

The Chocolate Lovers' Club

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Extract

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Chapter One

‘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.’

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.

Taking my first bite, I feel its warm, comforting taste start 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 and sink into it. My weary bones start to relax and, breathing in the strong vanilla scent, I feel my head starting to clear, too.

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 chcoholic. It's tucked away in a cobbled back street in a smart 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 people on Easyjet flights and you can't move on the beach for 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 flatlined. 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. '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 either as they tuck into a crackpipe or 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 guess.) I don't actually drool, but I feel that I look as if I do. And, I think you'll agree, drooling is best done in private.

It was during one of my many solo visits that I met Autumn. There wasn't a 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 inevitably grow up to have curly red hair and will vote for the Green Party – just as this one does.

Autumn is a dark-chocolate person. In the world of chocolate psychology – and I'm sure there is one – this may indicate that she's hiding her dark side. Autumn nibbles her chocolate – eke-ing 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 number 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 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 need to eat more chocolate to make myself feel better.

'Clive,' I shout to our friend and supplier over at the counter. '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.’

‘Fabulous.’

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 Clive’s business and life partner, 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 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 night after night without proper sleep was the main reason for *her* tears, but things are better now. Lewis sleeps through on enough occasions to allow Nadia to function in the real world.

Nadia is not discerning in her choice of chocolate. 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 99 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, Chantal Hamilton, like Nadia, 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 who’s on the telly all the time. There’s never a hair out of place. Chantal is invited into the VIP 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 who would terrify punters with bank accounts within the normal range. Yes, 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 an addict. Our American friend simply 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 the cockles of 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 sigh of anticipation as I dish out the glasses.

My fellow club members and I snuggle down into the soft, deep sofas. We sip the hot chocolate in unison and there is a second collective sigh – of appreciation.

‘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?’ They all nod at me and we simultaneously reach for a thick, chocolate-y *feuillantine*. ‘Then let me begin . . .’