for the fish and pulled a large piece of ice and put it in the sink, placing the wrapped fish on top. He proceeded to painstakingly tell Benito about the rumors concerning Claudia. He had not seen her, but he had overheard a conversation between some men at the *Cuban Club* about Benito’s beautiful wife. Everyone knew Benito, he was liked and loved by many. A kind and friendly soul, they all knew his humbleness and hardworking ethic. Many had seen him proudly walking with her as they visited family and even at times, when he could, they would be seen at dances or gatherings. Many months had passed, and many people now knew her. Armando had met Ricardo on several occasions while he tended bar. Ricardo liked to drink. He did not work, he lived by doing odd jobs for rich widows in Key West or anything else they needed from him. Ricardo was a lovely man, and he did what he needed to do to make his living. Armando told Benito, “*They say round town that that degenerate is Claudia’s lover and that she’s a cabrona, a real bitch!*” Armando told Benito he had not shared the information with anyone else and Milagro did not even know. Benito chuckled. How could it be, she was always at home with everything ready for him when he arrived from work. It was impossible and it was horrible that now, his beautiful wife was the subject of gossip and envy of a bunch of frustrated old women with nothing else to do.

“*No, the women are not the ones spreading the rumors, the men are! I’m telling you because while I was serving*

*some customers, this guy, Ricardo, came in and started talking about her, by name. He said they have been lovers for over a month. They go to 'her place' and she is wild and insatiable."*

Ricardo had told a couple of men at the bar that they no longer had to go to Havana. Havana was there for the taking and the price was right. It appeared to Armando that Claudia was involved in an intimate relationship with Ricardo and possibly worse. In addition to that, everyone knew that Ricard was scum. Benito could not believe what he was hearing. It was impossible. This was his wife, and they were in love. He brought her here and promised to give her everything she needed and wanted. He had been faithful to completing that promise! Something like this was unconscionable.

For days, Benito's thoughts were flooded with what Armando had told him. He came home and they slept together. He would wake up early and watch her sleep and prepare himself to leave and eventually go to work. They had been so happy, he thought. But now, he could see the faces of his co-workers and those who came in to eat at the restaurant every day. He could sense the ridicule in their faces, he knew that people were laughing at him behind his back. How could he doubt her, he had no proof, but how could he ignore what people were saying? Gossip is an evil thing; it is one of the things most hated by God because of its capacity to destroy a peaceful life. Benito knew he had to find



out for himself. He could not go on with this darkness overshadowing his dreams and his future. Immediately, he knew what he had to do.

As usual, Benito bent down and gently kissed his wife as she slept in the early morning before the sun rose. It was a cool morning, and the day ahead would be long for him. On days like today, he would wash up and dress; he walked several blocks and entered the back door of the small café and began to prepare the produce and the meats for the lunch specials. People loved his food, and they enjoyed eating there with him, his pleasant smile, nice conversation, and how they felt when they left. But not today. Benito washed his face and proceeded out the door as usual. He walked to the restaurant and none of the other workers or servers had arrived yet. He grabbed an ice pick that he had alongside his knives and other cooking utensils and placed it in a brown paper bag. Benito immediately locked the back door of the restaurant on Duval, he walked quickly, heading back down the street towards the small little house where he lived with Claudia. The anguish of what he would find upon his return made him nauseated and even though he had not had anything to eat, the acid came up and he stopped to expel it from his throat. The cool breeze did not help the sickness in his stomach and in his soul. The house appeared silent, but Benito slipped through the side yard towards the back of the house and entered through the door of the kitchen which was open. There was a strong smell of perfume, the scent he had purchased for her on the day they were married. He pulled the ice pick slowly from the

paper bag trying hard not to make any noise, but no sound was heard by the two as they reveled in wild delight in the small bedroom, upon the small bed that Benito had just shared with Claudia less than an hour before. He pushed the door open and stood there briefly, breathing heavily, sick, and disgusted. Ricardo lunged to his feet and stepped back away from the bed and Claudia sat up, her tousled cinnamon curls covering most of her face. Benito put down the ice pick and moved quickly towards Ricardo, punched him, and knocked him to the ground. Claudia continued to scream obscenities at Benito and begged him to stop! Benito pulled Ricardo and proceeded to drag the slender man through the house, opened the door and shoved him out the front of the house. Ricardo ran naked down the street yelling for help and now some of the neighbors were outside and witnessed the commotion. Benito, now raging, went back into the bedroom where the woman cursed him. He picked up the ice pick and flung himself at her in the bed, stabbing her consecutively until she passed out. He lifted himself, now full of blood, from the bed. He looked on to her and softly repeated, "*How could you do this to me?!*" One of the neighbors had gone to warn Armando about what was happening. Armando and Milagro immediately ran down the street to the small, rented house, now surrounded with people. They pushed their way through and found the horrid site and a devastated man who now sat in the corner of the small room, weeping miserably for what he had done. Benito was inconsolable. Armando yelled to the crowd begging someone to call an ambulance and tried to revive the bloody naked woman that now laid

almost lifeless on the bed. Milagro knelt over Benito trying to comfort him. What had happened to him and had he done this horrendous thing? The neighbors told Armando about Ricardo and they could only assume what logically had transpired.

The police and an ambulance arrived. Claudia was still alive, and they immediately took her to the nearby neighborhood hospital. Later, she was taken by ambulance to Miami due to her critical condition. Benito was arrested and he went peacefully. The brothers gathered to discuss any help they could offer Benito and the horrible day turned into days and nights of sorrow for the humble family. Meanwhile, Benito felt nothing. He could not eat or drink anything and simply sat in his cell until the date of his hearing. Armando and the other brothers went to the jail every day to see him. They told him that Claudia was alive and there was a chance that he could get out, but he needed a lawyer. Benito refused legal counsel, he only sat and cried thankfully to God that she was alive. He knew that he could never see her again, but he rested knowing she would live. Sometimes living in a certain condition is more of a curse than death itself. Unfortunately, the puncture wounds festered and hardened into small tumors. She was alive, but she would never be the same again. Her youthful body was now a vessel of inflammation and pain, scarred and hideous. The wounds had punctured some of her vital organs and she underwent several operations to save her life. There would be many foods she could no longer eat, and she would eventually walk but her

gait would be short, and she could no longer stand up straight or for long periods of time. Claudia decided to stay away from the small island and the family saw to it that she was provided with money to live until a determination of the charges and a sentence was reached by a judge.

Finally, Benito was emotionally ready to face the judge on his case. His brothers were present at the hearing and since there was no legal counsel, the judge asked him questions and Benito answered truthfully. The judge knew Benito very well. He ate daily at the restaurant and knew the love and devotion that Benito had exhibited for Claudia. The judge had asked for an investigation of her life in Havana and had kept up with her recovery and the diagnosis of her future health. Claudia had lied to Benito from the day that they met. She was single and took money from men, used them to live and to get what she wanted. This was common knowledge in Havana and just because Benito was blind or even stupid for believing the lies and not seeing the reality of the type of woman that he made his wife, the judge could not bring himself to condemn Benito for this obvious crime of passion. He ordered that Benito would be released to the custody of his brother Armando for one year, that he should not try to see or communicate with Claudia, and that for the following three years, a percentage of his earnings would be deposited into an account for Claudia's support and medical care. Every six months for the following three-year period, Benito would come before the judge and give a report of his compliance. Additionally, a trust was set up through a legal office where

she decided to settle and a report of her health and wellbeing would also be sent to the judge. At the end of the three years, the judge received a letter written by Claudia asking that he release Benito from any further responsibility. That was all, it ended there. No one on the island ever heard from Claudia again. Ricardo disappeared and it is said he was killed in Havana during a bar room brawl.

Benito remained on the sleepy island, living his life alone and working at the restaurant. He stayed close to his family. Milagro eventually helped him by washing his clothes and cleaning the small place where he lived. No one ever laughed at Benito again. It was a shock to many that he had not been sufficiently punished for his crime and that perhaps justice was not had for the beautiful young woman that was no longer her true self. It is said that Benito took a wife and fathered a son, but he never forgot the experience that haunted him and impacted his life. It is also said he fell in love many times, but his love was never reciprocated. He was fond of and married a good woman who bore him a son, but she would never be the love of his life. He did have great satisfaction in having a son and loved him dearly making sure he grew up to be an honorable man. This part of his life did bear good fruit. Sometimes life is that way. Passion and intensity of love so strong can result in obsession and must be kept at bay. Betrayal for some is too much and can give rise to violence in the heart of a gentle man. Crimes of passion can erupt in anyone. Love, even when not always true, can move individuals to near insanity, it moves people

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to go outside of themselves for even just a moment of blissful content. Sometimes, it doesn't heal but destroys. It must be chosen carefully and thoughtfully; never taken for granted.

## CHAPTER 11:

### “ANGELINA”

*When youth is gone and your time has passed,  
When the darkness is darkest, how long will it last?  
Is the night so long, that you can't cry no more?  
Has life long been wasted, with no open door?  
So, what to do, to dance, to sing?  
Can we just pretend life is a never-ending fling?  
Is this the end, will I be happy again?  
So many thoughts, just let me sleep and be done.  
Madness, I cannot give in to you yet, be gone!*

Coming back from the first World War with no medium for escape from its horrors was a reality for Angelino. He had gone abroad, fought for his country, and experienced suffering, illness, loss and lack. He started out as a good Italian boy from a nice family. Well, maybe not that nice, but everyone in the neighborhood thought so. Now, all his mother's tears could not prevent him from moving forward and grabbing everything life made possible for him. He was tired of Chicago, and he couldn't stand to see the tired frustration on his mother's face. She was a workhorse, that is all she did, work. She worked for the family, for her fat, lazy slob of a husband. Yeah – her husband, his father, a slob! Angelino's mother hated the cold weather, and it was cold

there in their building. And the women around town, they were frigid. He hated their arrogant, tight red lips. They were dames with an agenda, wanting to trap any fool with a job and tie him down to the rat race of life, only to get fat and die from a heart attack, like his father did. Now, to make it worse, there would be no booze. A couple of buddies were heading to Tampa, Florida. It was a booming hotspot for hustlers, peddlers, and access to all the liquor you could handle. To top it off, there was plenty of money to be made and it sounded like just the ticket. Angelino wasn't a saint, and he didn't pretend to be. After all, his sisters could take care of his momma. They could go to the neighborhood Catholic church, complain to the father what's-his-name, and light a candle for him on his way to Florida. He had to get out of town or be food for the wolves in some hell-hole prison with no heat. He had come too close to the cops and now they were searching for him. Sometimes his father said he was too good-looking and swore that his sisters would have done a lot better had they gotten his features, his thick, lustrous hair, and especially his smile. He knew he was soft on the eyes; he had a pretty face and some men liked that in prison. It was uncomfortable for him the way his father had spoken to him. It didn't seem right; he was his son! He thought of his father's last words to him before he stormed out, because it made him sick to hear his voice, even anything that he had to say because he was vulgar and demeaning.

*“Yeah boy, you know you give some of those sissies on the street a hard on when you walk by, with that smile a*



*yours! Christ – I did it right with you when I got your mother pregnant, your sisters, Christ, I’m gonna have to support them until I drop dead – they so ugly no one will take them off my hands. So, what about it – you a sissy, boy? Get outta here and if you go – just don’t go to jail! All I need in my miserable life is to have a son who got turned into a sissy in prison!”*

So now what, Angelino wondered. Soon after he walked away from the last conversation with his father, the old man fell dead as he was going through the front door to go buy a pack of cigarettes. The funeral was quick because nobody came, just him, his mother, and his sisters. All he could do was stare at them while they cried over the body. His sisters weren’t ugly, they were hideous. Trying to put that thought out of his mind, sometimes he felt he would turn into his father. Additionally, when his mind was flooded and he felt anxious, he started to doubt his own sexuality. After all, it was true that it felt good when his friends told him he was pretty. Maybe his father was right, maybe he was a homosexual. Fear crept up on him at the thought of it; no, no – he wasn’t like that he reassured himself silently. He liked women, and he had to run away from his father’s voices. He got so crazy and could almost feel he would end his life just to stop that voice – the one that haunted him and made him question everything he was and everything he wanted.

Tampa was a dirty old town with brick buildings and cobblestone streets. You could hide and seek in Tampa, you

could play, drink, have sex with the underaged girls and no one could touch you. If you were a part of the right circle, they would never touch you. The smell of liquor and sewage seeped from the water drainage on the streets, but the higher benefit was that no one knew Angelino, no one knew his family, and he liked it that way. Angelino connected with Tommy T's gang in *Ybor City*. They arranged a place to stay and a job to get him started. Instantly, he had money in his pocket and a future with the mob that took him in. If he kept quiet and did what he was told, he could climb his own ladder of success and live the life he wanted. His first order of business came straight from Tommy T. Angelino would have to monitor a few of the small neighborhood stores and collect the money they would provide for their own protection. He would also have to deliver and exchange the liquor provided from local and international bootleggers. The small "*bodegas*" like the Cubans called them would silently house the liquor, it would keep the owners involved and it would keep them faithful to the mob. To sweeten the pot, they would pay. Everyone got paid, even the police in those days. This made it a sinch for the underground to operate one of the "wettest" cities of the day with little or no heat.

Angelino had a favorite *bodega* he liked to visit. He would dress up real nice and drive down Palm Avenue, heading West, so he could catch a glimpse of the prostitutes leaving their lovers and stumbling through the street to get home. It was amusing to him. Women were only good for one thing, he thought, and these women, well, too much

experience loses the luster of the game. Nice women, on the other hand, were calculating and always keeping their virtue to use as a *queen of hearts* in what they pretended was the game of love. To him, it was just another card game. He wanted to hold all the cards. His arrogance swelled inside of him. Life was a game that he had to play, so he figured he might as well have fun. The only important thing to remember, in his mind, was never get caught and never give yourself over to anyone. War had taught him that. He had run from the battle and hid in the bush many times to avoid the fire. He made it through and out of the war and to everyone, he came back a survivor and even a hero. When he came back, his father had not even acknowledged him. Like his father, he knew he was no hero but yes, he was a survivor and that was the main thing in the life he was leading. His life would be nothing like the one that the fat old man lived.

The owner of the *bodega* would always welcome him and give him a shot of *expresso*. What he liked best was Maria or Miriam, or whatever her name was. She was an adorable little Cuban girl, maybe she was almost sixteen and that was old enough for Angelino. The girl's eyes grew bright with excitement when she spotted the older, well-dressed man arrive at the store. Usually, she unpacked boxes in the back, but her aunt and uncle were anxious to get her married off, so they allowed her to come to the front and help Angelino with anything else he wanted or needed in their little store. At the end of his visit and with a bag in hand and a couple of cigars, Angelino would collect some cash from

the old man's register. But the girl thrilled him. She was sweet, with a gentle smile and her eyes were large and dark. Best of all, she adored him and that gave him the most pleasure. He would return to the store two or three times a week, develop a conversation with the young girl and eventually, she snuck out and saw him in his car, in the alley, even in the back storeroom of the store. Her aunt and uncle knew. Her cousins knew. She was infatuated with the man almost twelve years older and she believed he would take her as his own and make her his wife. Like his sisters up north, she prayed to their resident virgin for a husband. Not this sucker, he thought to himself.

His nature called, the inevitable happened. The store owner and his wife noticed their niece's early morning sickness and vomiting. Most of her days, she could not eat and fell asleep in the back room while unpacking the bottles of aspirin and other sundries. On a day when Angelino came to the store, the old man solemnly told him that the girl was pregnant. His forehead was moist with beads of sweat as he spoke because he didn't want to upset the man for fear of what he could or would do. At the same time, the family was concerned for the small girl. She was barely sixteen. Angelino smugly denied any involvement with the girl and said he had no idea how she got pregnant, that perhaps they should inquire further. He would not acknowledge his intimate relationship with the young girl, soon to be a mother to a child that everyone in the house knew was Angelino's. He refused to acknowledge the fatherhood of the child and

suggested that the family take care of the problem with the girl themselves. The girl's heart broke but she remained silent, as she always did. She made no demands because the fear of bringing an unplanned and unwanted child into the world while she was so young and now, very clearly, alone, was unspeakable. Doing away with the child was costly and dangerous but mostly not often considered by a Catholic family. Having no other solution, her uncle drove her to Miami where she would take the railroad down to Key West, where her father was. She dreaded this the most. He was a cross and stubborn man who asked his brother to take her off his hands when her mother passed almost ten years prior. She hadn't seen him in a decade; the world had changed so much and so had she.

She thought of Angelino often and despite her father's cruelty and rejection, she started working as a maid for a prominent family in Key West. The Gato's were good to her and she worked every day, saving what she could until the birth of her child. At almost the end of the summer in 1927, she gave birth to a girl. At times and when needed, she left the child with a neighbor or her father. She came to know a few men and finally a fisherman who provided for her and her small, scrawny girl with too much black hair and unfavorable looks. Angelina resembled her father's sisters. She had his dark hair, but she had a large nose, and her teeth were crooked. She was taller than most little girls her age and very awkward. The neighborhood children would laugh and mock her. She eventually became a teenager and the

fisherman who lived in her mother's house took advantage of her. Her spirit of rejection took on a new light and she realized, just like her father, that she had to learn to play the game of life. She didn't like being poor and she didn't like Black people. She imagined herself living in a mansion and far away from the neighborhood on the island that was inhabited by Black, Bahamian people. Many of them were kind to her mother, who continued to be humble and sweet. They would help her and bring her their delicious food, knowing she was so poor that she barely covered the necessities. They were good people, warm, happy and carefree. But not Angelina. She believed she was better. Many times, she played in front of the mirror, experimenting with a lipstick and eyeliner she stole from the bedroom of one of the prominent ladies her mother cleaned house for. She would also steal girly magazines and society papers that featured the movie stars of the day and pretended to be rich and famous. It was horrible going to a public school where she had no friends and swore that if she mingled with the girls at the convent, she would be popular and able to go to the dances and parties they went to. The Great Depression had taken its toll on her mother and because of her common law husband's great indiscretion with Angelina, mother and daughter were now alone to fend for themselves. Angelina's mother seemed so insignificant, but she did serve a purpose, at least she made some money and managed to have some friends. With that, they were able to live and eat. The naval base brought in some gorgeous boys from all over the country and they were anxious to have a good time. Angelina ignored

the boys at school and one day, she never went back to high school, again, it was insignificant for her goals. Sometimes, she was invited to the Cuban Club with a suitor and would find little treasures she could take with her from the ladies' powder room. Rich girls were stupid and didn't appreciate their belongings, leaving their compact or lipstick laying around after they had freshened up and simply forgot as they giggled and left the powder room to continue dancing and flirting with the boys. Sometimes stray gold earrings would find their way into Angelina's bag. Her mindset justified the fact that she took everything she found unattended.

Unfortunately, she realized she too was stupid because she never paid attention to what could happen when you play with boys. Unlike her mother, she wasn't in love, and she didn't keep to the Catholic doctrine of never considering abortions. Neither did she know who the father of her unborn child was. One of the sailors she went with fell for the sob story about her condition and how everything would be fine if he paid for her to get rid of the child and that she did. Her mother knew that she had gotten rid of her unborn children, a few times. She worried because she was sick and even had a fever for several days, so she made her some soup and prepared hot compresses for the cramps. Angelina toughened up and recovered because she wasn't about to grow fat, especially with all her plans. The years progressed, the war was over, and Angelina never found her fine, European gentleman with money. So came the 1950's and everyone was so immaculate, especially during the day. At night, there

wasn't much to speak of because most of the fun crowd would hop on the ferry and go to Cuba for the weekend and all the excitement Havana made possible. Angelina had discovered a crowd that would provide her with a ticket to Havana and one Friday afternoon, that dream became a reality. Havana was magnificent with its *Tropicana* and *El Hotel Nacional de Cuba*, and so much more! Of course, her relations had access to the private parties at the mansions lining the streets of *El Vedado*. A girl with certain friends could find a nice life if she knew the right people. She had acquired a look that was attractive, learned how to apply make-up, and borrowed dresses and shoes in order to continue life and play the part. The excitement Havana, Cuba brought to the world opened doors and opportunities to meet and mingle with people from all over the world. She knew she would find her European knight in Cuba.

A couple of her girlfriends decided they loved the city of Havana and wanted to stay for a while. There was a future and livelihood that could not be obtained in Key West. At the time, Havana was considered the Pearl of the Caribbean by many, for lifestyle, the famous personalities, the night scene, and the money. Angelina got a job at a local dress shop. It paid little money, but it was enough to rent a small room that included her breakfast and one full meal a day. The owner of the dress shop designed and made the clothing herself and loved that Angelina had a social life, with connections to the rich who could become potential customers. Angelina could wear the creations out on the weekends and promote sales.



Additionally, if she brought in a client, she would gain a commission in addition to her regular salary. When Angelina dressed up, she was stunning, slender, and very tall. So, she took the dresses and wore them for promotional purposes. It had been a while since she had left Key West and travelled to Cuba, so she decided to write her mother a letter. It was the first of two letters she would write to her mother. The second one would eventually come, bringing both sadness and joy. Nonetheless, Angelina stayed for several years in Havana, working, and enjoying her jet set lifestyle despite her empty pocketbook. On a hot, blistery day, she walked outside of the shop for some air and ran into a man that would give her a reason to fall in love. Gregorio was about her height when she wore her heels. As fate would have it, he was an Italian born merchant and shoe dealer, looking for a place to market his beautiful women's shoes in Havana. He had travelled a long way to expand his already lucrative business. Angelina invited him into the store and introduced him to the dress designer. They connected quickly and shared almost a year of romance and passion. She was happier than she had ever been and even learned a bit of Italian. Gregorio would travel back and forth from Italy to Havana and would stay with her at a flat he rented for her. It was posh and cozy in a nice area of town and she could easily walk to the dress shop. The shoes did very well, and the designer expanded her store. Angelina confided in the store owner that she wanted to have a child by Gregorio and believed she had conceived during his last visit. She longed for him to return so that she could tell him the news. The news reached Gregorio before

his next trip to Havana, and he later sent a representative to continue the marketing and supply of his shoes at the designer's store. One day, when Angelina was close to her fifth month of pregnancy, the designer called her in and terminated her employment. She was closing the shop and moving to Italy, with Gregorio. Angelina went back to her ritzy flat where she was told she had three days to move out. She went up the stairs and wrote the second letter to her mother. The ferry ride back was not so exciting this time as she left Havana and her old lifestyle behind.

Angelina arrived at the small wooden house where she had lived before with her mother. She hated it but no more than she began to loath herself and the child living inside of her. It was too late to get rid of it. No doctor on the island would hear of it and she had no money to travel up north and locate a doctor that would perform an abortion. The thoughts of an ugly existence began to swell up inside of her and during her remaining months of pregnancy she fell into a deep depression. Her thoughts raced and she ate very little. Maybe the baby would be born dead. She saw no one. Many times, she would daydream and fantasize that perhaps she would have a baby girl and take care of her like no one could. Of course, the child would be beautiful and petite. Angelina could continue to work and give the girl modeling lessons and music lessons. Somehow, she would go to the convent to study and make the right kind of friends. The birth of the child came, and it was unfortunate for Angelina's plan because she had a boy. She cursed Gregorio and his wretched

lover; she cursed their designs and their wealth. She cursed her life, and she cursed God because like her father, he had never been around. Finally, she pronounced that her child would be a girl anyway, in every way possible. Her insanity had taken to flight and once again, Angelina's mother would serve a purpose and raise yet another unwanted child, or at least for a little while. Angelina's mother loved the child and to the best of her abilities, she cared for it.

Loneliness and bitterness are terrible companions. Angelina thought about it and believed she could simply refuse to be lonely. Life, she thought, could be exciting and fun again. She could dress up and put on make-up, ready to face the world. No one would marry her, but she didn't care anymore. What was marriage? A silly notion of a stupid girl, in love. She had once been that stupid girl. Stupid, to believe in fairytales. Stupid, to believe in a period of time that would bring her what she always wanted, everything and anything that filled fantasies. Of course, she would need a lover. She had a child but wanted that child to be a girl, most of all. With a baby girl, life would be wonderful. Most of her days she would work hard and buy nice little dresses and bows for her daughter and she would raise her to be pretty and smart. One day, her little girl would grow up and be glamorous and lucky in love. And, most of all, her little girl would not be like her, stupid.

Despite her thoughts and plans, her pregnancy did not give her a girl. Again, Angelina pondered her life and her

theories about loneliness and what she could do to avoid all that. She thought about boys and how they always leave their mothers, and men always leave their women. Again, women were generally tangled up with their silly notions and that's why women were lonely and broke. Men and boys were always unfaithful. Now, she had another dilemma, and she thought what if she could make her boy more like a girl. Why not? No one really knew if she had given birth to a boy or a girl. No one cared or came to visit. Always alone with only her mother, it could work to her advantage. She would dress him up. She would train him to always be close to her. Her boy would never be allowed to play outside or play ball with the other boys. And, if no one saw that he was a boy – he could be, yes, he could be her daughter! She marveled at her thoughts and ingenious ideas, after all, life is what you make it. Many, many times she had tried to be patient and things just didn't come out like she planned. She used to pray and ask "god," whoever he was or wherever he was, and he just seemed too busy to do what she really wanted from him. Of course, she thought, god was a man, after all. Her god could be whatever she chose it to be and she would have to be wiser and more cunning because life was a game and now, she would force herself and learn a better way to play that game.

The infant was quiet and didn't eat very much. Angelina slept through the night and sometimes he would cry, but she would take her pills and it wouldn't bother her. It wasn't so bad, she thought, being a single mother with a baby. In the morning, she would wake up and call her mother who came

over to feed the baby. Later, Angelina would swaddle the infant in pink and white satin and place the child in its crib. She marveled at how the child slept for hours and hours, a sleeping beauty, she thought as she smiled to herself. Everything would be fine, just as she planned. Right before dressing for work, Angelina would take the baby out in its stroller, unless it was humid or raining. Angelina's hair would be impossible to style, and it would take at least an hour to straighten her long black locks. She noticed her hair was falling out. What a disaster! She couldn't go to work looking like that, the job she had was an opportunity to meet a proper suitor! Feverishly, she searched through catalogues to find a wig that could hide the patches on her head. Her mental condition and instability caused her to lose her working opportunities. Her coworkers were intimidated by her abrasive and forward demeanor so every time she worked at a store or even as a receptionist, she would lose the job because her clothing was loud, and her make-up was too heavy and bold for an office situation.

Angelina finally found a job working as a waitress in a bar. She had gotten the job and returned to work, which was important for her plans and her future. It's all she thought about. She left the baby with her mother. Her conversations soon became a monotonous story she would tell everyone, even those she served, and they stared at her while she went on and on about her plans, her future, and her loves. Sometimes the people at the tables she served walked out of the bar. Most of her co-workers wondered why she never

talked very much about her new baby. Mothers are always proud of their children and talk about how they are developing, when they are starting to walk, to talk, and how they are growing. Not Angelina. It was odd and most people noticed she wasn't very interested in any discussions about her child just simply said, *"My mother watches 'her.' She is a special child, very good, and never cries. The man whom I choose to marry will be fortunate to have me as a wife, and my child, fortunate; she never cries! He's gonna have to support me and my baby girl and give me all the money I need. Things are expensive and me, I need to live good because, well, look at me?"*

It was raining on a Friday evening and the bar room was very busy. A call came in for Angelina. She ran to the office to tell the night manager that her baby was ill, and she had to leave. That night the child passed away. The next afternoon, Angelina was back on the job. The manager was stunned to see her arrive at work and asked if she was okay, or if she needed anything. She simply and nonchalantly mentioned her child had passed away, the arrangements had been made, and that she needed to come back to work to forget about her loss. Of course, there were bills to pay and she needed a nice dress to get back to normal. No one understood. She continued her life from that point forward as if nothing had happened.

Years went by and Angelina grew older and older, her charms were fading but her job at the bar was something she

could depend on. Her abilities with make-up and corsets gave her a picturesque and exotic look. But there are some things make-up and beautiful clothes can't hide. No one had come into her life that she would "consider" as a husband, and she would remain alone until that fateful day where she would meet the man she was destined to marry. This was her dream, a limerence, she imagined him and many times her fantastic dreams would make her feel like he was actually there. At night she would walk home. She didn't mind the cat calls or the whistles, after all, she was still desirable and that was important. Sometimes, she would invite them to come with her because she yearned for the company and the attention. But, no, none of them ever came along to see her or visit even for one night.

Lilly came to work at the bar because she had just separated from her husband and was going through a divorce. She was raising her daughter alone now and her little one needed a lot of things. Unlike Angelina, Lilly struggled to make the most money possible for her little girl who was the most important person in her life. It was the *sixties*, and Key West was a wonderland of fun and adventure for the little girl. Sometimes, she would come with her momma to work but since she could not be seen in the bar, she would climb high onto the roof to sketch and observe the tourists walking on Front Street. The little girl made friends with everyone and would stay close by and check in with Lilly while she worked. The shopkeepers on the block loved her to come by and talk to them on slow days and Lilly never worried

because everyone loved her little girl. Angelina would notice the child when she was working during the same shifts as Lilly. She and Lilly became friends. Lilly felt sorry for Angelina and knew she was lonely. Angelina seemed so interested in the little girl, always commenting on how adorable she was, how smart she was, and how friendly she was. She had heard that Angelina lost her baby but never knew all the details. Angelina would speak to the little girl in “Italian” and the child would giggle and laugh at Angelina’s animated antics. After hours, during the cleanup, Angelina would prance around like a gypsy, pulling out several scarves from her purse and twirling around to the music from the juke box. The little girl enjoyed Angelina and began to dance and sing along with her, pretending to speak and sing in “Italian.” Lilly was happy that Angelina enjoyed her company and the company of her little girl. Their friendship grew and eventually Angelina would invite them over to her house for dinner and conversation.

It was a cool, crisp evening in December and Angelina had made one of her famous Italian inspired dishes. Lilly was always so amused with Angelina’s obsession with anything Italian and even when a man, who was well into his years and looked the part, Lilly would stay away and let Angelina get his table and serve him drinks. She knew Angelina had a very specific goal in mind when it came to the type of man she was trying to catch and marry. It amused her but sometimes it seemed a little scary to her too. It didn’t seem to be only a preference to Angelina but her specific intention and nothing



else would do. That evening at Angelina's was enjoyable for Lilly and her little girl. After dinner, they sat on the couch and Angelina brought out some photographs of her baby. The photographs depicted an infant lying in an elaborately decorated basket and surrounded by fluffy, stuffed animals. The infant was noticeably tiny in the photographs, dressed in yellow, pink, orange, and red.

Lilly commented, *"Your little girl was so sweet. I am so sorry that she passed away. What happened to her?"*

Solemnly, she explained to Lilly that she had not been fortunate enough to have good care for her child and she was not able to breastfeed. Further, she explained, the child would not eat and had been sick for a very long time.

Angelina then quickly changed the subject and told Lilly, *"Why talk about this and spoil our evening, let's go outside in the back yard, it's a beautiful night and the moon is out."* Lilly was a little puzzled by the reaction and again because she had no idea about the details and the infant, she decided to let it go. Angelina must have been continuing to experience the pain of her loss and was obviously not ready to discuss the matter. But she never as much as shed one tear.

It was late and Lilly had to take her little girl home.

*"Perhaps another time, Angelina. There is school tomorrow, and we have to be going,"* Lilly said.

*“Of course, another time, Lilly. But we need to plan it for when the moon is full. I want to show you a dance that I made up. I would like to perform it at the bar some time. I think I am very good, and it would liven up the place a little bit. I think the customers would enjoy me entertaining them!”*

Angelina saw them to the door and closed it behind them. Immediately, she ran to her bedroom and threw herself on her bed crying hysterically. She thought about people who had come into her life, about the many talents she had, but no one understood. Her thoughts wandered to another time, a time when she was young, and men wanted her. Endless limerence of imaginary lovers. There had been a time that women were not always here friends, she consoled herself a bit and thought that Lilly had become her friend, she was grateful for that. Maybe they could be more than friends? Yes, perhaps. After all she had never had any luck with men. Lilly was beautiful and more importantly, Lilly had a little girl. It was perfect. Their friendship could blossom, and she could be close enough to possibly be “*Aunt Angelina.*” Yes, it could be perfect. She would invite them again and she would dance for them, the little girl would laugh and sing. It was possible to have them as her family. After all, what had been given to her as her own had been taken away. What else was she left with? It takes hard work, she thought, for people to love you and you had to be worth it. Love was not cheap; it was work and it took a lot. This time, she would have the family she wanted. And, once the right companion was in her life, well,

it would be just them and she would not have to worry about being alone.

Weeks passed and Lilly was very busy at work. There were also issues at home, with her husband and her divorce. Her little girl was kept at home with grandma most of the time because Lilly was in fear that her ex-husband and the possibility that he would take the child away. Sometimes at work, she would cry, but she pressed on. When she felt bad, she worked harder. Angelina continued to ask her to come over but Lilly just could not spare the time to visit.

Frustrated, Angelina exclaimed “*Why don’t you just have him killed?!*”

Customers in the bar stared at her and Lilly, shocked by the comment, said “*What is wrong with you, you are kidding, right?*”

“*Of course, I am kidding; you can’t just kill him – that’s against the law! But, it’s a nice thought, don’t you think?! That son of a bitch, no one would miss him! At least maybe you can make him WISH he were dead!*” She burst into a hysterical laughter repeating, “*Of course, I’m kidding!*”

Late into the evening that night some men came into the bar and wanted a round of drinks. It was close to closing but the night manager agreed to serve them. Angelina begged him to let her dance. It was just the three men, and this would

be the perfect time to show the manager her talents – perhaps this was her opportunity to stop waitressing and become a performer. Lilly needed the extra money and agreed to stay and serve the three men. The bartender stayed on as they appeared to be very wealthy tourists. Their order was taken, and Lilly brought a dish of pretzels and drinks. Angelina hurried into the ladies’ room to dress in her gypsy outfit, made her way to the jukebox and put on some sultry music. She began her dance. The men were amused and intrigued by her “dancing” and after several minutes of what appeared to be a gypsy dance, Angelina flung herself on the floor, revealing for a moment, her breasts, and the fact that she wore no undergarment or panties! Lilly was beside herself with embarrassment. The bartender grabbed a clean tablecloth from behind the counter and scrambled around towards Angelina, throwing the tablecloth over her, trying to cover her.

The men laughed and demanded, “*more dancing!*”

Lilly said, “*no, no, no, this is not that type of place, this was a mistake and it’s gotten out of hand!*”

Angelina rose to her feet and furiously responded to Lilly, “*No, you are wrong, it is not a mistake, I am a talented dancer, and I was told I could perform! Who are you to say this is a mistake?!*”

Lilly and the bartender were not sure what had happened, but Angelina snatched up her bag and left the bar in a rage. The men were no longer laughing, and they told Lilly if there was no more dancing they did not want to pay for the drinks, rose to their feet and left the bar. Lilly went to the back to let the other workers know. There was nothing else to do but clean up and close the bar. It was late, very late. The bartender and Lilly had wasted several hours of work, and they would not be paid for it. Lilly picked up her little girl from grandma's house and settled down for the evening. She called Angelina to try to speak to her about what had transpired but Angelina never answered.

Days passed and Lilly went to work every day. Angelina never came to work. She called her house and got no answer. Finally, she found out the telephone number for Angelina's mother and called her. She explained to the woman that she might have offended her in that she was so set on becoming a performer and getting out of waitressing. She told her that she was concerned. Angelina's mother opened up to Lilly and explained to her the fact that Angelina was not mentally stable. The child that she had given birth to was a son and that Angelina had severely neglected the child, leaving it without food and sometimes leaving it to cry all night without attention while she slept. Angelina was on medications given to her by the doctor and sometimes she would sleep for twelve or fourteen hours at a time, sometimes for days. She cried and confessed to Lilly that she had no idea what to do about her daughter and had tried to help her with the baby but

that many times, she was not even allowed to come to the house. Angelina's mother also said that she knew the baby had died from malnutrition because it would not eat. The doctor was a very old friend of the family and would not say for certain why the child had died, she had begged him to not reveal the horrible neglect her daughter had had with the baby boy. Further, Angelina always wanted a little girl – she hated the child. That hatred had manifested itself with Angelina's indifference towards the child. Angelina's mother was devastated and cried in anguish because she blamed herself and begged God to forgive her! Lilly could not believe what she was hearing. How could this be? She managed to calm Angelina's mother down and tell her that she was Angelina's friend and would try to see her and see if she could help. Lilly knew that it was necessary for Angelina to seek professional help and that her condition could only lead to further tragedy.

Lilly left her house, got in her car and drove to Angelina's house. She knocked on the door and to her surprise, Angelina opened the door and welcomed her in. She was dressed in lavish loungewear and was holding a glass of red wine. All of the doors and windows to the house were open and the evening was clear and bright. The moon was high in the evening sky and Angelina was flying high.

*“Welcome, my friend! Please come out into the terrace, I am having some hors d'oeuvres and wine! I am so happy you could come and enjoy this wonderful evening with me, please sit!”*

Lilly wasn't sure what was happening, but the music was loud and again Angelina began to dance and twirl on her outside terrace, she began to remove pieces of loungewear as if she was performing an exotic dance!

*“Angelina, I need to speak to you, you need to stop your dancing, you are not “Mata Hari,” please stop! We need to talk!”*

Angelina whipped around and furiously yelled at Lilly, *“Talk about what?! Talk about how you try to steal the men from me, how you try to take my talents and use them for your own benefit! How you take the child that you say is yours, when she is mine!!”*

Lilly paused in disbelief. What was happening? It seemed as if she had stepped into a nightmare.

*“Please Angelina, you are my friend – you need help,”* Lilly spoke as softly as she could, but Angelina grabbed her and pushed her through the house and out the front door, then she picked up Lilly's purse and threw it at her.

*“Just go and never come back, I don't have any friends, I don't have anyone, and I never will!”* The words rung in Lilly's head as she walked to her car, got in and drove away.

Lilly left her little girl at her mother's that night. She needed to be alone to think about what had happened and

how she could find help for Angelina. No matter how horrible the scenario was, she cared for Angelina and felt sorry about her situation. To her, everyone should have help and a fair chance to change. It was so very sad to her. What Lilly didn't understand was that she could not be the help Angelina needed. Sometimes, people are so far gone within themselves that no matter what is done for them or how much people love them, they must want help and they must seek it themselves. Angelina had become a victim of her own obsessions and selfishness; because of that she was victimizing others and especially those that she should have loved. Her mother had contributed to the downward spiral by allowing and covering up the criminal acts committed against an infant. Lilly realized that all of this was in the name of a very sick "love," which damages the person and others. She was sick to her stomach to think that she could have possibly put her own daughter in danger. She too was hungry for friendship, and she had no idea that someone could be that far gone. It was horrifying.

Lilly woke up on the couch. She was still dressed from the night before and realized it was late. She lingered a little longer around the house and had her coffee. Gathering her thoughts, she pondered. Not everyone adjusts to being alone or other changes in life. As years fall upon us, we must face growing older and the acceptance of same. Time does not stand still. Many times, in life, a person does not receive what they want or reach their goals. Sometimes, if this happens, they can fall into an obsession which can turn into something

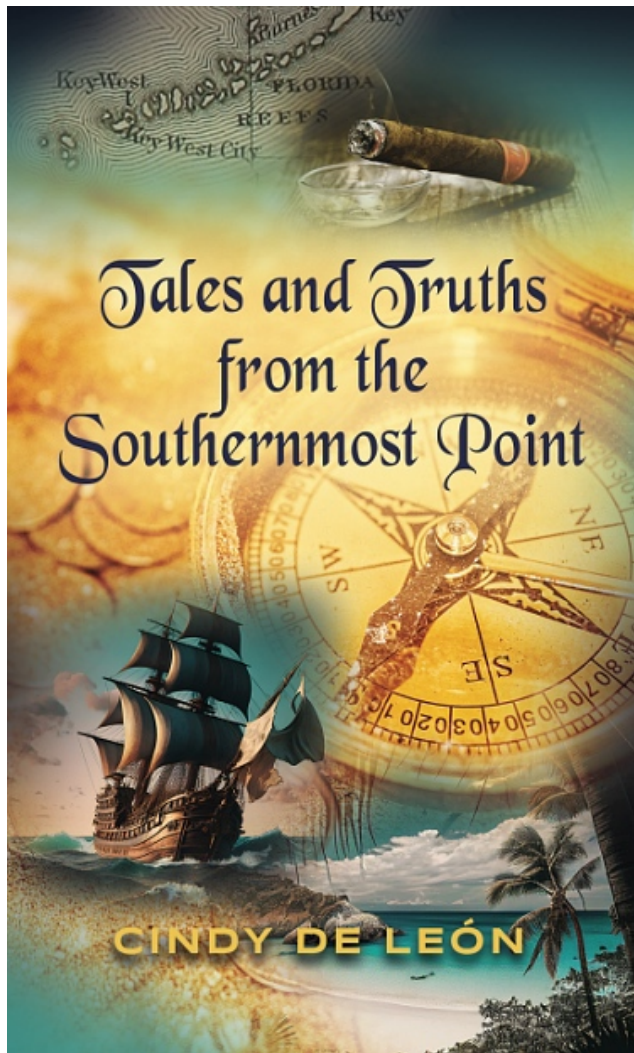


worse. The mind is a wonderful miraculous creation, but it is the heart we must guard. If we don't, it can produce mental illness, pain, physical illness, even disease. Sometimes people lose what they must never lose, hope.

Lilly called Angelina's mother the next morning. Angelina had come over in the early morning hours to have some coffee with her mother. She told her she was sorry for everything she had done and had to go home and clean her house. Angelina worked all day cleaning her house, then she bathed, got dressed in her best gown. She put on her most beautiful black wig and full make up. Angelina stood in front of the mirror as she emptied her bottle of pills in hand. She took them one by one imagining she was eating expensive chocolates given to her by her perfect lover. She smiled at herself saying, "*you are ready, my darling.*" Pouring a full glass of red wine and having a couple of drinks, she walked upstairs to her bedroom and opened the large window overlooking her terrace. It was a dark night, and the moon was high. It was a beautiful night, she thought. How desperately she wanted to be a part of it. Looking forward and never down, she walked towards the moon, and suddenly her life was over.

When Lilly heard the news, she was devastated. The manager signaled her away from one of her tables and told her. In shock, she slowly picked up a large tray of water glasses and bread and proceeded to serve her customers. The tears ran down continuously, and she finally had to ask if she

could take the rest of the day off. It was too much. How many things would happen before she too would lose her mind. No. Insanity would never overtake her. It was not about her. She had a life, she had a child, and she knew she was strong. Lilly knew that she could never give so much of herself that she would lose control of everything. There was an important lesson to be learned. You can never be so consumed in your own loneliness or despair to let it go. There was a God, and he did put each of us here for something. What we decided to do with that was our choice and there was always something bigger and greater than what she could see or even understand. Angelina was weak and she depended on society and men to give her value. Lilly smiled to herself as she walked home from the bar. She knew she had value, even though sometimes her vision was clouded by words from others or her current reality. She knew it would be different for her, it had to be because there was too much at stake and she wanted to be the best role model possible for her daughter. It was necessary to be true to yourself, but she knew the importance of what one's life reflects upon those closest to them and the consequences that come from making wrong choices.



*This book is a series of poems, memories, and short stories based on truth and historical events involving fictional characters, tragedies, and triumphs, and dramatic family and personal life situations.*

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