The Gravedigger

A Romance by William Baer

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Editor: Cynthia Hickey
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"...the writing is crisp, sarcastic, and wryly funny."—*Foreword Reviews* (Five-star review)

"...I love books like this! A rarity. Five Stars!"—*Reader Views* (Five-star review)

For my family and friends

“O my Luve’s like a sweet, sweet chocolate.”

– Angus Kinnell

1. Chocolate

Friday, October 23rd

It started with chocolate.

Naturally.

I was cutting across the South Lawn on the Columbia campus at Morningside Heights. Walking across the grass between Low Library, where they handed me a diploma four years ago, and Butler Library with its two million books. I was, of course, listening to music, but not what you might expect from a twenty-five-year-old. It was a playlist of old Gaelic songs once recorded by my father, including "*Mo Rùn Gàidhealach*," which means "My Highland Love," which my father composed over thirty years ago.

Bidh mo ghaol-sa dhi buan am feasda
Air Eilean àluinn a' Cheò.

Meaning something like:

I will love my love forever and ever
On the beautiful Island of Skye.

Little did I know, 3,000 miles away, at that very moment, my father was singing the exact same song over the cliffs at Tarskavaig on the Island of Skye. Right above my mother's grave. Beneath a brilliant Skeat sunset at 5:30 Scot time.

Back here in Manhattan, it was only 12:30, on a lovely, crisp, October afternoon. I was dressed in a blue-plaid skirt, a button-up yellow blouse, and a double-breasted blue Lauren blazer with gold buttons. Looking perfectly professional for my presentation on 114th Street.

"There are four basic food groups."

They waited without interest.

I continued.

"Milk chocolate, dark chocolate, white chocolate, and chocolate truffles."

They smiled creepy little "I'm craving sweets" smiles.

There were twelve of them, all five-year-olds, all twitching weirdly in their seats. It was Rickie's kindergarten class, and I was there to lighten the afternoon with my "expertise."

"Chocolate was once known as 'the food of the gods.'" I explained. "It makes us happy, reduces stress, and gives us energy. It's one of the most perfect things on earth. Like snowflakes, roses, diamonds, baseball,

and love."

They nodded politely, ignoring most of what I was saying.

"It's also good for your heart" I tried, "and good for your blood pressure."

Which was perfectly dumb. What five-year-old cares about his blood pressure? I wondered what my father would do.

I leaned over them and smiled.

Intimately.

Conspiratorially.

"I have only one rule about eating chocolate. Would you like to hear it?"

They were slightly interested.

"Never eat more chocolate than you can lift."

They liked it.

They actually smiled. I had them back. Rickie also smiled in the back of her colorfully-decorated classroom, clearly relieved that I was no longer boring her "brats" to death.

I pressed forward.

"I tell you what, kids, let's do some math!"

Which revived disinterest.

"How do you get two pounds of chocolate home from the store in a hot car? So the chocolate won't melt?"

They had no idea, but they appreciated the difficulty of the situation.

"You eat it in the parking lot."

Rickie rolled her eyes, but two of the kids clapped.

My favorite students.

Yes, I was shamelessly playing to the crowd. Any semblance of a real "lesson" was long gone, but I felt fully justified since I'd already discussed the history and geography of chocolate, as well as how it's made. All to drowsy eyes.

"All right, kids, any questions? Comments?"

One little boy felt it necessary to express his deepest feelings.

"I like chocolate without nuts."

"Me too!" I agreed. "Nuts just take up space where there could be more chocolate."

This garnered general approval.

Then a little girl, a little blondie who was much too pretty for her own good, raised her hand.

"My father says sweets aren't healthy."

"Well, you father's correct about most sweets, but not about chocolate. It's a vegetable."

They all looked shocked.

"Chocolate is made from cocoa beans, and the sugar comes from sugar cane, which is also a plant. Besides, if it's milk chocolate, then it's full of nutritious milk."

This time they *all* clapped.

I was on a roll.

A little redhead boy raised his hand.

"Do they *really* pay you money to taste chocolate?"

A teacherly voice, thick with the Bronx, called out from the back of the classroom.

"Yes, they do, Eddie. And very good money I might add."

They looked at me intently. A little brunette expressed the group sentiment.

"I think you're the luckiest person in the world."

They all nodded.

They all wanted my job.

"I think I am too," I agreed.

But blondie smarty-pants had more to say.

"Then why'd your boyfriend dump you?"

I was stunned.

"Dump?" I said stupidly.

A cell vibrated in the back of the classroom. I was hoping that Rickie would rescue me, but, instead, she gestured that she needed to take the call outside, stood up, and immediately slipped out the door. Leaving me alone with her twelve little monsters.

I flashed back to *Lord of the Flies*.

Then a sweet little boy tried to clarify the situation.

"Miss Moreno said to be extra nice to you since your boyfriend dumped you. Since you still aren't over it."

Miss Moreno, my best friend, would be strangled later.

I did my best.

"The truth is, kids, I *am* over it. Thank goodness. Unfortunately, things like that happen in life. But I'll

tell you another secret."

A potential escape hatch.

They seemed curious.

"Many people believe that eating chocolate can heal a broken heart."

"Can it?" asked a serious little munchkin.

"Yes, I believe it can."

Rickie re-entered the room, and I gave her a mock glare.

"Have they been causing trouble?" she asked.

"No, just the teacher."

2. Córdoba's

Friday, October 23rd

Later, after a quick browse at Westsider Books, we hopped in a cab.

"Córdoba's on 116th," I said.

Rickie was surprised.

"I finally dump the brats, and you want to go to Córdoba's?"

"You really like that word 'dump.'"

She ignored me.

"Why are we going to Córdoba's? You're supposed to be over Matt."

"I *am* over Matt, which you can announce to your class by the way. I'm leaving town for two weeks tomorrow, and I want to eat at my favorite restaurant. Besides, who likes Mexican food more than me? Besides, let's not forget that Córdoba's was *my* favorite restaurant long before I took Matt there."

She changed the subject.

"What's the book?"

I took it out of the bag and handed it over. She read the title:

> *The Highland MacDonalds: A History of the Scottish Highlands*

She looked at me.

"I thought you knew all this stuff?"

"I do, but I like to remind myself."

She smiled wishfully.

"I wish *I* was going to Scotland!"

"You wish you were going anywhere!"

Inside the colorful restaurant, Rickie checked the reservation with the maître d'. A comforting mariachi was playing over the speakers as I looked around and saw what I didn't want to see.

Immediately, I started across the floor of the restaurant, in between the crowded tables, and I could hear Rickie behind me.

"Uh-oh!"

I stopped at a table with a young couple. Matt and a pretty snowbunny.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

I don't really have much of a temper, but I was mad.

Angry.

"It's good to see you, Polly."

His sincerity was a bit unnerving, so Rickie took over.

"You've really got a nerve coming here, Matt."

He seemed helpless.

"I'm sorry."

He then commenced the most awkward introduction in world history.

"This is Kimberly Sinclair, and this is Polly Kinnell and Rickie Moreno."

The rest of us, the three women, just looked at each other. Then Kimberly turned to Matt.

"Why'd you dump her? She's beautiful."

Am I?

It was suddenly very hard not to appreciate Kimberly, who, I have to admit, was remarkably pretty.

So maybe it's time for a few facts about The Chocolate Princess:

> Once upon a time (I hope this is the way you want your story), the Chocolate Princess was born in the wilds of New Jersey, in a place called Scotch Plains, to a wonderful mother and father. The father was an immigrant from Scotland and a chocolate maker. A Chocolatier. He owned Kinnell's Chocolates, a boutique shop on Fifth near Saks. The mother, Bonnie MacDonald Kinnell, also an immigrant from the Island of Skye, was a librarian, an amateur Scot historian, and a marvelous mother.
>
> The CP (Chocolate Princess), also known as Polly Kinnell, had no brothers or sisters, but

she grew up happily in the wilds of New Jersey. Eventually, she commuted to Columbia University in Manhattan, where she majored in British literature, with a special interest in Scottish ballads, Burns, Scott, and Stevenson, with a minor in something called business. Ever since she was a young girl, she'd helped her father with the store on Fifth Avenue, developing a reputation for chocolate "tasting."

She also had a "secret" ambition. Or ambitions. She wanted to write a book about the extraordinary history of chocolate, maybe for children, maybe for adults. But she also wanted to write stories of the kind she'd read as a child with her mother. Stories about life, about fate, about love. But all such ambitions were eventually put on hold, although she did keep writing late some nights, writing extensive Amazon reviews of new and old books whenever she could find the time.

Which no one knew about except her father.

In her junior year, she moved into the city, sharing an apartment on 119th Street with her best friend Rickie. Where they both still live. When her mother died, when the CP was twenty-one, her father moved back to Scotland, to Armadale on Skye, opening a second Kinnell's Chocolates, leaving the one on Fifth in

the less capable hands of his daughter and his kindly sister, Aunt Katie MacDonald, a widow. But the father, Angus James Kinnell, came back to visit the CP several times a year, and was always inviting Polly to travel to the Highlands, which she wanted to do, but invariably put off, until guilt finally overwhelmed her and she arranged for a two-week vacation in Skye beginning tomorrow night.

(Since this story, as you've requested, is a "romance"), then, yes, there *was* a romance between the Chocolate Princess and the legendary Ice Warrior for almost two years until he dumped her a year ago, who was now, rather sheepishly, sitting beside his gorgeous snowbunny, staring upward at the Chocolate Princess, above his waiting fajitas and salted margherita.

Where were we?

Oh, yeah, Kimberly had just said that I was beautiful.

"You're not so bad yourself, sister," Rickie responded, "but he'll dump you too."

Always the word "dump."

Kimberly (let's start calling her Kim) was not only undaunted but oddly amenable to the possibility.

"Maybe he will."

She looked back at me.

"It's best not to take these big-shot athletes too seriously."

I didn't know what to make of that.

As for Matt, he seemed nonplussed, staring at his date.

"You're a big help!"

I'd had enough.

I'd already made my grand entrance, attracting too much attention from the other diners, and now it was time for a gracious but equally grand exit.

"You shouldn't have come here, Matt," I said.

It was restrained.

It was true.

I turned around and started walking away, hearing Rickie behind me.

Getting in the last word, as always.

"Try the Juárez jalapeños, Matt. They'll blow your brains out."