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Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

Written by Jane Costello

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Jane Costello
Summer
Nights
at the
Moonlight
Hotel



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For Joy Wolstenholme

Chapter 1

Some things just don't work together. Chocolate and teapots. Straw and houses. Lead and balloons. Now I've discovered another combination to add to the list: high heels and the Lake District.

If we were tourists, we'd be forgiven for dressing like this to negotiate a landscape that's timeless, rugged and catastrophically ill-suited to four-inch strappy numbers. But my friends and I are not tourists: Cate and I have lived here for ever and Emily long enough to know better.

I should stress that we wouldn't ordinarily come out like this. Normally, you couldn't pick us out from lots of other women in their early thirties around here, the ones in slouchy tops, boho prints, combats, cut-offs and, an occasional necessity, given our changeable weather, waterproof jackets.

But Cate was convinced a different approach was required where we're heading tonight on a warm spring evening. And

for a reason I can't quite remember, Emily and I listened to her. So, blossom-cheeked and perspiring, we teeter up one of Bowness's steepest hills, the vast blue-grey ribbon of Windermere behind us.

'Just so you know, Cate, even if I end up enjoying this, I'm not wearing these shoes again,' I tell her.

'They're dancing shoes. What were you expecting to wear – trail boots?' she grins.

'Converse would've done,' I protest.

'Oh, Lauren – not for *salsa night*.' The last two words are delivered in an unconvincing Latin American twang and accompanied by a J-Lo-style bum wiggle. I struggle not to snigger.

The reason we're en route to the class, on this evening in spring, is because a regular customer at Cate's florist's shop in Ambleside asked her to put a card in her window this week. It read: 'LEARN TO SALSA DANCE. *Experience the red-hot vibes of Latin America right here in Lakeland. Beginners and singles welcome.*'

Thanks to recent events, all three of us fall into both categories.

Which is why, despite the fact that I'm absolutely *not* on my way to meet the man of my dreams – I've already met him, even if I'm nothing more than a friend in his eyes – Cate has dragged me along tonight, when I'm not even remotely in the mood to mambo.

Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

‘I have to admit, Lauren,’ says Emily, ‘the shoes suit you. They’re gorgeous.’

‘What did I say? They’re fantastic,’ Cate adds, satisfied. She said the same about the false eyelashes she persuaded me to try out tonight, for the first time in my life. It feels as though my eyelids have been smothered in Pritt Stick and adorned with a catatonic tarantula.

‘Fantastic or not, the chances of me being able to dance in them are slim, given that I can barely walk in them,’ I say.

Emily, I hasten to add, didn’t need the false eyelashes. The eyelashes nature has bestowed on her – just like *every* feature nature has bestowed on her, from her luminous blue eyes to her translucent skin – are already beautiful.

Nobody could begrudge her though, since Em is one of those rare creatures who are unequivocally lovely inside and out – something that was immediately apparent when I first met her four years ago, after she moved in next door to Cate’s old place in Windermere. It’s not only that she’s easy to get along with, she’s just incredibly *nice*: the kind of friend who sends cupcakes for your birthday, texts after a night out to check you’re home safely, and doesn’t even flinch when a check-out girl presses yes to the question *Is the customer obviously over 25?* If that isn’t evidence of a soul entirely devoid of ego then I don’t know what is.

‘What time does this go on until?’ she asks now. ‘Only I’ve

got to be up at six tomorrow morning to take a group of Americans up Helvellyn and Striding Edge.'

Emily is originally from Derbyshire, but for the last four years has worked as a mountain leader for Windermere Adventures, taking hikers up some of England's most challenging fells. She's passionate about her job and entirely at home on the most treacherous crags, even those with names like 'Bad Step' and 'Sharp Edge', which as far as I'm concerned might as well be called 'Best Stay at Home With a Nice Cup of Tea'. She can turn her hand to everything from gorge scrambling to wild camping, for which there is an unfeasibly large demand. She's basically Bear Grylls, but with nicer hair.

'Are they aware of the torrential rain that's forecast?' I ask.

'No idea. Nobody ever enjoys it less when it rains anyway though.' She's apparently being serious.

'If you say so, Em.'

'I'll prove it to you – if I ever manage to get you up a mountain with me one day, Lauren.' She's aware the likelihood is minimal. I've lived here all my life and, although I'd only ever whisper this, have never wavered from the view that the mountains are best appreciated from a distance.

'To answer your question, the class itself lasts for an hour,' Cate says. 'But then there's a "social" afterwards, when we get to dance with all the gorgeous, single blokes who will *definitely* be there.'

Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

Em and I flash each other a look.

Em's been single for a couple of months, having finally split up with a guy called Beck who was working in a hiking shop in Grasmere; she'd been seeing him on and off since last New Year. She'd made the schoolgirl error of assuming that being surrounded by crampons and camping stoves automatically made him the action-man type she always goes for, until she worked out that she never actually saw him *outside*. Not ever. The most dynamic thing he ever did was getting up to go to the bar in the Golden Rule, where he'd apparently set up long-term residency.

In Cate's head, the fact that Emily has been single for a couple of months, that she herself has been single for around the same time and that I've been single for so long there is virtually rust in my knickers . . . means that we **MUST ACT**.

At times like these, it's just easier to humour her, not least because I can't claim I'd usually be doing anything more exciting on a Tuesday evening – unless you count marking Key Stage 2 literacy tests for the primary school where I teach.

'Why didn't we just drive here?' I ask, as we leave the outskirts of the town behind us and cross the road towards the Moonlight Hotel.

'Because it's launch night and there are free margaritas.'

'How many people are going to be there?' asks Emily. 'I just want to know if I'll be able to slip easily into the background.'

‘Marion, the salsa teacher, is expecting forty or fifty. But for the record, you won’t need to slip anywhere,’ Cate insists, pushing her short blonde bob behind the four piercings in her ear. I used to have a couple myself in my late teens but Cate’s never fully grown out of her alternative phase and never really wants to. ‘Nobody’s expecting you to be any good on the first lesson – none of us will be.’

As we crunch up the driveway, the pale stone towers of the hotel rise up above a watery sunset.

When I was growing up, I had a vague awareness of four types of holiday establishments here in the Lakes: campsites for the walkers; pubs for the walkers soft enough to want a hot shower; chintzy guest-houses overflowing with paper doilies; and grand, old-fashioned establishments like the Moonlight Hotel, with heart-stopping views, abundant history and gingerbread high teas served in bone china cups.

In recent years, much of the National Park’s accommodation has been renovated for a younger, trendier, distinctly fussier market. But some of those older places have been frozen in time, refusing to relinquish their floral curtains and drag themselves into the twenty-first century. The Moonlight Hotel is one of them. And I’m glad.

It’s nothing to do with the aforementioned floral curtains, but because this is not just any old hotel to me. It’s part of my childhood, the backdrop to my most precious memories – of long summer holidays making dens in its gardens and

Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

mischievous in the kitchens on the pretence of helping to wash up.

So despite the fact that I'm not here often these days – I've popped in with Mum for a tea a handful of times in the last five years – when I push through the door into reception, a rush of familiarity engulfs me.

Everything, from the austere oak walls and imposing reception desk, is exactly the same as it always was, only a bit quieter. Any evidence of throngs of people arriving for a riotous night of Latin-style hip-swivelling is thin on the ground.

Cate pulls out a business card from her purse. 'It definitely says the Moonlight Hotel, every Tuesday. Let's see if one of the staff can shed any light.' She pings an aluminium bell, or at least tries to. It sticks a couple of times, before responding with an unexpectedly loud *ting!*

A middle-aged woman with thick glasses and slightly greasy hair appears looking so stressed out you'd think she was on the trading floor of Wall Street. She isn't someone I recognise, although most of the staff who were around when I was a child have long gone. It's clear she has no time for pleasantries, so we're simply directed to the Lake Room at the back of the hotel. Not that I needed directing.

The door is firmly shut and it's deadly quiet when we reach it. Then suddenly, the throb of music bursts out from behind the door.

‘There you go,’ Cate declares. ‘The red-hot vibes of Latin America – as promised.’

She turns the knob and flings open the door, and we stand mutely, surveying the room while our eyes begin to water with the volume. It’s fair to say this was not what we were expecting. Apart from one couple and the teacher, we’re literally the only ones here.

Chapter 2

‘You came – excellent!’ cries the woman I can only assume is Marion as she battles with the remote control from a music system, flings it down, then hurtles across the empty room. ‘Come on in. Don’t be shy!’

When I was a little girl, this grand room reminded me of the one in *The Sound of Music*, but it was only much later that I found out the house was built in 1895 as the private residence for an Austrian baroness – although what she was doing in the north of England I couldn’t tell you. To my young and untrained eye, this was the kind of room where balls should be held, where elegant ladies should swish across the floor in silk gowns and white gloves.

This evening, soft light floods through the windows overlooking the lake and Langdale Pikes; the stucco ceiling and intricately patterned wallpaper are still just about intact. I don’t know why they got rid of the old tables and chairs. Disappointingly, they’ve been replaced by the cheap, plastic

kind you'd find in a British Legion club. Despite this, and the threadbare carpet and slightly crumbling walls, it's every bit the room I once knew and loved.

My dad worked at the Moonlight Hotel for more than two decades, having started here in his early twenties, shortly after he'd emigrated to the UK from Australia. For the last twelve of those years he was General Manager – and although he'd never class himself as a workaholic, you're not in a job for that long without passion and pride infusing everything you do.

'Hi, Marion,' replies Cate, with some trepidation. 'When are the others getting here?'

The woman responds with a protracted wince, as if someone's trodden on her bunions. 'It's not quite the turn-out I was expecting. But it's early yet,' she says, looking at her watch. I can't knock her optimism. Cate flashes a glance at Emily and me, which prompts a flicker of panic in Marion. 'You won't leave, will you?'

Cate claps her hands together. 'Course not. Right, where do I learn to have hips like Shakira?'

I realise I must have been holding some obscure preconception about what a salsa teacher might look like. I can't define this, except to say that it's in every way the opposite of Marion, who is the least Latin-looking woman on the planet, with her unruly blonde ringlets and short legs whose chubby, baby-faced knees peek out of a long jersey skirt, slit to

Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

mid-thigh. She offers us one of the dozens of complimentary margaritas lined up on a table. I take one – and come to the unavoidable conclusion that it's actually Robinson's Barley Squash.

'Please tell me you're beginners too ...' The woman addressing us is about three inches shorter than me, with scarlet lips, perfect flicky eyeliner and the sort of hour-glass figure that in the 1950s would have attracted wolf-whistles. 'Our only experience of salsa dancing is watching *Strictly*.'

'And that was painful enough,' adds her boyfriend. He looks six or seven years older and wears a sheepish smile to accompany the small spare tyre protruding over his cleanly pressed jeans. After a few introductions, we learn that the couple – Stella and Mike – are getting married in July. Preparations were going brilliantly until he dropped into conversation that, in the light of his two left feet, he *didn't think a first dance was necessary*.

'I had two words to say to that,' Stella tells us. "AS IF". So here we are.'

'I've got four months in which to become a Latin lothario,' Mike grins.

Stella looks sceptical. 'Love, if we just get your legs moving without you doing yourself an injury, I'll be happy with that.'

'All right, ladies – gent,' Marion nods. 'How about we start with some basic moves? Let's get you all paired up.'

She turns on the music again and lowers the volume to a

level at which the windows are no longer vibrating. We stand in allotted pairs: Stella and Mike. Marion and Emily. Cate and me.

‘No offence, Lauren,’ she mutters, as she grabs my hand. ‘But when I said I wanted to dance with someone dark-eyed and gorgeous, you weren’t what I had in mind.’

‘It could be worse – you could be in poor Emily’s position,’ I point out as our friend is forced to stand at the front of the ‘class’ and take part in Marion’s demonstration. For Cate’s sake I pretend to be disappointed that the room isn’t a sweaty, bustling hotbed of male lust. But in truth I couldn’t be more relieved, even if Marion isn’t very satisfied with the situation.

‘It’s extremely difficult with only one man here,’ she laments. ‘In salsa it’s the man’s job to lead so I’m teaching you this the wrong way round. Which one of you wants to be the man?’

‘It’s been that long since I waxed my legs, I’d better volunteer,’ Cate replies.

What becomes most apparent in the first half-hour of the lesson is just how difficult it is to master steps which are technically meant to be easy. They even *look* easy. But easy is the last thing they are, at least to me.

Even when we’re trying to get to grips with the basics and follow Marion’s instructions – to loosen the knees, move from the hips, keep the body central – Cate and I are a clash of ankles and giggling hysteria. This situation worsens

Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

significantly when Marion foolishly decides we're ready to move on to a turn.

We are instructed to ensure we're putting pressure on our feet each time we make a step, the idea being to get us wiggling the bottom half of our torsos and looking almost like dancers. I suspect we all look more like a pair of demented geriatrics on a waiting list for hip replacements.

Once we start taking this seriously, however, things start slotting into place. Although Marion seems to be under the impression she's tutoring *The Kids From Fame*, and doesn't find our haplessness at all amusing, she does get Cate and me moving in a vaguely salsa-ish way. Or maybe it's just that we don't look bad compared with poor Mike, who is not over-burdened with natural co-ordination.

As Marion turns her attention to showing him – again – how to master the basic mambo, Cate grabs me by the hand. 'What did Marion say this step was called? A kerfufla?'

'Enchufla,' I correct her.

'Bless you,' she replies. 'Whatever it is, I'm determined to crack it.'

Cate is nothing if not enthusiastic. She's always been like this. I've known her since we were little girls – we went to primary school together – and she was always the first to stick her hand up in the air and volunteer for just about everything. That was the case whether we were being asked to give out library books or, on one notable occasion, audition for a part

in a TV advert for a breakfast cereal (she didn't get it; the producers said she had 'slightly too much personality'). Tonight, what we jointly lack in technical ability, my friend seems determined to make up with speed, *joie de vivre* and – it turns out – her innate ability to draw unwanted attention to us. To be absolutely fair, it's not Cate who manages to get one of the threads from the ailing carpet wrapped around her high heel – it's me.

'Cate!' I shriek, but she takes this as encouragement, grabs me by the waist and carries on dancing while the thread pulls against my ankle. Cate only becomes aware of my predicament when, in desperation, I reach out to try and stop myself from falling, a move that has the converse effect of making me lose my balance and stumble to my knees, taking my friend with me.

I attempt to scramble to my feet, aware that Cate is speechless with laughter and Marion has her arms crossed in disapproval. 'Sorry,' I mutter, pulling down my skirt as I sit up and start picking at the threads around my ankle in an attempt to release them.

'Oh, don't worry – at least no one's here to see us,' she sighs, as I glance up at two of the best-looking men I've seen in my life standing at the door.

In the excruciating moments that follow, I take in and process a succession of facts. The guys in front of us have that

Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

athletic, healthy look about them – tanned, muscular and with the air of being as at home in the great outdoors I would be in front of an episode of *EastEnders*. They are both wearing hiking boots, and one of them has on the instantly-recognisable bright red jacket of a Mountain Rescue volunteer.

I've noticed a certain trait in this kind of bloke over the years: they insist on *helping* people. It's not even a result of all the first aid courses they have to do. This is something in their genes that means they're physically unable to restrain themselves when there's anyone in need of assistance, whether it's a lone hiker cragfast on Skiddaw, a group of walkers attempting to decode their Ordnance Survey maps, or two women in strappy heels scrambling around to untangle themselves from a fraying carpet.

I respond to their attempts to help us up with the level of mortification the situation deserves – red faced, mumbling that none of this is necessary – while Cate holds out her hand as if she's Deborah Kerr in the *King and I* and rises elegantly on to her toes, with a demure smile.

As I brush myself down, I try not to look at the guy in front of me, although I've already caught a glimpse of clean-shaved skin, unusually symmetrical features and dark, brooding eyes that somehow look older than his face.

'You've got something on your cheek,' he says. I lower my eyes and follow the trail of a disconnected eyelash, before peeling it off and shoving it in my pocket.

‘Gents! Come in and join us! Are you beginners too?’ Marion asks, seizing the opportunity.

The guy with the brooding eyes backs away. ‘Actually, we’re here for a business meeting. I have a feeling we have the wrong place though.’ At that, his phone pings and he opens a text, before turning to his friend in the red jacket, who is almost as tall as him, with blond hair and a smattering of freckles across his nose. ‘At least, we *did* have a meeting.’

‘They’ve cancelled on you again?’ asks the blond guy.

‘Apparently so.’

Marion zones in on her chance like a heat-seeking missile. ‘Don’t suppose either of you fancy a go at salsa, do you?’

‘Er, no, I don’t think so,’ the guy with dark hair says instantly.

But his friend is smiling: a broad, unashamed, distinctly flirty smile – aimed directly at Cate. ‘Oh, come on,’ he says. ‘We’re not doing anything else now, are we?’

To be fair to the two newcomers, they throw themselves into the situation. And the result, against all the odds, is quite an enjoyable evening.

I am more than happy to step aside and let Cate dance with the blond one, who’s called Will, and Emily dance with the dark one, who’s called Joe, while I stick with Marion. Meanwhile, Stella tries her very best to encourage Mike, despite the fact that every time I look over, his feet appear to

Summer Nights at the Moonlight Hotel

be defying the laws of nature and going in opposite directions.

The lesson itself is over before we know it, at which point it's time for the 'social'.

Which isn't admittedly as 'social' as it could be given that there are still less than ten of us in the room. But after sticking to a fairly regimental set of steps under Marion's guidance, it's an opportunity to let our hair down and do a little more actual *dancing*, at least as I know it.

The kind where you get to loosen up, move with the music, enjoy yourself – although technically speaking, our salsa steps would never win Len Goodman's approval. Once the music is cranked up, it's easy to get into the swing of things, even if I am stuck with Marion while Cate and Will spin around the room laughing, and Joe gazes into Emily's eyes as he takes her hand and leads her, like we were shown earlier.

As the sky gets blacker and the moon shimmers outside, Marion looks at her watch and begins her appeal to drum up support for next week. 'I realise it wasn't as packed as we'd anticipated,' she says. 'But it's early days, isn't it?'

Cate places a reassuring hand on Marion's arm. 'It's been a great night. And once word gets round, you'll be packed out.' She turns to Will. 'But do us a favour boys: next week, can you bring a few friends?'