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ONE

“I just don’t think it’s that good,” said Denise. “It doesn’t do anything for me.”

Becky bit back a smile, even though Denise couldn’t see it over the phone. They’d had this conversation every other week for two months now. It still made for a good distraction, though, and helped fill up the time until Ben got home.

It always worried her a bit when Ben was away. Ben was in charge of high-security projects. Mostly weapons. Often in high-risk areas.

Granted, this had been one of the lowest-risk work trips he’d ever taken. Just four days in San Diego. And on a non-weapons project.

“I mean, Marty really likes it,” Denise continued, “but it just seems like nothing but boobs and snow and blood. And the frozen zombie things. I just don’t get them. It feels like not a lot ever actually happens, y’know? Five years and they’re still talking about winter.”

Becky gathered up some socks, underwear, two T-shirts, a skirt, and a bra that had been scattered across the bedroom floor. She was a horrible slob whenever she had the house to herself. Worse than she’d been in college, for some reason she couldn’t figure out. “So why do you keep watching it?”

“Ehh. Marty really likes it. He won’t admit it, but I just think he likes all the boobs. Are you guys still watching?”

She walked to the bathroom, and shoved the armload of clothes into the hamper. The bathroom was a mess, too. Her yoga clothes and more underwear. How had she gone through so much underwear in four days? “We’re a couple episodes behind, but yeah,” she said. “I think he likes the boobs, too. And the dragons.”

Becky put her foot in the trash can and mashed down the small pile of bathroom trash, just enough so it didn’t look like it was overflowing. “We were talking about doing a DVR marathon this weekend. Something to relax a bit after his trip.”

“When’s he get back?”

“His plane landed a little while ago,” she said. “He sent me a text saying he had to stop at the office and give a quick report to his boss. Probably be home any minute now.”

“Cleaning up your mess?”

She laughed. “You know me too well.”

“I should let you go, then.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Give me a call next week,” Denise said. “Maybe we can all do dinner at that new Japanese place.”

“Okay.”

She hung up and tossed the phone on the bed. She looked around and tried to spot anything else he could tease her for leaving out. There was a wineglass on her nightstand, and a plate with a few cheesecake crumbs. And another wineglass on her dresser. God, she was a slob. And a lush.

It crossed her mind now and then that she should try to be one of the good wives. The ones who kept the house clean, and had dinner waiting for her husband when he came home. When they’d met, she’d actually been dressed as a 1950s housewife at a Halloween party,

complete with martini glass, apron, and a copy of an old *Good Housekeeping* list of duties she was supposed to perform. He'd laughed, said she didn't look like the kind of woman who sat around waiting on a husband, and bought her a drink. They'd ended Halloween night with a few things that were not covered in the *Good Housekeeping* article. Fourteen months later they were married.

She gathered up the glasses and the plate. She could swing by her art studio in the back and grab the dishes there. There was definitely a plate next to her computer from today's lunch, possibly a wineglass from last night. She could rinse them in the sink, maybe.

As she reached the studio door, a faint rasp of sliding metal echoed from the front of the house. A key in a lock. There was a click, and then the hinge squeaked. They'd been trying to fix that damned thing for years.

The front door.

"Hey, babe," she called out, setting all the dishes down on the desk. "How was your flight?" Ah, well. He wouldn't notice them right away in the studio. And it wasn't like he didn't know her by now. She took a few steps toward the hall, then decided to take the back staircase. It was closer, and she'd probably meet him in the kitchen.

Something tickled her brain as her foot hit the first step. The lack of something. The usual chain of sounds she heard when Ben got home had been broken. She hadn't heard the hinge squeak again, or the door close. Or his keys hitting the table in the front hall.

"Babe?"

She lifted her foot from the step and walked back down the hall. From the top of the staircase she could see their front door. It sat open by almost a foot. She could smell the lawn outside and hear the traffic heading for the beltway.

Ben wasn't there. She didn't see his keys on the table. His briefcase wasn't shoved under the table where he always tossed it.

Becky took a few steps down the stairs. She peered over the banister to see if he was lurking in the hall. It wouldn't be the first time he'd leaped out to scare her.

The hallway was empty.

She walked downstairs to the front door. It hung open in a relaxed, casual way. The same way it did when she was heading out to grab the mail or to growl at Pat from down the street for letting her dog crap on their lawn.

Had she left the door open when she went out for the mail earlier? Maybe just enough for the wind to push it open? Had she imagined the sound of the key? Ben was due home any minute. She might've just heard the hinge squeak and added everything else.

She leaned out the door. It was cool. This late in the afternoon, the front of the house was in the shade.

Ben's car was in the driveway. It was right where it always landed, in front of the nearer garage door. She could see a faint shimmer of heat above the hood.

Becky pushed the door shut. The hinges squeaked. The latch clicked.

"Are you in here, babe?"

Floorboards settled. The air in the house shifted. Someone was in the kitchen. She recognized the creak of the tiles near the dishwasher.

"Ben?" His name echoed in the house. She took a few strides toward the back of the house. "Where are you?"

The silence slowed her down, then brought her to a stop.

"If this is supposed to be funny, it's not."

Nothing.

She weighed her options. There was still a chance this was a trick. A joke gone bad. Ben would leap out and make her shriek and she'd hit him and then welcome him home.

It didn't feel like a trick. The house felt wrong. Ben's car might be in the driveway, but there was a stranger moving through their home.

They owned a gun. A Glock 17 or 19 or something. She'd taken four classes and gone shooting at the range three times. It was a badass, secret agent-level gun. That's what Ben had said. They'd probably never need it, but better to have it and not need it than need it and not . . .

The Glock was upstairs. In their bedroom. In the nightstand. She could take six long steps back and be at the main staircase.

Or take three steps forward and get a view into the kitchen.

She took two steps forward.

Ben's briefcase and travel bag sat in the hallway. It was a beat-up, gym bag sort of thing he'd had for years. He still used it because it held three or four days' worth of clothes, but it fit in an overhead compartment. Cut half an hour off his travel time to not be waiting on luggage.

"Babe, I swear to God, I'm calling the fucking cops in two minutes." Her voice echoed in the house. "This isn't funny."

A long groan sounded above her. The noise of stressed wood. The spot by her studio, close to the door. Neither of them had stepped on it in over a year because it was so damned loud.

Whoever was upstairs had stepped on it.

They were *upstairs!*

She looked up at the ceiling. Three seconds passed, and another board squeaked. She could almost see the footsteps through the plaster. Someone was circling around the house. Straight through to the kitchen, up the back staircase she'd had her foot on just five minutes ago, and into the upstairs hallway. They were near the bedroom.

Near the gun.

Jesus, why hadn't she grabbed the gun as soon as things got weird?

But why was Ben's luggage in the house? Why was his car in the driveway? Had someone grabbed him at the airport? Did he get carjacked?

There was a panic number she was supposed to call. In case something happened to him, if someone tried to get to him through her. He'd given it to her, and she'd never even put it in her phone.

It was in the desk in her studio. Of course.

Becky stepped into the kitchen and grabbed her cell phone from the counter. Then she grabbed a knife from the big block. A wedding present from one of Ben's old college friends. It was a great set. The blade of the butcher knife was almost fourteen inches long and sharp as hell. And the handle sat well in her hand.

They'd all laughed at the idea that knives were a bad-luck wedding gift.

She slid her fingers over the phone's screen and tapped in 911. She held off pressing call. There was still a chance this was a bad joke. Some stupid plan to get a scream or a laugh or excitement sex or something, but he sure as hell wasn't getting any off this.

And it wasn't his sort of thing.

She circled through the living room. It had a thick carpet, almost silent to walk across. Just make it through the house, give Ben one last time to admit he was an idiot, and then out the door. She'd call 911 from the front yard.

She was halfway across the living room when she heard the sound of metal sliding across metal. It was a fast, back-and-forth with a hard snap at the end. She'd heard it a lot at the range. She'd been the one making it.

She swallowed.

Becky looked down at her phone. Could she raise her voice enough to talk? Did the person upstairs know where she was in the house? What did 911 do when they got a silent call? Did they trace it and send a car? Did they hang up?

She had to get out of the house now.

The front door was closer, but it was a clear shot—bad choice of words—a clear *line of sight* for anyone in the upstairs hall. Almost straight from their bedroom door to the front door.

The back door was farther away, but there was more weaving and someone would have to get much closer to aim—to *see* her. She'd have a chance to make the call. But the backyard was a wall of fences around a pool they hadn't filled for the summer yet. She'd have to run back around to the side gate. And no one would be able to see her. Maybe not even hear her, with all the noise from that new house they were putting up one block over.

Plenty of time and opportunity for someone to grab her and drag her back into the house. It had to be the front door.

Becky gripped the knife, made sure her finger was still near the call button, and took three long strides across the living room. The carpet absorbed her footsteps, but she heard the fabric of her jeans and felt the air move around her.

Her foot hit the hall and she heard the creak of the second step from the top of the staircase. She froze. They were on the stairs. They'd see her going for the front door.

She should've gone out the back. She still could. But she'd have to be fast. They'd hear her for sure.

She ran for the door. Feet thumped on the stairs behind her. She reached for the knob. "Stop!"

She turned and raised her knife. "You fuckhead," she gasped.

Ben stood on the staircase, four steps from the bottom. One foot was still on the fifth. He was wearing the charcoal suit with the cranberry shirt that looked so good on him. The Glock was in his hand, its barrel pointed in her direction. He clutched his own phone in his other hand.

"Put the knife down."

Becky's shoulders slumped and she tossed the knife on the table. It slid to a stop right where his keys usually landed. "You scared the piss out of me, you jerk. I thought someone was in the house."

He lowered himself to the next step. The pistol rose up. She could see enough of the muzzle to tell it was aimed at her.

"I've called the police," he hissed. "They're on the line right now."

She glanced past him up the staircase, then her eyes went back to the gun. Had they *both* been playing tag with an intruder? "Okay," she said. "Calm down and point that somewhere else."

Ben stared at her and came down two more steps. The pistol didn't waver. His wide eyes flitted to the knife, then past her to the front door, and over into the living room. "Where is she?"

"Babe," she said, her eyes on the pistol, "you're freaking me out with the—"

"Where is she?" he shouted. His voice echoed in the hall. The glass in the door trembled behind her.

She shrieked and her mind stumbled for a moment. "She? She who?"

Ben stepped off the staircase and glared at her. He raised the pistol. The barrel was just a black square with a hole in it. He was aiming it right between her eyes. “What have you done with her? What do you want with us?” He took a step toward her, and then another.

Becky couldn't tell if he was angry or sad. The black hole kept pulling her eyes away from his face. It was just a few feet away. She could see the little trembles and shifts as he squeezed the grip. “Babe,” she pleaded, “what are you talking about—”

“Who are you?” he yelled. “*Where the hell is my wife?*”

