

Extract from “The Chocolate Lovers’ Club”

Chapter 1

Hit me again,’ I say.

Eyebrows are raised. ‘Are you sure?’

‘I can handle it.’

‘You can overdose on this,’ he warns. ‘Even you, a hardened user.’

‘Never.’ I smile.

In times of crisis, my drug of choice is single plantation Madagascar. There is nothing – absolutely nothing – that it fails to cure. This is the remedy for anything from a broken heart to a headache and I’ve had plenty of both in my time, I can tell you.

‘Bring it on, boy.’ I nod solemnly and my dealer hands over my drugs, making me sigh with relief. Chocolate. Mmm. Mmm. Mmm. Lovely, lovely, creamy, sweet, delicious chocolate. I just can’t get enough of it.

Biting into the first chocolate I feel its warm, comforting taste starts to edge through my pain. There are times when chocolate really is the answer to all of your prayers.

‘Better?’

‘Getting there,’ I say with a wan smile.

‘The posse will be here soon and then you’ll be okay.’

‘I know. Thanks, Clive. You’re a saviour.’

‘All part of the service, dear.’ He high-fives me in a very camp way – but then he’s gay, so he’s allowed.

Taking my stash, I find a sofa in the corner, sighing again as my weary bones start to relax. Breathing in the strong, heady vanilla scent, I feel my head starting to clear.

I’m not alone in my desires. Oh no. I’m part of a small but perfectly-formed sect that we’ve christened The Chocolate Lovers’ Club. We have just four members in our guilty gang and we meet here at Chocolate Heaven as often as we can. This place is an addict’s paradise – the equivalent of the opium den for the chocoholic. It’s tucked away in a little, cobbled back street in a salubrious area of London, but I’m not going to say where, because then my secret would be out and hordes of wide-eyed, craving women would descend on our special place and spoil it. It’s like when you discover a great holiday destination – miles and miles of deserted, white beaches, intimate little restaurants and nite-spots: then you tell everyone about it and how fabulous it is and next year it’s been swamped by unwashed masses of people on Easyjet flights and you can’t move on the beach for fat, bloated bodies in beaded sarongs from Matalan and ghetto-blasters. All the intimate little restaurants now serve sausage and chips and the nite-spots offer half-price drinks and have foam machines. For now though, Chocolate Heaven is the haunt of the chosen few and long may it remain so.

I let my head drop back and score once more, popping another divine chocolate into my mouth with yet another heartfelt sigh.

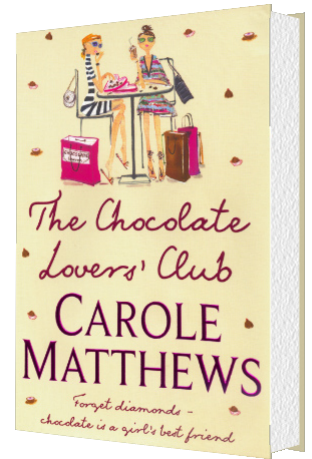
I’m Lucy Lombard and I suppose I’m the founder member because I’m the lucky soul who found Chocolate Heaven first. Today, an ad-hoc meeting of The Chocolate Lovers’ Club has been hastily convened. If any one of us texts – CHOCOLATE EMERGENCY – we all try to drop whatever we’re doing and run for our sanctuary. It’s the equivalent of telling an on-call doctor that his heart patient has just flat-lined. This time I’m the one who’s called the meeting. Wait until I tell my best girls what’s happened - they won’t believe it. Or maybe they will.

Autumn is the first to arrive. As I finish my last chocolate, she bursts through the door with a frown on her face. ‘Are you okay?’ she asks breathlessly. Autumn Fielding is one of life’s carers.

Marcus. Again,’ I offer. Marcus is supposed to be my dearly-beloved boyfriend - but more of that later.

She tuts sympathetically in return.

Many moons ago, I used to come in here alone and skulk in the corner. I don’t really like eating in front of other people and I particularly don’t like to be watched when I’m eating chocolate. I suspect druggies don’t like to be watched as they mainline their heroin – there’s something slightly sleazy about being observed while taking part in your particular perversion. Unless your particular perversion is being watched, I suppose. I don’t actually drool – but I sort of feel that I look as if I



do. And, I think you'll agree, that's best done in private.

It was during one of my many solo visits that I met Autumn. There wasn't one spare seat in the place except the one next to me, so she plonked herself down and we hit it off immediately. But then I don't think anyone would not like Autumn – as long as you don't mind people who can't help being constantly nice. A small word of caution though. Parents be warned if you're going to call your daughter Autumn, she will grow up to have unnaturally curly red hair and will invariably vote for the Green Party – just as this Autumn does.

Autumn is a dark chocolate person. In whatever shape or assortment it comes. I think in the world of chocolate psychology – and I'm sure there is one – it would perhaps indicate that she's hiding her dark side. Autumn nibbles her chocolate – eeking out each piece with a thousand tiny tasting bites which I think makes her feel less guilty about the poor people. She suffers terrible guilt when she feeds her chocolate habit. The rest of us agonise about the amount of calories we're consuming and how long they're going to sit on our hips. Autumn agonises about the starving children who have to survive on a bowl of rice every day and can't even have chocolate – not ever. I don't worry about starving children – I try to block them out of my vision completely as, quite frankly, I have more than enough stuff to worry about at home.

'We need hot chocolate to give us a lift,' Autumn says as she unwinds her scarf – no doubt hand-knitted by some poor Mexican teenager earning a quid a year in a filth-ridden slum. I eat another chocolate to make myself feel better.

'Clive,' I shout over the counter to our friend and supplier. 'The others will be here soon. What about getting some hot chocolate on the go for us?'

'Will do,' he says and bustles into action.

Then Nadia arrives. She comes and gives me a hug and looks deeply into my eyes. 'He's not good for you.'

'I know.' We all know. She didn't even need to ask who was the cause of my crisis. It's always Marcus. 'I've just ordered hot chocolate.'

Nadia Stone was the next person to come along to take our cosy couple to the realms of a gang. She arrived one lunchtime at Chocolate Heaven looking stressed and tearful before ordering a wide selection of goodies from Tristan with more haste than good taste. Both Autumn and I empathised with that as we have been there a million times ourselves. It was only right that we took her under our wing right there and then.

Autumn and I had already slipped into the habit of meeting up at least once a week – twice if our stress levels warranted it. Now we all have a sort of rolling arrangement.

Nadia is the only one among us who is a mother. She has a demanding three-year-old – aren't they all? Her son's called Lewis and nights after night without proper sleep were the main reason for her tears, but things are better now. Lewis sleeps through the night on enough occasions to allow Nadia to function in the real world.

Nadia is not discerning in her choice of chocolate. She says she enjoys anything. Sometimes I wonder if Nadia enjoys her chocolate at all – she says it's her only respite, but she seems to wolf it down without tasting it. A sin in my book. If you have an addiction, you should at least be able to savour it. Nadia eats her chocolate for comfort – along with ninety-nine per cent of the female population I should imagine. Like me, she is on the comely side of size ten. She blames it on never regaining her figure after the birth of Lewis. I'd blame it on the fact that she snaffles all of her son's chocolate before he can get near it. She even admits to licking the chocolate off his digestive biscuits when he's not looking.

'I hate the British weather.' The final member of our foursome to arrive is Chantal. Flopping into her seat, she shakes the rain from her glossy hair.

Originally from sunny California, like Nadia, Chantal Hamilton is also married. She has a fabulously wealthy husband, Ted, who is some kind of financial genius in the City. Chantal is the oldest among us – pushing forty - but is by far the most gorgeous and glamorous. She's tall, slender, always immaculately groomed, ridiculously beautiful and talented. If she was a horse, she'd be a thoroughbred. Her hair is cut into a sleek, dark bob by one of the top stylists in London – one of those that's on the telly all the time. There's never a hair out of place. Chantal is invited into the V.I.P room and gets complimentary champagne with her hairdo. How the other half live. She wears the kind of shoes that make my feet hurt just looking at them and frequents the type of designer boutiques where you require appointments and have sales advisors that would terrify punters with bank accounts within the normal range. Chantal Hamilton has everything in life.

Everything but a husband who wants sex with her.

It's true – in this day and age when we assume everyone is mad for it, Chantal and Ted make love about once a year. Twice if she can get him drunk at Christmas on the lethal combination of

vodka and something she calls ‘egg nog’. Sounds hideous. Either Valentine’s Day or her birthday can be counted on as a cert – but the rest is in the lap of the Gods. Chantal wishes it was more to do with Ted’s lap.

Despite her good breeding and high-class image, Chantal is also an indiscriminate chocolate eater who refuses to admit that she is a chocolate addict. Our American friend insists that she has a sweet tooth. I’d call that deep denial.

‘So why are we here?’ Chantal wants to know. ‘You should have seen the butt on the photographer I just had to blow off.’ Chantal has ways other than chocolate of dealing with her husband’s lack of desire to exert his conjugal rights. Not to put too fine a point on it, she prefers to blow her photographers rather than blow them off. ‘It had better be good.’

‘It’s not,’ I say, morosely.

Clive brings over a tray laden down with four glasses of steaming hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and shavings of milk chocolate. He puts it down on the low coffee table in our midst. A curl of steam rises into the air. It looks just the thing to warm our cold toes – and to soothe my broken heart.

‘I’ve made some feuillantines,’ he tells us with a dramatic raising of his eyes heavenwards indicating bliss. ‘Thin slivers of wafer flavoured with ginger, clove, nutmeg and cinnamon.’ We coo our approval. ‘You have to try them.’

Quite frankly, who are we to argue?

‘Here we go, ladies.’ There is a collective, appreciative and audible sigh of relief as I dish out the glasses to my grateful cohorts.

My fellow club members and I snuggle down into the soft, deep sofas. We sip the hot chocolate in unison and sigh collectively.

‘Well?’ Chantal says.

Autumn already has a ring of chocolate round her mouth and is wide-eyed with expectation.

I look round at the circle of my good friends. ‘Are you sitting comfortably, ladies?’ They all nod at me and we simultaneously reach for a thick, chocolately feuillantine. ‘Then let me begin...’

Chapter 2

She who eats chocolate must workout – it’s one of the first rules of the universe. So, on Tuesday evenings I go to a yoga class. I finish the last bite of my Mars Bar and throw the wrapper in the bin. It’s six o’clock and I’m hauling my gym bag from under my desk with the hope of making a prompt escape.

I’m currently working at Targa – a computer company which specialises in data recovery – whatever that might be. All I know is that I work here more frequently than anywhere else in my role as a temporary secretary, thoroughly wasting the 2:2 in Media Studies that I struggled so hard to get – despite the fact that everyone views it as a ‘nonsense’ degree. Targa has endemic levels of stress, sickness and the deployment of duvet days. I think some of my colleagues would benefit from going to my yoga class more than I do. Whenever anyone falls pregnant they seem to find a reason to sack the poor, unfortunate woman, so I’ve done more than my fair share of maternity cover over the last few years. Employment legislation means nothing here.

One of the few reasons that I like working at Targa is that it’s perilously close to Chocolate Heaven and, if I’m brisk, I can nip there in my lunch hour. My current job is to cater for the wide and varying whims of six assorted salesmen, under the eagle eye of sales manager, Mr Aiden Holby.

‘Hi there, Gorgeous,’ Aiden Holby says as he passes my desk. ‘Off to put your legs behind your neck tonight?’

Targa is a very politically incorrect company too. Sexual harassment and general abuse of the staff are regularly encouraged – mainly because it’s the only form of relief from the constant stress. An ability to flirt outrageously and encompass a wide vocabulary of offensive language are both necessary requirements of recruitment.

‘Yes. Yoga beckons.’

‘What I wouldn’t give to see you bending over in one of those tight little Lycra leotards.’

‘Yeah?’

He holds up his hand. ‘Don’t interrupt me. I’m having a male moment.’

‘Dream on,’ I tell him as I head for the door.

‘I’m having a drink later with the guys at the Space bar,’ he says, turning up his hundred

kilowatt smile. 'Join us.'

'Can't. But thanks.'

It's tempting. There's only one thing that can count as better than chocolate and that's a chocolate/alcohol combo. 'I'd better give it a miss,' I say, trying to be virtuous.

'I was hoping to get you drunk so that you'd seduce me.'

'You couldn't afford that much vodka.'

He laughs softly. 'Goodnight, Gorgeous. See you tomorrow.'

Aiden always addresses me as 'Gorgeous', but I'm not sure whether it's because he does, in fact, think I'm gorgeous, or because they've had so many temps through the office that one generic name fits us all. Saves all that pesky remembering. I don't, however, call him gorgeous – even though he is.

Aiden Holby is possessed of a rare charm. All the female members of staff - particularly those of a certain age and of an impressionable disposition - think he's fab. He's tall, dark and ridiculously handsome. The fact that he's got an irrepressibly cheeky smile and naughty twinkling eyes hasn't exactly escaped my attention either. I do occasionally find myself talking in glowing terms about Mr Aiden Holby at The Chocolate Lovers' Club and the girls have duly nicknamed him 'Crush'. Not that I have a crush on my boss - not really. It's just a slightly exaggerated appreciation of his skills in the workplace, his charm and his rather obvious rugged good looks. Besides, while Mr Aiden 'Crush' Holby is a resolutely single man, I am a woman in a committed, long-term relationship. I'm loyal to Marcus to the nth degree – even though my friends at the Chocolate Lovers' Club quite often point out that my loyalty is entirely misguided.

