



Happy Birthday

By Danielle Steel

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Valerie Wyatt is the queen of gracious living and the arbiter of taste with a successful TV show. Since her long-ago divorce, she's worked hard to reach the pinnacle of her profession and to create a camera-ready life in her Fifth Avenue penthouse. So why is she so depressed? All the hours with her personal trainer, the careful work of New York's best hairdressers, cosmetic surgeons, and her own God-given bone structure and great looks can't fudge the truth or her lies about it: Valerie is turning sixty. Valerie's daughter, April, has no love life, no rest, and no prospect of that changing in the foreseeable future. Her popular one-of-a-kind restaurant in downtown New York, where she is chef and owner, consumes every ounce of her attention and energy. Ready or not, though, April's life is about to change, in a tumultuous transformation that begins the morning it hits her: She's thirty. And what does she have to show for it? A restaurant, no man, no kids. Jack Adams once threw a football like a guided missile. Twelve years after retiring from the NFL, he is the most charismatic sports analyst on TV, a man who has his pick of the most desirable twenty-something women. But after a particularly memorable Halloween party, Jack wakes up on his fiftieth birthday, his back thrown out of whack, feeling every year his age. A terrifying act of violence, an out-of-the-blue blessing, and two extremely unlikely love affairs soon turn lives inside out and upside down. In a novel brimming with warmth and insight, beginning on one birthday and ending on another, Valerie, April, and Jack discover that life itself can be a celebration ? and that its greatest gifts are always a surprise.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Danielle Steel has been hailed as one of the world's most popular authors, with over 590 million copies of her novels sold. Her many international bestsellers include *Happy Birthday*, *44 Charles Street*, *Legacy*, *Family Ties*, *Big Girl*, *Southern Lights*, and other highly acclaimed novels. She is also the author of the story of her son Nick Traina's life and death.

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Chapter 1

November first was a day Valerie Wyatt dreaded every year, or at least for the last two decades, since she turned forty. She had successfully staved off the potential ravages of time, and no one who saw her would have guessed that she had turned sixty when she woke up that morning. She had been discreetly shedding years for a while and it was easy to believe her creativity about her age. *People* magazine had recently said she was fifty-one years old, which was bad enough. Sixty was beyond thinking and she was grateful that everyone seemed to have forgotten the right number. Valerie did everything she could to confuse them. She had had her eyes done for the first time when she turned forty and then again fifteen years later. The results were excellent. She looked rested and fresh, as though she had been on a terrific vacation. She had had the surgery done in L.A. during a summer hiatus. She had also had her neck done when she was fifty, giving her a smooth, youthful neckline with no sag anywhere, and her plastic surgeon agreed that she didn't need a full face-lift. She had great bones, good skin, and the eye and neck work had given her the effect she wanted. Botox shots four times a year added to her youthful looks. Daily exercise and a trainer three times a week kept her long, lean body toned and unmarked by age. If she had wanted to, she could have claimed to be in her forties, but she didn't want to seem ridiculous, and was content to knock nine years off her age. People also knew that she had a thirty-year-old daughter, so she couldn't stretch the truth too far. Fifty-one worked.

It took time, effort, maintenance, and money to maintain her appearance. It served her vanity, but it was also important for her career. Valerie had been the number-one guru of style and gracious living during a thirty-five-year career. She had started as a writer for a decorating magazine when she got out of college, and she had turned it into an intense dedication. She was the high priestess of how to entertain and for everything that went on in the home. She had licensing arrangements for fine linens, furniture, wallpaper, fabrics, exquisite chocolates, and a line of mustards. She had written six books on weddings, decorating, and entertaining and had a show that had among the highest ratings on TV. She had planned three White House weddings when presidential daughters and nieces got married, and her book on weddings had been number one on the *New York Times* nonfiction list for fifty-seven weeks. Her arch-competitor was Martha Stewart, but Valerie was in a class unto herself, although she'd always had deep respect for her rival. They were the two most important women in their field.

Valerie lived exactly the way she preached. Her Fifth Avenue penthouse, with a sweeping view of Central Park, and an important collection of contemporary art, looked camera ready at all times and so did she. She was obsessed with beauty. People wanted to live the way she told them to, women wanted to look the way she did, and young girls wanted a wedding just the way Valerie would have done it, or as she instructed them to do on her show and in her books. Valerie Wyatt was a household name. She was a beautiful woman, had a fabulous career, and lived a golden life. The only thing missing in her life was a man, and she hadn't been involved with anyone in three years. The thought of that depressed her that morning too. No matter how good she looked, the age on her driver's license was what it was, and who would want a woman of sixty?

Even men in their eighties wanted girls in their twenties now. With this birthday, Valerie felt she had become obsolete. It wasn't a pleasant thought, and she wasn't happy today.

She looked in the mirror intently as she prepared to leave her apartment that morning. She didn't have to be in the studio until noon for a taping, and she had two appointments before that. She was hoping the first one would cheer her up. And the only thing keeping her from a major panic attack was that at least no one knew her right age. But she was depressed anyway. She was relieved that the image she saw in the mirror reassured her that her life wasn't over yet. She wore her blond hair in a chic well-cut bob that framed her face, and had it colored regularly. She never had roots. It was the same color it always had been, and her figure was superb. She carefully selected a red wool coat from the closet to put over the short black dress she was wearing that showed off her spectacular long legs, and she was wearing sexy high heels from Manolo Blahnik. It was a great look and would be elegant and fashionable when she taped her show later that day.

The doorman hailed a cab for her when she left the apartment and she gave the driver an address on the Upper West Side. It was in a seedy neighborhood, and she noticed the driver looking at her admiringly in the rearview mirror. She was pensive as they sped through Central Park. The weather in New York had turned chilly two weeks before, the leaves had turned, and the last of them were falling off the trees. The red wool coat she was wearing looked and felt just right. Valerie was looking out the window of the cab as the radio droned on, and they exited from the park on the West Side. And then she felt an electric current run through her as she heard the announcer's voice.

"My, my, my, I never would have believed it, and I'll bet you won't either. She looks terrific for her age! Guess who's turning sixty today? Valerie Wyatt! Now that is a surprise! Good work, Valerie, you don't look a day over forty-five." She felt as though the announcer had just punched her in the stomach. Hard! She couldn't believe it. How the hell did he know? Their researchers must check DMV records, she thought with a sinking feeling. It was the most popular morning radio talk show in New York, and everyone would know. She wanted to tell the driver to turn it off, but what difference would that make? She had already heard it, and so had half of New York. The whole world knew now that she was sixty years old. Or at least the better part of New York. It was humiliating beyond words, she fumed to herself. Was nothing private anymore? Not when you were as famous as Valerie Wyatt and had your own TV show, and had for years. She wanted to cry as she sat in the backseat wondering how many other radio shows it would be on, how many TV shows, what newspapers it would be in, or celebrity roundups announcing whose birthday it was and how old they were. Why didn't they just sky-write it over New York?

She was frowning as she paid the cab driver and gave him a handsome tip. The day was off to a miserable start for her, and she never liked her birthday anyway. It was always a disappointing day, and despite her fame and success, she had no man to spend it with. She had no date or boyfriend, no husband, and her daughter was always too busy working to go out for dinner. And the last thing she wanted to do was make an issue of her age with friends. She was planning to spend the night at home alone, in bed.

She hurried up the dilapidated steps of the familiar brownstone, nearly tripping on a chipped step, and pushed the button on the intercom. The name on the bell was Alan Starr. Valerie came here at least twice a year and called between visits to boost her spirits or when she was bored. After she rang, a voice filtered into the chilly November air.

"Darling?" It was a happy voice, and he sounded excited to see her.

"It's me," she confirmed, and he buzzed her in. She pushed open the heavy door once it unlocked, and hurried up the stairs to the second floor. The building was old and looked tired, but was clean. He was

waiting in an open doorway and threw his arms around her, grinning broadly. He was a tall, handsome man in his early forties with electric blue eyes and shoulder-length brown hair. And despite the shabby address, he was somewhat well known around town.

"Happy birthday!" he said, hugging her close to him as he smiled with a look of genuine pleasure to see her. She pulled away, scowling at him unhappily.

"Oh shut up. Some asshole on the radio just told the whole goddamn world how old I am today." She looked on the verge of tears as she marched into the familiar living room, where several large Buddhas and a white marble statue of Quan Yin sat on either side of two white couches with a black lacquer coffee table between them. There was a distinct smell of incense in the room.

"What do you care? You don't look your age! It's just a number, darling," he reassured her as she tossed her coat onto the couch.

"I care. And I am my age, that's the worst part. I feel a hundred years old today."

"Don't be silly," Alan said as he sat down on the couch opposite her. There were two decks of cards on the table. Alan was said to be one of the best psychics in New York. She felt silly coming to him, but she trusted some of his predictions, and most of the time he cheered her up. He was a loving, warm person with a good sense of humor, and a number of famous clients. Valerie had come to him for years and a lot of what he predicted actually came true. She started her birthday with an appointment with him every year. It took some of the sting out of the day, and if the reading was good, it gave her something to look forward to. "You're going to have a fabulous year," he said reassuringly as he shuffled the deck of cards. "All the planets are lined up for you. I did an astrological reading for you yesterday, and this is going to be your absolutely best year." He pointed to the cards. She knew the drill. They had done this many times. "Pick five and place them face down," he said, as he put the deck down in front of her, and she sighed. She picked the five cards, left them face down, and Alan turned them over one by one. There were two aces, a ten of clubs, a two of hearts, and the jack of spades.

"You're going to make a lot of money this year," he said with a serious expression. "Some new licensing agreements. And your ratings are going to be fantastic on the show." He said pretty much the same thing every year, and so far he'd been right. But in her case, that was easy to predict. Valerie's gracious living empire was sound.

"What's with the jack of spades?" They both knew she'd wanted a man in her life since her last relationship ended. She had been divorced for twenty-three years, and had devoted more time and energy to her career than to romance. But she missed being involved with someone, and was disappointed that no one had turned up in years. She was beginning to think that no one ever would again. Maybe she was too old. She certainly felt it now.

"I think one of your lawyers might retire," Alan said about the jack of spades. "Give me five more."

This time the king of hearts showed up, and the queen of diamonds. Alan smiled.

"Well, that's interesting. I see a new man," he said, smiling wider, and she shrugged, unimpressed.

"You've been saying it for three years."

"Patience, darling, patience. It's worth waiting for the right one. I like this man. He's important, powerful, very tall, and good-looking. I think you're going to meet him through your work." Valerie laughed at that.

"Not in my business. Any guy involved in decorating, lifestyle in the home, or the wedding industry is not likely to be straight. I'm going to have to meet him somewhere else."

"Maybe he's one of your producers," Alan said, concentrating on the cards. "I definitely think you're going to meet him through work." He had said that before, and no one had appeared. His other predictions were often true, but lately not about men. "I think your daughter might have a baby this year," he said, turning over the queen of diamonds and handing her the deck again. Valerie smiled and shook her head.

"I don't think that's going to happen. She works harder than I do. She doesn't even have time to date. She's not married, and I'm not at all sure she wants a husband or a child." Nor was Valerie anxious to be a grandmother--that was definitely not on her wish list or her radar screen, and fortunately it was not on her daughter's either. Alan was off on that one.

"I think she might surprise you," Alan said, as Valerie turned over five more cards and the reading continued. It was similar to what he always predicted for her, success in business, a new man on the scene, and an assortment of small warnings about upcoming projects and deals and people she worked with. But this time the new man came up several times. Alan was adamant about it, and Valerie sighed as she listened. People always told her that she couldn't have everything, a fabulous career and romance in her life too. Life just didn't work that way. No one got everything they wanted, they said, and Valerie hadn't either. Like most people, her success hadn't come easily, and in her case she had wound up alone. The two of them chatted as she continued to turn over the cards, and Alan told her what he saw ahead for her. Most of it was good. Her health wasn't a problem, he said, and as usual her ratings would soar. He saw some kind of production deal in the Far East, possibly a line of furniture, that would be advantageous for her, and it was obvious as he read for her that he genuinely liked her. She was honest, direct, and fair. Some people said she was tough, but it was mostly a standard of excellence that she applied to herself and everyone else. Valerie drove herself and everyone around her hard. She hadn't gotten to the top of her field by accident. She had crawled up the mountain for thirty-five years, with sheer hard work and a certain kind of genius and unfailing instinct about what she did. Alan admired her for that. He loved how straightforward she was. She didn't play games, or hide. What you saw was what you got. And he didn't need the cards to know how upset she was about her age today. Valerie said several times that sixty just seemed so goddamn old, and now everyone was going to know. He could see that the very thought of it made her want to cry.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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