

A vibrant tropical jungle scene. In the upper left, a toucan with a large yellow and black beak is perched on a branch. To its right, a green and red parrot is in flight. Further right, a small red and black bird is perched on a branch. The background is filled with lush green palm fronds and tropical foliage. The title 'Cafe Tropicana' is written in a large, elegant script font, with 'Cafe' in orange and 'Tropicana' in teal and red.

# Cafe Tropicana



BELINDA JONES

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## About the Book

Latte-lover Ava Langston knows exactly what she wants: her very own café in a vintage arcade in Bath and a life free of complicated relationships. But her plans go awry when her long-distance dad phones insisting she hop on the next plane to Costa Rica to meet his brand new wife.

Ava has no intention of jetting to Latin America to acquire a stepmother - until, that is, her father offers her head honcho status at a beachfront café. The lure of frothing cappuccinos in a land where the coffee beans grow proves irresistible. But she hasn't planned on Santiago, her sexy-yet-stubborn business rival, or rugged Ryan whose idea of romance is swinging through the rainforest canopy at 6 am. Both men have the heartbreaker gene, but could one prove to be her very own star-crossed lover? There's only one way to find out...

## About the Author

Belinda Jones's first paid job was on cult kiddy comic *Postman Pat*. Since then she has written for a multitude of magazines and newspapers including *Sunday, Daily Express, Empire, FHM, heat, New Woman* and *more!* magazine where she was a staff writer for four years. Belinda's widely acclaimed first novel, *Divas Las Vegas*, was voted No. 2 in the *New Woman* Bloody Good Reads Awards in 2001 and *On the Road to Mr Right* - a non-fiction travelogue love quest was a *Sunday Times* top ten bestseller. *Café Tropicana* is her fifth novel.

Also by Belinda Jones

Fiction

*Divas Las Vegas*

*I Love Capri*

*The California Club*

*The Paradise Room*

*The Love Academy*

*Out of the Blue*

*Living la Vida Loca*

Non Fiction

*On the Road to Mr Right*

*To embark on more fabulous journeys with Belinda Jones,  
visit her website: [www.belindajones.com](http://www.belindajones.com)*

Belinda Jones  
Café  
Tropicana



arrow books

For Ty Simmons

(and everyone with jungle fever)

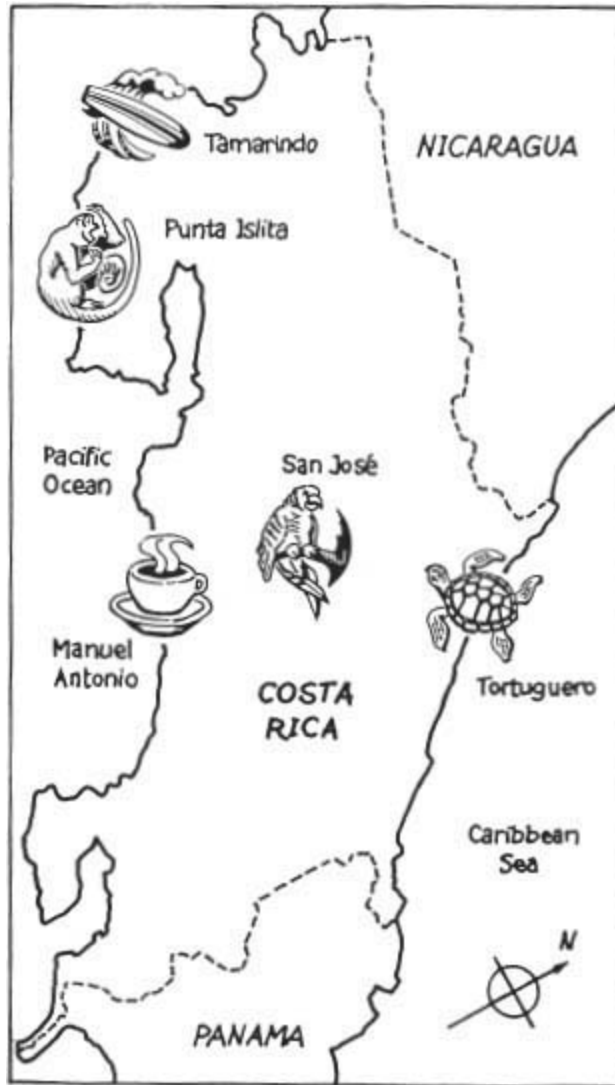
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# 1

Yesterday my father married a woman I've never met. Today he tells me he wants us to meet. Why now? I want to ask. My approval is hardly mandatory or he would've introduced us before he made a big firework display of his feelings. (I mean really, just how heinous must she be if he only dare unveil her as a fait accompli?)

Of course divorced parents marry people their children despise all the time, but generally offspring are given the opportunity to become consumed with resentment and loathing before the grown-ups say 'I do'. That's just basic etiquette.

I can only assume Papa Langston and his lady-love became so deeply engrossed in each other that the outside world misted to a hazy irrelevance. Only now that everything is official, and thus a little more grounded in reality, is it dawning upon them that they may have overlooked a key element or two ...

'Didn't you say you had a daughter?' I see a quizzical look playing upon the brow of the new bride as the couple - now with matching surnames as well as bathrobes - breakfast on some sublime private balcony.

'Why yes, I do!' I imagine my father's initial startlement, softening to a smile of recollection as he nods, 'That's right, her name is Ava.'

'I'd like to meet her sometime,' my stepmother chimes as the sunlight turns her spoonful of marmalade to glowing

amber.

‘Really?’

‘Well, she is your flesh and blood!’ Here she leans in to flick a flake of smoked kipper from his chin. ‘The way I see it, that’s just more of you to love.’

‘By golly, you’re right!’ he toots, throwing down his monogrammed napkin. ‘I’ll get on it this very moment!’

‘No rush,’ she shrugs, already disenchanted with the topic and ready to move on to more pertinent issues. Like where’s the top-up on her Buck’s Fizz?

But my father is already on a mission: ‘On the contrary, my love – I consider it my duty to summon whatever your heart desires with the utmost expedience!’

And so it was, in my mind at least, that he reached for the phone and dialled my number. Never mind that it was 5 a.m. UK time. At first I thought I was dreaming, what he was saying seemed too absurd, but then I realised that only in my dreams is my dad considerate of my feelings. Here he was announcing that he’d married a stranger and demanding I drop everything to jet off to Costa Rica for cocktails and awkward small talk. Yup, I was most definitely awake.

‘Couldn’t you have waited until I got there to marry—’ I stalled. ‘What was her name again?’

‘Kiki.’

Sick. Surely that’s a name for a chihuahua not a human. ‘Well, couldn’t you?’

‘It was a very spontaneous ceremony,’ he said, his low tone smacking of a sexual urgency that made me shudder. ‘But it’s not too late to get acquainted,’ he continued in earnest.

‘Well, I’m afraid it’s just not possible at the moment,’ I brisked, sounding as businesslike as I could while splayed beneath my duvet in Betty Boop pyjamas. ‘I’m in the midst of a property deal.’

‘Then I really am your father!’ he teased, inappropriate as ever.

My dad is in real estate. For years he’s been goading me to grab a rung on the property ladder but, almost to be contrary, I’ve resisted. Even now it’s just a year-long lease I’m bidding for but if I had the money I’d go the whole hog – this is a project I am so besotted with I can’t wait to do the deeds.

‘Why don’t you give me the details and I’ll see if I can’t speed things up a bit?’

‘Dad—’

‘Who are you dealing with? Hamptons? Humberts? Hobbs?’

It’s like the bloody mafia with him and estate agents.

‘If it’s Giles & Sons they owe me a favour—’

‘Stop!’ I yowled, taunted by the digital redness of my alarm clock. ‘Firstly, I’m handling this. Secondly, even if you could speed things up that would just mean I’m all the more committed to staying here. As soon as the property is in my name I’ll be overseeing the refurbishing and equipment installation, finalising the branding and marketing strategy, a million things!’

‘So you’re opening a business?’

I couldn’t believe I’d let the cat out of the bag like that! I so wanted this to be all mine, no outside interference. Even conceding the word ‘Yes’ made me feel uneasy, as if I was giving too much away.

‘What kind?’

I fidgeted within my bedsocks. Just how ambiguous could I be without being noticeably rude?

‘A café,’ I told him in a tiny voice, half hoping he wouldn’t hear.

‘A café, that’s great! So what’s the USP?’

There was no way I was going to give away my Unique Selling Point to someone I barely knew so I simply said I

was aiming to supply a divine caffeine fix without the £3 shafting offered at more established chains.

‘Interesting,’ he mused. ‘And you don’t think this fabulous new career could wait even for a weekend?’

I took a Lord-give-me-patience breath and calmly reminded him that it would take me the entire weekend just to fly there and back, as well he knew.

‘It’s only a two-hour hop from Miami,’ he reasoned, without in any way being reasonable.

‘But I don’t live in Miami, Dad, I live in Bath. Remember – jolly old England?’

‘But Kiki really wants to meet you.’

I rolled my eyes. Of course. It’s all about her. Or, more specifically, about him looking good in her eyes. My sigh came with a hint of a snarl. For someone who travels so much it’s funny that it’s never yet dawned on him that planes fly both ways.

‘Tell you what, if it matters that much, bring her to me,’ I challenged.

‘Well, you know I would, darling, but ...’

Oh here we go, I thought, the usual barrage of excuses – another day, another deal. A fine excuse when it’s his money, but this time instead of him bandying around words like conveyancing and completion I hear ‘honeymoon’.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. It is, of course, the natural follow-up to a wedding, yet somehow I’m offended that Dad has deemed Kiki worthy of his personal time when he never extended that courtesy to me.

As he talked I thumped my head on the pillow, jolting the stack of questions racking up in my brain: where did you meet? Where’s she from? How long have you known her? Are you sure she’s not just after your money? Are there any other aspects to your midlife crisis I should know about?

‘Listen, Dad, I’ve got to get some sleep,’ I cut in, deciding that the less I knew, the less I’d be troubled. ‘Why don’t you call me later?’ I put down the phone and roll over.

Married. My dad just got married without telling me! It's not like I needed to be consulted - his life and my life overlap so little these days - but it would have been nice to at least have been invited to the ceremony. Sometimes I wonder if he does these things deliberately to ram home just how insignificant I am to him. If Kiki (urgh!) hadn't expressed an interest in meeting me then would he have bothered calling at all? Maybe a year from now he would have referenced his wife in passing and I would have realised he didn't mean my mother and then it would have all come out.

'Didn't I tell you? Oh yeah she's terrific. Right little firecracker in the boudoir. In fact, you've got a little sister on the way.'

I sit up in bed. *She might already have children!* I might have just acquired stepbrothers and sisters without even realising it - whole new dimensions to what I laughingly call my family. I try to call him back to find out more but the only number I have for him is out of service.

As usual, just when I need him most, he's utterly unreachable.

The next morning he calls to beg some more and each day he dangles bigger and glitzier incentives. On Tuesday he offers to fly me business class. On Wednesday he offers to pay for a friend to come too. No. And no again.

'Come on, Ava, if the estate agent calls you can dash straight back but you know these things can drag on for weeks.'

'It's too important to me, Dad. I want to be here.'

I find it infuriating that he's so dismissive of my commitment. This is the biggest thing I've ever done, I'm on the verge of a dream fulfilled, and to him it's just a glitch that's stopping him from getting what he wants. He doesn't have the first clue about the planning and the passion that has gone into this.

After years of fiddle-faddling with different careers, thinking I had to have a title like 'accountant', 'office manager', 'beekeeper' etc. (and ending up as a combination of the first two at a local architects' firm), I realised that the highlight of my day was my afternoon java. I loved the ritual of it, the sense of stepping into a haven where, for thirty minutes or so, I couldn't be got at. Not that I think the world is out to get me, but there's some kind of alchemy that goes on in a coffee shop that soothes the soul and revives the spirit. In that moment all you really have to worry about is foam preference and fluid ounces. I was never once too dull or too single or too chunky of thigh to inhale the fragrant wafts of French Vanilla. On the contrary, the warmth from the china in my palms transfused throughout my body giving me a cosy-calm centring sensation. Like liquid meditation.

'I wonder if they'd let you rent out one of these tables as your desk?' my best friend and co-worker Ollie pondered one day as we sat in the Bridge, a dinky, duck-your-head café set within the blond stone arches that wade across the River Avon in an achingly picturesque fashion. 'You are so Zen in here.'

'Are you inferring that I am a tad manic in the office?'

'A tad? Noo,' he shook his head.

'More than a tad?' I raised my brows at him.

He smiled benevolently. 'I just sometimes think you might be happier with a can of squirting cream than a marker pen.'

I grimaced, thinking of that morning's presentation, then looked over at the girl behind the counter - seventeen if she was a day - and all the treats and nifty gadgets she had at her fingertips: the cake tongs, the cinnamon shaker, the mushroom-shaped tamper to pack down the espresso powder, the ching-chinging till - and it reminded me of playing shop and hosting tea parties as a child. 'Can you

imagine owning a place like this?' I mused, hugging my mug to my chin.

Ollie cocked his head to one side.

'What?'

'I don't know, it's funny, I've always thought older people owned places like this. Other people ...'

And then his eyes met mine and we had the same thought. The thought that it could happen to me. I was old enough. I had savings. I'd seen FOR LEASE signs. Suddenly my breathing became exaggerated and my eyes flicked around trying to process the rush of possibility. We scrabbled for paper and scribbled feverishly, trying to keep up with all the ideas springing from our lips.

'Maybe it should be themed?' Ollie's eyes took on a crazed glint. 'So many tourists come to see the Roman baths - what about centurions instead of waitresses?'

Already I was talking over him. 'I know there's a tea room serving Mrs Bennet's lemon drizzle cake at the Jane Austen Centre but we could hire our very own Mr Darcy in a white shirt!'

'And the hundredth customer every day could get to throw a glass of spa water on him!'

I snorted delight then rattled onward: 'What's that Austen quote? "Who can ever be tired of Bath?" What about recliners and foot masseurs for sore-soled sightseers?'

'Or you could literally go the bath route - have claw-footed tubs instead of sofas, toilets as seats!'

'Rolls of loo paper instead of napkins!'

'That's such a terrible idea!'

'I know!' I screeched. This was a hoot!

I didn't do a jot of work that afternoon, every time my boss's back was turned I was scanning commercial properties and ceramic wholesalers online. Then night and day my thoughts were consumed with visions of me hostessing the cutest café in town: I'd wake up in the

morning and my first thought was which speciality roast best suited the day ahead. As I percolated in my dinky kitchenette, I toyed with the idea of becoming a local eccentric known for serving my pre-10 a.m. customers in my pyjamas with bed-hair and sleep-gunked eyes. I'd open the dishwasher and wonder if I could give discounts or self-service refills to regulars who came with their own mug? Over breakfast I'd chew on what side-of-the-saucer delicacy I might offer instead of teeth-shattering biscotti.

Each day I'd leave the house early and visit (aka spy on) a different café, assessing their strengths and weaknesses. I loved the stencilled wall quotes at the Metropolitan Café but decided I'd prefer lyric-free music so as to not to direct people's thoughts. I salivated at the menu at Bar Chocolat - opting for the white chocolate and cinnamon milkshake - and, despite feeling a bit sick, wondered if I might also offer smoothies. I envied the fact that Sally Lunn's had laid claim to the oldest house in Bath and wondered what I could do to create the newest must-visit establishment.

I timed service, tipped the smiliest staff and read *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Owning and Running Your Own Coffee Shop*, learning that, in terms of picking a location, having competition nearby is actually a good thing - that way you know the area can support your kind of business. So that's why Caffè Nero and Starbucks were comfortable with being separated only by a toff's clothing store on Old Bond Street. Interesting.

Though these places were always chock-a-block with customers, I decided that the decor in the popular chains was too masculine/laid-back gentlemen's club for my taste. I didn't want tea-shoppe chintz but I had to come up with an alternative to leather chairs, dark mahogany tables and bare floor-boards. I started window-shopping at furniture stores instead of boutiques on the way to work. And I couldn't wait for my lunchtime powwows with Ollie.

'What about internet access?' he enquired the day we reviewed Carwardines at the Podium shopping centre. 'Little cybernooks. High-speed servers - and by that I don't just mean waitresses that move really fast.'

I giggled and then shook my head. 'Nope.'

'Nope? How can you be so dismissive? It's the way of the future.'

'I'm sure it is, but people who go to internet cafés go there to check their emails which essentially means checking out. They're not interested in their surroundings. I want people to be present so that they savour the company they're keeping and the drink they're supping.'

'Fair enough.' He reached for his own beverage then choked halfway through his sip. 'I've been meaning to tell you all day - last night on TV I saw this guy whose mission in life is to visit every single Starbucks in the world!'

'What?' I was aptly incredulous. 'There's got to be thousands!'

'Over nine thousand at the latest count!' Ollie confirmed. 'Aside from America, he's already been to branches in Spain, France, Japan ... They're actually making a documentary about him called *Starbucking!*'

'Starbucking? I love it!' I enthused, then frowned. 'But it's never going to end, is it? They're forever spawning - *Coming soon to your cupboard under the stairs!*'

'I know, but I can't help envying him. He said: "Every time I reach a Starbucks I feel I've accomplished something, when really I've accomplished nothing."'

'I know just how he feels!' I collude.

'Speaking of an utter lack of accomplishment - work?' Ollie helps me to my feet.

'I never want to be that big,' I informed him as we strolled back to the office. 'I want to keep it personal.'

'Just one signature store?'

'Well. I wouldn't mind secretly owning a few, but all different. Obviously I'm going to have to start boxy and

tucked away, but one day I'd like a place with a terrace or a balcony or a view ...'

'A Brew With A View! Hey! What about that for a name?'

'That's a keeper!' I acknowledge. 'I'll copyright it for when I find a place that isn't opposite a drycleaner's.'

'I can't believe how hard it is to find a decent venue.' Ollie gave a sigh loaded with sympathy.

'Well, I'm seeing two more tonight so fingers crossed.'

'Names ... names ...' Ollie mused as we backed against a wall to allow a swarm of OAP tourists to pass. 'What about Oliver Macchiato?' he turned his head to mine.

'What, because you're so macho?' I scoffed at the lovable bear of a man beside me.

'Nooo! As in Oi'l hava macchiato. Oliver Macchiato!'

'Oh good Lord!' I clunked my forehead with my hand as we continued on.

'I've got more!'

'One!' I granted him as we loitered outside the office door.

'Whole Latte Love! Like the Led Zep song—' He broke into the chorus of 'Whole Lotta Love' complete with de-nuh-na-nuh-na guitar impression.

'I get it!' I held up my hand to make him stop. 'It's cute. If entirely inappropriate.'

Ollie grimaced as he held the door open for me. 'You're still hurting, aren't you?'

If by hurting he meant I was still beating myself up over my last relationship failure - Nick, thirty-three, cocky recruitment consultant with a chin dimple - the answer was yes but instead I shrugged and said, 'You know what? I'm fine. This project is an excellent distraction. I'm just impatient now to get it up and running.'

It was very nearly the truth. Besides, Ollie had been such a rock during the aftermath of the breakup, I didn't want him to feel his listening ear hadn't helped. (It was one thing having my girlfriends commiserate with me but I

found his manly pragmatism bolstering in a whole new way, possibly because here was a guy, albeit a gay one, being so nice to me in the wake of one so mean.)

That said, it was actually me who did the dumping. But only because I felt I was being broken up with in less direct ways - I couldn't bear the slow-burn rejection.

My girlfriends said, 'Good riddance to bad rubbish!' But is it ever that simple? Though abrasively brash at times, Nick was still a human being. Someone I slept next to night after night. And someone who ultimately increased my fear of being alone.

And, while he was at it, my fear of being with anyone else. Ever again.

I think it's fair to say that I'm actually ashamed of the person I become in a relationship.

The minute I start going out with a guy, I feel his feelings first and mine second. I always want to be available to him so I'm loath to schedule any arrangements until I know his plans for the week just in case we'd end up not seeing each other for a run of four days and then that would send him the message that he's not my priority and then he'll leave me for someone who makes him feel special and I'll be alone and riddled with regret. But by waiting on him to show his hand I get resentful that he gets to decree how the week is going to shape up and I get annoyed with myself for sitting with my hands demurely folded in my lap and not having the courage of my convictions to state, 'I'm going to yoga with Danielle on Monday and on Friday a group of us girls are going out dancing.' I'd be afraid of what that would start - he'd think I was out having fun without him so he'd plan some get-back night out with the boys and then where would that lead? Better I just keep a low profile socially so I can always offer him a perpetually open door and a warm bed.

One of the symptoms of all my energy going into becoming the girl of his dreams, is that my personal

ambitions dwindle. With Sean, the guy before Nick, I turned down a job that required me to work three evenings a week thinking that would be detrimental to our relationship, only to have him accept a transfer to Edinburgh within the month. I don't want to be that girl any more - the one who becomes compulsively self-sacrificing and feels paralysed until she receives his permission to move. But I have to be realistic - I can't trust myself to meet my own needs when I'm with a guy so the smartest thing for me to do is to stay away from them.

Especially now that I've finally found something that really matters to me.

The only person I would consider sharing the café experience with is Ollie - despite all this recent talk of weddings, I'd take his friendship over a romance any day.

## 2

At 6 p.m. as promised, my estate agent – aka mump-faced Mo – took me to see two new options. The first was a dank no-no, but the second was It. Perfection. Or, at the very least, Promise.

As soon as Mo led me down the narrow city-centre arcade known as The Corridor, I got chills. The other shops might seem curious neighbours – a skateboard retailer, a studenty record store, a laser hair-removal surgery – but the overall design with its high, greenhouse-style roof, wrought-iron twiddlings and gold-painted lion-head accessories spoke to me of Regency flamboyance.

The store itself was glass-fronted with a picture-frame trim. Inside, an interior balcony offered an intriguing split-level effect. I loved the potential for having two looks within one. As I climbed the spiral staircase, visions of dainty porcelain demitasses danced before my eyes, fronting a chorus line of cupcakes. How fitting to serve high tea upstairs!

High tea ... As the words registered I started wondering how I could link that to the downstairs area – High Tea & Low Coffee? What's another word for low ...? I gnawed my lip. Well, it's the ground floor ... Oh my god! High Tea & Ground Coffee! I spun around in a tizzy of excitement! It was all I could do not to run out into the street and shout the name of my café at every passing pedestrian! I was on to something; I could feel it. Upstairs I'd have ornate

mirrors and candelabra and chaises longues in plum velvet. Downstairs would be golds and ivories and a lovely warm fireside vibe. Cosy decadence - I'd found my theme!

'I'll take it!' My voice was a trembly shrill.

'Well, it's not quite as simple as that - the next step is to submit an application to the landlord—'

'Yes, yes. Tell me exactly what you need and I'll get it for you. I have to have it, Mo. I love it. *I love it!*'

He beamed a great, puffy-cheeked smile, and I mirrored it right back at him.

Then I skipped - *actually skipped* - all the way home.

It was exactly one week later that my dad rang and dropped the bombshell about his wedding. At the time the only calls I was interested in receiving were from Mo or the assorted suppliers I was priming with my needs so, aside from the shock factor, a lot of what he said was just blah-blah-blah to me. I got that he wanted me to visit him and Kiki in Costa Rica but he was deluding himself if he thought I'd leave now. After months of 'too poky', 'unworkable floor space', and 'would have to hire an armed guard every time I opened the till', I had hit the jackpot and I wasn't going anywhere.

Now it's Thursday. Having already deflected Dad's daily enticement, I'm not expecting any more international calls but nevertheless I check the caller display when the phone rings at noon.

Oh joy! Oh heart tremor! It's Mo! He's got news, I can sense it.

'Hello!' I squeak, barely holding back my celebratory squeal.

'Ava, I'm so sorry—'

My heart dips violently. Oh no. Oh no. 'What is it?'

'They got a better offer.'

'What?' I'm stunned. 'What do you mean? I agreed to their rate—'

'They were offered 20 per cent more. I'd counter but I know that would put you way over your budget.'

I open my mouth to protest but I can't argue with that. I was already at my limit.

'So that's it? It's gone?' I can't believe it. I've given my notice in at work, taken my overdue holiday and made myself free to fully devote myself to a café that doesn't now exist.

'I really am sorry.' Mo sounds equally gutted.

I put down the phone and sit motionless, unable to even cry. It seems incomprehensible to me that I could lose something that felt so mine. There must surely be some mistake? This can't be real. And no amount of 'it obviously wasn't meant to be/something better will come along' platitudes can placate me. I know for a fact that this was it. My one shot.

I think of all my research, the measurements, the custom-made purchases, the orders poised for submission ... none of that counts now. I have nothing. No café. No coffee. No customers. No career. The disappointment is unbearable.

With every hour that passes I become more wretched. And weak. All my recent failures seem to pile on top of me, muffling my very breath.

I'm almost glad when my dad does call again so I can lash out at him, my bad-luck charm.

'They'll be others,' he begins.

'No there won't!' I spit, instantly scornful. 'Have you looked at the property trends here lately? Do you have any idea how expensive Bath is? That was it. The perfect place. The only place.'

'If you knew how many times I felt that when I was starting out—'

'Dad. Please. It's not comforting to have you say these things. It's just irritating.'

I wait for him to chirpily announce that I can now visit him in Costa Rica since there's nothing to keep me in Bath, ready to argue that I intend to descend into a deep and all-pervasive depression that would make my mother look as smiley as Sandra Bullock, but he doesn't go there. Maybe Kiki has gone off the idea of meeting me.

'Oh, Dean,' I can hear her tutting. 'Ava is so last week. What I really want now is a pony with gold-painted hooves.'

I hate everything and everyone. Especially my stepmother.

'You know, I have to confess your talk of coffee shops got me thinking,' he takes a new tack. 'It's still very much a developing market here in Costa Rica. And a booming one too, especially with all the American tourists who like their coffee a very specific way. I really think there could be an opportunity for you right here in Tamarindo.'

'That's a really long commute,' I grizzle.

'What if you came out and helped me set up for a month or two?' He tiptoes around my claws.

'What do you mean?' I didn't see this coming.

'I want to tap into your expertise. No doubt you've given this a lot of thought—'

'I have, but all my plans relate to Bath. I don't know anything about the market there,' I object.

'But I do,' he counters. 'At least I know the property market. You know the coffee business, and getting some hands-on experience in a country that produces its own beans ... Well, that could only benefit you, surely?' He pauses before adding, 'You'd be doing me a huge favour.'

He so nearly had me.

'Think about it,' he persists. 'My business savvy, your coffee consciousness, Kiki's people skills ...'

'Kiki?' Oh here we go.

'Well, it would be a nice little project for her after you've gone back.'

I sputter and shake my head. There was I thinking he was doing this for me when really he's just using me to indulge his spoilt brat of a wife. I can just picture how this all began:

'*Chérie*, I'm so sorry - Ava can't come because she's opening a café.'

'A café? Oh that sounds adorable, can I have one?'

'Of course, darling! I'll get right on it - what size do you want - tall, grande or venti?'

Oh how they must have laughed.

It's just so unfair. I've spent the past six months working on every last detail of my dream only to have it taken away from me. Kiki mentions it on a whim and she'll no doubt be frothing cappuccinos before the week is out.

I shake my head in despair - if they think they're going to benefit from all my research and sales forecasting and creative brainstorming, they are sorely mistaken. Wake up and smell the coffee, people! Nothing and no one could persuade me to return to Costa Rica.

### 3

Fifteen years have passed since my last trip to Costa Rica. I hear a lot has changed. It has certainly become more fashionable as a destination. Previously, when I said my dad lived there people would look a little confused and wait for me to explain that it's the small Central American country between Nicaragua and Panama, famously resplendent with nature. (Did you know there is more flora and fauna per square foot in Costa Rica than any other country in the world? - 850 species of bird, 10 per cent of the world's butterflies, 9,000 plants including 1,500 species of orchid, all in a country about the size of Wales!) Previously I just had to say the word 'biodiversity' and my friends would swiftly change the subject. Now I get, 'Oh you're so lucky to have a relative out there! Haven't they just opened a new Four Seasons in Guanacaste?'

The deluxe turn-down service was definitely absent from my teenage experience. Dad had only just moved into his first property there and had yet to furnish it so we slept in a pair of matching hammocks, lulled by the rattle'n'whirr of a plug-in fan. I remember my scaremongering mum convincing me (down the phone from the UK) that I was going to get 'banana-spine disease' if I spent eight hours a night in a crocheted curve but frankly that was the least of my worries. I, like any normal child, had a horrible fear of all things reptilian and there were far too many scaly-skinned, gnarly-nailed creatures skitting

across the terrace tiles for my liking. The last thing I wanted to do was to go visit them in *their* home, but running out of ways to amuse me while he was wheeling and dealing in his office, Dad got his native assistant, Chepy, to take me on a nature trek through the rainforest one afternoon.

We'd barely snapped one twig underfoot when I freaked out at the sight of a gargantuan iguana - easily three times the size of Dad's 'pets' - with pimply-bobbly armour-plating, a horrible scraggy neckflap, a crest of rubbery prongs and a long, thrashing alligator tail. It was all too *Jurassic Park* for me - I stumbled backwards, tripped on a root, reached out to steady myself and gashed my hand on a rogue nail sticking out of the wooden bridge we were about to cross. That's when the really freaky thing happened - and I swear to god this is true: Chepy picked up a giant leafcutter ant, had it bite my wound closed, and then pulled off its body so its jaws would remain clamped like a stitch until we could get medical attention. Naturally I fainted, somewhat impeding my transportation back to civilisation. (Ticos, as the Costa Rican people are known, are predominantly a petite, lean people and my puppy fat was no match for Chepy's dainty physique.)

Ultimately I was returned to my mum's care scarred, splotched with sunburn, riddled with diarrhoea and having nightmares about headless beasties for weeks.

My mother forbade me to ever visit my dad in Costa Rica again and I was grateful. When she went to court demanding full custody neither myself nor the judge argued with her. What kind of father lets his daughter get burnt and bitten and just laughs and says, 'It's character-building!' Little did I know then that watching over my freshly divorced mother would be far more painful than any animal incisors.

Every day I'd see her fall apart a little bit more and it made me all the more determined to stick myself together

with superglue. She let her grey grow in, I dyed my hair a brighter shade of red; she stopped wearing make-up knowing it would be sluiced off with her tears within the hour, I went to the No. 7 counter and asked them to recommend a stay-fast new look. She wore only tracksuit bottoms and pyjamas, I found that structured jackets and tailored skirts made me feel together and in charge. (And I wonder why I ended up with an office job. Even at uni I looked like a visiting auditor.) I don't know whether I was doing it for both of us or to distance us, to make sure everyone could differentiate between us - the mum might be in pieces but look how great the daughter is doing, she's really got it together!

As long as I looked smart on the outside, no one questioned what was going on inside.

At the time, what was going on inside was basically a lot of trepidation, especially with regard to dating. I offered a unique combination of clingy and one-foot-out-the-door when it came to relationships. It was tough living with a cautionary tale - 'Look what happens when your man leaves you!' my mother's whole being screamed. 'This is the fate that awaits you if you give yourself fully to a man. They'll wreck you. They'll take your soul. And your will to pluck.'

I used to wonder if I might tweeze her eyebrows when she was sleeping. Maybe smooth on some face cream and flush some blush on her cheeks. But it wouldn't have made any difference. It's almost impossible to look pretty when you're bitter on the inside.

She wasn't always this way. She used to be radiant, playful, known for her throaty laugh and flirty eyes, but Dad leaving knocked all the stuffing out of her and she never recovered. It's spectacularly depressing to see her with no hope, no self-esteem, just a pair of shadowy eyes and a snipey tone of voice. There's not a thing I can say to convince her that she doesn't have to live out the rest of