

Butterfly in a Hurricane

By Kerry Reid

A polite *whit-whit* reinforced the lights flashing in Lydia's rear-view mirror.

Shit. "I see you, dammit." Just when she was thinking she might actually get to the interview on time. She whacked the palm of her hand on the steering wheel. Her eyes stung with tears of frustration.

She pulled her Elantra onto the shoulder off Route 41 and pressed one button to open the window, another to turn off the radio. The blast of summer's first heat wave in South Florida beat its way into the car, turning a prickle of nervous sweat into an all-over saltwater bath. She leaned across the center console and retrieved her registration from the glove compartment.

When she straightened up again, he was there, a square jaw, dark hair and mirrored sunglasses. Behind those, she couldn't tell what he was looking at, but it was something below her chin. One hand rested on her windowsill, the other on his gun. His name badge said *R. Fuentes.*

Her skirt had ridden up as she reached across the car. She itched to pull it down, but that would only draw his attention to her legs, if it wasn't already there. Why had she chosen *this* dress this morning? The long Indian print would have been just fine. For that matter, why was she doing this article at all? The paper would hardly pay enough for her gas. Much less a speeding ticket.

"License and registration, please, miss."

She complied. His fingers brushed hers as he took them, and the butterflies in her stomach turned somersaults. Startled, she darted a glance at his face.

He slid his sunglasses down his nose half an inch and peered at her over the top. Oh, so blue! Bradley Cooper blue. Or Paul Newman. She'd watched enough of those old movies with her parents; she ought to know. Odd for a Hispanic man, though. *Look at something else, Lydia.*

His lips curved a little at the corners. *Is he laughing at me?* Well, why shouldn't he? She must look like a wreck. Her dress clung damp around her ribs like a beach towel left out in the rain, and she always turned bright red when she got hot. She shoved a lock of hair behind her ear.

The cop cleared his throat. Just a small sound, like he couldn't quite get his voice started. "Lydia Koehler DiMarco. Is Koehler your maiden name?" He pronounced it wrong, of course. He had no accent that she could detect. And *he* wasn't sweating.

"No. Just a family name." As if it was any of his business. "And it's pronounced Kay-ler."

"Really? I never heard of that. Had a friend in school with that name, but he pronounced it Ko-ler."

"Many people do. But in my family, it's Kay-ler."

"Huh. Learn something every day, don't you?"

Lydia ground her teeth. "Listen, I... I'm late for an interview. Could we get this over with?"

He pursed his mouth.

What does that expression mean? She'd never seen it in childhood sessions with her psychiatrist or in those *Read These 10 Emotions* tests on Facebook.

"A job interview?"

"No. It's for an article I'm writing."

"Ah." His gaze scanned the passenger seat, which held her notebook and the strappy sandals she'd bought just for this dress.

Shit, was it illegal to drive barefoot? The shoes were so uncomfortable she couldn't stand to put them on before she absolutely had to.

"Do you know you were eighteen miles over the limit?"

She'd already told him she was late, what more could she say? She tried a rueful smile. No telling how it turned out.

"Wait here, Ms. Lydia Kayler DiMarco." He pushed his glasses up where they belonged and tapped his fist twice on her windowsill before walking back to the silver sedan.

She tugged her skirt down and turned the air conditioner up full blast while she waited. Dug a Kleenex out of the center console and mopped her face. Ugh. Why had she returned to Florida after college? She could do freelance writing anywhere and at the moment, she would give a lot for a cold winter day. Of course, it wasn't winter in Chicago, either...

She checked the mirrors again. His silhouette still sat in the car, no doubt enjoying his own air conditioning. His computer check couldn't possibly take long—there was nothing to know about her.

God, she hated being late. Hated herself more for letting it happen. The first thing she had to do when the cop left was call and cancel the appointment. She'd already rescheduled it once—she wouldn't do it again. If the paper really needed another article about the coming hurricane season, they'd have to find someone else.

She closed her eyes and leaned against the headrest, breathing deeply as her therapist had taught her. It didn't help.

What the hell is taking so long? She jerked around to get an un-mirrored look at him dawdling back there, but her right hand met his as she grabbed for the windowsill. She flinched away, but he caught her hand and held it, just for a second. Afterwards, it felt different, like it didn't quite belong to her.

"Don't worry, miss. You have a clean driving record, so I'm going to let you off with a warning. You stay within ten miles over the limit, most of our deputies won't stop you."

She pushed her hair back again.

He returned her documents. "Sorry it took so long. Hope you're not too late."

She was. Much too late. But it really wasn't his fault. "It's okay. And thank you."

Fuentes pulled off his glasses and leaned down to her level. "I... You be careful." Then he straightened and gave her a little salute. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Lydia Kayler DiMarco."

"Um... Thanks. Would it be really rude to say I hope I never see you again?"

He grinned, showing straight white teeth. "Next time, I'd have to give you a ticket. But maybe in different circumstances?"

What was he asking? She couldn't think of a thing to say. She clamped her lips shut and stared blindly through the windshield.

After a minute, he stood away from her door. "See you around," he said. Then he walked back to his car and pulled out onto 41.

Just go home and start the day over, Lydia. Forget the traffic stop. And do NOT think about Hispanic cops with stunning blue eyes.

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Roy Fuentes drove south to the county line and turned around. Good thing it was August traffic instead of January, 'cause he didn't remember a thing about it, didn't consciously see anything outside his own brain.

Lydia. Who the hell was named Lydia? Grandmothers, maybe. Not twenty-four-year-old innocents who looked like *that*. Long, perfect thighs and that sophisticated dress beneath her pretty, delicate face. And those brown eyes full of... What? Trust gone sour? Like she'd found a land mine in her own garden. Made him want to throw himself on that mine so she wouldn't get hurt.

What did she think he was going to do? Yank her out of her little car at gunpoint, bend her over the hood and pat her down? Ridiculous. It made him crazy that good people were so afraid of cops.

Oh, he'd have loved to get a good look at her. Pat down every inch, see just how big her boobs were under the drapy neckline of that dress. But she'd been so nervous, he felt guilty even fantasizing about it.

Back to work, Roy. He snapped on the radar and cruised through the light at Bonita Beach Road. There was an ambulance in front of Perkins, but he'd have heard something on the scanner if they needed assistance. Lydia lived over there beyond the restaurant. Some of those little streets near the Imperial River were pretty nice.

Yeah, and some were threadbare, little more than trailer parks. Surely, this Lydia—*his* Lydia—didn't live on one of those.

He aimed to find out. He couldn't ask her for a date, but he sure as hell wanted to know more about her. Terry Street, then over to Old 41 to access the roads south of the river...

No, Sea Grape Drive was okay. He breathed easier. Except for a couple of big new places on the cul de sac, the houses were modest, but they were well kept, their lawns mowed and flowers planted here and there. Even a sea grape or two.

Lydia *Kay-ler* DiMarco lived three houses from the river. Roy chuckled, remembering her insistence on the pronunciation. Probably a stickler for spelling and grammar, too, especially if she was a writer. Maybe she would proofread his reports before he turned them in. He could almost see the two of them, checking them over in bed before lights-out. She wore a sexy little teddy and some sexy little reading glasses perched on her nose. He wore nothing.

The house was small but immaculate, freshly painted in a pale yellow. Fresh landscaping too, the bushes small and inexpensive. The yard benefited from a big old oak that stood between her house and the one next door, shading both of them and the... Damn! Her car sat hidden in that shade, right there in the driveway. She hadn't gone to her interview after all. Now, he felt like a heel for stopping her. He could have let her go on her way. And he would never have met her at all.

Yeah, and you wouldn't be making a fool of yourself now, trying to go slow but not slow enough to be obvious, because you don't want her to see you even though you DO.

No other vehicle kept her little blue Hyundai company. Didn't mean she lived alone, of course. She had worn no ring, but that didn't mean much either. If she had a man, he presumably—hopefully—had a job. He'd be working at 2:00 on a Tuesday afternoon. Roy hoped the guy treated her right. She seemed so fragile.

He stopped the car in the cul de sac by the river, where anyone might stop to admire those big houses and get a glimpse of the water. Except he looked the other way, towards her house. Yup, neat as a pin. Not much more to see.

What would she be doing right now? Maybe stripping off that dress, taking a shower...

Nope, don't wanna go there, Roy.

Lydia.

No, it's Ms. DiMarco. You're a police officer now, not a Cuban citrus farmer. Act like one.

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Lydia sat at her kitchen table with a mug of oolong and gazed out at her little back yard. Showered and changed into her uniform of shorts and a T-shirt, she felt human again. Or as close as she ever got. By the time she'd turned seven, she had known she was different, a human who had no clue how to deal with other humans. She'd spent all of first grade with the same fifteen kids without ever figuring out which name went with which face.

Alone in a corner, she had read books from the third-grade classroom. She dissolved into tears of frustration when another child had the toy she wanted, or cut in line, or when she didn't understand a lesson on the first try. And oh, how she hated group projects! The kids who didn't do their part, the kids who goofed off, the kids who called her *weirdo* and *dummy*—until it came time to write the report, when they were only too happy to hand it all over to her. Her report cards showed excellent marks on everything but socialization; that one was always dismal. Her parents had taken her to doctors all over town before she was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. She'd learned a lot of coping mechanisms, but she would never be like normal people.

Her laptop sat open in front of her. After half an hour searching the sheriff's website for any sign of R. Fuentes, she'd given up. They didn't mention the regular patrol officers, and she could think of a lot of men's names starting with *R*. She'd be wasting her time looking for him anywhere else. In any case, she was only fantasizing about an impossibility. Impossibly attractive and a cop besides.

She heard a child's voice, high and excited, and a moment later her neighbor's daughter, Carla, appeared around the corner of the house. Lydia tensed, preparing herself for the onslaught of affection. The girl ran toward the back steps, her mother trudging behind in dress and heels. "Carlita, slow down. Remember to knock."

The knock came, and the child let herself in before Lydia reached the door. "Look, Miss Lydia! Look what I wrote in school! My teacher said it's the best in the class. She's gonna put it on the wall, but I told her I have to bring it home to show *you* first."

Lydia flinched from the creased pages waving madly in her face, even as she recognized how ridiculous that was. Then she took them from Carla's hand and flattened them carefully on the table. "Okay. But let's see, first I have to start the coffee." She'd set up the machine earlier, so she just had to press the button. "And say hi to your mother."

Rosario extended Lydia's quick hug into a long one, as she usually did. In the year since they became neighbors, the Venezuelan woman had appointed herself Lydia's best friend and friendship mentor. And after a year, those hugs still felt like penance, a lesson she had not yet learned. However hard she tried to relax, Lydia still felt stiff and awkward. Rosario had likened it to hugging a life-sized wooden doll. But if it went on long enough, it began to calm her like the weighted blanket she'd had as a child, like swaddling a crying baby. This one went on long enough.

Lydia turned to put her arm around Carla's thin shoulders. "How was the first day of third grade? Do you like your teacher?" A silly question. Carla liked everyone. If Lydia's best friend was Rosario, Carla was her second best. That didn't mean much; her online friendships were honest and deep, but these two generous souls in the house next door had added a new dimension to her life.

"Oh *yes!* Her name is Ms. Arthur, and she has curly yellow hair and a laugh like Santa Claus and this *big* smile..."

Lydia rescued the coffee mug from the child's out-flung arms and filled it with the steaming hazelnut concoction Rosario liked.

They sat at the table and chatted about Carla's day, Carla's friends, and Carla's new classroom. Rosario talked of the lines at Office Depot to buy last-minute school supplies and her half-day behind the teller desk handling other people's money.

Carla blew through her straw, making bubbles in her lemonade.

"Stop it, Carlita. You make a mess," complained her mother, although she hadn't. All Rosario's rules never seemed to affect Carla's sunny exuberance. The girl's boundless energy made Lydia nervous, but it was hard to feel depressed when Carla came in, a wide smile on her narrow face, chattering about whatever flitted through her brain. That worked better than any of the medications Lydia had tried, and the only side effect was laughter that might spring from nowhere at the memory of something the child had said.

"How will the schedule work out?" Lydia asked.

Rosario blew a sigh of relief. "The bus no arrive until 4:25, so I will be home most days."

"Just let me know if you can't," Lydia said. "I can take her."

"Oh yes!" Carla crowed. "You can stay late every day, Mama, and I'll come home with Miss Lydia." Somehow she managed to dance, while sitting right there in her chair. She jostled the table and the computer came back to life.

Rosario glanced at the screen. "What you want with the police department, Lydia *mia*? You in some kind of trouble?"

"Of course not. I was just looking for someone. I almost got a speeding ticket today, but he was nice enough to..."

"Ohhh, he thought you were pretty." Rosario moved the mouse around. "Did you find him? Show me."

"No, they only have the top people on there."

Across the table, Carla stuck her arms straight out from her shoulders and tilted from side to side, singing. "Lydia's got a boyfriend, Lydia's got a boyfriend. Is he handsome, Lydia?"

Lydia felt the blood rush to her face. "No! I mean yes, but..." Being teased, even by a nine-year-old, she still found ridiculously humiliating. "I don't even know his first name. Besides that, he's..." She flicked a glance across at Carla, doodling on Lydia's notepad. No, she couldn't talk about *that* with Carla in the room.

"Carlita," said Rosario, "you go outside now. Maybe you find the neighbor's cat."

"Oh, *sí*, Mama!" Carla carried her glass to the sink and ran outside. The door slammed behind her.

Rosario turned to Lydia, eyebrows raised, waiting for her to go on.

Lydia deflated. "Well, he's a policeman. And besides that, he's... well, he's Hispanic." One side of her friend's face screwed up in a peculiar expression. Lydia had no idea what it meant.

"You know," Rosario said, "I am Hispanic too." How to read her tone of voice? There was laughter in it, Lydia thought, but anger too.

"Oh, please don't be offended." She reached out and touched Rosario's arm for just a second, then pulled away awkwardly. "It's just... The only Hispanic man I know is Luis and he scares me."

Rosario shook her head. "He is *un diablo*, you are right. I don't believe I married him. The worst decision I ever made and it is the one that stays with me like..." She flicked her hand toward the computer. "Like a crime record. Lydia, I know it is hard for you to see people for real, and to trust them. But you are one silly girl if you think all Latino men are like him."

Lydia picked up her spoon and stirred her tea, long gone cold. *Silly* was the kindest possible word for what she had said. Ignorant, thoughtless, mean. And maybe unpardonable. She would never say such a thing online, because she would have time to *think* first.

“I know. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

Rosario waved the apology aside. “Is like saying all white men are nice. Do you believe that, *amiga?*”

“Of course not.” Lydia had Asperger’s but she wasn’t stupid. She read the news; there were plenty of white men doing despicable things. Her only boyfriend hadn’t been nice. But he was no Luis. They’d lived together for two months and he’d never called her names, never hit her. He had a wife and daughter now, and Lydia was sure he didn’t hit them, either. Luis, though... Despite the divorce, he still lurked in the shadows, a constant threat to Rosario and happy little Carla.

“I still think you should get a restraining order,” Lydia said.

“I don’t want to cause so much trouble for him.”

“Why not? He makes you miserable and contributes nothing.”

“*Sí.*” Rosario gazed out the window at her daughter, trying to tease a bored-looking cat into playing with a stick. “But they deport him, and Carlita has no papa.”

Lydia had no answer for that. It was true that Carla loved her father fiercely in spite of his shortcomings. Maybe a devil dad was better than no dad at all.

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