

Lily Dodge

Romance | 1st person | Past Tense | Multiple POV | 2k words

LUCAS CAIRN

It had been a rough day. My firm was working to close a major investment deal, and I had spent the entire afternoon helping one of our older partners sift through three years' worth of financial paperwork related to the deal.

Don't get me wrong - I'm usually happy for a chance to help out Mr. Nathaniel Watson, the "Watson" of Watson & Laramie Financial Services. I've been working at W&L for years now, and I'd like to make partner soon, which means making a good impression on the big bosses.

But on that particular day, my patience was well and truly spent. I'd been stuck in meetings all morning about some political changes happening in New York City, thanks to our new mayor, Bobby Randall. He wanted to upend decades of regulations and institute new policies that would make things very difficult for bankers like us at M&L, so no one was in a good mood to begin with.

Cap the day with a mountain of paperwork that brought me back to my time as an intern doing miserable grunt work, and I was ready for a drink.

I headed out through the lobby of the Wall Street building that housed the W&L offices, nodding at the doorman and grabbing my umbrella from the silver bin near the front doors. It wasn't raining yet, but the skies looked pretty gray, and given the way my day was going, I didn't want to take the risk.

I made my way past the marble columns and art deco entryways of the other banks. I knew exactly where I was headed: Cash On Hand, a swanky bar frequented by the wealthy folks who make their home on and around Wall Street.

Cash On Hand was warm inside, its atmosphere cozy yet chic. I handed my coat and umbrella to the host and made my way to the bar. It was a cocktail sort of day, I thought, so I ordered their black cherry Negroni and settled in to nurse a well earned drink.

Seated at the bar, I finally took a deep breath, letting the worries and frustrations of the day take a back seat in my mind. In one corner of the bar, a pianist was playing jazzy covers of pop songs, and I smiled to myself as I recognized the Taylor Swift piece currently floating through the air.

Cash On Hand is a great spot for people watching, and without any rowdy friends to distract me, I could take in the entire scene. There were a handful of cryptocurrency

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high rollers, underdressed for a bar like this one, doing shots at the other end of the bar. At a table near me, some older investors I recognized from Kerrigan & Sons were squabbling over the appetizer menu.

“They’ll end up ordering the pepper squid,” the bartender said, rolling his eyes as he wiped down a glass. “They always argue over what to get, then get the exact same thing every time.”

“Is it any good?” I asked.

The bartender shrugged. “Those guys seem to like it.”

I was about to ask if he thought I should order myself a small plate when my attention was pulled away by the sound of pouring rain outside. Sure enough, it had begun to pour, and now that someone had opened the bar’s heavy wooden doors, we could all hear the roar of the weather.

The door closed behind the figure, dampening the noise, and I could see a young woman pulling off a soaked coat before smiling apologetically at the host who had to take the sodden garment from her.

She looked familiar, but I couldn’t place her. Based on her age, I’d guess that she was an intern, but I’d never seen her around W&L or any other nearby firms.

“Who is that?” I asked the bartender.

“That’s Melanie Randall,” he said matter-of-factly. “New mayor’s daughter.”

That’s where I knew her from! Her face had been on some of the campaign materials, the exact ones I’d spent the morning staring at as my colleagues and I tried to decipher what her father’s policies would mean for our livelihoods.

What was she doing in Cash On Hand? I wondered if she was aware that the bar was primarily frequented by the bankers and investors her dad was trying so hard to put out of business.

An idea struck me, then.

My bosses were very concerned about the impact the Randall mayorship would have on our business, and part of the problem was that no one knew exactly what the new

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mayor was planning. So far, he'd been vague enough about the changes he wanted to make that we were still scrambling at W&L to figure out what we needed to do to be ready once he actually announced the policies.

If, perhaps, I could get close to his daughter, I might be able to glean some details about Mayor Randall's upcoming proposals that would help us out.

And if we were the only firm to have that information, well, that would only help even more - especially when it came to me making partner.

She sat down at the bar a few seats away from me and started examining the cocktail menu. I slid over, ending up in the seat right beside her, and gave her my most charming smile.

"What do you like? I'm here all the time, I can give you a good recommendation."

I had so many plans in my head, plans to get some information out of her and take them back to the partners at Winston & Laramie, but they all melted completely out of my awareness when she looked up at me. Melanie Randall was absolutely gorgeous, with thick dark curls and sparkling green eyes behind classy, stylish silver-rimmed glasses.

"Sure," she said, putting down the menu and smiling at me. "What do you recommend?"

MELANIE RANDALL

My dad would have killed me if he knew I was spending the evening at Cash On Hand, a fancy bar in the heart of Wall Street. He wanted to clean up the financial district and change the way banking was done in New York City, and he certainly didn't enjoy rubbing shoulders with the men and women who saw him as an adversary.

But some of my friends recommended the place, especially since I like a good cocktail, and the mayoral offices weren't actually that far away. So I'd slipped away after yet another family photoshoot to seek out the forbidden treasures on Wall Street.

Inside, it seemed like just another high end bar, with a crisply dressed bartender mixing cocktails and a bunch of banker types sitting around wooden tables. But I wasn't here for the atmosphere - I was here for a drink.

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I found a spot at the bar and picked up the leather-bound cocktail menu, trying to remember what my friends had suggested I get. Before I could even get through the first page, someone sidled up next to me.

“What do you like? I’m here all the time, I can give you a good recommendation.”

I looked up and saw a man a little bit older than me, with sandy brown hair, blue eyes, and a strong, handsome nose. He was wearing a grey suit, and I guessed that he must work in the area.

“Sure,” I said, putting the cocktail menu down. “What do you recommend?”

“Well, what sorts of drinks do you like?”

“Anything with rum in it,” I told him, “possibly something herbal.”

He grinned, and I could see his perfectly straight teeth. “You’re in luck, then. They do a great rum and rosemary punch.”

“I’ll have that, then.” I hadn’t expected him to order for me, but suddenly he was leaning over the bar, asking the bartender for a rum and rosemary cocktail.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said, blushing a bit. “I can pay for my own drinks.”

He laughed, sipping the last of his own drink - something with cherries in it. “You must be new around here. If the old timers at Cash On Hand saw me letting a pretty girl buy her own drinks, I’d never be welcomed back.”

I felt my blush deepen. “I’m Melanie,” I said, hoping to change the subject a bit.

“Lucas,” the man said, holding out his hand to shake mine. His hand was warm, his grip firm without being too much.

“Do you work around here?”

“Guilty as charged.” Lucas put his hands up as if he were under arrest. “Are you also a Wall Street pigeon?”

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I knew my dad and his friends sometimes referred to the bankers as pigeons - birds that weren't originally native to the city, but which had taken over and flourished on the New York streets. But I was surprised to discover that they talked about themselves that way.

"No," I said. "More like...a school sparrow, I guess? I just graduated from NYU."

The bartender brought us our drinks, and Lucas lifted his for a toast. "To pigeons and sparrows," he said, clinking his glass against mine.

I took a sip, and was delighted to find that the cocktail was complex and unique, but still very drinkable. "This is delicious! Thanks for the recommendation."

"If you're amenable to another recommendation," Lucas said, leaning in close, "I happen to know that these barstools are the least comfortable place to sit in the whole bar. There's a booth over there with plush leather seats, if you'd prefer."

The drink was so good that I knew I had to take his word for it. I hopped off my seat and followed Lucas to a cozy booth in the far corner of the bar. Rather than sit across from me, he slid in beside me, setting his rum punch on a coaster right next to mine.

"I must admit," he murmured, tapping his fingers on the lacquered wood of the table, "my recommendation was only partly about comfortable seating."

"Oh?" I had a fairly good guess about where he was going with this, but I wanted to let him continue. "And what else are these booths good for?"

"They're more private." Lucas leaned in close, resting one hand over mine. I could smell his cologne, subtle and fresh, like cedar wood. "And I had hoped to entice you into more than a drink."

"What other indulgences would you recommend?" We were so close that I only had to speak in a whisper for Lucas to hear me.

"If you're amenable, Miss Melanie, I would quite like to kiss you."

I was absolutely amenable. In answer, I turned my head toward Lucas, brushing my cheek against his jaw before our lips met.

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He tasted like whiskey and cherry, and I wanted more, more, *more*. I ran my tongue over his lower lip, letting the bright herbal notes of my drink mingle with the heavier tones of his whiskey.

I felt a gentle hand on my waist, the soft pad of Lucas's thumb teasing at the hem of my shirt. I leaned into the touch, and at that signal, he held me close, stroking circles over my skin with warm, strong fingers. It sent electric tingles up my body and I let out a soft little moan and could feel Lucas smile in response, his mouth still pressed up against mine.

"You are gorgeous," he mumbled, pulling back just enough to kiss my jawline. Turning my head gently, he began nibbling at my ears, his breath tickling my neck.

"You too," I responded, breathless, nearly squirming under his touch. It felt so good, his hands under my shirt, his lips on mine. I reached up and ran a hand through his dirty blonde hair, loving the way he groaned as I lightly drew my nails over the back of his neck.

"I have one final recommendation," Lucas said, his voice low and sweet in my ear.

"What do you suggest?"

"My apartment."

My breath caught in my chest at the idea of it - going home with this daring, charming, incredibly attractive man. "Let's go."