

Men, Money,
and
Chocolate



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Men, Money, and Chocolate

*A tale about pursuing love, success, and pleasure,
and how to be happy before you have it all . . .*

MENNA VAN PRAAG



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For Artur, my love, my light



From the Editor: To our North American readers, please note that for the most part, we have maintained the British style of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and syntax of the original text in order to preserve the editorial intent of the author, who hails from the United Kingdom.



From the Author: In the U.K., flapjacks are made from oats, golden syrup, sugar, and butter. Unlike U.S. flapjacks, ours are a bit like granola bars but chewier and much sweeter!

*Go to that place of silence within.
You'll feel the vastness of the world
And its limitless possibilities.
You'll know you can do anything,
And have everything
You will see that right now
You are perfect, exactly as you are.*

A Note on Self-Judgment

When this story begins, the protagonist, Maya, hates her life but doesn't know how to change it. Trapped in fear, doubt and negative thoughts, she doesn't believe she will ever have a life she loves.

Then she meets a series of extraordinary people who show her some of the secrets to happiness. With their help, Maya finds the courage and passion to create her own joyful life.

But in the beginning, Maya is still stuck in self-pity. This might feel uncomfortable to read, especially if you're sometimes hard on yourself and hold yourself to very high standards. You may notice feeling annoyed with her, judging her for being stuck, just as you may judge yourself for similar 'faults'.

However, when you join Maya on her journey, you'll start to discover how to be kind to yourself. And, as you accept and love her, to have compassion for her suffering, you can learn to love yourself unconditionally, too.

And, of course, unconditional love is one of the deepest, most essential secrets to happiness of all. . . .

Maya hadn't always felt so frustrated. Although she could barely remember it, twenty years ago she'd been supremely happy. Free from doubt and fear, she'd known exactly what she wanted from life and just how to get it. Desire and direction were joined in her, and her future was certain to be wonderful.

As a child, Maya often imagined the glorious life she'd have as a grown-up, with a beautiful man who adored her, a child of her own and work she enjoyed as much as play.

Maya had liked to chat about these things with God. She hadn't been raised religiously, so it wasn't a specific god she talked to. It was more of a feeling she connected with, a feeling that someone or something was out there. Listening.

Often Maya directed her dreams at the sky, the clouds, a bird, or a tree. In everything she saw she

felt the vibration of magic, of cosmic energies, of God. So she talked and talked. And, even though she didn't hear answers in her head, she knew they came because she felt them in her heart.

It thrilled Maya to chat like this, feeling as though she was harbouring a special, secret connection with creation. She skipped along the pavement, leaping up to touch the branches of trees, catching sunlight in her hands and grinning as her heart tingled with joy. Maya didn't mind when people gave her funny looks. She just smiled, wanting to share her secret with them but not quite knowing how.

Maya engaged with the world as though it was a living, breathing being she loved, imagining she was completely connected with everything, part of it body and soul. She looked for patterns in the rhythms of life, searching for hints and clues while pondering the questions life gave her. She played with everything she saw, twirling with leaves as they danced in the wind, imagining them blown by the breath of a universe that delighted in everything it created.

Sometimes Maya was silent, spending long, languid moments just staring at things. She loved being outside, sitting on the grass and gazing up at swallows dipping in the sky. But her favourite experience above all was watching frogs. Maya liked to lie on her stomach, waiting for a quiet rustling in the grass. And when a tiny green frog jumped past her nose, her heart leapt with it. She'd creep up close after they landed and watch their tiny hearts pumping while they waited for the next urge to leap.

Lily had often watched Maya chatting away to the sky and it had worried her. But she'd told herself Maya would grow out of it. And so she did. One day Maya just stopped talking with God.

She was nine years old. The first day at her new school. She had been so excited to meet new friends, to take them on her walks, to share her secrets with them all. But that first afternoon, as Maya skipped past the trees and talked to the birds, she learnt the horror of being the odd one out, of being mocked in the playground. Their taunting voices filled the air and tears fell down her face. The humiliation

slid down her spine, crept into her chest and muffled her heart. The sour taste stayed in her mouth for days, and the voices haunted her dreams for years.

That was the last time she looked up at the sky, smiled at nothing and talked to something she only sensed but couldn't see. Later in life Maya still remembered that moment and understood why most adults walked through life so carefully contained, too scared to smile at strangers. She understood that the fear of embarrassment is a great dampener of joy.



Now Maya no longer shared her heart with God, or with anyone else. She kept her desires and dreams to herself. Secrets locked away, only to be studied in moments of great solitude.

But the fact that she no longer admitted them to anyone didn't stop her dreaming all day long. Her desires lingered in her mind while she leant on the counter at the café. And, as long as no one interrupted her, Maya could daydream for hours.



Maya sat behind the till, digesting a sandwich and another cupcake, the disappointment with Jake having sent her back again to the comfort of chocolate. She flicked through a magazine, enviously eyeing the skinny celebrities and trying to forget that it was barely midday and she'd already broken her no-chocolate promise, twice.

Maya tried hard not to think about Jake; instead she decided to focus on cleaning the coffee machine. It didn't look like she'd get many customers that morning, so she took the opportunity to take it apart.



Maya, her head still deep in the coffee machine, was interrupted by a series of little coughs. She turned to see a tiny old lady standing on the other side of the counter.

‘Oh, hello.’ Maya quickly wiped her hands on her apron. ‘I was just . . .’

‘I’d like a large hot chocolate, dear,’ the old lady declared, ‘with lots of froth.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I can’t. I’m in the middle of cleaning the machine.’

Maya braced herself for the old lady to get annoyed. But she only laughed, then pressed her tiny nose to the display case and pointed to the chocolate-chip and orange cake Maya had baked that morning.

‘Well then, dear, I’ll have a large slice of that delicious-looking cake instead.’

Maya nodded and opened the case, pulling it out. She cut a slice while the old lady watched her with a smile. Maya tried to keep her head down and focus. But there was something about this woman, Maya realised, that made her smile, too. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but there was something special about her.

‘Would you like to join me?’ the old lady asked.

‘Sorry?’

‘For a slice of cake.’

‘Oh, I don’t . . . I’m a little busy.’

The old lady looked at her. ‘Are you?’

Maya frowned. Customers never spoke to her so directly, if at all. With the exception of several scattered thank-yous, nothing of significance ever occurred in her café interactions.

Maya eyed the old lady suspiciously. For such a forthright person she appeared deceptively meek.

A tiny woman with a short grey bob, blue twinset, pearls and little eyes that stared out intently behind gold-rimmed glasses. But her eyes sparkled. For no reason, or perhaps for this very reason, Maya suddenly trusted her.

‘No, I’m not busy,’ she admitted.

‘So why don’t you join me?’

This was something Maya hadn’t done since she was a little girl. In those days she chatted with everyone, constantly sharing slices of cakes and cups of hot chocolate with customers. And now she realised just how much she’d missed it. With a slight ache in her heart, Maya nodded, walked round the counter and followed the old lady to a table.

‘I’m Rose,’ the lady said, sitting down.

‘Maya.’

They sat in silence. Rose delicately devoured her cake. After several mouthfuls she looked up.

‘I was right. This is absolutely delicious.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t you want any?’

‘I don’t eat cake,’ Maya lied.

‘Oh,’ Rose said, with a little smile.

Maya sat back in her chair, trying to ignore the lure of the cake, resisting the urge to snatch it from Rose and stuff it into her own mouth.

As Rose finished the last few crumbs, carefully picking them off her plate with a moist finger, she regarded the young woman carefully. Maya shifted uneasily in her seat. She wasn’t used to being looked into like that and it made her uncomfortable.

‘You’re not often here, are you?’ Rose said softly.

‘Every day except Sunday,’ Maya said.

‘That’s not what I meant, dear.’

‘Oh?’

‘I mean, you don’t appear to be really living your life, but rather watching it being lived,’ Rose said. ‘And that’s why you feel so . . . unfulfilled.’

‘Unfulfilled?’ Maya frowned.

‘Aren’t you? I’m sorry, dear, but you seem rather unfulfilled to me.’

Maya was both shocked and touched that the old lady spoke with such honesty. And when she said ‘dear’ she seemed to really mean it. As Maya smiled, Rose returned her gaze with a look of such compassion that to her great surprise and embarrassment, tears came to Maya’s eyes.

‘Yes, I am. Deeply.’

‘You can’t hide it.’ Rose nodded. ‘It’s all in the eyes.’

‘What’s wrong with my eyes?’ Maya asked.

‘Your eyes, my dear, have a distinct lack of sparkle.’



Maya and Rose now had a plate of chocolate flapjacks on the table between them. The old lady munched on her third while the young woman

watched her. Rose nudged the plate across the table, but Maya shook her head.

‘Are you sure you don’t want one?’ Rose asked, crumbs falling onto her lap. ‘They’re quite delicious.’

‘I know. I’ve eaten at least a hundred this year,’ Maya said, unwrapping this semi-truth carefully, revealing a little piece of herself to Rose.

‘Oh, but that’s not too many,’ Rose said.

‘Yes, well, I wasn’t really telling the truth,’ Maya admitted. ‘I eat at least three a day.’

Rose smiled, popped the last piece of flapjack into her mouth and chewed with relish.

‘How do you do it?’ Maya asked. ‘How do you eat so much and stay so thin?’

‘If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.’

‘Why not?’ Maya frowned, trying to imagine what spectacular weight-loss secret this old lady could possibly be concealing.

‘I can’t tell you now.’ Rose brushed crumbs from her lap. ‘You’re on a journey, and you’ll get there. But there are things you must experience in life before you discover the secret to always being your perfect weight.’

‘You know it —’ Maya was horrified. ‘— And you’re not going to tell me?’

‘Life is like any other education,’ Rose explained. ‘You’ve got to grasp the basic principles first before you graduate to the higher truths. If I told you right away, you wouldn’t know what to do with them. And, more importantly, you wouldn’t believe me.’

Maya eyeballed the old lady indignantly, suddenly furious, wanting to choke these truths out of her if she had to. Finally, as the anger and frustration swelled up inside her, ready to burst out, Maya sighed, realising Rose was right.

‘I don’t even know how to achieve the simple things in life,’ Maya said. ‘Love, success and happiness seem so completely impossible to me. People live them every day, but I can’t. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.’

‘Ah.’ Rose discreetly patted her hair, catching a stray curl and putting it into place. ‘Now I see what your first lesson needs to be.’

Maya sat up a little, trying not to look too intrigued. For all her general cynicism, she realised that, if some people held the secrets to life, Rose was one of them. She’d never met anyone so happy, so quietly content with life.

‘Before you try to get everything you want,’ Rose said, ‘start to notice how hard you are on yourself. This is the beginning. You need to start being more gentle.’

‘What do you mean?’

Maya leant forward and Rose reached out to gently pat her hand. Warmth flushed Maya’s skin and, just as she was about to pull away, she realised she hadn’t been touched so tenderly in a long time. Indeed it’d been quite some time since she’d been touched at all.

‘My dear,’ Rose said, ‘you think there’s something wrong with you. You think you’re overweight, that you’re inadequate and have no willpower. But

it's not true. You hate working in this café, and you think you're a coward for not following your real dreams. But you're not. You wish you had a boyfriend, partly because you're lonely, but mostly because you believe that not having one means you're unlovable. Nothing could be further from the truth.'

Rose leant closer, fixing her sparkling green eyes on Maya, who couldn't help but smile a little, although she wanted to cry.

'How do you know all this about me?'

'I'm an old woman. I know a lot of things. And when you start paying attention to other people, you'll notice all kinds of things you never saw before. Most people are too busy worrying about themselves to pay anybody else much notice.' Rose sighed a little, then smiled. 'It's a shame, because they miss so much.'

'I almost missed you.'

'Yes, my dear, you almost did.'

Maya smiled again. There was something about this woman that made it hard not to smile. She

seemed so content, so pleased with everything, and her happiness was infectious. Maya wasn't a touchy-feely person, but all of sudden she just wanted to reach over to Rose and hug her.

Rose grinned, as though she knew what Maya was thinking. Maya glanced out of the window, embarrassed. It had stopped raining. She hoped this wouldn't mean a sudden rush of customers. For, while she needed the income, she wanted to keep talking to Rose even more. Maya's gaze returned to the old lady.

'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'I'm sorry, dear, looking at you like what?'

'As though you know something about me that I don't.'

'Oh, you know it. You just refuse to believe it.'

'Believe what?'

'That you're absolutely perfect,' Rose smiled, 'exactly as you are: single and struggling and so... sexy. If you only believed that, then your life would begin to unfold into something magnificent.'

This idea was so radical to Maya, such a shock to her system, that she barely even heard Rose say it.

‘No,’ she said. ‘If Jake fell in love with me, if I wrote a bestseller and lost twenty pounds, then my life would be perfect.’

Rose raised her eyebrows, and her green eyes shone. How she wished she could tell the young woman all the secrets to a happy life right now. It would save so much time, so much pain. But there was nothing she could do about it. This wasn’t how it was done. Because it never worked.

Rose knew from experience that while inspired instructions were essential on the path to fulfillment and joy, alone they were never enough. For some reason, that even she didn’t quite understand, advice had to be balanced with experience before such instructions were written on the heart instead of simply held in the head.



‘You’re trying to graduate before you’ve learnt your lessons,’ Rose said, trying to set Maya in the right direction.

‘But I’ve been waiting for that life forever,’ Maya complained. ‘I don’t think I can bear to wait any longer.’

‘Oh, my dear, don’t worry about that. People fall in love in a second, book deals are made in a day and people have lost ten pounds in a week,’ Rose said, trying to drop little clues into the conversation, like hot toffee dropped into cold water. ‘But it’s much better if we don’t get the things we *really* want until we’ve learnt our life’s lessons.’

‘Lessons about what?’ Maya asked, curious and hopeful that perhaps the old lady was about to tell her the longed-for secrets after all.

‘Life gives everyone challenges, difficult situations they think they don’t want. Conditions like being lonely, broke and overweight. But people push against these things so strongly that they miss the gifts hidden inside them.’

‘Gifts?’ Maya asked, incredulous.

Rose knew then that her first instinct had been correct. She couldn’t tell Maya all the secrets to life right now, because she simply wouldn’t believe

them. And that would be no use at all. Maya's cynicism overpowered everything else: her desire, her curiosity, her longing for a happier life. She was dipped in it, head to toe, and its mixture of mistrust and resignation fogged her mind and gave off little puffs of suspicion-smoke that clouded her vision.

Rose wasn't in the business of trying to convince anyone of anything, but she saw a real sweetness in this young woman and, for that, decided to try. She also noticed, deep inside Maya's exhausted eyes, soft sparks of hope, buried under years of sadness and disappointment but still desperately trying to shine through. It was this hope that Rose had to awaken first, if Maya stood any chance at happiness at all.

'Well, if you look deep into these situations, these seeming twists of fate, if you look for the secrets to happiness contained within them, then you would sense both how to transcend them,' Rose explained, 'and how to be happy along the way.'

Maya considered this carefully. 'But I don't see how the condition of being broke or overweight could contain any secrets to happiness. Wouldn't I be

happier if those things just changed? If I was rich and thin, I'd be happy. I think that's all there is to it.'

'Well, it all depends on how you get there,' Rose said, knowing that this was the truth most people had the hardest time understanding. 'People who attain great wealth, even by doing what they love, usually aren't completely happy if they didn't follow the right route getting there.'

'I don't think I understand,' Maya said. But her curiosity grew, she wanted to be told the secrets she suspected this woman could give her, clues to contentment she'd known as a child but could no longer remember.

'Some people have everything you want, but it doesn't make them truly happy,' Rose said. 'That's because they sped down the path without looking. They were so focused on their goal that they missed the realisations about real joy, and surrender, the opportunities for compassion and, most of all, the experiences that could crack open their hearts and connect them to God.'

Maya sat in silence for a moment, rather awed by what had just been said. Rose smiled softly, seeing how her words were beginning to reignite the sparkle in Maya's eyes.

'So, how do I get what I want?' Maya asked. 'Without missing those things?'

'Well, dear, these lessons are different for everyone. We each hold unseen gifts that need expressing; we each hide unique wounds that need healing,' Rose said. 'If we walk our paths, listening to other people's instructions and our own intuition, life will give us what we need.'

'Really? Is that always the case?' Maya, having felt nothing but stuck for the last ten years, couldn't quite believe this.

'Yes,' Rose replied, with a smile. 'Your life is so full of potentially glorious lessons and gifts right now I'm surprised you're not tripping over every second step you take.'

'Well, I am rather clumsy.' Maya laughed. 'How did you know?'

Rose's eyes shone mischievously. 'You're constantly being offered lessons to learn and gifts to gather. But if you ignore the nudges you'll soon find yourself hit over the head. Indeed, if you insist on ignoring them for too much longer I'd start to watch out for falling bricks while you're walking down the street.'

A horrified look passed across Maya's face.

'What are they, these lessons and gifts? Can you tell me?'

The young woman looked across the table with such a sense of expectation, and spoke with such hope in her voice that, no matter what the rules and regulations were, Rose couldn't possibly say no.

'Compassion. Courage. Connection,' she said.



'Oh, I see,' Maya said, although she didn't really see at all. Still, it was a good start.

'Those are your keys. They will unlock the happiness that waits inside you.' Rose smiled at the image of Maya as a little treasure chest, waiting to be

unlocked. ‘Without these keys you might grab onto the things you want in the world, but you’ll still feel uneasy and scared of losing them. Your heart will be cut off from your senses. You’ll have everything, but you might feel nothing at all.’

‘No,’ Maya said quickly. ‘I don’t want that.’

‘That’s why it’s much better to create your dreams carefully, rather than rushing headlong into them, or having them fall into your lap. The magic of manifestation is all very well and good,’ Rose warned, ‘but experiences like compassion, courage and connection are essential to living a joyous life. Without these you would feel lost, but you wouldn’t know why. You could have love, wealth and beauty, but you still wouldn’t be truly happy.’

As Maya listened Rose adjusted herself in the chair, tweaking her twinset and perfecting her pearls.

‘I know you might not want to hear it, dear,’ Rose said gently, ‘but your first lesson, before you do anything else, is to realise that there is nothing wrong with you. To see that you’re absolutely perfect, exactly as you are. This is compassion.’

Maya closed her eyes, sighing softly.

‘That is the first, and most important, reason you don’t yet have the life you want,’ Rose explained. ‘Because truly, deep down, you don’t believe you deserve it. You think you’re not good enough.’

Maya swallowed back her tears.

‘Try saying it,’ Rose suggested. ‘Try saying that you deserve to have everything you want.’

Maya opened her mouth. Words formed and hovered on her tongue, waiting for her to speak. But she couldn’t.

‘I don’t know why I find it so hard.’

‘It’s okay. Just try again. But this time, say it even if you don’t feel it.’

Maya took a long, deep breath, summoning the words from down inside in her belly. ‘I deserve to have a loving relationship. I deserve to write and sell a wonderful book. I deserve to have a beautiful body.’

Maya exhaled in a rush. Rose gave her hand a little squeeze across the table.

‘Well done, dear. So how do you feel?’

Maya shook her head and shrugged. ‘Undeserving and guilty, but I don’t understand it. I suppose I think . . . why should I get the things I want? What makes me so special?’

‘Exactly!’ Rose exclaimed suddenly, slapping her tiny hand on the table so hard that Maya jumped. ‘That’s what most people think. And it’s so sad because it keeps them from having the things they long for in life.’

Maya nodded. She was slowly beginning to understand what Rose was trying to show her. She had never noticed it before: the weight of guilt that sat on her chest like a shiny black stone. Now it was all she could feel. And it was so heavy she could barely breathe.



‘Listen,’ Rose said, leaning forward, her eyes shining, conspiratorial, full of secrets. ‘You can’t battle these negative beliefs, because they’re very powerful and shared by most of the world. But you can bypass them.’

‘Really? Are you sure?’ Maya asked, still struggling to breathe properly, and wondering just how long she’d felt like this.

‘Absolutely, you just have to be practical. Don’t think about whether or not you deserve to be happy,’ Rose said. ‘Know instead that you *need* to be happy, for the benefit of the rest of the world.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Everyone on this planet needs to be happy. It isn’t a selfish impulse. They owe it to the rest of humanity.’

‘They do?’

‘Yes,’ Rose said. ‘When you’re happy you light up those around you and make the world a better place to be. But when you’re unhappy you spread unhappiness. You may not want to, but you can’t help it. Your sadness just seeps out and into those around you. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.’

Maya nodded. This she understood.

‘In order to light up the world, you need to make yourself happy first.’

Maya was silent.

‘Don’t you want that?’ Rose asked.

Maya nodded reluctantly, barely able to admit it. Tears gathered again, and her breath held in her throat. The old woman gazed at Maya until she started to cry. Then, slowly and quietly, Rose moved to sit next to her. Maya wept while Rose held her, hugging and rocking her gently.

‘You just need to forgive yourself,’ Rose whispered. ‘That’s all. For everything you’ve ever done. Because the only way to stop hurting other people is to stop hurting yourself.’

As the truth of these words sank in, Maya sobbed. For all the pain she’d ever caused others and all the pain she’d ever caused herself. The times she’d yelled at her mother because she wanted to go out and play instead of stay and serve, the cruel words she’d sometimes screamed and lies she’d told. These memories, scattered among many more, built up and released themselves in Maya’s sobs.

Most of all, Maya cried for the millions upon millions of times she'd been horrible to herself. For all the little put-downs, the cutting criticisms, for every time she'd looked in the mirror and hated what she saw.



Rose hugged her. She stroked Maya's hair and told her everything would be all right, that we all hurt people, but we're all innocent in our pain. Because, if we could possibly behave any better, if we could find love in our hearts instead of hate, we would.

Gradually, ever so softly, Maya's tears washed away her guilt. Eventually she breathed deeply, wiped her eyes and looked up at Rose.

'I haven't cried like that in a really long time. No one has held me like that since...'

'I know, dear,' Rose said softly. 'I know.'

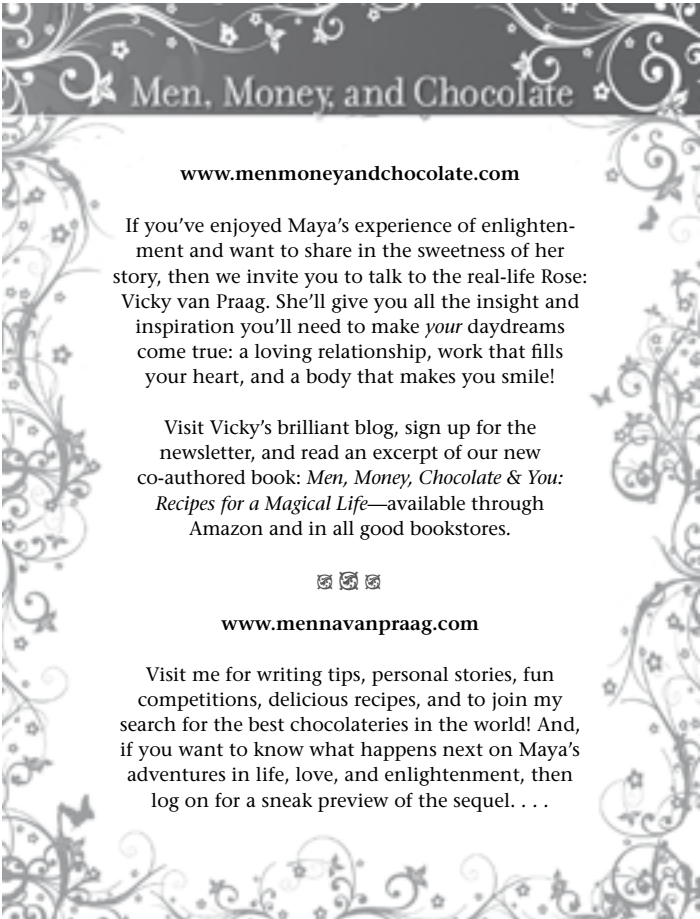


Rose stood on the doorstep and Maya leant against the door, reluctant to see her go. The old woman reached out and Maya squeezed her hand tightly.

‘You’re going to be fine.’ Rose chuckled. ‘In fact, you’re going to be wonderful. This is the first step in your journey. You’ve started to open your heart. Now you can begin to see the truth of who you really are.’

Maya grinned, letting go of Rose’s hand as she stepped onto the pavement. She watched the old lady walk away until she turned at the end of the road and waved. Maya grinned and waved back, feeling lighter and brighter than she had in a very, very long time.





Men, Money, and Chocolate

www.menmoneyandchocolate.com

If you've enjoyed Maya's experience of enlightenment and want to share in the sweetness of her story, then we invite you to talk to the real-life Rose: Vicky van Praag. She'll give you all the insight and inspiration you'll need to make *your* daydreams come true: a loving relationship, work that fills your heart, and a body that makes you smile!

Visit Vicky's brilliant blog, sign up for the newsletter, and read an excerpt of our new co-authored book: *Men, Money, Chocolate & You: Recipes for a Magical Life*—available through Amazon and in all good bookstores.



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With Love and Thanks

Having already loved & thanked everyone in the UK edition, I'll just mention again those without whom *Men, Money, and Chocolate* wouldn't exist—for them, for this, my love and thanks are limitless.

Artur, the biggest blessing in my life; and the sweetest, sexiest husband I ever could have hoped for. Vicky, for giving me life and enlightenment, too. David, for bequeathing me his literary genes and love of books. Jack, who stayed in the kitchen for weeks until he'd perfected the recipes. Michelle, for believing in my little book. And Ariel & Shya Kane, whose wonderful workshops have helped me create a life more magnificent than any of *my* daydreams. . . .

About the Author

Menna van Praag is an Oxford graduate, journalist, and chocolate aficionado. A magnificent insight by her mother, Vicky, led to a three-day experience of enlightenment, from which *Men, Money, and Chocolate* was born. Menna now lives happily in the UK with her husband, Artur, a gourmet genius. They are currently working on fulfilling a long-cherished dream of opening a bookstore/café together.

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(760) 431-7695 or (800) 654-5126

(760) 431-6948 (fax) or (800) 650-5115 (fax)

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