

‘...in innocence there is peace
and danger in equal measure’



Dancing
Through Fire

Catherine Alexandra

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By Catherine Alexandra

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For my Dad

About the Author

Catherine Alexandra lives in Ayrshire on the West coast of Scotland with her partner Michael and their two Ragdoll cats. She has a grown-up son Rory who lives and studies in Glasgow

Although she trained as an English teacher, Catherine soon realised that her heart lay with children who have additional support needs and so this has been the focus of her teaching career for the last twenty years. Her love of books and storytelling has continued to play a large part in her life however, fuelling her ambition to write the novel they say is in all of us. Dancing Through Fire is Catherine's debut novel

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Part One

Chapter 1 – Ellie

I've never understood why blue is considered a cold colour. When I think of blue I think of a sky so hot it shimmers. I think of glittering far away oceans and cobalt blue eyes which brim with love. There's nothing cold about blue, not to me, yet here I am flying through a sky so intense it is breathtakingly beautiful and still I feel a chill run the length of me. It's twelve years since I last made this trip and I've yet to get rid of the ghosts from that time. It's no surprise that they should surface here, now, on this journey I never expected or wanted to make. I was only eighteen last time. Eighteen and ready to take on the world. It isn't excitement which stirs in my chest today.

I look around me at the other passengers, trying to distract myself. The elderly couple beside me have been going to Mallorca every year for the past thirty years they tell me and the young couple in front of me are taking their twin toddlers for the first time because it's the kind of place you'd go to for a first trip abroad with children, being not too far from home and not too hot in April. There are some business men and women, frequent fliers I guess who have learned to manage their briefcases and coffees in the small space they have. They are not concerned by the turbulence which hits us. I, on the other hand, scan every face I can see for signs of panic but hot drinks and duty-free goods continue to be served and sold, even as the seat belt sign pings on. I hold on to the smiles of passing air stewards and turn up my music knowing we'll soon begin the descent.

With my suitcase collected and a chilled bottle of water in hand I head out into the late afternoon sunshine, fumbling in my shoulder bag to find money for a taxi. It isn't so much what I see that's familiar, it's what I smell; sea salted air, warm skin, dusty sun-baked earth... And I remember the sounds that surround me as I stand in the taxi queue; suitcases being pulled along concrete, car doors slamming, raucous laughter... I decide to take a seat on a nearby bench and wait until this planeload of holidaymakers moves on. I distract myself watching the light change the colours of the sky from bright baby blue to deep turquoise shot through with gold. The afternoon exhales and a cool breeze from the sea touches me just as stillness sets in. I close my eyes for a second and take a few deep breaths.

When I eventually head to the nearest taxi there is no-one else around apart from a trio of taxi drivers who lean against the front car enjoying a quiet smoke. They are in no hurry to move and so I busy myself shifting nothing in particular around with the point of my shoe while they finish their cigarettes. I am eventually driven north in the back of a large white people carrier with tinted windows, amazingly good air conditioning and the oldest of the taxi drivers who has the kind of face which tells a thousand stories. There is little conversation throughout the journey which suits me fine as I sit back and take in the first few sights of the island again.

The first thing that strikes me is the never ending stream of billboards advertising events, shows and water parks the length and breadth of the island. One particular poster crops up several times, advertising a soon-to-be-opened luxury resort in Puerto Pollensa, not far from where I'm heading. It shows a mature couple strolling arm in arm and bare foot along a wide expanse of empty beach, all toothpaste smiles and billowing white linen. Mallorca: The Island of Romance. I smile despite myself.

The journey north is not quite as I remember it, though the landscape is familiar with its tree-clad mountains, a backdrop to the fields of grape vines and olive trees that run for mile upon mile between towns and villages. A peppering of farmhouses and pastel coloured villas are scattered along the way and old rusty cars with missing wheels and headlights lie abandoned underneath the shade of the fig trees. In the distance large multi-storey hotels light up the skyline, highlighting the massive surge in tourism the past twelve years has seen. There has been so much happening on this island, so much landscaping and sculpting of resorts which have appeared out of nothing and no-where.

After fifty minutes, we drive through the old Roman fortress into the Port of Alcudia and a hundred butterflies take flight inside me. The taxi sails through Alcudia and on towards the outskirts towards Playa de Muro where we finally come to a stop. For a moment I feel as if I might not be able to stand as all sensations drain from me, but the driver is out and offloading my luggage before I have time to think. He takes the fare and his tip, offering a surprisingly gentle toothless smile before he drives off leaving me standing on the pavement with my case at my side. I suddenly have no idea where to go or what to do. I remind myself that I am thirty now and that if I can live alone, run a college department and actually step on the plane which led me here in the first

place then I can decide what to do in this moment.

I look across the road and see a place which makes perfect sense.

When I worked here, this was the time I liked best. The town would have started to quieten with a balminess descending like slow dripping honey at the end of a hot day. It was what my Dad called 'bronzing' time: the golden hour. The pace would shift down a gear as sun-bathers walked slowly back to their hotels and apartments from the beach, wet towels over their shoulders, rosy-cheeked and exhausted children with sandy, salt tangled hair straggling behind. I used to long for this time of day. I'd had my break and a cool shower and was ready to face the night ahead. There was no stopping once it started. We went hell for leather in that cramped kitchen, never stopping to take a breath until the last customer had gone. But that was never good enough, we were never good enough, or so Sheila told us. She flitted in and out of the kitchen checking, criticising, clapping her hands to gee us along. She had never done a single shift in that kitchen in all the years she'd been there. She had no real idea what it was like day after day, night after night, working in a heat that sucked the breath out of you. No idea what it was like to be flambéing your twenty fifth brandied steak of the night in one pan and tossing garlic mushrooms in another, hot sparks of bubbling butter spitting at you when all the while you felt as if the heat might make you drop. Not that I complained at the time. I was too busy taking off into the world like a champagne cork. Too fuelled with adventure to see what was really going on. They were meant to look after me, Sheila and Jack. It was meant to be the opportunity of a lifetime. They're long gone now, thank goodness. They went their separate ways five years after I left because Jack's eye wandered once too often. I spent so many years wondering what I would do if I ever saw either of them again, what I would say, until I learned to let it go.

I open my eyes to rid my mind of the memories and see a young waiter standing before me. He's smiling that wonderful smile, that effortless smile of the young and handsome. He nods as he takes my order and swiftly wipes the table in a swirl before fetching me a tall glass of fizzy lemon. I sip at it slowly and relax back into my chair, pushing my sunglasses onto the top of my head to let the sun have all of me.

I am suddenly aware of a shadow falling across me. I look up to see a large shape blocking the sun and for a moment I'm unable to see the face, masked as it is by the shadows. Then my eyes adjust and I see more clearly the man standing in front of me. We search faces, lock eyes, and smile.

"Well, well, well," he muses, nodding slowly. "The little one returns."

"Sam... I don't believe it!"

"Well I'll be damned. Ellie," he says quietly as I place my drink down on the table. "If you aren't a sight for sore eyes."

I stand and he pulls me into one of his all embracing holds, squeezing me until I laugh and hurt all at once.

"God it's good to see you my girl." He calls the waiter back and asks him to bring a bottle of wine and two glasses. "You've got time for a glass right?"

"That would be wonderful."

"Good," he states, waving a dismissive hand at the pile of paperwork on the next door table and sitting down at mine, "the accounts can wait. I'm off duty until the wine is drunk and so are we." He smiles through eyes filled with mischief, a look I remember with such fondness.

Sam: still full of Irish charm. His was the bar I liked best when I was here all those years ago. It wasn't full of drunken tourists like the others; Sam preferred to play host to locals and seasonal workers or 'gap chaps' as he called us. The bar is different now. Even the location looks different, the surroundings landscaped beyond recognition. Gone is the flowery bamboo furniture, replaced by mosaic topped tables and wrought iron chairs. A better look all round. It hadn't occurred to me that I would bump into Sam quite so soon. I wasn't even sure he'd still be there but I'm delighted that he is. He makes the best Irish coffee ever. I tried to make it for myself when I got home, same whisky, same brand of coffee, but I never managed to get it quite right. But then the atmosphere, the warm midnight breeze, the camaraderie that was added to Sam's was never there back home, not in Glasgow on rainy

summer evenings with no-one for company but next door's cat.

We sit, Sam and I, in that glorious space between day and night sipping our wine and picking at tapas. He asks me what I'm up to, if I have a brood of babies back home and so on. I let the comfortable chat soothe me, but the thought of what is to come is there all the time, like a quiet person sitting between us waiting to be noticed. And Sam knows exactly why I am back.

"So," he exhales casually, when we are half way through our third glass, "You seen him yet?"

I don't know whether it is the combination of the wine and my exhaustion or the fact that it's suddenly out there which releases my tears. Embarrassed, I try to quickly blink them away. Just as quickly Sam reaches out and takes my hand giving it a brief squeeze.

"I'm sorry. I'm an insensitive old sod."

"No, it's fine. I'm just feeling a bit nervous, that's all. I haven't seen him yet. I mean I can't wait to see him, of course I can't, but...." I shrug my shoulders, not knowing where to start. So I don't. Instead I raise my glass. "Just enjoying this in the meantime." I turn my head to look in the direction of his house, knowing full well the road I'll have to travel to get there. It's a sobering thought.

"You're a brave girl Ellie, coming back here. He'll be so pleased to see you," he adds gently.

"How is he?" I ask after a moment.

"Hard to tell. You know what he's like, stubborn, private, never one to complain. He comes down this way less and less. I'm damn sure seeing you again'll put a smile on his face though."

"I couldn't have come here before. I..."

"I know. He knows too. Like I said, you're a brave girl. I never thought you'd come back."

"God Sam, neither did I."

The thing I feared most about coming back wasn't being here again in the place where it happened, the sights, sounds and smells bringing it all back. It was the thought of coming face to face once again with the man who'd held my heart for the last twelve years. For all that time I'd believed that Guy was my very own guardian angel, my saviour, which of course he was. I had taken what I remembered of him, of our time together and cradled it carefully in my mind, as if turning my head the wrong way one day would be all it took for the memory of him to slip away. And I didn't want to lose the memory of him, not for a minute. I wanted to hold on to every detail of his face and voice and smell in the way we do when someone we love is far from us. What scares me even more though, now that I'm here, is the idea that he might look at me and see that I haven't quite healed as he had hoped I would. And that is unbearable.

There have been letters, not many and not at predictable times. Just occasional letters, like gentle nudges blown in on a warm wind to remind me that he's still there. Never long, never referring to anything or anyone from the past, and always signed off with the words, 'yours always'. Those two words: they make me feel connected in this large chaotic scheme of things. They let me know that even when things seem hopeless I am still in someone's heart despite it all, despite my mistakes and my flaws so quickly judged by others. His is the kind of love that cares nothing for all of that.

By the time I leave Sam, almost a full bottle of wine and an Irish coffee down I am fit for nothing but bed. Sam offers to call me a taxi but I decline. I want, I need to feel the breeze from the sea and so I ease myself onto the tips of my toes, plant a kiss on his cheek and set off trailing my suitcase and a promise to return behind me. It isn't a long walk but I go slowly, fascinated not by the bright shops selling pearls laced round conche shells or the sparklers in

cocktails the colours of gems but by the stream of young workers I see around me. Teenagers some of them, no older than I was. I want to go to them, ask them if they are alright, if there is anything they need, if they are safe. But of course I don't. They have faces which shine with purpose, and so I offer a smile to any who look in my direction and quietly go on my way.

There are days which test us to the limits and this has been one of them. Every part of the journey to get here, Sam, the history relived, the senses reawakened; it's been the most testing day I've faced in twelve years and I am well and truly wrung out by the time I arrive at my hotel. It's a small place accessed from a side street which leads down to the beach. I'm glad it's not a big four star all inclusive kind of place with late night cabarets and noisy children. This place is quiet and one of the few hotels left which is owned by locals. They have reserved their best room for me, directly above the baker's shop. I imagine waking to the smell of hot sugared pastries and brewing coffee. There is a very small balcony, just enough for one person. I would like to wake in time to see the sun rising, a hidden artist washing colours across the canvas of this town. However I doubt I will. My head is swimming with the tensions of the day and the anticipation of things still to come. I feel as if I should be having a drink but I know I've had enough and another coffee would only serve to keep me awake all night so instead I throw myself face down on the bed, the wrought iron frame scraping on the stone tiles and I lie there completely abandoned, wondering what to do next.

What happens next is that I slip into the deepest of sleeps and know nothing until I wake to the spiralling sounds of the street below; the loud Spanish greetings, the tooting of car horns, the clattering of chairs being moved around on pavements. They are pleasant sounds, holiday sounds which make me think that perhaps I have got it wrong and this isn't the place which will break me in two once again.

Chapter 2 – Ellie

Coming back to Mallorca wasn't the first step in my journey. The first was heading back home to the place which will always have my Dad standing at the front door, a smile on his face and arms out ready to fold around me.

Home is a 150 year old cottage nestled amongst half an acre of woodland, in a village called Bachrie, just outside Inverarie. It's a tiny village with only four other houses, a bus stop and a disused post box. You'd pass through it in the blink of an eye without knowing it existed if it wasn't for the old white road sign pointing our way. Our house is beautiful with tiny turrets, stained glass windows and a garden filled with cottage roses. My mother told me that roses had been the favourite flower of the new bride who'd moved into the house a century and a half ago. From as far back as I can remember she told me of how the young bride had died of a broken heart when her husband went missing at sea. Legend had it that after her death the master bedroom and sitting room would occasionally fill with the scent of roses when none were there. To begin with, the thought of a haunted house terrified me but as I grew older I found the notion romantic and dreamy. The legend was right though. The unmistakable scent of roses would reach us when we least expected it and we learned to mention it as casually as we would a change in the weather.

As a child I spent most of my summer holidays in the garden, helping Mum prune and weed and pick and plant until she finally sat back on her haunches, removed her straw hat and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. That was Mum at her best, the late afternoon sun glinting off her chestnut curls, her cheeks glowing. Once we'd tidied everything away we would sip lemon tea under the cherry tree as we waited for Dad to come home. We would listen for the sound of his car in the drive, a silver rimmed cup sitting empty in its saucer, fresh tea in the pot and finely sliced lemon at the ready. Then all of a sudden I'd hear the crunch of gravel in the driveway, the car door being shut and his voice calling, "Where are my girls?" I would run to him and shriek with laughter as he scooped me up one handed and planted a kiss on my nose.

Those were the days when Scottish summers were hot and blue skied and filled with birdsong. They seemed to stretch on forever and were filled with raspberry picking, ice cream cones and running bare foot through the cool spray from the garden hose. Then all of a sudden the seasons would change and we were knee deep in fallen leaves, all the colours of fire by day, indistinguishable by nightfall. My favourite time though, without question was winter. I would wake each morning and throw open the curtains praying for snow. Then one morning, without warning, the air would be different; still and quiet and clear. As quietly as I could, so that I could have that one moment of uninterrupted solitude, I would throw on my slippers and my dressing gown and tiptoe down the stairs to open the back door, the sudden slap of cold air taking my breath away. I didn't care that I was shivering uncontrollably, that the end of my nose had gone numb and my ears were going to ache later. I could have stayed in that moment forever, listening to the silence of the snow, lost in a white world of my own.

It's funny how some memories can be perfected with time. The way I remember it, the sun always shone when school stopped for summer and snow always fell as we laced fairy lights around our Christmas tree. Nowadays I can't remember the last time it snowed so heavily that it lay in thick inches for days on end. Whenever it snows in Glasgow, the white soon turns to grey under the endless stream of traffic and exhaust fumes. There is no purity, no magic there with all of nature swallowed whole. It leaves me claustrophobic. But at home I feel free and able to breathe. I can see the hills, the sky and the loch, feel the heat of the sun or the sharp chilling sting of the wind. I'm glad Dad chose to stay there after we lost Mum. It's where we will always belong. It's also the only place where I could ever contemplate sharing my difficult secrets.

I stepped out of the car, closed my eyes for a moment and breathed in the heady scent of the lilac trees lining the driveway.

"This is a nice surprise!" Dad called, standing at the door as he has done all of my life.

"Hi Dad." I quickened my step and slipped into his embrace.

"A doubly nice surprise by the looks of it. What's this?" he asked as he took the bottle I held out to him.

"I figured we could enjoy a dram together after supper."

"Sounds like a plan. I've got a pot of soup on as it happens and there's some roast beef left over for a buttie if you fancy?"

"Lentil soup?"

"Of course."

"Count me in."

"This *is* a nice surprise," he repeated, squeezing my shoulder as we stepped inside.

We made our way through to the kitchen where I watched Dad as he sliced the remains of his Sunday roast, swatting my hand away as I picked stray pieces off the chopping board. He has tried every sort of carving knife imaginable in pursuit of the perfect cut. The latest is Japanese and lethal, as he reminded me when I ventured anywhere near it. He has always liked to carve his beef as close to wafer thin as possible. I, on the other hand, would have torn it into straggly chunks and popped it on some bread with a dod of horseradish. But Dad has always wanted to make everything perfect, even the sandwiches.

"There's some of that diet stuff in the fridge if you want to help yourself."

I reached for a coke and offered him one too.

"Not for me thanks. I'll have a ginger ale and ice though. There's a can at the back of the fridge somewhere, or there might be a bottle in the scullery."

Out of the corner of my eye I watched as he fanned thin slices of meat out in front of him, assessing them before fetching some spinach from the fridge and some horseradish from the cupboard. I passed him the brown bread and butter and he got to work while I stirred the soup which had been simmering impatiently. It was golden and rich, the remnants of the ham hough sitting in a saucer by the cooker, another thing for me to pick at.

"So is this your handy work or Elspeth's?"

"Mine of course."

"How is she?"

"Very well thanks. Just back from a two week cruise round the Med with her sister. Sickeningly tanned. She'll be sorry she missed you."

"When are you two going to get your act together?" I teased.

Dad gave me his sharpest raised eyebrow. "I've told you before, it's keeping our own front doors that keeps us together."

"You're incorrigible."

"But right."

"If you say so." I resisted the urge to prod further having tried and failed time and again throughout their ten-year courtship. They have always been happy as they are and proud of their 'modern arrangement.'

"How about eating outside? You might need your cardi but it's a decent enough evening."

“Let’s do it. Want me to dish up?”

“I’ll get the soup, you take these.”

He passed me a large plate of sandwiches cut into triangles and sprinkled with cress; the most lady-like butties I’d seen in a long time. I made my way out with Archie, Dad’s Westie, close at my heels, Dad following with our soup which had been ladled into the chunky caramel coloured pottery bowls we’d bought on a trip to Crail one summer. I tossed a handful of croutons on top, trying not to think about the amount of oil that went into them.

How do you start to divulge the details of a secret you’ve been carrying for twelve years? A secret which you should have shared a very long time ago? It wasn’t that I hadn’t trusted Dad. I just hadn’t wanted to hurt him. But sometimes life steps in and takes away our choices. So there I was, all those years later, about to tell him what I’d spent so long trying to hide from him

Within half an hour of sitting down we’d finished the tastiest meal I’d enjoyed in a very long time. Soup done, sandwiches gone we sat full bellied under the cherry tree which would soon be full with white blossom, as light and delicate as whispers.

“Dad…… there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

He had nodded a single nod without looking in my direction, hands clasped over his stomach, eyes closed.

“D’you mind if we have those drams?”

He opened his eyes and slid them in my direction.

“I’ll get them.”

I fetched them as I always did, mine on the rocks, Dad’s with a splash of soda. He had cleared some space on the table by the time I returned, Archie jumping around and about me looking for anything of interest.

“So what’s so serious that you have to soften the blow with this?” he asked, as he raised his glass to mine.

I took a deep breath. “I need to talk to you about Mallorca.”

He took a long sip and watched me for what felt like an eternity. “I was wondering when you would.”

Afterwards, four drams down, I found myself back in my old bed with the patchwork quilt pulled tight around me, staring at the ceiling. I may have been surrounded by familiarity but I felt as if something massive had changed. And the thought that Dad might never look at me the same again made my chest churn.

Despite the warmth of early evening, a sudden drop in temperature had made my bedroom cold. I shivered and pulled the quilt closer, sneaking a hand out to switch on my bedside light before snapping it back between my thighs. The powder pink walls looked peachy in the low light and the wooden floorboards glowed like strips of old gold. My rucksack and jacket which I had thrown on the wicker chair made the place untidy. If it hadn’t been so chilly I’d have got up and moved them just so that I could enjoy the uninterrupted sweep of the bay window with the graceful drop of the curtains, ivory silk fringed with tiny pearls and pink crystals. I thought they were the most glamorous curtains I’d ever seen when I got them in the Jenners sale in Edinburgh for my sixteenth birthday, part of a bedroom re-vamp I’d been promised to mark my entry into adulthood. I still think they’re beautiful. My mother would definitely have approved.

I felt odd, having finally emptied a mindful of memories. The clock beside me told me it was one in the morning and I should have been tired but I wasn't. I heard no noises from anywhere else in the house other than the steady tick tock of the grandfather clock in the hallway. Dad hadn't gone to bed but I knew he hadn't turned the television or the radio on either. My heart missed a beat as I thought of him sitting alone, rolling these revelations around inside him, trying to find a place where they would fit in smoothly and make some kind of sense. He had listened so intently as I told my story, never taking his cobalt blue eyes from me even when I had to stop for a moment. He made no judgements, asked no questions. And when I was finished he simply stood up, pulled me to my feet and held me close in that safest of places which only a father has.

When I woke in the morning I knew in an instant it was there, despite it being early April and the lilacs almost in full bloom. I stood for a moment in the bay window before pulling the curtains back in time to the smile which blossomed from the very core of me. I pulled on an old sweater, found some socks and trainers and made my way quietly to the back door trying not to make a sound. As I opened it I felt once again the sharp slap of cold white air which made me hunch in on myself, exhaling short sharp breaths which left me on tiny clouds. Hands shoved in pockets, head resting against the doorframe I was sure I was dreaming, trying with all I had to put myself back into the safety of my childhood when the world was perfect with that the most perfect moment of all. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Who'd have believed it?" He paused. "Morning love. Sleep well? There's a pot of coffee on the stove when you're ready."

When I turned to look at Dad I saw immediately that he wasn't looking at me differently at all. And there was such relief in that. I let my head fall against his shoulder and I let myself breathe out.

Chapter 3 – Guy

Maria is up to something. I can tell. She's been all coy and quiet around me which is worrying because Maria is anything but coy and quiet. She's been cleaning in places she usually ignores, changing the bed linen in the spare room; she even got her barber friend to come to the house and give me an old fashioned shave and cut which is above and beyond the call of a housekeeper. She's either up to something or she wants something and it's unsettling to realise that although she's been keeping house for me for nearly twenty years she can still take me off guard.

"I be leaving shortly Mr. Saunders!" she shouts from the porch. "But I come back later, yes?"

I make my way out to where she is, frowning as I go.

"Why will you be coming back later? You've finished here. You don't need to come back today."

"Mr Saunders I leave early as I have to go shopping." She looks away as she says this, a sure sign that she is fibbing.

"Okay, but you still don't need to come back today. Look," I say sweeping a hand out towards the house, "This place is perfect." I choose my words carefully and make sure to smile as I don't want to ignite her temper which legend has it can render a grown man incapable of moving. "Is everything okay Maria?"

"Of course Mr. Saunders," she answers cheerfully, "very okay. I be back later yes?"

I open my mouth to argue but she holds up a silencing hand and repeats more forcefully, "I be back later yes."

"Sure. I guess I'll see you when you get back then." I know better than to argue further, so turn back into the house to get a glass of iced water and one of the oranges she brought me from the market yesterday.

The weather is unseasonably hot for April and at only ten o'clock in the morning I can already feel my shirt sticking to me. It's a bad sign. I can only imagine what it will be like come July. Summer tourists will be dropping like flies and filling the local medical centres with sun stroke and third degree burns. I don't think I could endure another summer like that, not now, with my energy so low and my ever-increasing sensitivity to temperature extremes.

My apprehension about Maria flits into my mind almost as soon as I have settled myself on the porch and pressed my thumb into the orange, ready to begin peeling. She has always been thorough in a slap dash kind of way but this place looks like a show home right now which is impressive for an old, dusty farmhouse. She drives me mad sometimes but she is nonetheless an angel. She often pops in to check on me in the evenings and offers to cook, trying to tempt my faltering appetite. She brings me food, things to revitalise and re-build me; fresh olives, almonds and eggs from neighbouring farms and fresh fish straight from the harbour. And thank God she does. She keeps much better track of what I can and cannot eat or drink: the result of her long-standing friendship with one of the nurses at the hospital who I'm sure is breaking all kinds of patient confidentiality so she can keep Maria up to date with my health. Without them both I would either starve or finish myself off early, so I say nothing of their ongoing dialogue which I'm meant to know nothing about. Besides, I think she likes the peace and quiet in this house, especially in the evenings when by all accounts her own home is chaotic. Sometimes we just sit in silence on the porch sipping coffee as the sun lowers itself over the ocean. It's welcome company at this time when the silence could so easily be filled with fear and longing.

I should be going to the hospital for a check up this afternoon but in truth I'm not feeling too bad today. Of course this could change in a heartbeat but for now I don't feel like making my way down to sit in a hot noisy waiting room, having to engage in polite conversation with strangers. I think I'm in danger of becoming a grumpy old man but I don't really care. I can reschedule. Today I will benefit far more from sleeping through the hottest hours than getting up to sit on the shaded side of the porch with a good book. I will pick an old favourite knowing there's something reassuring about slipping into a familiar make-belief world every so often, like visiting an old friend.

I don't know why I still think I can control or predict the times when I will sleep. I really should know by now that it comes when it's ready, not when I am. Yet still I am surprised when I wake with a start sitting exactly as I was, the half peeled orange in my lap and the water untouched. I check my watch, nearly eleven o'clock. I cannot recall even closing my eyes yet I feel as though I have woken from a very deep sleep and this, above all else, is what unnerves me the most. This lack of control. This unpredictability. It is perhaps better that Maria is coming back after all.

Charlie, my four-legged friend, is kicking up a fuss by the side of the house, shattering my peace. He is fifteen years old and has, like me, seen better days but my goodness can he holler when he wants my attention. I raise myself up carefully, pain searing through my back, and make my way slowly round to the front of the house where I expect to find Maria. Instead I find a visitor, a young woman who is down on her haunches stroking a delighted Charlie whose tail is sending a puff of dust into her eyes. I'm about to call out to her when suddenly I feel light-headed as if the whole world has shifted beneath me. I steady myself against the side of the house and take a deep breath as she straightens up and looks right at me, locking her eyes with mine. We stand there transfixed as I listen to the drumming of my heartbeat in my ears. She raises her hand to her mouth and stays exactly where she is. "Sweetheart," I manage, my voice just a whisper. Then she runs to me and is in my arms holding me like I haven't been held in a lifetime and she fits just perfectly like she never left, my chin resting on the top of her head so I can drink in the smell of her. I rock her ever so slightly, holding on to her tightly until finally I pull away to look once again into those thunder grey eyes of hers which always reeled me in.

"Sweetheart," I repeat as I try to understand how the only person in this world who I love is suddenly right there in front of me.

She turns and nods towards Maria who is striding up the hill with a large self satisfied smile on her face. It begins to fall into place.

"She is so beautiful yes?" Maria states as she reaches us. She sniffs and pulls a hankie out from her pocket, blowing loudly.

"Oh yes," I answer, stroking her cheek, "and all grown up." I feel emotions closing around my throat as I'm suddenly overwhelmed that she's right here in front of me, smiling that smile that so defines her.

"I'm sorry," she says taking my hands in hers. "I should have been here before now."

I shake my head. "No." I tell her. "Now is just fine." I stroke her hair, plant a kiss on her forehead then take her by the shoulders and look long and hard at her, the way she's matured, her defined cheekbones and clear skin, the self-assured look in her eyes and the natural glow of a woman her age. She is still my girl though, still looking at me through large eyes which glisten with love. I turn to see Maria who is watching us, tears flowing, hand on chest. We laugh, Ellie and I, and pull her into our embrace.

"Now," Maria says firmly, "I go." With a swift sharp sniff and an upward tilt of her chin she composes herself.

"Maria." I feel lost for words at this gift she has given me so I simply take her hand.

"I see you tomorrow Mr Saunders," she says gently. "And you too my Ellie."

We watch as she walks briskly down the hill. Then we are alone and it feels like we're the only two people in the world.

"How about a seat?" Ellie suggests nodding towards the porch.

I take her face in my hands again, not quite sure if this is the first hallucination. "I'll get another chair from inside." I pause, "You stay right here. Don't go anywhere."

Inside I sit down for a moment to catch my breath. Ellie. I never thought for a moment I'd see her again, despite the years I'd hoped I would. Her smile, her

hand in mine. Those eyes. And I suddenly have no idea what to say. Small talk has no place here with all that we have between us. I want to tell her how hard it was to let her go. How desperately I wanted her to stay. I want to say all the things which were left unsaid but instead rub my hand across my forehead, unaware that she has come in quietly. She links her hands around my neck from behind.

“Can I join you? It’s a bit hot out there.”

I nod, unable to speak, not wanting to let emotion take over and she comes next to me and sits with my hand in hers, her feet tucked up behind her and her head on my shoulder, smelling of sunshine and apples. I sit as still as I can, holding on to her hand like it’s life itself, trying not to move in case I burst this bubble and she disappears from my life once again. I tell her how wonderful it is to have her here. She doesn’t move or say anything but I can feel her smile.

“How long can you stay?” I ask after a while.

“As long as you need me.”

I turn to look at her. “What about work, family?”

“It’s all been sorted. I’ve arranged for some time off and I’ve told Dad everything, why I’m here, all about you.....” She links her arm round mine and squeezes her cheek into it.

“You did?”

“I know,” she says sitting up to look at me, “I thought I’d never be able to do it but I couldn’t have come back here without explaining, it wouldn’t have made sense. I’d always told him I’d never come back.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For this. For having to tell him. I’m sorry you had to tell him.”

“I’m not,” she says firmly. “It needed done. It should have happened a long time ago, as you told me many times if I remember correctly. Anyway it turns out it wasn’t half as bad as I thought it would be. I’m glad he knows and he’s fine, we’re fine. There isn’t this big ‘thing’ hovering between us anymore.” She elbows me gently in the ribs, “You’ve done me a favour being ill.”

“Well I’m glad I could be of assistance. So tell me, how did you and Maria manage this?”

Maria, as it turns out, organised Ellie’s visit with military precision. She phoned her mid March to tell her that I was unwell and that she thought I’d like to see her again, which of course is absolutely true, even if I had never dared to voice it. Poor Ellie, I can just imagine how she felt all those miles away receiving that call. Maria, even if she has got a heart of gold, would have exaggerated shamelessly and left Ellie thinking she barely had time to book a flight before I kicked the bucket. She had then organised the hotel and had met Ellie there today, in a large silver Mercedes driven by her son who had ‘borrowed’ it from the used car forecourt where he works, whisking her along to the bottom of the road at speeds better suited to time travel.

She laughs softly at my side as she tells me this and I pull her closer, overwhelmed all over again that she’s right here beside me.

“But you won’t want to stay in the hotel. I mean you’ll come here won’t you? You’ll come back and stay here?”

She hesitates and immediately I understand why.

“Sorry, too much too soon. You know you’re welcome, whenever you’re ready. Your room is still your room and always will be.”

“It’s daft, I know I’m being daft. I can come all the way out here....” She stops to take a breath and when she looks up I see tears welling in her eyes. They spill over as she looks away, embarrassed, and it makes me ache for her.

“Don’t cry, please. Look at me.” I tilt her face up and rub her tears away with the pads of my thumbs as I’ve done so many times before.

“I’m sorry,” she says, breathing out.

“Don’t be.”

“It’s so good to see you again,” she says, exhaling deeply. “I can’t believe I’m back here, in this house with you. I would love to come and stay...”

“Then we’ll just wait until you’re ready. No rush. Anyway I’m hardly being a good host. I haven’t even offered you anything to eat or drink yet.”

She sits up, smooths her hands across her cheeks. “I am a bit hungry actually. In fact you sit here and I’ll have a rummage in the fridge. You don’t mind do you?”

She is up and heading in the direction of the kitchen before I have the chance to answer.

“I don’t know if you’ll find much in there.” I warn her.

She pops her head round the corner. “Are you questioning my culinary skills?”

“Challenging them perhaps.”

She smiles that breathtaking smile of hers and something shifts in my chest.

Within ten minutes we are sitting at the scrubbed wooden table out back shading ourselves from the sun which is now at its hottest. We sip our way through a bottle of cool Sauvignon Blanc and chat about the people, the island and all the bits we’ve left out of the letters of the past twelve years. And I can’t quite believe it, that she’s here at my table again like she never left, like it isn’t twelve long years since we last did this. It makes me feel as if I have reawakened, as if everything around me has suddenly come to life again. The purity of the sky, the smell of the pine from the hills behind us, the beginnings of the freckles which will scatter themselves across her nose within a couple of days. All my senses coming back to me. Even the hibiscus flowers around my garden have opened wider than I think I have ever seen them before and they are straining upwards like mini satellites searching for the sun and absorbing it into their butter yellow petals and flame orange hearts. There is miracle in the way they respond to the heat; the way they open up like this, their tips translucent gold against the clear turquoise sky. At night they will bow their heads ready to sleep, wrapping petals like satin shawls around themselves and I will marvel all over again at how clever they are. They are mesmerising today, in this heat and in this company.

I watch Ellie as she effortlessly quarters some ripe peaches and sections a whole camembert while we chat. We wait while the bread warms in the oven and for the first time in God knows how long I realise I am actually looking forward to eating this simple feast: the company, the wine, the food to come all feels incredibly nice. Too nice to spoil with talk of practicalities. Too nice a time to tell this young woman who I love beyond measure that she won’t be here too long because I’ve been sent home to die.