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1586 Words

THIS VALENTINE'S

BY MELODI CODA LAINE

It's Valentine's Day today. I'm always single on this day. But I've never been mad at it because I proceed happily to jump in my car, head to the bookstore and have a date with a novel. A romance novel, of course.

I shut off the engine and walk in. I'm greeted with the warmth of the heat, bright pinks and deep reds, and symbols of love. Xs and Os float in the air and mini cupids are plastered on the shelves. Hearts made from pages of novels hang from the ceiling and cling to me as I walk past.

"Welcome to Novels & Coffee!" the girl at the cash register sings. "Let anyone know if we can do anything for you!" She winks at me.

"Thanks, Isabella," I chuckle, heading back to my usual Valentine's Day spot. There's a perfectly placed table in the café that sits by the window. When I read there, I'm in my happy place—the park on a spring day bathing in the sun. I place my book down and get in line for coffee.

"Hey! Paul!" I hear and recognize the voice. Instantly I'm a bit more happy because Addie's working today. I shuffle to my left so I can see her. She places a mug on a machine and as espresso falls, she steams some milk. Her movements are so smooth, so fluid from one action to the next. As silky as the steamed milk she pours into Paul's mug.

He looks down into his coffee. "A book?" A question, but he's impressed.

"Pretty cool, no?" Addie says. "I've been practicing my art. Enjoy."

“Hi. What can I get for you today?” Addie says. And then she really looks me in the eyes. Now I can't speak, but she fills the silence for me. “Wait. You'reee...Aaaria... Right? You like the vanilla oat milk cappuccino?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“But with just a splash of syrup, right? Because you don't like it too sweet?”

“Yeah.”

“That'll be seven dollars and twelve cents.”

“Could I actually get one of those sandwiches, too?”

She hits a couple buttons on the machine and says, “That brings it up to twenty-seventy-two.”

I hand her twenty dollars fifty and ask her for her patience as I try to grab the dime and two pennies that keep evading my fingers. I hand her the dime. “I have the two cents, I swear.”

“Actually, don't worry about it.” She puts her hand in her pocket and puts two cents into her hand. She smiles. “Your order will be ready soon.”

“Thanks.” I pull out a dollar and put it in the tip jar. I give her a smile before going back to my seat. In no time I hear Addie's voice again. It's really close. She's right here.

“One vanilla oat milk capp and a house panini.”

“Oh—my god. Sorry! I would've gotten up—I just—I, I didn't hear you calling.”

“I never did. There just wasn't a line, so I thought I'd bring it straight to you. I wanted to get from behind the bar anyway.” She sets down my drink. “Enjoy.”

I'm used to my cappuccinos having a small rim of coffee-dyed milk foam, the rest undisturbed in color. But the ratio is wrong. There's ninety percent brown, and ten percent white. The white, a small heart that still sways from the motion of Addie placing it on the table. I sip the warm drink and it awakens my taste buds. The balance between the flavors is exactly what I wanted. I taste the strong Italian espresso. I taste a hint of vanilla. “Thanks so much,” I say. “I love the heart.”

“Very festive, isn't it?” She doesn't wait for me to respond. Already backing away, she says, “Happy Valentine's Day.”

I cozy into myself as the sun shines onto me, a sign that this Valentine's is going to be a good one. I open my book, but not before taking another sip of my coffee.

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My eyes tire. I close my book for a little reprieve. I leave it in the café and walk around the bookstore, which is getting busier now. I see a woman with a slight frown on her face. She fans through the pages of a book, puts it down and does it to another before moving onto the next. Single, I think. Then correct myself: a sad single—nothing like this other woman who seems to be laughing to herself as she looks around. I think: happily single and clearly thinks this holiday is a joke. There are a few couples. Some hand in hand, some separating into the section of their preferred genre. And I see this one boy who looks as lost as ever.

“Excuse me. Hi. What can I help you with?” I ask him.

“Oh. Me? I’m just looking for a book for my girlfriend.”

“What’s she like? What kind of books is she into?”

“Well, she’s cool. She likes art and likes romance books, I guess. Although, I don’t remember if she has any favorite authors.”

The pitiful answer makes me want to ask him how long he’s been in the relationship, but I don’t. “Okay, well. There are lots of great choices. But how about this one here? It’s one of the newer books, so it’s almost guaranteed she hasn’t read it. It’s a romance, and it’s super cute. Bonus points if she likes the outdoors because this couple goes camping a lot.”

“She actually does. Thanks!”

“No problem.”

I walk back to the café and see someone sitting at my table. It’s Addie.

“Hi. Oh my god. I’m so sorry. All the other tables are full. Do you mind? Can I sit here with you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I actually wasn’t sure if you were coming back. But then I figured how does one leave their book behind at the bookstore. What are you reading? Is it something super secret?” My stare must be making her uncomfortable, and she must be the type who can’t stop talking when she’s uncomfortable because she keeps going. “The title pages are missing, and the covers and spine are blacked out. I’ve never seen a book like that—”

“No, no, no,” I interrupt her. “Nothing super secret. Just embarrassing. What are you doing over here anyway? Are you on break or something?”

“I am. I just sat down, actually, so I have more time to talk if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course it’s okay, but do they not, like, have a break room for you?”

“It’s a little stuffy sometimes, and there’s no windows or anything... During the day I prefer soaking up as much light as I can. This is actually where I usually sit, if I sit inside for break...and the table’s not taken, of course. You choose the best spot in house.”

“Yeah. Something about the sunlight for me, too.”

“I’ve never seen you stay for such a prolonged period. Get kicked out of your house or something?”

“No. I just—it’s something I do for Valentine’s day. This shop, it’s just the perfect place to be. A subtly romantic place to read romance, to treat myself. Self-care and self-love and all that.”

“Some singles drink wine, eat chocolate, and watch chick-flicks. Some go get their hair done and get ready to go to the club. But I guess some just hang out in book shop cafés?”

I laugh. “Exactly.”

We begin to have a silent moment when an annoyed voice calls for her. “Addie. We need you back. Now.”

“Oh.” A nervous laugh escapes her. “I gotta go. But one more question—do you stay all day on Valentine’s... or...?”

No. I typically don’t. I usually leave right before sunset. The perfect time to catch the beautiful sky on my drive to the store where I buy myself some roses and chocolates, a nice backdrop to debate which romance I should rewatch to the end the night. But I say, “Yeah. The longer, the better, really.”

“I’ll see you at the end of my shift then.”

It wasn’t a question.

Outside, the sun begins splashing its color across the horizon. I no longer feel its heat, but its beauty makes me so warm. Cozying up in my chair, I open my book. Then close it.

I look across the café at Addie. I’m seeing her for the first time. Each second that passes, I see her for the first time. It’s hard to keep up—it’s hard to register what I think I’m feeling. I try to keep up. Is it happening that fast, right this second? Or did it already happen? If so, when? I just continue to stare. To watch her. To listen to her voice. To wonder what she does outside of work. To wonder what she looks like in street clothes, what she looks like in sweats and a hoodie. How badly I would want to see her in sweatpants and a hoodie. And I think again, when did this happen? When did I identify as...? Do I identify as...? The sound of footsteps interrupts my thoughts. Addie stands at my table.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hi,” I say.

“Where to?” she asks.

I look out the window to my right. The sun has set. The sky is darkened. The moon is rising from below the horizon. I chuckle to myself, even happier to be single this Valentine's Day. I look back to my left, and I say to Addie, “What do you have in mind?”