

Under A Perfect Sky

By Rachel Rausbeth

It was the day of the wedding.

Golden streams of late summer sunlight seeped beneath the doors at the end of the aisle. There within, it was dark, hazy, lit only by the flickering flames of candles that caressed the walls and stage where they now stood. There was an easy smell of warmth, of perfume and cologne. It floated up and hung around her, heady and surreal till she was only vaguely aware of her bridesmaids and their escorts, of the shy little flower girl and the guests who were behind them. A low grumble of excited whispers moved among them like the gentle roll of thunder when a storm first sets in.

She felt him squeeze her hand, strong and reassuring, every muscle defined within her palm. Her heart was full, and she felt her breasts rise to meet its beat within the lacy bodice of her gown. She traced the contours of his arm, stopping when she'd reached his face. He was smiling, his lips hugging the corners of his mouth as he gazed at her intently with his bluish-green eyes. She sighed softly, content just to have his hand in hers.

She blinked.

His face became suddenly waxy, the smile placid and frozen in place. Dazed, her mouth hung slightly agape as she watched his pupils slowly recede from recognition into unperceptive points. His eyes became vacant and dark. In replace of light was only emptiness.

She forced her eyes from his face to the rest of him.

The suit. He wasn't wearing his suit. Or was he? She could see it under the fireman's turnout jacket, undefined and obscure, just a ghost under the coarse, beige canvas.

Feeling something, a hot burning sensation at her wrist, she looked down. Her eyes opened wide, their whites glittering in the candlelight. His fingers—they were melting like hot wax between her own, trickling down in a bronzed puddle on the floor. A splatter fell upon her dress. Glancing up, she looked on in horror at the smile that remained molded on his face. It too was dripping wax, dribbling down the sides of his chin.

A sense of confusion paralyzed her, but as the heavy wooden doors at the end of the aisle flew open, a sinking bite of wild comprehension reached her senses. Flames burst into the room, fingers of fire flashing through the air and clawing forward down the aisle. She screamed, turning back to hide within his arms.

But he was no longer beside her.

She spun around to face the flames, her breath catching in her chest. They held him, the torching fingers taking hold of his arms and wrapping around his chest, licking at his face as they pulled him back down the aisle towards the doors. Her heart stopped.

She had to reach him. Crying out, reaching her arms towards him, she brushed his fingertips. She had to hold on and never let go. The air crackled in her ears as her fingers curled around his. Tears streamed down her face, burning her cheeks as her eyes darted towards the doors, so close now. She held on tighter, but suddenly his waxy grip slipped from hers.

The flames roared forward around him in an instant, sucking him back and swallowing him in darkness. The mahogany doors slammed shut.

Bridget awoke.

Her eyes fluttered open slowly as she focused on the reassuring emptiness of the white ceiling. Her eyebrows were furrowed together in a sweaty line, her lips drawn, every limb rigid and locked. She closed her eyes, sinking back into the fluff of the pillow and letting out a long, shaky breath. The room was shadowy with the blinds drawn, the blue walls glowing slightly with the rising sun.

There is something very soothing about waking to reality, a welcome loneliness. For Bridget, it was almost relief. She lay there quietly, letting the dream gradually slip away, ignoring the nauseous feeling that had begun rising up through her stomach. All was quiet but for the muffled tenor of morning traffic outside. Without it, in the easy solitude of darkness, she might have forgotten that she was still part of the world.

She rolled over to face David. He was breathing softly beside her, his hair flattened against the pillow, his bare chest rising methodically from under the covers. She laid a hand there breathlessly and brushed the soft blond hairs as if for the first time. He stirred, breathing a little deeper and shifting his body towards the middle of the comfortably cramped mattress.

The mattress had been hers before they were married, when she still lived with her mother in Seattle and then after when she'd moved to California. So it was only a full-size—too small for them both, but especially for David.

“Broad shoulders and long legs,” her mother had noted approvingly in Bridget’s direction when she met him. Then turning to him, she said, “*You* must be David.” This had prefaced even the simplest of introductions. Bridget winced at the memory.

After Bridget moved, over a year had passed before her mother visited her in California. She and David had just gotten engaged, and she was eager to show him off. Bridget remembered the setup with painful clarity. David due to arrive at any minute, her mother slicing bell peppers in the kitchen, his confident knock at the door, and her inward excitement as she let him in. But she had barely closed the apartment door when her mother had emerged from the kitchen, stood with one hand on her hip, and sized David up and down like a turkey she had a mind to

dress. The full effect, Bridget thought, had been her mother's free hand that still held the kitchen knife from cutting peppers.

Her mother was too blunt sometimes, too blatant, too... *Embarrassing*, Bridget thought. At the time, she had imagined that slow death by a plastic butter knife would be better than the awkward moments that her mother created. But David hadn't noticed. He simply laughed and lifted all four and a half feet of his future mother-in-law off the ground in a hug.

"What?" Her mother had asked her later in the kitchen, arms thrown up in defense. "What did I do wrong?"

Bridget chopped off the head of strawberry. "Nothing." She couldn't explain her frustration to herself, so she wouldn't try to for her mother.

Her mother had sighed. "Really, Bridget, sometimes you're just too... Just too..." *Good*, Bridget had thought. *At least she can't explain it either.* Her mother had shrugged. "You have a hard time letting go of things, that's all, sweetie."

Bridget's cheeks began to tingle with resurfacing flush. *The point*, Bridget reflected, picking a fuzz off the comforter, *is that the mattress is too small.* But they hadn't gotten around to buying a new one yet. David was never home.

"Next weekend, honey, I promise," he'd say in that sweet tone that made her smile.

Next weekend never came, though, not in the two years that they'd been married. She could have gone without him, she supposed. Bridget nestled in towards him, cupping her head on his chest as his arm sleepily found its way around her shoulder.

But there was always next weekend.

Her gaze was tender as she stared at him. She enjoyed knowing that he was real within her arms, that she could hold him and be held for a little while longer.

She stiffened. But how much longer? she wondered. How long before he'd be called away today?

Bridget realized then that the alarm was playing. It had been for awhile now, the newsman rattling on over a fuzzy station. She hadn't noticed it before.

"—in honor of Fireman John Carter." She fumbled for the clock, her eyebrows drawing into a line. "Fireman Carter died yesterday while fighting the brushfire in Orange County, leaving behind a wife and two—" Her fingers found the snooze button, and the newsman clicked off. The ceiling seemed suddenly full, heavy.

Leaving behind a wife.

David opened his eyes. He smiled sleepily. Was she smiling? She struggled to relax, to reclaim the calm that waking darkness had given her. Her arms were cold outside the covers and she shivered, drawing them under onto his chest. *Relax.*

Bridget sighed. "You're warm," she murmured, drawing closer to him and wrapping her legs around his. She closed her eyes expectantly as he bent his face close to hers. She could feel his breath meet her own.

The telephone rang.

David rolled his head backwards onto the pillow and muttered something she couldn't hear. She felt his eyes watching for her response as he sat up to reach the phone. Her heart sank. No, no, no...

"Hello?" David paused, listening. "Yes sir." He swung his feet onto the floor, turning his back. Bridget fingered the edge of the pillow case. *I can still hear you, David.* "Yes sir, I'll be there." The phone beeped off definitively. A period at the end of a sentence. Her mouth was dry, but she swallowed anyways.

"Sweetheart?"

Not that voice. Her jaw twitched. It was the one he always used, just before he left. Bridget hadn't yet opened her eyes. She closed them tighter.

The first time David used that voice was just after she'd moved down from Washington and taken a job in a tanning salon out of LA. Three years ago seemed like yesterday. She'd been working the front desk when he walked in.

He left almost as soon as he came; a little worse for ego maybe, but that was all. People walk through wrong doors every day, never to be seen again. She didn't think twice about it. So when he returned a day or so later, it was only naturally surprising. She eyed him carefully, amused with his interest in women's bathing suits and lotion. Frankly, she was stumped.

For one thing, equally exciting as it was intimidating, he was a fireman. She'd seen other firemen pass by the salon before. She knew them by the Station 47 logos printed on their navy shirts. Usually they came by on Friday nights to rent movies from the video store next door. But they never came into the salon. Why would they? They'd seen enough sun as it was.

He picked up the same bottle of lotion for the tenth time, only to set it back on the shelf and pick up another. He flashed a corny smile at her.

So he was weird. Lots of people were weird. On a slow day with nothing better to do, she would do what she did with every customer, casually offering the day's special on sunless tanning. Only, he accepted.

She hadn't actually operated the spray tan machine since getting the job, but her fingers had hovered over the controls for only a few seconds before she confidently punched the settings in.

Half an hour later when he emerged, Bridget's eyes went round at the sight of him. She could only imagine what the rest of his station would say. A sudden, fierce urge to laugh had welled up behind her pursed lips. Who could pass up a beautifully even, pumpkin-orange complexion without saying *anything*? But she swallowed the laughter.

It was what *he* had to say that worried her. After all, he was a fireman too. Didn't that make him a hot-head by profession? She cowered behind the computer as he walked directly up to the counter. She was finished. She knew it. She'd lost her job.

That was the first time that David used the voice. He stood, leaning over the counter as he spoke, grinning down at her as if everyone in the world had orange skin. He threw out his hand, introducing himself. And then he was gone, still orange, still grinning. As Bridget watched him leave, perfect bulges under his t-shirt hinting at the orange muscles underneath, she smiled. It was all she could do.

But not today. Here she was, in bed with this man she loved, despairingly thankful for that day in the salon, listening to the same voice charm her all over again. And she hated it.

"Honey," he tried again, softer. She opened her eyes to his. He had gotten back in the bed.

"They need me at the station." He hesitated for a moment. Was he avoiding her eyes? "They don't have enough men with the... well, with the..." he trailed off without finishing. She wondered briefly if he was just too sleepy to remember the word she hated most, or if he wanted her to finish the sentence for him. Her head tilted as she looked at him, painfully aware of how much he loved her. Or at least how much she loved him.

"With the fire?" It was hard to say, as if saying it meant accepting it. She hoped he didn't hear the effort in her voice, but just the same, she doubted he could miss it.

His watery eyes poured into hers as if to say, It's what I do, sweetheart. Or didn't you know that? He looked away at something on the other side of the room. Yes, she knew that.

"You should go." It sounded stronger, at least to her ears. Maybe too strong. David looked at her, surprised or relieved, she wasn't sure which.

"I don't want you to worry." He placed a hand on her arm like he'd do for someone who'd inhaled too much smoke. She shrugged, his face becoming hazy as she looked at him.

"Then I won't." Bridget threw the covers off, letting his hand slip off her arm as she got up from the bed. David didn't move. She pulled on a t-shirt. It was worn thin and hung around her loosely, barely covering the bottom of her underwear. She turned back towards him slowly.

David was staring through her now. She shivered, feeling suddenly exposed, naked. Don't look at me like that, David, she wanted to say. Don't you know how trapped I feel? How alone in this? He seemed to stare a long time till she almost suspected that he did know. But if he did, he didn't say. He simply got up from the bed.

There were some things that she might never get used to. Watching the muscles on the side of David's body flex and retract as he pulled on a Station 47 shirt was one of them. Watching him leave for what might be forever was another.

Her throat closed over itself as he kissed her cheek. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she squeezed briefly before letting go. He held her at arm's-length, a short smile lighting his face as he shook his head.

"I love you, darling." Her ears were hollow as he told her he'd be home by nine.

He still doesn't know. He doesn't realize that I'm scared.

Bridget watched the front door close from the doorway of the bedroom, the click as it shut echoing through the empty house.

But how could he, possibly?

"I love you too," she whispered. Placing a hand on her stomach, she leaned her head against the doorframe. The snooze clicked off and the newsman rattled on behind her.

Leaving behind a wife.

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David worked the hose back and forth over itself in the back of the engine. It piled upward neatly, the folds even and consistent as it passed through his hands. Midday traffic paced in the street behind him, waves of heat rippling upward from the asphalt. He glanced over at Ryan, working the second hose.

"Keep that line straight, Ryan. Or the Captain will make us do this all over again."

Ryan laughed, working the line more to the left. "It's not like we wouldn't have the time." Ryan shook his head, the smile fading. "No calls today."

No kidding, David thought. It was a slow day to cover town. A bad day to be slow, too, with the fire. Bad when you knew most of the people fighting out there.

He stopped to fix the leaning pile of hose, feeling the heat of the sun on his back.

It was their job, sure. That's what they'd all say. Just like they'd say that someone has to cover town. But there was something about being the station left behind. You'd get this sick

sort of regret in the pit of your stomach that left a dry taste in your mouth all day. *Helplessness*, David thought. You don't like it because you can't do anything about it. You have to stand by and watch people get burned, just because someone or something else might need you.

David looked up at Ryan, who was just finishing his line, and paused, watching him thoughtfully. Ryan was fairly new to the station. Impulsive, headstrong, young. Too young, maybe. Too inexperienced to know that survival would take a new definition over time. Eventually, it would mean nothing more than being alive.

Ryan reminded David of himself at that age, when he'd first signed on at Station 47. His father had still been alive then, still the captain of the station on the other side of town.

"You're just like him," his mother would say. Her smile would be bittersweet, as if there was a different candy in each of her cheeks, one sweet and one sour. Then smiling, she'd add, "I forgave him, too."

He remembered how she'd stop, looking away and fixing the curtain at the kitchen window. She'd look out across the street at the row of houses that lined the sidewalk. One level houses with straight lines and flat lawns. It always seemed to David that she was looking much further than that, though, looking at something she'd given up, long ago.

His thoughts came back to the moment as Ryan jumped down from the engine. "How's your wife these days?" Ryan squinted, shading his eyes and looking up at the cloudless sky.

"Oh, you know Bridget..." David grinned artificially, finishing his line and standing up. Ryan crossed his arms as he continued. "There's never a cloudy day for Bridget." He frowned. Who was he trying to convince, anyways?

"All sunshine, huh?" A knowing smile spread across Ryan's face, little crow's feet at the edge of both eyes. "What'd you do this time?"

David folded his own arms, looking up at the sky and narrowing his eyes as he tried to think of something to come back with.

"You have no idea, do you?"

David rolled his eyes. He had always wondered whether a station or a wife knew more about a fireman. Right then, the station was looking pretty smart.

Ryan's smile waned and he nodded thoughtfully, hesitating before he spoke again. "Is it the fire?"

The question startled David. He wasn't sure if that was because he hadn't thought of it before, or if he hadn't expected it from Ryan. He spoke slowly, staring past Ryan at the squad.

"You know, a week ago I would have said no. Bridget's always been good about keeping her head, even in the beginning." He stopped. "But now..."

But now what? What had changed? David couldn't place it. Fires hadn't bothered Bridget for so long. They shouldn't now.

Ryan shook his head, looking down the street. "Sometimes, you're too dense, man. Maybe the answer's *inside* the box this time." Ryan shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe she's pregnant."

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The clock hung on the wall over her head like an open-ended question, one that pestered her endlessly with ticks. Bridget looked up at it without lifting her head. Her shoulders sagged as she returned to the mess of bubbles on the bathroom floor, scrubbing a little harder at the linoleum.

Two hours. Had it only been two hours? A clump of hair fell out of her ponytail, sticking to the clammy sweat on her temples. It was itchy, aggravating. She tried to blow it out of her face, inhaling the pungent stench of cleaner instead. Coughing, she covered her mouth with her forearm and sat up, not particularly aware of what she was looking at. Her lips quivered as she focused on the metal frame next to the soap dispenser.

It was a photograph of the two of them, taken at the fire station just before the wedding. David was behind her, his arms around her middle as she smiled at the camera from under his fireman's gear.

It was all too big for her. His helmet tilted sideways on her head, the pants hung baggily from her waist, her arms and torso were engulfed by the smoky turnout jacket. The camera's flash had lit up the reflectors on the jacket, casting a dreamlike glow about their faces as they laughed, leaning their heads together.

She remembered how heavy it had been to wear, how everything had weighed down on her shoulders as he put it on her. *And yet, for him this load is light*, she thought. *Even now he's...*

Bridget had been staring, living within her thoughts until her eyes had glossed over and the photograph had become cloudy.

And now he was what? Her mind hesitated even as it challenged itself.

"He's fine." She threw the brush back in the bucket and rolled the yellow gloves inside out before standing up to leave. She glanced at the picture as she switched off the light.

"He's just fine."

Bridget marched into the kitchen and threw open the fridge. She was hungry, and it was nearly lunch. Takeout, steaks, macaroni and cheese. She avoided looking at the carton of eggs.

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The sight of oozy, yellow yokes had sent her running for the bathroom just the day before, and she did *not* want to repeat...

Lurching sickeningly upward, Bridget lost her stomach almost before she reached the garbage bin under the sink. She knelt, doubled over on the floor with the bin in front of her, her head completely submerged in its white haven of polyethylene. Marbled puke slid down the side of the trash bag and collected in the bottom. *Lovely*. Groaning, more with frustration than nausea, Bridget groped upward for a clean dishcloth. She wiped her mouth and stood slowly.

After hiding the garbage bin back under the sink, Bridget went back over and closed the refrigerator door. She turned to open a side cupboard and pulled out a package of saltines, taking out a few and stashing the rest away.

Wandering into the living room, Bridget stood in the middle and leaned against the couch, taking small bites of the crackers. *What now?* she wondered. She doubted if the house had ever been cleaner than it had been this week. She looked around her.

There was an armchair and a couch just big enough for two, the one side worn a little more than the other. There was a small coffee table that stored a few unopened board games, and the television sat on a stand in the corner. Mostly there were photographs. Many, many photographs.

“Why do you take so many?” David had asked once, laughing into the lens.

“Because,” she would tell him, as if that explained everything.

Bridget loved pictures. They were fragments of their life together, frozen moments that she could hold onto forever. She straightened a picture frame next to the window.

It came to her suddenly as she was standing there, caught up in all those memories. She wanted to know how bad the fire was. Part of her had wanted to know all morning. She knew she wouldn't do it if she thought twice. Pushing a small crumb that had escaped to the corner of her mouth back between her lips, she went to the television, not thinking any further than to click it on.

Her heart missed a beat and the broadcast went mute in her ears. Her hand hovered midair with the remote.

“Oh my...”

The brushfire raged on screen, orange tongues rising up from the blackened earth in smoke. Houses were being eaten whole, devoured mercilessly. Trees toppled. The sky was a gasping gray.

Bridget held her breath. The camera switched to view a fireman, fighting the flames with a hose. Her hand went to her mouth, her knees slack, withering down till she found herself sitting

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on the coffee table. He was wearing a mask over his face, the goggles smeary with smoke and ash. *He could be anyone*, she thought. *He could be...*

She dropped the remote.

Leaving behind a wife.

The telephone rang.

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A solid red line of brake lights stretched out in front of David's pickup on the I-5 highway. David worked his fists back and forth around the steering wheel. They were sweaty, cold. He looked at the clock and swore. Nine fifteen.

He'd told her nine.

He swore again. She hadn't been right this morning. She hadn't been right all week, he'd known that. He should have known it.

What Ryan said had jolted his thinking, like a camera coming into focus. It had all become clear. The doctor's appointments, the early mornings in the bathroom. David ran a hand through his hair. It had just never *occurred* to him.

He fought the urge to slam his fist into the horn. It wouldn't get him to her sooner. *But it would feel good*, David thought. He gripped the wheel harder and leaned his head back on the seat, staring up at the age-old coffee stain on the ceiling.

He wasn't ready for this.

It was hard enough to try and be there for her as a husband. And now what? A kid? What would a kid think of a father who was never home, one that left everyday without being able to promise he'd be back that night? What would Bridget think? A cloudy image of a child ran through David's mind. Faceless, just arms and legs, but looking up at him. Looking up *to* him.

So what? He'd quit? David shook his head. He would do it for her, if that would fix this. But after talking to Bridget on the phone, quitting made about as much sense as a band-aid. It didn't.

He had called her just after talking to Ryan, hoping that he would fix things. But he hadn't. Something was there as she spoke to him that had never been there before, and he'd realized. This wasn't about his job anymore. Maybe it had been, somewhere down the line. But not now. This was much bigger than that.

They'd had their problems in the past, of course. But it had always just fallen under the job description, like everything else. He remembered the words his father had told him, only weeks before he died. "It's a hard job on the wives, son," his father had said. David swallowed.

His father had died in a fire. He had gone to work that morning thinking it was just another day on the job, that he'd be back that night. He hadn't known that he'd be gone before noon. David shook his head. One thoughtless match destroyed more than just a building that day. The grief had nearly broken his mother. David shuttered, picturing Bridget. Home alone one day, watching the news when the phone rang, a child in her arms. He pushed the thought away.

Bridget was different. She was stronger.

He had thought so, anyways. There was a strength in her, a determination that he could see and feel. He had seen that from the beginning.

Meeting her had been an accident. David gave a short laugh, remembering that day in the salon. Dyeing his skin orange had been an accident, too. He remembered her face when he'd come out, adorably horrified. It had been cute, but for all he knew, she could have been anything, anybody. It wasn't until she brought her chin up and looked him straight in the eye that he saw it. The strength there in her eyes.

Most people didn't think of Bridget as strong. They didn't even look at her twice, usually. Since that day in the salon, he'd watched them, disgusted, one protective arm wrapped around her. They liked her and forgot her within two minutes of each other, without seeing anything special. But not him. He wouldn't just forget her like that. He couldn't.

David's jaw locked. It wasn't fair. She loved him without any certainty for their future. Totally, unselfishly, courageously. She had to break sometime, carrying that load. A faint smile touched his lips. She'd done it, though. Somehow they'd made it work this far. That was part of the strength in her. The smile vanished.

But he couldn't reach it.

I... I can't do this, David. Not alone.

He couldn't make her see it for herself.

What are you talking about, Brie? You're not alone. We'll do this together.

He had tried, but didn't know how.

No, David. Can't you see? It'll never be together... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I have to go.

There had been a quivering in her voice as she said it, a broken desperation that wouldn't let him put the phone down after she'd hung up.

He closed his eyes, sick with the thought of it, not sure what she had meant. She hadn't meant that, had she? She didn't mean she was leaving. She wouldn't...

David brought his fist down on the horn.

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Bridget shut the door behind her, taking a deep breath and blinking in the high afternoon light as it fell down upon the house. She couldn't do this any longer, staying there, all day, just thinking and puking and thinking over again. She needed to go. To be free of four walls. And David. She couldn't dwell on David. When he called...

Her eyes burned, threatening tears. She looked up, blinking them away.

The sky was too perfect to be helpful. She found herself wishing it was broken and gray, raining down on her so she could cry without anyone knowing. Especially David. Somehow, David always knew when she cried.

Bridget walked forward down the cement boardwalk towards the street, kicking a rock with her shoe.

He had only called to reassure her. He wasn't even working the brushfire today. There was some relief in that, she supposed. They were loading up the engine, covering town for now.

For now? she had repeated.

There was a certain measure of sweetness in that statement that was instantly lost to a question of tomorrow. No, an *expectation* of tomorrow. David didn't answer quickly. She had stood there in the kitchen, holding the receiver to her ear, listening and waiting. She began to tremble in that silence, a startling foregleam of life without him.

There was absolutely nothing, no noise at all.

When David did answer her, she had barely been conscious of what he was saying. She heard the sweet tones of his voice without response, without becoming part of them for once. It was like holding them in her hand, looking them over for the first time and understanding. There would always be this. The question of tomorrow would always hang over her in silence.

So she'd told him. Everything. It spilled out over the receiver in convulsive ripples, her voice cracking hysterically. She'd told him she was pregnant, that she'd found out weeks ago but he was never home to tell, or if he was the moment was never right.

Bridget frowned. At that point her stomach had had its way again, and she'd practically hung up on him. Had she mentioned that she was scared before she hung up? She couldn't remember. She knew she'd told him that she felt alone. Bridget rolled her eyes at herself. It wasn't quite the same thing.

She wasn't sure where she was going. It just felt good to move. She walked to the end of the paved driveway and stood there a moment, looking around her.

It was still early in the afternoon, not quite yet one o'clock. A detaching tranquility seemed to rest upon the neighborhood, waking when it came to the lively intersection down the street. Up to that point, each house seemed to slumber on its lot, the palm trees stretching their fronds with little interest towards the sky.

She looked back down the road to the busy traffic that passed by at the intersection.

"You out to git your mail?"

The question surprised her. She wasn't expecting it. She hadn't even realized that someone else was on the street.

Bridget turned around. "Excuse me?"

An elderly woman, maybe seventy or so, stood before the row of mail boxes, pulling out a small stack of letters and bills from a sunny yellow one. She smiled, waving the stack in her hand.

"Your mail. You out to git yours?" Her brown eyes were friendly, inviting. Bridget stared at the mailboxes for a moment, her mind blank.

"Oh. Yeah, I am." Bridget said, opening the box closest to her and then shutting it quickly. Being more careful to open the right box, she pulled out her own stack of mail. She flipped through the letters without reading them, waiting for the elderly woman to walk away.

Instead, she watched Bridget thoughtfully. "Now, don't I know you?" She spoke with an accent, one that reminded Bridget of hot cornbread and beans that her mother used to make her eat as a child. She loved the cornbread, but the beans had taken years of getting used to.

"Um... I don't think so," Bridget replied, not really giving any thought to it. The woman was resting her stack of mail on the shelf of her plump stomach, fingering her chin thoughtfully. Her eyes lit up abruptly.

"Oh, I know. It was at one of those picnics they hold for the county fire department every summer." She bobbed her head. "It's Bridget, right?" She laughed and clapped her hands together as if she'd performed a great trick.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

The woman clasped a hand to her heart, and for a moment Bridget was sure she'd given her a stroke. "Oh, my, where are my manners?" She tucked the mail under her arm, sticking out a hand, withered and covered in sunspots. "I'm Norah."

“Norah?” Bridget repeated. She couldn’t recall ever meeting a Norah.

“That’s right, Norah Williams.” Bridget thought hard, a vague and wispy memory of the picnic slowly materializing. She remembered a sweet older woman who had briefly given David a kiss on the cheek. A long-time friend, David had said.

There was a break in the conversation as they stood, taking each other in, Norah smiling and Bridget staring, unsure of what to say.

“Do you like tea?” Norah exclaimed.

“Tea?”

Norah gestured towards the sun and flapped a hand at her face. “It’s hotter than Hades out here! How ‘bout comin’ and sippin’ on a nice cup of sweet iced tea with me?” She bobbed her head again.

Bridget liked tea. But right now, tea seemed worse than a perfect sky.

“I’m a little busy, actually.” A feeling of guilt crept up through Bridget’s gut.

Norah’s accent thickened with her response. Her brown eyes were soft but serious.

“Well now that’s just nonsense, sugarplum. Aren’t you a fireman’s wife?” She nodded, convinced. “No fireman’s wife has *anythin’* good to do when there’s a fire ‘round.” She laughed, turning away and waving the stack of mail, motioning Bridget to follow.

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Little heads of steam rose up from the pitcher as Norah added ice, talking freely as it crackled. She handed a glass to Bridget, who stood listening absently. Norah was like those doors that swung both ways in western movies, pivoting back and forth without complaint as they let the good in with the bad. It was hard not to like.

Norah sat down at the small kitchen table, her own glass within her hands. “Your family live ‘round here?”

“No.” Bridget sat down across from her, tucking one leg under the other. “No, I lived with my mother and sister in Seattle till about three years ago. That’s when I moved to California.”

“Oh, I see.” Norah tapped her chin with her fingers pensively for a moment. “Then why were you all turned ‘round out there by the mailboxes today? You should know your way ‘round by now.”

Bridget stiffened, unable to think of any excuse to offer. She was about to make some sort of reply when Norah stopped her, chuckling at her own joke. "I'm just kiddin' you, sweetie pie." Norah began to drink from her glass slowly, still smiling.

Bridget relaxed. "So, where are you from?"

Norah looked at her from over the top of her glass. "Me? I'm from Mobile, Alabama." Bridget's eyebrows rose. "I know. It's not exactly 'cross the street, is it?"

Bridget freed one hand from her tea and pushed a strand of hair away from her face. "Why did you come here?"

"Same reason you did." Norah smiled. "I grew up quickly, as most girls do, I guess, an' then I left my mama and papa for the unknown."

Bridget hesitated. "Oh." She thought she saw Norah hesitate herself, but if she did, it wasn't by much.

"My mama an' I never really saw eye to eye." Norah wrinkled her nose. "She was always pushin' me with housework. No doubt tryin' to prepare me for the day I'd run my own home." Norah shook her head, the sunlight dancing on the gray hairs that rested there. "But I didn't want that." She paused. "I guess I ran away as far as I could, an' California was just about that."

Bridget wiped the condensation of her glass on her jeans, a dark smear smudged across her thigh.

"In the end, I never moved back. It wasn't till after I'd finished my trainin' as a nurse that I realized I'd never planned on goin' back."

"You were a nurse?"

"Mhmm." Norah nodded. Bridget looked Norah over for a moment.

Yes, she could believe this woman had been a nurse. Norah's hands grasped strongly at her glass, the skin clinging to the bone and muscles underneath. Working hands, but still graceful and steady as they moved. She kept her posture taut with ease. And then there were her eyes. The warm sense of natural honesty that she'd glimpsed outside remained there still, a soft brown suggestion of inner strength and years of experience.

"An' then I met Jim."

It was Bridget's turn to smile. "Your husband?"

Norah tilted her head a little bashfully. "Yeah. He was a sweetheart if there ever was." Her eyes twinkled. "He was a fireman, you know. That's how we met. He came in one day with a

burn from some ol' fire he'd been fightin'." Norah laughed, the wrinkles under her eyes curving happily around them.

There was a comfortable moment of silence between them, the sunlight floating with the dust motes in the air around their heads.

"So. That's *my* story. What's yours, sugar beet?"

Bridget swallowed the tea in her mouth quickly. "Mine?"

Norah nodded, settling into her seat and breathing in the aroma of her tea without sipping. "Which of those handsome firemen is yours?"

"David."

Norah smiled with new pleasure. "Oh, David's a sweetheart. His mama and I go way back." She laughed, almost to herself. "David. Now that *is* appropriate, isn't it?" Bridget must have looked confused. "You know, David an' Goliath? Fightin' against the odds?" Norah waved her hand and turned her attention back to Bridget. "You two have kids?"

Bridget's eyes wavered, drooping slightly. "Not yet."

Bridget considered. Norah was practically a stranger. But in the half hour that she'd spent there, she realized she felt more at ease here than she often did with her own mother. Her thoughts trembled as she realized she was speaking.

"I'm expecting, though." It came out surprisingly steady, confident. Still, Bridget suddenly felt anxious. She held her breath, waiting for Norah's response.

Norah only smiled. "Oh, Bridget, that's grand."

Bridget breathed a sigh of relief.

A corner of the wall behind her caught her eye for the first time since they'd sat. She turned to look at it straight on. It was mostly old and fading photographs, framed and hanging in the sunlight. She pointed to one. Norah was in it, embraced by an older man.

"Is that—"

"My husband, Jim. Isn't he handsome?" She beamed. "Finest fire captain you ever saw." Her voice faltered faintly. "That picture was taken just before he died." Bridget lowered her hand.

"I'm sorry." Norah's eyes were forgiving, and she shrugged meekly. Bridget looked down into her tea at the swirling chaos of ice cubes. "To die like that..."

Norah tipped her head. "To die like what?"

“In a fire. So suddenly. Just one day, you get a call and—”

Norah shook her head, puzzled. “Jim didn’t die in a fire.” Bridget stared, realizing her mistake even as Norah did.

Norah set her tea down on the table. “They don’t all die in fires, Bridget.” Bridget shifted her weight to the other side of the seat, thumbing the rim of her glass. Norah leaned forward, her voice firm.

“Now, just you listen to me Birdie. There are worse ways to lose your husband than a fire.” Norah leaned farther across the table. “Don’t ever go pushin’ your husband away ‘cause you’re scared.” Her eyes pored into Bridget’s, but she half-laughed and sat back. “Now that, darlin’, *is* the worst way you can lose him. In his heart, where it matters.”

««««»»»»

David’s hopes sank as he pulled into the driveway. It was happening. All the lights were off. He fumbled with the keys to the front door, opening it slowly before he entered into the darkness. He stood with his jacket over his arm, looking on at the living room and kitchen. He was still holding the door with one hand before he closed it.

There was a suffocating tightness in his chest that reached up into his throat as he moved through the house. He got the same feeling searching for bodies after a fire. Bodies of people they weren’t able to save. He reached the bedroom door, his heart stopping when he looked in.

She wasn’t there. Only darkness.

David staggered slightly backwards, a hand in his hair. No. She hadn’t. He closed his eyes but opened them quickly, suddenly aware of the soft thumping coming from the laundry room. David walked down the hallway and pushed the door open.

He sighed.

Curled on top of the dryer, Bridget lay fast asleep in one of his old sweatshirts, the dryer balls going round and round inside. He smiled at the old habit and walked over, brushing a brown kink of hair from her cheek.

“That’s my girl.” Bridget stirred as David turned off the dryer and lifted her up.

“Hi,” Bridget whispered. She yawned, leaning into his arm. “I think...” she laughed, “I think I got a little worried about you today, David.” She stopped, the laugh dead. “I was really worried about you.” David brushed her forehead with his lips, whispering an apology as he walked towards the door. His station jacket slipped from his arm to the floor.

“David, your jacket.” The words slurred.

Rachel Rausbeth, 4/11/2009

“It’ll be there tomorrow, Brie,” he said, closing the laundry room door with his foot. She smiled, sinking back into the curve of his arm.

“I ordered a new mattress today,” Bridget murmured. David slipped her underneath the covers.