



an *SRN* free read

*Rainy Days  
and Cafes*



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Rainy Days and Cafés

by

Diana Castilleja

Jackie filled her coffee cup, and watched Daniel toss on his jacket. She smiled. It was hard not to. She still loved him after thirty years of marriage, and he was still as handsome as he had been when they'd met in college. He had been a business major, and she'd been studying music. She taught in the school district for a long time but had retired to do private lessons. Her family had been more important to her, and she'd never regretted staying home.

Lately though... The smile wavered. She sighed, sipping her coffee to hide it.

Daniel looked up, pulling his tie down, checking to see if it was straight in the cabinet glass reflection. As a Senior CEO, he prided himself on looking the part. But she knew that those he worked with would never believe he wasn't all ties and cufflinks all the time. He cut a definite masculine, powerful wall in his business suits. Her cup didn't move, fearing he'd see her smirking.

"What's the matter?" he asked, tugging one last time on his sleeves. "You sigh, you smirk, and you think I can't see it." He teased her with a gleam in his eyes, soft gray-green that always warmed when he looked at her.

"It's nothing." *It's Valentine's Day, and I feel old*, she finally admitted, if only to herself. "It's suppose to rain today," she said, avoiding telling him the truth. "Rainy days always make me feel out of sorts."

He leaned over and brushed a kiss to her cheek. "Well, don't let it bother you too much. Oh, I've got a full meeting schedule today. I'll probably be late."

Disappointment made her blink. Well, that was his job and she knew it happened. This was just another day in the week to him and she shouldn't mope about it. But just the same, she'd hoped. He palmed his briefcase and she remembered the present she had put in it. A little pre-anniversary something, since it was only a few weeks away. Damn it all. She shouldn't be falling to pieces because he can't do anything on Valentine's Day. It wasn't the first time he'd had responsibility come first. But their upcoming anniversary seemed to punctuate just how dull things had gotten. How old and boring she felt. Mid-life crisis, here I come, she thought wryly.

"I have to go," he murmured, already thinking ahead to his day at the corporate offices. "I'll give you a call. Let you know about dinner. I am sorry." He bent down and suddenly her heart thudded against her ribs with anticipation as his lips found hers. Old or not, his kiss still made her feel like a schoolgirl. His fingers were gentle tracing her chin just before he let her go. It had always been his way, like he was branding her, or savoring her. "I love you," he whispered before turning and sauntering out of the kitchen.

"Arrogant so-and-so," she muttered, knowing full well he knew what he did to her.

"I heard that." His voice reached her just before the front door of their penthouse apartment closed. She shook her head, grinning.

She didn't have any lessons today, and hadn't scheduled any that night, leaving it open for any spontaneity. Now she didn't know what to do with herself knowing that she'd be alone all day.

She straightened the kitchen, and put away the remains of their breakfast. And then there was nothing left to do. Laundry? Check. Groceries? Check, at least for now. She sighed. *Rut*. It haunted her.

By noon she'd dawdled and piddled until she couldn't take it anymore. She called her son.

"Hi, Mom," Jason said when he answered his cell phone. "Happy Valentine's."

She smiled. Darn him anyway. Saw right through her. "Hi honey. Thank you, you too. How's work?" She tried to play it off but heard it in his voice that acting was something she should avoid.

"Fine. Just the usual. Papers, taxes, and numbers," he groaned with a light chuckle. "No students today?"

"No." But they sure would've kept her occupied. "I have three in the evenings after school, but not today." She knew she sounded wishful. She just hoped she didn't sound disappointed on top of it. "I know! What are you doing tonight?"

"I can't Mom, I'm sorry. I'm taking Gwen out."

"No, I shouldn't have... I mean, have expected..."

Jason's voice was soothing. "It's okay Mom. Dad told me he'd been swamped lately."

She cleared her throat. "Honey? You've always been straight with me."

"Well as straight as any boy can be to his mom," he joked. "You did let me slide when I got busted for trying to steal the neighbor's motorcycle when we lived in the 'burbs."

"And we promised you'd never mention it again," she said sternly.

He coughed. "Mention what?"

She swallowed her laughter, then took the plunge. "Jason? Do you think I'm boring?"

"Of course not!" he immediately stated. She wanted to believe his firm tone, but...

"And you're not just saying that because I'm now AARP eligible, are you?"

"No Mom. You have a very full life. I think you just need to see it from the outside, and look in."

"Do you have to be so right, and be my son?" She sat down on the kitchen chair. The spray of flowers in the middle were delicate and full of spring scents. Daniel made sure she had a fresh bunch a couple of times a week. The vase dared to wink in from the overhead lights. "I feel so old, and...boring."

"You're in your prime, but I'll never take old or boring." She heard him acknowledge someone on his end. "Sorry, Mom. Duty calls."

"Okay, honey. Have fun tonight."

"Thanks." And he ended the call.

She looked out the window and the clouds that had been hanging in her view suddenly looked much grayer and gloomy.

\* \* \* \*

She wrote out some pages of music for her students during the afternoon, playing as a distraction against the weather and her pending lonely evening. Lean Cuisine and me she hummed, writing then erasing when her mind kept taking off for tangents unknown.

Finally she tossed the pencil down and just played, letting her mind wander, and remember.

Daniel when they'd been in college and he'd been the sexiest thing on legs. His smile. Those smoky eyes of his. The passion.

They still had that, if not as often or as intensely, so she knew she should be grateful. And she knew at their ages and for the duration of their relationship that they weren't like many who'd loved and lost, or who'd given up.

Music flowed into the apartment, nostalgic notes climbing high and flitting along the ceiling as she played.

She *was* getting older. That was inevitable, but she wasn't old. She had her friends, the church choir she played for a couple times a week, polishing their Sunday services with exceptional expertise. There were her students. Jason was right. She just needed to "see" it from the outside.

The music rose in a happier crescendo, her fingers flying and picking over the keys.

*But what about the rut*, that little voice asked again. She winced when she missed her mark.

Well, if she wasn't dead, and the last time she looked she wasn't, she could do something about it. She showered and did her hair, wanting to look good for him at the very least when he came home after a long day of dealing with cooperate headaches.

Daniel still hadn't called to say he'd uncovered her Valentine's gift to him by the time she'd finished. He must have been really busy. Her surprise wasn't much, just a signed baseball card she knew he would covet if he had known it existed. She found it on eBay and knew she probably paid more than she needed to, but she had it authenticated and that was all she needed. Daniel's secret passion since college had been baseball. It was funny how the world seemed to disappear for him from April until October. But she cheered with him, and lamented when his team didn't do so well. She knew the dates well, because he watched the news reports for the first team check-ins starting right after their anniversary.

Preparing to face a quiet dinner, she studied the contents of the freezer, but nothing appealed to her.

She jumped a little when the phone rang, destroying the soothing tones of the classical music she'd turned on after her shower.

She answered, already half-sensing what was coming. Why was it getting to her so bad this year? Frustration almost made her growl in her throat, but she swallowed it before it became real.

"Hi honey. I'm sorry, I'm still working, and I'll be here a little longer yet. I need a favor though. I think I left my wallet at the Café. Would you mind going and see if they have it. I haven't had a chance to call. If I did, I'm an idiot."

"No, not an idiot. Just distracted. Yes, I'll go."

"Thank you." And he ended the call. Not even an 'I love you' this time. She sighed and grabbed her umbrella and her overcoat. No sense in driving, it was only a few blocks away, and so what if it rained? She'd be home again and likely in bed before Daniel got home by the sounds of things.

And of course, not five minutes from the apartment building's gilded doors, it started to mist. "Happy Valentine's Day to me," she muttered.

The warm scents of hot apple pie and baked breads made her mouth water when she opened the door, shaking her umbrella to put in the bin. The walk must have revived her appetite, but she'd only brought her keys and her ID. Oh well.

She approached the counter and asked for the manager. "Hi, Sal. Did Daniel leave his wallet here today?"

He gave her nod. "He left something." He poked under the counter and handed her an envelope. She took it, but asked with her brow in a quizzical twist, "Just this? No wallet?"

"No, no wallet." He gave her a wink then turned and started on an order. She moved to the side and looked at the envelope. It had her name on it in Daniel's bold sweeping writing. What was going on? Fear made her mouth dry. Was he asking for a divorce?

Her hands trembled when she slid the envelope open and pulled out the one sheet of paper.

*My dearest love,*

*Happy Valentine's Day. I know you thought I'd forgotten, but I haven't. I wanted today to be special, and it wasn't easy. How can I surprise the woman who knows me, my every thought and want, even when I don't know it myself? The baseball card was exceptional. Saying that, you have a good idea of when I wrote this. I didn't lose my wallet, I lost something larger. I lost my heart to the most beautiful woman I've ever known. And I hope you still know it's yours. You are not old, nor boring. Yes, our son is a tattletale.* Her lips smirked even as the dampness in her eyes grew to cloud her vision and lay on her lashes.

*I do have a surprise for you, and if you look up, you will see it.*

*Love*

*Daniel*

Stunned, she looked up and found him the doorway, his hair damp from the falling mist. Tears clouded her eyes, but there he stood, and the déjà vu was almost instant. The night he'd asked her to marry in this same Café not long after he'd started working for the company he now headed. It was one of the reasons after Jason had

moved out for college they'd moved into the inner city. He could walk to work and their favorite Café was only a few minutes away.

She lifted a hand to her eyes and tried to blink the tears away. He walked up to her, and with his hands cradling her face he simply kissed her. She didn't care that they were in the middle of the eatery, or that pretty much everyone had stopped to watch.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he whispered when he finally released her. She felt weak in the knees and clutched the lapels of his coat with tight hands. Her head was swimming.

"Happy Valentine's Day. I love my surprise." And she did. Daniel was romantic, but this was in his words "exceptional".

"That wasn't it."

She tilted to look at him. "It wasn't?" Expectation hung in the air and someone was shushed out of her line of sight.

He shook his head and pulled out two ticket packets. She spotted the cruise ship logo and felt confused.

"This is your present, but..." He paused for effect. And got down on one knee. Looking for a place to set the packets, a nearby customer quickly laid out a palm, avidly watching the exchange with a wondrous smile. Daniel handed them over with a wink. Lifting his face to her, he said, "I've spent thirty years with the most wonderful woman I've ever known, and I'm hoping she'd be willing to spend the next thirty with me. Jackie, will you marry me? Again?"

"You want to renew?" Tears fell down her cheeks and he nodded. "Yes!" she cried, unable to care when he rose and kissed her breathless again amid all the people, who cheered and whistled.

He took back the tickets and showed them to her later over a champagne toast supplied by Sal. "It was hard to keep this secret for so long. I've been working on it for six months. And believe me, Jason had to be sworn to secrecy." He opened to the itinerary. "It's three weeks of unadulterated fun in the sun." He leaned in closer, and whispered, "And hot sex."

She gagged on her champagne, then managed to get it down, the hard bubble in her chest telling her just how long it took.

“Daniel!” she cried, hoping like hell no one heard him say that.

“No, I owe you an apology. I’ve been working hard this year because I’m training my replacement. I know you knew I’m semi-retiring after this year but I didn’t realize that my longer hours were turning into a problem with you, and I’m sorry.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s why you’ve been working so much.” She put a hand on his sleeve. “You should’ve told me.”

“Well...” He tapped the packets. “I have a hot woman who’s been very patient with me, and now I get to marry her. Again. I can’t wait for our anniversary.”

“Anniversary?” This time she winced when she was too loud, seeing people glance in her direction. She dropped her voice again. “As in next month?”

“To the day. It’s already set up.”

“But...But—” He pressed a finger to her lips.

“You can think about it tomorrow. Right now, I want to go home and make you cry my name.” He leaned over and nibbled at her neck and her lashes fluttered. His hand massaged her thigh through her pants and his tongue traced the nerves beneath her skin. And for the first time in a long while, she forgot that she wasn’t twenty-three anymore, that she had a full grown son, or that time had no master. In that moment, she was in love.

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