

The Essential Ingredient —

Love

Tracy Madden



For my protector. Since I was 13 years old, he has loved, cared, encouraged and protected me. My essential ingredient – my husband Chris!



My thanks go to my children, the powerful and beautiful Fleur and the strong and silent achiever Nick. Fleur you teach me how to dream bigger, Nick you teach me how to be a better me. To my children-in-law, Rohan and Genevieve, who give me encouragement when I need it most and more importantly, give me love. To my own family who have made me who I am today and to my many beautiful girlfriends, who bring me joy, make me laugh, share their lives and stories and always manage to love me. I am blessed to have you all in my life. Thank you all!

Chapter 1

*T*he voice-over crackled through the airport lounge for the second time in 40 minutes. Her flight home to Brisbane had been delayed yet again. Drumming her red tipped fingers on the arm of the chair, Chilli glanced around the grey Qantas departure lounge, imagining the possibilities a colour transformation would bring, turning this busy area into a much more exciting place to wait.

Petite, with a figure totally at odds with her 43 years, and lustrous chocolate brown hair styled in a long bob with a blunt fringe, framing huge brown eyes, Chilli wore her style well. Her signature red lipstick accentuated the fullness of her upper lip and complimented the red Charlie Brown pantsuit she was wearing.

Keen to be on her way home, she glanced around once more, then gracefully locked her hands together and leant forward, stretching her back. Stifling a tiny yawn, she pulled her phone from her bag and dialled Rob, her husband. She found herself smiling into the phone as she left a message. "Just wanted to let you know that my flight's been delayed yet again, but we should be boarding soon, landing around 7.30. And by the way, please don't be late I'll be starving by then. I don't mind where we eat. See you soon, love you."

Still smiling, Chilli snapped the phone shut. She was about to pop it back into her black Hermes bag, but it slipped from her grasp and slid under the seat. She crouched down and saw that it had landed under the seat of the woman behind her. She would have asked her to assist, but the woman had her eyes closed and looked like she was asleep. The only way to retrieve it was to kneel down on all fours and stretch out, backside in the air. It wasn't exactly ladylike, and she was grateful that she was wearing trousers. Having reached the phone, she stood up, flicked her hair behind one ear, straightened her jacket and sat back down, just in time to see a gentleman smile briefly before he quickly looked away and sat opposite her.

Fiddling with the mass of pearls chunked at her neck, she crossed her legs, and surreptitiously looked his way. At first glance, it wasn't hard to

see he was a man with an easy style. Tall and of a solid stature, he was wearing denim jeans with tan R. M. William's boots. She glanced away but then took a second look. His tanned face gave him an outdoorsy look. As she watched, he pulled his sleeve up to check the time and then ran a hand through his wavy hair. Chilli noticed his cufflinks. Square green jewels, not dissimilar to the ones she had recently bought from a store in Chapel Street for Rob. Every time she visited Melbourne she came home with something from that store for him. It was almost becoming an obsession.

Chilli had spent the last two days in Melbourne at Designex, a must see industry event brimming with the latest in design innovations, inspirational interiors and architectural revolutions. As a developer, it was more up Rob's alley, but as she assisted the company with the finishes, in particular the colours, she had gone in his place.

Colour was Chilli's thing. She was passionate about it. Always had been. At the tender age of five she was astonished to learn that not everyone saw the days of the week like she did. Hours, days, even weeks of her life were spent dreaming of colour. She had been known to design a complete interior colour scheme in her mind while lying on the floor, gazing at the ceiling. Whether she was designing, or preparing a meal, she was always harnessing a rainbow of colour.

Finally the flight to Brisbane was boarding. In her eagerness to board, Chilli jumped up, caught the heel of her Manolo Blahniks on the wheel of her case and did a little double hop, banging her shin on the corner of the bag. Righting herself with as much poise as one is able to at such an embarrassing time, she smoothed her suit and hoped no one had noticed her embarrassment.

The gentleman with the green cufflinks appeared amused. Raising her eyebrows, she shook her head and gave him the briefest of smiles.

Slinging a tan leather overnight bag over his shoulder, he returned the smile and joined the long queue.

Chilli usually loved to fly, but not only was she weary and keen to be home, her shin was now smarting and she was desperate to pull the leg of her trousers up and rub it. Once she was seated she'd take a look.

Resting her small case on the aisle seat, she pulled out some brochures to give her something to do for the next two hours. Then, with some dif-

faculty, she attempted to hoist the case into the overhead locker. It was harder than she thought because she had gathered so many samples of weighty marble and granite, along with everything else. On her tippy toes, once again she attempted to lift and was taken by surprise when a hand came over the top and effortlessly pushed the case into place.

“You right there?” was all the tall voice said.

Turning she smiled. “Thank you.”

It was the man with the green cufflinks. “No problem,” he said, pushing his own bag into the next locker.

Chilli sat down and fastened her seat belt, wishing that everyone would board quickly and find their seats so the plane could get underway. She watched as a man walked back and forth a couple of times and then spoke to a flight attendant. Really how hard could it possibly be to read the boarding pass? The man and the flight attendant looked her way and then together came and paused at her row. Chilli stood to let the man pass but the flight attendant spoke.

“Excuse me madam, but may I see your boarding pass? I think you may be in this gentleman’s seat.”

Chilli dug into her handbag and retrieved the pass. She glanced overhead at the seat number and realised she was meant to be in the row behind.

Feeling the eyes of the plane upon her, she apologised and slid into the seat behind, but not before noticing that the gentleman next to her was none other than the green cufflink wearer. He cocked an eyebrow. “Having a few problems?” he asked.

“Just one of those days,” she said.

Nodding slowly, he turned his attention back to his magazine. She in turn gave all her attention to the brochures, acting as if it all was terribly interesting. This also worked to settle the nerves that reared their ugly head lately when she flew. Flying had not been the same for her since 9/11.

Within minutes they were underway and the customer service manager made the welcoming and safety announcement. Putting her reading aside, Chilli watched the flight attendant in front of her, noticing that barely anyone else was paying attention. She wanted to know exactly where her nearest exit was if anything did happen.

Exhaling heavily, she closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the seat. God, did she have to over-think everything?

*I*t had been such a big year that she had hardly been able to take a breath. When life was sweet, time seemed to pass at an accelerated rate.

Fifteen months ago, her son Sam, a chef, had decided he wanted to open his own restaurant. And just three months ago his dream had come into fruition and Montgomery's was born.

As a young chef, Sam had done a stint in a restaurant in Victoria's high country. The woman that he had worked for had been a true mentor. What she had taught him had been invaluable; number one, to have the utmost respect for his ingredients, and number two, to understand where his food had come from. She told him to go back to the roots of the produce and see how it was grown, to feel the bond with the land. If he wanted to serve rabbit, then he had to see what the rabbit ate; that was how a good chef developed love and respect for food.

The Victorian restaurant was set on farmland and most of the kitchen's ingredients were grown on site.

Sam had told Chilli that when they picked a lettuce in the late afternoon, they would have it on a plate within hours; the vibrancy palpable. He said he didn't even have to eat it; he could see it and smell it. That's what he wanted as a chef, that vibrancy in all the meals he served.

He had come back home to Brisbane full of enthusiasm, saying that when the time was right he wanted his own restaurant. He began working in a French restaurant in the city at night, and by day looked for a suitable location. For the past two years, he had been living in a house that Rob's father, Harry, had left to him, in the leafy inner city suburb of New Farm, not far from where Chilli and Rob lived. After exhausting many possibilities, Sam phoned his parents early one morning and excitedly said, "Hey, when you guys go for your walk this morning, can you pop by my place?"

A breakfast of corn fritters and bacon stack, a favourite of Rob's, was set up on the front veranda of the large, shabby, old Queenslander. Typical of the day, the house had undergone many renovations until most of the charm and character had been removed.

In the midst of them enjoying the wonderful food, Sam leant back in

his chair and waved his arms around. "Well, what do you think of here?"

"What do you mean darling?" Chilli asked, taking another sip of the freshly squeezed pineapple and mint juice.

"For my restaurant," he explained, looking from one parent to another. "For a start, I already own it." Sam stood up, unable to contain himself any longer. "Renting out a few bedrooms to my mates is hardly profitable, a restaurant would be far better business. And the area is perfect. Remember I told you last week about that other property I looked at and the huge amount of rent they wanted. It got me thinking about here. I didn't want to mention it until I had it clear in my mind."

Chilli shared a glance with Rob. He shrugged, nodding his head. The truth was you couldn't get a better position. With its already eclectic mix of multi-cultural restaurants, galleries and delightful Victorian buildings, seasoned with Art Deco and spiced with ultra modern architectural statements, it could well be the perfect location. She was surprised that none of them had thought of it before. After all, it was the cosmopolitan heart of Brisbane.

Chilli looked back at Rob. He didn't have to say a word, she knew the look on his face, she had seen it plenty of times. That mind of his was going into overdrive, working out the figures.

"Well?" she asked.

He scratched his chin. "Sam could be onto something."

Chilli began to walk around the house. One of her greatest skills was seeing beauty where others could not. She imagined tearing down walls and restoring elements of character. The possibility of creating a unique interior inspired her. A picture began to grow.

Rob was already on the same wavelength as her. His face had run the gauntlet of interest, excitement and was now looking cautious. "This is going to be a huge job mate. Do you think you are up to it? After all, it's a slightly more ambitious dream than what we had talked about."

"Look Dad, you've always said to break free of mediocrity and strive for greatness! Well, I am breaking free now." He waved his arms around. "I know I'm young, but Grandad Harry leaving me this place was unbelievable. I think it's meant to be and I know I would have his blessing with it. The finances are another story. I have to see the bank, but you said maybe you'd like to be involved." He looked from one parent to the other. "And

don't say anything yet Mum, I want you involved as well, and Miranda. She's gone to see her mother and will be back soon. I asked her to let me talk to you first."

Stopping in her tracks, Chilli put her hands on her hips. "Darling, what could I possibly do in your restaurant? Surely you're not thinking that I could wait tables?"

"Yes that was my thought!" Sam teased. "Of course not. Firstly, I would want your help with the fit out..." He hesitated.

"Of course darling. I did hope to be involved on that level. But do I sense a second thing?"

Sam started up at great speed, "Since you sold your business, I know you've been looking around for something else. As the house is rather large..." He paused briefly, and then dived headlong into it, "I wondered if you would be interested in doing something homey in it as well?"

"What do you mean homey?" Chilli frowned thoughtfully. "Do you mean homewares?" she said, imagining the idea as she spoke.

When she had sold her business five years ago, she found she still had a need to express her creativity, albeit in only the tiniest details. The world was such a kaleidoscope of wonderful materials that she itched to use them. Having studied at an art school and taken numerous workshops, she had joined Rob's business as a consultant.

"Yes, that's it," Sam carried on excitedly. "This would be far too big for the type of restaurant I'm imagining, so there would be space for you as well."

Chilli's mind was spinning, she clasped her hands together and out aloud she said, "I love it! Beautiful things and beautiful food!"

Rob, always the analytical thinker, turned to Sam. "Okay, what are you imagining? To be honest mate, we thought that it would take some time for you to come up with something, so we probably haven't discussed exactly what it is you want."

It was not hard to catch some of Sam's enthusiasm. His brown eyes shone, his hands were animated and the excitement and emotion for his trade poured out. "Right well, I know it sounds ambitious to have something this big, but I've listened to you saying, 'best to crawl before you walk', so I don't think I will start with evenings until I get established and even then I think I will only do special occasions, functions and the like."

He spoke quickly. "My plan is to open early in the morning and do fabulous breakfasts and lunches. I want it to be a place where you can come and have a coffee and something to eat and read the newspaper, or buy a gift, or take home something already prepared, or meet friends for lunch and purchase something for your home. I don't want it to just be a cafe or a restaurant; I want it to be an experience. You know, I think a mix of modern and traditional. I want a fabulous, modern, open kitchen, where I can see everyone and they can see me and my staff, and I want people to have food that gives them raptures, using the absolute freshest, seasonal produce."

"Well you sound like you have been giving this heaps of thought," Chilli said, liking what she heard.

"You sound like your mother!" Rob commented dryly.

Sam laughed. "I want a blackboard menu, where we are inspired everyday by what is fresh, so we constantly change people's experiences. I want to serve mouth-watering desserts, so that people find it impossible to choose just one. Tarte tatins with seasonal fruits, toffee glazed coffee custard eclairs, gateau au chocolate with a chocolate mousse filling, desserts that scream comfort.

"And I want to have totally different breakfast ideas. Probably my version of a bircher muesli, and also a huge bowl of stewed fruit with organic yogurt and bush honey and prunes stuffed with mascarpone. And lunches tapas style, with a good soup in winter and different salads every day. Fantastic combinations like beetroot and walnut salad; chicken, celery heart and tarragon. Or witlof, pear, blue cheese and hazelnut, and even a couple of warm salads. Perhaps saffron mussels, pipis and prawns with rouill or white beans and duck confit. You know the type of things I like!"

Both of his parents nodded their heads in agreement. Sam wandered around imagining, as he continued on with mouth-watering excitement. "We must have great coffee, dark syrupy espressos, milky breakfast bowls of cafe lattes, and tiny, bite size sweets to have with it. Great cheeses too!" He paused for a minute and then added, "And I am hoping to do take home style meals and even take home canapés."

Rob waved his hands at him. "Slow down mate! What happened to crawling first?" He patted his son on the back. "Listen, I'm pleased you're this excited, but we need to do a business plan first. Let's do our home-

work.” He nodded his head. “Personally, I think you may be on to a good thing.” Turning to Chilli he asked, “What are your thoughts Chill?”

She had been quietly taking it all in. Her mind was buzzing a million miles an hour. A business with her son!

“To be honest, I think going back into business scares me a little, particularly with the hours we would have to open.” Chilli narrowed her eyes. “Are you thinking seven days a week?”

Sam sat down at the table opposite her. “I was, but the beauty of us doing this together is that we would always have staff on board and you can call the shots for whatever hours you want. I know any business needs a huge amount of work, I’m just saying that you could make it as big or as small as you’d like. I’ll be happy with whatever you want Mum. I know for me it will be huge hours, but as you say Dad, I am young and this is the time for me to do it.”

Rob scratched his head. “I seem to have been saying a lot of things. To be honest mate, I didn’t think you had been listening.” He caught Chilli’s eye. The pride they felt for Sam at that moment was reflected on each of their faces. For the first time they realised Sam had been like a sponge, absorbing every little thing they had said. Chilli’s strict regime of always eating dinner as a family and discussing their day had obviously paid off. Rob continued, “Now, I seem to remember you mentioning Miranda?”

Leaning forward, Sam put his hands on the table. “What do you think about somewhere you could buy fresh flowers as well? Working at her mother’s florist was meant to be for pocket money but Miranda’s found she really loves the creative side of things. She also wants to put her business and marketing degrees into action and has some sensational ideas. I can’t do justice to it, so I’ll let her explain it to you. It would be another business inside of this business.” He looked between his parents, thoughtfully touching his upper lip with his index finger.

His parents exchanged a glance. Then Chilli spoke, “Darling...” she paused to gather her thoughts. “I know you two have been together for a couple of years, but having a business together is a whole other thing for a couple so young.”

“Right, so what you are saying is,” Sam glanced between his parents again, “What if we break up? We thought you might ask that and we want, actually, I want you to know, I don’t think that is going to happen. Mum,

I think she is the one.”

Although not exactly surprised, Chilli raised her eyebrows at his honesty, but Sam continued on. “We want to go on this adventure together. We will cross any disasters when and if they happen. We can’t not attempt something because of the what ifs.”

Rob tried his best at a bit of smoothing over. “That’s all well and good and romantic mate, but that is not how businesses are run. You have to have a good business plan that takes into account every party here. Maybe Miranda could lease her space and operate that way. Give me a bit of time to think about it.”

A cheery voice from the doorway startled them. “That’s exactly what my mother just said.”

Miranda walked in and stood beside Sam’s chair. She kissed him on the forehead and ran her fingers through his hair.

“Sounds like both of our parents are thinking along the same lines Sammy.” Standing behind him, Miranda reached forward and put her hands down onto Sam’s chest. His hands grasped hers and then he kissed one of them.

Once again, Chilli and Rob shared a meaningful glance. And then Rob tried to explain, “Miranda, I wasn’t attempting to be cynical or disrespectful.”

“I know you weren’t Rob. I’ve already said to Sam that I knew you would work it out perfectly for us and I would be very happy whichever way it went. You haven’t been in business all these years for nothing, and we need every bit of advice you can give us. I just see both of us achieving this wonderful dream together, with the help of you and Chilli. Isn’t that right Sammy?” Miranda looked at Sam as if the whole world started and finished right there. At that moment Chilli looked at Miranda and fell in love with her as well.

Miranda had been a delight to them from the moment Sam had first brought her home. If they could have handpicked a girlfriend for Sam, Miranda would have been it. She possessed the most beautiful qualities inside and out. She wasn’t tall but had a curvy little figure and long, dark, wavy hair. Sometimes in the middle of talking to them, she would absentmindedly pile her hair up on top of her head and secure it with some obscure thing like a chopstick or a pen, making her look simply amazing. She had

a beautiful, dreamy face, but underneath was a sharply intelligent mind. She always had a special knack of looking at the happy side of things and seeing beauty in everything. One of her best traits was that she delighted in small things. Luckily, her family appeared to love Sam as well. Chilli had said to Rob, that she wished Sam had met Miranda when they were both a bit older, as she was everything she would have loved in a daughter-in-law, but they were both so young.

“You know guys I am feeling a bit left out. I am not sure that I fit in anywhere here. I don’t seem to have a job,” Rob teased.

With his arm around Miranda’s waist, Sam told him, “You have the big one Dad. Helping us make it happen.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” Quickly he shook his head and then laughed. “Okay, let’s talk about every possible idea you two have and then we’ll all go away and have a think. We’ll have a meeting together in a couple of days. Let’s start making lists and we’ll see if this plan can work.”

The young couple walked them around, revealing all of their exciting ideas. They wanted to open the house up entirely across the front. On one side they cleverly suggested putting in huge bi-folding glass doors and on the other, large glass windows overlooking the street. In front of the bi-folding doors, Sam thought they may be able to obtain council approval to build a large covered deck that ran right out to the footpath. Inside they wanted to knock out every wall unless it was load bearing. Thankfully they wanted to keep the old fireplace and renovate it.

“We want a mix of modern and old Chilli, but we will be guided by you,” Miranda explained.

“Not wanting to upset the apple cart, but you two have been living together here, so where do you see yourselves going?” Chilli asked. “You can of course, come home to us.”

“Thanks Mum. We probably will during the renovations. But I was thinking about the old store rooms downstairs. I know they haven’t been touched for years and are full of Grandad’s tools and stuff, plus when I checked them out the other day, I noticed that they are pretty dank. There must be a water problem somewhere. Do you think that there is any way we could make those liveable? We don’t actually need much space and as I’m going to be up early every morning, it would be quite handy?” The block the house was on, dropped away from the road and there was an-

other level underneath.

“Anything is possible. You know Sam, we are talking big money here in general though. This is going to be an enormous renovation job and it will have to be done properly.”

“Yes I agree it will,” Rob cut in, “but I think it would be a great investment and as much as I have to look into it further, I am excited by it and I’m in if you’ll have me mate.”

“Gee Dad, I’ll have to give it some thought...” Sam laughed. He looked up at his father and patted him on the back. Rob was a good four inches taller than Sam. Growing up, it had never been hard to see who Sam’s mother was, they were alike in so many ways, dark hair, brown eyes and olive skin, but as he matured, his mannerisms were becoming more like his father’s every day.

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*N*early 12 months after they first talked about it, Montgomery’s was ready to open. It had been a huge amount of work, more than any of them had envisioned.

Tonight was their soft opening. Their plan was to wait until they had been trading for a couple of months for the more formal one. Tonight’s guest list comprised of one hundred people, mainly made up of their family and closest friends.

Three months earlier, Rob had insisted that the young couple take a week’s holiday in Hawaii. Both had worked extremely long hours every day and it was finally taking its toll. He had said to them, “Look guys if we don’t have a chef, we don’t have this business. The two of you have worked your butts off. And I’m really proud of you both. Once the business opens, there’s no way possible you’ll be able to have a holiday for a while. Take a week now. We have everything under control. Come back refreshed and be ready to get back into it again.”

Sam had argued futilely, but finally said they would think about it. He didn’t want to miss one day of any part of this adventure. A few days later, Rob walked in with airline tickets to Hawaii. Waving them in the air, he said, “All booked and paid for. Just turn up and enjoy.”

“Dad, I can’t pay for these just yet.”

“Of course, you can’t. I have. I wanted to. What do you think I am

going to do, take my money with me when I go? It's for us to enjoy now, and if it's okay with you, I've just picked you and Miranda to enjoy it. We can't have an exhausted chef for the opening. Case closed!"

"But what about you and Mum? You've both been working pretty hard as well."

"Not as hard as you two. We can take a holiday whenever we want. Your mother's not going to be indispensable on a daily basis. We've talked about this and we're good. We're hoping to go to France within the next year, so we'll be fine until then. You know your mother has been hoping to show me her Paris for the longest time." Rolling his eyes, he laughed.

Hawaii had been a great idea of Rob's. The young couple came back brown as bears and loving each other all the more.

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*F*inally *Montgomery's* was ready to open. From the footpath, Chilli stood looking in, admiring all of their hard work. The restaurant literally sparkled as every light was switched on. The bi-folding doors were stacked back and there was a view straight into the kitchen, all stainless steel and shiny. Amid the flurry of activity behind the counter, the kitchen staff bobbed and weaved fluidly.

Glad to have a couple of minutes to herself, Chilli continued to stand there and take it all in. It had turned out to be a much bigger job than envisioned. All of the carpets had been ripped up, the floors sanded back and then glossed to within an inch of their lives. The ceilings were painted white and the remaining walls black. Right along the right hand side of the house, they had lost all of the windows and ran a huge white, leather, studded banquette, resembling an enormous white Chesterfield. Strikingly, it sat against the backdrop of a black wall and beneath two enormous Venetian mirrors. White chandeliers were fitted throughout into coffered ceilings, and white marble tables adorned the floors. The old fireplace had been retained and revamped with white paint and then topped with a Calcutta marble mantle. On either side of it were two Louis XV chairs, upholstered in black and white striped fabric.

Tucked behind the kitchen was where her homewares and gifts were housed on black shelving against black walls. A 12-seater French oak dining table took centre stage to display treasures. The table was also to be

used for small private dinner parties that Sam had planned for in the future. There was black tissue paper for wrapping, and the carrier bags were black and white striped with a hot pink square, embossed with Montgomery's signature in black.

A certain amount of the stock was themed in the restaurant colours; black, silver and glass. Overall there was an eclectic mix of all of Chilli's favourite things, a blend of the contemporary and the nostalgic. Style books and cookbooks sat alongside elegant black and white striped cups and saucers. There were black anodised water carafes; crystal perfume bottles; vases and urns and fluffy white towels with black trim; luxurious towelling robes and slippers to match; fragranced bath and body products that came packed in black and white boxes; monogrammed scented soaps in silver plated dishes; and vintage glassware in red and clear crystal.

Miranda had filled the restaurant with white orchids in square, white, china pots. Square mirrors were placed under each pot and tea-light candles in glass votives were scattered around. Candles of varying sizes were massed on the fireplace mantel, glowing reflectively in the huge, ornate mirror hanging above.

As a double bonus, Miranda had been brilliant with the marketing. The invitations for tonight were done in black and white striped backing paper, topped with sheer white paper, secured with a small hot pink bow for a splash of colour.

Noodle boxes had been made up to match, and not only were these to be used during the evening, but also as gift boxes to take home with a selection of Sam's desserts made in mini version. The idea was to give them some taste sensations to delight their palate to remind them of their very first visit to Montgomery's.

The breezy, yet efficient, floor staff were dressed in black, with the kitchen staff in white, and all wore the Montgomery's black and white striped aprons.

Chilli was out the front of the restaurant, when Sam spotted her. She had chosen a lemon, sunray pleated cocktail dress with fine straps and a trail of fabric flowers trailing over one shoulder and down across a breast, and she looked stunning. With her dark shoulder length hair and olive skin, she wore the colour well.

"Mum, where's Dad? I have been trying to catch the two of you to-

gether all day. It's been impossible."

Chilli admired her son in his dinner suit. Both he and Miranda had decided on a formal dress code for the evening and on seeing him, Chilli was glad that they had. And it had given her the perfect excuse to purchase the silver strappy heels heavily adorned with Swarovski crystals.

"Dad will be along in a minute, Sam. He's just raced home. He had on mismatched cufflinks. Can you believe it? He must have been flustered when he was getting dressed and didn't notice." Chilli gave a small laugh and then noticed that Sam appeared agitated. "What's up darling? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong. But I did want to talk to you both together before the guests arrived," he said, running a finger under his collar. "When Dad gets back, please come and find me. It's important," he stressed.

"Okay. Do you want to tell me anything now?" Chilli straightened his bowtie. He was such a good looking boy. Smoothing his lapel, she picked at an imaginary piece of lint.

"No," he said touching her hand. "I'll wait for Dad. Don't look so worried, it's nothing bad."

"You're probably nervous. Take a few deep breaths." She touched his arm, feeling the solid presence of him. "I'm glad you found me out here, I wanted a moment alone with you." She paused for a couple of seconds. "I want to tell you how incredibly proud I am of you. You have turned into a wonderful young man and you are in a wonderful time of your life. Enjoy the journey sweetie and remember to stop and smell the roses along the way." Her voice broke a little and she put her arms around him. In return, he embraced her, and even through his jacket, she could feel his heart pounding. They stood that way for a few seconds, until they were interrupted by a call from one of the kitchen staff.

"Chef, we need you for a minute?"

"Coming Dom!" Sam made to leave and then turned back and kissed her cheek. "Love you Mum."

As she watched him go, she saw Miranda rearranging the orchids yet again. Never had Chilli seen her looking more beautiful, dressed in an ivory Collette Dinnigan beaded number, with her black hair piled loosely on top of her head.

Earlier in the week, Miranda had asked if Chilli had any earrings that

she could borrow. They had both decided on a pair that Chilli had bought in Paris some time ago. Chilli thought they looked perfect with her dress tonight.

She watched as Rob parked his silver BMW. Some people looked like their cars and Rob was no exception.

Walking towards her, she had to admit that at 49 he was still a handsome man. Although, his blonde hair peppered with grey had just begun to recede, it took nothing away from his looks. In fact he was like good wine; he got better with age.

But she barely had a chance to catch him as the first of their guests arrived.

On the front deck, to the background of the string quartet, waiters received guests with sparkling wine poured over a closed wild hibiscus. There was something hypnotic about the way the flowers, preserved in syrup, unfolded in the flute.

Guests were ushered in to admire the restaurant and treated to a bevy of canapés, designed by Sam. The first canapé to tantalise their taste buds was seared scallops with lemon pesto and cucumber. All at once, they were tasty and refreshing.

The four hosts floated from one guest to another making sure everyone was enjoying themselves. Every now and then Sam would dash back into the kitchen to oversee something and put out fires. Chilli saw him attempt to catch her and his father's eye numerous times, but they didn't seem to be able to get a moment together.

Finally, an hour into the evening, Sam caught up with both of his parents. "Guys I really, really need to see both of you together for five minutes. Miranda will look after everything here. Come downstairs." Sharing furtive glances with each other, they followed.

Downstairs, as he turned to face them, he used the back of his hand to wipe at the beads of perspiration on his forehead. "Mum, Dad, I have something to tell you. I thought keeping it a secret until the last minute was the right thing to do, but now I'm not so sure and I'm a bit nervous." He ran his hands through his hair and began to pace. His face was pale.

Chilli caught his arm. "What is it?" she asked, feeling a little ill.

Stopping he exhaled and nervously placed a hand on his head. He looked between his parents. "In a couple of minutes Miranda and I are

going to be married.”

There was deathly silence. Rob was the first to find his voice. “What are you talking about mate?” His voice couldn’t hide his shock.

With her arms folded across her chest as if to protect herself, Chilli asked, “What do you mean?” Her voice sounded strange.

“I asked Miranda when we were in Hawaii and she said yes. We were going to ring you and tell you, but the more we talked about it, the more we decided that there wouldn’t be time for a wedding for the next year at least. You and Dad had paid for our holiday and you’ve invested so much money and time in this place. We didn’t want to ask you for anything else. We knew if you knew, you would have planned something grander with Miranda’s parents and we didn’t want that. We’re incredibly grateful for everything you’ve done for us and this is the way we want it. When we officially open in two days time, we want to do it as a married couple.”

Rob and Chilli were speechless, trying to digest what Sam had just told them.

Sam continued, “That was one of the reasons that we decided not to open tomorrow. We thought that after the wedding tonight, we would all need a day to recover.” He paused. “Mum, please say something. Say it’s okay.”

Chilli realised that she had covered her mouth with her hand. Pulling her hand away, she took his. With a dry mouth and a hammering heart, she let out a huge breath and spoke slowly. “Of course it’s okay. I’m sorry darling, I’m stunned. Too much is happening. We love Miranda of course.” Placing a hand on her chest, she shook her head, still in shock, and glanced across at Rob.

His face said it all; he was far too emotional for words. He put his arm out and drew his son to his chest. Chilli just stood there, and nervously rubbed her forehead. She felt like a bolt of lightning had come down and struck her on the forehead. She wasn’t ready for this. She did love Miranda, but they had given no clue that this was going to happen. Putting his other arm out, Rob pulled her into their embrace. The three of them clung to each other, the last time for them to be a family of three.

Suddenly Chilli pulled away and asked the first of the 500 questions that were going through her head. “Hang on, I still don’t understand. How is this happening? I mean, who is going to marry you?”

“Ned Armoury. I had to see him to sign some papers when we came back from Hawaii, and I remembered that he was a Justice of the Peace. I asked if he could officiate a wedding ceremony. He said yes and so we took it from there.” Sam ran one of his hands through his hair. “I really wanted to tell you this morning, but I couldn’t get the two of you together.”

“What about Miranda’s parents?” Chilli asked, still rubbing her forehead.

“I wanted to ask her father for permission, so I went to their home this morning. Miranda’s mother has been in a panic all day and hasn’t stopped calling.”

Chilli could well imagine! Rob still hadn’t said anything. Normally, she was the emotional one and he was her rock.

She knew she had to take control. “Okay my two men. Let’s do this. Hang on, I have to hug you again my darling.” She couldn’t let go of her son; she busied herself straightening his bowtie. “When did you turn into this man and I wasn’t looking!”

He was not her little boy anymore. It wasn’t that she was unhappy; she was just totally overwhelmed. Chilli had imagined his wedding before, and this was not how she thought it would be. Things began to make sense now; the dinner suits, Miranda’s dress, the borrowed earrings, Sam and Miranda stressing over details that normally wouldn’t be an issue.

Again the three of them hugged until finally Rob regained his composure. He cleared his throat. “Right, we have guests upstairs and a wedding. It’s your show mate, lead the way.”

*

*U*pstairs, guests with noodle boxes in hand, were munching on crisp, fried, soft shell crab with green mango salad and roasted shallots. Murmurs of delight echoed around the room.

Miranda flanked by her parents, Ken and Lucille, watched as the Montgomerys rejoined the party. With his parents in tow, Sam made a beeline for her. Chilli embraced the young woman tightly and wasn’t sure whose heart she could feel pounding more, Miranda’s or hers.

“I don’t need to say welcome sweetie, you have been for a long time,” Chilli whispered to her.

Rob shook Ken’s hand furiously. “Right Ken, I think that this show is

all yours.”

Sam interrupted, “But Dad I don’t want the wedding to overshadow the opening. Maybe we should do the formalities for it first?”

“Priorities mate. I think that just maybe the wedding is going to overshadow it, so let’s make sure it well and truly does.” He patted his son on the back and turned back to Ken.

But Ken was keen to hand it over. “Quite frankly, I’d like to be guided by Sam and Miranda. This is their show and we may have a few hours on you Rob, but we’re still a little overwhelmed,” he explained. The two mothers reached out and grasped hands, squeezing tightly.

Finally Chilli found her voice. “Could I have one second please? I’d like to touch up my lipstick.” What she really needed was a few moments alone. Her face belied the shock she was feeling as she walked across the room, making small talk with her guests as she went. She closed the door and looked around, grateful to have it to herself. It was the first time since this dramatic room of floor to ceiling black Bisazza tiles had been finished that she didn’t walk in and admire her handiwork. She didn’t see a thing.

She leant against the black vanity, rubbing her forehead, her mind going a million miles an hour. She caught sight of her reflection in one of the silver oval mirrors, and instantly lifted her brows to alleviate the furrow put there by shock. A pot of white orchids sat on the vanity. Her index finger gently stroked a petal. Her mind briefly registered that Miranda had not missed a single detail. She shook her head to clear it. Head bent, she rested her palm against her forehead.

What the heck had just happened? He was her baby. She wasn’t ready for this. When did he grow up and she wasn’t looking? At this moment, she didn’t feel very grown up. And she did not feel ready to have a son who was a husband. What she needed was for all of the guests to leave so she could digest it. She didn’t want to talk to anyone at the moment. Maybe if she just lay down for a couple of minutes, she’d be fine. But they did love Miranda and they didn’t want anyone else. Miranda was the one. Sam was ready! Miranda was ready! But she was not ready. Maybe she was never going to be ready. Maybe this was the best way. Maybe if they had been engaged for a year, she still wouldn’t be ready. Oh my God, Sam was a man and she hadn’t seen it. And that man was about to do one of the most important things in his life and she was in the bathroom.

Deliberately she took her hand away from her forehead. After taking three slow, deep breaths, she opened the door, squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and swept back into the room, summoning up every bit of composure she had.

Her family was waiting for her. Smiling serenely she looked at her son, and nodded her head. "Ready darling?" But her heart was pounding and her knees were wobbly. This was too surreal.

He looked down at her face. "Absolutely Mum! Are you?"

"Absolutely darling, I'm with you all the way." No she wasn't, she was never going to be ready.

"Chilli," said Miranda, "I've made this wrist corsage for you. I kept your dress in mind, so I hope that it's okay for you to wear."

Chilli touched the young woman's hand. "Oh sweetie, you're so talented. Of course I'd love to. How delightful. Can you tie it for me or are your hands shaking as well?" Together they laughed at their nervousness.

Sam tapped a teaspoon against his champagne flute to attract the attention of his guests. "Good evening everybody and a very huge welcome to our new baby this evening. We love it, and we hope that you will love it, and that you are going to return and bring as many of your friends as possible." He paused and looked around the room. "This was initially my dream shared with my beautiful Miranda and my parents. My parents, as you all know have supported me every step of the way. They have helped make my dream a reality. I will never be able to thank them enough." He paused. "Not only are they my parents but they're my best friends as well." There was a huge amount of cheering at this. Sam took a deep breath and continued slowly. "It's very hard when you have a special secret and you can't share it with even your best friends and that is what Miranda and I have done."

Guests began to look at one another, wondering what was to come next. Chilli caught her parents' eyes. She smiled and winked at them, acting far more composed than she actually felt. Not in a million years would they guess what was about to happen.

Sam continued. "This was a very select guest list. Our more formal opening will be in a couple of months. Tonight we wanted people who were special in our lives and you all are. You are so special in fact, Miranda and I would like you to share in our wedding this evening."

There was complete silence, while everyone registered exactly what had been said. Then there was bedlam. Everybody began talking and laughing at once. A couple of people even shed a few tears of emotion. Chilli knew exactly how they felt, but thought if the tears started they may not stop. She looked around for her older brother Charlie. From across the room he held his champagne flute up to her, and with a look of delighted surprise on his face, he toasted her. She smiled in return.

Sam tapped his glass again. "If everyone could please gather around the fireplace, we would like to start."

A voice called out, "What? Do you mean this minute?"

"Yes, I mean this absolute minute." Sam laughed. "Where's Jason? Come on mate I need a best man." Sam and the tall and gangly Jason had been best friends since pre-school. As different as chalk and cheese, both had originally followed the same paths at Grammar and then onto the University of Queensland to follow their dreams of studying law. But within a couple of months, Sam broke the news to his parents that it was not the path for him, and that instead he wanted to be a chef.

Chilli's brother, Charlie, as a chef had been another strong influence in Sam's life, and every school holidays had given him work as a kitchen hand, for pocket money, never realising that one day Sam would make it a career for himself. Sam told his parents that he believed strongly that the style of leadership, passion and respect for food shown there, built onto his developing food affair that his mother had first started, was where his future lay.

Meanwhile Jason had graduated with honours from university. The five top firms in Brisbane had opened their doors to him, offering a position. Chilli looked up at the young man's face now, noticing he still carried an air of boyishness about him, lawyer or not.

"My God, what is happening Chilli?" He shook his head. "I don't know what to say."

She could well imagine. She didn't know what to say. She gave the tall skinny boy a huge hug, putting her arms around his waist. He bent down to her. She wasn't sure if she was doing it for him or to steady herself, but he hung on.

"I know this is ridiculous," he said, "But I'm ..." He shook his head, swallowed and blinked rapidly, "I had no idea. I can't imagine what a shock

it is for you and Rob. Wait until Mum hears. She'll flip."

Sam was busy directing everyone. "Mum, Dad, I want you and Granddad and Grandma up here near me. Lucille, Miranda will want you here."

Realising she was still clutching Jason rather tightly as she still felt the need to anchor herself somewhere, tentatively she let go of her hold and ushered him towards Sam.

The string quartet began to play and Miranda's younger sister Jess walked in, the soft pink of her dress absolutely perfect for her role in the wedding. Earlier, she had told Chilli that even though Miranda had been unbelievably busy, she had taken the time to help Jess pick out a dress for the opening this evening. Looking at Jess, Chilli now understood why. Sam and Miranda had thought of everything. What darlings they were.

Then Miranda, clutching a bouquet of white orchids, followed, escorted by her father. Ken, with tears in his eyes, smiled nervously. Miranda, an oasis of calm, looked at all of her guests with confident beauty and then looked to her waiting groom with such adoration; she looked as if she would melt.

Just before Miranda took her place beside Sam, she stopped and embraced the two mothers. The young woman looked into Chilli's eyes and Chilli saw depths of beauty she had never seen before. She could not ask for a more perfect daughter-in-law. Holding back the tears, she kissed the beautiful girl's face.

Throughout the short ceremony, Sam and Miranda looked at each other with such love, that Chilli just loved them both all the more. It was as if her son had suddenly become a king. There was an aura about him, as he stood so proud and sure of himself. Chilli had always thought that as a parent one could never be too cocky, but tonight, she gave herself a pat on the back and realised what a great job they had done with this boy.

As the beautiful young couple exchanged the vows that they had written for themselves, Chilli was overcome with a sense of surrealism. Everything seemed to be in slow motion and for a moment she couldn't hear anything but the pounding of her own heart in her ears. It was as if she was floating in the room and simply observing. Even the room had the most magical glow to it.

Chilli glanced at Rob beside her. He sensed her, and ever so slowly turned his head, gave her a slow smile, and then turned back to the young

couple. She couldn't help but think she was in a dream; a dream she was not ready for. She wondered if she could just ask everyone to stop, postpone it until she felt ready, but the reality was it didn't matter if she was ready. They were ready!

She was startled back to reality, as at that moment the young couple kissed, and kissed again, amidst cheering and laughing and slaps on the back. Rob took Chilli's hand in his and squeezed it tightly.

With that, the young married couple turned and embraced their parents. Sam then pulled away and looked down at his mother's face.

In a quiet voice, he earnestly asked, "Mum this is how I wanted it. Are you okay with it?" At that moment someone clicked their camera and so Chilli was always to be reminded of that moment in time, when it had seemed that Sam was asking her permission.

Chilli looked into his face and reassured him. "It's perfect my darling. It's all about what you two want. We're happy with that. A bit of notice perhaps... no I'm joking, truly." Playfully she slapped at him. "Your bride awaits... go."

Chilli felt unsure of herself, and she knew it had nothing to do with the young couple. They were meant for each other; she knew that. It was her. She was feeling all sorts of emotions, emotions she didn't even know she had.

The party continued on, with much eating and drinking. Sam's deserts were so sensational that, despite groans of full stomachs, everyone seemed to make more room for the truly sublime mini caramel custards with young coconut sorbets.

However, the *piece de resistance* of the evening was the magnificent wedding cake. On a silver platter, delicately scented violet tinted meringues filled with violet cream were piled high and scattered with sugared petals. There were murmurs of rapture from the guests.

It was at this time that both fathers felt the need to say something. Ken began, clearing his throat first. "Well, when I woke up this morning, I didn't think I was going to be giving my daughter away this evening. All I knew was that we were coming to the opening of Montgomery's and I had to get all dressed up. I thought that was going to be my biggest issue of the day. Little did I know? Anyway, Lucille and I did have a couple of hours notice. Gee thanks kids, that was so kind of you!" he said mockingly,

amidst much laughter. “But, what I did think today when Sam came and asked my permission was that I gave Miranda away to Sam a long time ago. He brings the best out in her, she brings the best out in him, or so I’m told. Anyway, I want to say that although they are young by today’s standards, I admire that they want to make this commitment and say, ‘you are the one for me for life’. I think that is pretty special. You guys make me proud.” Tearfully, Ken hugged the two young ones to him.

And then Rob took the floor. As he spoke he had one hand on Sam’s shoulder and one on Miranda’s. “Well, I am glad that you had a couple of hours notice Ken, because we only had five minutes.” He held his hands up, “It’s okay, he did try earlier. I am told it was my fault.” Pausing, he smiled and took a deep breath. “What I would like to say is, in one of life’s satisfying ironies, sometimes those who make the least amount of noise as they go about their business, are often the ones who are rewarded by shining brightest and most spectacularly in the long run. I don’t need to welcome Miranda into our family, she was welcomed a long time ago. Your mother and I love you both.” Swallowing quickly, and unable to say anymore he squeezed them both and then put his arms around Chilli and kissed the top of her head.

By midnight, many of the guests had departed except a few of Sam’s friends. The young ones were still buzzing about the evening. Most of this group of young men had gone to school together and were still remarkably close. A couple of them had brought their girlfriends along. And, being girls, they were still talking about what had happened earlier.

From across the room, Chilli was admiring this group of beautiful young people, when a voice from behind stunned her out of her reverie. “Well, my darling girl, you must be very proud of yourself.” She turned and her father Jack wrapped her in his arms and hugged her warmly.

Right at that moment it was exactly what she needed. A big bear of a man, Jack gave the best hugs in the world, although sometimes he overdid it and upset an elaborate hairdo, or knocked one of her earrings off. But tonight Chilli didn’t care and embraced him tightly. He sensed something in it.

“Come out onto the front deck my girl.” Ushering her outside, he pulled a chair out for her and sat down next to her, taking her hand in his large one, reminding her of how safe he always made her feel.

“It’s a huge thing when the baby cub grows up and leaves the den isn’t it?” He paused. “But darling, he has been grown up for a while. Perhaps you didn’t see it until tonight.” He spoke gently to her. Jack had always been excellent at reading his daughter. There was nothing she could hide from him.

“Dad I’m truly happy for them. She’s perfect.” But Chilli’s voice was shaky.

“She is perfect!” Jack said firmly. “She’s been a member of our family for a while now. This is just a formality. We all love her. You know your son has excellent taste. Do you know I saw it with your mother with each of your brothers when they got married? God knows, we love those girls. Of course Charlie’s first wife was another story. Thank God that marriage didn’t last long. Your brother wouldn’t listen. We all saw it coming...”

Patently, Chilli smiled at her father but then interrupted. “Dad, what are you getting at?”

“I’m trying to say, when a son gets married, for a brief moment, the mother feels misplaced. She has been his biggest female influence until then. If you’re lucky and they have a happy marriage, the new wife will now be the biggest influence. It’s what we want for them. It’s the same for a father when his daughter marries. It’s a shifting of the tides for everyone. Give yourself a little time to work out your emotions.”

“You’re probably right. But at least Mum had the three boys and me, I only have him. I feel far too young for that part of my life to be over.”

“It’s not over. It’s just a different chapter sweetie.” He squeezed her hand.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak for a few seconds. “I know. But I liked the old chapter.” She shrugged. “Really, I think I just need a good night’s sleep. I feel rather exhausted. Tomorrow I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you will.” Yawning, he stood up. “I’m off to find your mother. An old guy needs his sleep.”

As he went to walk away, she took hold of one of his hands. “Dad you’ll always be the king. I do have a prince charming, but you’re the king...”

He kissed the top of her head and squeezed both of her shoulders. She watched him go, looking very distinguished in his dinner suit. The years had been kind to him and, at 72, he remained a handsome, fit looking man with a full head of hair, silver though it was. A retired dentist, he now

spent most of his days playing golf.

Chilli waved to her parents as they left. Her mother mouthing, "Call you tomorrow." Chilli nodded. She wondered where Rob was. All evening, they had played the perfect hosts and had not had a moment together since the wedding.

From across the room, she saw him farewelling their good friends, Cherie and William.

"Typical of you Montgomerys to throw the best parties ever," William called.

"We'll see what we can organise for the next one," she heard Rob answer. "We do like to please."

Chilli walked over and kissed them goodbye.

"I'm sure we'll speak tomorrow," Cherie said.

"I'm sure you will," Rob said, waving and placing an arm around Chilli. He seemed to have recovered.

She tucked her arm around him. "Rob, I'm exhausted. I think it's time to go. There are just a few of Sam's mates left and they should be off shortly."

"I might go and hurry them along. Miranda is wilting as well."

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*T*hey decided to leave Rob's car at Montgomery's and come back for it in the morning. All day, they had been backwards and forwards from the restaurant, until finally both of their cars had ended up there.

They climbed into Chilli's small car for the brief trip home. She loved her little blue pearl Crossfire coupe. But it had been a sore point between her and Rob for the longest time. He had really wanted her to have the Mercedes coupe, but she had chosen the Crossfire, because she said it made her smile. He had told her that was not the way to select a car. But it was for her. After that, every time Rob got into the car, he'd shake his head and mutter, "Should have got the Merc."

With a flash of her eyes and more than a little annoyance, she'd determinably say, "But I loved this car."

For the first time tonight, he forgot. Chilli was grateful. It had begun to wear a little thin.

Rob let out a huge breath and glanced across at her. “What a night. It blew me away. God, did you have any idea?”

“Not one! It’s incredible. I’m overwhelmed.” Chilli yawned. “Not to mention very tired. I just want a cup of tea, a hot shower and bed, in that order.”

“What do we do about gifts? People were asking,” he remembered.

“Yes, I know. People were asking me as well. I think that Dad wants to give them either money to invest or some shares. Why don’t we ask the kids tomorrow? They might have a plan. They seem to have one for everything else.” Looking sideways at him, she gave a brief smile. He squeezed her knee.

Chilli pulled into their driveway and continued down past the tennis court. The tennis court was on the street front, with the house behind it, nestled within a lush garden on the riverfront. It had been their home for the past two years. They had purchased a dilapidated old house on a huge block of land, which they were then able to subdivide into four blocks. The house had been pulled down and three of the blocks developed with homes, the fourth was their tennis court.

The approach to each of the homes was an easement driveway that ran down beside the tennis court. The block of land that it was on meant that it was an expensive tennis court, but Rob always maintained that it was a good investment and they could sell it anytime as a housing lot. Each of the houses had its own design, character and personality and it had been a challenging project for the architect to combine all of the properties into one cohesive enclave. The houses had all been built to maximise privacy and to complement each other.

Chilli loved her home. It really was like a large two-story apartment. With this move, they realised that they didn’t need as much space as what they had previously had. As much as they had hoped and wanted, there was never going to be more than just the three of them. They had delegated an area to Sam, should he decide to return home, and the rest they had designed quite simply for the two of them, without any wasted spaces.

At the front door, Chilli removed her very glamorous, but much too high shoes, her tired feet enjoying the coolness of the limestone flooring underfoot. She made a beeline for the kitchen. “I’m just going to pop the kettle on,” she called out. But Rob, removing his cufflinks, was already on

his way up to the bedroom.

“Be down in a second,” he called.

If there was one space in Chilli’s home where she was truly at home, it was her kitchen. This was a house used for cooking and entertaining and the kitchen was the soul of it. All high-tech, it had stainless-steel appliances, cabinetry and countertops. In the adjoining living area was a huge plasma screen, which she could see from her kitchen bench. Dominating this area was a ten-seater espresso coloured timber table with a frosted glass top. She turned on the pendant lights, switched on the kettle and plonked herself down on one of the neutral, very wide, comfy sofas.

A strange noise broke into her consciousness. She realised she had been asleep. Beside her on the lounge, Rob was snoring loudly. He had turned the plasma on but with the sound down low. On the kitchen countertop, stood a cup of tea that he had made for her. Luckily it was still warm. Picking it up, she placed both of her hands around it and drank. It was just what she needed. Taking it with her, she went upstairs.

She removed her wrist corsage, marvelling at what a magnificent job Miranda had done with the white and yellow Phalenopsis orchids. Earlier, she had been too stunned to even notice. And then she unzipped her dress. It had felt lovely on, soft and floaty. Placing it on a coat hanger, she stood back and admired it, tracing the trail of flowers with her fingertips. Would this have been the dress she would have worn to her son’s wedding, had she had known? What was the point of wondering, her darling boy was now a married man.

Sleep didn’t come easily that night. Rob seemed peaceful enough where he was, so Chilli left him sleeping on the sofa. Tonight she didn’t feel like his snoring. She lay in bed very still, thinking over the events of the evening. Her four nieces had been so adorable.

When her brother Charlie’s first marriage to Tina had broken down, with the help of his family he had fought for custody of Tiffany, his young daughter. The restless and immature Tina eventually went to live in Florida, so Chilli had helped raise her niece. At times, it was as if she had twins, so close in ages were Sam and Tiffany. At meal times, two highchairs were lined up side by side, and pureed vegetables were spooned alternatively between tiny mouths. Four years later, when Charlie married the beautiful Penelope, Chilli had continued to share a special relationship with her

niece. They looked far more like mother and daughter than aunt and niece. Tiffany was in advertising and already well regarded in the industry.

Ever since Tiffany had been quite young she would eagerly come into her aunt's wardrobe to look at anything new, showing an appreciation of quality rare in someone of that age. Her fingers would brush across the fabrics, and closing her eyes she would smell the leather on the handbags and very gently try on new shoes in front of the full length mirror, before delicately placing them back on the shelf. Once she had even asked, if when she was a big lady, could she have all of her aunt's shoes? Laughingly, Chilli had promised. Well it was a promise that she never had to keep, as that was one of their differences; Chilli had a size 36 foot, whilst Tiffany was a size 39.

Her much younger sister, the groovy Miss Violet, was a blonde version of auburn haired Tiffany and was the same age as her cousin Imogen, the porcelain skinned, slender ballerina, Jim's daughter. And lastly there was little Mia, the redhead, who at only 11 was already taller than her older female cousins and not showing any signs of slowing down. She was at the stage where she wanted to be more grownup but still liked being the baby of the family as well.

Although she loved them all, tonight Tiffany had been extra wonderful. Her face had shown it all. She'd been genuinely excited for Sam and Miranda and had told her aunt that she was just as excited as if she had gotten married herself. She said that she couldn't imagine being anymore excited on her own day. But, she added, she would have Chilli to help her plan hers. With that, she put her arms around her aunt and squeezed her hard. It was exactly what Chilli had needed.

Lying in bed now, she was grateful for her niece's kind words that evening. Only having one child, she would have loved to have had some input into her son's wedding, and Tiffany had sensed that.

But not one bit of that mattered now. Sam was married to his beautiful Miranda and if that was the wedding they wanted, so be it. All she needed was time to adjust.

Chapter 2

“Excuse me Madam, would you care for dinner this evening?” The flight attendant’s question jolted Chilli back to reality.

“Just a cup of tea would be lovely, thank you.” She gave a slight yawn and briefly stretched. She reached for her handbag and lifted out a small bronze and gold box embossed with the curly signature L. Inside were two mini eclairs filled with coffee cream, from Laurent’s Patisserie.

It had become a habit, that whenever Chilli visited Melbourne, she popped into Laurent’s to pick up a tasty treat for Miranda and her. She wasn’t particularly fond of airline food and always liked to have a little something small with her that she could delight in.

Next to her the gentleman with the green cufflinks was examining the contents of his tray. There was a sound of disapproval.

He looked over. “You don’t happen to have another one of those do you?” he asked, indicating the little eclair.

“I do actually,” she laughed, “But I’m afraid it’s for my daughter-in-law, and I’ll be in big trouble if I give it away.”

He nodded. “Well, it doesn’t look particularly filling anyway. I think I’ll wait until I get home. I’m really not that hungry. Eating seems to break the flight up though doesn’t it?”

“Yes although unless it’s fabulous, there doesn’t seem to be much point.” The amount of pleasure eating good food bought to her was inestimable yet so simple. She flashed a dazzling smile, blotted her red lipstick on a tissue and took the tiniest sip of the hot tea.

The man pointed to her reading material. “I notice you have brochures from Designex. Did you enjoy it?”

Placing her cup back on the tray she nodded. “Mmmm, lots of exciting new and innovative products. Did you go as well?”

“No, not this year, but we did send some of our staff and I hear they got a lot out of it,” he explained. “What is it you do?”

“I assist my husband in his development company, plus I now have a homewares store. What do you do to recognise Designex?”

“I’m an architect.”

“In Brisbane?” she asked.

“Yes,” he nodded.

“Good for you. That’s certainly an interesting field to be in. Are you working on many projects at the moment?”

“Actually yes, it’s a busy time for us. The Ivory at Southbank has just been completed, there’s a couple more about to start in the city, Le Bank in George Street and one in Felix Street, and then there’s The Domain at West End.”

“Really! I’ve read a fair bit about The Ivory. Rather ahead of its time. It’s an amazing looking building.” She paused. “I take it you are one half of Bryson and Buxton?”

“I am,” he nodded smiling. “I must say it’s good to see our PR is working.”

Her curiosity had peaked now. “So are you Mr Bryson or Mr Buxton?”

“I am Mr Bryson.” He offered his hand. “Jeff actually.” His face creased into warm lines that threw a kink across his brow, snatching hold of his wide smile and making it wider.

“Chilli Montgomery,” she said giving his hand a shake. She admired his work and only recently had read a profile on him and his company. His career had certainly etched a powerful presence on the Brisbane skyline.

“Well, Chilli Montgomery, where is your store?”

“It’s at Montgomery’s restaurant in Brunswick St, New Farm. We’ve only been opened for three months.”

Recognition struck. “Yes, I know it. Your son’s the chef, right?”

She nodded.

“You’ve done a great renovation job on that old place. Good on you. I’ve been watching it for a while. You’ve also had some amazing reviews haven’t you? Your son sounds like a very innovative chef for someone so young. I gathered it was a family thing?” It was now his turn to sound interested.

“Yes, the concept was my son’s idea. Sam wanted it to be an experience for our clientele and I think we have created that. He wanted me onboard with my homewares and his wife has a contemporary floristry business there, as well as looking after our marketing. My husband is involved in the business side of things. I feel very lucky that at this stage of my life I am working with my family and loving it,” she explained, the enjoyment

showing on her face.

Jeff handed his barely touched food tray back to the flight attendant. "Thank you." He smiled at Chilli.

"So tell me," he said sounding intrigued, "Wasn't there a story about your son getting married at the opening? A surprise or something?"

"Yes, there was, but they were married at the soft opening in front of family and friends, not in front of the media or strangers."

"He's only young. Is that right?"

Chilli nodded. "He's 23. Do you have children?"

"Yes, I have three; a boy and two girls. Trent is 24. He studied architecture, but," Jeff drew inverted commas in the air, "He's not sure what he wants to do. He's working in a bar at the moment. I'm just glad he's working. Justine is 19, studying interior design and working part time, and our youngest, Coco, is 12 going on 30."

"Wow, aren't you lucky. Three is a lot. I only have one and he's kept me busy. Your wife must have been run off her feet."

"You could say that." He paused for a brief second and then continued. "We were a little worried about Trent though. He finished his architecture degree, and then decided that he didn't know what he wanted to do, so he went overseas for a year and is now doing the bar thing. Justine has always known which direction she wanted to go in. In the past, during the school holidays, she worked in my firm but now she has found her niche with someone else. Little Coco is still at school obviously, and says she will take over my business when I retire." He laughed and she joined him.

"What a great name." She glanced at the open magazine on his lap. "I'm probably talking your ear off. Please don't let me keep you from your work."

"It wasn't work." He held up the boating magazine. "I am the proud owner of a new Riviera." He turned the page to show her a picture of a 42 foot white Riviera with a flybridge. He caught the look of interest on her face. "I'm heading down to the Gold Coast to the Riviera factory tomorrow to have another look. It's not quite finished yet."

"Lucky you," her voice was truly envious. "Looks like something your family will enjoy."

"I'm hoping so. The plan is to have quality time with the kids."

"That's great. I'm sure you will. My son would kill for a boat like that.

Are you mooring it in Brisbane?"

"I'm just working that out. I'd like to take it up to Hamilton Island and moor it in their harbour for a while. We'll fly up and go out from there. It's a fantastic place. Been there at all?"

"Yes, a couple of times, but not on a boat, just to stay on the island. Rob, my husband, has always had an interest in boats. He said in the past that if we got a decent sized one, that's exactly what we'd do. We've got a ski boat at the back door, because Sam loves skiing, but we only got around to using it for a few months before Sam came up with the idea for his restaurant. Since then we've been run off our feet. Anyway, the plan is to have more time for that type of thing in the near future."

"So are you on a canal, or on the Brisbane River?"

"Brisbane River. We bought a parcel of land in Oxlade Drive at New Farm and developed it."

"It's not that little enclave with the tennis court out front is it?"

"Yes, well one of the houses and the tennis court is ours," she told him, surprised that he picked it. "Rob grew up in the area, so we'd been looking to buy for some time. After months scouring the suburb for a site, we finally came across the huge, overgrown block with the old house, and then won a bidding war on it. We then embarked on designing the enclave and a house for us that would embody our ideals."

"Right," he said sounding very interested. "You and your husband did a clever job of that. Do you mind if I ask which architect you used?"

"Dennis Nicholls. He was fantastic. We wanted to create something unique and contemporary, something that would convey the sense of a cool, waterfront lifestyle. Dennis really captured that."

"Dennis is doing great work. I am most impressed. I actually drove past your home recently and admired the job."

"Well thank you. It is definitely a serene haven in the inner city. When I come down that driveway, I instantly feel good."

And then, shaking her head in disbelief, she laughingly told him. "I can't believe you know it. Best not to do anything wrong in Brisbane, it's too small a place."

"I'm with you there," Jeff chuckled. "Actually, we have a project coming up shortly in the area, so I have been familiarising myself with it. There's a lot more stuff happening inner-city than ever before."

“I agree. What is your project?”

“We’re designing penthouse-style apartments. There are only seven in the building, one per floor.”

“Sounds exciting, there’s more of that happening now isn’t there?”

“Yes, there is. Just closing the door when you go on holidays sounds rather tempting. I’m a little over maintenance, but I definitely couldn’t live in a shoe box. The beauty of these apartments are that they are in a boutique building, quite large floor plan, no waiting for lifts or trying to get out of the car park with dozens of other people at ten to nine in the morning, plus fairly prestigious location, with beautiful views of the river. I think they’ll be a winner.”

“So your wife is keen to do it as well?” Chilli asked.

He paused. “Probably not, but I’m not designing them for her, I’m designing them for clients.”

“Of course.”

They both sat there for a couple of minutes not saying anything. Chilli wondered if perhaps she had asked more than enough questions.

Jeff broke the silence. “So tell me what happened with your son getting married at the opening. It was a great PR angle you know.”

“It was really nothing like that,” she explained. “We didn’t know a thing about it until minutes before, and I can tell you, it totally blew my husband and me away.”

“Well, I can understand that.”

“I realise why he wanted it that way though. Sam is quite a humble boy. He likes to earn his way, which is very much like his father. He really didn’t want any more fuss or money spent on him. I’ve got to say in hindsight, it certainly is a good way of cutting back on all those relatives that you feel you have to invite.” They both laughed at this. “I’m joking. Really, I would have loved to have planned a wedding for him as we didn’t have a big one ourselves, but that is what he wanted. Also, once the restaurant opened, I don’t know when they would have had the time for a wedding much less a honeymoon.”

“So they didn’t go away?”

“Not in the order that you would think. Three months before the restaurant opened my husband sent them to Hawaii for a week’s holiday. That’s when Sam proposed. They told us after the wedding that they con-

sidered it their honeymoon.”

He laughed. “It sounds like it’s your husband’s fault for sending them to Hawaii.”

She joined him. “I’ve never thought of it like that. I’ll be sure to tell him tonight.” Chillli felt her face warm with the mention of Rob. “Though I have to say, he is very generous. It’s one of his best traits.”

“Sounds like a good guy. No bad habits at all?” he asked rather cheekily.

Chillli didn’t waste a second answering. “Yes one. Being late! I can’t stand it, but you can’t have everything.” She smiled. “Anyway as I was saying, the wedding was a huge surprise, but they are so right for each other. We were a little stunned when there was a bit of press about it with the launch of the restaurant. Sam wanted them to rave about his food and not focus on the wedding.”

“If I remember correctly, there seemed to be a fair bit of raving about his food in the articles I’ve read. He seems like a very clever chef.”

“He is.” Chillli remembered the latest review she had seen that week in the local paper. It stated, ‘Chef, Sam Montgomery, achieves a balance of flavours, enhancing the individual tastes and textures of ingredients without masking or overpowering them. All of the elements are in place to make Montgomery’s a smash.’

Jeff cut into her thoughts. “So, any other children for you?”

She shook her head. “No, just one divinely perfect one!” she said, laughing. “I wish there were more. I’ve been going through a bit of an adjustment since Sam got married.”

“In what way?”

“Just getting used to not being the most important female influence on him, that’s all. Lucky for me, I have a beautiful daughter-in-law, and I couldn’t love her more if I tried,” she explained. “And she really tries to include me in so many things, how could I possibly complain?”

He raised an eyebrow. “But you still sound hesitant?”

Chillli bit her lip. “No, not at all. I’ve probably noticed that Miranda is now more self-assured. She asked my opinion more often before. So did Sam. But then again, I have raised him to be able to make a decision, and goodness if he was married and had to keep asking my opinion, it would be a bit of a worry. My father tells me that it really is just an adjustment in the tides.”

“Well, you sound very lucky to me,” Jeff said, “You’ve got it all worked out. Lucky you!”

“Thank you.”

There was a pause and then he asked, “One thing I hope you don’t mind me asking.”

“What’s that?” she asked, not sure if she should.

“Were you only five when you had your son?” he asked with mock seriousness.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I was six,” she said, joining him in his laughter, noticing that he seemed as startled and delighted as she was by this sudden flash of candor.

Chilli was used to people asking this question. Her mother and grandmother had all looked young for their age. It definitely was a compliment, but she also loved people to know that she was Sam’s mother. She didn’t want to look like his older sister or friend.

Their laughter was interrupted by the announcement to prepare for landing. It had been a quick trip and Chilli had enjoyed the easy conversation.

As the plane taxied in, she saw Jeff pull his cuff back and check the time. Leaning across she said, “I meant to say that they are great cufflinks. I noticed them because I’m always buying cufflinks for my husband.” She also couldn’t help but notice that they matched his pond green eyes.

“Thank you. And I meant to say,” he said slightly mocking her, “That is a very smart red suit you are wearing. I noticed it at the airport.”

“I think you are making fun of me.”

“No really, I did notice it at the airport.” Again, there was that kink across his brow as his smile widened.

“Well, good luck with your boat.”

“Good luck with your restaurant. Not that I think you need it.”

Chapter 3

*I*t was a beautiful evening as Chilli walked out of the Brisbane airport with a spring in her step. She checked the time. Hopefully Rob should be pulling in any second. She'd had two fabulous days in Melbourne, was feeling great and looking forward to having dinner and telling him everything. She didn't have to be apart from her husband for long to miss him.

Since Sam had finished school, whenever Rob had travelled for work, he insisted she travel with him. While he worked, she spent great, luscious portions of her life browsing book stores. When Rob's business was finished for the day, they would try new restaurants and see shows that didn't come to Brisbane. Her two favourite gourmet magazines were read from cover to cover and new restaurants circled. It became their delightful challenge to dine in as many of them as possible. In the last 15 months, with their latest venture, she had been unable to travel with him quite as much and had missed it.

At 25 degrees, it was much warmer in Brisbane than what it had been in Melbourne. Taking off her jacket, she placed it on top of her case, and thought once again that it was a shame that no one could see the beautiful silk lining of black and white stripes with huge red cabbage roses.

Rob's silver BMW was nowhere to be seen. She dialled his mobile and it rung seven times before it went to message bank. She checked her mobile for any messages. Nothing. She was starving. Again she looked at her watch. How many times did she have to remind him to be on time? He was very frustrating. She stifled a yawn.

From where she waited, she saw Jeff Bryson leave the airport terminal and join the queue at the taxi rank. Five minutes later, a taxi pulled along beside her. The window went down. There were those green eyes and that wide smile again. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"No, thank you. It's fine. I am waiting for my husband. He's just running a bit late, as per usual." She gave a wry smile and raised her eyebrows. "Thank you very much anyway."

She tapped her foot on the ground a couple of times and then thought

about the nice weekend they had planned. Tomorrow they would start the day early with a brisk walk. This was their talking time without any distractions. The area they lived in was entirely surrounded by boardwalks and walking paths along the edge of the Brisbane River; the same river that graced their back door.

Chilli loved spring in Brisbane. Many of the native plants had burst into flower, attracting an assortment of birds, butterflies, bats and possums. The subtropical climate and green leafy suburb had always made Brisbane the perfect lifestyle choice for them.

She hoped they would have time for the Farmers Markets in New Farm Park where the fresh produce was unbelievable. She viewed looking at food the ways some women window shopped for fashion. There was not only green but also white freshly picked asparagus from the man who sold only asparagus, bags of mushrooms with their intoxicating earthy smell from the mushroom man, and all different types of potatoes from the potato lady, with the Dutch Cream being a favourite at the moment for the best potato mash.

There were flavoursome, rich, red baby Roma tomatoes still on their green vine, which she kept on a platter on her kitchen bench, so she could pluck off fresh tomatoes at any time and bite into the small, juicy, mouth-watering fruit. The apple people not only had apples, some still with their leaves attached, but divine apple juice that was not squeezed but pressed. Piled high next door were sweet and colourful small capsicums; green, red, yellow and orange. Not only delicious but ornamental, the peppers had a regular place on the kitchen bench as well, before sadly they disappeared into that night's dinner, leaving a blank spot where so much vibrancy had been. The organic free range eggs had beautiful, rich, yellow yolks, and the leaves man had every possible green leaf or herb you could want in a salad.

After eating the organic garlic from the markets, it was hard to eat anything else. It was so moist and almost oily and it crushed so easily that it had become addictive. Of course there was the fabulous aroma of dozens of breads to die for. The red onion and olive had become a favourite. Thickly sliced with fresh real butter wrapped in paper and sold in a stick, was heaven. There was a huge range of marinated and stuffed olives and dips and antipasto to choose from, and the pungent aroma of ripe cheeses

made it quite difficult to not buy too many at a time. But the *piece de resistance* was the chocolate brownie that she always had to have as her treat. To die for! After all of this shopping, they'd probably grab a coffee at Montgomery's, and see what was happening.

Then, late afternoon they were meeting up with five other couples at Montrachet for an early dinner before going to watch a Rugby match at the Suncorp Stadium. The dinner was in honour of one of Rob's friends turning 50. The 50th birthdays had started and it was Rob's turn in November. The Montgomerys caught up with this group two or three times a year, usually during Rugby season, as the guys had all played football together 30 years earlier. They were a great bunch and Chilli was excited at the thought of going to Montrachet. She was in love with its divine food.

Their Pissaladiere, which was a sort of pizza with caramelised onions, aromatic rosemary, olives and anchovies, was a wonderful taste of sweetness and salt at the same time. Rob always started with it and gave Chilli a taste. Generosity was definitely one of his best traits. If he ordered a seafood dish with only one large prawn, he always offered it to her, insisting that she loved it more than him so she should have it.

Briefly she reminded herself of that just now, trying not to be too annoyed with his worst trait of constantly being tardy.

Anyway, already she knew what she would order at Montrachet; the double baked soufflé with sand crab and gruyere cheese. For her, good eating was a requisite of life. But now, simply thinking about tomorrow night torturously made her stomach growl in hunger and her mouth water with anticipation.

Where was Rob? Letting out an annoyed breath, her eyes scanned the oncoming traffic. She wondered if she should hail a taxi.

But her next thought went back to Montrachet. She hoped that the restaurant still had the strawberry tarte tatin on the menu.

Thinking of this, reminded her of her French grandmother, Grandmere Celeste. The older woman had been a strong mentor, and as such, an incredible influence on Chilli. The woman had an amazing sense of style. She loved theatre and she loved music. She always used to say that all the money in the world could not buy happiness or style. Happiness was inside. "You must look within yourself for it. You can't buy style, but you learn to appreciate it. It's not about everything new and it's not about

everything antique; you need to bring it together elegantly. Grace and elegance will see you through. Remember that Chilli.”

After meeting an Aussie boy in France, Celeste had come to Australia as a young bride. It was a huge surprise to the rest of his family.

And surprise it was, her grandmother had told her, in her still heavily accented English, despite all of the years she had spent in Australia. “In those days, Australia was not as multi-cultural. Your grandfather’s family treated me as if I was going to serve them frog’s legs or *escargot* for dinner.” Her hands danced around as she spoke. “You could not buy frog’s legs much less *escargot* ’ere, so where did they think I was going to get them from?”

Chilli was a clone of her grandmother. Both tiny and slim, with feet the size of dolls, they were typical of a certain type of French women. Chilli had inherited her grandmother’s huge chocolate brown eyes, framed with long, dark lashes and thick straight dark hair. Both were quite unlike Chilli’s own mother, Solange, who was a tall leggy, blue eyed blonde.

Chilli attributed her love of food and her love of France to her grandmother. Somewhere tucked away at the back of a drawer, smelling faintly of lavender, were the diaries Chilli had scribbled as a little girl. In a childish scrawl, they recorded the magical holidays she had shared with Grandmere Celeste in France. And the one theme laced heavily throughout the diaries was food. For her, food and France are one and the same, and that’s how it had always been. She had spent huge chunks of her childhood exploring her grandmother’s kitchen, where a fervent passion for cooking and all foods French flourished.

Back then, she was properly teased about her enthusiasm for all things edible – it was a family joke – but it was hardly surprising that French cuisine had such an impact on her; after all, it was in her blood. The family even used to joke that one day she would marry the French baker’s son Phillippe. But of course she didn’t, she married the Aussie butcher’s son Rob.

During the course of her love affair with that country, she had come to know Paris well; the brassy picture postcard Paris and the more demure private Paris. French life was vibrant. It was colourful as much as for the people as for the surroundings; whether in the city or the country. Over the years she was consistently drawn to the culture, where pleasure and

beauty were revered.

From their very first trip to France, her grandmother informed her that one must never leave France without purchasing a fabulous silk scarf, a handbag and a pair of shoes. "If you have that Chilli," she had said, "You can wear anything and look stylish."

She had taken her to the Hermes flagship store on the rue de Faubourg Saint-Honore, a temple to style, where under a glass topped cabinet were the most luxuriously printed, gloriously coloured squares of silk. With the shop assistant's help, she had lessons on the fine art of wearing a scarf with style. Then it came time to choose. Her first Hermes scarf! The problem was they were all beautiful. How could she pick just one? But Grand-mere Celeste told her she would know it when she saw it. She did. It almost leapt out at her, with a mixture of all her favourite colours in one; tangerine, purple, mint green, gold and bordered in crimson. The shop assistant placed the treasured piece of silk into a small flat orange-coloured box, tied it with brown satin ribbon and then handed it over in the legendary Hermes carrier bag. For the rest of the day, there were admiring glances from other well-dressed mademoiselles, at the recognition of someone so young carrying a Hermes bag. And to this day Chilli remembered her grandmother's words, "To buy a Hermes scarf Chilli, you don't need to be a millionaire, you just need to understand that it is a beautiful thing to own. That is the real luxury. Not the price of the item!"

As for her love affair with food, it took on a new meaning when she dined with her grandmother. Mealtime was an occasion. The table was set with real linen napery. Flowers always took centre stage in crystal vases. Hours before they would have visited the green grocer where there were lessons on how to smell the fruit and vegetables to see if they were fragrant, how to weigh them with their hands to see if they were ripe. On returning home, Chilli stood on a little stool in the kitchen, while her grandmother gave her lessons on how to make the simplest of ingredients a feast. Once seated at the table, they savoured every delicious morsel and if it wasn't the type of food to be savoured, then they didn't bother to eat it. The older woman told her the secret of having a happy husband and family was not just feeding her family, she must nourish them as well.

Those lessons, Chilli came to live by.

Recalling those wonderful memories made her smile. Again she tried

Rob's number. Again it rang out and went to voicemail. She remembered the incredible sadness when her grandmother had passed away. Chilli had said to her mother that she couldn't bear a life without her grandmother and she didn't know how her mother could.

In return Solange had said to her, "Every time I feel sad, my darling, I will look at you. My mother has taught you so many wonderful things, that she goes on living through you. I hope that Sam and your brothers' girls will have some of her characteristics as well. Your grandmother had a great capacity for love Chilli and I see that in you."

That moment was the closest Chilli ever recalled having had with her mother. They had put their arms around each other. Solange had pulled away first. However, for Chilli, that memory always bought great comfort. From that moment on, there was a different type of closeness between her and her mother. She had to admit that in the past, her grandmother had a stronger influence on her than her mother had.

Solange was one of those mothers who preferred boys. She preferred their masculinity, their sports, their talk, their humour, their school, their friends. She revelled in it, and was lucky enough to have three sons. Charlie was 20 months older than Chilli, next came Jim who was three years younger, followed by Eddie who was a year younger again. Give Solange something to do for the boys and she excelled. Give her something to do for Chilli and she did it dutifully, but not quite as easily. Truth be told, this never overly bothered Chilli as she knew her mother loved her. Her father was a different story. She was his princess! And he was the one who had chosen her name.

During her pregnancy with Chilli, Solange had suffered dreadfully with heartburn. It had been decided that if they had a girl they would call her Celeste after Solange's mother. But when a tiny dark haired screaming baby girl arrived in the world, Jack took her in his arms, and said, "There's the little Chilli who has caused all the problems." It was said, that the moment Jack spoke, Chilli stopped her wailing and contentedly lay in her father's arms, watching him. The name stuck. He thought himself amusing when he came up with other names for her. One day it would be 'chilli pepper', the next day 'chilli dog' and sometimes even 'chilli sauce'.

The first trip with her grandmother to France was the year after her grandfather had died. The time had come, when the older woman wished

to return home to visit her sister. Yes, she still thought of it as home, even after all that time. She had asked Chilli's parents if she could take the little girl with her.

Very early one morning, they flew over France. Looking out the window of the plane, Chilli was mesmerised. All over, lights were coming on in little farm houses. The excitement she felt on that trip, always returned with every trip afterwards.

Her great Aunt Rose lived in a tiny but beautiful apartment in Paris, close to the Seine in the sixth arrondissement, tucked away off the main street. The apartment was in a very old building, above a bookstore and small café. To get to the apartment they first had to enter through an enormous, heavy iron gate into a stone-paved courtyard with potted scarlet geraniums and an old oak tree in the centre. They then passed through an ancient wooden door that creaked open. Tante Rose's apartment was up three flights of stairs. It seemed like such an adventure to the young girl, and with each step her anticipation grew.

Rose had been a very beautiful woman in her youth, and even though she was in her sixties now, her beauty was still evident. The apartment was tiny. So was she, with petite features to match her small stature. She was chic and tasteful in her dress, lucidly intelligent, viciously funny and nervously intense. The two sisters cried and cried when they saw each other, hugging and kissing and speaking rapidly in French. When her grandmother introduced Chilli, Tante Rose bent down and looked into her eyes, looked back at her grandmother and shook her head. She then cried some more and clung on to Chilli. It was rather overwhelming for a child of ten.

Tante Rose's apartment was another world to young Chilli. Persian rugs in henna, temple gold and jade covered the floors, and bookshelves covered the walls from floor to ceiling. There were gigantic dictionaries and fabulous books on art and writers. Every spare space on the walls was taken up with gilt framed mirrors and paintings. The beds were made up with linen sheets and heavy, red, velvet curtains lined with damask, hung from the windows.

Dinnertime was a grand affair, and each place was set with heavy silver cutlery, bone china dinnerware and heavily cut crystal glassware. Chilli took great pains to be very careful not to bump or knock anything. She

learnt that dressing the table was part of the whole dining experience, as important as the food to be served.

Breakfast was eaten at the café downstairs. The smoke stained walls and checked red and white tablecloths made for a traditional scene. Lace curtains, bistro chairs and an ornate pressed tin ceiling only added to the picture. Her absolute favourite thing to order was a *Croques Monsieur*; a ham sandwich, on bread unlike any she had ever eaten, and a milky weak coffee served in a pottery bowl. It was pure heaven. She remembered thinking that the aroma of coffee must be one of the greatest and simplest of pleasures in life. She had never forgotten the first breakfast they had eaten there. It was the most important breakfast of her life. It was the beginning of her lifelong fascination and adoration of food.

Her grandmother had said to her, “Chilli, I will show you the Paris that tourists see and then I will show you the real Paris. The soul of Paris lives not simply in the impressive structures, but in its quiet boulevard and parks filled with birdsong, its patisseries, its boulangeries, its bustling markets and quaint shops tucked away in back alleys.”

Paris was, even now, the most exciting and beautiful city that she had ever visited. She was hopelessly besotted with it. French life was vibrant, colourful; the people, the language, the food, the history and the style. The women were so beautiful, at that time sporting boyish haircuts, wrapped in thick fur coats, more often than not with manicured canines on designer leads. There was so much to see, so much to do, so much to eat.

It didn't take much time before she learned to love their Michelin Stars, their glamorous chefs, their *fois gras*, their *fromage*, their long aproned waiters, their starched linen and their cheese trolleys. Never would she forget the wonderful abundance of food, all of it delicious and served in groaningly generous portions.

They ate onion soup very early in the morning at the Les Halles markets. They snacked on plump rosy peaches and bright red cherries. They sampled wheels of ripe cheeses, some with intense aromas but beneath their rind were oozing creamy textures with sweet and savoury flavours. There were fat succulent sausages and racks of fresh pasta, stalls of iced fish and dark shelled mussels.

They visited Hediards a gourmet food market that had opened in 1854 and dedicated itself to good taste. It was pure excitement, tantalising every

sense. There were the lingering aromas of coffee and spices packed in huge timber crates. The colours of the fruit and vegetables were unlike anything she had ever seen.

Hediards did not just have green asparagus; it had purple and white and miniature. It had tiny bananas, and mini apples and pears to serve with cheese. Crates of plump shiny brown dates, fruit pastes and jellies in a rainbow of colours, intensely fruity flavoured jams, caviar, smoked salmon, terrines, pates, oils, cooked chickens, soft white bread that smells of comfort, condiments and their very own Hediards biscuits that came packed in distinctive red and black metallic boxes for freshness.

Together they sampled all of this. They'd purchase tiny servings and make a picnic to share on their favourite park bench in the Jardin de Tuileries. Always to accompany it, a warm, crisp baguette from the local boulangerie; the outside toasty, tight and crackly; the inside creamy, nearly golden, never bone white, and marked with an irregular profusion of glossy bubbles and holes.

Her grandmother explained that you only needed a taste of all of these delicacies; but there was so much to taste. Chilli loved it all, the colours, the tastes, the sounds and the smells.

The food delight that she was never to forget was her first visit to Laduree, a turn of the century tea salon. It was famous for its crispy, flavoured macaroons. They came in delicious flavours of praline, coffee, chocolate, vanilla, pistachio, lemon and raspberry. Her grandmother found a table beside the window. They were to sit and take their time and savour every moment. In between, they would people watch. It was incredibly exciting.

However, the problem was that Chilli did not know which flavoured macaroon to choose. Her grandmother reminded her that they would return many more times, so to pick just one to try now. The pot of steaming hot chocolate came in a little silver teapot and when it was poured it was liquid chocolate, and the scent was pure heaven. Her first macaroon from Laduree counts as one of life's memorable taste sensations.

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Chilli pulled the cuff back on her black organza shirt and looked at her watch for the hundredth time. Tutting, she tried Rob's number yet again. How ridiculous! If his meeting had gone over time, he

must have some idea that she'd be getting worried by now, not to mention hungry. She shook her head, thinking that she should have insisted on catching a taxi.

Maybe she should give Sam a call and see if he had heard from his father? No, why bother him? She'd just have to wait. Surely he'd call any minute.

Further down from where she stood was a seat. She'd wait there. She repeatedly fiddled with the lock on her black patent Hermes handbag. Beautiful handbags were a love of hers. Another love inherited from her grandmother.

At her home, with the help of a furniture craftsman, she had designed a walk-in-robe for her extensive collection of beautiful handbags and shoes. Many of which had been purchased with her grandmother on their trips.

The memories were so special, the last thing she wished to do was to lock them away out of sight. And of course there was a special bank of glass fronted, shallow drawers for her scarf collection. All sorted by colour.

The shopping trips in France had been wonderful. Not that they had actually ever purchased much. They were more browsing trips or learning trips, as so much information was passed on to her during the looking.

Her grandmother would buy her a pair of shoes, a handbag and a scarf, even on the very first trip, when she was only a child of ten. These were only purchased near the end of their stay when the two of them together had looked at everything. Or it felt like everything! Her grandmother explained that she could get almost as much fun from just looking at all of the beautiful things. "Spend your time looking at quality and then only buy a few special pieces," were her words of wisdom.

Printemps and Galleries Lafayette were absolute favourite department stores. As a young girl, it was like being Alice in Wonderland. They roamed around every department and looked at and felt all the beautiful fabrics. They viewed all of the lingerie. They admired every handbag and pair of shoes. They inhaled the fragrances of all of the perfumes. There were lessons in fine napery and quality sheets and towels.

Together they roamed Paris looking at the art galleries and antique shops, in between stopping at markets and cafes to fortify themselves; trying tasty morsels and sipping teas flavoured with rose petals. These trips were pure indulgences for both of them and Chilli just soaked it up. This

was another world and she loved it. Her grandmother was a wonderful teacher in appreciating the finer things in life.

Chilli would be forever grateful for this grounding as it gave her the confidence to open her own business when she was just 26. On returning from her trips to France, her friends had been envious of her purchases. Knowing there was a need in the local market for such things, she began importing beautiful handbags, stunning shoes, racks full of scarves, exquisitely bold jewellery and dramatic accessories. After all, the French invented the word *luxe*, and no one did luxury goods as they did.

She started out with not much more than bold enthusiasm, retail was new to her. However, before long, appreciating texture, colour, dimension, proportion and quality became second nature to her. She was an excellent merchandiser, and with her grandmother as her mentor, she could hardly lose.

She set up 'Celeste's' in Racecourse Road in the 80s and quickly established a stylish clientele. Within the first few weeks, her stock was selling almost faster than she could refill the shelves. She stayed in the tiny shop until her lease ran out and then moved down the road to larger premises and added additional French products to her stock range; at first a small collection of lingerie and then a much larger range when she saw how popular it was. Also adding beautiful fragrant French body products was so well received that they virtually walked out the door. Her merchandise was very different to anything else that was available, and her clientele appreciated her unique vision of luxury.

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*O*kay this was really getting ridiculous. Chilli crossed her arms. A bit late was one thing, but this was a whole other story. She sighed loudly. She would get a taxi.

"Where to luv?" the driver asked, looking at her in the rear vision mirror.

"Oxlade Drive, New Farm please," she said, at the same time pulling her mobile phone out of her handbag. She dialled and then exhaled heavily, waiting for Sam to pick up.

"Listen sweetie, you haven't heard anything from your dad have you?... He was supposed to pick me up from the airport and he's running really

late... No darling, I'm already in a taxi... No his phone is ringing out and then going to message bank... Yes I'll keep trying... You know him, always late... Okay I'll give you a call when I finally hear from him... Bye."

Sitting further back on the seat, she couldn't help but wonder what was so important he couldn't call her. Thank goodness the taxi driver wasn't a chatterbox, she wasn't in the mood for small talk.

"This your street lady?"

"Yes, thank you. Turn left into the easement beside the tennis court," she instructed.

The taxi driver gave a slow whistle. "Well, some people are very lucky?"

"Yes, they are." That was the second time she'd heard that tonight.