

History Repeats Itself by Cathy McDavid

Rain hammered against the office window with such force the pane shook. Rochelle turned her head sideways, rested her chin in her hand, and stared wistfully outside at the dark, dreary afternoon sky. She soon forgot all about the monthly budget reports and her four o'clock deadline. Instead, she slipped into a cozy daydream about being home and curled up in front of a crackling fire with a cup of cocoa and the newspaper. No, a glass of wine and a fashion magazine. No, no, a steaming mug of Irish coffee and an even steamier best seller.

Mmmmm.

A shrill buzz from the intercom snapped her back to reality.

"Yes?"

"Maxine Jenkins on line two."

"Thank you." Rochelle tucked the phone between her shoulder and ear. "Hey, Cuz. You're a welcome distraction."

"Tough day?"

"Trying to finalize some reports, but I can't stay focused. Must be this foul weather. It's got me feeling lazier than you on a Saturday morning."

"Ooh, that's bad. So tell me, girl, got any plans for tonight?" Maxine's voice bubbled with excitement.

"Oh, yeah. A hot date with a good book."

"How about a date with a *man*?"

"Uh, oh." Rochelle dropped her papers, leaned back in her chair and crossed one long leg over the other.

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

"Remember I told you Lenny's buddy was staying with us until his new house is ready? Well, he's getting tired of being odd man out. I was thinking it would be so cool if the four of us went to dinner together."

Rochelle groaned into the receiver.

"Come on. You've hardly dated since well, it's been ages any how."

There was a lengthy pause during which Rochelle tapped out a sharp rhythm on the desk top with her pencil. Her eyebrows drew together in an impatient scowl as she compressed her lips

into a thin line. How come everybody was always acting like she might burst into tears at the very mention of *his* name? They'd split up months ago and she was long over him.

But then again, maybe she was partially to blame. It was true she rarely dated, and that no doubt gave people the wrong impression. Well, maybe the time had come to change their way of thinking.

"So, I'm listening."

"Oh, he's a fine one, girl. Carl Davis is his name, and he looks like a beefed up, younger version of Denzel Washington. Only not so intense. More cuddly like. He's all the time making me laugh. Him and Lenny go way back.

"Does he have a job?"

"A good one. Football coach at Cartright High School."

"Ugh! You know how I hate contact sports."

"So he's not perfect. Won't kill you to go on one measly date. Besides, remember what happened to Granny Fae?"

"This isn't the same thing. But I'll go just so you can't be holding it over my head the rest of my days.

And to prove a point, Rochelle thought to herself. They agreed on when and where to meet. Rochelle waited a full three seconds after hanging up the phone before questioning the wisdom of her decision.

* * *

The constant thinking of the wipers grated on Rochelle's nerves. She could barely see through the sheets of rain smearing her windshield as she struggled to safely guide her vehicle through rush hour traffic. She chided herself for the tenth time in as many minutes for ever agreeing to this ridiculous scheme.

Granny Fae, ha! It was just like Maxine to dredge up that old bit of family history. She and her cousin had heard the tale at least a hundred times from their grandmother while growing up. Granny was quite proud of the way she had first met her man.

The highest rainfall for the year had been recorded on the day Faith Cummings arrived in town. She'd come to stay with her sister and brother-in-law for a time and help out with their new twin babies. Faith was not yet nineteen-years-old and not quite five feet tall.

As soon as the bus had dropped her off in front of the drug store, Faith ventured out in search of a public phone. She spied one on the opposite end of the street and stepped off the curb without

looking first. Her foot plunged straight into a ditch brimming with filthy, brown water. Losing her balance, she toppled head first into the ditch.

From out of nowhere, a giant of a man appeared. He'd swept Faith into his arms, pulled her from the deep, muddy water, and gently set her down on the walk way. Stunned and out of breath, she lifted the brim of her hat, and looked into the face of her gallant rescuer.

Granny Fae would always get a dreamy expression at this point in the story and say, "I tell you child, he was something else. When I saw the laughter shining in those devilish black eyes of his, I knew then and there my life weren't never gonna be the same again. Your Grandpa proposed to me the following spring." Rochelle sighed with relief when she spotted the restaurant entrance, then scoffed in disgust. As if some guy would appear out of nowhere and sweep her into his arms. For one thing, she was nose to nose with most of them, having inherited Grandpa's height. Naturally, she couldn't find a close space and had to park in the last row.

She slammed her door shut and trotted between the rows of cars. She didn't notice a huge puddle directly in her path until it was too late. As chilly water penetrated her suede pumps, she jerked back and yelped like a frightened pup, managing to snag her pantyhose on a nearby truck bumper in the process.

After examining the damage, Rochelle promptly decided she'd had enough, and would telephone Maxine on her cell phone and apologize for standing them up.

Suddenly, from out of the swirling mist, a hulking figure emerged and plowed directly through the middle of the puddle. Water exploded in the air, instantly soaking Rochelle to the skin. She gasped and recoiled from the shock, promptly losing her balance and teetering on one foot. With no warning whatsoever, the man reached out and grabbed her waist, lifted her up, and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of grain. His hands scooted up her skirt and settled on the back of her thighs.

Rochelle let out a choked scream.

"Hold tight, I'll get you inside."

"I don't want to go inside!" Rochelle's protest was muffled by the man's slicker as it pressed into her face and scraped off every trace of makeup. Her red leather purse slipped through her fingers. Luckily, she caught the end of the strap before it dropped onto the ground. Unluckily, the small bag was dragged through the murky water like a hydroplane.

Rochelle was more angry than frightened. She kicked out and pummeled his back with clenched fists. One of her shoes went sailing through the air. Her abductor knelt down and retrieved it, cupping her backside with his other hand as he did.

"Put me down. *Put me down now . . . you . . . idiot!*"

He abruptly dumped her on the sidewalk at the front entrance.

A half dozen heads swivelled on rubber necks in time to see Rochelle trip on her bare toe and pitch forward into the man's waiting arms. He caught her at the shoulders and straightened her up.

"There you go, honey. You're fine now."

"I am not find, and don't call me honey."

Patting her head, she determined at least three thick coils of hair had escaped their meticulous arrangement. Stains soiled her skirt, which she attempted to straighten, and a button was missing from her jacket. She fumed at the man, angry as a wet kitten.

He appeared not to notice. His eyes glowed with appreciation as his mouth spread in a lazy grin.

"Who gave you the right to pick me up and drag me here against my will?" she demanded. "I have a mind to call the police this minute."

"Sorry. Looked to me like you needed some help." He handed over her shoe and dropped his gaze, and tried to appear appropriately sheepish.

Rochelle didn't buy his act for one minute. "The caveman routine went out a long time ago, buster." She lifted her foot and awkwardly replaced her shoe. "What gives guys the idea that if they manhandle a woman she'll—"

He was spared the remainder of Rochelle's lecture by the timely appearance of Maxine and Lenny.

"Are you okay, Rochelle?", Maxi inquired as she laid a reassuring hand on her cousin's arm. Then she turned on the man like a ferocious mother grizzly. "What have you done to her, Carl?"

"Nothing," Carl said, defending himself. "There was this big ol' puddle in the parking lot and she couldn't get around it. I was doing the boy scout thing. She don't have to get so fired up about it, you know."

"You're my date?" Rochelle shook her head in denial. "I don't believe it."

"And that's so bad?" Carl asked, apparently insulted.

"You stuck your mitts up my dress and acquainted yourself with my underwear."

"Yeah, I did." Carl gave Rochelle a playful wink.

She sucked in air through gritted teeth. "Of all the nerve."

Lenny slapped him on the back. "No fooling, man. What was it like?"

"Don't you dare answer him." Maxine jabbed Lenny's ribs with her elbow. "Since the show's over, how about we all get inside before we freeze to death?"

"I'm not going."

"Say, what!"

Rochelle faced her cousin. "I'd already changed my mind before Alli Oop here carted me off. I'm sopping wet, freezing cold, and I look like crud. I only agreed to this stupid idea to get you off my back." Slowly her features softened. "Look, I'll call you tomorrow."

Carl cut in front of Rochelle. She had to lift her chin several notches in order to meet his fiery gaze, something she wasn't accustomed to doing. "Your cousin went through a lot of trouble to get us together. I'm sorry about, uh, *manhandling* you like I did, but let's not ruin the entire evening. You gotta be hungry and cold." He spoke in a soft, silky voice that caressed her chilled skin and heated her stiff bones.

Rochelle refused to be swayed by his tempting words. "Sorry Carl, you're not my type and there's no sense in pretending otherwise."

Carl waved his hand at Lenny and Maxi, shoosing them away. "You two go on in, I'll see if I can talk some sense into the girl."

"Look, Carl. If she don't want to go out with you, then—"

"That'll do, baby." Lenny hustled a reluctant Maxine through the door. "Leave 'em be like the man asked."

Rochelle stalked off towards the parking lot with Carl glued to her heels. It had stopped raining, but the air was stinging cold.

"Aw, honey, what gives? It was a tiny misunderstanding is all."

"I told you, don't call me honey."

"I'm not so bad, really. This one little gal said I ..." Carl chuckled when Rochelle shot him a poisoned look. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you about her just yet."

"Go home, Carl." Rochelle tried to imagine herself sinking beneath the suds of a warm, scented bath.

"Coach Davis, is that you?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Cooper! Nice to see you." Carl extended his hand to the approaching couple. "How's Bobby doing these days?"

Rochelle wanted to leave but the Coopers blocked her way. Rather than be rude, she stood next to Carl, shivering like a leaf, hugging herself, and working up a serious head of steam. Cut into her bath time, would he!

Mrs. Cooper couldn't contain her enthusiasm. "He's great, Coach Davis, thanks to you. You gave us back our son and we'll always be grateful."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. He only needed a push in the right direction."

"But it's true. He'd fallen in with the wrong crowd and was doing terrible things. We didn't know what to do. You changed his attitude, and turned his life around."

"I always knew he was a good kid deep down. Is he still playing ball?"

"You bet," Mr. Cooper answered. "Starting right guard. He graduates next semester with a degree in communications. He still talks about you all the time. You gave him the confidence he needed to make something of himself."

"Watch it, you're swelling my head, and it's plenty big already."

Rochelle could attest to that, but refrained from commenting.

"We mean every word of it." Mrs. Cooper turned to Rochelle, and she saw the gratitude shining in the woman's face. "You have a wonderful man here. I've never met anyone who cared more about young people."

"Let's get going, Virginia," her husband said. "They're obviously on their way home and it's cold as blue blazes. Nice seeing you, Coach Davis."

"Same here. Tell Bobby hello for me."

When they were alone again, Rochelle felt confused and uncertain. She'd been so sure Carl was a first class jerk. Now it seems he was practically a hero, at least in the Coopers's eyes.

"They're nice folks. You were good to their boy."

Carl nonchalantly shrugged his broad shoulders, "No big deal. All part of the job."

"I gotta go."

"Sure I can't talk you into staying?"

"Sorry."

Rochelle had traveled only a few feet when she stepped into the enormous puddle she'd forgotten was there. She jumped at the icy contact, landing unexpectedly against Carl's chest.

In one easy move, he looped an arm about her waist and hooked the other one behind her knees. He lifted her up, snuggled her against his warm body, and ferried her across the puddle.

"Are you crazy?"

"Crazy about you."

No man had picked up Rochelle and carried her like this since she was a little girl. After all, she was hardly the frail, helpless type. She laughed, despite her determination to be angry. When they reached her car, Carl continued to cradle her in his arms.

"Carl?"

"Yeah?" He nuzzled her temple with his cheek.

"You can put me down."

"Not until you agree to go out with me."

"I told you before, it won't work."

"How do you know that?" He released her then, letting her slide down the entire length of him before pinning her against the car door.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" she asked, the breath leaving her body in a soft whoosh.

He bent his head, bringing his lips close to hers. "Convincing you."

Suddenly lightheaded, Rochelle cradled his cheeks in her palms and searched his face in the pale moonlight. When she saw the laughter shining in his devilish black eyes, she knew then and there, her life would never be the same again.

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