
Opening Extract from...

The Olive Season

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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THE OLIVE SEASON

Amour, a New Life and Olives Too

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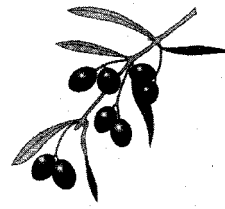

My very special thanks go, as always, to my loyal agent, Sophie Hicks, and to the team at Ed Victor, whom I regard as champagne-quaffing buddies and without whom my professional life would grind to a halt: Maggie Phillips, Hitesh Shah and Grainne Fox.

While out promoting the first volume of this story, *The Olive Farm*, I met some of the people whose job it is to sell books. I understood then what a vital role booksellers play in the publishing process, so my thanks to them, too, for supporting me, welcoming me into their stores and promoting my work.

Almost without fail, when working on a film or television drama, I get a really uplifting kick from the team spirit it engenders. Now, for the first time since I have been pottering about in the publishing world, I know it elsewhere: at my publishing house, Time Warner Books. The group of people

who have worked on *The Olive Farm* and *The Olive Season* are too numerous to name. They include the sales guys I have travelled about with, signing books and grabbing sandwiches; the marketing people; the design team who have given me such stunning jackets; fabulous publicists and, of course, the editorial team. I mention one out of such a splendid force because he has become an inspiration to me, my editor and friend Alan Samson.

For Michel,
I was born in love with you.

And for my mother. Our friendship has been a long time in the budding. But now that I have understood what she was fighting for, I want her to know how much I love her.

The Ancients sang their way all over the world.
They sang the rivers and ranges, salt-pans and sand
dunes. They hunted, ate, made love, danced, killed:
wherever their tracks led they left a trail of music.
They wrapped the whole world in a web of song;
and, at last, when the Earth was sung, they felt tired.

Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*

This is a true story. A fragment of my own and, because it is my own, I have taken certain liberties: bent time, changed names, rejigged the script here and there. 'To protect the innocent,' as they say in the movies. As well as a few of the guilty lurking within these pages.

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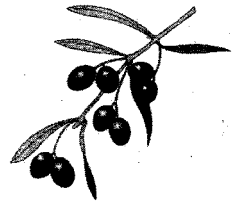
Getting Spliced, Polynesian-Style



The car draws to a halt in the leafy lane that not so many years ago was barely a mule track. In front of us is a set of tall, Matisse-blue gates. Ours.

'*C'est bon*, we'll walk the rest of the way,' Michel informs our driver.

Our man at the wheel is puzzled, and so am I.

Michel smiles, and insists. '*Vraiment*, there's no need to take us further.'

In the boot of this Mercedes taxi is an extremely heavy suitcase, an aluminium briefcase containing Michel's video-camera equipment, two laptops and one hand-painted didgeridoo measuring close to four foot in length, as well as sundry pieces of rather battered hand luggage. It is evident to anyone that carrying all this will be no easy exercise. It is also obvious that beyond the locked gates there is a drive which snakes up a steep hillside, and we are both exhausted

and jet-lagged. We have been travelling for more than twenty-four hours. Yes, the prospect of carting our luggage by hand and tramping the hill on foot feels like more than I am able to face, but now I see what Michel has seen.

Our three dogs, led by Lucky, the Alsatian, are bounding down the drive. Lucky, who had been abandoned, and who I found curled up like a moth-eaten mat at the foot of our property, bone-thin and nervy. We decided to adopt her, and here she is now, airborne at the gates, barking and growling at the innocent driver.

He stares fearfully at her. '*Ah, vous avez raison, monsieur.*'

Our bags are swiftly unloaded, the fare is settled and, once the car has safely rounded the corner, Michel unlocks the iron gates. They creak like a mummy's tomb as I pull them open and three sets of canine paws land firmly on my stomach, tails wagging.

We are home.

I scan the terraces, planted with row upon row of ancient olive trees. It is April, late spring. Here in the hills behind the Côte d'Azur, the olive groves are delicately blossomed with their tiny, white-forked flowers. Beyond them, perched halfway up the slope of the hill, our *belle époque* villa comes into view. Abounding in balustrade terraces, nestling among cedars and palms, facing out at a south-westerly angle, overlooking the bay of Cannes towards the sun-kissed Mediterranean, there it is, Appassionata, awaiting us.

'Mmm, it's good to be back,' I murmur.

'Would you like me to carry you?' asks Michel.

'Carry me? I know I'm tired, but I'm not that exhausted!'

'Over the threshold, *chérie*,' he adds with a grin and a wink.

Ah, yes. I had momentarily forgotten. We are returning to our olive farm as man and wife. We tied the knot a week ago

at the whackiest of wedding ceremonies. Our nuptials took place on the tiny tropical atoll of Aitutaki, one of the Cook Islands in the South Pacific.

'You know, I never thought I'd go through with it,' I giggle.

'What's that?'

'Getting married.'

'Well, there you go.'

I smile, reminding myself of how it all came about.

The first time Michel proposed to me was in Australia on our very first date. We were sitting side by side at a table in an open-air restaurant in Elizabeth Bay; shy strangers awaiting two plates of Sydney Bay prawns.

'I think we have a problem,' Michel said to me.

I looked across at him in surprise.

'I've fallen in love with you,' he muttered softly. 'Will you marry me?'

I confess that I was completely blown away and reacted as any amazed woman might, which was to gulp down a huge mouthful of my Brown Brothers Chardonnay and shrug off the proposal with a confused laugh. The fact is, I didn't take this handsome, blue-eyed man seriously. In any case, I was a career girl, a thirty-something actress, independent, ambitious, in demand and not the type to settle down. Or so I was perpetually reminding myself in those days. Terrified of commitment, scared of losing or being hurt was probably closer to the truth. And although within months of that first dinner in Australia we had scrambled together the rather substantial cash deposit to secure this gloriously dilapidated property, I hedged my bets as far as marriage was concerned. Until one morning, the following autumn, Michel flew in to London from Paris, arrived at my flat, went down on one knee, small, square jewellery box in

one hand and the other holding mine, and said: 'We have known each other a year now. A year to the day, exactly. We have our olive farm. Soon all the papers will be signed and it will officially belong to us. I think we are very happy. Both my daughters adore you, Carol, *chérie*, and I, *je t'aime avec tout mon coeur*. So will you, please, accept to be my wife now?'

My heart was beating like a clapperboard. I love Michel passionately, but was I capable of taking that final step?

Out popped my answer. 'Only if the King of Tonga marries us.'

What did I know of the King of Tonga? No more than anyone else: that he was famous for his massive girth, was the ruling monarch of a small archipelago of Pacific islands and that he was Polynesian. It was a flippant response intended only to buy me more time and keep that final itsy bit of commitment at bay. But even then, after so many months of living with Michel, I was underestimating the measure of his love for me and the tenacity of a film producer's spirit – or this one's, certainly – for they can usually be counted upon to provide whatever mise en scène has been requested.

A few weeks later I was back in Sydney and at work. I was filming a series based on a book written by me and produced by Michel. A fax arrived at the hotel from the kingdom of Tonga, addressed to me. Buried in the make-believe world of the role I had created for myself, I had completely forgotten my careless riposte of weeks earlier and so the fax bemused me at first. It was handwritten by the King's personal secretary. Standing in the hotel lobby, I read on. The communication sought photocopies of my and my parents' birth certificates and my current passport, details of criminal record, if any, religious adherences, etc. I flipped to the next page, heart palpitating, beginning to anticipate what

was coming. Continuing, His Highness's secretary explained that the King insisted all betrothed visiting his island be scrupulously investigated before any 'joining in holy matrimony blessed by His Royal Highness could be approved'.

I dashed upstairs to my seaview suite, telephoned Paris, woke Michel and immediately began to interrogate him. 'Is this a practical joke?' I cried. 'Is it? I mean, what's it all about?'

I could almost hear the smile in his voice as he confirmed that, as I had entreated, we were to be married in the royal kingdom by none other than King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, the King of Tonga. To say that I was stunned when I replaced the receiver would be an understatement. Still, after a minor panic attack, my enthusiasm for the idea began to grow. A South Sea-island wedding, warm, spumy waves lapping our naked toes as they sank into golden sands, a portly Polynesian potentate waving a scarlet hibiscus or two over our heads, muttering blessings in an incomprehensible tongue . . . Mmm, I thought, if I've got to go, then this is the way to go.

Having furnished the necessary mountain of paperwork, I then learned that the wedding ceremony would be a very different function to the one I had been dreaming of. The King was a devout Methodist. There would be no beach celebrations, no champagne. Prayers, countless hymns and a protracted service would be the order of the day, and no alcohol. I have nothing against such weddings for those who select them but it was not what I had envisaged for us, and so I rang Michel again. This time to explain, rather sheepishly, that I didn't fancy the wedding he was organising.

'Couldn't we just forget it?' I muttered, all too aware of the trouble he must have gone to to bring the arrangements thus far.

He accepted my reservations without complaint. All plans

were halted, and not much more was said on the subject of marriage until three years later, which is to say a little more than a month ago.

We were back in Sydney, the city where we met four years earlier, having dinner with a fellow television producer and longstanding friend of Michel's, Roger. During the course of the meal he asked, in the rather blunt manner Australians sometimes favour: 'I thought you folks were getting spliced. What happened? Decided yer don't like one another? I warned yer she'd be too much for yer, mate!'

I blushed as Michel recounted my objections to the almost forgotten Tongan escapade. Roger guffawed and laughed. 'Bloody lucky escape, I'd say, mate. That old bugger's a religious nut. And they're all still cannibals at heart. You must have heard the story about his mother, the old Queen, when she travelled on the *QE2*?' And before we could reply, Roger proceeded to recount the well-known anecdote about Queen Salote who, when handed the dinner menu at the captain's table, perused it briefly before passing it back to the waiter, saying, 'There's nothing there I fancy. Please bring the passenger list.'

'Listen, why don't you go to Rarotonga? The — Hotel will put on a good do for yer, and no questions asked. Won't even check if y'er already married! Get yerselves spliced, Polynesian style.'

Rarotonga, I learned then, is the capital of the fifteen Cook Islands, which remain, loosely speaking, a protectorate of New Zealand. As it turned out, Michel and Roger had filmed the pilot for a television series on one of the southern islands, Aitutaki, which they claimed was 'absolutely gorgeous'.

'I'll send a fax to the manager. He knows me. They'll do it for yer almost on the spot and it'll only cost yer thirty dollars. Lot cheaper than the divorce'll be.' He grinned at me

with a wink. 'Two days on the island is all you'll need. Buy the certificate on yer way in; they'll stamp and date it for two days later and Bob's yer uncle. Sit on the beach and tank up on a few tinnies while they get all the festivities rolling. I'd come along, be worst man for yer, but I can't leave, mate, I'm in pre-production.'

And so we arrive in Rarotonga, where blustering rain greets us, armed with a copy of the telex sent to the hotel by best mate Roger as well as his rather splendid, if a touch cumbersome wedding gift to us: a hand-painted, hand-carved didgeridoo which stands chest-height off the ground and which neither of us can raise a sound out of.

The rain rattles like gunshots against the corrugated roof as we enter the customs shed.

'Film producer?' enquires the customs officer.

Michel nods.

'Are you carrying any unsuitable film material or pornographic magazines with you?' Michel assures him that we are not while I, waiting alongside them, silently marvel at the proportions of this man. I am reminded that when I visited Fiji for the first time I never ceased to be amazed by the size of everyone's feet. Great paddles, they were, in sturdy brown leather sandals, creaking and slapping against the dry, dusty earth. The locals here are Maoris, Polynesians, not Melanesians, as the Fijians are. Still, this officer's feet, his whole physique, are simply stupendous. Michel is over six feet tall but in order to look this man in the eye he is obliged to crane his neck. My husband-to-be explains that the purpose of our visit is to get married. The man smiles jovially and we are, as Roger promised, furnished with a piece of paper – our wedding certificate – dated (but not yet signed by a church minister) for two days hence.

A taxi takes us through the sloshing, muddied capital of

Avarua and delivers us to our beachside hotel, where the native staff greet us in a friendly, if ponderous way. We introduce ourselves to a pretty desk clerk at reception and she plods off in search of Jim, the manager. He is a complete contrast: a harassed New Zealander who bursts from his office as though on the run and greets us anxiously. 'Welcome,' he mutters distractedly, not looking us in the eye, while pumping our hands. 'Yes,' he says, he has been expecting us and, yes, he received the telex and he has come up with an idea. He will arrange for one of his staff to row us and the minister out to a speck of an islet about forty yards offshore, where the service will take place, and then row us back for a champagne breakfast in the dining room.

'Sounds good,' we smile uncertainly.

We are standing at the entrance to the lobby, hemmed in by streaming rain. I glance towards this balding manager – what hair remains is powdered with dandruff; his eyes are bloodshot, bleary-looking with heavy, puffy bags semi-circling them; his nicotine-stained fingers are trembling and it occurs to me that he might have a drink problem – and then I peer out to sea, squinting at where he is pointing, but I see nothing. The sheet of rain coming in off the steel-grey ocean has obscured the islet in question.

'Don't worry, it will be clear and dry by Saturday. There might even be a nice breeze, if the weather forecast is to be believed.' But his nasal whine suggests that nothing in life can be counted on. 'The monsoon season finished a month ago. This shouldn't be happening,' he adds, desperately attempting to conceal concern.

I smile again and stare back towards the dining room. It is remarkably dark. In fact, everywhere in the hotel is dark. The place has a neglected, lost-in-the-middle-of-oblivion feel to it. In all the hotels on all the Pacific islands I have

ever visited I have always been thrilled by the beauty of the brilliantly coloured, erotically shaped flowers displayed in vases at reception, the robust succulents growing in the surrounding gardens. Here there are none. None at all. I don't like it here, I am thinking. We have been flying for five hours, so it is probably my mood and the depressing weather. Tomorrow, after a good night's sleep and a bit of tropical sunshine, I will be bursting with excitement at the approach of our wedding day. I must buck up. Still, standing in this godforsaken lobby, I find it hard to believe not only Rarotonga's claims to have one of the densest tourist trades in the South Pacific but that it is a much sought-after and applauded holiday destination.

Our room is up two flights of darkly varnished wooden stairs. It is a simple space, not dissimilar to a room in a downmarket motel. Simple and damp. It smells musty, of mothballs and well-trodden carpet. The furnishings are worn. There is one chair covered in a threadbare fabric, limp burned-orange curtains, our double bed, with its sickly-white counterpane and sunken centre, a built-in wardrobe and one wooden shelf at knee-height which now holds our suitcase, Michel's camera equipment and our didgeridoo. Adjacent to this is our en-suite, cupboard-sized bathroom with its slanting tiled floor and a shower nozzle in the ceiling a couple of feet to the left of the electric lightbulb, which is screened by a white plastic, tulip-shaped shade with a crack up one side of it.

The view from our only window looks out over the car park towards the interior of the island where, in this filthy weather, the volcanic mountains tower, black and threatening.

Perhaps my desire for these days, this occasion, to be perfect is unrealistic. But however naïve and sentimental I may be, by any standards this is not promising. I feel choked

with emotion but unable to communicate any of it. I am thirty-eight years old and have never been married before. Fear of commitment, a violent childhood and an over-acute sense of romanticism have kept me single. I wanted this to be *special*. I have travelled a fair amount in my adult life and ended up alone in some dead-end dives, yet I have almost always managed to retain a modicum of humour or at least my sense of adventure by assuring myself that at some point in an unforeseen future the situation will make good copy. But this is different. Or so some inner voice keeps repeating.

Is this Roger's idea of a bloody good practical joke, cobber?

I decide to put on a brave face and unlock our suitcase ready to begin the unpacking. Michel is on the telephone alongside the bed – an ancient cream appliance with no dial which looks as though it has been thrown out and found its way to a bric-à-brac stall. He is trying to contact reception. Finally, he gives up and decides to walk back downstairs.

'I'm going to see if they have another room,' he mutters impatiently as he closes the door. I cross to the window and gaze out at the rain. It is falling like a barrage of knitting needles. I cross to the bed and lie down, sinking into the pillow, which smells awful and is humid against my clammy cheeks. A tear falls, and I feel miserable.

The storm persists throughout Friday. Its density prevents us from going out in the rowing boat to visit the islet where the wedding is to take place. Jim, desperate to keep his cool, now suggests a contingency plan which is that, should the rain not let up, we will be married at the point of a roofed pontoon that juts a few metres out to sea from the hotel beach. We see little alternative but to accept, and so the plans are rearranged.

Miraculously, fortunately, somewhere around eleven on Saturday morning, the weather clears, blown away by a

tradewind approaching from the south-east, from the direction of the Tropic of Capricorn and Easter Island. The sodden, palm-covered pontoon is now swaying back and forth in the surging swash like the tail of a gigantic prehistoric reptile.

Still damp from my shower, I stare at it from our room on the first floor – we moved yesterday – while water from my shampooed hair drips on to my shoulders and runs in rivulets down my naked body. I have no idea where Michel is; I have hardly seen him these last two days except during our meals together in the cheerless dining room. It has been too wet to consider wandering in to town. I dress myself in a bathing costume and sarong and decide to dry my hair in the wind on the beach. Anything to get out of this bloody room.

A glimmer of sun breaks through the banks of fast-moving clouds. My hair is whipping against my face, streaking my eyes, as I perch on a boulder and look out across the South Pacific to a horizon barely delineable. I am thinking about life back at our olive farm, and our future plans for it, wishing I was there, when, suddenly, carried on the wind, I hear my name and turn to see Michel running towards me, waving wildly. I leap to my feet.

'What's up?' I cry.

'Get dressed, we're leaving!' he shouts as he approaches.

'Leaving? But I thought we were getting married!'

'We are, but not here. Come on, let's go. I've packed the case.'

Blown by the wind, I stagger after him, completely bemused.

'Where are we going?' I call, but Michel cannot hear me, or he is not listening. He has a scheme afoot, and it involves settling the bill, organising someone to collect our case and

ringing for a taxi to take us to a strip of the airport reserved for private inter-island aircraft. Amid the scramble I have to bullet back to the room after the taxi has pulled up because we realise that the bellboy has not collected the didgeridoo, and then scurry to the lobby loo to change from bathing suit and sarong into shorts and a top dragged from the case.

So it is only once we are seated, squashed together at the back of a plane loaded with sacks of unripe bananas, do I receive an answer to my question.

'Aitutaki. I telexed yesterday and have just received a reply. A representative from the hotel there will collect us at the airport and we will be married in their garden later this afternoon.' He puts his arm around me and draws me towards him. 'I have told them we would like something special. So, we'll have our Polynesian wedding after all, and because the storm has not touched that island, we'll have sunshine, too. After the service we'll drink New Zealand champagne and swim in the crystal-clear lagoon. It's the most magnificent I have ever seen.'

Aitutaki.

Stuck in our Rarotonga hotel, I have been reading a bunch of South Pacific guidebooks I picked up in Sydney. I know that Aitutaki is one of the most northerly of this southern group of Cook Islands. Other facts I have learned: the Pacific Ocean is larger than all five continents put together; its depth is deeper than all other oceans; reef sharks and plentiful other more dangerous family members inhabit these waters; sharks have not evolved in many hundreds of thousand of years, which is proof of their perfectly proportioned form; coral is the fastest-produced structure of anything created by any living beings. Some of these fascinating if not terribly useful bits and pieces I have gleaned while trying to keep myself sane during the interminable rain, dreading a dismal beginning to married life, which I,

with my acutely superstitious Irish nature, might have read as a bad omen.

The pilot arrives, apologising profusely. He is in his early thirties, has lustrous, bleached hair and a thick Aussie accent. There will be a short delay because the wind is too strong to take off, but once we are airborne, he assures us, it will be a smooth and pleasant ride.

I cannot deny a silent moment of scepticism.

The engine of our plane drones like a snoring bee, the air in the cabin is stifling, the bananas, green when we left Rarotonga, smell so fruity that I think they must have ripened during the two-hour flight. My head aches from the lack of fresh air and because I haven't eaten a thing all day. But I am thrilled by what awaits us below.

Michel is filming our approach to Aitutaki through the window on the left-hand side of the plane. Occasionally I lean against his sticky flesh and gaze down upon what he sees. It is little different from what I am looking at: tiny, sand-banked atolls, *motus*, in turquoise water so clear you can almost see the fish swimming. Here and there a lone, dark-skinned fisherman leans out from his canoe to draw in his net. The triangular-shaped lagoon is fringed with small, white waves breaking against the coral reefs which, in turn, are ringed by deeper, greener waters, winking and sparkling in the sun like precious stones. There are lagoons within lagoons. Turquoise, white, green, aquamarine smudged with golden shafts of sunlight: a sultan's jewellery casket.

I hear the shift in the engine's whine and the plane inclines to the right. Bags of bananas slide heavily against my feet as we swoop and then dip gently seawards. The pilot calls to us from the cockpit to get ready. 'Landing in ten,' he shouts. And then I catch sight of 'our' island. It slides into view as though from the other side of the curvature of the world.

Aitutaki, a slug-shaped mass of pale honey sand peppered with sparse patches of one- or two-storey shacks and buildings buried among forests of palms whose fronds are waving and flapping in the wind like happy dancing girls.

'Yes!' I turn and press my head into Michel's chest and kiss him hard. 'Thank you.'