Chapter 8

Havana, Cuba

2016

Ashleigh stepped out onto the concourse at the José Martí International Airport, grateful for the shorts, thin cotton shirt and sandals she’d elected to wear despite Veronica’s smart-assed comments about tackiness.

In just seconds on the ground in Cuba, Ashleigh felt as if she’d walked through a warm mist, leaving water dripping from her temples and down the middle of her back.

She was also grateful she hadn’t wasted time putting on makeup, a thought that made her turn around and watch bitchy Veronica teeter down the roll-up stairs. Snidely, she couldn’t help but take pleasure in watching Ronnie’s carefully applied makeup soften and smudge almost instantaneously, and as Ronnie approached, she stifled a grin at the dots of black mascara that were stuck to her skin just below her eyebrow.

“I can’t breathe,” Veronica groaned, looking around the tarmac as if hoping a half-naked man with a palm branch awaited her command.

Charlotte popped up over Ronnie’s shoulder, waving one of those fold-up Oriental looking fans old ladies carried in front of her face.

“This place is hot,” she said, her smile chipper and wide.

“No shit, Mom,” Ashleigh said, turning back around to stride for the airport door.

It took the group of six nearly 45 minutes to get through the line where Cuban officials checked their tourist cards and verified their identity. But within 10 minutes of that time, they were seated in a limo on their way to La Villa Teresa, the inn Danielle had found online, declaring it quaint and gorgeous.

As if this was a fucking vacation, Ashleigh thought viciously. Still, it was hard not to be charmed by the yellow and white inn, with its gorgeous windows, tall ceilings and elegant furnishings. But sitting in her beautiful room that she’d been forced to share with Danni, Ashleigh couldn’t focus on her surroundings, instead one question traipsing over and over through her brain.

Was her father alive? Was he? Could the bastard have put her through the hell of the last five years while he relaxed on a beach in Cuba?

She didn’t even know what to hope for. She didn’t want him dead, but the betrayal should he be alive . . . the idea made her clench her hands in rage. Even if he had a good reason for going into hiding – and she couldn’t imagine a reason good enough that he hid from her – she didn’t know how she’d move past the nightmare of the last few years. And having to put up with her brothers’ bullshit.

“Let’s get going. Better to get the bad news out of the way,” Ashleigh told Danni, who was unpacking and putting her clothes in the white wicker-style dresser. She’d been avoiding Danni’s sympathetic gaze because she couldn’t decide whose side her best friend was on. The fact that Danni had chosen to stay in her room hinted – flat-out highlighted – problems in her relationship. Ashleigh had seen the couple arguing when the rooms were booked. She couldn’t shake the feeling that Danni was spying on her so Preston could get information.

And she was dying to tell Danni all about what her precious Preston got up to with that trampy whore Vanessa. But too much remained of their friendship for her to spew that truth, even in anger. Despite her suspicions of gold-digging, Ashleigh knew Danni truly cared about her faithless asshole brother.

Storming downstairs to a parlor where they’d all agreed to meet, Ashleigh, trailed by a sweating Danni, considered skipping the meeting and going off on her own. But she was a little nervous about running around Havana by herself. And frankly, she wasn’t sure where to start.

A fight was already in progress, clearly announced by raised voices that were causing the inn staff to hover outside the door.

“It’s all right,” she told the man and woman who were peeking in the room nervously. “We’ll be fine. Can you bring us some drinks?”

In pitchers.

Nicky and Charles were taking center stage in the middle of the room, faces bright red and sweat dripping, as they yelled at each other, their noses less than a foot apart.

“You arrogant son of a bitch, I’m sick to death of being ordered around by you.” Nicky’s wrath reverberated through the room, and even Vanessa and Charlotte were looking uncomfortable. It took a lot to shake Vanessa, Ashleigh thought, now interested in the fight.

“What the hell is going on?” she strode right up to her brothers, putting a hand on each of their stomachs and pushing them apart. Charles took a step back, but Nicky actually followed him in his retreat, pushing Ash’s hand away.

“Do you hear me?” Nicky’s voice had dropped, but it rang with menace. “Quit trying to control everyone’s life. You aren’t the old man. I won’t be told what to do, how to do it and when to do it anymore.”

“What the hell, Nicky? What is going on?” Ashleigh was bewildered by the shift in her brother, who usually left the histrionics to Charles and Vanessa.

“He told me I have to dump Danni, like she’s some piece of trash I picked up and need to drop off at the recycling center.”

Danni gasped from behind Ashleigh, and despite her concern over her friend’s motives, Ashleigh immediately went into protective mode. Danni was in no way shape or form able to stand up to the viciousness in Ashleigh’s family.

She turned on Charles. “Butt the fuck out, bro.” It took everything she had not to add – and you’d better focus on where your personal skank is opening her legs instead of worrying about Nicky’s fiancé.

Charles narrowed his eyes at her. “Don’t speak to me that way. We all know she’s not appropriate.”

Even Vanessa seemed surprised at the fact that Charles was completely ignoring Danni’s presence in the room. He may be a heartless asshole, but it was unusual for him to put his ugliness on display like this.

Charlotte had clearly had enough because she bounced to the middle of the room and exclaimed, “Enough of this. We’re not here to air dirty laundry in our family. We’re here to find clues to what happened to Edward.”

Danni was hovering in the doorway, her eyes awash with tears, and Ashleigh took pity on her. “Danni and I are going to follow our own clues. I’m sick to death of dealing with all of you.”

Sweeping across the room and regretting that she hadn’t waited for the drinks to arrive, Ashleigh grabbed Danni’s hand and stormed out.

In the hallway, Ashleigh glared at Danni. “Don’t cry,” she said between gritted teeth. “Never let them see you cry.”

Danni blinked and straightened her shoulders. Her voice was husky when she said, “Where are we going?”

Striding outside and raising a hand for a taxi that waited on the long driveway, Ashleigh answered. “Daddy owned property here. I had Joel send me the property list, and there was a place in Cuba. We’re headed there.”

She gave the taxi driver the address, pulled from the screen shot on her phone, and refused to look at Danni. “I told you my family was awful. All those years laying awake at night in school, talking half-drunk to you, but did you listen? No. You think Nicky’s a good guy. He’s not the worst – he’s not Charles – but he’s NOT a good guy.”

Danni released a shaky sigh. “I know. Something’s going on with him and Vanessa, isn’t it?”

That question shocked the shit out of Ashleigh. “How did you know?” Only as she said the words did she realize she was confirming something Danni only suspected.

Tears once more filled Danni’s eyes. Determinedly, Ashleigh looked away, scanning the streets lined with palm trees. “Danni, I’m sorry,” she forced the words out. “But I can’t do your relationship woes right now. I think you should dump his ass – spectacularly, in some way that embarrasses the shit out of him in all the cliques he cares about – when we get home. Right now, I need to find out if my dad is alive.”

Danni laid a gentle hand on Ashleigh’s leg. “Let’s do it. Then I’m going to cremate the bastard.”

Ten minutes later, they arrived at Old Havana Rooms, a bed and breakfast her father had bought about three years ago. The soft turquoise color of the building, highlighted by the creamy stone on the outside, created a warm and welcoming feel. Ashleigh ignored that and pushed right through the lobby to the registration desk.

“I’m looking for the owner,” she told the smiling young woman.

“I’m sorry. The owner is not available. The manager is here.”

Ashleigh frowned, unsure what to do. Danni chimed in, “Can we look around? Is there a restaurant?”

“No, ma’am. But there’s a courtyard through there. You’re welcome to explore. We have rooms available and would love to be of service.”

Ashleigh, still frowning, followed Danni as she led to the courtyard, where iron tables and chairs surrounded a pleasing waterfall and numerous trees shaded the area. “I’m not sure what to do,” Ashleigh admitted.

“Me either. I thought we should look around and see if anything jumps out at us.”

Ashleigh scanned the courtyard, which was almost empty in the afternoon hours. As her head swiveled, she took in brilliant purple flowers and numerous trimmed trees. One tree in particular drew her eye.

Her face unable to conceal her surprise, Ashleigh moved toward the tree. “What is it?” Danni asked, following behind.

“It’s an ash tree. In Cuba.”

Ash-Tree – she could hear her father’s voice with it’s sing-song rhythm that he used to tease her.

“It’s a fucking ash tree. Do they even grow here?”

“Well, clearly they do,” Danni said, and even in the midst of her shock and conviction that this was a real clue, Ash was glad to see that her friend still had the snarkiness in her that made them friends in the first place. They stood in front of the tree, both studying a small metal stake that gave the scientific name of the tree, “Fraxinus caroliniana,” followed by the words, “The Ash-Tree is vulnerable to many pests that easily kill it. ‘We have scorched the snake, not killed it.’”

“Jesus fucking Christ, is that more MacBeth? Dad hated Shakespeare.” Ashleigh studied the metal plaque as if it would begin speaking to her to clear things up.

Danni looked at her friend. “Do you see the hyphen between Ash-Tree? He was talking to you.”