

The thud came again

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Rose clicked the television on mute, straining her ear against the storm that splattered the roof with a mixture of rain and hail.

The soft thump came from the basement, as though someone, or something, had knocked a book to the floor. Rose gripped the arms of the chair and cursed her husband for leaving her alone on a night like this, knowing she was fearful of storms, empty houses and prowlers, however imaginary they might be. She'd already lit every lamp and overhead light in the house, but they failed to dispel the damp, dreary feeling of impending doom.

Rose was a bit too over protective about things, she wouldn't stay outside for more than 10 minutes, because of the dangerous sunrays. Her husband Jimmy had nagged her about getting a dog to keep her company on the nights he worked late, but she wouldn't have anything to do with a dog. What if the dog got rabies and went mad while she was alone with him? Her small delicate frame would be no match for a snarling animal who would shred her to pieces with its gnashing teeth.

The television screen flickered in muted silence as it ran the news story again, warning the public about the man with the knife. He'd been fooling the police for weeks, leaving behind no clues or reasoning to his appetite for slaughtering woman who were home alone.

But Rose knew where the man was. He was in her basement skulking around in the dark with the butcher knife between his teeth.

She reached for the phone, preparing to summon the police again, but shuddered at the arrogance during their previous visit less than an hour ago.

While searching room to room the officers exchanged glances, as if satisfying a woman's imagination was a waste of their precious time.

" It's Rose Campbell again," she said weakly into the phone. Despite her attempts to sound rational her voice quivered like a woman on the verge of insanity. " You must send someone right away. He's in my home... I know he is."

Lightning filled the night sky and Rose pulled the receiver away from her ear, fearful of being struck through the mouthpiece. She'd read somewhere about an elderly woman struck by lightning as it travelled through the phone wires and burned her to smithereens. She got more nervous as she thought of it.

" Mrs. Campbell," the officer sighed, " our officers have already checked your home from top to bottom and found nothing, why don't you make yourself a nice cup of tea and..."

" Cup of tea?" Rose shouted as a clap of thunder hit the house. " I don't want a cup of tea... there is a man in my house! I can hear him in the cellar, don't you understand?"

It suddenly occurred to Rose that the intruder might hear her, race up the basement stairs, knife clenched in his fist, and put a quick slicing-end to her cry for help. She lowered her voice to a panicked whisper and listened for footsteps on the cellar stairs.

" Maybe he wasn't in the basement when the officer's checked," she whispered, " or maybe he was hiding... behind the boiler maybe... or came in through a window after they left."

Rose envisioned the officer rolling his eyes like the others had done. " Okay, Mrs. Campbell," he said in a defeated voice, " I'll send someone out as soon as I can."

" But when will that be?" she demanded, refusing to be treated like a mad woman while a maniac moved slowly just one story below.

" I'm not sure," his voice had the tone of impatience. " Lot's of problems due to the storm. We are all pretty busy. Maybe you could call a neighbour? Someone to sit with you till we arrive?"

" Sir, I don't need a baby-sitter! I need you to come and arrest this killer!"

There was a long pause followed by a sigh. " Okay Mrs. Campbell. I'll send someone right over."

Rose replaced the phone in its cradle, this was her lifeline, and trembled at the emptiness of the house. The roar of the storm scared her, a blanket of loneliness encased her, tickling the hairs on the back of her neck.

A jolt of lightning crackled nearby, its brilliance exploding the yard beyond the window. The lights flickered, plunging her into darkness and Rose dug her nails into the fabric of the chair. The lights fluttered, fighting to stay alight as the storm roared directly overhead. The lights remained at half strength, their dirty yellow light casting deep shadows in the corners.

The phone echoed loudly in the stillness, giving her the fright of her life. She lunged for it; her grip was tight on the receiver. " Rose? Rose, are you there?" Her husband's voice came wonderfully through the earpiece. " Yes," Rose said through her dry mouth. " Jimmy, please come home right away."

" What's wrong Rosie?"

" He's in the house, Jimmy... a man with a knife is in the cellar. The police won't do anything about it." She kept her voice low to prevent anyone but Jimmy from hearing her.

There was a silence at his end and Rose didn't like the sound of it. She saw her husband's mind working, preparing to hear the same old speech about her imagination running away with her.

" Now rose..." he began.

" Don't Rose me!" Her voice shook with anger and panic.

" But Rose... we've been through this time and time again," Jimmy said, his voice with patience. " You get yourself all worked up for nothing, scaring yourself half to death. I have to work late sometimes. You know that. Why don't you let me get you a dog to keep you company."

" What good is a dead dog when there's a killer in the house?"

" Okay Rosie, okay. Maybe I can knock off a little early tonight, but we're going to have a talk about this."

The lights were burning with less strength than before and Rose felt the shadows creeping in on her. She pushed her shaking body from the chair and tiptoed into the kitchen, relieved that Jimmy would be home soon. She hadn't heard any more thuds from the basement. Had she imagined them? She did have an active imagination.

Creeping past the closed cellar door Rose opened a kitchen drawer, removed a box of waxed candles and pushed two of them into their candlestick holders. A match lit and breathed life to the wicks. She decided to have a cup of tea and set the kettle on the stove.

It came from behind her, on the other side of the cellar door, and Rose spun around, her heart quickening with each beat. She stumbled backwards and pressed against the kitchen counter, never taking her eyes from the doorknob. The cellar door was closed, but not tight, and something was pushing it outwards, revealing two fiery lights twinkling in the darkness.

Rose clamped a hand over her mouth, fearful that a scream, however quiet, would squeeze the last bit of breathable air from her lungs. Spinning towards the counter she ran her hands across its surface searching for anything she might use as a weapon. Nothing. She pulled at the knob on the silverware drawer and sent the contents crashing to the floor. Fumbling through the mess Rose felt the carving knife handle and clenched it firmly in her fist.

Thunder and hail rocked the frame of the house as another bolt of lightning crackled over her head, illuminating the kitchen just as the cellar door burst open. The creature with the bright eyes stood at opening, it stared at.

Rose halted and squinted at the creature, its tail wagging side to side.

" You're are cat!" she shouted, her veins pounding with blood. She tossed the carving knife to the floor. It's just a stupid little cat. Her laughter eased her frightful state, soothing her petrified nerves.

The short-hared cat licked its paws. " Just a cat," Rose whispered again as kneeled by its side and stroked its fur with her trembling hand. " Where did you come from, You scared me half to death." Arching its back it rubbed against Rose's thigh. " You must be hungry? How about a bowl of milk?" She rose to her feet and opened the fridge door.

" Just a cat indeed," the man whispered from the shadows of the cellar. Candlelight glinted off the butcher knife in his fist.