Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Behind Closed Doors

Written by B. A. Paris

Published by Harlequin MIRA

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

B A Paris

HARLEQUIN® MIRA®

FREE PROOF COPY. NOT FOR SALE.

This is an uncorrected book proof made available in confidence to selected persons for specific review purposes and is not for sale or other distribution. Anyone selling or distributing this proof copy will be responsible for any resultant claims relating to any alleged omissions, errors, libel, breach of copyright, privacy rights or otherwise. Any copying, reprinting, sale or other unauthorised distribution or use of this proof copy without the consent of the publisher will be a direct infringement of the publisher's exclusive rights and those involved will be held liable in law accordingly.

All rights reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. This edition is published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, locations and incidents are purely fictional and bear no relationship to any real life individuals, living or dead, or to any actual places, business establishments, locations, events or incidents. Any resemblance is entirely coincidental.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the prior consent of the publisher in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Harlequin MIRA is a registered trademark of Harlequin Enterprises Limited, used under licence.

Published in Great Britain 2016
by Harlequin MIRA, an imprint of Harlequin (UK) Limited,
Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

© 2016 Bernadette MacDougall

ISBN 978-1-848-45412-5

59-0615

Harlequin (UK) Limited's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the legal environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

PRESENT

The champagne bottle knocks against the marble kitchen counter, making me jump. I glance at Jack, hoping he won't have noticed how nervous I am. He catches me looking and smiles.

'Perfect,' he says softly.

Taking my hand, he leads me to where our guests are waiting. As we go through the hall, I see the flowering lily Diane and Adam brought us for our garden. It's such a beautiful pink that I hope Jack will plant it where I'll be able to see it from the bedroom window. Just thinking of the garden makes tears well up from deep inside me and I swallow them down quickly. With so much at stake tonight, I need to concentrate on the here and now.

In the sitting room, a fire burns steadily in the antique grate. We're well into March but there's still a nip in

the air and Jack likes our guests to be as comfortable as possible.

'Your house is really something, Jack,' Rufus says admiringly. 'Don't you think so, Esther?'

I don't know Rufus or Esther. They are new to the area and tonight is the first time we've met, which makes me feel more nervous than I already am. But I can't afford to let Jack down, so I fix a smile on my face, praying that they'll like me. Esther doesn't smile back, so I guess she's reserving judgement. But I can't blame her. Since joining our circle of friends a month ago, I'm sure she's been told over and over again that Grace Angel, wife of brilliant lawyer Jack Angel, is a perfect example of a woman who has it all—the perfect house, the perfect husband, the perfect life. If I were Esther, I'd be wary of me too.

My eyes fall on the box of expensive chocolates she has just taken out of her bag and I feel a flicker of excitement. Not wanting her to give them to Jack, I move smoothly towards her and she instinctively holds them out to me.

'Thank you, they look wonderful,' I say gratefully, placing them on the coffee table so that I can open them later, when we serve coffee.

Esther intrigues me. She's the complete opposite of Diane—tall, blonde, slim, reserved—and I can't help respecting her for being the first person to step into our house and not go on about how beautiful it is. Jack insisted on choosing the house himself, telling me it

was to be my wedding present, so I saw it for the first time when we came back from our honeymoon. Even though he'd told me it was perfect for us I didn't fully realise what he meant until I saw it. Set in large grounds at the far end of the village, it gives Jack the privacy he craves, as well as the privilege of owning the most beautiful house in Spring Eaton. And the most secure. There is a complicated alarm system, with steel shutters to protect the windows on the ground floor. It must seem strange that these are often kept shut during the day, but as Jack tells anyone who asks, with a job like his, good security is one of his priorities.

We have a lot of paintings on the walls of our sitting room but people are usually drawn towards the large red canvas that hangs above the fireplace. Diane and Adam, who have already seen it, can't help going over to have another look, and Rufus joins them, while Esther sits down on one of the cream leather sofas.

'It's amazing,' Rufus says, looking in fascination at the hundreds of tiny markings that make up most of the painting.

'It's called *Fireflies*,' Jack offers, untwisting the wire from the bottle of champagne.

'I've never seen anything quite like it.'

'Grace painted it,' Diane tells him. 'Can you believe it?'

'You should see Grace's other paintings.' Jack eases the cork from the bottle with only the slightest of sounds. 'They really are quite something.'

Rufus looks around the room with interest. 'Are they here?'

'No, I'm afraid they're hanging elsewhere in the house.'

'For Jack's eyes only,' Adam jokes.

'And Grace's. Isn't that right, darling?' Jack says, smiling over at me. 'For our eyes only.'

'Yes, they are,' I agree, turning my head away.

We join Esther on the sofa and Diane exclaims in pleasure as Jack pours the champagne into tall glasses. She looks across at me.

'Are you feeling better now?' she asks. 'Grace couldn't make lunch with me yesterday because she was ill,' she explains, turning to Esther.

'It was only a migraine,' I protest.

'Unfortunately, Grace is prone to them.' Jack looks over at me sympathetically. 'But they never last long, thank goodness.'

'It's the second time you've stood me up,' Diane points out.

'I'm sorry,' I apologise.

'Well, at least you didn't just forget this time,' she teases. 'Why don't we meet up next Friday to make up for it? Would you be free, Grace? No dental appointments for you to suddenly remember at the last minute?'

'No, and no migraines either, I hope.'

Diane turns to Esther. 'Would you like to join us? It would have to be at a restaurant in town because I work.'

'Thank you, I'd like that.' She glances over at me, maybe to check that I don't mind her coming along and, as I smile back at her, I feel horribly guilty, because I already know I won't be going.

Calling everyone to attention, Jack offers a toast to Esther and Rufus, welcoming them to the area. I raise my glass and take a sip of champagne. The bubbles dance in my mouth and I feel a sudden flash of happiness, which I try to hang on to. But it disappears as quickly as it came.

I look over to where Jack is talking animatedly to Rufus. He and Adam met Rufus at the golf club a couple of weeks ago and invited him to join them in a game. On finding Rufus to be an excellent golfer, but not quite excellent enough to beat him, Jack invited him and Esther around for dinner. Watching them together, it's obvious that Jack is out to impress Rufus, which means it's important I win Esther round. But it won't be easy; whereas Diane is simply admiring, Esther seems more complicated.

Excusing myself, I go through to the kitchen to fetch the canapés I made earlier, and to put the last touches to the dinner. Etiquette—Jack is pedantic about it—means I can't be gone for long, so I quickly whisk the egg whites that are waiting in a bowl into peaks, and add them to the soufflé base I made earlier.

As I spoon the mixture into individual dishes, I glance nervously at the clock, then put the dishes into a bain-marie and place it in the oven, noting the exact time.

I feel a momentary wave of panic that I might not be able to pull everything off, but reminding myself that fear is my enemy I try to remain calm and return to the sitting room with the tray of canapés. I pass them around, accepting everybody's compliments gratefully, because Jack will have heard them too. Sure enough, with a kiss to the top of my head, he agrees with Diane that I am indeed a superb cook, and I breathe a silent sigh of relief.

Determined to make some headway with Esther, I sit down next to her. Seeing this, Jack relieves me of the canapés.

'You deserve a rest, darling, after all the hard work you've done today,' he says, balancing the tray on his long elegant fingers.

'It wasn't hard work at all,' I protest, which is a lie, and Jack knows it, because he chose the menu.

I begin to ask Esther all the right questions: if she has settled into the area, if she was sorry to leave Kent behind, if her two children have settled into their new school. For some reason, the fact that I am well informed seems to irk her, so I make a point of asking the names of her son and daughter, even though I know they are called Sebastian and Aisling. I even know their ages, seven and five, but I pretend that I don't. Aware of Jack listening to my every word, I know he'll wonder what I'm playing at.

'You don't have children, do you,' Esther says, making it a statement rather than a question.

'No, not yet. We thought we'd enjoy a couple of years on our own first.'

'Why, how long have you been married?' Her voice registers surprise.

'A year,' I admit.

'It was their anniversary last week,' Diane chips in.

'And I'm still not ready to share my beautiful wife with anyone else,' Jack says, refilling her glass.

I watch, momentarily distracted, as a tiny splash of champagne misses the glass and lands on the knee of his pristine chinos.

'I hope you don't mind me asking,' Esther begins, her curiosity getting the better of her, 'but were either of you married before?'

She sounds as if she wants the answer to be yes, as if to find a disgruntled ex-husband or wife lurking in the background would be proof that we're less than perfect.

'No, neither of us were,' I say.

She glances at Jack and I know she's wondering how someone so good-looking managed to stay unattached for so long. Sensing her eyes on him, Jack smiles good-naturedly.

'I must admit that at forty years old, I'd begun to despair of ever finding the perfect woman. But as soon as I saw Grace, I knew she was the one I'd been waiting for.'

'So romantic,' sighs Diane, who already knows the story of how Jack and I met. 'I've lost count of the number of women I tried to set Jack up with but no one would do until he met Grace.'

'What about you, Grace?' Esther asks. 'Was it love at first sight for you too?'

'Yes,' I say, remembering. 'It was.'

Overwhelmed by the memory, I stand up a little too quickly and Jack's head swivels towards me. 'The soufflés,' I explain calmly. 'They should be done now. Are you all ready to sit down?'

Spurred on by Diane, who tells them that soufflés wait for no one, they drain their glasses and make for the table. Esther, however, stops on the way for a closer look at *Fireflies* and, when Jack joins her rather than urge her to sit down, I breathe a sigh of relief that the soufflés are no way near ready. If they were, I would be near to tears with stress at the delay, especially when he starts explaining some of the different techniques I used to create the painting.

When they eventually sit down five minutes later, the soufflés are cooked to perfection. As Diane expresses her amazement, Jack smiles at me from the other end of the table and tells everyone that I am very clever indeed.

It's during evenings like this that I'm reminded of why I fell in love with Jack. Charming, amusing and intelligent, he knows exactly what to say and how to say it. Because Esther and Rufus are newcomers, he makes sure that the conversation as we eat our soufflés is for their benefit. He prompts Diane and Adam into revealing information about themselves that will help our new friends, such as where they shop and the sports they play. Although Esther listens politely to their list

of leisure activities, the names of their gardeners and babysitters, the best place to buy fish, I know that I am the one who interests her, and I know she's going to return to the fact that Jack and I have come relatively late to marriage, hoping to find something—anything—to tell her it is not as perfect as it seems. Unfortunately for her, she's going to be disappointed.

She waits until Jack has carved the beef Wellington and served it with a gratin of potatoes, and carrots lightly glazed with honey. There are also tiny sugar peas, which I plunged into boiling water just before taking the beef from the oven. Diane marvels that I've managed to get everything ready at the same time, and admits she always chooses a main course like curry, which can be prepared earlier and heated through at the last minute. I'd like to tell her that I'd much rather do as she does, that painstaking calculations and sleepless nights are the currency I pay to serve such a perfect dinner. But the alternative—serving anything that is less than perfect—isn't an option.

Esther looks at me from across the table. 'So where did you and Jack meet?'

'In Regent's Park,' I say. 'One Sunday afternoon.'

'Tell her what happened,' urges Diane, her pale skin flushed from the champagne.

I hesitate a moment, because it's a story I have told before. But it's one that Jack loves to hear me tell, so it's in my interest to repeat it. Luckily, Esther comes to my rescue. Mistaking my pause for reticence, she pounces.

'Please do,' she urges.

'Well, at the risk of boring those who have already heard it before,' I begin, with an apologetic smile, 'I was in the park with my sister Millie. We often go there on a Sunday afternoon and that Sunday there happened to be a band playing. Millie loves music and she was enjoying herself so much that she got up from her seat and began to dance in front of the bandstand. She had recently learnt to waltz and, as she danced, she stretched her arms out in front of her, as if she was dancing with someone.' I find myself smiling at the memory and wish desperately that life was still as simple, still as innocent. 'Although people were generally indulgent, happy to see Millie enjoying herself,' I go on, 'I could see that one or two were uncomfortable and I knew I should do something, call her back to her seat perhaps. But there was a part of me that was loath to because—'

'How old is your sister?' Esther interrupts.

'Seventeen.' I pause a moment, unwilling to face reality. 'Nearly eighteen.'

Esther raises her eyebrows. 'She's something of an attention seeker, then.'

'No, she's not, it's just that…'

'Well, she must be. I mean, people don't usually get up and dance in a park, do they?' She looks around the table triumphantly and when everyone avoids her eye I can't help feeling sorry for her.

'Millie has Down's syndrome.' Jack's voice breaks the awkward silence that has descended on the table. 'It means she's often wonderfully spontaneous.'

Confusion floods Esther's face and I feel annoyed that the people who told her everything else about me didn't mention Millie.

'Anyway, before I could decide what to do,' I say, coming to her rescue, 'this perfect gentleman got up from his seat, went over to where Millie was dancing, bowed and held out his hand to her. Well, Millie was delighted and, as they began to waltz, everybody started applauding and then other couples got up from their seats and started to dance too. It was a very, very special moment. And, of course, I fell immediately in love with Jack for having made it happen.'

'What Grace didn't know at the time was that I had seen her and Millie in the park the week before and had immediately fallen in love with her. She was so attentive to Millie, so utterly selfless. I had never seen that sort of devotion in anybody before and I was determined to get to know her.'

'And what Jack didn't know at the time,' I say in turn, 'was that I had noticed him the week before but never thought he would be interested in someone like me.'

It amuses me when everybody nods their head in agreement. Even though I am attractive, Jack's film-star good looks mean that people think I'm lucky he wanted to marry me. But that isn't what I meant.

'Grace doesn't have any other brothers and sisters so she thought the fact that Millie will one day be her sole responsibility would discourage me,' Jack explains.

'As it had others,' I point out.

Jack shakes his head. 'On the contrary, it was the knowledge that Grace would do anything for Millie that made me realise she was the woman I'd been looking for all my life. In my line of work, it's easy to become demoralised with the human race.'

'I saw from the paper yesterday that congratulations are in order again,' Rufus says, raising his glass in Jack's direction.

'Yes, well done.' Adam, who is a lawyer in the same firm as Jack, joins in. 'Another conviction under your belt.'

'It was a fairly cut-and-dried case,' Jack says modestly. 'Although proving that my client hadn't inflicted the wounds herself, given that she had a penchant for self-harm, made it a little more difficult.'

'But, generally speaking, aren't cases of abuse usually easy to prove?' Rufus asks, while Diane tells Esther, in case she doesn't already know, that Jack champions the underdog—more specifically, battered wives. 'I don't want to detract from the wonderful work you do, but there is often physical evidence, or witnesses, are there not?'

'Jack's forte is getting the victims to trust him enough to tell him what has been going on,' Diane, who I suspect of being a little in love with Jack, explains. 'Many

women don't have anybody to turn to and are scared they won't be believed.'

'He also makes sure that the perpetrators go down for a very long time,' adds Adam.

'I have nothing but contempt for men who are found to be violent towards their wives,' Jack says firmly. 'They deserve everything they get.'

'I'll drink to that.' Rufus raises his glass again.

'He's never lost a case yet, have you, Jack?' says Diane.

'No, and I don't intend to.'

'An unbroken track record—that's quite something,' muses Rufus, impressed.

Esther looks over at me. 'Your sister—Millie—is quite a bit younger than you,' she remarks, bringing the conversation back to where we left off.

'Yes, there are seventeen years between us. Millie didn't come along until my mother was forty-six. It didn't occur to her she was pregnant at first so it was a bit of a shock to find she was going to be a mother again.'

'Does Millie live with your parents?'

'No, she boards at a wonderful school in North London. But she'll be eighteen in April, so she'll have to leave it this summer, which is a shame because she loves it there.'

'So where will she go? To your parents'?'

'No.' I pause for a moment, because I know that what I am about to say will shock her. 'They live in New Zealand.'

Esther does a double take. 'New Zealand?'

'Yes. They retired there last year, just after our wedding.'

'I see,' she says. But I know she doesn't.

'Millie will be moving in with us,' Jack explains. He smiles over at me. 'I knew it would be a condition to Grace accepting to marry me and it was one that I was more than happy to comply with.'

'That's very generous of you,' Esther says.

'Not at all—I'm delighted that Millie will be living here. It will add another dimension to our lives, won't it, darling?'

I lift my glass and take a sip of my wine so that I don't have to answer.

'You obviously get on well with her,' Esther remarks.

'Well, I hope she's as fond of me as I am of her—although it did take her a while once Grace and I were actually married.'

'Why was that?'

'I think the reality of our marriage was a shock to her,' I tell her. 'She had adored Jack from the beginning, but when we came back from our honeymoon and she realised that he was going to be with me the whole time, she became jealous. She's fine now, though. Jack is once again her favourite person.'

'Thankfully George Clooney has taken my place as Millie's object of dislike,' Jack laughs.

'George Clooney?' Esther queries.

'Yes.' I nod, glad that Jack has brought it up. 'I had this thing about him…'

'Don't we all?' murmurs Diane.

'… and Millie was so jealous that when some friends gave me a George Clooney calendar for Christmas one year, she scrawled on it "I don't like George Clooney", except that she spelt it phonetically—J-O-R-J K-O-O-N-Y—she has a bit of trouble with the "L",' I explain. 'It was so sweet.'

Everyone laughs.

'And now she never stops telling everyone that she likes me but she doesn't like him. It's become a bit of a mantra— "I like you, Jack, but I don't like George Cooney".' Jack smiles. 'I must admit that I'm quite flattered at being mentioned in the same breath,' he adds modestly.

Esther looks at him. 'You know, you do look a bit like him.'

'Except that Jack is much better looking.' Adam grins. 'You can't believe how relieved we all were when he married Grace. At least it stopped the women in the office fantasising about him—and some of the men too,' he adds laughingly.

Jack sighs good-naturedly. 'That's enough, Adam.'

'You don't work, do you?' Esther says, turning back to me. I detect in her voice the thinly veiled scorn that working women reserve for those who don't, and feel compelled to defend myself.

'I used to, but I gave up my job just before Jack and I got married.'

'Really?' Esther frowns. 'Why?'

'She didn't want to,' Jack intervenes. 'But she had a high-powered job and I didn't want to come home exhausted and find that Grace was just as exhausted as I was. It was perhaps selfish of me to ask her to give up her job but I wanted to be able to come home and offload the stress of my day rather than be offloaded onto. She also travelled quite a lot and I didn't want to come home to an empty house, as I already had done for many years.'

'What was your job?' Esther asks, fixing me with her pale-blue eyes.

'I was a buyer for Harrods.'

The flicker in her eyes tells me she's impressed. The fact that she doesn't ask me to expand tells me that she's not going to show it yet.

'She used to travel all over the world first class,' Diane says breathlessly.

'Not all over the world,' I correct. 'Just to South America. I sourced their fruit, mainly from Chile and Argentina,' I add, largely for Esther's benefit.

Rufus looks at me admiringly. 'That must have been interesting.'

'It was.' I nod. 'I loved every minute of it.'

'You must miss it, then.' Another statement from Esther.

'No, not really,' I lie. 'I have plenty here to keep me occupied.'

'And soon you'll have Millie to look after.'

'Millie is very independent and anyway, she'll be working most of the time at Meadow Gate.'

'The garden centre?'

'Yes. She loves plants and flowers so she's very lucky to have been offered the perfect job.'

'So what will you do all day long?'

'Much the same as I do now—you know, cooking, cleaning, gardening—when the weather permits.'

'You'll have to come for Sunday lunch next time and see the garden,' says Jack. 'Grace has green fingers.'

'Goodness,' says Esther lightly. 'So many talents. I'm so glad I was offered a post at St Polycarp's. I was getting quite bored being at home all day.'

'When do you start?'

'Next month. I'm replacing a teacher on maternity leave.'

I turn to Rufus. 'Jack tells me you have a huge garden,' I prompt and, while I serve more of the beef Wellington, which, along with the vegetables, has been keeping warm on a hotplate, the conversation around the table revolves around landscaping rather than me. As everyone laughs and talks together, I find myself looking wistfully at the other women and wondering what it must be like to be Diane, or Esther, to not have someone like Millie to consider. I immediately feel guilty because I love Millie more than life itself and wouldn't change her for the world. Just thinking about her gives me new resolve and I get purposefully to my feet.

'Is everyone ready for dessert?' I ask.

Jack and I clear the table and he follows me through to the kitchen, where I place the plates neatly in the sink to be rinsed off later while he tidies the carving knife away. The dessert I've made is a masterpiece—a perfect un-cracked meringue nest three inches high, filled with whipped Devon cream. I fetch the fruit I prepared earlier and place slices of mango, pineapple, papaya and kiwi carefully onto the cream and then add strawberries, raspberries and blueberries.

As I pick up a pomegranate, the feel of it in my hand transports me back to another time, another place, where the warmth of the sun on my face and the chatter of excited voices were things I took for granted. I close my eyes briefly, remembering the life I used to have.

Conscious of Jack waiting, his hand outstretched, I hand the fruit to him. He slices it in half and then I scoop out the seeds with a spoon and sprinkle them over the rest of the fruit. The dessert complete, I carry it through to the dining room, where the exclamations that greet its arrival confirm that Jack was right to choose it over the chestnut and chocolate gateau I would have preferred to make.

'Would you believe that Grace has never done a cookery course?' Diane says to Esther, picking up her spoon. 'I'm in awe of such perfection, aren't you? Although I'm never going to get into the bikini I bought,' she adds, groaning and patting her stomach through her navy linen dress. 'I shouldn't really be eating

this considering that we've just booked to go away this summer but it's so delicious I can't resist!'

'Where are you going?' Rufus asks.

'Thailand,' Adam tells him. 'We were going to go to Vietnam but when we saw the photos of Jack and Grace's latest holiday in Thailand, we decided to keep Vietnam for next year.' He looks over at Diane and grins. 'Once Diane had seen the hotel they stayed in, that was it.'

'So are you going to the same hotel, then?'

'No, it was fully booked. Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of being able to go on holiday out of term-time.'

'Make the most of it while you can,' Esther says, turning to me.

'I intend to.'

'Are you going back to Thailand this year?' Adam asks.

'Only if we can go before June, which isn't likely with the Tomasin case coming up,' says Jack. He looks meaningfully across the table at me. 'After that, well, Millie will be with us.'

I hold my breath, hoping no one will suggest that if we wait, we'll be able to take Millie along too.

'Tomasin?' Rufus raises his eyebrows. 'I heard something about that. Is his wife one of your clients?'

'Yes, she is.'

'Dena Anderson,' he muses. 'That must be an interesting case.'

'It is,' Jack agrees. He turns to me. 'Darling, if everyone's finished, why don't you show Esther the photos of our last holiday in Thailand?'

My heart sinks. 'I'm sure she doesn't want to see our holiday snaps,' I say, keeping my voice purposefully light. But even that slight suggestion of discord between the two of us is enough for Esther.

'I would love to see them!' she exclaims.

Jack pushes his chair back and stands up. He takes the photo album from the drawer and hands it to Esther. 'Then Grace and I will make coffee while you look at the photographs. Why don't you go through to the sitting room—you'll be more comfortable there.'

By the time we come back from the kitchen with a tray of coffee, Diane is exclaiming over the photos, although Esther doesn't say much.

I have to admit that the photos are stunning and, in those where I can be seen, I am shown to my advantage: beautifully tanned, as slim as I was in my twenties, and wearing one of my many bikinis. In most of the photos, I'm standing in front of a luxurious hotel, or lying on its private beach, or sitting in a bar or restaurant with a colourful cocktail and a plate of exotic food in front of me. In each one I am smiling up at the camera, the epitome of a relaxed and pampered woman very much in love with her husband. Jack is something of a perfectionist when it comes to taking photographs and takes the same shot over and over again until he is happy with the result, so I have learnt to get it right the first

time. There are also some photographs of the two of us, taken by amenable strangers. It is Diane who points out teasingly that in those photographs, Jack and I are often gazing adoringly at each other rather than at the camera.

Jack pours the coffee.

'Would anyone like a chocolate?' I ask, reaching as casually as I can for the box that Esther brought.

'I'm sure we've all had quite enough to eat,' Jack suggests, looking around at everyone for confirmation.

'Definitely,' says Rufus.

'I couldn't eat another thing,' Adam groans.

'Then I'll put them away for another day.' Jack holds his hand out for the box and I'm just resigning myself to never tasting them when Diane comes to the rescue.

'Don't you dare—I'm sure I can fit in a chocolate or two.'

'I suppose there's no point mentioning your bikini,' Adam sighs, shaking his head in mock despair at his wife.

'Absolutely no point at all,' Diane agrees, taking a chocolate from the box Jack has handed her and passing it to me. I take one, pop it in my mouth and offer the box to Esther. When she declines to take one, I take another before passing the box back to Diane.

'How do you do it?' Diane asks, looking at me in wonder.

'Sorry?'

'Eat so much and never put on weight.'

'Luck,' I say, reaching over and taking another chocolate. 'And control.'

It's only when the clock strikes half-twelve that Esther suggests making a move. In the hall, Jack hands out the coats and, while he helps Diane and Esther on with theirs, I agree to meet them in town the following Friday at 'Chez Louis' for lunch at twelve-thirty. Diane hugs me goodbye and when I shake Esther's hand I tell her that I'm looking forward to seeing her again at the lunch. The men kiss me goodbye and, as they leave, everybody thanks us for a perfect evening. In fact, there are so many 'perfects' ringing round the hall as Jack closes the door behind them that I know I've triumphed. But I need to make sure that Jack knows I have.

'We need to leave at eleven tomorrow,' I say, turning to him. 'To get there in time to take Millie for lunch.'