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Julia's Chocolates

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Chapter One

I left my wedding dress hanging in a tree somewhere in North Dakota.

I don't know why that particular tree appealed to me. Perhaps it was because it looked as if it had given up and died years ago and was still standing because it didn't know what else to do. It was all by itself, the branches gnarled and rough, like the top of someone's knuckles I knew.

I didn't even bother to pull over as there were no other cars on that dusty two-lane road, which was surely an example of what hell looked like: you came from nowhere; you're going nowhere. And here is your only decoration: a dead tree. Enjoy your punishment.

The radio died, and the silence rattled through my brain. I flipped up the trunk and was soon covered with the white fluff and lace and flounce of what was my wedding dress. I had hated it from the start, but he had loved it.

Loved it because it was high-collared and demure and

innocent. Lord, I looked like a stuffed white cake when I put it on.

The sun beat down on my head as I stumbled to the tree and peered through the branches to the blue sky tunnelling down at me in triangular rays. The labyrinth of branches formed a maze that had no exit. If you were a bug that couldn't fly, you'd be stuck. You'd keep crawling and crawling, desperate to find your way out, but you never would. You'd gasp your last tortured breath in a state of utter confusion and frustration, and that would be that.

Yes, another representation of hell.

The first time I heaved the dress up in the air, it landed right back on my head. And the second time, and the third, which simply increased my fury. I couldn't even get rid of my own wedding dress.

My breath caught in my throat, my heart suddenly started to race, and it felt like the air had been sucked right out of the universe, a sensation I had become more and more familiar with in the last six months. I was under the sneaking suspicion that I had some dreadful disease, but I was too scared to find out what it was, and too busy convincing myself I wasn't suicidal to address something as pesky as that.

My arms were weakened from my Herculean efforts and the fact that I could hardly breathe and my freezing-cold hands started to shake. I thought the dress was going to suffocate me, the silk cloying, clinging to my face. I finally gave up and lay face-down in the dirt. Someone, years down the road, would stop their car and lift up the pile of white fluff and find my skeleton. That is, if the buzzards didn't

gnaw away at me first. Were there buzzards in North Dakota?

Fear of the buzzards, not of death, made me roll over. I shoved the dress aside and screamed at it, using all the creative swear words I knew. *Yes,* I thought, my body shaking, *I am losing my mind*.

Correction: mind already gone.

Sweat poured off my body as I slammed my dress repeatedly into the ground, maybe to punish it for not getting caught in one of the branches. Maybe to punish it for even existing. I finally slung the dress around my neck like a noose and started climbing the dead tree, sweat droplets teetering off my eyelashes.

The bark peeled and crumbled, but I managed to get up a few feet, and then I gave the white monstrosity a final toss. It hooked on a tiny branch sticking out like a witch's finger. The oversized bodice twisted and turned; the long train, now sporting famous North Dakota dirt, hung towards the parched earth like a snake.

I tried to catch my breath, my heart hammering on high speed as tears scalded my cheeks, no doubt trekking through lines of dirt.

I could still hear the dressmaker. 'Why *on earth* do you want such a high neckline?' she had asked, her voice sharp. 'With a chest like that, my dear, you should show it off, not cover up!'

I had looked at my big bosoms in her fancy workroom, mirrors all around. They heaved up and down under the white silk as if they wanted to run. The bosoms were as big as my buttocks, I knew, but at least the skirt would cover those.

Robert Stanfield III had been clear. 'Make sure you get a wide skirt. I don't want you in one of those slinky dresses that'll show every curve. You don't have the body for that, Turtle.'

He always called me Turtle. Or Possum. Or Ferret Eyes. If he was mad he called me Cannonball Butt.

Although I can understand the size of my butt – that came from chocolate-eating binges – I had never understood my bosoms. They had sprouted out, starting in fifth grade and had kept growing and growing. By eighth grade I had begged my mother for breast-reduction surgery. She was actually all for it, but that was because all of her boyfriends kept staring at me. Or touching. Or worse.

The doctor, of course, was appalled and said no. And here I was, thirty-four years old, with these heaving melons still on me. Note to self: one, get money. Two, get rid of the melons.

But the seamstress couldn't let go of them. 'It's your wedding day!' she snapped, her greying hair electrified. 'Why do you want to hide yourself?'

I hemmed and hawed standing there, drowning in material so heavy I could hardly walk, and said something really sickening about loving old-fashioned dresses, but I could tell she didn't believe me.

She stuck three pins in her mouth, her huge eyes gaping at me behind her pink-framed glasses. 'Humph,' she said. 'Humph. Well! I've met your fiancé.' Her tone was accusatory. As if he were a criminal.

'Yes, well, then, you know his family is a very old Boston family, and they have a certain way.' I tried to sound confident, slightly superior. Robert's mother was brilliant at

that. Brilliant at making people feel like slugs.

'Very old, *snobby* family,' the dressmaker muttered. 'And that mother! Talk about a woman with a stick up her butt!' She tried to say that last part quietly, but I heard her. 'Well, fine, dear. That's the way you want it, then?'

Again, she pierced me with those sharp owl eyes, and I couldn't move, caught like a trapped mouse who knew she would soon be eaten, one bite at a time.

She dropped her hands. 'You're sure?' The words came out muffled through all those pins. '*Very* sure?'

'Yes, of course.' And inside me, that's when the real screaming started. Long, high-pitched, raw. It had been quieter for months before then – smothered – but, sometimes I could almost hear my insides crying. I had ignored it. I had a fiancé, finally, and I was keeping him.

I had dug my way out of trailer life and scrambled through school while working full time and battling recurring nightmares of my childhood. I had a decent job in an art museum. People actually thought – and this was the hilarious part – that I was normal. The rancid smell of poverty and low-class living had become but a whiff around me.

I tried to be proud of that.

At that point, the day the dressmaker fitted me, the wedding was exactly two weeks away. Exactly two weeks later I was on the fly.

I bent again to the cracked earth and caught up a handful of dirt, heaving it straight up at the dress, sputtering when some of it landed back on my head.

I spat on the ground, wiping the tears off my face with my dirty hands, flinching when I pressed my left eye too hard,

the skin still swollen. Damn. That had been the last straw. I was not going to walk down the aisle with a swollen, purple, bloodied eye.

Then everyone would know how desperate I was.

I whipped around on my heel to the car, then floored the accelerator, the old engine creaking in protest. My wedding dress flapped its goodbye like a ghost. Sickening.

Goodbye, dress, I thought, wiping another flood of tears away. *I'm broke. I'm scared shitless. Inhaling is often difficult for me because of my Dread Disease. But I have no use for you, other than as a decoration on a dead tree in hell.*

I was now headed for the home of my Aunt Lydia in Oregon. Everyone else in our cracked family (cousins and aunts and uncles) thinks she's crazy, which means that she is the only sane one in the bunch.

Robert would come after me, but it would take him a while to find me, as my mother had run off again last week – with her latest boyfriend, to Minnesota – and would not be able to give him Aunt Lydia's address. I almost laughed. Robert would feel so inconvenienced.

But he would come. Burning with fury and humiliation, he would come to eke out some sick, twisted punishment. My hands shook. I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Aunt Lydia is my mother's older half-sister. Although my mother decided to marry no less than five times, and have only one (unplanned) child, my aunt has never married or had children. She lives on a farm outside the small town of Golden, Oregon, in a rambling hundred-year-old farmhouse.

When I was a child, Lydia would pay for my plane ticket to come and see her during the summer for six weeks. It was the highlight of my life, a pocket of peace next to my mother's rages and her boyfriends' wandering hands and bunched fists.

Two years ago, before I met Robert, I visited Aunt Lydia. When I arrived she was standing in front of her home, hands on her hips, with that determined look on her face.

When I got close, she engulfed me in a huge hug, then another, and another. 'The house is depressed, Julia!' she bellowed, which is the way she always talks. She never speaks at a normal volume; it's always at full speed, full blast. Her long grey hair floated about her face in the light breeze. 'It's anxious. On edge. Sad. It needs cheering up!'

My suitcases were piled around me, and I was still clutching my gift to her, a large yellow piggy bank shaped like a pig. I knew she would love it.

'This house should be pink!' She jabbed a finger in the air. 'Like a camellia. Like a vagina!'

That week we painted the house pink, like a camellia and a vagina, and the shutters white. 'The door to this house must be black,' Aunt Lydia announced, her loud voice chasing birds from the tree. 'It will ward off evil spirits, disease, and seedy men, and we certainly don't need any of that, now, do we, darlin'?'

'No, Aunt Lydia,' I replied, nudging my glasses back up my nose. At the time I hadn't had a date in four years, so even a seedy man might be interesting to me, but I did not say that aloud. My last date had asked me, in a sneaky sort of way, if I had any family money to speak of. When I said I didn't, he excused himself to the bathroom, and I had picked

up the bill and left when it was clear he was gone for good.

We painted the front door black.

During my visit, people would come to a screeching halt in front of Aunt Lydia's house, as usual. Not because it looked like a pink marshmallow, burnt in the centre, and not just because she has eight toilets in her front yard.

But let me tell you about the toilets. Two toilets are tucked under a fir tree, two are by the front porch, and the rest are scattered about on the grass. All of them are white, and during every season of the year Aunt Lydia fills them with flowers. Geraniums in the summer, mums in the fall, pansies in the winter, and petunias in the spring. The flowers burst out of those toilets like you wouldn't believe, spilling over the sides.

She also built, with her farmer friend Stash, a huge, arched wooden bridge smack in the middle of her green lawn. The floor of the bridge is painted with black and white checks, and the rails are purple, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red. Yes, just like a rainbow.

But I think it's what is under the trellises that has drivers screeching to a halt. Four trellises, to be exact, lined up like sentinels in the front yard, which are all covered with climbing, blooming roses during the summer. The roses pile one on top of another, dripping down the sides and over the top in soft pink, deep red, and virginal white. And underneath each of the trellises sits a giant concrete pig. Yes, a pig. Each about five feet tall. Aunt Lydia loves pigs. Around the neck of each pig she has hung a sign with the pig's name. Little Dick. Peter Harris. Micah. Stash.

These are the names of men who have made her mad for

one reason or another. Little Dick refers to my mother's first husband and my father. His real name was Richard and he decided to leave when I was three.

It is my earliest memory. I am running down the street as fast as I can, crying, wetting my pants, the urine hot as it streams down my legs. My father is tearing down the street on his motorcycle after fighting again with my mother. The plate she threw at him cracked above his head on the wall, missing him by about an inch.

The dish was the last straw, I guess.

Within a week, another man was spending the night in our home. Soon he was Daddy Kevin. Followed by Daddy Fred. Daddy Cuzz. Daddy Max. Daddy Spike, and numerous other daddies. I have not seen my father since then, although I have heard that he was invited to be a guest in the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

The pig named Peter Harris is named after Peter Harris. He is a snobby bank teller in town who refused to take a four-dollar service charge off Aunt Lydia's bank account and then explained the situation to her in a loud and slow voice as if she were a confused and dottery old woman. For her revenge, she simply asked her friend Janice, a concrete artist, to make her another giant pig and then hung the Peter Harris sign around his neck.

When the pigs were featured in a local newspaper, Peter Harris was plenty embarrassed and came out to the farm in his prissy bank suit and told Aunt Lydia to take down the sign.

'I...CAN'T...DO...THAT!' she said, nice and slow, at full volume, as he had done to her. 'THE PIG LIKES HIS NAME AND WON'T ALLOW ME TO CHANGE IT.'

When Peter started to argue with her, she said, 'YOU OBVIOUSLY DON'T UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION. DO YOU HAVE A RELATIVE WHO COULD EXPLAIN THIS TO YOU?'

He kept arguing, stupid man, and even reached for the sign around the five-foot-tall pig's neck, but Aunt Lydia said again, 'THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE IN LINE TODAY. PLEASE, MOVE ALONG.'

Peter Harris got a little more peeved then and told Lydia he was going to sue her from this side of Wednesday to the next. His anger didn't faze Aunt Lydia.

He was only about three feet away from her when she yelled, 'I'LL BE RIGHT BACK,' and went inside and grabbed not one, but two rifles, and came out shooting. Peter Harris left. He went straight to the sheriff, but as the sheriff is one of Stash and Aunt Lydia's best friends, he walked Peter Harris to the bar and bought him a few stiff ones, and that was that.

The pig named Micah was named after a skinny, gangly cousin of hers who had a penchant for Jack Daniels and loose women. He was a belligerent drunk who never worked but always had time to pester Aunt Lydia for money. One night when he'd been at the local bar too long, he accidentally crashed his car into her front porch. As she had just painted the front porch yellow with orange railings, that was the last straw.

Lydia dragged his body out of that beater, his head lolling to the side, and stripped him naked. Next she drew a short red négligée over his unconscious head, then hauled him into her own truck. She dumped him off in the middle of a field right behind the town.

The gossip in town over gangly Micah in the red

négligée didn't subside for two weeks, and the little girls who found him and ran and got their mothers will never forget the sight. Micah woke up surrounded by giggling women, rough and tough farmers and townspeople who looked at him with disgust and pointed their guns at his personal jewels.

'We don't need your type here, Micah,' Old Daniel said, who owned the gasoline station and had regular poker games in the back room.

'You're disgustin',' said Stace Grammar, who worked in a factory and had biceps the size of tree stumps. 'Get out of this town. Next thing you know, you and your boyfriend will be demanding equal rights.' He shot off his gun six inches over Micah's head. 'Take it to the city, boy!'

Micah turned and ran as fast as he could through town to Aunt Lydia's, his bottom jiggling out the back of that red négligée. He ignored people's hoots, hollers, and another gunshot, revved up his truck, and zoomed out of town.

We have never seen Micah again.

Stash is the only man in town who can ever beat Aunt Lydia at poker – that's why a pig has been named after him. No one will play with Aunt Lydia anymore unless she agrees to play for pennies only, except Stash.

Aunt Lydia says he cheats. Stash is a grizzled man with a white beard and a bald head who's built like an ox. His eyes are always laughing, and every time he's come over when I've been there, he brings me fruit or candy and gives Aunt Lydia a plant or a new herb for her windowsill. Twice now he's brought her perfume.

One time during my visit, he brought her a little box with something silky inside. Aunt Lydia shoved it back in the box

real quick, tied the ribbon up tight, and threw it at his head. I've never seen Stash laugh so hard. He left the box on the dining room table.

Stash owns hundreds of acres of farmland, all of it surrounding Lydia's five acres. He has a company called Oregon's Natural Products, and he sells his goods all over the nation. He has farmhands and 'business hands', as he likes to call them, who help him run 'The Biz'.

I remembered that Aunt Lydia pretended to get angry every time he came over. 'Would you quit staring at me, Stash?' she'd snap, and he would laugh. 'Can't look away from a beacon of light,' he'd always say. Then he would settle back in a chair and watch my Aunt Lydia as she pottered around the kitchen or talked to her plants.

Whenever Stash could, he'd run his fingers through her thick, greying hair or hug her slender body to his. Now and then she'd allow it, but most of the time she slapped his hands away and told him to behave because there was a child in the house. The last time this happened, I was thirty-two.

He always kissed her right on the lips before he left and then told her what he was going to do. 'I'm gonna plough your back acres tomorrow, Lydia Jean,' or, 'I'm sending the guys out to harvest your corn on Thursday,' or, 'If you make some more of that jam, I'll sell it for you at the Saturday market.'

'Stay off of my land,' Aunt Lydia always yelled as the screen door slammed behind him. I could tell she didn't mean it, because she had to try hard to hide her smile. Stash always left with one of Lydia's jars of jelly or freshly baked bread.

I don't really know why Aunt Lydia has named a pig after Stash except that she really does take her poker seriously and is not a good sport about losing.

But the pigs do gather a lot of attention from anyone driving by her farm. 'No sense having a boring front yard,' Aunt Lydia has told me on several occasions during our talks. 'Life is too short for boredom, and pigs are never boring.'

Aunt Lydia also has a real, live pig she calls Melissa Lynn and a multitude of parakeets and lovebirds she lets out of their cages twice a day so they can stretch their wings in the house. Remarkably, they will usually agree to go back into the cages.

She cleans her gun every day after target shooting, loves to do crafts of any type, and grows a little pot in her basement. 'For my colitis,' she tells me, although she hasn't been to a doctor in decades.

Aunt Lydia, I reflected, was the one stable person in my life, and within about three days, driving almost straight through, I would arrive at her home. I wiped the tears from my face, tears I had no idea had sprung from my eyes, and floored the accelerator, even as fear gnawed at the insides of my stomach like giant claws.

No need to worry about the size of my butt anymore. Robert was gone, and I had no use for men. None. I wiped my eyes again. Stupid men. Stupid and mean and beastly and selfish. With all the men running the world it is a damn miracle we have not blown ourselves to smithereens. Yet.

The wind whipped around my head, and on impulse, I ripped the rubber band out of my brownish-blondish curls and let them whip around my face for the first time in two

years. Robert had had no use for 'wild-looking women'.

Sweating, dirty, and exhausted, I knew the only cure: chocolate. I drove with my knees and peered through the red bag on the passenger seat, grabbing a packet full of chocolate squares I had made myself. The first bit of chocolate hit my tongue like a slice of heaven. The second had my tears drying up. The third had me laughing, in a pathetic sort of way, about my hapless wedding dress.

I dropped two chocolates into my mouth. I had failed in almost every aspect of my life, I thought in a burst of disgusting self-pity, but the one thing I was good at was melting in my mouth right at that moment. I knew chocolate. And, Lord, no one *anywhere* made chocolate as good as I did.

Golden reminded me a bit of the tree where my wedding dress was probably still flapping. It had at one time been a thriving little town, but the logging boom was over, the endangered species had won, and many of the residents had moved on. There was one rather long Main Street, lined by the requisite trees; spring flowers hung from the lampposts. The flowers were the only things that looked alive.

Several of the shops were simply gaping black holes of businesses that had come and gone. But there was a corner drugstore with a broken sign that read S MS DRU STORE. There was also a movie theatre, a cosy-looking coffee shop with red tablecloths, a grocery, an auto repair shop, a hardware store, and several other stores one would expect to see. There were people out on the streets – coming home, I thought, from one of the town's two restaurants or a board meeting at school.

I suddenly felt my heart lighten a bit. I didn't feel like I

was going to vomit in fear, the way I did when I was packing up my suitcases in Boston over a week ago, leaving my tight white heels behind.

'For God's sake, Possum, your feet are huge!' I could still hear the sneer in Robert's voice a month ago. 'Shit, bitch, don't look at me like that! I'm just stating a fact. You always take things so personally.'

He had picked up my foot and then shoved it off his lap as if he couldn't bear to have it touching him for a moment longer.

And still, I tried to appease him, briefly wondering if I could get my feet surgically shortened. But Robert had wanted me. Me – with my frizzy curls and large butt and a family history that could make your blood curdle in your veins and a past I couldn't share for fear of the revulsion I'd see on people's faces. I wanted out of my past before it became my present, and Robert offered me a new type of life, light years from apartments with rats the size of possums and cockroaches that knew no fear.

He had been so charming, so possessive at first, wanting to spend all his time with me, sweeping me off my very big feet. He wanted to know where I was all the time, who I had talked to at the art museum, had any men talked to me? Who?

He had discouraged me from going out with any friends. Not that I had a lot. OK, I had only two women friends, but he soon thought I shouldn't see them anymore and I had caved in and agreed.

At first I was almost sickeningly dizzy with delight. Robert wanted me all to himself! He loved me! That was why he didn't want other people in my life.

But then I had started to irritate him, and I felt his scorn like a sledgehammer. He would upset me, I would cry, he would pin me down on the bed and badger me until I sobbed, but then he would so sweetly apologise, blaming his bad behaviour on a fight with his high-profile father or the cashier at the supermarket.

Later Robert sometimes lost his cool and sometimes cracked me in the face with his palm or shoved me against the wall, or leant me over a chair and stripped off my pants even though I protested. Well…later he would beg me to come back to him, to forgive him, and I did.

And soon I had my ring. I had slept with him, and come hell or high water, I was going to get married. I was going to leave my wasted mother and jailbird father behind. I was going to be proper and respected in a proper and respected family.

Even though Robert's violent behaviour escalated and scared the living shit out of me more and more as time went on.

I shook my head, blowing thoughts out of my mind, and rolled down my window, the mountain air cool. I inhaled the familiar scent of pine trees as I paused at the town's one and only stop light. I thought I could hear the river rushing by, although I knew that was unlikely because it was too far out of town.

After running my fingers through my hair, I switched on the overhead light and stared in the rear-view mirror. Yep. Looking lovely again. My eyes were swollen, my face a lovely shade of death, my lips puffy and chapped.

Gorgeous. No wonder the men were breaking down my door. I ate more chocolate.

I turned right, went past a few other small businesses, and then through a tiny neighbourhood where big wheels and bikes were scattered in the front lawns. Taking a turn into the country, I drove about two miles straight out, then took a left at the mailbox with a giant wooden pig attached to the top with his tongue hanging out.

Like I said earlier, you can't miss Aunt Lydia's house, and when I turned into the gravel drive and saw the giant pigs, the toilets, and the rainbow bridge, all freshly painted, just like I remembered from years ago, I parked the car, bent my head against the steering wheel, and cried.

And that's how Aunt Lydia found me.