

# DEATH UNDER THE PERSEIDS

by Teresa Dovalpage

## Excerpt

### 1: Surprise Tickets

The cruise ship Narwhal, all twelve decks of her, towered above the terminal building. It had a festive air, with the hull painted white and bright ribbons of red, yellow and green splashed all over. From a distance it looked like a giant tropical bird that had inexplicably landed on water.

August in Miami was, as usual, ninety-four degrees with a devilish mix of heat and humidity that made you want to crawl inside a refrigerator. The Nautilus instructions said to be at Terminal B before noon, but it was well past one and the line to enter the building wasn't moving. It was worse than being at an airport, por Dios! Then I remembered that we had no right to complain. After all, we had gotten the cruise for free.

I was still scratching my head about the whole thing. It all began when a young woman showed up at Pretty and Pampered, the pet grooming salon where I worked part-time, asking for me. She looked like a teenager, but dressed professionally in a beige suit, and introduced herself as a Nautilus representative. I was getting ready to give a summer cut to a standard poodle when she presented me with an embossed envelope and cooed, "Congratulations, Ms. Spivey! You've just won two cruise tickets to Havana!"

I was born and raised in Havana. After marrying Nolan in 2008, I had returned many times to visit my grandmother but never thought of taking a cruise back. And in July 2017, sailing to Cuba was the last thing on my mind. "I've won what?" I asked.

The poodle took advantage of my surprise to get away and hide under a chair.

"A couple of tickets!" the girl chirped, perky as could be. "Aboard the Narwhal, our most popular ship! The cruise's departing on August the tenth."

Nautilus Cruise Line had started to offer short cruises that included Cuba in their itineraries, she explained. They were carrying out their biggest ever promotional campaign with many giveaways. I was one of the lucky winners. Cool, eh? What that chick didn't say was how and where I had signed up for the raffle or whatever it was that I had won.

I used to enter sweepstakes that promised everything from five hundred dollars a week for life to a grand prize of a million, or a Porsche, or a weekend in Paris, but that was a long time ago. It had finally dawned on me that most were a waste of time, if not outright scams. I didn't know how these Nautilus people found me either, but I guess everybody's information is online nowadays. Besides, the idea of winning something, anything, was appealing. I kept my mouth shut and accepted the "gift."

As soon as the girl left, Candela hugged me. She smelled of patchouli, sandalwood incense and, faintly, wet dog hair.

"I'm so happy for you!" she said. "That's the start of the hot streak I told you about. ¿Viste?"

I didn't "see" anything clearly, but went along with her.

Candela and I had met at a Starbucks in 2011. Nolan and I had been in Gainesville for around five months, and I already missed Miami and the friends I made there. Not that there were many. Since I didn't drive yet, I couldn't go out on my own to meet new people, and my husband's colleagues wouldn't have anything to do with me. I needed someone to talk to. To vent, actually. In my own language.

So I was waiting for my iced caramel macchiato when someone said coño aloud. Coño is like the Freemasons' secret handshake for Cubans. I looked up and saw a young woman, curvy and petite, with arms covered in jingling silver bracelets and a zodiac sign necklace.

"You Cuban?" I asked shyly in English.

"Kind of." She smiled. "You are."

Daughter and granddaughter of Cubans, Candela spoke fluent, if at times old-fashioned, Spanish. She was into esoteric stuff—astrology, the Law of Attraction, the Ascended Masters, the whole metaphysical enchilada. She said she liked my aura that first day. I just liked hanging out with someone who cursed in public. We became fast friends.

When she opened Pretty and Pampered, I joined her as a "pet stylist." I didn't know much about styling pets but enjoyed working with cats and dogs, and even the occasional rabbit—why anybody

would want to groom a rabbit is beyond my understanding. The cochinos stink and bite, and I got three stitches after a Holland Lop tried to take off my finger.

The weekend before the ticket surprise, Candela had read the Tarot for me. I got the upright Wheel of Fortune, one of the most auspicious cards for money, according to her, and the Eight of Wands, up too, indicating a trip. I also drew the Star Reversed. “A warning sign, but you got two good cards out of three,” she concluded. “The Star Reversed just means you should be careful, now that so many wonderful things are bound to happen.”

Even if I didn’t believe in Tarot, the Eight of Wands card popped into my head when I opened the envelope with the Nautilus Cruise Line logo.

I thought of Nolan too. His job situation had him all stressed out. The cruise could be turned into something fun, a second honeymoon of sorts. We hadn’t had much intimacy, sexual or otherwise, for months. I hadn’t called him “papito,” my romantic nickname for him, in a long time. He needed a vacation, poor guy. So did I.

Candela passed me the poodle, who wasn’t happy to be back on the grooming table.

“You’re going to live la vida loca for a few days, Merceditas. It’ll do you good!”

Candela was the only person in Gainesville who called me Merceditas—the affectionate form of Mercedes. Everybody else called me Mercy; Merceditas was too long and difficult to pronounce for most Americans, including my husband. I had tried using Mercedes, but people kept asking why I had been named after a car.

I reread the letter. Though it seemed legit, that was the first time I had heard of the company. I knew Carnival—Nolan and I had taken one of their el cheapo Cancún cruises when we lived in Miami. Viking and Princess were familiar names from the ads. But Nautilus?

Candela said it was a small but well-established company that catered to “older people with disposable income.” Seeing that I didn’t fit into that category, I asked her to call their main office—my accent is a problem over the phone because I tend to drop the final consonants. They confirmed that there was a paid-for reservation in my name, a balcony stateroom for two.

“It’s all good, chica!” she said, her silver charms tinkling as she spun around. “Estate tranquila and don’t be so suspicious of everything. You have to start trusting the universe. Now let’s go celebrate!”

And so we did at La Margarita Bar and Grill. Nolan had a fit when I came home around midnight, tired and tipsy. But when I told him about the cruise the next morning, he got over it fast.

“It’s a godsend, Mercy,” he said. “Just what we need.”

In truth, he needed it more than I did. It had been a strange and difficult year for him.

The rough spell started in March when his daughter, Katy, who had moved to Albuquerque, disinvited him from her wedding, asking her maternal uncle to walk her down the aisle instead. She’d become incensed when Nolan wanted to include me in the invitation, though I had no desire whatsoever to be part of it. Katy had once been his favorite, and they had been close until he divorced her mother to marry “the Cuban homewrecker.”

A few weeks later, a certain Doctor Fernández, a Cuban professor, asked Nolan to give a lecture at the University of Havana in the late summer. The catch was, he discovered later, that Doctor Fernández couldn’t buy him a plane ticket “because of the embargo.” That was a lie the size of the Narwhal. He simply expected Nolan to pay for his own airfare and stay. That’s how things work in Cuba: you’re a foreigner, you pay for everything.

Nolan had accepted and was looking forward to the trip—it was an honor, he assured me, to be invited by my (almost) alma mater. But then, in May, he lost his job. Though Point South College didn’t actually fire him, they didn’t renew his contract, which was the same for all practical purposes. He didn’t have tenure, so there was nothing he could do.

His firing didn’t surprise me. Nolan was very liberal. Point South was a small private college with conservative views. He’d had disagreements with both his department chair and his dean several times over the years, and they finally decided to get rid of him. There had been warning signs, subtle and not so much, like the day he came home stunned because no one had asked him to be part of the hiring committee for a new literature professor. (Later he figured out that they were interviewing his replacement.) Or when they sent everybody in his department, except him, to a professional development conference in Las Vegas. He knew that his Point South days were numbered.

In truth, he had never liked his stuffy colleagues or the college’s conservative bent. He still pined for the status and privilege he had once enjoyed as a tenured and popular professor at Florida International University—until I showed up and turned his life upside down.

In any case, after he was let go, he panicked. He had made some inquiries and sent his resume to a few colleges in a frenzied flurry, but none had been answered yet. He talked about teaching Spanish

at a local high school, but that wasn't going to work either. I knew, because I had been an occasional sub, how sassy and plain disrespectful those kids were. They would eat him alive.

Suddenly, spending several hundred dollars on a trip to Havana to deliver an unpaid lecture didn't sound like a good idea. He was ready to turn down the invitation, but the free cruise changed his mind. That, and the fact that the gig would fluff up his résumé. He was planning to attend the Modern Language Association's annual convention in January to meet with future employers. In my non-scholarly eyes, the convention was a huge boring meeting where jaded or out-of-work professors and hopeful graduate students listened to dull presentations and nosed around for jobs.—This text refers to the [paperback](#) edition.