

Who needs
love when
you've got
chocolate?

the
chocolate
run

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

From the author of *My Best Friend's Girl*,
a Richard & Judy Summer Read Selection

*The
Chocolate
Run*

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

sphere

‘there’s only one thing
better than illicit sex –
illicit chocolate’

chapter one

give us a break

You're floating on a sea of chocolate.

Soft, warm, sweet, sensual chocolate . . . soothing, calming, velvety chocolate. It's lapping over your tired, naked body. Covering it. Caressing it. Taking away all your aches and troubles. Everything, the world, reality, people, washed away by the fluttering of chocolate against your skin. Peacefully, mil—

'I'll, er, be off then.'

That doesn't sound like part of my chocolate nirvana. I cracked open a sleep-deprived eye, checked my surroundings.

Oh. I wasn't drifting on a creamy, cocoa-based ocean after all. I was hunched up on my sofa with my knees pulled up to my chest, my forehead resting on my knees, and my off-white towelling dressing gown pulled around my naked body. I didn't need a mirror to know my face was saggy from lack of rest; my black-brown eyes were ringed with crusts of sleep; and my usually neat, cheek-length black hair stood up in so many peaks and spikes it resembled a Gothic wrought iron sculpture. Nope, couldn't get further from my heaven if I tried. Especially when there's a man stood in my living room yammering on about leaving.

Moving like a woman approaching the gallows, I lifted my head and turned to face him.

Greg was dressed: midnight-blue, wide-rib jumper under a knee-length coat. Navy blue jeans. Black record bag slung across his body. Dressed. Fully dressed. *Why am I surprised? If he's leaving, he'd hardly be stood in his underpants, would he?*

He looked back at me, obviously waiting for me to speak. To respond to his statement of intent to leave.

I played for time by lowering my legs, careful not to flash anything under my dressing gown. I started to fiddle with a spike of my black hair, winding it around my index finger as I tried to make eye contact without looking at him.

How am I supposed to act? It's been so long since I've done this, I've forgotten how it goes. Am I meant to be casual? Blasé? Keen? Serene? Desperate?

Then there's the speaking thing. What am I supposed to say? 'So long and thanks for all the sex?' or 'Go away and never darken my bedroom again?'

And what about breakfast? I'm pretty sure you're meant to offer it. But that's, what, another hour or so. Surely he wouldn't want to prolong this by staying for breakfast. Or would he? But if he leaves now, what do we do on Monday? How do we behave – *be* – if we leave things up in the air?

There were so many questions that needed answering you'd think someone would've written an instruction manual on this, wouldn't yer? *The Little Guide to Big Mistakes* or something. They'd be raking it in.

Maybe I should go for a compromise. Not breakfast, not door . . . Cab! I'll offer him a cab. That way, he'll hang around long enough for one of us to blurt out, 'It never happened, OK?' Then we'd agree to never mention it again. Ever. And then he'd do the decent thing and go away.

I cleared my throat, forced myself to make eye contact. The lock of hair was twisted so tightly around my index finger the tip throbbed. 'Do you want me to call you a cab?' I asked, sounding pleasant and calm. Nobody would guess I was having

trouble breathing, would continue to have trouble breathing until he'd gone.

'No, I'll just be going. Get out of your way,' he replied and didn't move.

'Are you sure?' I persisted.

He nodded and still didn't move, showed no sign of knowing how to move.

'Really, it's no trouble,' I said. 'You stand there, I point at you and go, "You're a cab." Dead easy. I do it all the time.'

He simply stared at me.

I stared at him.

Breakfast it is then.

chapter two

messy

Greg opened the lower cupboard of the unit nearest the kitchen door, pulled out the white chopping board. Next, he opened the drawer above that cupboard and rummaged through it, searching for the right knife.

I stood watching him. He moved with such ease in my red and white kitchen I was mildly surprised he didn't live here. That it was my kitchen, not his.

He unhooked my red apron from behind the kitchen door, slipped it over his head, tied it around his middle, then hoiked up his jumper sleeves. Hang on, *is* this my kitchen? Did I really own an apron? One that said . . . *Dream Stuffing*? The irony wasn't lost on me as Greg grinned above the words on his chest and rubbed his hands expectantly.

I opened the fridge and my eye fell immediately upon the giant bar of chocolate sitting on the top shelf. What I'd do for a couple of squares right now. I'd just discovered I couldn't work under pressure without it. That when the going got tough, I needed chocolate. But, nobody could ever know I sometimes ate chocolate for breakfast. I fished an onion and the last tomato from the vegetable crisper and tossed them to him. We were going to have an omelette for breakfast. You

know, breakfast, this travesty of a meal I'd been manipulated into. (Yes, it was me who'd uttered the damn joke but he could've done what I've heard most men do in these situations and leave me choking on the dust thrown up by his legging it into the sunset.)

Greg caught the onion one-handed then caught the tomato with the other hand, but instead of getting down to work, he grabbed the chopping knife and a wooden spoon. 'Watch this,' he said and, one by one, tossed them in the air.

Absently, I tightened my dressing gown tie, cutting off most of the circulation to my legs, then flattened a few of the black spikes by dragging a hand through my hair. I watched the onion, tomato, wooden spoon and knife dance through the air while Greg juggled. The knife crossed the onion on its way up, the spoon crossed the tomato on its way down. The knife went up again, as did the onion. My eyes followed the smooth lines the items carved in the atmosphere. I was mesmerised. By its contradictory grace; by the natural elegance of the juggler. Chucking things about shouldn't be so beautiful, exquisite. I'd always wanted to juggle, to make things float and dance but I didn't have the co-ordination for it. Greg was perfect. Cocky git.

Tosser.

That'd been my first thought of Gregory Walterson when we met. *Absolute tosser.*

He'd been sat in a pub with his best friend, Matt, at the time. Matt had been seeing Jen, my best friend, for a few weeks and they were treating Greg and me to a meal so we could all get to know each other. Jen was desperate for me to like Matt and thought meeting Matt's best mate – who, by all accounts, was usually Velcroed to his side – would assist the liking process, hence the meal.

I'd had to work on a Saturday and entered the pub at almost a run, flustered and pissed off at being late.

‘Ambs, this is Greg, Matt’s best mate,’ Jen said, grinning insanely as her gaze flitted between the pair of us. ‘Greg, this is my best friend, Amber. Don’t call her Ambs, ever, she hates that. Thinks it’s too personal, especially when you don’t know her. Only I’m allowed to call her Ambs. But Greg doesn’t mind being called Greg or Gregory. He’s easy-going about his name.’

While Jen babbled on, I took a gander at this Gregory who didn’t mind being called Greg, and internally flinched – it was like being slapped in the face. Matt was attractive, but Greg . . . Greg had been created by someone who didn’t know when to stop; someone who when presented with top-quality ingredients, chose to endow one man with them rather than dishing them out fairly amongst the rest of the male populace. Greg’s eyes, for example, were like Minstrels, were like shiny discs of hard, dark chocolate. His hair was so black it was blue-black and hung like long curls of liquorice around his face. His slightly olive skin was lovingly moulded onto his strong bone structure. And his lips . . . his lips were as succulent as pink Jelly Babies.

Greg’s Minstrel eyes held my brown-black eyes a fraction longer than necessary before his Jelly Baby mouth parted into a smile and he said, ‘Hi.’ Long and slow and overtly sexual.

Tosser, I’d thought, before I smiled a tight-lipped, sarcastic hello in return. *Absolute tosser*. No matter how tasty he looked, no matter how much I wanted to lick his eyes and his lips and his hair, it was abundantly clear: Greg was gorgeous. Greg knew it. Greg used it at every given opportunity. But, I had to be nice. Jen was madly in love with Matt even though they’d only met three weeks earlier (‘Ambs, I think he’s The One, I really do’), so this man was going to be in my life for a while. I had to get on with him.

We started off seeing each other occasionally with Matt and Jen, then he rather disconcertingly started to make an effort

(emailing, calling me at work, asking me to meet him for lunch because we worked near each other in town) meaning I had to – make an effort that is.

I went along to lunch the first time because I was open-minded enough to know he'd spend the hour talking about himself and checking his reflection in any shiny surface, thus confirming beyond a shadow of a doubt what a tosser he was. Unfortunately, I left lunch grudgingly impressed because he had the kind of wit, knowledge and intelligence I'd only encountered a few times in my life, plus he didn't once check himself out in the butter knife.

We regularly went out alone after that. And, three years later, Gregory 'Tosser' Walterson had become my second-best mate. He was number two on all my phone speed dials; the second person I called when anything big happened; the person I spent most time with after Jen. We talked and emailed every day. He was Greg, after all. My mate. Still a tosser, but now my mate who happened to be a tosser. Nothing more. Honestly, nothing more, until last night.

'Huh? Huh? Whaddaya think?' he asked, turning to show me his juggling properly. Before I could reply, he miscalculated a catch and everything was thrown off balance and suddenly the blade end of the knife was hurtling towards his hand. He jerked his hand away with a fraction of a second to spare and the knife fell to the floor, closely followed by the rest of his tools. The spoon clattered away across the kitchen, the onion rolling behind it. But the tomato, which had been over-ripe and spoiling for a fight anyway, exploded with a damp splodge, juice and flesh and seeds oozing out on the red and white lino tiles.

Greg grimaced at the splattered tomato, then glanced up at me. 'Oops,' he said.

““Oops”?” I replied. ‘What do you mean “Oops”?’

He shrugged. ‘Oops.’

‘Cloth, water.’ I pointed at the sink. ‘Get cleaning.’

‘Sorry, mate, you’ve seen my bedroom, you know I don’t clean.’

He then picked up the onion, went back to the cupboard, took out a clean knife, returned to the chopping board, and sliced the top off the onion. He even started whistling as he stripped the onion of its outer layer.

“‘I don’t clean”, indeed,’ I said above his out-of-tune whistling. ‘You’re lucky I don’t batter you with a teaspoon, yer cheeky *get*.’

Greg laughed. A laugh so warm and easy that I’d long suspected it came from somewhere deep in his heart. Hearing it was like having sunshine poured directly into your ears, feeling it radiate throughout your body. His laugh often made me laugh. Right then, I could only rustle up a small smile.

A few seconds later, I bobbed down with a damp J-cloth to clean up the tomato explosion.

This is so weird, I thought. It’s like every other morning he’s spent here. Anyone looking in at us, at how he’s chopping and I’m cleaning, wouldn’t guess we’d . . .

I lifted the lid on the bin but paused before dropping in the tomato-soiled cloth – it’d gone suspiciously quiet at Greg’s end of the kitchen. And ‘quiet’ meant he’d broken something and was trying to hide the evidence. My ‘Director’ mug had gone that way, as had the scary cat mugs my mum bought me. (That was a bonus seeing as I’d tried a few times to ‘accidentally’ end their existence and they seemed to be protected by some kind of force field.) I glanced around to check what he was up to.

My stomach lurched to find him watching me. Openly, blatantly staring at me.

His Minstrel eyes, which had been intensely fixed on me,

jerked into huge circles of fear. Recovering his composure, he struggled with a small, shy smile, lowered his eyes, then spun back to continue chopping.

I turned back to the bin with my heart galloping in my chest and my whole body aflame. I flung the tomato and cloth into the bin, let the lid fall into place.

It was only a look, a glance, a mere expression, I told myself. It didn't mean anything. Yeah, and you can walk on water.

RRRIINGGG!

Like an unwelcome alarm clock the phone shattered my late Saturday morning peace.

I was showered, pyjamaed, and curled up under my duvet on my sofa. I'd attempted to go back to bed after Greg left, but had been poleaxed by the state of my bedroom. The rumpled bedclothes, the condom wrappers on the floor, the wicker bin with used condoms in it, clothes I'd been wearing last night flung to the four corners. Worst of all, it reeked of it. Us. What we'd done. Even after I'd opened the large sash window and let in the frosty February air, the smell was there. As though it'd seeped into the paintwork and carpet and ceiling cornice and wasn't ever going to leave.

So, I'd done the decent thing and ignored it, knowing that if I ignored it long and hard enough, it'd magically tidy itself. I'd trooped off to the shower, returned to find it wasn't tidied, and promptly upped the level and severity of blanking (it really was going to work). I'd been drifting off with a film on the TV when the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and mumbled a hello.

'Hi, Ambs.'

Jen.

JEN!

My eyes flew open and I sat bolt upright on the sofa. *What the hell am I going to tell her? Am I going to tell her?* I told Jen

'I DIDN'T MEAN TO, HONEST TO GOODNESS I DIDN'T.
IT JUST HAPPENED.'

Amber Salpone doesn't mean to keep ending up in bed with her friend Greg Walterson, but she can't help herself. And every time it 'just happens' their secret affair moves closer to being a real relationship, which is a big problem when he's a womaniser and she's a commitment-phobe.

While Amber struggles to accept her new feelings for Greg, she also realises that her closeness to Jen, her best friend, is slipping away and the two of them are becoming virtual strangers. Slowly but surely, as the stark truths of all their lives are revealed, Amber has to confront the fact that chocolate can't cure everything and sometimes running away isn't an option . . .

The Chocolate Run is a delectable tale of lust, love and chocolate.

'A smart, funny read'

Heat

'A fantastic blend of love, friendship and laughs'

Company

'Great stuff'

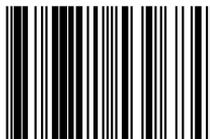
London Metro

www.dorothykoomson.co.uk

GENERAL
FICTION

ISBN 978-0-7515-3968-4

U.K. £X.XX



9 780751 539684 >