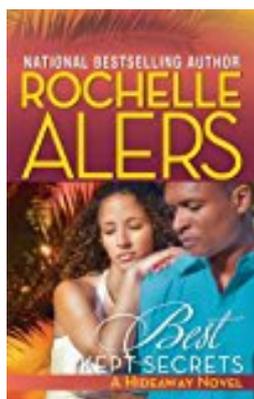


# [PDF] Best Kept Secrets (Arabesque)

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**Description:**

**About the Author** Hailed by readers and booksellers alike as one of today's most popular African-American authors of women's fiction, Ms. Alers is a regular on bestsellers list, and has been a recipient of numerous awards, including the Vivian Stephens Award for Excellence in Romance Writing and a Zora Neale Hurston Literary Award. Visit her Web site [www.rochellealers.com](http://www.rochellealers.com)

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'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land; taught my benighted soul to understand.

—Phillis Wheatley

Havana, Cuba—veintiuno de Octubre 1924

At the age of twenty-six, Samuel Claridge Cole was on a Portuguese tanker sailing for Havana harbor, following his heart. All he had was his name, a business proposal and a bank draft for enough money to buy a sugarcane plantation in Artemisa, Cuba.

Oblivious of the twin smokestacks belching smoke, the minute black particles dotting his white linen suit, oblivious of the tropical sun beating down on his head, he stood calmly at the rail of the prewar ship instead of the sleek cruiser to which he'd been denied passage in Miami because of his race. He was determined that neither prejudice nor racial bigotry would dissuade him from his quest.

His mother had called him a dreamer, but his father's constant ridicule made him an overachiever. Before Charles would compliment him he'd say, *You won't never 'mount to nothin' because yo head is always up yo ass.* Samuel's sole mission was to prove Charles Cole wrong.

But his maternal grandmother believed in him, listened to his tales of grandeur, encouraged him to follow his heart, and depend on nobody but the goodness of the Creator.

His daddy hadn't lived long enough to witness his youngest son's success, but that no longer mattered because he didn't need Charles's approval.

He reached into a pocket of his trousers for the watch attached to a gold fob at his waist. It was after four o'clock—an hour later than his appointed time to meet his guide and interpreter.

Samuel returned the timepiece to his pocket and rested his arms on the railing, his gaze narrowing as the skyline of Havana grew larger. He was certain his guide would wait indefinitely for the *norteamericano* who would pay him more for a week of his services than he would earn in six months as a Havana taxi driver. A cynical smile lifted the corners of Samuel's mouth. Everyone had a price. That was something he'd learned as a soldier during the war.

Before peace had been declared and he found himself on a battleship sailing back to the States, Samuel had witnessed firsthand black marketeers selling everything from cigarettes, tins of food and medical supplies, to shoes and wine. Some Frenchmen willingly bartered priceless heirloom pieces for a case of quality Bordeaux or Chardonnay.

Samuel learned more from the marketeers in three months than he'd learned in twelve years of instruction in a segregated Tallahassee, Florida, school system. Even though he didn't smoke or drink wine, he'd managed to stockpile the much-sought-after products and trade them for a strand of perfectly matched pearls, a gaudy ruby and diamond brooch, and a woman's ring with a large, flawless pale pink Australian diamond. After smuggling the jewels into the States, he sold them, using the proceeds to buy land to set up one of the first soybean farms in the South.

He knew he was taking a risk investing in Cuba, but he knew any attempt to set up a plantation within the United States would be viewed unfavorably by both whites and Negroes. His hope was to purchase either the Cuban sugarcane plantation or, if this proved futile, a banana plantation in Costa Rica.

Forty minutes later, Samuel disembarked from the tanker after dock officials had checked the captain's manifest and cargo, and it was another half hour before he was able to clear customs.

Samuel sat in the rear of a Ford Model T staring at the Spanish Colonial buildings as the driver increased his speed to twenty miles an hour along the Malecon, the seawall built in 1901 when the United States government controlled Cuba. Waves crashed over the wall, soaking cars and strollers alike.

"Are there many Americans living here?" Samuel asked.

Hernan Cruz nodded, but did not turn around. "Yes, Senor Cole. Too many," he added, wondering how the *norteamericano* would interpret his response. If Samuel Cole had been other than a Negro he would've lied to him.

"They come here," he continued in accented English, a language he'd learned while working in a Tampa cigar factory, "with their bossy attitudes, yelling orders as if we were slaves."

Samuel rested the back of his head against the leather seat. "Although I've seen very little of your very beautiful country, I have no intention of living here."

Hernan glanced up into the rearview mirror. Samuel Cole was a *norteamericano* but could easily pass for a Cubano. His coloring and facial features reflected those of African ancestry throughout the Caribbean and the other Americas, the result of European slaveholders mixing their blood with their slaves. "I am certain it would be different with you, Senor Cole." Samuel lifted a thick, black eyebrow. "Why me?" Hernan's gaze returned to the wetroadway. "You're not Anglo." *How right you are, Senor Morales, I am not Anglo*, Samuel mused. He was a citizen of the United States—albeit a second-class citizen who'd risked his life fighting with the 369th Infantry, the first black U.S. combat overseas unit, a regiment that didn't lose a man, trench or any ground, a regiment known to the Germans as the "Hell Fighters." He'd been one of 171 who'd earned a *croix de guerre* or a Legion of Merit, France's highest military medal. No U.S. medals of honor were awarded to any black troops.

He had been a black soldier, returning from World War I, and he refused to march at the back of a victory parade because a segregated parade seemed contradictory to the principles they'd supposedly fought for.

Closing his eyes, Samuel recalled the first time he'd killed another man—a German boy with peach-fuzz cheeks, a soldier whose uniform collar was too large for his scrawny neck, an enemy soldier who would've killed him if he hadn't bayoneted him first. It took days before he was able to erase the image of his sightless blue eyes staring up at the darkening sky, blood staining the front of his uniform, the distinctive sound of a death rattle. After his first kill, the others no longer mattered to Samuel. It was either kill or be killed, because he'd had no wish to die on foreign soil.

A wry smile twisted his mouth, but he did not open his eyes. He'd killed white men in Europe and had received a medal for his actions. But if he had killed a single white man in Florida he would've forfeited his life—with or without a trial.

A weighted fatigue swept over him as he sank deeper into the leather seat. He didn't know when the car increased its speed or when Hernan left the city of Havana, heading southwest. He slept soundly, waking only when the vehicle stopped in front of a small salmon-colored, two-story building several hundred feet from a plaza filled with an elaborate marble fountain, palm trees and flowering shrubs. The cloying fragrance of orchids, bougainvillea and frangipani lingering in the sultry air wafted through the car's open windows.

Straightening, his dark eyes widening, Samuel stared at the small crowd that had gathered around a

group of musicians. The sounds filling the air had a distinctive Latin beat infused with rhythms that were unmistakably African. A lithe, dark-skinned woman in an ankle-length white dress swayed and twirled in tempo with the hypnotic drumming. Her ruffled hem snapped and fluttered wildly as she danced as if under a powerful spell that made her spin as fast as the hands pounding the skins stretched over drums of various shapes and sizes.

"Senor Cole?" Hernan held the car door open for him.

Samuel blinked as if coming out of his own trance. He didn't know whether it was the music, the flora, the tropical heat, the smells or the sight of the woman dancing in a sensual, unrestrained abandonment that held him captivated, but there was something about the island country that pulled him in and refused to let him go. Within seconds he had become enthralled with Cuba, its people and its music.

Ducking his head, he stepped out of the car, smiling. The sounds of spoken Spanish floated all around him, and although he could not understand more than five words of the language, it still sounded like music to his ears.

Hernan reached for the bag with *SCC* branded into the supple leather, cradling it in his right hand while his own corrugated luggage sat on the ground beside him. He had thought himself blessed when his Florida cousin asked him to act as Senor Cole's driver and interpreter. The money he would earn coupled with what he'd saved would be enough to buy the house he'd wanted for years. He was tired of living in the little guesthouse behind his in-laws' much larger residence.

He leaned closer, noting his passenger's entrancement. Samuel Cole had fallen in love with Cuba.

Samuel followed Hernan and the proprietor of the converted convent up a staircase to the second story. Despite the heat, the interiors of the stucco building remained cool. The owner unlocked the door to a room facing the plaza and pushed it open.

"This is my best room," he said to Hernan.

Hernan nodded, his expression purposefully serious. "Senor Cole is a very important businessman from the *Estados Unidos*" he said in Spanish, his tone low and mysterious. He would occupy another room—a much smaller room—connecting to Samuel's by a common door.

The innkeeper stepped aside, bowing slightly. "I understand. If there is anything you need, please let me know." He smiled broadly when Hernan handed him a coin. "*Mil gracias.*"

Hernan could afford to be generous because Samuel had been more than generous with him.

Samuel found the furnishings at the hotel provincial, but they would serve his purpose during his stay. All he needed was a clean bed and indoor plumbing with a private bath.

A bed, a mahogany armoire and a matching rocker were the only furnishings in the s...

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