

THE CHOCOLATE BANDIT

"One week until Valentine's Day!" Laurie Cox, a freshman at Oakley Heights Christian University, announced as she carried her tray to a table and waited for her friends to arrive. She loved being surrounded by people and, although had not chosen her area of expertise, knew she wanted to work with children.

Darlene, the self-claimed leader of the group laughed and said. "I've already told Brian I wanted roses. He's the type who would rather give me money and have me buy my own gift. How romantic is that?"

"What do you hope to get for Valentine's Day, Mary?" Laurie said, turning to the shy young lady with long golden locks and bright blue eyes on the seat next to her.

"Chocolate would be nice," Mary replied smiling.

The mention of chocolate made each woman's mouth water.

"Hmm, yes I can add that to my wish list for Brian. He doesn't have anything else to do with his money he earns at the garage," said Darlene. "I'll probably give him a gift certificate. It's so hard buying a gift for a guy these days. After graduation, if we get married, I hope we have a girl so I can buy her lacey and frilly dresses. I wouldn't know what to buy for a boy." She laughed.

Sherri was the last to join the group as she was debating which of the entrees had the most nutritional value. She managed to hear Darlene mention buying girls' gifts. "Yes, but with your luck Darlene, your daughter would be a tom boy, and not want any feminine things," Sherri said, teasing as she sat across from her best friend.

Darlene smiled sweetly at Sherri. "Oh my dear, frills and lace are in my blood, it would be you who would have a tom boy for a daughter; after all, you are the one who likes to get her hands dirty."

Sherri laughed. She and Darlene used to take things personally, but over the years they had learned to appreciate each other's unique personality. "If you call working on my Bachelor's Degree in Forensic Science getting my hands dirty then I'm guilty! Although wearing gloves most of the time should prevent any dirt from getting under my fingernails."

At the mention of dirt each girl carefully glanced at her own set of nails to make certain they were clean and polished. It couldn't have been more synchronized if they had practiced.

Sherri chuckled and then bowed her head. "Let's pray."

Sitting alone at a nearby table, a young man about 5'10, short, wavy black hair and dark velvety blue eyes ate his lunch in silence. He had an opened book in front of him, a pad of notepaper, and a pen. He was busy taking notes; not from anything in the book, but from the conversation coming from the ladies at the next table.

Josh was a handsome, but shy young man who was new to the area. He missed his friends who lived about two hours away, and had not yet met many new friends.

Darien, another freshman who was in his photography class joined him.

"Hey Josh, what's up?" Darien asked. Darien was nice and had befriended Josh when he had offered to help him in study hall.

Josh raised his brow, then nodded when he saw his friend sit across the table from him.

"Doing homework?" Darien said, brushing a few rebellious strands of sandy blonde hair off his forehead.

Josh watched every move Sherri made; the way her silky dark locks fell across her shoulders. Her eyes reminded him of pools of milk chocolate which he could drown in if gazed at long enough.

Darien was no fool. He saw the object of Josh's intense study. "Why don't you ask her out?"

Josh never took his eyes off of Sherri. "No, with someone like her it has to be carefully planned."

Darien shrugged his shoulders and finished his lunch.

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Sherri was busy doing a project for extra credit. She asked each of her friends if she could take their fingerprints, and then use them as a base to study other prints she found throughout the day.

Laurie was the first to volunteer. "You can take my fingerprints! Sounds like fun!"

Mary was the second to offer her fingers to Sherri out of friendship, and not wanting to offend her by refusing.

When it was Darlene's turn she cheerfully obliged. "There is someplace I can clean up afterwards, isn't there?"

Sherri nodded. "We can do the prints in the study room; there is a bathroom next door." All the girls agreed to this.

The dark figure dressed in black and wearing gloves knew the girls had left their dorms. Climbing to the second floor, he used a screwdriver to pry open the window. The room definitely belonged to a lady. The scent of Vanilla Musk filled his nostrils. Fresh red carnations sat in a vase on the windowsill flooded the room with color. An opened box of chocolate chip cookies sat on the bedside nightstand. The masked man grinned as he pulled out a small box of chocolates, pulled back the blanket to reveal a soft pillow, laid the box of candy on top of the pillow, then pulled the cover back over to hide the sweet surprise.

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"What do you mean you didn't sneak into my room and hide the box of chocolates on my pillow?" Darlene said, arguing with Brian on the phone. "You know I love surprises, as long as I know about them!"

"I think it is so romantic!" Laurie swooned as she softly giggled when Darlene shared her story around the lunchroom.

Mary nodded, wishing she could find such a romantic token on her pillow. Once again, Josh was at the table nearby taking notes of the ladies' responses. He noticed Sherri was quiet, and didn't voice any opinion either way, but smiled politely, before turning her attention to her study book.

Josh sighed as he wished he had enough nerve to confront her face to face, but he was certain his communication skills would suffer greatly if he was even alone with her.

A couple of nights later, the mysterious bandit returned; this time in Mary's room. She was thrilled when she returned to discover she had been the latest recipient of this mysterious man's romantic gestures.

"He breaks in our rooms while we are away and leaves us chocolate! How romantic can you get?" Laurie perked when Mary showed her the box of chocolates. Sherri carefully took the box and removed a magnifying glass out of her knapsack.

"Sherri Blackstone, don't tell me you are looking for fingerprints?" Darlene shrieked out loud.

Sherri calmly replied. "I love romance the same as anyone else, but don't you think this is a little more than a coincidence?"

"I don't care, no one is hurt, nothing is taken; personally I'm thrilled that he visited me." Mary admitted to Laurie who was grinning from ear to ear.

"It's like he's a 'chocolate bandit' or something." Laurie giggled then realized she liked the sound of that. "Yes, 'The Chocolate Bandit', I like that!"

Josh smiled to himself. He liked the sound of that too. If only he knew what Sherri thought of the idea.

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After a few more 'chocolate break ins,' Sherri decided it was time to search for clues. She asked the girls' permission, then began her work checking for any footprints, fingerprints, fibers, hairs, any pieces of traceable evidence.

Sherri started at the point of entry, which was the two story window. She carefully searched inside the room, then arranged to borrow a ladder from the maintenance man, explaining she needed it to do research. Taking her 35 mm camera, she shot off a whole roll of film, taking photographs of the surrounding area, so she could do more intensive study.

Word had spread around campus of this 'Chocolate Bandit' until even the mention of chocolate brought up the subject matter. Some girls even made up rumors that they had seen the chocolate bandit and that he had visited them while they were in their dorms.

Josh blushed, realizing these girls were speaking of him. He was the newest sensation, and the timing couldn't have been more perfect, with tomorrow being Valentine's Day. He had only one more evening to plan his big surprise.

Sherri was busy in her room jotting down notes, scribbling diagrams and trying to come to a logical conclusion. There was one possible clue, the impressions a small sharp tool that had been made at the point of entry. She found microscopic markings and groove impressions on the sides and edges of the windows. All she had to do was find the tool that matched these impressions and she would have her bandit!

Josh got everything he needed at the store. Tomorrow would be the biggest surprise of them all. He knew there was a Valentine's Day party that night on campus and realized he would have to arrive late. He had previous plans that were much too important to delay.

The red and white hearts dangled from the ceiling of the recreation room as the matching red and white helium balloons swayed back and forth.

Sounds of violins and strings urged couples to slow dance on the wide open wooden floor as servers dressed in tuxes offered them red or white non-alcoholic fruit punch.

The buffet table was lined with heart shaped bowls containing potato salad, macaroni salad, and coleslaw. Samples of chocolates were at each table in red and white foil with an 'I Love You' sticker along each side.

The hot foods consisted of Italian meatballs, barbecue chicken wings, and mini hot dogs wrapped in biscuits. Next in line was the macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and corn.

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Josh smiled as he looked around Sherri's room. He was amazed how neat everything was and in perfect order. Her books and folders were lined perfectly on shelves; rows of shoes were matched and lined side by side against the wall.

Her clothes were neatly folded or hung up in her closet. He smiled as he reached for the duffel bag he brought inside with him, and began to decorate the room.

About forty-five minutes later the room was complete. Surveying the room, and pleased with its outcome, he smiled. Closing his backpack, he once again made his exit through the window and down the fire escape.

Josh had made a quick stop by his dorm to change before heading to the party. He was happy to see it was still in progress. He looked for Sherri, but didn't see her. A server with a tray of drinks offered one to him.

"Thanks, I'll take an extra for a friend," he said, thinking he might see Darien. He turned and almost spilled the punch on a lovely lady in front of him.

He froze, seeing her up close. "I..I'm sorry." He managed to blurt out. Sherri smiled at the handsome man who seemed very nervous. They stared into each other's eyes for quite sometime, then lowered their gaze to the glasses he held in his hand. "This is for you, if you want it," he said.

Sherri was attracted to him. His strong physical features, his hands were large, rugged looking, yet he had clean fingernails; something she admired in a man.

"Thank you." Sherri smiled as she took the drink from him; their fingertips touching in the exchange. The sound of soft music began from the live band as they announced this was their last set.

Taking a deep breath, Josh invited her to a table where he set their drinks down. "Care to dance?" he spoke with anticipation. Sherri smiled as she followed him to the front of the room. She slipped her arms around his neck, looked up at his handsome face and they began to move gracefully across the floor.

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By the end of an evening better than Josh could have dreamed he was breathless with elation. He felt so comfortable with Sherri. After that first dance they had talked and talked, realizing how much they had in common. They both loved crime scenes, mystery novels, romantic comedies as well as police dramas. They loved the outdoors, including camping and hiking but had put these on hold while they were pursuing their studies. They seemed to be made for each other.

"I had a nice evening, Josh." Sherri smiled as the party was ending.

"I did too, Sherri." He offered his arm as he walked her back to her dorm.

She reached out and clasped her hand in his. The electricity they felt was both exuberating and stimulating. A piercing scream broke their trance and drew their focus to a woman standing outside the dorm. "Help me! I've locked myself out of my room!" A pretty red-haired beauty sobbed.

"I have some tools in my car, I'll be right back." Josh valiantly offered.

Sherri watched him leave, and then stood alongside the woman. "It will be okay, we'll get you inside."

Josh returned momentarily with his toolbox. He tried a few different instruments until finally he pried the door opened with a crowbar. He then pushed the door opened, making certain the young lady got inside her dorm.

Sherri, noticing he had many useful tools in his box, saw a screwdriver with familiar markings. While Josh was busy making certain the woman was safe inside the building, Sherri carefully removed a handkerchief she kept in her pocket for emergencies, picked up the tool, and hid it inside the front of her coat. She knew she should have asked. I can always tell him after I check it out, and it doesn't match. Then we can have a few laughs over me expecting him to be The Chocolate Bandit.

The young student thanked him again for assisting her before he and Sherri left.

Josh took Sherri's hand in his and walked her to the outside of her dorm. He wanted to ask her if he could kiss her, but thought she might refuse him, seeing they had just met. "Sweet dreams," he said, smiling as he turned and pretended to leave.

"Sweet dreams." She repeated, waving before entering the hall, which led to her room.

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Sherri unlocked the door and turned on the light. She gasped. The room had metamorphosed into a romantic honeymoon suite. The room smelled with cinnamon incense; red velvet heart shaped cushions lined across her bed. A stuffed white teddy bear with a large red bow saying "Be My Valentine" sat in the middle of her bed; a glass vase filled with red roses sat in water on her desk, next to a red heart shaped five pound box of chocolates.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed, not believing such romantic gestures. Her friends heard the commotion and hurried into her room.

"Sherri, are you okay?" Darlene said, then stopped and slowly grinned as she realized what had happened.

"This is great!" Laurie shrieked as she sampled a piece of chocolate.

Mary picked up the teddy bear and handed it to Sherri. "Seems The Chocolate Bandit has set his affections on you!" she said, a bit of envy in her voice.

Josh listened to their excited chatter hidden from view behind some bushes, and then headed back to his dorm. He wished he could have hidden inside her room to see her reaction, but then he would never have had the chance to see her at the Valentine party or to dance with her and talk with her. He sighed – love was beautiful but it did hurt. 'How can I tell her I am 'The Chocolate Bandit?' he wondered, as a sudden doubt crept into his mind that perhaps Sherri would not approve of his banditry

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Sherri waited until her friends retired to their rooms. She could hardly wait to compare Josh's screwdriver with the impressions of the markings, which she had collected from the other girls' window ledges.

Her heart was pounding as she examined each one carefully, and found it to be an exact match. She was excited and couldn't wait until morning to see him. If only for a moment, she had to surprise him too.

Josh made it back to his room; he was too worked up to sleep. He knew he had to confide in Sherri about his alter ego.

Hearing a scraping sound outside his door, he looked out of the peep hole. He saw someone, but couldn't see their face. His hand gripped the door handle, and slowly pulled the door open.

A lady wearing a black eye mask and a black snug swordsman outfit handed him a single red rose, her other hand behind her back. Josh was speechless as he admired the incredible outfit complete with high-heeled boots and a black leather belt.

"What's behind your back, Senorita?" he played along thinking it was Sherri, but couldn't imagine why she would be doing this.

The masked woman revealed the missing screwdriver. Josh's mouth dropped open in shock. "I...I..." he stuttered.

"May I enter the premises of the Chocolate Bandit?" the lady said, smiling as she removed her eye mask.

It was Sherri.

"Sure!" he laughed, then stood back to allow her inside. "How did you know...wait, the screwdriver; how did you get it?"

"When you helped that woman get in her dorm. I recognized the markings; they looked familiar to the ones I had managed to get from other window sills," she said.

He playfully smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I thought I was clever by wearing gloves."

"I liked what you did to my room." Sherri whispered, moving a little nearer, closing the gap between them.

"You did?"

"Very much." She leaned forward, her lips pressing to his.

"Hmm very sweet. There's only one thing missing," he said grinning.

"What?" Sherri said, a bit surprised, then also smiled as she saw him pulling a piece of chocolate out of his pocket, unwrapping it, and holding it carefully, placing the sweet morsel into her mouth.

The End

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