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Opening extract from

Coco Caramel

Written by

Cathy Cassidy

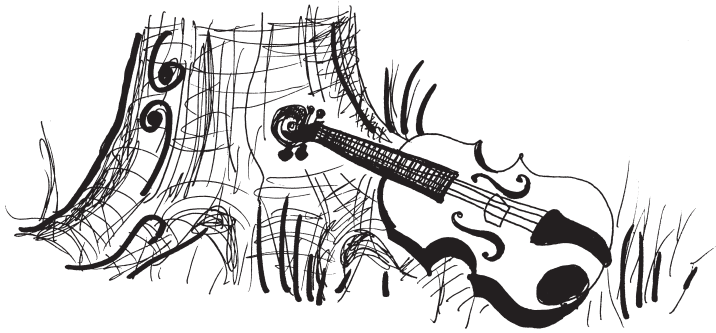
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1

They say that families are like chocolate – mostly sweet, with a few nuts. More than a few, in my family's case . . . and they say that I'm the crazy one? Yeah, right.

They also say that life is like a box of chocolates, and that you can't expect every one you pick to be exactly the way you'd like it to be. This seems a little ridiculous to me – and as my mum and my stepdad Paddy run a chocolate business, well . . . I think I should know. Better just to out your favourites, even if they don't come in a fancy box. With a little planning, you can get what you want, with no nasty surprises. Simple.

I lean back against the tree trunk and rest my violin across my lap.

I have just finished my practice. I have only been playing

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for a year and because my family is not especially musical and not especially tolerant of beginner violinists, I am banned from playing indoors.

Our house, Tanglewood, is a B&B, and Mum says that my playing might disturb the guests, and that she cannot afford to lose custom because of it. This shows you the kind of thing I have to put up with because only one or two guests actually complained, and that was *ages* ago, when I was just starting out. These days I am lots better and my playing sounds nothing at all like cats being strangled.

The B&B business is winding down a little lately now that the chocolate business is taking off, so why anyone cares about losing one or two guests who are probably tone-deaf anyway is quite beyond me. Still, I am banished from the house and so I have to practise outside, perched in my favourite climbing tree, an oak. It is quite a comfortable tree because there is a wide branch that meets the main trunk almost at a right angle. I have added a cushion from one of the garden chairs, and if you want to you can pull your legs up and lean back as if you are sitting in a lumpy old armchair.

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Or you can let your legs dangle, the way I am right now, and look down through the oak leaves at the ground below. It is October, the end of the half-term break, and the leaves are a hundred shades of gold and burnt orange and crimson. There is a definite chill in the air, and I am wearing a scarf, a jumper and a beanie hat. It's not quite cold enough yet for gloves, but it will be soon. If you have ever tried playing a violin wearing red and black striped woolly gloves, you will know that this is not good.

You'd think my family would take pity on me and let me practise indoors, but there's no chance of that. Sometimes I think they are philistines.

My friends at school think my family is cool, but they don't know the half of it. Mum and Paddy are always hassled and busy, juggling B&B stuff with chocolate orders and new truffle ideas and designs for the handpainted boxes. As for having four sisters . . . well, that can be seriously hard work, especially when you are the youngest.

Like I said, my family is mostly nuts.

Honey, my eldest sister, is definitely more sour than sweet – she looks cute on the outside, but inside she's pure rebel. It's like she has no limits, no rules. She



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accidentally caused a fire back in the summer and tried to run away; a few weeks after, she stayed out all night and skipped the first day of school. Everyone thought she'd run away again and the police and social services got involved. Scary stuff. Honey seems to have quietened down again now, but for how long?

My stepsister Cherry is cool, but when she first arrived last year, she had a few problems sorting fact from fiction. She also had a problem staying away from Honey's boyfriend, and now the two of them are an item. This is great for Cherry, but not so great for Honey – since Shay ditched Honey she has dated practically every boy in Somerset, the more unsuitable the better. Cherry and Shay broke up recently for a week, and rumour had it that Honey was responsible . . . but they're back together now and stronger than ever. Don't get me wrong, I like Cherry a lot, but still, I can't help wishing she hadn't fallen for Shay Fletcher.

So. My sister Skye likes to dress in dead girls' dresses, or 'vintage' as she calls it. Last year she had a crush on some imaginary ghost boy; this year she has a long-distance boyfriend up in London, and they are always

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writing and texting and emailing. If you want my opinion, I think she should have stuck with the ghost boy.

As for Summer, Skye's twin – I used to think she had it all; looks, talent, popularity, big dreams, determination. She had a scholarship for a boarding ballet school this term . . . but she threw it all away, cracked under the pressure. Her dream turned into a nightmare, and she is still struggling to break free of it. These days, Summer is like a shadow girl, frail, fragile, lost. She picks at her food as if she thinks it could be poisoned, and we have to creep around her pretending nothing is wrong when we all know that things are very wrong indeed.

Summer hangs out the whole time with Alfie Anderson, who is a million miles from cool, the kind of boy who puts salt instead of sugar in your hot chocolate and thinks it's funny. I really don't, and I have no idea what Summer sees in him.

Boys are nothing but trouble – if they vanished off the face of the earth right now, Honey, Cherry, Skye and Summer would probably be a whole lot happier and much more fun. Personally, I think animals are far more reliable and rewarding.

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I peer down through the leaves at Fred the dog, who is waiting patiently at the foot of the tree, while Humbug my pet sheep munches grass nearby. You see? Animals are loyal. They don't care if you play a few dud notes when practising the violin. They never judge you, and they don't let you down.

People can learn a lot from animals. I know that my sisters are not perfect, but I love them and I am loyal to them. If someone else says anything at all against them, I will defend them to my last breath.

The problem with being the youngest is that people don't take you seriously. You are stuck forever as the baby of the family, which can be very annoying indeed. I'll show them, though. I have my life all planned out and I am pretty sure it's going to be *amazing*.

I want to work with animals – I will do voluntary work and save endangered species. I have started on this task already because let's face it, time is running out. I am having a cake sale at school on Monday, in aid of endangered pandas, and before half-term I made a petition to save the white rhino. I collected 233 signatures, and sent them all off to the government with a first-class stamp.

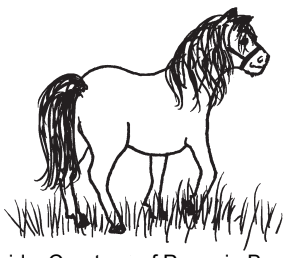
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Once I have saved the panda, the white rhino and a bunch of other threatened animals, I will train to be a vet and eventually I will live in a big house by the sea (a bit like Tanglewood) and have my own horses and play the violin whenever I like. Indoors and out.

I know what I want, and it doesn't seem too much to ask.

If life is a box of chocolates, I will just make sure that I pick carefully. Why waste time on nougat and jaw-breaking toffee brittle when you can have something you really love instead? I like most of the truffles that my stepdad Paddy makes for his business, The Chocolate Box, but the caramel truffle he invented for me back on my twelfth birthday a while ago is without a doubt the best of all.

If my life is going to be a box of chocolates, I will plan ahead and make sure I choose caramel, rich and smooth and sweet, every time.



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