



HOLDING
PARADISE

FRAN CLARK

"You said you were going to call me."

"I know and I'm really sorry. It's just that something came up."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means I won't be around for a while."

"But Angelica, I need you."

"I know Maddy, but I won't be gone long."

"Are you going to tell me where you're going?"

"To see Mum."

"What?"

"Yes, I know. I can't talk about it now Mads. I have to go."

There's silence on the other end. I've just added my sister to the list of people I've let down. I turn and look at the kitchen. The table is still set for two. The meal, untouched.

My suitcase is packed. I pick it up and look back at the unmade bed. Memories of that night are all too vivid. The doorbell rings. I gently close the bedroom door behind me and head downstairs.

"You're doing the right thing, love. Flying off on a day like this. Not getting any better according to the forecast."

I barely acknowledge the cab driver. I just sit in the back seat as he puts my case in the boot, slams the door and drives off.

*

The plane increases its speed along the runway. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and start counting backwards from ten. In ten seconds we'll be airborne, in a minute the knots in my stomach will ease, and in eight hours I'll be with Mum.

I stare out of the window. London is far behind me now. Dank, miserable London, where I felt isolated, unable to think straight. The next twenty minutes are a blur.

"Another cup of tea?" The flight attendant looks at me with pity.

I've managed to secure a window seat and I've got the row to myself, but it's hard to settle. Images of that night are still there. I remember that just before I cried myself to sleep I had a strong feeling that Mum would be the one to help me find a way forward. Help me to piece my life back together. My marriage, my family, my business. Everything.

Josephine was the fourth child of a family of eight children. Apart from her younger sister, Eunice, the rest were boys. Josephine had a gift. Some members of her family found it frightening, others were amazed by it and wished they too could have such a gift. For Josephine, this gift could be the greatest of burdens yet at times it made her feel special.

On several occasions, Josephine had accurately predicted the future through her dreams. Vivid dreams about family, friends, local people. Every detail, each word was fixed clearly in her mind and she would tell her mother exactly what she saw as though she'd read it in one of her school books.

Only some of her dreams were predictions and she recognised them as such when she woke, slightly hot, slightly out of breath and unable to get the images out of her head. Her sister called her a witch. Josephine's mother, Rose, discouraged Josephine from telling anyone outside the family about this gift for fear of what others might say. Josephine and her family could be very secretive and where they lived, it paid to be so.

On a cool January morning, Josephine and her family awoke one by one and left their warm beds. The younger three were loud and playful, ready to embrace each waking moment. The older children, knowing it was another school day, washed and dressed slowly, hoping to cling to as much of their freedom as possible.

Rose was unusually late to rise this morning. She worked hard every day but would normally be the first to get up, see to the little ones and make breakfast for everyone. Somehow, she had managed to gain an extra twenty minutes of sleep. She was surprised to discover her husband's side of the bed empty and cool to the touch when she stretched and rolled over.

Her husband stood in the kitchen. The small, low built shack in the yard, where he had already prepared and eaten a light breakfast before his journey. He was about to travel across the island to visit his parents and to do some work on their house. They were getting older and Raphael took responsibility for helping them as often as he could.

It was 5.30am. Pitch black outside. Cool and still. Most of the crickets appeared to have forsaken their chorus until nightfall, only a few continuing a refrain about to be outdone by morning birdsong. Very soon, the transport to his parents' small village, one hour away, would be leaving. Raphael had to hurry.

As he left the kitchen he hitched a small bag over his shoulder and looked up at the house. From the top of the steps that led up to their wooden house on stilts, three sets of eyes spied him – his two youngest sons and his daughter, Josephine. He waved a quick goodbye and went on his way.

Josephine's father, Raphael, loved nothing better than to play and talk with her. His first daughter, now aged ten, was bright and intelligent and full of imagination and stories. In many ways Josephine was like her father. They shared a resemblance and similar sense of humour. They could chat endlessly, sitting, as they often did, on the second of the five steps to their front door, sampling fruit Raphael had picked from his garden that day.

"So, my Josephine. What did you learn at school today?" Raphael always made a grand gesture of presenting Josephine with the first piece of mango, melon or avocado.

"Well Daddy, Miss Brown gave us a test to see if we know our five times table."

"And how you score?"

"Well I only get some right and a lot wrong."

"And what that tell you?"

"It tell me I don't like times tables and I don't like Miss Brown."

Whereas her mother would tell Josephine she should work harder, Raphael just tilted back his head, opening his wide mouth to give way to the thunderous roar of laughter resonating in his chest. His laugh echoed around the wooden houses and told everyone that Raphael was home.

It was laughter or a cheerful whistle that signalled Raphael's arrival back from his garden. Here he grew provisions like yams, plantain, and green bananas, for the family and to sell at market. Securing the produce into a large sack that he carried on his head, he walked the twenty minutes back home, whistling, his cutlass swinging idly at his side.

The children waved and called goodbye to their father but could barely make him out as he stepped carefully on his way out of their front yard and onto the dusty road. Raphael passed two houses. Outside of each of these houses, a small dog resided. From their front yards the dogs barked in unison. A little further along the road, Ma Taylor's goat

bleated, as though in response to her canine neighbours. The tiny hamlet was waking up. Raphael waited only minutes beside the old Glory cedar, before jumping onto the lorry, almost full of travellers from the last two villages. By the time the villagers reached the next stop, the lorry's headlights would be out and the sun would be high in the sky.

The two oldest boys went into the kitchen to light the fire under the stove. Josephine lingered at the front door of the house, picturing her father finding his place on the lorry and holding tight while it accelerated along the narrow road.

Rose came out of her bedroom to make her way to the kitchen. Her arms were raised as she secured her bright red headscarf that bit tighter to her head. She caught the look on her daughter's face.

"Josephine," she said. "Don't look at me like that, you making me afraid." Rose was afraid because the look on her daughter's face told her that Josephine had had a dream and that its message was not good.

It happened just like the dream.

Raphael left his parents' house in the late afternoon. He'd worked hard all morning. It had been particularly hot for that time of year, but the temperature had since dropped to a comfortable level. Amongst his jobs around the house, he had fixed a broken window latch in the bedroom. A strong breeze at night would make the window rattle and his mother, finding it difficult to sleep lately, would have one less disturbance to worry about.

He kissed both of his parents before rushing to the road to catch the transport home, stopping briefly at a water tap for a quick drink. The sun set early in the evening and his wife would always insist he travelled in daylight as far as possible. The roads around the island were mainly mountainous, fairly narrow, with potholes of various sizes dotted haphazardly along the way. The islanders complained that the Government should improve the roads. Neighbouring islands were a lot more developed and this was 1936 after all. Passengers travelling in a lorry, being approached by a second from the other direction, would take a silent but sharp intake of breath. When the two vehicles passed each other safely, the passengers would give a loud cheer and shout "very good driver!"

Just like the dream, people chatted and laughed during the journey. Everyone was in high spirits except for Raphael. He suddenly felt as though he'd been dealt a forceful knock to the side of his head. He dropped his bag to the floor and held one side of his face for a moment. A sense of panic gripped him as the pain grew stronger. As the lorry bumped its way along, some of the other passengers noticed his distress. Raphael appeared to be gasping for air, his eyes flitting from one passenger to the next but he seemed not to recognise any of them.

"Stop the truck." Raphael thought he'd said this loudly but his instruction was a breathy whisper that only Thomas, standing by his side, could hear.

"He say stop the truck driver!" Thomas shouted on Raphael's behalf. Someone else banged on the roof of the lorry's cabin and the driver pushed firmly on his brakes until they came to a halt.

"This is not a stop," cried the driver, "it dangerous to stop here!"

"Is Raphael Douglas, he look sick."

The lorry buzzed with comments of concern about the health of their fellow passenger. Each spoke with authority on the situation, their voices loud but their words indecipherable to Raphael. They gesticulated, pontificated and argued though Raphael felt no real sense of being part of the commotion. He soon found himself being lifted from the lorry and put to sit by the side of the road.

By now Raphael's breathing was becoming shallow. Someone was loosening his top button, someone else was fanning him with a large leaf but no one knew exactly what to do or what was about to happen.

"Pick him up he needs the hospital," one of the passengers shouted. Another hailed down a battered, old car that was heading in the direction they'd come from. In the time it took for two men to raise him up from the ground and carry him to the battered car and its bemused driver, Raphael's life had ended.

They placed his body carefully into the back seat of the old car. Thomas got into the passenger seat and looked over his shoulder at his old friend, lying, still, as if asleep. One woman from the crowd of onlookers wailed. The rest of the party watched in silence as the old car disappeared. The last trace of daylight was engulfed by the night sky as Raphael's body was sped along in the dark toward the island's only hospital.

When darkness fell on the Douglas house, Rose was standing in the kitchen cursing her husband under her breath for not observing her specific instructions about travelling the roads by night. She replaced the supper utensils, purposefully, as she cursed.

Rose finished her work in the kitchen, stopped and looked up at the house where she saw Josephine, sitting by the open door looking down at her feet. A solitary figure hunched on the top step. Rose felt a cold shiver sweep over her body. She had gone about her day not wanting to hear anything about her daughter's dream. She'd packed the oldest off to school, washed and changed into a simple dress, entertained the young ones, swept the yard, tidied the house and adjusted her favoured red headscarf several times. Even during dinner, Rose had avoided remarking on Josephine's distant stare.

Looking out of the little kitchen window toward the road, Rose saw the light of a torch and could identify the figures of a small group of people walking toward the house. Their voices were low at first, muffled. As she stepped, tentatively, into the yard, she could hear someone crying. The group of people closed in on her. Her children, now aware of the stirring of the crowd, gathered at the front door to see what was going on. Josephine rose from her seat.

Spilling from the mouths of the people surrounding Rose, a million words, some in English some in their other language. Simultaneous, jumbled. Rose struggled to find her breath when she finally and clearly heard the words - *Ma Douglas, your husband dead.*

The children leapt down all five steps and clung tightly to their mother who stood trembling in the yard. Her right hand covered her mouth, her thin eyebrows raised and joined to form an arch as she searched each face to make sure they hadn't been mistaken. She pulled off the brightly coloured headscarf and covered her eyes with it.

Josephine stepped backwards, away from the crowd. As her family cried with the others in the small yard, she moaned in a low monotone hum. She felt sure that had she not had this *gift*, her father would be standing here now and not this uninvited party of visitors. Josephine shook, she wept uncontrollably. One woman caught hold of her and in an attempt to calm her, held her arms firmly to the sides of her body. Ma Taylor pushed through the crowd, she pulled Josephine's arms free, shouting, "let her cry, her father just died, let her cry."

When the crowd finally dispersed, the family sat in one room. Sadness filled every corner of their tiny house. The little village had lost a great man, a family had lost its backbone, and a woman had lost her most precious love.

The island is reported to have 365 rivers, one for every day of the year. Whenever anyone recounted the events of the night Raphael died and of the number of tears that were shed, they would insist that the islanders awoke the next morning to find river number 366.

I flick through the laminated leaflet again. What to do in case of an emergency. I completely ignored the flight attendant's safety drill earlier. I was staring at her waving her arms, putting a life jacket over her head, pretending to blow a whistle. I had been thinking about seeing Mum. It had been a long time. Instead of listening to what to do in the event of the plane making an emergency landing, I was listening to Mum's stories in my head. A picture of my childhood was obscuring the safety measures and for a while I could forget the pain, loneliness and desperation of the last two months.

How old was I when Mum's stories started making sense? When I was a teenager, Mum's stories were a hindrance. Her words stifled me. Prevented me from going to discos, parties, sleeping in on a Sunday because I was expected to go to Church.

Assisted by the word of God and a lifetime of experience, Mum raised us on those stories. A story about a girl that was assaulted when she went out on her own, told my older sister, Del, that she must be chaperoned if she wanted to go to a party. A story about a young man who ended up on the streets because he turned his back on his family, told my older brother, Marcus, that he should not leave home at nineteen to share a flat with friends without sufficient savings.

Mum started each story with, "I'm not an educated woman but..." and made the sign of the cross at the end. The sign of the cross also signified the end of discussion and there was no sense in arguing with the sign of the cross.

My parents had been strict, unbearably so it felt at times. I know that West London in the 1950s, when they first arrived, had been a far cry from their island in the West Indies. They had five of us to raise. I know they did their best.

My eyes feel heavy. The nights of not sleeping are taking their toll and the plane's relentless hum lulls me into trance until my eyes close completely.

A lanky, teenage girl. Walking to school in a pristine school uniform. The Catholic school for girls where they wear grey, knee length socks. She's smiling. Listening to stories that the other fourth year girls are telling about their weekends. Boyfriends, eyeliner and would she like to come to the disco with them at the Church Hall next Saturday? It's a Rockabilly one, they're always good. They chatter on but the teenage girl is hearing another voice.

"I'm not an educated woman but I know what happens to girls who want to go to discos. A girl I know go to a disco. They were taking drugs at this disco and she have to have her stomach pump because so much drugs she take. After that she even sneak out the house to go again. Before anyone know - she was an addict. Three times the girl already have her stomach pump. But the last time, no doctor on this earth could save her life. Her poor mother had four daughters and now she only have three. I have three daughters and I don't want to end up with two because one of them wants to go to a disco."

I haven't made the sign of the cross in a long time, but I'm waking from a dream and doing just that. The flight attendant walks by and gives me a strange look. I wonder what else I'd done in my sleep. I look at my watch. Five minutes have gone by.

I must avoid looking at the couple across the aisle. I remember them from check in. Young, in love. Probably off on honeymoon. They were annoying me then, too. But being cynical isn't going to help me. I had what they had. If I think back far enough I can even remember my first love. Mum married hers. If only life could be that easy for the rest of us. Why some of us have to go through the trials and tribulations of finding that perfect match is a mystery to me. I'd give up all my past loves for one lasting one. Like Mum's.

They say you never forget your first love. Some of the detail gets worn away with time but the big things last. 1987 my first heartbreak. Anil came from a Hindu family and his parents naturally expected him to marry someone of their own religion and class. As far as they were concerned, I was only ever going to be a temporary distraction. My credentials as a lapsed Catholic from a West Indian family would never be good enough.

We had started dating in my late teens and by my twenties I'd started to think about marriage and children. I knew I could never have this with Anil, but it was so hard to leave him. We had broken up a couple of times before, practise runs before the real thing. It was during one of those break ups that Mum told me the story of Julie Daniels.

"Mrs Daniels' daughter, Julie, went out with an Irish for 10 years and he never marry her. The last anyone heard, he went back to Ireland and marry an Irish girl and they have 8

children. Now Julie have 48 years. She never marry, she never love again. All her young and beautiful years she waste on someone who never love her enough to marry her."

It was the story that made my mind up for me. I had to end it all with Anil. For me and for Julie Daniels.

New Year's Eve 1986. We'd left the party early and went to Anil's.

"Where do you see this all going?" I asked as I sat up in bed.

"Mm?" he replied, pretending to be sleepy and to not understand what I meant.

We'd been there before, and I knew he wanted to avoid a confrontation. That night of all nights.

"Look, Anil, I really can't do this anymore. Next year I'll be 26 and before I know it I'll be 30 and soon I'll be 48 like Julie Daniels."

"Who?"

"Never mind. The fact is, you say you want to be with me but eventually your parents will insist you get married and eventually you'll be mature enough to want to. When you are, you'll do it their way and where does that leave me?"

"What are you talking about, Angelica? Nothing will change. We'll always be together."

"I want to be with someone who loves me enough to want to marry me - even if his parents *didn't* approve. To have children with me and not care that a bunch of people, most of them living in another country, won't accept them as part of the family. Someone who wouldn't feel as though it was a tough choice to make between marrying me and keeping his parents happy. There wouldn't be a choice because I would be all he wanted. And that's not you is it, Anil?" He closed his eyes and a tear ran down the side of his face, onto the pillow.

"No, Angelica, that's not me."

I got up and put my clothes on. He never tried to stop me or ask if he could call. We both knew there would be no point. There is never a good time to have your heart broken - but for it to happen on New Year's Day.

I cried in my car as I drove home. I cried in my bed that night. I cried all the next morning and through to the afternoon. When I told Mum what had happened, she said I did the right thing. I was in my twenties and men would still be looking at me - her words. The older you are the harder it is to get a man, she said, and sat on the edge of my bed as she told me at least three stories about single women she knew, now in their sixties, who wasted their lives chasing the wrong kind of men.

"I'm sorry, but do you mind if I sit in this seat for a while." My daydream ends abruptly. "It's just that I need to spread out a bit. Loads of paperwork for my meeting to get in order and I noticed no-one else was sitting in this row and my bosses are expecting me to come back with results. So? Is it OK?"

I half smile to acknowledge him. He's probably about my age - mid to late forties. Slightly overweight, wearing a formal shirt but no tie and smelling of aftershave and new clothes. He sits in the aisle seat and takes a laptop out of its case.

I'm slipping in and out of sleep, and daydreams. My fake smile says that I don't mind someone sitting next to me but I was better off as I was. Lost in my thoughts. I'll just stare out of the window. Maybe he'll sort out his papers and go back to his seat. *Please don't talk to me. Please don't be here when they bring lunch.*

Unlike this stranger, who'd just revealed to me the reason for his trip to the Caribbean, the burden of working for a boss was something I'd left behind long ago.

I was clueless when it came to career choices after I left school but I managed to get a reasonable job. I had no idea back then that I'd end up running a business. Or who I would be running it with.

When the New Year started I was not only heartbroken, but desperately keen to leave my job, despite my promotion to Office Manager. I felt a change was needed after two years of trying to manage a team of middle-aged women, who seemed intent on making my life a misery. Whatever their problem was with me, it was time to make my exit.

I enrolled on an evening class called How to Start a Small Business. On the first evening of the course I met a friend from school that I'd completely lost touch with.

"Angelica?" I felt a tap on my shoulder as the class of about fifteen people waited patiently for the tutor, who was off trying to find the key to the classroom door. I turned

around.

"My God! Jasmin. How are you? It's been like, forever." I hugged her. I was surprised and happy to see her.

"Yeah, I'm good thanks. Angelica you haven't changed in all this time. You look amazing." Jasmin still had that wide, gleaming smile of hers, that head of beautifully thick black curls and was as stunningly attractive as ever.

"This is unreal. You're back in London." We hugged each other again and giggled as though we were back at school. "How is married life treating you? Any children yet?" I asked.

"Well the marriage ended a few years back. Didn't really get started." She was still smiling about what I thought to be bad news. "To tell the truth," she moved in closer. "He turned out to be a real bastard and no, we never had any children."

"Oh I see. I'm sorry."

"The only thing to be sorry about is that I'm back home with the folks." She gripped her throat and stuck out her tongue. I could see the noose, I knew it well.

Jasmin had an English mother and a West African father who was stricter than both of my parents put together. We were nineteen when she'd announced that she was getting married and moving to Canada. It had been a shock but I'd suspected back then that she was trying to escape her father. She wrote to me a few times once she'd settled in Canada and I replied each time. But then her letters stopped.

"What about you?" She asked. "Married? Kids? String of divorces?"

"No, no and no. Just trying to get my act together. Wasted too much time on someone."

"Mm, I know the feeling."

We were slowly filing into the classroom. It was hard to sit next to Jasmin and not talk. We had years of catching up to do. We'd become best friends in the Sixth Form. I suppose we were drawn to each other because, amongst the other girls, we stuck out like a sore thumb. Those girls in the Common Room with their fashionable shoes and coats. Their constant talk of boyfriends and clubs. We wished we could be like them but that was only ever a dream when we were seventeen.

The man in the aisle seat is smiling at me. I thought my closed eyes would serve as a conversation deterrent, but I was wrong.

"I've just found this picture on my laptop." He says. "This is my daughter Phoebe. An absolute darling."

I smile back.

"Any children yourself?" He's still beaming as he asks.

"One. But she's all grown up now." My voice is croaky. This is the most I've said to anyone since I got in the taxi at six a.m. this morning. *Please see that I don't want to talk.*

"A grown up daughter? You don't look old enough." He grins at me. Nice face. Ordinarily I would chat but I can't fake it. I rub the side of my head as though it hurts and rest my head on my hand so that my face is turned away. It's rude but what can I do?

By the second week of the course Jasmin and I had already decided to rent a place together. It was that simple. We started renting a flat a short distance from Mum and Dad's. Dad had said that I should really think about buying a house rather than renting so that I would have security. My parents were planning to go back home soon, so they wanted me settled.

Jasmin and I had a frenzied, first month of playing our music loud, shopping and clubbing. It was the most fun I'd had in a while. I was getting over Anil.

The man in the aisle seat clears his throat.

"Sorry. I think I've dumped my case on your headphones. There you go." He smiles at me as he hands them over. They must have slipped onto the floor without me noticing. I don't want these. I'm not interested in seeing a film, listening to the radio or seeing how far we'd flown. I take the headphones, still in their plastic wrapper, and fiddle with them.

"Decided on a film?" He tries to maintain a conversation. "I like to bring my own entertainment. Or just chat. You meet a lot of interesting people when you're travelling. I travel a lot. How about you?"

"Not a lot, not really. First time in a while."

Duty Free is approaching. I'm not interested but he's looking keen. I plan my escape. I'll just grab the in-flight magazine and bury my face in it. Look engrossed. He'll

take the hint. Good looking people on the beach. I remember Michael.

I never saw Michael on a beach but he had an amazing body. We'd met at a health club and I'd spent more than a sneaky half hour eyeing him up from the treadmill whilst he lifted weights. Dark brown skin that would contrast well with my mid brown. Tight muscles, cheeky smile. I wouldn't say he was handsome but I certainly didn't refuse when he asked me out that day. Anil wasn't quite out of my system but Michael would help that along quite nicely.

I bumped into Michael one morning in the health club café, where he was drinking a fruit juice and I'd just ordered hot chocolate and a chocolate covered flapjack. I didn't notice him at first until I was paying for my snack and heard a voice from behind a newspaper saying: "I guess you've earned that." There was Michael, with his cheeky smile, making me a little uncomfortable about my food choice.

"I think so. That was a tough workout today." I took a seat at the table next to his.

"I see they're having another of their social events." He nodded to a poster by the door advertising a cocktail party. "Do you ever go to them?" He asked, sipping his juice while I was too embarrassed to unwrap my flapjack.

"No, I've never been. I don't think it's my kind of thing anyway."

"What is your kind of thing?"

"Well, you know, restaurants, theatre, cinema."

"So how about a film tonight?"

The plastic wrapper and headphones slip off my lap. I bend to pick them up.

"I think I'll watch a film after all." My travel companion tries again. "Should be able to fit one in before lunch. If I drop off before they serve, will you give me a prod?" I think I'll do more than prod him if he doesn't shut up. He's got me thinking about food now. I realise I'm starving. I know I'll complain about it when it comes. Always do. Food is my business. I know about food.

"Do you know something?" I said to Jasmin. "I think we've gone off the beaten track. We're letting men take over our lives."

It was Sunday morning. Jasmin had just come out of the bathroom and I was drinking a smoothie. She looked puzzled.

"Well since you started going out with Nigel and I started seeing Michael, we haven't once mentioned starting our own business. How many brainstorming sessions have we had? How many lists have we drawn up?"

Whenever Jasmin and I planned *anything*, we made a list. Lists help you focus and keep you on track. The number of lists we'd made was piling up and all focus was lost.

"Tell you what," said Jasmin. "One thing we've never done since we've been here."

"What's that?"

"Have a house-warming party."

"Jasmin. What's a house-warming party got to do with starting a business?"

"Nothing at all. But they're fun."

The craziest thing about that conversation was that it was the house-warming party that led to our business starting up. About thirty people crammed into our little flat, dancing, chatting and eating the never-ending supply of food we'd made. Jasmin and I had gone a bit far and I could see us eating albondigas and spring rolls well into the next month.

I was doing some clearing away in the kitchen when Michael's sister, Karen, walked in.

"Who did the catering for this party?" She asked.

"Oh that was me and Jasmin, we've been cooking since yesterday."

"The food is fantastic. I've asked my secretary to sort out the catering for a do I'm having for my clients. If you two are free on the eleventh would you like the job?" She was perfectly matter of fact.

"Wait a minute, Karen. You know Jasmin and I are not professional caterers don't you?"

"Well your food tastes professional. So, how about it? Just call my secretary on Monday. I'll tell her about you. We have to throw these little soirées once in a while to keep our clients sweet. Our American company does it and we have to follow suit. It's a real drag when the last thing you want to do on a Friday night, is spend an evening answering questions about your clients' account. There'll be eight of them and then a couple from the

firm. So, for ten people then?"

"I'm not sure we could do it. We'd need to work out the menus, hire equipment. It would take a lot of planning."

"Well, I'll leave all that to you. Food just like tonight would be great. Call the office. Michael will let you know the number." She poured herself another glass of wine and joined the others in the living room. I wondered if Jasmin would be keen to take on a job catering for some posh company.

"Of course we'll do it," she said. "As soon as we're sober we'll make a list."

We had no idea what to quote Karen's secretary, so I'd phoned around various catering companies asking for quotes for the kind of food we would make until Jasmin and I settled on a price, taking into consideration hiring crockery, cutlery and glasses. Working out how much wine we needed was the hard part. Did everyone drink as much as Jasmin and me? We'd planned everything to a tee and only had to write five lists to make it all possible. Karen was very impressed. She said she would definitely use us again and would recommend us wherever she could. She was true to her word and we got a couple of catering jobs on the strength of that first party.

"Maybe we've finally found our calling," I said to Jasmin after the second party. "Maybe this will be the thing that gets us out of our nine to fives. I can see a future in it, with the right planning. What do you think?"

"I'm glad you said it because it's exactly what I've been thinking. I've got lots of ideas about marketing and that kind of thing but, oh my God, I'm so excited. When can we start?"

The flight attendant stops at our aisle. Crouches slightly with her hands on her knees.

"Are you going to have your lunch here, Sir, or will you be having it in your own seat?" She's looking at me while she asks this question. Wondering if I'm up to visitors I suppose. He's looking at me now and pulling off his headphones. Looking so much like a lost puppy - how can I turn him away? I smile and give a shrug that says 'you decide, I don't mind too much.' That's all he needs.

"Yes, I'll stay here then." He says to the flight attendant, who gives me one last look that asks, *are you sure about this?*

"Oh and mine was the vegetarian option."

"Yes Sir."

When I broke the news to my family about my plans for starting a new career, it was met with the kind of enthusiasm that only my family could have.

We were all having Sunday lunch at Mum's when I told them. My parents were worried about me keeping up rent payments if I wasn't going to be paid monthly anymore. I tried to assure them that we wouldn't give up our jobs until we knew it would work. My brothers and sisters, and their partners, all had an opinion.

"I always remember you complaining when Mum wanted your help in the kitchen." Marcus said.

"But Angie," said Del, "do you know what it takes to run your own business? You need commitment and you need to be able to trust your partner. I don't know much about Jasmin, she's only your age and already divorced. Not that good at sticking with things is she?"

"Have you thought about all the long hours and how antisocial it can be?" Maddy, my younger sister, added to the onslaught.

With the exception of my younger brother, James, who was a writer, my other siblings and their partners all had nine to fives. Regular incomes. Of course it was hard for them to understand where I was coming from or to be in the least bit supportive. I knew that deep down, their concern was not that it was a bad idea but that they weren't convinced that I had it in me to see it through. I was determined to prove them wrong.

"Jasmin, this thing is do or die." I said to her that evening. I'd had a whole afternoon of holding my tongue at Mum's. "We've got to give this business everything we've got."

"Ang. I'm with you. I've already got a failed marriage under my belt. My mum doesn't get it. My dad thinks I'm some kind of flake, and he's probably washed his hands of me."

"So, we're doing it?"

"We're doing it. I think we should call ourselves Angel Catering. That way we get

listed high up in Yellow Pages and people are more likely to call us before they give up and get bored looking down a long list.”

And she was right. We got lots of enquiries and many of them became jobs. Eventually we were turning business away because we were only working weekends and evenings. Winter came and we could see that Christmas was going to be busy for us. It was time to give up the day jobs.

One wine induced evening, we composed our letters of resignation. Jasmin typed them both up at work. I remember breathing a huge sigh of relief on my last day at the office. I was free and as far as I was concerned my life would never be the same again.

"Josephine!" Josephine rubbed her eyes and yawned.

"Josephine. Wake up. Don't forget to take those sheets by the river to wash. Leave the boys with Ma Paul and take Eunice with you. She can help. We going to market."

"Yes Mama." Josephine rolled lazily onto her back. This was no time to dream. Saturday morning and her day had already been planned. There was no need for her mother to remind her of her duties.

Four years had gone by since her father died. Josephine had been consumed by guilt and had put the blame on her gift. She'd sat by the river watching her mother wash clothes.

"Is something your father already had." Her mother, Rose, had said. "In his brain. The doctor told me it could happen at any time. Your dream never cause this Josephine."

"I don't want to dream anymore." Josephine's tears had spilled over her face and into the cool of the soapy river to mingle with the bubbles. Rose had turned her face away and dried her eyes with the upper part of her sleeve. That was the day Josephine decided she would look after her mother and never leave her side.

Rose had drawn strength from the willingness to fill their father's shoes that the three oldest boys adopted during those years. Each took it in turns to accompany her to garden on a Tuesday and Thursday before school, to tend the land, gather ground provisions and carry them in a sack on his head, holding steady to his father's old cutlass all the way home. And, in turn, each had left home and bid a sad farewell to the family before setting off to find his way.

Josephine had made her mother proud because of her dedication to helping her. But by age fourteen she had suffered with her health and had taken a lot of time off school. Having been kept back for two years, Josephine sat amongst a class of ten and eleven year olds and felt perfectly ashamed. She was embarrassed by her very womanly form and would often hide in the lunch hour while her contemporaries sat and chatted, feeling out of her depth because their level of conversation had matured. The more they tried to include her the more she would shy away from them.

One day, Josephine left school at lunchtime, with hers arms folded across her ample bosom and her books firmly shut on the desk in the classroom. She marched home, determined that things would change. Rose spotted her daughter walking toward the house with her head held high and lips creased together in a thin line.

"Why are you back so early, Josephine? School haven't finish yet."

"I know Mama but I can't do it anymore. I'm too big for that class and I don't belong there. All the way home I been thinking and I have an idea. I'm going by Ma David. She always said she would teach me to sew and Veronique has left her now, so maybe she need someone to help her. Someone new to train. I know I am good at sewing and I could make a good seamstress."

Rose didn't have to consider this for very long. She knew how much her daughter suffered. They had discussed it several times whilst they worked around the house.

"Alright," said Rose, "let us go now and talk to Ma David to see if she can take you."

By age fifteen, Josephine knew everything that Ma David had to teach. She had an absolute flair for designing and making dresses. Many of the women who had clothes made there would secretly wish that it was Josephine taking charge of their dresses rather than Ma David herself. Josephine could cut the fabric just right and make exact alterations and the number of satisfied customers grew so that jobs were coming in from farther than just theirs and the neighbouring villages. Ma David revelled in her new found popularity and satisfied herself that it was her ability as a good teacher that made Josephine so good at her job. All the while Josephine was saving up for her own sewing machine. She had made up her mind to set up on her own one day.

The classy young woman that Josephine was growing into did not go unnoticed by the villagers. One, in particular, had always been attracted to her. Like the others, James Dennis would watch as she walked like a film star along the dusty roads, carrying an umbrella to keep the sun off her and a handbag and shoes to match her dress.

"Good afternoon, Miss Douglas." James called one day. Josephine recognised the voice but did not slow down and did not turn around.

"So now you are ignoring me? Well OK, you don't have to speak, but you can't stop me from walking along this road too."

"You can do as you please, Mr Dennis." Josephine nodded her head slightly but made no eye contact with her admirer.

James did everything he could to make his feelings toward Josephine plain but she never fell for the chat up lines that worked so well on the other girls. Whilst he had a reputation as a flirt, Josephine had a fixed idea in her head that she would never marry and that she would remain with her mother and take care of her in her old age. She was the oldest sibling at home and she took her commitment to stay with Mama very seriously.

"You know there have a dance on Saturday?" James was not ready to give up.

"I believe I heard about it from Dora, yes." Josephine walked a little faster now and James hastened his pace to keep up.

"Well, anyone ask you to go yet?"

"A few boys have asked."

"And you going with any of them?"

"No." Josephine turned her gaze to a passing neighbour and nodded. James took this as an opportunity to block her path and stand in front of Josephine. He smiled.

"Would you consider, would you like to. I wonder if I can escort you?" He was nervous around her now.

Josephine paused a while and appeared to be considering the offer.

"Well, no, I don't want to go." She said, finally. "Maybe someone else might accept you." Josephine turned and took the path to Ma David's house as James stood and watched her go.

"You breaking my heart Josephine. You know that?" He called to her but she had already disappeared behind the red hibiscus bushes that hid Ma David's house from the main road.

The six remaining members of the Douglas household lived a peaceful enough existence. Josephine shared a bedroom with her sister, Eunice, and the three boys, Benjamin, Caleb and Little Raphael, slept on couches to the back of the main room, which was sectioned off by a curtain at night time. Rose slept on her own in the bedroom she had once shared with Raphael. Although she was a young and attractive woman when her husband died, she never looked at another man and she would never love or marry again.

Every Sunday, the family went to church. It was there, at about age twenty, that Josephine became the object of attraction of one Milton Clarke, a twenty-eight year old police sergeant of the most serious disposition. He never approached Josephine himself, but he made it known to any eligible bachelors that he wanted to marry her.

One Saturday afternoon, with all their chores done, Rose, Josephine and Eunice sat chatting in the main room and heard the distinct sound of horse's hooves approaching from the roadside. They stopped to listen as they heard the trotting become louder and stop just outside the house.

"Ma Douglas," a voice called. "May I speak with you please?"

Rose knew this must be a policeman as only they were likely to be on horseback. She came to the door expecting the worst, only to see Milton Clarke in his sergeant's uniform, his cap firmly fixed onto his head. The afternoon sun beat down hard on everyone it would seem, except Milton, who remained cool and focused and without one bead of sweat visible beneath the peak of his cap. When he saw Rose, he showed his teeth.

"Good afternoon Mrs Douglas. No need to look afraid. It's only me, Sergeant Milton Clarke from Pontville. I've come to ask your permission to marry Josephine."

"What?" From inside the house, Josephine gasped. She was taken aback and horrified by the suggestion that she would even contemplate marrying such a fool. So much so that she decided it would be best to stay put rather than to risk offending him by going outside to turn him down.

"I cannot speak for my daughter. She has never mentioned you, why you think she would want to marry you?" Rose screwed up her brow.

"I don't," Josephine whispered under her breath. Eunice giggled and could see several faces beginning to congregate near their yard.

"I feel Josephine is at an age for marriage. I am a hard-working man and I will take good care of her. Being as she has no father..."

"Get out! Get away from my house. You are a fool." Rose clapped her hands and the horse rose up on its hind legs. Milton tried to steady him.

"Josephine will choose her own husband when she is ready and I'm sure it will never

be you. Now go away and look for someone else." Rose was so angry she shook as she returned to the house saying to Josephine, "by the way, you didn't want to marry him did you?"

"No Mama, you said exactly what I would have said."

Eunice opened the curtain and peered out at the disgruntled Milton Clarke who was muttering under his breath that this was the last time he would ever ask one of these countryside girls to marry him. The girls in town have more sense.

Marriage was the last thing on Josephine's mind but now, approaching twenty-four, she would listen to the stories about what her friends got up to when they were alone with their partners with interest. Although these stories could be quite thrilling, Josephine focused on her future plans. Making and selling clothes and looking after Mama. She told herself that she could live quite happily without that kind of intimacy. Even her younger sister, Eunice, teased Josephine and said to her one day "do you think you are the Virgin Mary? You will marry you know, you won't stay by Mama forever."

There was truth in Eunice's words. Although Josephine didn't want to admit it to herself, in all these years of wishing to stay a single woman, she was starting to have feelings for a particular man and what surprised her most of all, was who that man was.

James Dennis had been asking Josephine to go out on a date with him for as long as anyone could remember and every time she had refused. It was no secret that he was a womaniser and according to reports, he had slept with practically every girl Josephine knew. He had even slept with her best friend, Dora, who was about to get married. Knowing full well that Josephine disapproved of his reputation, he decided to change his tactics. Instead of trying to sweet talk her, he had begun to write a series of letters. She read most of them in the beginning and did find them appealing. But she could not bring herself to accept any of his offers. At the end of each letter he would ask her to come for a walk or to meet him after church for a chat. It had come to the stage that when a letter arrived, and sure enough there would be one every week, she would simply tear it up without opening it.

"What is wrong with James that you can't give him a chance?" asked Eunice, incensed one day. "He is good looking, he have a job, and all the women want him, except you. What are you waiting for?"

"You have him if you want. He's just not my type." Josephine was busy packing a case because she was on her way to stay the night at Dora's house. It was the eve of Dora's wedding day and Josephine was to be on hand to dress the bride and fix her hair.

"Well, if he looked my way, I would, but anyone can see that he only have eyes for you." Eunice was looking through the wardrobe at Josephine's clothes. Although Josephine had repeatedly told her not to touch them, Eunice couldn't help but try on Josephine's dresses. Sometimes she wore them to go out when she thought she would get away with it and very often came home with a little tear here a spilt drink there. She would put the dress straight back into the wardrobe without saying a word. Josephine became exasperated by her younger sister's antics but she always forgave her.

There was a six-year gap between them and Josephine still saw Eunice as a little girl. Eunice was always restless, a live wire, quick to put a person in their place if she thought it necessary. Her temper was as volcanic as the island they lived on.

"In fact everyone only have eyes for you, don't they?" Josephine did not answer. She was already on her way out of the door and kissing Rose on the cheek. At which point Eunice dragged out Josephine's burnt orange blouse from the wardrobe and put it on. She also kissed Rose on the cheek and left the house saying, "Josephine told me to catch her up, she needs me to help at Dora's."

The last thing Eunice was going to do was catch up with Josephine. She was off to meet friends to hang around outside Anton Bardouille's liquor bar. Her group of friends sat next to a big old tamarind tree, laughing at people passing by and at the people going in and out of Bardouille's. The yellow racemes of the tamarind would make the perfect backdrop for Eunice in her nice new blouse. She was bound to have everyone talking about her and the way she looked, just as they did Josephine. It was obvious to a lot of people that Eunice was envious of her sister. Josephine never saw this.

As Eunice hurried along the road she saw a familiar figure walking towards her. It was James, tall and broad shouldered, looking very handsome to her in the crisp, white shirt he wore for church. As a carpenter he would often be seen in tatty work clothes,

shirtsleeves rolled up, hair in a mess. This evening he had a swagger and a warm smile for Eunice as he approached.

"Going somewhere nice?" he asked her.

"Nowhere special. How about you? Where are you going so dressed up?"

"Well as a matter of fact I was going by your place." He smiled.

"Oh, really. Maybe I should have stayed home so I could receive you properly."

Eunice grinned back, her eyes never left James'.

"Well, um, I wanted to talk to Josephine. Do you know if she might reply to my letters or what? What is she saying?" James felt a little uneasy because of the way Eunice stared so deeply into his eyes.

"Josephine is gone out. She gone by Dora so she can talk about her boyfriend."

Eunice looked away now, not wanting James to see how disappointed she was to have to talk about her sister.

"Josephine have a boyfriend?" He asked.

"I believe so. I heard them talking, she and Dora. If you are going to Dora's wedding you will see them together. Are you invited?"

"Yes, I..."

"And who you taking?"

"Well I was hoping..."

"Josephine already spoken for. I am invited but I wouldn't mind an escort." Again she smiled and focused her gaze on James who swallowed hard, composing himself before he spoke.

"If you need an escort, I suppose I could come for you. Will ten o'clock be all right? I will come in a car. You think Josephine will mind, or your mother?"

"No no, they will be happy I'm going with someone they can trust."

"Josephine say I'm someone she can trust?" James brightened and was about to give way to a smile.

"Well is Mama who say it, James. Josephine don't want to hear. You know she tear up all your letters? She never read a single one. I would be angry if I were you. When you pick me up you can tell me all about how you planning to forget about Josephine and find yourself somebody else." With that Eunice turned and headed along the path to Bardouille's, trying her best to walk like a sophisticated woman. She had the reputation of a naughty young girl and she hoped James did not regard her in that way.

James had supposed that his coming to the wedding with Josephine's little sister might, somehow, please Josephine. He wouldn't be turning up with some other woman and had hoped to slip away from Eunice at some point and try again to talk to Josephine about the way he felt.

On the morning of the wedding, Josephine probably awoke more excited than the bride. Dora would be wearing the first wedding dress she had ever made and Josephine couldn't wait to see how her friend would look, floating along in the ankle length gown, with flowers in her hair. It was tradition for the bride's party to walk to church in a procession. The church bells would ring twenty minutes before the party was due to arrive at the church and then stop once it had reached the churchyard. If the party was late, and very often it was, the bells would just keep on ringing. Josephine made sure that Dora was not late getting ready.

The wedding party left the house and began the procession. Those who were not invited gathered along the roadside to catch glimpses of the well dressed, well groomed party. An occasion such as this would bring out the brightest and most colourful of outfits. Women in rich coloured dresses and hats, men in crisp suits and patterned ties. The invited guests would already be at the church, which this morning was full to the rafters, with voices at volumes louder than the bells themselves. The packed out little church very obviously included people who had not been invited but so many of them just couldn't resist a good wedding.

The bride and the morning were beautiful. The sky was now bright blue and cloudless. There was, unusually, no breeze and by late morning it became unbearably hot. The overly long ceremony ended and the wedding party gathered at the church hall for the wedding breakfast. A small band played guitars and the local chanteuse sang. Everyone laughed, drank, ate and danced.

Josephine couldn't help noticing how her younger sister followed James around. She

was embarrassed by her sister's forwardness and wished Eunice could have a little more decorum at times. Rose sat with a group of older members of the party, fanning herself with a large woven straw fan, pretending to be interested in the conversation but all the time staring at Eunice who ignored everyone, her eyes fixed on James.

"I thought you said Josephine have a boyfriend, Eunice." James said. "I've had my eyes on her all day and she isn't with anyone. I don't see a boyfriend."

Eunice couldn't fail to notice where James' attention had been since the ceremony. She had spent most of the day trying to keep him engaged in conversation, just so that he could look her way once in a while.

"What do you see in Josephine? She is not like any of the girls you hang around?" Eunice was hot with anger and tried desperately to appear calm.

"What I see in her is exactly what I don't see in anyone else." James excused himself and headed to the table of drinks where Josephine stood having someone pour her a tumbler of punch.

"You look very pretty today Josephine," he said. James positioned himself with his back to Josephine's admirer who soon knew his presence was no longer required.

"I thought you only had eyes for my sister." Josephine sipped some punch and stared into the glass as the orange fluid danced inside it. Her hand trembled slightly.

"Eunice is a child," said James and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Would you like to come outside for some air? It's such a nice afternoon and so stuffy in here. Maybe it would be better outside?"

"It's just as hot outside I think." Josephine felt Eunice's eyes penetrating her skin and turned her head slightly to see her sister about to boil over like a sulphur spring.

"Alright, let's go outside." She thought Eunice would fly at her at any moment and wanted to avoid a scene. One of Eunice's outbursts was bound to ruin Dora's day. She put down her drink and followed James, trying to avoid Eunice's glare.

The pair stepped out into the hot afternoon air and walked a short way along a nearby avenue of white cedars that lead to the neighbouring playing field. They stood under a cedar tree for shade. Neither of them spoke for a moment. James' warm smile made Josephine nervous. She felt as though the hot afternoon sun had taken up residence about two feet above the tree. James searched for the right words. He didn't want to put Josephine off him as he had often done in the past. All he managed to say was her name in a slight whisper as he gently placed a kiss on her lips. Then he held both of her hands and pulled her toward him, placing her arms around his waist and holding her trembling body next to his. They stood like this for several minutes. Neither of them noticed the people coming out of the church hall one by one, smiling at the couple who stood as if posing for a photograph.

Eunice joined the onlookers. Rose had followed close behind her and placed a firm hand on her daughter's arm. Eunice's face never revealed the flaming anger she felt. Her thoughts were on her sister.

Once again, Josephine had managed to get something she wanted. Eunice knew in her heart, though, that what Josephine had, she could always find a way to take.

"I can never really get used to this bit." He looks tense.

"I'm sorry?"

"Turbulence." He's glad to have my attention again. "They say flying is the safest form of travel, but I can never stop wishing I had control of the levers when this happens." I'm not sure I like where this is going. "It's not that they don't know what they're doing. Of course they're trained. But do you ever do that thing when you sit in someone else's car, they're a bit of an erratic driver and you start pushing on imaginary brakes in the passenger side? You haven't got control but you feel you must do something. That's how I feel about turbulence. You know. Whoa, it's getting bumpy – let's put on the brakes." He gestures, stop, with his hands to illustrate his point. I wish I knew what point he was trying to make. There's nothing you can do about turbulence but ride it out. There are just some things we don't have any control over. You just go with the flow.

I was doing just that when the business was in its early days. Going with the flow. But at the same time, finding myself becoming more and more distant from the family. Angel's went from strength to strength. Little jobs here and there and when the big occasions came up we had to take on temporary staff. Mostly in the form of Jasmin's sister and her mates. They were easy to train and didn't cost too much. We also started a sandwich delivery service. Got a load of flyers printed up and delivered them to the Business Park near the High Street. The only decent sandwich bar or café was on the High Street and a good fifteen minute walk from the Business Park. That was an opportunity right there. An outlet on the High Street. Something new and different. Jasmin and I set our sights on opening our own premises one day.

The increasing level of work didn't impress Mum too much. She complained that I never called her enough or came around as often as my sisters did.

"I'm not an educated woman but one thing I know is that a mother's love for her children never dies and too many children break their parents' hearts. You see Mrs George? Mrs George had six children, three boys and three girls and she loved all of them. She did everything she could to care for them and raise them up to be good children. They were so good, most of them became doctors or lawyers, one of them even had a shop on the Harrow Road.

But when all of them marry, have children, make lots of money, they never have time for her again. She bake cakes for them, put ice-lollies in the freezer for the grandchildren and none of them come to visit her. When she see no one care anymore, she go and lie down in her bed without eating – and die. Her children never discover her body for *six* months."

"Mum, that could never happen to you." I said down the other end of the phone.

"Even though I get really busy you'll always have Del and Maddy."

"Well is three daughters I have." She'd hung up on me that day without saying goodbye, replacing a farewell with the sign of the cross I suspected. Another of Mum's stories and I was on a guilt trip. I didn't want Mum to think I was turning my back on her. That was far from true. My work was important. But, no matter what I did, there would always be a part of me that cared what Mum thought.

The *Please Fasten Your Seatbelts* sign flashes. He's the first to do so. Rattling the buckle so loudly, I wonder if he needs help. I'm not sure I believe his claims about being a seasoned flyer. He grips the edges of his seat.

"You alright there?" I have to ask.

"Oh yes, yes. Perfectly fine. I just really hate this bit."

"I'm sure we'll go through it soon. Must be the time of year or something. I don't know." I look away. I can see he's gearing up to carry on the conversation. All I wanted to do was placate him.

"Shifting wind currents in the sky." He says. "That's what I read. In fact it doesn't do any harm to keep your seatbelt on for the endurance of the flight. I've read a lot of reports about serious injuries in a plane when turbulence came on suddenly." He stops to smile at me. "But I won't frighten you with those."

Yes turbulence can come on suddenly. Just when you think everything is running smoothly, it hits you.

"Angelica!"

"Yes. It's me. Who were you expecting? Just thought I'd surprise you. I knew you

weren't doing anything. Our party got cancelled a few hours ago so I thought I'd rustle up some treats and come and cook for you. You always complain I don't cook for you enough." Michael hadn't moved from his spot so I pushed one of the carrier bags I was holding into his hand and brushed passed him with the other in the direction of the kitchen.

"Just put the bag down, go back to your music and I'll start. Hope you like lobster."

I hadn't noticed the expression on Michael's face but I had noticed from the hatch that looked onto the living room, that there was someone sitting on the sofa wearing a pair of black ski pants and patent leather, stiletto heels. I couldn't see the top half from the angle I was in until I stormed into the living room. Michael followed behind me, one hand on his mouth, the other reaching to turn off the music. Miss Ski Pants rose from her seat and just stared at me. She was tall and beautiful and reminded me of Sade.

"I, I wasn't expecting you," Michael managed to stutter.

"Evidently," I said, looking from one to the other.

"Please tell me this is your sister." Sade Ski Pants, turned to Michael and pursed her ruby red, lipstick lips together.

"No, actually, I thought I was his girlfriend." I interrupted before he could answer her. "What the hell is going on Michael? This is the last thing I expected of *you*." I stopped to take a breath and no-one spoke for a second.

"My God, I don't believe this. How long have you two been...?" I pointed my finger from one to the other.

"I've been seeing him for a few months now," she answered. Michael was obviously having difficulty trying to speak. "I *knew* he was up to something. Last night I answered the phone to someone who hung up suddenly, was that you?"

"No, it wasn't me." I looked at Michael and I still couldn't believe what he'd done. I'd brought my knife set. I might get to use it after all. "I was working last night and *he* was supposed to have been visiting his mother. Do you know what Michael? I'm just going to leave you to this. Whatever *this* is." I raised my right hand to stop him offering any kind of excuse. "Do you know what? Forget it."

I went to get my bags from the kitchen while Sade was getting her things from the bedroom. We both stormed out at around the same time with Michael calling 'hey wait I can explain everything' from the front door. She sped off in a little red sports car and I drove away in my delivery van. Speeding off at zero to seventy in six seconds would have been a much more dramatic ending than ambling out of Michael's cul de sac at fifteen miles an hour in my Ford Transit.

I watch as the flight attendants glide effortlessly down the aisles with their trolleys, delivering service with a smile in narrow quarters.

"Here you go. One chicken and one vegetarian. Enjoy your meals."

"This looks good," he smiles. The *Please Fasten Your Seatbelts* sign switched off ages ago but he's being safe rather than sorry by the looks of things.

"Bon appetit."

It was a lot easier getting over Michael than it was Anil. I threw myself into my work. My pastry course started a month or so after we broke up. It was a two-week course at a private college. I had to get up a bit earlier to help Jasmin with the sandwich orders but she was happy to do deliveries on her own. On the first day of the pastry course I was completely mesmerised by the kitchen. It was just perfect and contained all the things I dreamed of having for myself one day. I fully intended to absorb everything. Mind on the course and nowhere else.

The tutor was a very attractive French chef. I tried to sum him up before he'd even opened his mouth. I would have placed him in his thirties, probably married but definitely attached. His name was Jules. Good humoured as well as good looking, not too much taller than me, a kind face. As the days went by I noticed he never lost eye contact with me whenever he explained anything and stood very close when he demonstrated the techniques. Of the six students on the course, I was the only woman. On the last day, we all went for a drink. I'd asked Jasmin to join us which pleased all the guys from the course. Jules was oblivious to Jasmin, though. He kept his eyes fixed on me and had talked only to me the whole time we were there. After a few rounds, Jasmin felt she just had to know what our private conversation was about and signalled for me to accompany her to the ladies.

"That guy, Jules," she said, "he really has the hots for you."

"Do people actually say 'the hots' anymore, Jas? This isn't a 1950s movie." I fixed my hair and tried to act cool and collected. I was the one with the 'hots' for Jules but all I knew about him was that he was amazingly attractive. Since Jasmin had broken up with Nigel we'd been bemoaning being single. But we'd pledged to be more selective in the future so that we didn't end up being hurt again.

"Jas, you know we said that we had to stop dating undesirables?"

"Yes." Her voice lingered on this word as she looked at me via the bathroom mirror while applying lip gloss.

"Well now the course is over, I suppose the only way I can find out more about Jules is to accept his offer of dinner." I kept up the pretence of being nonchalant.

"He's asked you out to dinner?" She shrieked.

The door opened as a girl walked in. I could see the guys at our table and wanted to get back out there as quickly as possible. I waited as Jasmin shook out her curls and wished, not for the first time, that I had them too. We made our way back to the table.

"So Jules," said Jasmin as we sat down, "are you married?"

"No," he smiled, "I am not married."

"Girlfriend?" She asked. He looked quickly from me to her.

"No, no girlfriend either. Sad, no?" He smiled and looked back at me.

"Well that really depends on who wants to know I suppose." She giggled like a teenager. I was so embarrassed, I wished that there was a trap door under Jasmin's seat that would open and stop her asking Jules any more of these leading questions.

"Hey Jas," I said. "I think it's time we were on our way. We've got that thing later."

"What thing?"

"You know that thing I told you about that we had to do later. Well it's later and we'd better get going. It was really nice to meet you guys. Good luck with everything." I drank the rest of my wine, about half a glass, in two seconds and went to put on my jacket. Jules immediately stood up to help me on with it.

"If we are to go for a meal I must have your telephone number," he said. I could virtually hear Jasmin squealing with delight behind that ridiculous grin she was wearing. The other men were looking disappointed that she was going and started finishing their drinks, wanting to leave. I reached into my bag and found one of our sandwich service flyers and gave it to Jules.

"You can get me on this number," I smiled. Jasmin and I left. That last mouthful of wine had gone straight to my head and made me feel woozy. Jasmin had to link my arm and prop me up as we walked out of the pub. She understood that I had to make a sophisticated exit and not bump into a stool or a punter as I left.

"How is it?" He's been trying to attract my attention since the flight attendant put our trays down. Now he's talking to me with an unchewed lump of food inside his mouth. He smiles and waits for me to respond.

"Oh fine, thanks." He wants more. "And yours? How's yours?"

"Well not too bad. Yours looks a lot better. It's not that I'm actually vegetarian. My wife always insists on getting the vegetarian when she flies. Says she doesn't trust meat on planes. Doesn't believe they know how to store things properly. Won't drink the water when she's abroad either."

"I suppose she's right in a way. Some places are a bit risky." I wonder if it's safe to take another mouthful. Will he want to ask me something else?

Jules was passionate about food. He always insisted on cooking for me rather than the other way round. His ambition was to open his own restaurant in France one day. He finally admitted to me that the only reason he came to London was to follow the woman he had fallen in love with. She was English and working as a translator in France, and had dumped him after he told her he loved her. The fact that I was really a rebound girlfriend got shifted to the back of my mind because of my growing feelings for him.

I loved how he made me feel. He laughed at my jokes even though I'm sure he didn't always understand them. He charmed both of my sisters, although my older sister, Del, advised me against going for looks and going for security instead. Insisting that that's what I needed now that I was in my late twenties. I was too busy getting wrapped up in Jules to care what she said.

Jules and I had been dating for a few months and everything had been going well

between us. We saw each other as often as we could. But a very busy time at work came up for me and almost two weeks had gone by since the last proper date. I'd called Jules, but a good few days had gone by and he hadn't returned my call.

I thought it strange, at first, and wasn't sure if I should just wait, call again or if I should be worried.

"Who could that be at this time of night?" The buzzer for our flat had sounded. Jasmin and I were already in our pyjamas. She looked at me and smirked.

"Must be the Latin lover, wanting a midnight rendezvous." Jasmin hadn't noticed that I hadn't had a date with Jules for a while. She was too busy falling for her new man, Steven, a Managing Director from one of the companies we delivered sandwiches to.

"Well, he's early. It's not eleven yet."

I sighed a weary, 'hello', down the intercom and was relieved to find it was Jules.

"I'm sorry it is so late. I would like if you can come with me for a drink?"

"Everywhere will be closing." I was angry with him but wanted to see him all the same. "Well, just wait there a minute. I'll be down." Jasmin winked and made rude gestures as I pulled on a sweatshirt and jeans and grabbed an old jacket.

"We can talk?" he asked. I was owed an explanation. I took him to the restaurant-bar about five minutes from our flat. They closed the curtains when it was after hours and never hassled their punters to leave.

It was a bit of a dive really and the music was awful but it gave Jasmin and me a good laugh once in a while. They tried so hard to be chic but they would religiously serve stale peanuts with drinks. The owner had no front teeth and his wife's enormous bosom toppled out over her low cut, tight dresses. Jules and I missed the funny side that night.

"I will be going back to France soon," he said. "I've arranged for the person renting my apartment to be out by the end of the month and I've made enquiries for work. I think I have at least two possibilities. Everyone remembers me there." He smiled briefly. My expression changed and my heart sank. I finally realised he meant that he was going to France for good. Not just a short trip as I'd first assumed.

"I'm sorry it seems so sudden but there are some things I really needed to say to you before I go." My mouth was open but I couldn't find anything to say. He took a breath and continued.

"When I came to London it was for a purpose but I think I stayed too long. I started to get over Casey, straighten out my brain."

"Your head." I finally said.

"Excuse me?"

"Your head, straighten out your head. That's the proper term. Not your brain." I never usually corrected his English but there he was, casually telling me I was dumped, what did he expect?

"Sorry, yes my head. My head has been everywhere it seems this year. First on Casey, then on my career and now on you Angelique. You see, I'm not ready so soon to be in love again. I need time to sort out my head once and for all and when I first saw you I thought you could help me do that. But now I feel I am falling in love with you and I need to stop before I get too deep."

"Why do you have to stop? We could fall deeply in love and sort each other's brains out."

"Heads. You mean heads, no?" He paused, waiting for my answer but I was out of words. "My mind is made up. It's right for me to go now. It's not fair on you with Casey still there in my head. I have to go back and start fresh to regain my sanity. Can you understand Angelique?"

I always wondered what would have been if I'd said, no I don't understand. If I'd pleaded for him to take me with him and try to convince him that he might change his mind about me. But, there was no point. I knew it then and I know it now.

"Well, Jules, I wish you luck. I hope your head gets sorted out soon. Maybe you will invite me to a meal at your restaurant one of these days and I can invite you to mine."

The door swung shut behind me and I never looked back. I never told him I loved him. I had that at least. Although, I wish he could have known how much.

When I walked in Jasmin was all smiles, grabbing at my left hand with mock excitement. And that's when the floodgates opened.

"Tea or coffee for you?" I'm not sure how many times the flight attendant has asked

the question. I'm miles away. I turn to see my new flying buddy, all teeth and pointing at his cup.

"Is it tea or coffee? I'm guessing you're a coffee person. Am I right?" What the hell has this man got to be so damned happy about?

"Tea please."

Jasmin was my absolute rock during the next phase of my life. She tried to take my mind off Jules and focus it on getting a business plan together. The time was right for trying to open premises. We had envisioned a sandwich bar with a decent enough kitchen to work in. All of the High Street banks turned us down for a loan. But Jasmin had a plan B to put to me. Her boyfriend, Steven, wanted to invest in the business and this would give us the capital the banks said we lacked. But Steven was a boyfriend and boyfriends let girlfriends down.

"But it wouldn't be a boyfriend, girlfriend thing. It's business and there would be proper drawn up contracts that are effective whether we're sleeping together or not. Steven's not an idiot. He's not doing it for love. He's seen our business plan and he knows how good this thing is. If we took his money and went back to the bank we could be in our perfect unit by next week."

It wasn't quite as quick as a week. But before we could walk into our new premises, there was one more river to cross.

I need to stretch my legs for a bit. Splash my face. Maybe put on some lipstick. Might make me feel a bit more with it. Maybe I'll stop snarling at the guy sitting next to me.

"Excuse me." I turn to him and force a smile. "Just need the ladies. Thanks." He makes an elaborate gesture of vacating his seat and standing like a doorman in the aisle whilst I make my way to the WC. He practically bows.

Peace at last. As I suspected, I look awful. My eyes have dark circles. Anyone can see I haven't been sleeping properly. I put my bag down and turn on the cold tap. The water feels great on my face. I take out my lipstick and apply two coats but I still look about the same. I might as well go back to my seat and admit defeat. But hold on, he'll still be there and might want an after-lunch chat. I'll just wait another minute.

"Just one minute and we'll know for sure." Jasmin had a furrowed brow and a smile at the same time. That was her worried, but pretending not to be look. The first test had already proved positive but Jasmin insisted she pop down to the chemist to try a different one, just in case.

"We had to wait for a blue line right?" I came out of the bathroom holding the second pregnancy test stick.

"Yes?" Jasmin had her hands clenched together.

"Well according to this I must be expecting twins because this line is navy. What the hell am I going to do?"

"Sit down Ang. You've got options and you don't have to rush into anything you don't want to do. There's no pressure. Just relax and think. O.K.?"

"Yes, O.K." I sat down.

"Well. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know Jas. What the hell *should* I do? Shit. I suppose I should tell Jules? But he'll be gone soon. I guess this is up to me now." I paused and took a deep breath. "Jasmin?"

"What?"

"How do I tell Mum about this?"

I make my way back down the aisle of the plane. He springs to his feet to let me get back to my seat. He really is a nice guy.

"Thank you." I say.

"Not a problem. You were gracious enough to let me sit here. I'll just get my laptop out and do some work. Shan't bother you anymore." Have I been such an obvious bitch? He doesn't deserve to be treated that way.

"Oh you're not bothering me really. I've just been caught up in my thoughts today. Just wanted to be quiet and sort things out in my mind."

"Oh. I see. Escaping are we? Is it problems at home or work?" I look at him sharply.

"There I go again. I'm being a bother. I'm sorry. I just can't help myself sometimes."

"No, don't apologise. It's just." I can't possibly dare to tell him. "Well work is a bit all

over the place right now. Just taking a break from the grind." I'm fingering the plastic bag with headphones in it. There's still a chance I can shut him out for a while.

"What is it you do?" He asks.

"I have a catering company."

"Oh, that sounds impressive."

"Well it's not huge or anything but it does quite well."

"Good. Good. You the sole owner?"

"Well, I started with a friend. It's all mine now, though."

"Must be tough going it alone."

Alone. That word again. I retreat into my shell once again. Open the plastic wrapper, take out the headphones and search. Film, radio. I don't mind. I don't want to be reminded about why I'm here.