



"A perfect storm of great  
storytelling, fast-moving plot,  
and rich historical detail...  
Chanel Cleeton's best yet!"

—KATE QUINN

*The* **LAST TRAIN** *to*  
**KEY WEST**

A NOVEL

**CHANEL CLEETON**

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of *NEXT YEAR IN HAVANA*,  
A REESE WITHERSPOON BOOK CLUB PICK

— ✨ —  
**BOOK CLUB KIT**  
— ✨ —

## **DEAR READER,**

One of my favorite aspects of writing historical fiction is the sensation that I am sifting through history, stumbling across stories I've never heard of, and embarking on adventures that lead me on a fascinating journey through the past. When I sit down at my computer and start a novel, I often know the shape of the book, but it's truly the gems I unearth in my research, as well as my characters (who often have very different ideas of how their stories will evolve), that fill the heart of my novels.

A little over two years ago, I was nearly finished writing *When We Left Cuba*, and I was following the coverage of a frightening hurricane brewing in the Atlantic—Hurricane Irma. I read a news article that listed the most powerful and deadliest hurricanes in history, and one jumped out at me—the Labor Day hurricane that devastated the Florida Keys in 1935. Having grown up in Florida, I was surprised that it was a storm with which I was unfamiliar, and what struck me most wasn't the force of the hurricane, but the people it impacted.

When I learned of the tragic fate of the forgotten heroes of the Great War who were sent down to work in the Florida Keys, the devastation the hurricane had on the region and its inhabitants, and the demise of Henry Flagler's legendary Overseas Railroad that was designed to link Cuba and the United States, I knew it was a story I had to tell. There were so many fascinating intersections to explore: the story of the veterans, the immense scope of the railroad that was referred to as one of the wonders of the world, as well as the time period itself: the specter of the Great Depression looming large against the region and the influence of Prohibition on smuggling in the Keys. I was also drawn to the close ties with Cuba and couldn't resist the urge to launch my beloved Perez family back in time as I "met" a new ancestor—Mirta Perez, Beatriz and Elisa's aunt.

As I researched *The Last Train to Key West*, my three courageous and tenacious heroines—Helen Berner, Mirta Perez, and Elizabeth Preston—came alive in the bucolic paradise of the Florida Keys as they fought for survival while danger lurked beneath the palms and a devastating hurricane swirled around them. They took me on an adventure filled with romance, history, and suspense, and taught me a great deal about the strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Thank you for letting me share *The Last Train to Key West* with you. See you in the Florida Keys in 1935!

Best,

*Chanel Cleeton*

# RECIPES



## *Black Beans & Rice*

Black beans and rice is one of my favorite comfort meals and a staple Cuban dish. Enjoy!

### **INGREDIENTS**

- (1) 15.5 oz. can Goya black beans
- 2 tbl. olive oil
- 1 tbl. white cooking wine
- 2 minced cloves of garlic
- 1 tsp. oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- ¾ cup of water
- 1 tsp. cumin
- ½ cup onion, finely chopped
- ¼ cup green pepper, finely chopped
- ¼ tsp. Goya Adobo seasoning
- Salt
- Pepper
- Cilantro
- 2 cups cooked long grain white rice

Place the beans and the water in a small to medium sized saucepan and cook over low to medium heat until warm. Add oil, cooking wine, garlic, oregano, bay leaf, cumin, onion, green pepper, and Adobo to the beans and mix. Bring to a boil. Lower heat and cook on low for one hour. Check regularly to make sure it doesn't foam/bubble over. Serve over two cups of cooked long grain white rice (either according to package instructions in saucepan or in rice cooker). Season with salt and pepper to taste. Can top with cilantro if desired.

## *Lechon Asado/ Roast Pork*

Roast pork is a popular Cuban dish, and in my opinion, the seasonings make this meal and it's always a favorite among guests. It's also great for leftovers.

### **INGREDIENTS**

- 4-6 lb. pork butt or pork picnic
- Adobo seasoning
- 6 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1 cup of orange juice
- ½ onion, sliced into rings
- ½ cup of lime juice
- Black pepper to taste

*You can also substitute the orange juice and garlic with mojo marinade if you can find it at your grocery store.*

Place the pork in the slow cooker. Pour the orange juice and lime juice over the top. Season with garlic, Adobo (lightly cover pork with seasoning), and black pepper. Top with onion. Cook on low for 8-10 hours. When you pull it out of the slow cooker it, should be soft and easy to shred. I serve it with black beans and rice and yuca.

# Something SWEET



## *Key Lime Pie*

If you've ever been to the Florida Keys, then you know what a staple key lime pie is in the area. It also makes a very special appearance in *The Last Train to Key West* as a favorite at my fictional restaurant Ruby's Café. Here's a recipe from the legendary Kermit's Key West Key Lime Shoppe in the Florida Keys.

### **INGREDIENTS**

9 inch graham cracker crust (you can make your own or buy premade)

(2) 14 oz. cans sweetened condensed milk

6 egg yolks

½ cup key lime juice

Preheat oven to 300 degrees Fahrenheit. Blend milk and egg yolks at a low speed until the mixture is smooth. Add in the key lime juice and continue blending until well-mixed. Pour the mixture into the graham cracker crust. Bake in oven at 300 degrees Fahrenheit for fifteen minutes. Remove pie from oven and let cool for twenty minutes. Once pie is cool, place pie in the refrigerator.

I like to serve mine with whipped cream, but you can also top with meringue. Enjoy!

## *Johnny Cakes*

In *The Last Train to Key West*, Helen makes Johnny Cakes at the beginning of the novel. While there are different variations of Johnny Cakes, here's a simple, but tasty recipe from Jiffy you can make for your next book club meeting.

### **INGREDIENTS**

1 package Jiffy cornbread muffin mix

1 egg

⅓ cup of milk

Preheat your oven to 400 degrees Fahrenheit. Grease an 8-inch square pan. Bake in oven for 20-25 minutes. Enjoy!

# Sip & READ



## *Rum Runner*

This is a famous cocktail in the Keys that was invented in Islamorada in the 1950s, but the rum runners it's named after populate *The Last Train to Key West*.

### **INGREDIENTS**

1 oz. Dark Rum

1 oz. Light Rum

1 oz. Blackberry Liqueur

1 oz. Banana Liqueur

1 oz. Pineapple Juice

1 oz. Orange Juice

Splash of Grenadine

2 cups of Ice

Fresh fruit to garnish (Strawberry or Orange Slice)

Combine all ingredients in a blender. Blend until smooth. Serve in a tall glass with a straw.

You can also make this on the rocks, by pouring all of the ingredients into a cocktail shaker filled with ice, straining it, and serving it in a glass over ice.

You can garnish it with fruit like a strawberry or orange slice.



# Discussion Questions



1. At the beginning of the novel, Helen says, “People are what circumstances make them.” Do you agree with her statement? Why or why not? Are there places in the book where this sentiment seems to be true? How do the characters demonstrate this?
2. The hurricane hits Key West in 1935, during the Great Depression. What effect does the Depression have on the characters, on the setting? How do larger world events shape characters’ lives in the book?
3. What parallels do you see between the effects the hurricane has on the characters and that of fighting in the Great War?
4. How is the treatment of the veterans of the Great War similar to the problems faced by society during the Great Depression? Were you surprised to hear about the veterans’ lives after they came home from the war and some of the challenges they faced?
5. Helen and John have both experienced trauma. How does it shape them? What similarities do you see between their experiences and the way they cope with them? What differences?
6. Mirta and Elizabeth both come from wealthy families that have fallen on hard times. What similarities do you see in their personalities? What differences? How do those similarities and differences influence the choices they make throughout the novel?
7. *The Last Train to Key West* alternates between Helen’s, Mirta’s, and Elizabeth’s perspectives. Which character did you identify with most? How do they grow and change throughout the novel?
8. Elizabeth tells Sam that the Depression has been particularly hard on women. What examples do you see throughout the book where women’s lives are influenced by society’s expectations for them? How do they react to these expectations?
9. During the Depression, marriage rates dropped significantly. At the same time, marriage plays an important role in the characters’ lives. How do the heroines’ views on marriage change throughout the novel? Do the women find power in their relationships?
10. Mirta and Anthony’s marriage changes throughout the novel. What shifts do you see in their relationship? What roles do they take on, and how do they evolve in those roles?
11. All of the main characters are searching for something at the start of the novel. Do you they ultimately find what they were looking for? How does the journey change them? What were they really searching for to begin with?
12. The characters’ lives are largely shaped by the hurricane and its aftermath. Have you ever experienced a natural disaster? How did the experience influence you?

# *Recommended Reading*

*Hemingway's Hurricane:  
The Great Florida Keys Storm of 1935*  
by Phil Scott

*Storm of the Century: The Labor Day Hurricane of 1935*  
by Willie Drye

*Category 5: The 1935 Labor Day Hurricane*  
by Thomas Neil Knowles

*Last Train to Paradise: Henry Flagler and the Spectacular  
Rise and Fall of the Railroad that Crossed an Ocean*  
by Les Standiford

*Hemingway's Girl*  
by Erika Robuck

*Havana Nocturne*  
by T. J. English



## *Book Playlist*

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## About CHANEL CLEETON



**Chanel Cleeton** is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick *Next Year in Havana*. She received a bachelor's degree in international relations from Richmond, the American International University in London, and a master's degree in global politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Chanel also received her Juris Doctor from the University of South Carolina School of Law. She loves to travel and has lived in the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia.

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