

Cambridge English Readers

Level 6

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Murder Maker

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Chapter 1 *The start of it all*

I used to think that murderers were born murderers, but now I know differently. Now I know they can be made.

In my case, it was shock that did it. Four brutal words that changed my life forever. And who spoke those words?

You.

Congratulations, you created a murderer.

But even though I've killed three people, I'm not to blame. You are. Because you betrayed me. And the sad thing is, there's still a part of me that can't believe you did it. Still a part of me that loves you . . .

But don't worry, I'll deal with that. I won't allow a little emotion like love to stop me from killing you. But until then, I'm hoping it will make me feel just a little bit better to write this whole story of sorrow and revenge down. I've got to do something to stop myself from going crazy.

The day you dropped those first seeds of murder into my heart was a hot summer Sunday afternoon in mid-August. August 21, to be precise. Charlotte and Rebecca had escaped from the heat and were indoors in front of the TV, quarrelling about what programme to watch. (No, I didn't hear them quarrelling, but when don't your daughters quarrel?) Anyway, they weren't around. Even the puppy was asleep, lying unconscious on the concrete after a morning of chasing flies. And as for our neighbours, they were all relaxing with the newspapers after their Sunday

lunches, content in the knowledge that their gardens were tidy and their cars were shiny and clean.

And you and I? We were lying on a blanket together in the garden. Side by side, in each other's arms beneath my favourite trees. The tall grey poplar trees that marked the boundary of the garden. I loved them for their changing colours, but most of all for their music. They sang and they whispered to us that afternoon, just as they had sung and whispered to us on many other afternoons since I had moved to live in your house.

It's still all so clear in my mind, like a scene from a film. I remember you had your eyes closed and a mixture of shadows and sunshine was painting your face. Your handsome face. Dark, light; dark, light. Shadows, sunshine; shadows, sunshine. Dappled shade, you called it. Dappled shade was your favourite place to be. If we ever had a picnic, you'd say, 'Let's sit in the dappled shade.' And if we went camping, that's where we put the tent, in the dappled shade.

I prefer full sunshine, I must admit, but I never told you that, because what good was sunshine on my own? You and the dappled shade were a million times better to me than full sunshine on my own. You . . . My man. My property. Mine.

I was completely confident of my status as your lifelong partner, lying there beneath the grey poplars. I had no doubt at all that we would be together forever. That we would be walking hand in hand by the sea together after our hair had turned white and your daughters were busy with their own lives. You and me together forever, right up until one of us died. Pathetic, really, especially as you killed me with your words right there in the garden on

August 21. And the worst of it was, there was no warning at all. Nothing to prepare me for those four little words of destruction.

One moment I was lying sleepily next to you under the trees watching the stripes of sunshine painting your face, and the next moment I heard you give a strange, nervous cough.

‘Carla,’ you said, and something about your voice made me feel instantly afraid.

I remember turning my body towards you and holding my hand to keep the sun out of my eyes. ‘What’s wrong, darling?’ I must have said, or something very similar. Poor, innocent creature. I thought you were ill or something. I was worried about you. ‘Tell me, what’s wrong, Mark, please!’

Well, you told me. You certainly did.

You looked at me with your beautiful dark eyes and you said, ‘I’m sorry, Carla. I’m so sorry. There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just come right out and say it. I . . . I’ve met somebody else.’

I’ve been busy in the last twelve months. I’ve changed my hairstyle. Moved to a new city and started a new job. Had a string of affairs. Some of the sex was even quite good.

I think I was a bit crazy for six months or so. I certainly didn’t care very much what happened to me or what I did. So I did pretty much whatever I wanted. Anything I thought might limit the pain. And sometimes it even worked for a short time.

Then one rainy morning I woke up next to some man I’d met in a nightclub the previous evening and I couldn’t even remember his name. There was an empty bottle of vodka on the bedside table and my headache was so bad I

knew I was responsible for drinking at least half of it. I went to the bathroom, and when I looked at my reflection in the mirror I didn't like what I saw. My face was as white as a ghost's, and there were black circles beneath my eyes. I looked wild and out of control.

And, worst of all, I knew that all the time I was suffering, you were with another woman. I doubted whether you even thought about me any more at all. Suddenly, as I stood there looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, the injustice of everything hit me right in the stomach like a hard punch. I had loved you with all my heart, and in return you had stamped me into the dust.

After I'd thrown the stranger out of my bed and out of my flat, I stood under the shower with the water mixing with my tears until the water ran cold. Then, as I dried my shivering body, I decided that enough was enough. I couldn't go on like this. I had to do something to make me feel better, and drinking vodka and spending time with anonymous men clearly wasn't working.

A few weeks earlier I'd seen an advert in the newspaper for a special course for people who have experienced a broken relationship. It was a Restart Course. I dialled the number in the advert, and two weeks later I was sitting in a classroom for the first session. And that's where I met Diane, Gemma and Cathy. Let me tell you, they're worth at least a hundred of you and for the moment they're my family. Or the only family that counts. Let me introduce them.

First up there's Diane, fifty-two, brutally rejected by her husband of twenty-five years in an email from Cuba. Then there's Cathy, thirty-two, abandoned by her husband after

several years of depression. Next there's Gemma, forty-five, who made her escape from a twenty-year marriage to a man who cruelly abused her. And then there's me. Carla, thirty-five, replaced by a blonde business studies teacher you met on holiday while I was at home loyally looking after your daughters.

After the weekly Restart class, the girls and I always go to the pub next to the college to have a few drinks and to laugh away some of the tension. And later on we inevitably start to remember happier times.

'My Alec and I used to have such fun when we were first together. Got into trouble all the time.' That's Diane. Long blonde hair, loud laugh. Turning heads left, right and centre even though she's old enough to be Cathy's mother. 'One night on our honeymoon, we decided to make love outdoors. Exciting and romantic, you know. Anyway, we'd just taken our clothes off when a group of elderly walkers came round the corner! I don't know who was more embarrassed, them or us!'

Diane tried to kill herself earlier this year with a combination of alcohol and headache pills. Fortunately she was discovered before it was too late, but she was seriously ill for some time. And Alec, the father of their three daughters, didn't even bother to get up from beneath his Cuban beauty to find out how she was.

Diane, Gemma and Cathy. I've hardly known them any time at all, but somehow I feel I've known them forever. If a life can be so completely changed in the space it takes someone to say four short words, then the whole idea of time means nothing anyway.

'He sent me another charming email from Havana

today,' Diane continues. 'He's disputing my solicitor's claim that I should receive half his pension.'

'The horrible man!' Gemma exclaims, and then she goes on to tell us about a story she read in the newspaper that day about a woman who took revenge on her cheating husband.

'His hobby was collecting valuable wine,' she told us. Gemma's really pretty, and she's gradually becoming more confident now she's got rid of her horrible husband. 'Anyway, his wife was so angry with him she went right round their village leaving bottles of his wine outside people's houses!'

We all laughed, me especially. I could just imagine how satisfying it must have been for that woman, getting rid of all her husband's precious wine. So, a little later on in the evening when Cathy told us all she was thinking of going away on holiday, Gemma's story and the idea of a holiday connected in my mind.

Revenge. Holiday. After the way you'd treated me, I deserved a holiday. And why not go to Cuba? It was a country you'd always wanted to visit. If you ever found out I'd been there before you, you'd be sick with jealousy. Yes, it would be a kind of revenge in a way, to go there first. Not as extreme as the wine story of course, but it would be a start. Yes, I could view it as a first step, a practice for some sort of serious revenge. I could spend my time in Cuba planning what to do to you. Or perhaps better still, I could practise first on someone else . . .

So I turned towards Diane and said casually, 'I'm going on holiday to Cuba next month. Do you want me to pay your husband a visit?'

Chapter 2 *Whispers and echoes*

I experienced Havana through your eyes. No, that doesn't express it properly. It wasn't an intellectual thing at all. I didn't think, 'Mark would have liked this,' or, 'Mark would have done that.' It was more as if I became you. As if your spirit possessed me in some strange way, making me respond to my surroundings the way you would.

The dilapidated Havana streets are alive with shady characters. Especially Old Havana, or Habana Vieja, as it's called in Spanish. The streets of Habana Vieja are no place for a foreign woman to walk alone after dark, I can tell you. Or probably even during the day for that matter. But the very first night I was in Havana, I left the normal tourist routes far behind and wandered past the near-ruined houses along dark streets, and I wasn't afraid. I walked tall with my shoulders back, all my senses working overtime as they absorbed the unique mixture of sights and sounds that is a real Havana night.

Tourists mostly experience a Cuba with its Sunday-best clothes on. A poor but cheerful country where everybody smiles constantly and tries their very best to please you. In a country where a tour guide earns more than a doctor, I suppose this isn't very surprising. Certainly, behind every smiled welcome there's a hunger. They want your money, but they're very polite about it. It's not the same as when we went on holiday to India and we had crowds of beggars running after us.

No, Cuban people are prepared to be nice to you in order to get their hands on your dollars. It's only when you examine those smiles a little more closely that you begin to see how false they are. Really they're jealous of you, with your expensive watch, designer sunglasses and, above all, your passport and freedom to travel. In a country where the supermarket shelves are often almost empty, a tourist is like a precious jewel in a pile of dusty stones.

The real Havana is a city of whispers and echoes. You'd love it, you really would. Lovers kiss in dark passages while music drifts in the humid winds. Paint peels from the front of once-grand buildings and men sit in doorways smoking cigars and drinking rum. And of course there are all the wonderful old cars left over from the days when Hollywood stars visited the city in the 1950s before the Revolution. Cadillac cars sail along the streets, curiosities from another time, polluting the atmosphere as they go. Money that could be spent on clothes or food is spent on cars by people with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Havana is a city populated by people waiting for something to happen.

And, as I walked along the dark streets of Habana Vieja, carrying the spirit of you inside me, many of the people sitting in doorways decided that I might be what they were waiting for. An opportunity.

They used the traditional Cuban way to attract my attention: by making a sound that isn't quite a whistle or a shout, but a strange hiss like a water bird on a lake. And some of the younger men found the energy to get up from their steps to follow me, bringing the smell of cigars and rum along with them.

‘Hey, *señorita!* Where are you going? *Señorita!* You are very beautiful!’ And somehow, perhaps because I was away from the regular tourist routes, their smiles seemed more genuine than usual.

Was I in danger? I honestly don’t know. I’m not even sure I cared very much. Oh, I suppose I didn’t really want any actual harm to come to me, but since losing you I have been very aware of how unpredictable life can be. Of how at risk and vulnerable we are all the time. The dark streets of Habana Vieja just didn’t seem any more or less dangerous than anywhere else, that’s all.

Anyway, I was alone in those unpredictable Havana streets for a reason. Alec Cartwright was renting a room somewhere near to where I was; I had his address in my pocket, written by Diane on a piece of expensive notepaper. But it would be no use going straight round there to challenge him. After all, what would I say? What would I do? No, I needed time to observe him, time to find out about his habits and his way of life. That way I could identify any weak spots which could form the basis of my revenge plans. (You see, I wasn’t thinking of murder then, only of some sort of simple revenge.)

But in order to study Alec Cartwright, I needed to find myself a base. Somewhere close to where he lived.

Fortunately, luck was on my side. Suddenly, in the dull light from an antique streetlamp, I saw a card in the front window of a tired-looking house. The card was stained brown by age or damp or possibly both. Of course it was written in Spanish, but it was simple Spanish, and my command of the language was sufficient to understand it. ‘Room to rent. Apply Bar Escorpión.’

I found the bar right at the end of the street. If I tell you it matched the houses around it, then you'll probably guess that the paint on the walls was faded and peeling and that the metal sign was rusty. It certainly seemed highly unlikely that any tourists had ever passed through its doors before, but I didn't care. I walked in, and I wasn't even put off when a quick glance around the dark interior of the bar revealed territory that was strictly male.

You'd have loved it, I'm sure, because it was straight out of one of those cowboy films you've got such a passion for. I don't know why, they all seem the same to me. Or at least, they all start the same way: a stranger arrives in a sleepy town, gets off his horse, beats the dust from his clothes with his hat and walks into the bar. As the doors close behind him, everyone stops talking . . .

Well, I didn't have a horse and my clothes weren't dusty, but just like in those films, all conversation stopped when I walked in. But I just gave a general smile around the room at everybody, then I went up to the bar and ordered a beer. By the time I'd been served and had settled myself at an empty table in a corner, the conversations had started up again. I guessed that most people were probably talking about me, but I simply chose not to be concerned about it. I didn't care. It wasn't important.

I suppose my desire for revenge had given me a real sense of purpose. But, looking back, I think at that moment in time, I actually felt quite relaxed. After a while I intended to ask about the room, but there was no hurry. There was plenty of time to just sit and drink my beer. Who knew? Perhaps Alec Cartwright himself would come in for a neighbourly chat before supper.

But when the doors did open a few minutes later, it was to admit a man who was the very opposite in looks to the grey-bearded fifty-year-old in the photograph Diane had lent me before I left England. The man filling the doorway had skin like milk chocolate and a smile that spread sunshine to all who received it. And it was only a matter of seconds before I was on the receiving end of some of that warming sunshine.

Luis – for I soon discovered that was his name – walked straight up to my table and sat himself down in the empty seat opposite me. For a while he said absolutely nothing, just looked at me, studying every millimetre of my face. Then a glass of rum arrived as if by magic on the table in front of him. He put his head on one side and picked the drink up.

‘I am a reader of faces,’ he stated grandly. ‘Do you want me to tell you what your face says to me?’

‘Well,’ I said, impressed by the standard of his English, ‘it appears to tell you my nationality anyway.’

Instantly he smiled, and I noticed there was a gap between his front teeth. ‘No, your guidebook told me that,’ he said, his eyes sparkling, and I smiled back at him, remembering that my *Rough Guide to Cuba* was sticking out of the top of my shoulder bag, which I’d hung from my chair.

‘You are English,’ he went on, still looking carefully at my face, ‘and you have only been in Cuba for a few days.’

‘Because I haven’t got a suntan, right?’ I guessed, and once again that gap-toothed smile shone out at me.

‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘Because your skin is still pale.’

By now I was enjoying myself. I'd almost forgotten about Alec Cartwright and the true reason I was here.

'Tell me something a little less obvious,' I encouraged him, but immediately regretted it when his face grew more thoughtful.

'You're looking for something or someone,' he said slowly, and suddenly it wasn't a game any longer. 'It's very important that you find him,' he said. 'A person's life depends on it . . .'

The room seemed suddenly cold despite the humid air drifting in through the open windows, and I shivered, avoiding his eyes.

Of course he noticed my tension. 'Am I right?' he asked casually, and I remember how exposed I felt. My new confidence had abandoned me.

But with a huge effort I managed to keep my feelings from my face, or at least I think I did. 'There's an element of truth in that statement,' I said, but if I'd hoped to confuse Luis by using long words, then I was quickly disappointed. His command of the English language was astonishingly good.

'Why don't you tell me all about it?' he suggested.

Of course I wasn't about to betray my plans to a total stranger, even one as attractive and friendly as Luis. Not that I had a plan, beyond finding Alec Cartwright and making him sweat. You see, even then I didn't know just what I was capable of. I suspected I was capable of blackmail, and of inflicting emotional pain, perhaps even severe emotional pain. But I had no suspicion of that potential for violence living just beneath my skin. A

potential that was swelling and increasing every second, like undiscovered cancer cells.

‘I’m here to do a favour for a friend,’ I said. ‘She wants me to find a missing reptile.’

For the first time Luis’s mind didn’t quite connect with the meaning of my words. ‘Has your friend lost a snake in Havana?’ he asked, and I laughed out loud.

Luis looked slightly offended, so I quickly apologised. ‘Actually,’ I said, ‘you’re almost right. She’s lost her husband, and I gather he is something of a snake.’

‘I see,’ Luis said. ‘And what is his name, this snake husband of your friend?’

‘Alec,’ I told him. ‘Alec Cartwright.’

And then suddenly it was Luis’s turn to laugh.

‘What?’ I asked him, curious. ‘What’s so amusing?’

‘Alec Cartwright is my neighbour,’ he explained finally. And that’s when I came to the conclusion that fate must be on my side. It wasn’t coincidence that had brought me into this bar at the same time as Alec Cartwright’s neighbour, it was fate.

Someone somewhere intended me to get my revenge. It was almost as if I was an actress in a play, speaking the lines of a writer’s plot. The situation was out of my control.

And every bit as inevitable as night following day.

Chapter 3 *Mr Mouthwash*

I bought Luis another drink. ‘Tell me about Alec Cartwright,’ I said.

Luis looked at me, and suddenly his expression was very Cuban. There was a sort of measuring look on his face, and I could almost see his mind thinking, ‘What’s in this for me? How can I turn this situation to my advantage?’ Then he asked me casually. ‘What is it that you want to know?’

‘Everything there is to know,’ I replied, equally casual.

Luis pulled an expressive face. ‘Alec Cartwright is fat and his clothes are too small,’ he said, his voice full of disgust. ‘His big white belly hangs over his trousers, and his neck is purple and tired like the neck of a turkey. The man is ugly. Ugly.’ He almost spat the word at me across the table. ‘But worst of all,’ he went on, ‘are his eyes. Alec Cartwright has small, suspicious eyes, and he never looks into your face when he speaks to you.’ He paused then, I think to give his last words emphasis. ‘I would not trust a man like that if he and I were the only two men left alive on this planet.’

I hadn’t been impressed when Diane had first shown me that photograph, I have to admit, but the picture Luis was painting was even more unappealing. It was certainly difficult to imagine that this was the same man who had made love to Diane outdoors on their honeymoon. In fact, the very idea made me shiver.

I’d put the photograph Diane had lent me inside my

Rough Guide to Cuba to keep it safe. Now I took it out and showed it to Luis. 'Is this the same man?' I asked him.

He took the photograph from me and immediately nodded. 'Yes,' he said, his face screwed up with disgust, 'that's him. He is older than that, and uglier. But it's him.'

He returned the photograph to me and I replaced it inside my book, thoughtfully. Maybe Alec Cartwright had changed considerably with age. Maybe it's just something that's inevitable, something that happens to everybody. Even you. Maybe if you lived to the age of fifty your muscles wouldn't be firm any longer. Perhaps you'd be fat too. And bald. But as it is, none of that is going to happen. You'll die a handsome man. I'm doing you a favour, really.

Anyway, back in that Havana bar, Luis was continuing with his story about Alec Cartwright. It was around eleven o'clock in the evening by then, and the room was full of chat and cigar smoke. But somehow, although we were surrounded by people, I was only really aware of Luis. It was almost the same as the effect you had on me when we first met at that party.

'However, despite all these things,' Luis was saying, 'I wasn't surprised when Alec managed to get a Cuban girlfriend. The man wears dull clothes, it is true. He does not look like a rich man and he lives here in these streets instead of in an expensive tourist hotel. But he travels around the city in taxis and he sits in bars drinking cocktails. No, I was not surprised about his girlfriend. But I am surprised when you sit here and you tell me that he has a wife in England who is concerned about him.' Luis shook his head in disbelief. 'The man is an animal with the habits of an animal,' he said. 'Every day he rises at five in the

morning. Every day at five in the morning he uses his bathroom, and you understand the pipes in these houses are very old. When somebody uses the water, the pipes they knock and bang about like builders on a building site. My work is mostly at night, and for this reason I normally go to bed one hour before Alec Cartwright gets up. And as soon as I go to sleep, those pipes they wake me up again. And after I'm awake, I lie in bed and I have to listen to him in his bathroom. Every day he uses a mouthwash. And every day I lie there and I have to listen to that mouthwash bubbling around in his throat. How is it possible for someone to make so much noise with a mouthwash, can you tell me that? I tell you it is the sound of the devil!

Luis's voice was very loud by now, and I became aware that people were looking in our direction. All other conversations in the bar had stopped. And Luis hadn't finished yet.

'Every day I wish for Alec Cartwright to move away. To pack his tight, dusty clothes into his suitcase with his mouthwash and disappear!'

At that, Luis picked up his glass and drank the rest of his rum in one swallow, his handsome face looking dangerous. I wondered what work took him away regularly at night. And I wondered too what he would do to anyone who really annoyed him when just the thought of Alec Cartwright's mouthwash could make him look so fierce.

Then the next moment, he was smiling at me and the tension was lifting from his face. 'You know, Carla,' he said, 'these old Havana buildings, they are full of insects. We Cubans learn to ignore them most of the time. They are familiar to us, you understand, a part of our

environment and our day-to-day lives. But some insects they are too unpleasant to ignore. Alec Cartwright is such an insect. The worst type of ugly, stinging insect. And if you say to me that you want to persuade him it is a good idea to return to England to the arms of your friend, then I will do anything in my power to assist you. In fact, it would be my very great pleasure.'

And that's how I ended up staying in Luis's apartment as his guest. And no, I don't suppose I would have accepted his invitation if he hadn't been a young, attractive man. But he was attractive. Very attractive. And charming. Interesting too. We sat together on his sofa and talked about everything. England, Cuba, politics, art . . . I even told him about you. (I think he placed you in the same category as Alec Cartwright: an insect – ha, ha!) And yes, we kissed. Of course. As I said, Luis was a very attractive and charming man. But then, before things could go any further, there was a loud noise from next door.

'Alec Cartwright!' Luis announced crossly, moving away from me slightly. 'He has returned and now he makes preparations for bed.'

'Is that really the pipes making all that noise?' I asked, and Luis nodded.

'Yes, indeed, that is the pipes. But you are fortunate. He does not use the mouthwash at night.'

Soon after that, Luis changed into black trousers and a black shirt and left for work, telling me to make myself at home in his apartment. Alone, I looked around properly for the first time. There was nothing expensive in the apartment, but it definitely had style. Unfortunately however, nothing could disguise the smell of the damp

coming from the walls, and later, when I climbed into his bed, the sheets felt chilly.

Not surprisingly, I couldn't get to sleep straight away. The pillows held the smell of Luis's aftershave. It was a nice smell: sexy, like Luis. But somehow it made me think about you. About your smell. The bare skin of your shoulder beneath my cheek as you held me in your arms after love-making. The smooth, soft place behind your ears. The warm hollow of your throat.

Gemma has a theory about smell. She thinks it's the basis of what makes you fall in love with somebody. That if someone doesn't smell right for you, then you'll never fall in love with them. She's probably right.

Anyway, lying in Luis's bed surrounded by Luis's smell, I thought about you and I felt more sad and alone than I had for weeks. But I refused to allow myself to cry. Since the split I'd cried enough tears for a lifetime. Enough tears to know that crying changes nothing. You and your special smell were gone from me forever, and I just had to accept that and deal with it. Which was precisely why I was here in Havana – to deal with it. Or rather to practise dealing with it. Because by the time I'd found ways to get revenge for Diane and then Gemma and Cathy, I would be an expert. And then I would be ready to take my revenge on you.

After that alarming noise from the pipes, there were no more sounds from Alec Cartwright's apartment, and I finally drifted off to sleep. I didn't even wake up properly when Luis came back from work. But when the pipes started up again I found myself lying in Luis's arms, with his face pressed into my hair and his chest against my back, and when Luis swore in Spanish, I could feel the

movement of his lips. I shivered, and Luis pulled me closer to him, wrapping his arms around me from behind. It felt comforting somehow, and despite the sound of the pipes, I found myself slipping into a light sleep.

But I woke up again immediately when Alec Cartwright started to use his mouthwash, and it wasn't only because Luis gave a groan of despair. It really was a ridiculously loud noise for an activity taking place on the other side of the wall. A detailed sort of noise, somehow. Certainly it was possible to imagine the liquid of the mouthwash moving around every one of Alec Cartwright's yellow teeth. (I didn't know then that his teeth were yellow of course, but it seemed inevitable, considering the lack of care he appeared to take with the rest of his body.)

Luis sat upright in bed, swearing loudly in Spanish. Then he threw a book at the wall. It landed face down on the floor, and I noticed it was my *Rough Guide to Cuba*. Alec Cartwright's photograph came to rest on the carpet next to Luis's black leather shoes, and the face in the photograph seemed to stare back at us stubbornly. 'I'll use my mouthwash when I want to and for as long as I want to!' it seemed to say.

'Are the walls in these buildings thin?' I asked Luis when at last the sounds from next door had stopped, and he ran an annoyed hand through his black hair, swinging his long legs out of the bed.

'No,' he said, 'they are not thin. But all the buildings in Havana are full of cracks and holes. Perhaps the sound travels through these holes. Or through the pipes. I don't know. It is just another mystery of this city. I will make us some coffee.' He put on a black dressing gown and went

into the kitchen, and soon the delicious smell of strong coffee reached my nostrils.

According to my watch, it was only five thirty in the morning, but I doubted whether I would get back to sleep again. There was too much to think about. Luis, for example. What had he been doing for half the night?

'Here,' he said, handing me a steaming mug of coffee, and as he leant across the bed to give it to me, his dressing gown fell open, revealing a long scar down the length of his chest. He saw me looking at it.

'I used to be a bad boy,' he told me.

'Aren't you a bad boy any more?' I asked.

He drank some of his coffee. 'No, not any more,' he said, and smiled. 'Well, not often, anyway.'

Bad boy or not, I knew I had nothing to fear from Luis. In fact, I felt very safe as I sat in bed drinking coffee with him. Safe and protected. 'So, what has your friend told you about her husband?' Luis asked.

'He's a doctor,' I told him. 'He's a doctor and he's here to do a piece of research into why your medical services are so good when your country is so . . .' I broke off, realising just in time that what I'd been about to say was hardly tactful. But Luis supplied the missing word from my sentence anyway.

'Poor,' he said. 'It's OK; you can say it. I will not be offended. Cuba is poor.'

I was embarrassed. 'Yes, well, apparently he was only supposed to be here for six months, but his contract was extended.'

'Perhaps the doctor is taking his time with his research,' Luis suggested.

‘You mean on purpose?’

He nodded. ‘Of course. Gina is a very beautiful girl.’ He gestured with his hands to draw the outline of a woman in the air.

‘Gina? That’s his girlfriend?’

‘Yes. She is twenty-three years old. A nurse at the hospital. She had a Cuban boyfriend until Mr Mouthwash arrived.’

‘Mr Mouthwash! That’s funny!’ I started to laugh, and when Luis laughed too, I found myself thinking what a nice laugh he had. Deep and dark. Extremely sexy. Yours was always a bit boyish for my taste really. A silly schoolboy laugh. Though I loved it of course, because it was yours, a part of you. But it didn’t make my knees go weak. You only had to look into my eyes to make me melt, but I can’t remember your laugh ever making me tremble with desire.

Luis’s laugh came from deep inside his chest, and somehow I found myself reaching out to stroke that chest as it moved, my fingers drawing a line down the length of his scar and across his muscles. And suddenly he wasn’t laughing any more, and when I looked up into his face, he was looking down at me seriously. Then he bent to kiss me, and desire swept through my body like a tide. And I doubt whether either of us would have heard if Alec Cartwright had decided to use his mouthwash again.