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The Chocolate Apothecary

Written by Josephine Moon

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The CHOCOLATE APOTHECARY

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1

Christmas Livingstone's Top 10 Rules for Happiness

1. Do what you love and love what you do.
2. Never let yourself get hungry.
3. There is almost nothing that cannot be improved by chocolate.
4. Nurture all five senses each and every day.
5. Share joy with others and you'll feel joyful too.
6. Massage is not a luxury but a necessity.
7. Ask yourself, 'What would Oprah do?'
8. Your destiny doesn't happen to you; you make your destiny.
9. Be on a quest at all times.

And, most importantly,

10. Absolutely no romantic relationships.

It was Thursday, Holy Thursday, to be exact—the day before the four-day Easter weekend, which also included the Evandale garden expo on Saturday—and The Chocolate Apothecary was a bubbling pot of activity. Easter, Valentine's Day and Mother's Day were the biggest chocolate events of the year, and this time around, Easter was late enough to be just a week before Mother's Day.

Cheyenne and Abigail were working the floor, selling and waitressing like their lives depended on it, carrying silver trays weighed down with mugs of hot chocolate, mochas, and pots of tea, apple pie and cream, chocolate fondants, chocolate-coated raspberries, chocolate brownies and pralines. Biscotti. Macarons. Meringues. The aromas of them all swirled together around the shop in a magical, intoxicating perfume and rolled out onto the street, stopping people in their tracks so they followed the scent inside, as if hypnotised.

Lots of visitors were in town for the Easter break, and it felt as though they'd all ended up inside Christmas Livingstone's stately Georgian building, hiding from the indecisive weather outside. She peeked out from the kitchen behind the swing doors, wiping her hands on her apron. The long communal table down the centre of the shop was full, with customers' chatter adding to the cacophony.

She'd be up all night replacing the chocolates and baked goods the crowd was consuming today. Maybe she should call someone in to help. But who? She couldn't very well expect Cheyenne or Abigail to stay into the night after working all day. Maybe her sister? Val couldn't cook a single thing, let alone temper chocolate or decorate it once it was set. But she was tremendously pragmatic. She would wash, clean, sweep, carry, lift and load. And she would keep Christmas's spirits up when the fatigue hit. But Val had a man and three boys to look after.

That really only left Emily. She was working today but she'd be up for an all-nighter. Christmas would only have to sell it to her as a girly sleepover like they'd had when they were kids, and give her a glass of bubbly, and she'd be in. It was one of the many things she loved about Emily. She was always so keen to help.

Christmas pulled her phone out of her pocket, then hesitated. She hated asking for favours, even when she knew the other person would be happy to oblige. But the crowd out there wasn't letting up and it was only going to get busier.

'Just do it,' she told herself, and tapped out a message.

Emily responded instantly. *Absolutely. Great timing! I've got a super surprise for you. I can't wait!!!*

A surprise? Christmas couldn't even begin to guess what that might be. And she had no more time to consider it, because the postman's squealing van had just pulled up outside the picket fence at the front of the shop.

'Excellent,' she said aloud, pushing open the swing doors into the shop, stepping around a little boy rolling a toy train on the floor and a number of steel walking frames propped beside chairs at the small round tables where senior citizens rested with their hot drinks. She'd put in an order for several kilograms of raw cacao butter to be sent express, just in case of a rush, and now she was exceptionally glad she had. She skipped the last two steps across the doorway to greet the postman, who was heaving out of his van a box with a *Caution: Heavy Load* sticker on it. He placed it on the ground while he fetched his paperwork and mobile scanner for her to leave an electronic signature.

Gordon Harding swooshed by on his penny farthing, his head bent low against the wind, his waistcoat buttoned tightly against

the cold. She waved heartily. It was one of the things she loved so much about living in Evandale—the penny farthings, from another time entirely, still whooshing about poetically, refusing to give in to the pressures of time and technology.

'Sign here,' the postman said, handing her the clunky device and the electronic pen. She scribbled her initials and said thanks, waiting to see if he might offer to carry the box inside. He didn't. So she waited until his van had moved on, then knelt beside the box and tested its weight. It was fifteen kilos, according to the sticker. She knew she was strong enough to lift that much, but she was wearing a skirt and it wasn't easy to brace her legs as she needed to, and the box was large and the cardboard packaging slippery. She levered it a few inches off the footpath before it dropped down again with a thud. She glanced in through the door of the shop, half embarrassed and half hoping someone might help her, but both Abigail and Cheyenne were busy and most of the men inside were older than her ex-stepfather, Joseph.

She was considering her options when an orange taxi pulled up in the space where the van had just been. Through the window, she saw a man thrust a couple of notes at the driver; then he opened the door and stepped out, dragging a battered traveller's backpack that had certainly seen better days and looked as though its zips and buckles might pop open at any moment. The man straightened, adjusted a laptop bag slung across his body, closed the door, and the taxi left.

An easy smile broke through his dark beard, which was largely unkempt and messy but just within the bounds of still being rustic and attractive. But it was the way his smile reached all the way to his staggeringly blue eyes that hit Christmas hard. The air around her suddenly drained away and she was speechless for a couple of moments, unable to take her eyes off his.

'Hi,' he said. 'Is this the chocolate place?' He was walking towards her, his backpack abandoned on the footpath, peering through the window. 'I picked up a brochure at the airport. I can't believe I've never been here before.'

Christmas found some words. 'You live here?' Okay, not impressive words, but they were better than stunned silence.

He turned back to her, that smile still shining from his eyes. One side of his shirt was tucked into his pants but not the other, and for some reason this made Christmas feel wobbly. 'I come from Tasmania but I've been overseas for work a lot in the past few years, coming back to live in my grandmother's house in between gigs.'

'I've been open for three years.'

'This is *your* shop? Perfect. Maybe you can help me choose some chocolates for my grandmother. She's in a nursing home and has a terrible sweet tooth. All good up here—' he tapped his temple—'but the body's letting her down. On my way to see her now. And I'm starving so I thought I'd grab some lunch too.'

Christmas didn't know where to look. She couldn't keep looking at him because her body was reacting strongly to his presence. There was an aura about him—something magnetic. It was something she hadn't felt in a long time. Perhaps ever.

And it wasn't allowed. It was rule number ten—*absolutely no romantic relationships.*

This wouldn't do at all.

'Well, come inside and we'll sort something out,' she muttered, head down, marching towards the door.

'Hang on, is this your box?'

She turned around and he'd already heaved the box onto his shoulder as though it was a wildebeest he'd just slain and was carrying home for dinner.

'Yes. Thanks.'

'I'm Lincoln, by the way,' he said, following her through the door, weaving his way through the tables and displays and behind the counter and through the swing doors into the kitchen.

'Sorry it's such a mess,' Christmas said, taking in the spilled chocolate that covered the stainless-steel benchtops, splattered up the fridge doors, ran across the floor and was generally sprayed from one end of the room to the other. It was like a graffiti attack, but a lovely one, made with chocolate.

'I've just come out of the jungle in South America. Trust me, this isn't a mess. Where do you want this?'

'Huh? Oh! On the bench, somewhere, anywhere. Thanks.'

Lincoln dropped the box with a thud. Then he stood, calmly, looking at her, still smiling, as though he was waiting for something.

She began to shuffle and find flecks of chocolate to pick off the bench with her fingernail. 'Are you a musician?' she asked, remembering that he'd used the word 'gig'.

'Botanist. But that sounds like a great alternative job if I need one.'

She was silent for a moment, mesmerised by his eyes. 'Well, thanks for carrying that in. We should get your chocolates. And shouldn't you get your backpack?' she said, suddenly realising they'd left it outside.

Lincoln shrugged. 'It'll be right.'

Christmas wished her heart wasn't thumping so hard. 'So . . .' she prompted.

'You haven't told me your name,' he said, touching her arm and sending a twang through her as though he'd plucked a nerve, *blatantly flirting with her*! It was incredible. No one flirted with her.

Not here in sleepy old Evandale. She felt safe from romantic entanglements in this small town. With a population of only one and a half thousand, there simply weren't enough people for romance.

'Christmas Livingstone,' she said, as ordinarily as she could.

He whistled through his teeth. 'I like that.'

Oh boy, she needed to get out of this. 'Come on. We'd better get you some food and your grandma some chocolate before it all disappears. It's terribly busy out there today. You don't want to miss out.' And she turned on the spot and marched into the shop, not looking back but trying to sense the whole time how far behind her he was, whether he might be about to bump into her, if she stopped suddenly, for example.

Not that she would.

Not on purpose, anyway.

The rules, she reminded herself. The rules were there for her protection. The rules had served her well and kept her steady for the past three years. Now was not the time to abandon the rules. She had to get a grip.

Emily arrived that evening after The Apothecary had closed, pulling autumn leaves from her long unruly hair, and sniffing as though she was getting a cold. But still smiling.

'Are you sick?' Christmas said, tossing some bowls and spatulas into the kitchen sink and turning on the tap.

Emily sniffed some more, hung up her handbag on the coat hook by the door, dropped her overnight bag on the floor and took off her leather jacket. 'I think it's hay fever. Can you get it in autumn?'

'I think you can get it any time. Thanks so much for coming. I owe you.' Christmas headed to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of bubbly.

'Rubbish. Think of it as thanks for helping me move into the townhouse over New Year.'

'Oh yeah.' Christmas eased the cork out of the bottle with a satisfying pop and it hit the ceiling. 'That *was* hard work,' she laughed. In fact, it had taken her nearly a week to recover. Emily was such a collector and hoarder, and where most people would see moving house as an opportunity to reduce the number of items they had to transport, Em actually seemed to have collected more. She still had dozens of boxes that weren't opened or unpacked.

They clinked glasses. 'Cheers!'

'So what's this surprise?' Christmas asked, leaning against the bench. 'I'm intrigued.'

Emily's face lit up and she let out a little squeal. 'I *should* make you wait until the end of the night, after we've finished all the work, but I don't think I can.'

She placed her glass on the bench, went to her handbag and fished out an envelope. Returning to stand in front of Christmas, she held it in two hands by the top corners. 'Okay, so you know how in the past you've talked about Master Le Coutre?'

Christmas frowned in confusion. This was unexpected. Master Le Coutre was a world-renowned French chocolatier, known for his brilliance, eccentricity, and the annual scholarship course he opened to anyone, anywhere in the world, where they got to spend a week with him *absorbing his greatness*. The arrogance was breathtaking; the competition for the scholarship, hysterical. The itinerary for his course changed each year, and no one knew what it would be when they applied. Previous recipients reported poetry readings, surprise flights to African cacao farms, sleep deprivation and all-night chocolate making, opera lessons, and camping out in tents under the stars while

Master Le Coutre lectured by fireside and stirred melted chocolate over an open flame; some even claimed they hadn't seen him once during their stay. He was mad, they said. He was cruel, said some. He was a genius, said many. But nothing he did ever turned people away from applying. It was as though the stranger his behaviour the more people wanted to be in his course. And as no promises were made as to what would happen during the week, and no one actually paid for their trip, no one could really complain too much. He was an enigma; and his devoted followers, including Christmas, hung off every one of his enigmatic words.

'Yeeess,' she said, instantly on her guard. Blood rushed through her ears. She had spoken to Emily about him many times, even showing her the magazines where the ads for the scholarship were placed each year. And they had laughed about how bizarre Master Le Coutre was.

'But would you go?' Emily had asked her in the past. 'If you had the chance?'

Christmas had shrugged. 'Sure, why not?' But she'd never considered the question seriously because she never thought she would go as far as to apply. No matter how brilliant Master Le Coutre was, going to France meant a whole lot more than professional development. Going to France was personal.

Emily's eyes brightened. 'You're in,' she whispered.

'What?'

'You're in! I got you a place in this year's scholarship course!' Emily flung her arms around her and squeezed so tightly that Christmas gasped for breath.

'Oh, sorry!' Emily said, stepping back, laughing. She thrust the envelope into Christmas's hand. 'Read it!'

'But I didn't do this,' Christmas said, alarmed and confused.

'I know. I did it. I applied on your behalf and wrote an essay and everything. It took so long,' Emily finished, breathlessly, as though even the memory exhausted her.

'What did you say?'

Emily waved her hand. 'Oh, this and that. I've heard you talk often enough about your dream for chocolate to be used as medicine that I could recite what you've said.' She tilted her head to the side. 'It's a strange application form. They don't actually care too much if you have previous experience with chocolate making, though of course I sent photos of your greatest pieces,' she hurriedly assured Christmas. 'But mostly I just talked about your passion for chocolate and for the new frontiers!' She delivered the last sentence very dramatically. 'You're going to France! Finally!' And Emily launched herself on Christmas in another bear hug.

Christmas didn't know what to say. Every year, only a handful of applicants were chosen for Master Le Coutre's scholarship week. She'd be mad to knock it back. But it was in France, the great unknown, the place she'd dreamed about, romanticised, loved, and feared going to her whole life. At one stage a few years ago, she'd been quite motivated to go. But then everything in Sydney had happened and she'd shelved the idea, along with thoughts of romance and children. She'd changed her life—made it stable and predictable.

France was the home of the father she'd never known. For so long it had sat there on the other side of the world, taunting her with the possibility of discovery, and the terror of what that might lead to. And given her history, her family history, inviting the unknown into her perfectly neat life was not something to be taken lightly.

But with the trip literally in her hands right now, how could she not at least consider it?