

***Prospect Street* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

PROLOGUE

Driving past Granger's Food and Gas, the country store just two miles from the Bronsons' weekend cottage, was like crossing the finish line in a marathon. For Faith Bronson, Granger's was a promise that the cultural journey from sophisticated Northern Virginia into rural West Virginia was about to end. By then Alex, the Bronsons' son, had pestered his older sister Remy to her breaking point, and even Faith—who secretly cherished Alex's boundless energy—was ready to pack him in the trunk with the suitcases and groceries.

David, Faith's husband, always claimed that Granger's, with its antique gas pumps, its tow trucks and tire mountains, was the point in their trip where his breathing and heart rate finally slowed. As the family passed the store he invariably tugged at his collar and slumped in the driver's seat, as if some unseen judge had looked away and David was out from under surveillance.

This morning, just ten days before Christmas, Faith was alone in the family's Volvo when she sighted Granger's--decorated in what seemed like miles of tinsel rope and fringe. By the time she pulled in for gas, the hour and a half of silence, which had seemed so promising when she'd climbed behind the steering wheel, felt hollow and unwelcoming.

"Morning, Miz Bronson. And Merry Christmas." As she stepped out of the car, Tubby, Granger's proprietor, lifted a gnarled hand in greeting. Tubby was rail-thin, with overalls draped in folds off sloping shoulders. The fact that the straps defied gravity had always mystified her.

"Merry Christmas, Tubby." She unlatched the gas tank and went to the pump but Tubby took the nozzle from her hand.

"Give me an excuse to stay outside. Last pretty day before winter really hits, I reckon."

Faith reckoned the same thing. The weather was unseasonably warm and thoroughly welcome. At dawn an infusion of sunlight had bathed her face and shoulders, and she had thrown off the covers and padded to the window to look out on the most perfect sunrise she remembered. David, away on his final business trip of the year, wasn't there to share it, and even Alex, who usually reveled in Mother Nature's excesses, complained when she shook him awake to see it. Now that Alex was twelve she supposed she had years of complaining ahead of her.

By the time she saw both children off to school, Faith was still immersed in the morning's magic. Before the day could become like every other she impulsively called her mother and asked Lydia to stop by the children's school that afternoon and take them to her house for the night.

Lydia Huston, obsessive senator's wife, checked her calendar, eternally packed with charity luncheons, visits to the salon and political photo opportunities. Although Christmas was her busiest holiday--as she pointedly reminded her daughter--she would come and Faith could go away for the night. But Lydia recommended that Faith not make a habit of this kind of reckless spontaneity.

Despite a fear she was being foolish, Faith had canceled a final planning meeting for the teacher appreciation Christmas party, packed the car, and taken off for the country.

"You see that sunrise this morning?" Tubby asked. "Woke me up, right out of my bed. My daddy always said a sunrise like that brought big changes. God's way of making an announcement."

Faith was delighted to find a fellow enthusiast. "He must have something big planned today."

"Just for the folks who seen it. Not for just anyone. Nuthin' like the end of the world, not that sort of thing."

Faith glanced at the pump and fished a twenty dollar bill from her wallet. "I'm glad to hear it. I thought I might have to drop down on my knees here and now."

"Me, I got another grandbaby coming. I figure this'll be the day." He shook the nozzle and put it back in the cradle, then he screwed her gas cap in place. "How about you?"

"Are the changes always good ones?"

Tubby screwed up his face like a sponge being wrung dry. "Nope," he said at last. "Day my daddy died started with a sunset so bright it like near to have blinded me."

She was caught now. Tubby was waiting, and suddenly months of worry clamped her chest like a vise. Faith could feel the old man staring expectantly at her. "Well, I guess I'll just be surprised."

"Don't say I didn't warn you, something big turns up." Tubby took her money and made change. "You need anything from inside? Or'd Mr. Bronson get everything you need?"

The question confused her. "David? No, he's away on a business trip."

"And here I thought you and the mister were havin' some time away from the kiddies."

"I'm hoping he comes here from the airport this evening." She hadn't been able to reach David at his hotel in Seattle, but she'd left a message on his cell phone and another with his secretary. From Dulles airport he could be at the cottage in an hour.

"Thought I saw him drive by last night." Tubby rubbed at a smudge on her windshield, wet his index finger and tried again. "My mistake."

“He’s in Washington state, speaking at a conference.”

“School prayer?”

David and Tubby engaged in endless friendly conversations about the state of the world. Harvard-educated David, director of Promise the Children, a conservative organization that lobbied for family values and social change, liked to share his philosophy with anybody who would listen. High school dropout Tubby could hold his own.

“Actually this time I think he’s talking about the need to police the media,” she said.

Tubby stepped away from the windshield, satisfied. “God bless him.”

God had blessed all the Bronsons. Faith knew it and was grateful. Beautiful, intelligent children, good health, prosperity, and a marriage built on common values. If lately it seemed she and David were no longer connecting, wasn’t it a small thing and easily remedied with a little work?

Beginning tonight?

“Well, I’m off,” Faith said. “Thanks for your help.” Once she started the engine she gave a quick wave and Tubby waved back.

Out on the road again their conversation nagged at her. She had spent the drive trying not to think about the problems in her marriage, but clearly they were coiled under the surface. Just a casual comment or two and they had sprung to life again.

Faith loved David. In fact he was the only man she had ever loved. At twenty-two she had fallen head over heels for him, and she still pinched herself when she realized that elegant, charismatic David Bronson had chosen her as his wife.

David loved her. That wasn’t in doubt. David had never looked at another woman during their fifteen years of marriage. He worked too hard, and he was often away from home, but he was a devoted husband and father. She was the envy of most of her friends. David lived the values he preached.

The recent problems in their marriage were subtle. Their relationship had always been more about love than passion. They had clicked at their first meeting, talking until dawn and every night after until all the things they’d never told anyone else had been said. She had been thrilled by his touch, but even more thrilled by his rapt attention. For the first time in her life someone had found her fascinating, and she had melted gratefully into marriage, a warm puddle of unending devotion.

If their sex life had quickly grown routine, Faith had been philosophical. She and David were soulmates. She would gratefully trade the emotional excesses other women

claimed to experience for the stability and tenderness she and David had built. She found satisfaction in their lovemaking and more satisfaction in their life together.

Until recently.

Faith slowed the car to take the long curve on Seward Road that led to the gravel drive to their cottage. Ten years ago David had bought the cottage with its fifteen wooded acres as an anniversary gift. He had promised they would steal occasional weekends without the children, but they never had. Instead she had contented herself with making the cottage a second home for all of them. Someday in the future when the children were grown, she and David could come here whenever they wanted to rekindle the spark of romance.

But this morning, as the sun lifted from the horizon, she'd wondered if her patience was partially at fault for the way that spark had gone out. In the last months their sex life had gone from routine to non-existent. David had been away more than usual, but even when he was home he claimed exhaustion when she cuddled close. He held her off with promises, but she was fast becoming aware that for once in his life, David was not living up to his word.

The fault had to be hers. Not enough patience or too much. Not enough compassion for the pressure he was under, or too much compassion and too few demands. David was a man who responded to the needs of others, and maybe he had to be reminded that his needs shouldn't be pushed aside.

With a resulting burst of enthusiasm she had planned this night away. Faith had packed her car with candles and gourmet food, fresh flowers and massage oil, then topped it all off with a gift she'd bought herself and never worn, a sheer lace teddy with ribbon bows that were just waiting for the right masculine fingers to untie them.

She made the turn into their driveway and slowed to a crawl. In the distance the highest peaks still sparkled with a post-Thanksgiving snow, but the winter-brown clearing where the cottage stood was carpeted with pine needles and dried leaves.

The same winter-brown clearing where David's silver Honda Accord peeked out from behind a tree.

Faith pulled up to the cottage and turned off the ignition. She had missed David at his hotel that morning, but she assumed she had missed him by minutes, not some portion of a day. When Tubby claimed to have seen him last night, she had thought nothing of it. But David *was* here, and clearly had been for awhile.

She sat in the car, her cheeks warming in embarrassment. She had counted on time to set the scene. She planned to have candles flickering and soft music on the stereo. Now she felt foolish. What could she do? Walk into the cottage with seduction in multiple shopping bags and hope he didn't laugh?

Her embarrassment segued into something darker. Obviously David had finished his meeting sooner than planned and taken an earlier flight back. Instead of coming home to help her make Christmas for the children, he had used this bonus time--as he sometimes did--to come to the cottage where he could work undisturbed.

David hadn't thought that she might welcome his help, or that she might welcome another adult in the house for a change. As he had all too often lately, David had thought first of his job.

For the moment she decided to leave the bags in the car. It was time she and David had a talk. She believed their marriage was more her domain than his. If problems had to be explored, she would have to be their emotional Lewis and Clark. If all went well, he could help her carry the bags into the house and unpack them.

She decided not to announce her arrival because his first reaction would tell her everything. She opened and closed the car door quietly, although the cottage was built of stone and nearly soundproof. She could picture him holed away in the knotty pine study. It was the first room he'd furnished. She wondered if this was the first time he had come here to work *without* telling her.

What else didn't she know about her husband?

The door was locked and she fished for her keys. It creaked when she pushed it open, but David didn't come into the living room. The family hadn't come often since school began. The house was silent and musty, as if he'd been too busy to open the winter-smudged windows and air out the rooms. Now she noted dust on the fireplace mantel and one labyrinthian spider's web hanging from an exposed beam in the corner. The cottage was warm enough, but no fire burned on the hearth. She padded across the oak floor to the hallway at the right and started toward David's study.

A moan stopped her. She froze. She wasn't sure where the sound had come from, but surely not from the study, which was just ahead to her right. The sound had come from one of the rooms at the hallway's end.

Faith couldn't seem to make her feet move. She listened intently, not daring to breathe. Just as she was about to call out for reassurance, she heard the sound of something scraping across the floor, then a low laugh.

Gratefully she closed her eyes and pictured her husband in their bedroom. David was moving furniture or trying to open a window. One window was out of reach without using a step stool they kept under the bed. She couldn't count the number of times he'd banged his toes on it when he kicked his shoes out of the way at bedtime. He had probably decided to take a nap, taken off his shoes. . .

She finished the scenario in her head as she started back down the hallway. This time she made enough noise to wake bears sleeping in the forest. She was close enough now to gauge his reaction when he saw her.

“David? Are you in there?”

Hand on the knob, she paused. She wasn't sure why. She had a sudden vision of that morning's spectacular sunrise. God's announcement.

And a premonition that she wasn't going to like the news.

She opened the door anyway. Sunshine flooded the room and the two men basking in it. One was her husband, naked from the waist down, standing in front of a pedestal mirror that had been dragged to that spot. The other was a man she had seen before, but never like this, never naked with his body embracing his lover's. Abraham Stein, the liberal journalist who had so often bedeviled Promise the Children, cradled David in his muscular arms, like a child with his favorite holiday gift.

David's patrician face drained of all color. As a stunned Faith watched, he crossed his arms, covering his erection with his hands.

In the last lucid moment she would have for the rest of the day, Faith realized that David was not protecting himself from Abraham Stein's embrace. He was protecting his sexuality from the unwelcome stare of the woman he had been married to for fifteen years.