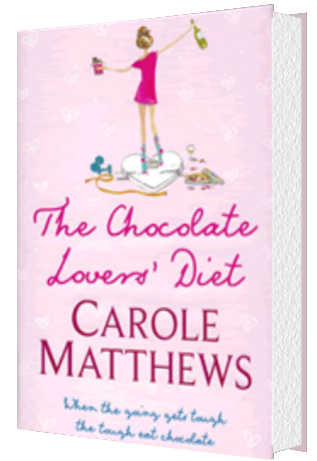


Extract from “The Chocolate Lovers’ Diet”



Chapter 1

There are two types of women, I’ve found. There are those who are addicted to chocolate and there are bitches. Bitches are the sort of women who say, ‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly eat a whole Mars Bar, they’re so sickly!’ Or, ‘I find one square of dark chocolate is more than enough, don’t you?’ Or, even worse, ‘I’m not really that keen on chocolate. I’m more of a savoury person.’ All said whilst nibbling conservatively on a Twiglet as if it’s a sufficient substitute for sheer pleasure. What’s all that about?

We, the members of The Chocolate Lovers’ Club, are out-and-out addicts. We love the world’s finest foodstuff in all its varied forms. No shame in that.

Today, my good friends and I are assembled at our club headquarters, a cosy haven in one of London’s more salubrious back streets. It’s called Chocolate Heaven – and chocolate heaven it is.

It’s also a week before Christmas and I’d like to describe an outdoor scene of Dickensian snowiness and charm, but I can’t because this is London in the era of global warming and, as such, the sky is school-skirt grey, it’s sheeting down with rain and there’s a gale blowing. We care not. Despite the elements raging around us we’re out in force. Chantal, Autumn, Nadia and I, Lucy Lombard – chocoholic supreme and founder member of the club – are hunkered down on the sofa in front of the fire. It might not be a roaring log fire, but it’s the modern gas equivalent and works just as well for us, as we’re dug in for the duration. Frankly, no one else is going to get anywhere near our prime space this side of closing time. We have a plate of chocolate fancies in front of us – featherlight sponge topped with a swirl of cappuccino icing – and some delectable fudge brownies. There’s also a selection of the finest truffles known to man made with fresh cream and Madagascar chocolate – a personal favourite. Because they’re made of fresh cream they only last for a couple of days – as if that’s ever going to be a problem! Believe me, this is the closest you can get to an orgasm in a public place. A little appreciative moan escapes my lips.

The owners of Chocolate Heaven, Clive and Tristan, are gloriously gay men – you’re not going to get straight guys running a chocolate shop, right? – who indulge us as we’re their best customers by far. If they’d let us rope off this area and have a vips only sign put up just for us then we would, but they churlishly insist on having other customers in this place even though they don’t eat nearly as much chocolate as we do.

Our damp coats are steaming gently in a heap next to us. My youthful blond bob, styled into a wondrous arrangement with a pair of straightening irons and pound of Frizz-ease, is now clamped flat to my head. Still, things are looking up. We all have glasses of hot chocolate, spiked with the intense flavour of red chilli and topped with a veritable excess of whipped cream. My taste buds don’t know whether to swoon or set on fire. Contentment is but a hair’s breadth away. Well, it would be, except for one slight snag.

On the wall of Chocolate Heaven there is a cheery, pottery plaque. Clive, in festive mood, has covered it with a swathe of silver tinsel. It reads:

Survival tips for times of stress

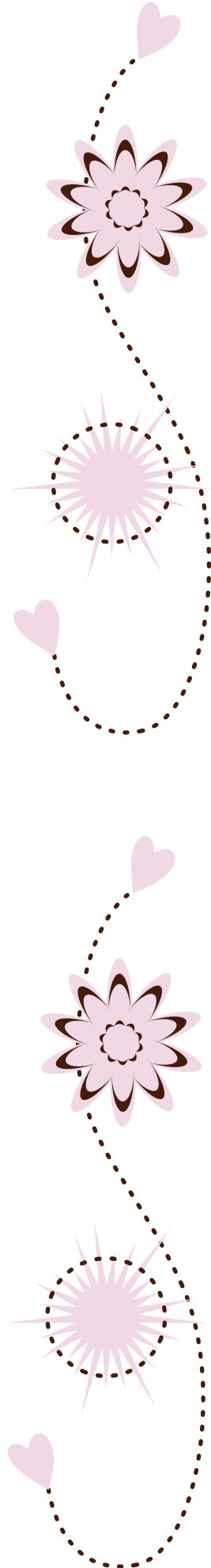
1. Take deep breaths
2. Count to ten
3. Eat chocolate

This is our policy statement. Our solemn edict for the way we live our lives. I take a deep breath, get as far as three, then I push in another truffle. A deep sigh of relief escapes before I can edit it out. This is a time of great stress. I’m wearing my knickers that bear the legend forget falling in love, I want to fall in chocolate – which might give you some hint as to the nature of my predicament.

‘Haven’t you heard from Crush yet?’ Nadia wants to know from beneath her frothy, cream moustache.

And that’s the slight snag. I shake my head. My current boyfriend, Mr Aiden Holby – aka Crush – is presently Missing In Action. In Australia.

Somehow, being MIA in Australia, on the other side of the globe, makes it worse. If he was MIA in, say, Belsize Park, then I could go round there on the bus or Tube and bang on his door at regular intervals until I could find out exactly what was happening. As it is, I’m a bit stuck. My fervent emails to him have remained unanswered. My calm but concerned phone calls to him all trip straight to



voicemail and, even though his computer tells mine that he's online, there's no response. I know not why. We were having long, transcontinental calls via our respective webcams – some of which were getting rather pleasantly steamy. Long live modern technology! Then nothing. Absolutely nothing.

'I can't understand it,' I say. 'It's not like him.'

Chantal snorts, loudly. It's a snort that says, 'He's a bloke, what do you expect?'

'Really,' I insist. 'He's not like other guys.' For 'other guys' read he's not like Marcus, my bastard, bollocky, recently ex-fiancé, who was the most unfaithful man on the planet. Even if you count Bill Clinton, Tom Jones and Darren Day.

My American friend with the perfect hair and the overflowing bank account snorts again. I try to bite my lip. Even though she's one of my very best mates in the world, relations between Chantal and me are still a little strained at the moment. This is due to the fact that she dated my ex-boyfriend – not Marcus, but another, much nicer one called Jacob. It's a very confusing time for me right now. My love-life has been the romantic equivalent of a major pile-up on the M1. Tangled metal, sirens wailing, total gridlock, destruction, bodies everywhere. Excuse me, but I'll have to ingest some more chocolate simply to keep my system going . . .

Let me fill you in while my chocolate hit kicks in. Jacob and I enjoyed a brief but mutually satisfying fling, despite never having got down and really dirty, through a combination of very unfortunate circumstances. He was, unlike Marcus, a very lovely guy. Although the shine did rather go off the relationship when I discovered his chosen method of earning a living. Jacob told me he worked in the leisure industry, which wasn't strictly a lie. It was just that he turned out to be a male prostitute. Why do I always find out that the men in my life have hidden depths way, way too late? My dear friend, Chantal, did know about Jacob's choice of employment, however. And, I suppose, all things considered, that she didn't really date him, she simply rented him by the hour. The knowledge that she slept with Jacob, even in a professional capacity – while I didn't get anywhere near his underwear despite wanting to – has, as you can imagine, left things somewhat scratchy between us. Then I got back with Marcus which was a Big Mistake to end all Big Mistakes. He just proved to me that, basically, he cannot be trusted as far as I can throw him. He will never change his philandering ways and I will never again believe that he will. That phase of my life is now over. The debris has been cleared, the motorway of my life is flowing smoothly once more. I've matured emotionally and have moved on. Thankfully, I'm now in a loving relationship with my old boss, Aiden 'Crush' Holby. Except that he seems to be temporarily misplaced. Maybe it's nothing more than a pesky traffic cone in the way.

'Aiden will turn up,' Autumn says, as if she's talking about some slippers that I've recently lost. She twines a finger round one of her crazy, red curls and gazes earnestly at me. I'd love to be like Autumn, whose glass is perpetually more than half-full. I mainly have one solitary drip left lurking miserably at the bottom. 'There'll be a perfectly plausible explanation,' she continues. 'You just wait and see.'

'I'll try him again later,' I tell them. Then I stuff in a few truffles in a desperate manner and my aloof façade is completely blown.

Keeping a relationship going over such differing time zones was, I guess, always going to be a trial, but – believe me – Crush is worth it. He's lovely, lovely, lovely. By far and away the best boyfriend I've ever had, and while it may not be an extensive list, there have been a few.

Aiden Holby and I both work for Targa, a data recovery company that, well, recover data. Don't ask me anything more technical than that. As I've said, Aiden was my boss, which is where my little 'crush' on him began – hence the nickname foisted upon him by The Chocolate Lovers' Club. Now Crush has been promoted to Head of International Something-or-another, terribly important, and that's why he's in The Land Down Under while I'm stuck in London in the Sales Department in a temporary and unspecified role and pretty much pass the time trying to avoid doing anything too taxing. I may be the most permanent temp that Targa has ever had, but I don't intend spending the rest of my days there. Oh no. I'm waiting to find my pre-destined role in life, you could say. Which, of course, is currently eluding me.

I was supposed to be joining Crush in Sydney to start a new life of fun and frolics as a bona fide, signed-up, full-time girlfriend. We were going to live together and everything. The whole Happy Ever After. But, as luck would have it, I broke my leg falling downstairs when some of the practice frolicking got a bit out of hand. Then, to add insult to injury, I was banned from flying for weeks due to my cumbersome plaster cast.

Crush had to zoom off to Australia without me – an important job waits for no man. But he was supposed to be getting things ready so that I could join him as soon as possible. However, now that my fractured limb is mended and the plaster has come off, I can't afford the air fare out there at this time of goodwill and extortionately jacked-up prices. And, in the meantime, lovely overseas boyfriend Crush, it seems, has vanished from the face of the earth.

'You don't know if he's coming home for Christmas then?' Nadia says.

'No. He did talk about it, but . . .' But he hasn't been returning my bloody phone messages, emails or anything. Instead of checking out the beer, barbecues and Bondi Beach, aforementioned boyfriend has gone walkabout. This definitely calls for more chocolate and a reinforcement of our policy statement. A bit of that fudge brownie looks as if it will just do the job.

Breathe. Count. Eat. Mmm. Ah, that's better . . .

Chapter 2

Whoever said money couldn't buy you happiness clearly didn't spend their cash on chocolate. After a lazy few hours with my friends consuming our favourite food – the fancies, truffles and fudge brownies are long gone – there's a rosy glow to my cheeks and a warm fullness in my tummy. I'm feeling very mellow and am finally starting to allow in something of the Christmas spirit. Am I the only person who thinks Christmas should come along only once every five years? That would be great. Once a year is far too often. I've barely put my decorations away when, lo and behold, it's deemed time to dust them off again. The only thing I'd miss are all the lovely special Christmas chocolates – selection boxes, chocolate coins, two-pound boxes of Milk Tray with snowflaked cellophane wrapping which it is technically possible to eat in one sitting.

Every year, despite vowing not to, I've somehow mega-maxed my credit card to buy Marcus my ex-fiancé something wildly extravagant that he probably didn't need and, most certainly, never appreciated. It's not much fun being in debt well into June just so that my once dearly-beloved could go racing round a track in an Aston Martin DB9, experience the joy of hang-gliding or float serenely across the sky in a hot air balloon, glass of champagne in hand. But then he always bought me such wonderful Christmas presents that I felt as if I had to reciprocate, sometimes even compete. When he was buying me a day out at a fabulous health spa or a gargantuan box of Belgian delights, I couldn't just wrap him a Greatest Hits CD and some cheap smellies, could I? Crush is a much more down-to-earth kind of guy and I'm sure that he will be more than happy with a small token of my love. Another great reason to be rid of Marcus.

Flopping down on my sofa, I undo the top button on my jeans and let my stomach sag comfortably. Controlling my chocolate consumption is a nightmare at this time of year; the temptation of all those tins of Quality Street, Celebrations, chocolate-covered brazil nuts and Terry's Chocolate Orange by the ton, is more than one woman should have to bear. And what about the metre-long boxes of Cadbury's Chocolate Fingers that you have to eat to be polite because someone in the office thought it would be fun to buy you one? Mmm. One of those little suckers is never enough, is it? I bet I could get into the Guinness Book of Records with the world's fastest consumption of a metre of Chocolate Fingers. Think of all the training I could do. My outlook suddenly brightens. Yes, maybe Christmas isn't so bad after all.

For reasons best known to myself, I've made a bit of an effort to spruce up my rather shabby lounge. Perhaps it was because I hoped that Crush might be coming home for a Yuletide visit. I've bought a real tree from Camden Market – not too much effort as the market is directly opposite my flat and the bloke, in a rush of unexpected seasonal goodwill, even carried it here for me. Though it did set me back nearly twenty quid. And I did give him a big tip. Now it's draped with red chilli-pepper lights which are winking on and off festively and not a little soporifically. It's supposed to be some indestructible strain of blue spruce or something, but already there's a growing pile of pine needles on my carpet. At this rate, it will be bald as a coot before Boxing Day. Maybe I've been sold a pup. No wonder the guy was in a hurry to get rid of it. So much for goodwill to men – or women – and all that.

I watch the lights on the tree some more and start to send myself into a trance. Before my eyes close completely, I decide to phone Crush again.

It's late afternoon here which makes it – oh, I don't know, probably some completely unsociable hour in Crush's world. It's virtually impossible to find a time to call him when we're both supposed to be awake and not at work. Australia, I'm sure, is a great country; I just wish it were a little nearer. Like just beyond Ireland, so that easyJet could get me there for less than the price of this rapidly moulting Christmas tree.

What will we do if Crush does manage to come home over the holidays, I wonder. I can see us taking long walks on Hampstead Heath, both wrapped up in soft, stylish woollies in primary colours – possibly from Gap – against the crisp, white frost. I can see us toasting marshmallows in front of an open fire, even though I don't actually possess an open fire and generally eschew marshmallows as inferior confectionery due to the absence of chocolate content. I can see us doing all kinds of furtively festive things on the floor beneath my fading fir tree and flashing chilli lights.

I nip into the bathroom to give my hair a quick rake with a brush. Let's face it, webcams don't generally show you in the best of lights and I want to give the air of not having tried too hard, but not looking too scruffy either. Casual glamour is a very hard look to achieve. Slicking on some lip gloss, I decide that I'm ready to meet in cyberspace with my loved one.

I log on to my computer and wait to see if my boyfriend is there waiting at the other end. But instead of Crush's lovely face looming large in front of me on the webcam, there's suddenly a very pretty woman on the screen.

'Hi,' she says at me, rather sleepily.

I can't speak. I'm too busy staring at the slutty underwear she's got on. It's black and very lacy with bright pink embroidery on it. The sort of underwear you wouldn't want to be caught wearing in the Accident and Emergency Department of your local hospital. The sort of underwear that doesn't look good on women with cellulite.

She whacks the computer on the top of its head. 'I can't hear anything,' she complains. 'Hello? Hello?' Then the woman turns and speaks over her shoulder. 'Did you leave this thing on? I think someone's trying to get through.' Whack. Whack.

Still my voice won't come.

'Ugg.' She purses her lips. 'All I have is the view of the inside of someone's nose.'

I back away from the camera.

'Here,' she says. 'See if you can make it work.' Then she moves her wondrously trim figure out of the way and, frankly, the inside of my nose is nothing compared to the view that I now have.

Lying on the bed behind this . . . this tart . . . is a naked man. A very naked man. Bottom in the air. Not even a sheet covering his modesty. I must at this point mention that Crush and I have never been involved in an intimate situation of this nature, so I don't instantly recognise the bare bottom. But who else's bottom could it possibly be? I wonder if I've somehow managed to hook up with the wrong computer. Can I possibly have contacted the wrong person in cyberspace and this lovely, if rather underdressed, woman is not really in my boyfriend's bedroom? Un?fortunately, I somehow don't think so. I'm sure this is Aiden's computer. And those are definitely his curtains and his wallpaper. Which means they are actually in Crush's bed. Her with her little matching bra and briefs and him and his buck-naked arse.

It's a very fine bottom, I have to say. But I don't really want to make acquaintance with it in this context. I'm blinking rapidly, as if one of the blinks will change the frame and will come up with a different and less disturbing image.

'Maybe it's for you,' Miss Skanky Pants says over her shoulder. 'Who would be calling at this hour?'

'Here, let me look.' The voice doesn't sound an awful lot like Crush, but then again that could be distortion due to the length of the airwaves or microwaves or something.

It's definitely an English accent. No doubt about that. The naked man starts to move and I decide that I don't want to see any more, that I've already seen enough. This is such a familiar scenario for me. I've been the victim of this kind of betrayal more times than I care to remember. Marcus was the past master at it. Now it seems that Aiden Holby has taken over the baton from him.

I don't want Crush to see me, mouth gaping open, brain frozen, fatter and more frumpy than the woman he's with, so I quickly log off. Then I sit staring at the computer, not knowing what to do. My palms are sweaty and my eyes are burning hot with tears. I dig my fingernails into my palms. I will not cry over this. I will not cry over this. I will calmly, and with a supreme degree of control that I never knew possible, carry on with my life as if this had never happened. I will not entertain any further thoughts of a lovely new life in Australia with a hunky man. I will leave him to get on with his new, ridiculously slim girlfriend without me. I will stop phoning or bothering Mr Aiden Holby in any way and he will simply cease to exist in my world. That's what I'll do.

Taking a Mars Bar from my emergency stash next to my computer, I sit and stare at it blankly. This is such a shame because Crush was really, really nice and I really, really liked him and I did so hope that things would be different this time. What's so wrong with me that no one can remain faithful to me for more than ten minutes? Fuck the flipping deep breath. And the poxy counting. I unwrap the Mars Bar and take a big bite from it. A humungously big bite. Then I think, Sod it, and I cry too.