

Tree of Dreams

LAURA RESAU



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El Corazón

I pluck a chocolate heart from the counter and drop it into my mouth, just as I've done a zillion times before. Letting it melt a bit, I slide it around on my tongue, then nibble off the stubs of veins and arteries. I push it toward one cheek, then another, maximizing taste bud contact. By now the aorta has dissolved, leaving only the ventricles and atria. I maneuver the now vessel-less heart directly onto the center of my tongue and nestle it beneath the roof of my mouth. Then, with my crooked front teeth, I bite the heart in half.

This heart comes from the rare Nacional cultivar of cacao, straight from the deepest depths of the Amazon jungle. And that's precisely how it tastes. Notes of earth, wood, flower, nut—maybe almond? There's a hint of amber honey . . . and some kind of fruit I can't put my finger on.

I close my eyes, swallowing the last bits. The flavors linger on my tongue . . . subtle, mysterious, enduring. Nearly perfect. For the next batch I'll tell Mom to roast the beans at 320° instead of 310° to heighten the smokiness.

In elegant script, I pen my description on a creamy card and

stick it behind the display glass. Then, with plastic-gloved hands, I grab the chocolates one by one from the tray and arrange them on the counter, this time in a spiraling pattern, starting from the outside and working my way in. These hearts are my latest chocolate concoction, the beans sourced from a little co-op Mom's been working with in Peru.

The word *weird* might come to some people's minds when encountering a thirteen-year-old girl who cares so much about chocolate. I prefer the term *rare*. If I were writing a description of myself on a creamy card, it would be something like this:

Of the Rocky Mountain cultivar, Coco Hidden possesses a solid maple complexion with tender layers of petals beneath. A bright touch of acidity at the edges. Subterranean hints of sorrow and fear. Undercurrents of longing, sweet notes of caramel with a burning touch of bitterness. A rare mix of steadfast and passionate.

Once the heart spiral is finished, I step back and survey my work, making a few tiny adjustments. All our chocolates are heart-shaped—that is, molded from a small but anatomically correct model of the human heart. This was Mom's ironic take on the whole chocolate-sweetheart-romance thing. El Corazón—*The Heart* in Spanish—is the name of our chocolate shop and factory in one. The sign features the bloodred human heart of the famous Mexican *lotería* card, complete with veins, arteries, and aorta.

Since there's not another soul in the shop, and I don't feel

like delving into algebra homework yet, I stare out the window at snow-tipped peaks, imagining the best sipping chocolate recipe for this particular bean. Even though it's nearly spring in some places, here in the mountains of Colorado, late February still means snowy ski season. Ideal hot chocolate weather.

I breathe in the scent of the hearts. Maybe I'll add a touch of vanilla? And almond? And maybe cinnamon? Petals of some sort, too, I'm thinking, to bring out the floral backdrop.

My gaze flickers over our shop—high ceilings, exposed brick, wavy glass skylights, old-fashioned arches, swirly antique molding. Four framed black-and-white photos of a jungle hang from the walls—a bug-eyed frog, a tropical flower, a palm hut, and giant aboveground tree roots—all as familiar as my handwriting. For all practical purposes, this has been my home for thirteen years, since before my birth. From the time I was the size of a cacao bean, the aromas and tastes of chocolate have been seeping into my blood. And in all those thirteen years, I don't remember El Corazón ever feeling quite so empty as it does now.

My own heart has a unique place for four things—well, technically three people and one thing. The one thing is our chocolate shop, located in my left atrium.

I pop another heart into my mouth, appreciating the endorphins and serotonin zipping around my brain cells. A hint of happiness ripples through me. And the theobromine adds to my freshly relaxed-yet-alert state. The perfect combination. As I always say, chocolate makes everything better.

At the edge of my vision, I notice movement outside the window facing Main Street. Customers? My pulse races, and

not just because of the cacao's phenylethylamine speeding it up. *Please be customers! Please be a whole big rich extended family of skiers in fancy down jackets craving loads of chocolate after a long day on the slopes.*

But then I see who it is and my heart screeches to a stop.

He's practically hidden inside a cluster of kids from school, the royalty of seventh grade, the faces that everyone knows, even the eighth graders. Which actually isn't saying much because the middle school's small, just fifty kids per grade. Although it *feels* bigger. Leo and I did kindergarten through sixth at a bilingual elementary school with a grand total of fifteen kids in our grade. Anyway, there he is, smack in the center of the little throng.

Leo de la Cueva. De la Cueva is his last name. *Of the Cave*—it makes you wonder what exactly his ancestors did to earn such a mysterious title.

Leo has always occupied the right atrium of my heart, which, incidentally, has started beating again, disturbingly fast. He was my best friend for twelve years—that is, if babies can have best friends. All our lives, his mom has worked in the small law office upstairs. Nieves and my mom used to share the cost of babysitters to watch Leo and me in the chocolate shop. When we were old enough, the babysitters stopped coming, but Leo and I kept hanging out together, making chocolate and experimenting with recipes, playing by the stream and climbing the cottonwood in the back courtyard.

Now he glances into the shopwindow, and for a terrifying second I think he's caught me staring. But no, it's so bright outside with the snow and sunshine, he's probably just looking at

his reflection. Lately, he's actually started caring what he looks like. Dark floppy hair half covering his eyes, cold-rosy cheeks, a creamy wool sweater, worn jeans. I want to look away, but I keep staring. It's weird watching him, knowing he can't see me, like a one-way mirror. And that's how it's felt all year.

Leo turns away to follow the others, who are staring at their phones while cutting across the street toward Donut Delite.

Donut Delite, the reason why El Corazón has been near empty for a year. Donut Delite moved in once the art gallery closed after a year of fires and floods and a terrible downswing in tourism. Donut Delite, with its enormous, fluorescent yellow banner advertising ninety-nine-cent donuts and hot chocolate. Never mind that their so-called fresh-baked donuts come in shipments of frozen dough, chock-full of preservatives and bursting with artificial flavor and color, assembled at some factory in China.

And their "hot chocolate"? Makes my soul shudder, and Mom's, too. Watery brown stuff too sweet with corn syrup and fattened with partially hydrogenated oils and whey products. Worst of all, they vent their ovens straight to Main Street. You can't walk within a block of the place without getting bombed by chemicals specially designed to make your mouth water. Atrocious.

There's a line in Donut Delite stretching out the door and down the icy sidewalk. Leo and his friends are shivering and stamping their feet but apparently they think it's worth the wait. Every once in a while Leo glances over at El Corazón. Does he feel guilty for betraying us?

I turn away, start wiping the counter, even though it's sparkling clean.

The bells on our door jingle, and I glance hopefully at the entrance. But it's just Mom, carrying grocery sacks of toilet paper and cleaners. She sets the bags behind the counter, unwraps her alpaca scarf, and sweeps her gaze around the shop. Takes in the emptiness.

It's nothing new. Business has been sluggish for so long that we don't talk about it anymore. We've cut way back on how much chocolate we produce; still, most of our truffles have ended up going to the homeless shelter the day before they expire.

"Hey, Coco," she says, nervously tightening her ponytail. Her hair is red and wavy and long, bordering on frizzy. She used to do elaborate inside-out French braids with little fringy curlicues, and weave in blooms from the flower shop next door. Now she's using a grubby terry cloth scrunchy.

"Hey, Mom." I feel my own hands mirroring her nervous hair-fiddling. My own hair is long and wavy, too, but it's caramel brown, the exact color of the unusually large freckles on my nose. I wear my hair swept partly back in a simple braid, and always have. Once I've found something that works, why change? I'm practical that way. Loyal. A creature of habit, Mom says. A hobbit, Leo used to say.

"How's it going, Coco bean?" There's something way too cheerful about her voice.

"*Más o menos,*" I say, twisting my braid, feeling guarded. I speak Spanish fluently because of the bilingual elementary I went to, but Mom just knows a few basic phrases.

“Listen, sweet bean, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something.”

My insides freeze. No good can come of a conversation that begins with false cheer. “About what?” I ask warily.

She pauses, tugs off her fleece jacket, sucks in a long breath. “About El Corazón, honey.” And from her voice, I can guess what she’s about to say. The top left quadrant of my heart suddenly aches, as if a window has opened, letting an icy wind shoot inside.

Quickly, I mumble, “I can’t talk now,” and rush to the back office and lock the door. But no, I can’t stay here; any minute now, she’ll knock and I’ll have to answer. I shuffle through the dresser beside the pullout couch and grab my red swimsuit. I tear off my clothes, drop them in a heap on the floor, and put on my swimsuit. I can’t find my robe or flip-flops, so I just fling open the office door, and before she can say anything else, I rush down the hall and out the back door.

Barefoot, I step into the snow.

A shock of cold on my toes. It zips straight to the hole in my chest. Holes, really. It’s not just the left atrium that’s abandoned. It’s Leo’s spot, too, in the right atrium. He’s barely spoken a word to me all year, ever since seventh grade started.

And while I’m spilling my guts, I’ll admit that the right ventricle—my mother’s spot—is pretty drafty, too. For the past year, she’s been like a robot, running the chocolate shop with pretend joy, but her batteries have been draining, and any day now, she might just stop.

Goose bumps pop up over my bare skin. I hug my arms tightly, cradling my bony elbows in my palms. I’m proof that

chocolate doesn't make you fat; at least high-quality chocolate like ours doesn't. I ingest about a pound a day, and still, my body is all sharp, awkward angles. My legs and arms are basically twigs. When girls moan *OMG-I-wish-I-was-naturally-skinny*, trust me, this isn't what they have in mind.

With the red swimsuit as my only insulation, I head deeper into the snow to try to warm my flesh and bones and heart. My heart that feels like our nearly deserted truffle freezer.