

My Grumpy Valentine
by S.A. Payne

Snippet!

Get a sneak peak into Ian and his love of the Valentine's day holiday

My Grumpy Valentine

The phone rang and Ian fumbled for it where it had fallen to the floor the last time he'd gotten up to get more coffee.

"What?" He snapped.

The phone clicked and the line went dead. It was starting to creep him out, that was the fourth time that day that someone had called and hung up. Normally he didn't get four calls in a week. He reached to shake out another cigarette but the box was empty.

"Shit." The carton was empty too. He was pushing a deadline and chain smoking and he hadn't bothered to go out for days. The small apartment was pretty much devoid of food, liquor and smokes and that would mean he'd have to go out. The food and booze could be overlooked but the smokes? Well that was essential.

There was no way he was taking a shower and going out with wet hair and he was feeling too lazy to blow dry it. It was getting longish again and he'd have to go get it trimmed before someone jumped him walking home at night thinking he was an overly pretty woman, again. He settled for pulling it back into a pony tail, the pale blonde length easily bunched up and tucked under his coat. That settled the slightly longish look and the lack of a shower in the last day or so. He didn't even care that he needed a shave, normally the slight stubble annoyed him and he would rather be caught dead than out in public with it.

There was a small grocery store at the far end of his street and he could walk there, get beer and cigarettes and back before the February cold froze him too much. It had snowed the night before and now everything was frosty white tinged in dirty brown colors. It seemed fitting and he pulled his coat around his chest and hurried up the steps to the street level.

Phil didn't understand his choice of apartments. He was making money now, he could afford a better place but Ian liked the small basement apartment. It suited him that there was only one small window to leak in daylight and that he could sit out on the steps that lead up to the sidewalk and watch the stars without anyone noticing him. Besides, it wasn't like he needed much space and really the small set of rooms suited him.

Phil just took any chance she could find to fuss at him. She claimed it was what agents were supposed to do but he was pretty sure she made it a personal hobby to annoy him. Some how fuck off and leave me alone never really sunk in with her. It would be touching and sweet if she wasn't making a butt load of money off his book sales. He was a product and no matter how she may actually care about him, he was a product first.

Red balloons danced on pink strings where they were tied to a doorknob of one of the townhouses he huffed past. A surprise waiting for some loved one upon their return from work and a reminder that he hated fucking Valentine's day. He made it a point not to leave the house until the fifteenth. People were too perky and it made him want to puke.

Even the red paper cut out hearts taped to the store's door and twirling from string from the ceiling made him frown. He snagged a basket from the stack, sneering because the thing had the misfortune to be red plastic and looked too cheerful, and made his way into the store. Strawberry poparts, bread, juice, more coffee he was going through an ungodly amount of coffee, a small pack of raw chicken and a handful of other small simple things got quickly and almost randomly pulled from shelves. He'd have to cook tonight, he hadn't eaten in a day and if he ordered in that would mean he'd have to see someone.

Worse, if his luck didn't hold out it would be one of the delivery boys he'd misbehaved with. It wasn't fair, the Chinese take out place had excellent food and really hot delivery guys and he'd been lonely and horny one night and things had happened. Not that he didn't mind offering the boy the extra tip, he just wasn't up for it tonight. And really, the pizza boy wasn't much better, he had a one in four chance or so of getting the cute college boy, all clean fresh faced and bright eyed full of hope for his future that Ian just needed to be rough with. Odds would be that he'd get one of them and he just wasn't in the mood. He tossed some of the marked down chocolate into his basket too and snagged a cardboard cube case of beer before going to the counter.

"Pack of reds and a cartoon too, box not soft side." He muttered and dug out his id and credit card. It didn't matter how many times he came here, they always carded him and the older woman that tossed his carton into the bag and handed him the pack studied the ID as if she knew it was fake, as if he couldn't be in his late twenties.

Well, it was fake, or at least the name, Erik Wilde, was but the ID was legit. It was a small repayment for services rendered, the new identity and name. He didn't even feel a little touch of panic when someone studied the photo of him, his hair shorter and not smiling, looking to see if it was false. An identity was such a fragile thing, only three people would know his was fake and of them only two were human.

The woman snorted a little but handed his ID back and let him pay without further harassment. Ian gathered his bag and beer and fumbled with getting the pack open as he left the store. Who needed candy hearts when there was nicotine? He sparked his lighter and drew the smoke into his lungs. Sooner or later he should quit, if only so he didn't have to go out and buy the damned things so often.

Trouble was he liked smoking and he happily finished his cigarette on the cold walk home. His mood had gone from bad to worse as he started to shiver and saw someone across the street getting flowers delivered.

"Fucking Valentine's day..." he muttered.

His phone was ringing as he stomped snow from his shoes and came inside. "Hello?"

The line clicked off again.

"Fuckers." Only a handful of people knew his number and none of them would crank call him. He hung up and tossed the phone onto his sofa.

It didn't take long to get what little groceries he'd bought put away. His kitchen was so small he couldn't have the oven and refrigerator doors open at the same time. So long as the fridge keep beer cold and the oven baked pizza he was happy.

The phone rang again and he slammed the fridge door shut. "Fuckers!" He hurried across the room to snatch the phone up from where he'd tossed it and clicked it on. "Look you sick son of a bitch if you're going to keep calling you can at least fucking heavy breath so I can fucking get off too!"

"Well now, honey if you want to have phone sex, I like my men a little less light in the loafers." Phil's teasing voice chuckled back.

"God, Phil it's not funny."

"You're the one that cussed me out."

"You haven't been calling me?" He pulled the band from his hair and shook it loose.

"Not until just now, what's going on?"

"Some asshole keeps calling and hanging up. It's really starting to piss me off."

"One of your boyfriends?"

He snorted. "I don't have boyfriends, just people I fuck. What is it you want Phil, I'm pressed for time."

"Big date tonight?"

"No, I fucking hate Valentine's day. Made up bullshit lovely dovey crap." Besides, he didn't have boyfriends or relationships, just people that wanted to fuck him. It was a painful truth but a truth none the less. People that just wanted to fuck you didn't send flowers.

"You should go out."

"Deadline, remember? You're the slave driver that wanted the stupid bodice ripper next week."

"Hey, your romances sell well. You don't think it's Travis do you?"

"Huh?" He hadn't even thought about his ex-lover. "No, he wouldn't hang up, if he knew where I lived he'd fucking be at the door."

"Erik..."

"It's nothing, just some twit trying to get their girlfriend and misdialing. Did you just call to check on me?"

The line was silent for a moment, a long guilty moment.

"Phil!"

"It's Valentine's day and all romantic and shit and you're down there alone. I was worried and wanted to call and ask if you'd be my Valentine."

"You're a dork." But he was smiling a little bit which was more than he had all day. "I'm going to go, want to get this chapter done."

"Alright, alright but you call me if you get, you know, lonely."

"Are you home tonight."

"Hell no! Got a date with a man young enough to be my kid. I am such a whore."

Ian chuckled and knew Phil was lying, she dated older men, older wealthy men. "Have a good time."

"I will, and the cell will be with me, you call me, okay?"

Valentine's day was getting to him, he could smell flowers. "Yeah I'll call."

"And eat something for a change would ya!"

"Bitch bitch bitch." He hung up the phone and tossed it onto the sofa. As he walked back to the kitchen to get juice he smelled flowers again, sweet and strong and without a doubt not in his head.

He sniffed the air and sure enough flowers. He sniffed around and found it was stronger from the direction of his bedroom door. Carefully he sniffed his way toward the door and the scent grew stronger. There was nothing in his apartment should smell like flowers and he approached the door carefully. Bad things often looked pretty and smelled nicer right before they ripped the skin from flesh and did even worse.

Very carefully he turned the knob to the door and pushed it open. The room was dark, the way he'd left it and he flicked on the light. There was no monster hiding in his room, no lingering hint of one either but things weren't as he'd left them.

His bed was made, perfectly as he'd left it. The room was ordered and neat and nothing was out of place but the scent of flowers washed over him. The source was a bundle on his pillows, tumbling branches of purple and white lilacs with honeysuckle vines woven around and about them, knotting the lilac branches together in an elaborate pattern. The sweet scents of lilac and honeysuckle filled the room and Ian stepped into his bedroom frowning.

Someone had broken into his apartment and left without leaving a sign except for the bundle of flowers. More, it wasn't just the lock on his door, there was no trace to any of Ian's senses, dimmed as they were that anyone had been there. He walked over to the bed and carefully lifted the bundle. The tips of the stems were still moist, the branches freshly trimmed from their shrub.

"Lilacs don't bloom in February." He heard himself whispering. He loved the smell, it was one of his favorite flowers but they didn't bloom in February, neither did honeysuckle.

He turned the woven bundle around in his hands and had to admire the work that it would have taken to so expertly weave the two flowers together. As he turned it over something shook loose from the bundle and fell on the bed. He picked it up carefully but it wasn't anything dangerous, just a pink candy heart. Printed on it was one word.

"Forever." Ian whispered again in the silence. There was only a limited number of people that could have snuck into his rooms unnoticed woven the flowers together or even gotten the out of season blooms.

The phone rang and Ian jumped, startled. He took flowers and the small candy heart with him and hurried to answer it.

"Hello?" He was still whispering and why the fuck was he whispering?

The line was silent.

"Jenner?" He whispered even though he knew it was stupid.

The only answer was a small hiss of an indrawn breath. He'd guessed right.

"Thank you."

The line clicked dead and left Ian standing alone in his tiny little box of an apartment with woven

together flowers and a candy heart.

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