

CHAPTER ONE

The Big Change

Chris peered out of the vehicle that was about to change his life forever.

From what he could see, hundreds of passengers ready to fly across the Atlantic had boarded the jumbo-size aeroplane. Excited chatter forced the reality upon him; he was travelling to the other side of the world to start his life over - be born again in Caribbean paradise.

Pleased he was positioned in a seat with a window, the allotted flight time was over seven hours to his first stop JFK, New York. Thankfully, the view from the plane would remove any form of claustrophobia, that might attempt to afflict him.

He felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Excuse me,” said the woman seated beside him. “I’ve got a bit of a favour to ask you. I understand if you say ‘no’ but well...do you mind if my son swaps seats with you to sit by the window? He was really hoping for a seat with a view of the sky and that.”

Chris’ head flicked to look out the window before he turned back to the woman, whose tired eyes sagged with her forced smile of discoloured teeth.

“Sure,” he said and began unfastening his seat belt.

“Thank you so so much,” she said as if his answer took the world off her shoulders.

“That’s alright,” he replied as he rose and squeezed out from between the row of seats.

The boy of about ten, who was already stood in the aisle with a nervous smile on his face, jumped across his mother, and took his new place.

As he sat down beside the aisle and fastened his seat belt, Chris nodded at the child .

The kid stared out the window and Chris could see his inflated cheeks protruding, indicating his grin.

“Thank you ever so much,” repeated the woman in a way that sounded like she was catching her breath . “What’s your name?”

“Chris,” he said.

“I’m Eadie and this is Darren. What do you say to Chris?” said the mother, prodding her son.

“Thank you Chris,” said Darren.

“That’s okay,” replied Chris.

She extended her hand. “Nice to meet you and really, thank you for that. You’re very kind.”

“That’s quite alright, and nice to meet you too.” He shook her hand.

“Looks like we’re ready then, innit?” she said.

“Looks that way.”

“So are you headed to New York as well then?”

“No. Change of flights at New York to go to San Juan, and then onto the Pharisee Islands.”

“Wow, sounds very nice. Never heard of them.”

“Not many people have. They’re really unknown on our side of the world and we don’t even see them advertised in the UK, but they’re a group of Caribbean islands owned by the British just under Puerto Rico.”

“How long you there for then?”

“Could be a year. Could be many years. I’m not sure yet.”

“Oh, so you’re moving out there then?”

Chris nodded.

“Have you been there before?” she continued.

“Yeah, I was there on holiday before so just um -” Chris paused to collect his thoughts. “Just seeing how things go when I arrive.”

“You got a job out there as well?”

“Um, yeah, uh. I’m going to be a bartender for the first time in my life.” He smiled.

“Oh wow - you’re gonna have a great time, all them lovely ladies,” she said, then leaned in close to Chris. “Bet they’re gonna love you.”

Chris continued to smile. “It’s definitely gonna be a new experience, that’s for sure.”

The woman leered. “Oh I’m sure it will be.” She turned back to her son. “Make sure you’re buckled in there love.”

Chris scanned the plane, seeing everyone seated, and the cabin crew walking backwards down the two aisles checking seat belts. The plane’s automated announcement-bell rang; the Captain greeted his passengers through the intercom and the screens on the backs of chairs, broadcasted an airline safety video.

Chris let his chin rest on his chest and closed his eyes.

The night before, one of his friends had reassured him about his impending, life-changing journey: “no matter what Chris, when you hear that plane engine, you’ll be excited.”

Chris had guaranteed that his mind was in such a strange place about crossing to the other side of the world, that he wouldn’t be excited at all.

His friend had protested.

The low growling of the plane’s engine commenced. The vehicle began to gain speed. And then, the authoritative roar of the jet projecting them forward informed Chris of the uncompromising truth; *no turning back now.*

His face remained blank.

Before he digested it, the vessel was flying out of London Heathrow Airport, soaring toward New York. It all seemed like he was playing out a prophesied scenario – a segment of his life he’d known he was going to have to live. He was conscious that his feelings toward this transition were unusual—that most people would be brimming with enthusiasm over emigrating to tropical Caribbean paradise; the islands, with their soothing heat, white sand beaches, glowing sun, azure blue ocean, beautiful women, and tasty cocktails.

It was an escape plan he’d promised himself long ago, but now, it felt like an obligatory relocation - as if he’d been forced out of London completely against his will.

With his eyes still closed, he swallowed hard and his eyes welled up. Just hours ago, he’d said goodbye to his parents. He replayed the last words he held with them in his mind.

“Ready to go? Everything packed up?” his mother said. Chris nodded.

“Okay then, let's do it,” she continued, grabbing his hand-luggage and making her way out the door. He examined himself one final time in the hallway mirror.

This is the last time I'll see myself in this mirror for ages, he thought, fixing the collar on his favourite blue shirt; a positive shirt that held good memories for him and seemed fitting for this life-changing occasion.

He took a deep sigh.

He checked his wallet to see his last two-hundred pounds from Job Seekers Allowance payments converted into American dollars, then put it away. He brushed a spec of dust off the shoulder of his black suit and nodded at his reflection.

Goodbye.

“Come on,” his mother said, pulling him from the abyss of hesitation. He grabbed his two suitcases—one in hand and one pulling behind him as they left their small flat in Pimlico, Central London.

On the concrete landing, they walked down the switch-back stairs. He balanced the luggage with the steps as the plastic wheels echoed hard into the apartment block with each drop.

Leaving for University had been different to this; Southampton was a train journey away from London. This trip felt permanent, like there was a possibility he'd never be coming back. Perhaps it was because that possibility was a potential reality. He'd hated London his whole conscious life and knew he should be happy with this escape plan. He was finally getting out of this horrible, rude, and emotionally cold City where no one cared for you. Where people never had the common courtesy to say “please” and “thank you.” Where mornings going to work were like being part of a mischief of desperate rats, scurrying toward food, no thought of the rat next to them.

Reaching the bottom floor and exiting the block of flats into the avenue, where two rows of apartments were situated on either side, he wheeled his luggage.

Was this really happening? Leaving home like this? Running so far to the other side of the world?

He had promised himself he would do it, but to actually be walking the walk—it felt like a death march. Like the vow he had made was not about freedom, but a debtor coming to collect what was promised ten years back.

They reached his mother's car outside of the avenue on the main street. The scratch across the silver BMW's driver door was a reminder of the malicious nature of London; that people will act on unpleasant intentions, sometimes for something. Sometimes for nothing.

As he loaded up his luggage, the coldness inside his mind did not allow his negative feelings about London to come to the surface. Instead, every definitive move toward his relocation hollowed him out.

He had chosen this. This was his choice. So why did it appear more like he was being forced out of London, than the great escape plan he'd wanted?

The car journey was slow, almost static, as if time had come to a standstill. Spring's

cloudy, dark sky and dawn's absence of life on the streets, complemented the eerie atmosphere.

Think of things that anger you about London, he told himself. Think of the decision you made so long ago. Remember?

But the thoughts weren't working. The only perception that emerged was that he was being pushed out of his country. Exiled. Ostracised. Abdication—the last resort of a desperate man.

"You're going to really enjoy it you know," his mother said as if reading his mind and helping as best she could.

"Alright," he mumbled.

They reached Victoria Station, unloaded his luggage, and caught the N38 Bus, heading to Green Park Tube Station.

Sitting at the back of the bus, the vehicle was as dead and empty as the rest of London.

"How were your friends about the whole thing?" his mother continued.

"Mum, I really don't want to talk right now," he murmured. "I'm just feeling really, really nervous."

The bus journey was short.

They were at the tube station, then on the vacant tube in what felt like seconds. His stomach had taken up champion-level gymnastics.

He used the tube journey to rest his head against the seat, calming his heart beat, before drifting to sleep.

"Chris. Chris, it's your father," a voice said.

"What? What?" he replied as he woke. The tube was now crowded with people carrying varying size suitcases.

His mother handed him her phone. "It's your father."

He took the phone and sighed. "Hey dad."

"Hey son," he said. "So this is it? The big one."

"Yeah," Chris mumbled.

"Well, good luck son. I'm sure it will all fall into place. Just take care of yourself out there, okay?"

"Thanks dad, and I hope it all does. I really do."

"Alright, well see you soon."

"See you dad."

Chris felt sick as he handed the phone back to his mother.

See you soon? his mind questioned. *What a lie.*

He wouldn't be seeing his father anytime soon if things went to plan and that hurt...a lot.

He let his head slump against the seat. The fatigue had been helpful in depleting his energy, draining his strength from crying.

The sign *Heathrow*, flickered in front of him between the windows of the moving

tube before he could retreat to the sanctuary of sleep.

“We're here,” his mother said.

He grabbed his bags and they headed out of the cramped underground. His heart rate was slow, but each thud was the drum beat of impending doom.

He was doing this. He was acting on a decision he'd made when he was fifteen years old!

If things aren't working out in London by the time I'm twenty-five, I'll leave the country.

Saying it, thinking it, telling people about it—that had been easy.

Now, every step Chris took as they made their way to the Heathrow Check-In was like walking on an electrified floor, shocking him with each time his foot landed. He was fulfilling a vow from ten years prior; a promise he'd hoped he'd never have to complete.

The meandering Check-In queue was quick and lucky; his luggage weighed right on limit, but it was to be expected that it would be heavy. After all, he was carrying his life with him. The busy airport's people were invisible to him as his mind pressed in what he was doing; he was leaving his family; his mother.

He continued with the Check-In procedure; his hand luggage was allowed to be carried on and as soon as he heard permission to move on through, his world stopped. It was all done.

He stood at the barrier of the airport where his mother couldn't pass.

Her eyes glistened and he held his head down. They both released a muffled “goodbye” without hugging, knowing that it would be too painful to do so.

He wouldn't be coming back to live in London ever again. This was part of his oath ten years ago. It would be the Caribbean, then maybe the United States. But never to live in London again. This was his big escape. His chance to start again anew, and erase his failed life of the past.

He went through the gate.

It was finished.

Exiting London air space, the plane was cruising at a good altitude, according to the Captain.

Chris fought back the stinging in his eyes, pulled a slip of paper out of his suit-jacket, and forced a smile. It was a simple list of the things he planned to do once settled in the Caribbean.

- 1) Pursue my writing career**
- 2) Get a driving license**
- 3) Get bar-tending experience**
- 4) Learn Spanish**
- 5) Stop frowning so much**
- 6) Gain true confidence in myself**

He stashed it away and looked around the plane. A few rows across, he saw a man who wormed around in his seat, sat between an exceptionally large guy and a fidgeting child. He observed another man whose eyes shifted from side to side and gaunt face looked as though he hadn't eaten a meal in weeks. Chris imagined he was cheap, like the sort of person who would buy a lottery ticket for a best friend's birthday and say, "that could be fifty-grand I'm giving you there." The type of person who would make a loud show of any luxury given him, provided it was free of charge.

He shook his head and as his eyes came into focus on the people near him. A beautiful woman blossomed into view at the seat across from him; mid-twenties, long brown hair, large blue eyes, and a facial expression that exuded warmth. She smiled and he smiled back.

Definitely has a boyfriend, he thought. No question about that.

Chris knowingly relieved the transparent plastic bagging from underneath his seat with the typical airline blanket inside, aware from previous British Airways flights that it was always placed there. He pulled it out, and covered himself. Sleep quickly embraced him.

It must have been an hour - maybe two, thought Chris as he rustled awake. The next thing his senses knew was the horrific stench of raw eggs. But the smell was even more pungent and deep, like chicken left for weeks in a disposal heap. His nostrils almost burned and breathing became difficult.

Chris watched as three, then four, then five people unbuckled their seat belts, got up, and moved away with faces wrinkled like prunes. Some who remained seated held their noses visibly, and others gritted their teeth under closed lips.

"That smell is stinky," said Darren.

"Yeah it's bloody awful innit," replied Eadie. She looked at Chris and shrivelled her nose. Chris smiled, raising his eyebrows, then scanned the other passengers.

Who had done it? he thought.

The odour began to retreat and just as clean oxygen appeared to surface, the stench slithered back into the atmosphere, drowning Chris with its thick breath.

He shut his nasal cavity, but in breathing through his mouth, he could almost taste the tangibility of mouldy cheese on his tongue.

"Oh for Christ's sake!" shouted a well-spoken, British pensioner as he rose from his seat and moved to the restroom area; many people had gathered around the space near the toilets to escape.

Some who were enduring the cloud, chuckled quietly, perhaps in nervous disbelief at how terrible the smell was. Others shared in the man's anger with deeply etched frowns.

The stink intensified, the heat of it brushing Chris' face. He watched as more people, stood up. One was visibly complaining to the cabin crew, while he saw another raise his head to the sky and breathe an exhalation of relief.

Someone on the plane had a great deal to answer for.

To his side, Chris heard Darren beginning to wretch.

“Oh love,” Eadie said. “Are you alright?”

It happened so fast that the wetness on the bridge of Chris’ nose and lips, confirmed its reality.

The child had projectile vomited over his seat, spraying the screen in front of him with yellow clumps, forcing bits to rebound into his mother’s lap and Chris’ face.

“Oh dear, what have you done?” she said. “Oh dear, oh dear. So sorry about this,” she exclaimed, talking to Chris.

Chris wiped his nose and mouth. “It’s okay. Happens to the best of us.” He stood up in the aisle, ready for the the child’s inevitable escort to the restroom.

“Thank you,” said Eadie as she ushered her son out.

From standing point, Chris continued to survey the faces of the people around him. More got up and moved out of the stink space. From a distance, he could read their lips as they spoke to the cabin crew—they weren’t happy.

The smell kept dimming, then growing worse, then hiding again, then amplifying to greater strength than before. The stink then intensified so much that Chris knew that whoever was causing this gaseous commotion, had descended from passing air to sharing solid matter with their underwear.

Chris checked the time on his phone and shook his head. It seemed likely that everyone on the flight would be obliged to live through this for the next four and a half hours.

He remained standing, waiting for his fellow passengers to return.

The smell of the vomit rising from the floor began to mix with the merciless stench. This was joined by the aroma of airline cuisine, creating an orchestra of scents, all vying for attention.

Delicious bacon battled against half-digested food, wrestling with the stink of an open sewer drain.

Chris looked at the beautiful woman to his side, who had her pink pullover stretched over her nose. She smiled at him with her eyes and he grinned, shaking his head.

“Definitely didn’t expect this,” he said.

She continued to smile through her eyes and returned to the romantic comedy Chris could see she was watching on her screen.

“Really really apologise about this,” said Eadie who returned, accompanied by a member of the cabin crew - a slim woman in her forties with a lot of makeup and perfume on. Darren trudged behind with his head down and his face bright red.

“Sorry sir,” said the cabin staff member. “Can I just get in there?”

“Sure,” said Chris as he stepped back, seeing she had a sponge and small bucket of soap water in her hands.

Chris scanned the plane again.

He caught sight of a guy picking his nose and scratching his groin; an individual who was clearly using the vicious distraction to indulge his habits.

Chris threw his hearing across to a couple; a man whose eyes had dark shadows underneath and a woman whose forehead vein was showing. “Sure,” replied the man; the

age forty-eight flashed in Chris' mind. He could have been older, but good genes must have maintained his youthful visage.

"You've got to be healthy," said the petite, tanned blond woman who appeared considerably younger, but gave the impression that stress was ageing her. "Think about Eric. He's your partner. Same age as you and keeping himself fit and strong. You better play when we get there. You promised."

Chris smiled and continued to listen.

"I will," said the man who breathed a sigh of submission.

"Good, good, it's important." Her words were so quick, it was as if they were trying to escape her mouth. "Remember what the doctor said about your heart. You need to make sure you're getting plenty of exercise. You've always liked tennis, haven't you?"

More of a statement than a question, Chris thought. He moved his gaze across to another individual on the opposite side of the plane, whose pale skin was almost green.

The man had one of his hands grasping his side, rubbing his ribs, then moving toward his stomach and darting back again to his ribs. He kept his head down and quickly looked to his right then back at his screen. He blinked rapidly, then looked up to his right as if something caught his interest. There was nothing above him, but the plane's overhead lights and air conditioning. The man touched his face, rubbing his chin and lips, then his eyes dashed back and forth. Chris could just about see that the man's forehead was glistening. The sickly looking guy shook his head and wiped his mouth again.

Chris' eyes widened.

It was him.

He was the one making this plane a toxic waste hazard.

Chris smiled. *Poor guy. How embarrassing.*

The smell of breakfast was beginning to conquer the stink and passengers' loosened their hands from their faces.

"All sorted," said the airline employee, who'd cleaned up the vomit.

"Thank you love," said Eadie. "Come on Darren."

The boy moved into the row to sit down and so did his mother, flashing a smile at Chris before he followed them.

Breakfast was now being served and Chris saw as the crew moved through the cabin placing down white trays, full of delicious wrapped treats. His stomach gurgled in response and he pulled down the seat-back tray table in front of him.

A crew member passed two trays across Chris to Eadie and Darren, then placed one in front of him.

He began peeling the wrappers of each small plastic container, revealing portions of different foods. It was a full English breakfast with strawberries and kiwi segments on the side. He was into the toast and bacon quickly. Each tasty bite reminded him that he was actually on a plane travelling somewhere far away from everything he'd ever known. The meal also delivered comfort.

Things will be okay. This is life. People make big changes all the time. Things will be

alright. It's all going to work out. This is what life is about. Travel. See things. Learn new things. Grow.

Chris brushed his hands and grinned inside himself.

It will all work out. It will all be fine.

The seat in front of him shoved back into his face, just missing his nose.

Chris tensed his jaw and looked at Eadie, who smiled. "That was close," she said.

"Indeed," said Chris with sufficient emphasis for the passenger in front to hear.

Finishing his meal, it was as if the air pollution absence had been granted solely so everyone could enjoy their breakfast.

As the cabin crew collected empty trays, the smell of a rat's corpse sneaked in. The stench was bold, confident, and relentless, promising to make everyone spew this time.

"You have got to be bloody kidding me," shouted the same man who by his voice might have possessed British aristocratic blood. "This is appalling!"

Some people laughed, but he was right. It was horrific, like entering a labourer's van who's gorged on copious egg and cheese sandwiches, and made his vehicle his own animal litter box.

Chris looked over to catch a glimpse of the guy's face, who he suspected was the culprit. The man kept his eyes firmly faced down.

Chris smiled and closed his eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to JFK New York, the local time is-"

Chris unwound his joints to the sound of the stewardess' announcement.

"-for your safety and comfort, please remain seated with your seat belt fastened until the Captain turns off the Fasten Seat Belt sign. This will indicate that we have parked at the gate and that it is safe for you to move about. At this time, you may use your cellular phones if you wish. Please check around your seat for any personal belongings you may have brought on board with you and please use caution when opening the overhead bins, as heavy articles may have shifted around during the flight. If you require assistance, please remain in your seat until all other passengers have disembarked. One of our crew members will then be pleased to assist you. On behalf of British Airways and the entire crew, I'd like to thank you for joining us on this trip and we are looking forward to seeing you on board again in the near future. Enjoy your stay."

"You were fast asleep, weren't ya?" said Eadie. "Big celebration last night was it?"

Chris rubbed his eyes. "No, just a few drinks with some friends."

"Probably best you slept," she continued. "That farting machine hasn't stopped them flapping out."

Chris breathed a chuckle and noticed an immigration form parked on his lap. Then, the familiar, putrid whiff, glided back in.

"Oh, wow. I see what you mean," said Chris widening his eyes.

"You see what I mean?" she said, nodding, laughing, and holding her nose.

"Blimey!"

Chris looked around, noticing passenger camaraderie through nods, raised eyebrows,

smiles, and shaking of the head—a shared ordeal; they’d survived the battle with pure sulphur, and were pleased it was over.

He pulled a pen from his jacket and filled out the immigration form quickly before disembarking commenced.

“Good luck on the islands Chris,” said Eadie as passengers manoeuvred themselves to retrieve their bags. “All the best to ya.”

“Thanks very much,” said Chris. “All the best to you too.”

Alighting from the plane and arriving in New York, the smell in the air was different from London; almost sweet, like fresh Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

In the huge, spacious, and high-tech airport, Chris knew from experiencing American flight security before to remain calm and collected, no matter how aggressive they appeared.

Reaching the head of the Arrivals queue, a muscled security-screening officer with a buzz hair cut, wearing a short-sleeve shirt called him forward with the flick of his thick, vein riddled forearm and chunky finger.

“Come on, we don’t have all day,” he said as Chris walked up to his booth.

“Hi,” said Chris.

“Passport, boarding pass, immigration form.”

“Sure.”

Chris handed him the documents.

“Reason for your stay?” demanded the militant-looking man as he continued surveying the documents that Chris had handed him.

“I’m in transit.”

“Where are you headed?”

“The Pharisee Islands.”

“Where’s that?”

“North side of the Caribbean.”

“Never heard of it.” He looked Chris dead in the eye. “Where’s your next stop?”

“San Juan.”

It’s on my tickets, Chris thought.

“Put your fingers, then your thumb on the panel when I tell you to, then look at the camera-” he said and paused with a clear intention to ask another question. Chris waited for his signal and placed his fingers, then thumb on the green-lit panel of the booth. He looked at the camera that was facing him. “-and what’s your reason for travelling to the Pharisee Islands?”

“Work.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m going to be a bartender.”

“You mean you are a bartender.”

“No, I’m going to be a bartender. I’ve never been one before.”

The officer looked Chris in the eyes again, shrugged his lips, and nodded. “Why are you wearing a suit?” he continued as he reviewed something on his computer.

“I always wear a suit when I travel.”

“It’s a smart suit.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay Mr. Charles. Enjoy your new life,” he said, smiling faintly, and handing back the documents. “Next!”

Entering the massive, busy airport, that reminded Chris of an exceptionally clean-looking mall, he used most of his seven-hour connection time exploring the electronics and gadgets stores that captured his curiosity. He then headed to check-in for his second flight to San Juan.

As he queued in the large line for another round with the metal detectors, he noticed a smile on one of the airport security guy's faces making eye contact with him. The tall, thin guy chatted to his co-worker, who looked up with a serious face, scanned the queue, fixed his eyes on Chris, then whispered something back to his fellow employee.

It could have been something. Could have been nothing. But Chris had seen that smile before - too many times. He prepared his mind for what he *knew* it meant.

The queue moved forward.

He watched as the tall guy strolled to another staff member and whispered something in her ear. She looked up, perused the queue, let her eyes fall on Chris, then whispered back to the guy. He chuckled.

Chris shook his head.

The queue continued to advance.

Reaching the metal detectors, he placed his hand luggage on the conveyor belt leading his bag into the X-ray. He removed his belt, shoes, keys, wallet, London Oyster card, black Biro pen, and phone, putting them all in the grey tray provided, also for the X-ray.

The tall guy who had been smiling and whispering to his co-workers, was now stern, standing at the side of the metal detector portal.

As Chris passed through it, all the airport security staff glared at him. He counted six of them and they were all in their mid to late twenties. Three of them had slight smiles on their faces. The machine made no alarm or alert he could see.

Chris knew though. Something was about to happen. *They* were going to get him, again...and he was going to have to deal with the consequences.

He sighed.

The tall guy moved right in front of him, towering above. “Step to one side. Now!”