

SAVED BY FEAR

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Rita Kolinger weaved her way around the maze of boxes to answer the doorbell. Her first visitor. How exciting!

She breathed a sigh of relief knowing it wouldn't be her mother standing on the other side. They had just hung up the phone five minutes ago. She had assured her mother repeatedly that everything was perfect: the apartment, the college, the classes.

"Yes Mom, the fridge is stocked ... no, not junk food ... I promise I won't skip breakfast. Mom ... Mom! I gotta go. Someone's at the door. Love you too."

No one had actually been at the door. Rita loved her mother dearly and understood how difficult it was for the family when their only child chose to spread her wings and leave the nest, but.... As she made her way to the door, the weight of guilt from the little white lie lifted from her shoulders. It could not really be considered a lie anymore; just a premature prediction.

A girl about Rita's age stood in the hallway holding a boxed apple pie from Fresh'n Fast Deli.

"Hello," Rita said, beaming with pride.

The girl returned her smile. "My name's Sarah Cartwright. I live down the hall in 3B." They stood in awkward silence for several seconds. "Oh, here, I brought this for you to welcome you to the neighborhood." Extending her arms, Sarah handed the pie to Rita. "It's not exactly homemade. I don't cook. That's why the building is still standing."

They laughed.

Rita invited her neighbor inside. "Sorry about the mess," she said. "I just moved in a couple of days ago."

"Hey, no problem," Sarah said. "I've been here six months and I'm still living out of boxes. I figure by the time I graduate, I'll have everything unpacked and in its proper place. Then I can start all over again." She paused, studying the bare walls with a quizzical frown. "But you know there is one advantage to living off campus. You don't have nosey roommates living out of your boxes, as well."

Sarah was warm, funny, and open, reminding Rita of her old friends back home. She instantly felt a strong bond with her.

Sarah shifted her weight from one foot to the other, wringing her hands nervously.

"Well, I'd better be going. Just wanted to stop by and say hi."

Rita was digging through a box in the kitchen for plates and silverware. They were in here somewhere. "Would you like to stay for some pie?" she asked, confused by Sarah's sudden itch to flee. Had she offended

her in some way?

"I'd better go," Sarah insisted, apparently eager to depart. "I work second shift at the Conoco down on 7th Street. I don't want to be late." She turned to leave. Looking back, she added, "Stop in sometime and I'll give you a ten-percent discount on whatever you purchase."

"Thanks," Rita said, relaxing a bit. "I'll take you up on the offer."

As the weeks progressed, Sarah grew to be the sister Rita had always longed for. They walked to classes together, ate lunch together, and spent many hours stretched out along the plush carpeting studying book after book in Sarah's den. On weekends, they rented horror flicks and returned to Sarah's apartment, 3B, to hover over a bowl of butter-smothered popcorn.

One evening while walking home after a late supper at Bell's Diner a few blocks from the apartment complex, Rita said, "Why don't you come over to my place for coffee?"

The late autumn air was crisp and invigorating. The star-splattered sky was absolutely flawless. Halloween decorations adorned the lawns of neighboring houses: haystacks, scarecrows, jack-o'-lanterns guarding front porches through flickering hollow eyes. Pint-size ghosts, ghouls, and witches raced past with overflowing bags of candy, giggling and shouting 'hoorays' over their loot. Rita's heart ached for home. How she missed nights like this in the country, coming home to a warm kitchen and the smell of hot chocolate after taking her cousins trick-or-treating. She wanted company tonight, craved company; someone who could make her laugh and take her mind off her longings for home.

"I don't know," Sarah said, avoiding Rita's gaze. "It's late."

"It's nine o'clock and it's the weekend. Come on. Just for a couple of hours." Rita knew it was useless to plead. Sarah had spent a total of two minutes in her apartment, and that was only because she was delivering a pie.

An owl hooted from a large maple across the street. Its warning seemed to add to the tension building between friends.

Sarah laughed nervously. "I guess I'm just superstitious."

"Superstitious? About what?"

"I don't know. Well, your place ... because of what happened there."

Rita stopped walking, turning to face Sarah. "What are you talking about?"

Sarah started shaking and Rita did not believe it was the night air chilling her friend. There was a haunting look in her eyes. She said, "About a year before I moved in, there was a young married couple living in 3A."

"My apartment."

"Yeah. I think their name was Stanton. The landlord, Glen Riley, said they were great people, loving, friendly. Never gave him a bit of trouble. They paid their rent like clockwork. Mr. Stanton worked nights at the hospital, so every morning when his shift ended, he would stop by Glen's office and have a cup of coffee. You know, hang out awhile and chat. Then several mornings passed and Mr. Stanton failed to show, so Glen went up to check on them. He knew they were home. Their car was still parked in the garage. He thought that maybe they had come down with something, the flu. Glen became worried when no one answered the door, so he used his key and let himself in. There was blood everywhere."

Rita's eyes were round as saucers.

Sarah went on to explain that Mrs. Stanton was found on the living room floor, naked, stabbed dozens of times. Mr. Stanton was in the master bedroom sitting in a corner, a gunshot wound to the head. The police and medical examiner's report agreed it was the result of a domestic dispute. Mr. Stanton apparently became angry, killing his wife, then, stricken with grief by what he had done, turned on himself. Case closed.

"My God, that's horrible," Rita said. "But why didn't Mr. Riley tell me this before I moved in?"

Sarah shrugged.

"Only apartment available, and Glen Riley loves his money."

Rita tossed and turned. It was only 11:45, and she wondered how she would make it through the rest of the night. Ashamed for leaving a lamp on, she felt like kicking herself for being so insecure. She hadn't needed a night-light since she was ten. What was she so afraid of? Memories? Visions of blood-splattered walls danced in her head. For God's sake, they weren't even her memories.

Angry clouds gathered outside. It seemed odd. The weatherman had predicted a week of sunshine and cloudless skies, no storms in the forecast. Rita hated storms. As a child, she would hide beneath her bed at the first crash of thunder. Now here she was in the city, three stories above ground level. What purpose would it serve to hide beneath the bed? She would only be under more weight to crush her body if the pounding wind decided to level the place.

I am not afraid! I am not afraid!

Squeezing her eyelids shut, Rita pulled the covers over her head. At least now the blinding reflection of lightening on the windowpane didn't seem so fierce. In need of comforting, she whispered her favorite childhood rhyme. "Ring around the rosy, a pocket full of posies. Ashes, ashes ... "

Thunder crashed, vibrating the walls. We all fall down! Giant drops of rain drummed on the windows. With another fierce boom, the lamp extinguished, its comforting beam vanishing. Rita lay motionless. Suddenly, the covers slid off her body, falling to the floor. The lamp flickered with life again. Her heart pounded against the wall of its prison. Sitting up, she searched the room for an intruder.

Footsteps in the hallway.

Rita gasped, but as reality set in, she relaxed a bit. "Sarah, I know you're here," she called out, not knowing whether to laugh or curse at the cruel joke her friend was playing. It was all so clear now. Sarah had told her that bogus story earlier tonight just to unnerve her, then sneaked inside the apartment to carry out the final version of the escapade. Mom had warned her that city folk were different; 'pranksters' are what she had called them.

The hardwood floor was chilly on her bare feet. Rita tiptoed down the corridor, playing into her friend's game of hide-and-seek. Searching the rooms one by one, then the closets, her stomach tingled with the anticipation of a sudden ear-piercing "Boo!" All corners proved devoid of crouching shadows.

She checked the locks on the door, propping a chair beneath the knob for good measure, and headed back to bed. She felt silly, allowing a little storm to mess with her mind in such a way. Retrieving the covers where they still lay on the floor at the foot her bed, Rita turned off the lamp, willingly allowing the blackness of night to envelop her.

Icy fingers probed her shoulder. Paralyzed, Rita denied the unmistakable sensation of a presence behind her. No one was here. No one was touching her. Nevertheless, she could not ignore his frigid breath whispering in her ear.

"Rita ... I am with you ... be afraid."

Across the room, a vase crashed against a wall. Falling to the floor, Rita slid beneath the bed.

Midnight. She lay frozen in a fetal position within the safety of her shelter. Persistent knocks echoed down the hallway. Who would be here at this hour? Sarah? No, she was determined never to set another foot in this apartment—Rita could see her point now. The only other person that left was her mother.

"Mom, I'm coming," she whispered, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't move. She couldn't scream for help. She wanted to run to the door, throw the chair aside, yet she feared the thing waiting silently between her and escape. Eventually, the knocking ceased.

Golden sunshine haloed the trees in their many splendid colors. Squirrels scampered playfully among the branches, welcoming the season of change.

Rita's season had changed too, but she could not embrace the turn with open arms. Standing in the doorway watching medics wheel the gurney towards the elevator, she didn't want to believe it was Sarah tucked inside the black vinyl bag.

Two officers stood in the third-floor corridor. Jotting notes in a small white tablet, the first officer remarked, "You know, it's not the first time this has happened here. Remember the young couple last year? Just wish we'd figured it out sooner."

The second officer nodded. "It's a shame all right. A damn shame."

Downstairs, Glen Riley was escorted to a patrol car in handcuffs.

Rita remembered the knocking on her door last night, the compelling need to leave this place, the fear holding her prisoner beneath the bed. "Rita ... I am with you ... be afraid."

Wiping a tear from her cheek, she whispered, "Thank you, Mr. Stanton."

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