

Claude in the Rain

Is it a sin to fall for a man based on one glimpse? Later I would think back to the first time I noticed Claude as he bumbled across my field of vision and robbed me of my breath. Though his hair was damp with mist after the rain, it was still a light blonde-red, tousled mess. The man's bulk under a dark, knitted sweater tossed over worn jeans was outlined under the damp wool and cotton. He was awkward, sweetly humble and so attractive he sent my gut into a twist. Then he looked right at me with forget-me-knot blue eyes and grinned as a blush swept him. I wonder now, as then, if he felt the same magnetic pull. Then he tugged at his collar, and I saw that he was a priest. My heart tumbled into the nether regions near my feet. I imagined kicking away the mental barrier like a soccer ball toward a goal. I was smack dab in love. I didn't even know his name.

Claude shouldered his way toward me, as I waited behind the counter. In an ordinary sense, I waited for his order—I'm sure I looked like any clerk behind the bakery counter. I doubted he felt the immediate fission of completeness with which I was awestruck but I had been rendered dumb. "Miss?" his voice was gravelly sweet and touched with the moisture of the cold rain that dampened his hair. I twisted my apron and lifted my chin to signal attention. I could not speak. He swallowed and looked directly into my eyes; it was cosmic. "Miss? I need your help. Come with me?" He nodded as my head bobbed immediate agreement. *I'd follow you anywhere.*

He blinked those beautiful eyes in surprise, as the co-owner of the shop rushed inside out of the sudden downpour. I slipped off my apron and muttered at George Owens who owned fifty-two percent of my shop since his father died three months ago. I handed my apron to George as he shook the beading drops off his pristine raincoat onto my clean floor. "Remember to take the tarts out of the oven in five minutes. We need the lot for a two o'clock pick up. I need to help the priest." I ignored George's unruffled appearance, his clean-shaven face and neat, black hair; the man looked more like a matinee idol from the thirties than the owner and bookkeeper for a pastry shop.

Greg let his hands reach his hips before he spluttered out a protest. I took his raincoat from the hook and shrugged it on still warm from his jog down the street from the bank. I followed Claude back out into the rain. "Josie!" Greg's exasperated voice followed me until the door slammed shut with the force of the gusty storm. *Serves you right*, I thought as the priest took my hand.

The priest with the light blue eyes and a longish shock of damp, red-blond hair hailed a cab and stood beside the back door as I slid inside. The dampness of the big coat, my pudgy girth and the vinyl seat didn't let me settle against the opposite door before the big man sat beside me. We were hip-to-hip, and after he gave an address, eye to eye. I noticed that he glanced at my mouth, and I wondered if I wore remnants of the cinnamon twist that I'd sampled before starting the tarts an hour ago. So much for diets; this man obviously saw directly through the excess twenty pounds I'd gained comforting myself after old Mr. Owens died and left me his son to micromanage my bakery into the ground. I'd been attracted to George Owens right up until the moment the will had been read, and I'd inherited an accountant for a partner.

The red-headed priest checked my eyes again; he was probably looking for the loose screw a woman must have to get into a cab with a strange man. His voice was that same sandpaper scratch it had been minutes ago. "You just came with me. You didn't even ask why!"

I'd follow you anywhere. I nodded and finally spoke, "Yes. My name is Josie Monroe." I'd have shaken his hand, but he was sitting on George's long coat and unconsciously restricted my movements. I looked at his whiskers which were a true Irish red. I watched his throat as his Adam's apple slid up for a gulp.

He blinked and I think he considered putting me out of the cab at the next corner. He blushed a decent pink under freckles. He glanced down at my hand with the fingers extended on my thigh. Didn't people look away when they lied? Again in that raspy, sweet voice, he said, "I'm Father Claude Raines . . . Rainesforth."

I narrowed my eyes at a twitch in his cheek visible because of his averted eyes and decided he was a lousy liar. Suddenly the sarcastic inner-bitch that has protected me for all my thirty-three years burst out of her fairytale cottage. I sat back and yanked Greg's coat out from under Claude. "Okay, Father Phantom of the Opera. What exactly do you need? Hey! And where are we going?" I glanced at the blocks sliding slowly past the melted raindrops on the windows. The rain and the traffic were heavy.

I watched him ruffle the adorably mussed hair off his forehead in frustration. "Sorry. My name actually is Claude Rainesforth. I'm nervous. Are you always so tough on strangers?" What he should have been saying was some excuse for his fumble. He looked out the window, "We're going to the church on Remington. Please help me." Why the neighborhood church? He turned and flashed those wonderful eyes at me again.

I straightened in the seat and thought "church"? Was this God's idea of some cosmic joke? I hadn't stepped foot in a church since old Owens died, and I had been rewarded for paying my respects to the old geezer by losing over half my business during the wake. I'd been pissed at everyone including God for a good long time since that momentous event.

The only thing that failed to suffer was my baking. I baked through everything: the loss of my parents, the illness of my little sister, even the extra burden of the bookkeeping when old Owens stopped doing the accounting. One thing I know is pastry, cakes and pies. I blinked and realized I had left George Owens, who knew nothing about baking, in charge of one hundred and twenty-five perfect tarts. That order might put us into the black for the week's receipts.

I shook my head, "What, exactly, do you need me to do?" The foolishness I was beginning to feel edged under the raincoat and dampened my mood further. The coat still felt warm from George's jog from the bank a few blocks away and smelled of his woody aftershave; it comforted me.

Claude looked miserable, "Vouch for me. Tell the pastor that you know me. He has something I have to take home." He clasped his hands together as if he prayed.

"Is Rainesforth your real last name, Father Claude?" He wanted me to lie to a priest that he was a good person? What could I say? *You see, I saw him looking at me from the window of the bakery and fell like a ton of bricks?* Explain that I was a sucker for that exact combination of eye color and hair texture? I was even attracted to the collar that seemed like nothing but a thin impediment.

"Rainesforth. Claude Joseph Rainesforth of Philadelphia." He looked back at me with just a bit of moisture in his eyes. "Forgive me. You were talking to those old men and looked dependable. You looked so warm and sweet that I could imagine Pastor Neely taking your word. Forget it. I'll try something else." I shook my head again because I was intrigued by the mystery of it. Claude also smelled good—talcum powder, leather, citrus hair tonic and warm man.

We'd arrived at the church which was an old, blatantly Catholic, granite structure with Gothic spires and large oak doors up a few steps from the dirty sidewalk. It was one of those stately structures that try to retain dignity, as the city fell into shambles building by building. I opened the door and ordered the cabbie to stay put, "We'll be right back," I looked at his identification on the visor, "Charlie." He and I exchanged glances so that I knew he'd been listening instead of attending to his earpiece. I doubted he wanted to become the getaway driver.

Claude slid out and extended a hand to me and tugged gently as I emerged. The ridiculousness of the situation caused a smirk to curl my lips. A heavy-set woman in clogs donned in a very fine, but male raincoat, a beautiful man who could have been an Irish raider in a previous life and torrential downpours. I hoped that Greg was removing the tarts from the oven, as we climbed the granite steps that lead to the smallest door to the church. Evidently, the old, carved door was the usual access to the rectory. I glanced up to Claude and blinked; he had recovered that earnest sweetness that had attracted my attention at the start.

We dripped through a foyer of cracked marble tile and followed a dim light at the end of a long, interior hallway to the right of the main meeting area of the church. Inside a fairly large office lit by a single desk lamp, an old man sat quietly as though he was expecting us. Father Neely was introduced, but I was so flustered that I didn't hear if Claude used either name he'd tried to palm off on me. Father Neely was perhaps seventy with bushy-eyebrows hiding sky blue eyes that peered into mine, as he leaned forward to nearly grasp my hand to get a good look at Claude's character reference. "Thank you for coming in all this bad weather, my dear. You have the bakery over on Thames, don't you?" He remained seated as if he were the king of some small monarchy.

I nodded but frowned, "Yes, Monroe's Sweet Treats. I don't remember you ever coming in." Claude had a good eye when he chose me; I knew just about everyone in the neighborhood and recognized all of my customers.

"I'm diabetic," he answered. "But I knew your partner. Wise man!" Father Neely looked away just like Claude had in the cab. What a pack of liars!

The sudden urge for the restroom coincided with my worry over the gargantuan order of tarts I'd left in the ovens and my uncomfortable perch between the two priests. Not that I thought they were priests. What could Claude from the rain need so badly? Why would the old priest refuse him?

I made an excuse to jog down the wide hallway in the guise of visiting the ladies room, but I dialed the bakery phone and let it ring no fewer than ten times. "Monroe's Bakery. Please be Josie!" George's normally deep condescension had slipped away into breathy panic.

"You get your wish. Don't answer the phone again like that. Did you take the tarts out of the oven? Use the spatula and gently scoot them onto the racks." I gulped as I heard shuffling in the hallway and the creak of a door.

Before George could say much more than, "Josie, honey! Where are you?" I hunched over in the stall and whispered, "Send the police to St. Alphonse on Remington. I think there's some kind of shenanigans in progress."

When I opened the door to the stall, I looked right into Claude's blue eyes which were narrowed into disapproval. "Who did you call, Miss Monroe?" He raised a brow, as I smirked and stepped aside to rinse my

hands and dry them. I'd left the bakery so quickly that I still had the remnants of flour and dough on my forehead. I glanced into the mirror and noticed my pink cheeks and flour on my chin. My hair had frizzed into ringlets. I was a mess yet again.

I met Claude's beautiful eyes in the old, spotty mirror. I must have been crazy to follow him out of the bakery before I even knew his name. "I called my partner. I left a hundred and twenty-five tarts in the ovens. George is not exactly a baker." I shrugged.

"He's probably called the police." He pulled on his bottom lip, "I'd have called the police if some stranger dragged you away in the rain." He shrugged, "Let's get going. The old guy saw right through me and refused to give it to me."

We left the ladies room and walked down the hallway that was now curiously dark. I wanted to give the police time to arrive, so I stalled, "Exactly what do you want from St. Alphonse?" We turned back into the pastor's office and approached the old man who seemed to be sleeping in his chair. The desk lamp had been extinguished.

Claude sighed. "A reliquary. Most people don't believe in miracles, but St. Brigit has a proven track record for healing the sick. I need to take it to a very special little girl in Philadelphia before this evening. My niece is undergoing a very serious operation on her heart. Between the rain and this priest who has thrown up roadblocks at every turn, I am losing patience." Claude gasped, as the old man slumped forward and struck his head on the desk blotter. Claude rushed around the desk and pushed the man back into the chair. I moved to Father Neely's other side and lifted his hand and then automatically touched his cold, stiff neck with two fingers searching for a pulse. His skin had the sick consistency of refrigerated dough.

Claude looked desperate. "Oh, my God! Do you think he had a heart attack?" Perspiration broke out at his forehead, as he stared at the old priest. The pretense and confusion cleared in that moment—they were both odd, confusing men, but these two frauds were actually priests. *Jesus, help me*, I thought.

"Maybe early this morning. He's cold, Father Claude. And yet, we just talked to him." I pried a small object out of the old priest's hand. It was a small, glass receptacle trimmed in gold about the size of a large test tube. I held it up and saw nothing more than cloth wrapping and something that could have been a bone or an old cigarette. I chided myself for such flip thoughts. "Well hello there, St. Brigit," I mused softly. I looked at Claude and cocked an eyebrow. "Does she just heal or grant wishes, too?"

Claude laughed nervously, "That was sacrilegious." He rolled his eyes heavenward, "Lord, I have a dead priest and a heathen on my hands. Please help me!"

He prayed on this matter and then performed last rites for the old priest while I wished with all my heart that I could somehow get my bakery back and that the little girl Claude wanted to help could get it. Then the police arrived and all hell broke loose.

There were a few accusations then a pat-down of both of us ensued that produced my cell phone, Claude's identification and a very official-looking letter. The Archdiocese of Baltimore had sent a letter to Philadelphia allowing Claude to carry the relic to the children's hospital for a solemn prayer service. Evidently Father Neely had refused to allow Claude to take the reliquary when Father Claude arrived that morning with damp impatience that bordered on rudeness. The old priest had charged him with finding someone to vouch for him before he'd let precious St. Brigit's finger bone leave the church.

I sat in stunned silence as a timetable of the events unfolded. I looked at the old priest and remembered speaking to him. Had I been rude? How many times had I used that same caustic tone on poor George since his father died? He hadn't asked to be saddled with me or the bakery.

As soon as the police cleared Father Claude to leave for Philadelphia, I stumbled to the door of the rectory feeling deflated. One of the police officers waiting for the morgue van offered a ride back to the bakery. I was imagining the place in flames with George at the helm.

I stood in the alcove for a moment before plunging back down to the street to hail a cab in George's damp raincoat. A movement at the church doors attracted my eye and then my breath caught. There was George with my old pink umbrella trying the door to St. Alphonse Church. He looked panicked and worried. He'd just finished banging on the door with his fist. I think he was going to yell, "Josie," when I whispered, "George?"

We met in the middle of the wide, stone steps and huddled under the umbrella in the renewed downpour. His eyes were wild as looked me over, "Are you . . . okay?" I swear his eyes were watery.

I nodded and let myself touch his face with one hand in the most generous caress I'd ever given him. "I'm sorry I went with him, George. I'm sorry I've been such a monster about the bakery."

George shook his head, "You're not hurt? Oh, sweetheart, I was terrified that something would happen to you. Forget the bakery. Josie, I don't care about the money or the business. It's yours. I'm so thankful that you weren't hurt." His deep voice broke over something he didn't say.

I kept my hand on his cheek and stared up at the man I had overlooked while I fought the takeover of my business. I thought about his chagrin as his father's will had been read. Perhaps he'd been just as outraged as I was at the time. "What do you want, George? What can I give you? The bakery was your inheritance."

"I want you to be happy, Josie. My dad was an interfering do-gooder, and all I can do is muck it up with you."

I let myself smile and wonder over Claude in the rain, St. Brigit and one hundred and twenty-five tarts. I let myself lean closer and offer George a kiss that he took.