

Kayla Erickson

Clara

Clara sat at her kitchen table, sipping her chamomile tea. She was trying to clear the fog in her head. She glanced at the clock. Why was she up so late? It was way past her bedtime. Oh well, fewer things made sense these days. The fog kept staying longer. She kept forgetting where she put things and forgetting to turn off the stove. She went to get her hair done at the parlor only to have her beautician tell her she'd just been there the day before. But it wasn't as bad as Rodney kept saying it was. They'd just spoken yesterday morning and she'd hung up on him. She felt guilty as she replayed their conversation in her mind.

"Mom, you really need to think about coming out here to live with me. California is not that bad. It's beautiful in San Diego, like springtime all year round. You'd love it," he said.

"I like it just fine here. Iowa's just as good as any other place. I've been here all my 76 years. And I have no intention of going off halfway around the world to be baby sat by you!"

"It's not good, you living out there on that dirt road like you do. You're all alone, the wrong kind of people could really take advantage of you. And I'd be way out here, couldn't get to you if you needed help."

Clara got angry at that. He was just trying to scare her! *I'll call his bluff*, she thought. "Well then, I'll just die right here! This is my home, no other place I'd rather be..." Her voice wavered at the end of the statement, which made her angry.

"Mom...I'm sorry. I'm just worried is all. Let's not fight. Now, I need to tell you something, me and --"

She interrupted him, "I need to go. I've got something on the stove."

"Wait! I need to tell you --" She hung up. He hadn't called back like he normally did.

The chime of the doorbell jolted her out of her thoughts. *Who on earth would be here this late? And in this weather?* She paused before getting up, Rodney's words were still very present in her mind. She brushed them aside

and shuffled to the door. Peering through the peep hole she saw, under the deluge of her porch light, a man and a woman with a baby in her arms. *What in heaven's name?* She thought. The man rang the bell again. *They looked harmless.* But still she cautiously cracked the door keeping the security chain latched. She pressed her left eye to the crack and examined the couple.

“Yes?” she said.

“Can we come in?” the man said anxiously. “We need to use your phone. Our cell phones are dead. The rental car we were driving stalled and we walked about a quarter mile in this rain. We found you pretty easily. Your house was the only one with lights on.”

“Well...” Clara hesitated. They were soaked through. And that baby looked like a little drowned rat, poor thing. “Well, alright then... bless your hearts.” She unlatched the door and opened it to let them in.

The small family came into the house. Clara closed the door. They all just stared at each other for a few awkward moments. “Oh! The phone’s in the kitchen,” Clara said. Once the man had the phone he started thumbing through Clara’s yellow pages. Clara invited the woman and baby to sit on the couch. *She’s looking at my house like she’s never been in one before,* Clara thought.

The woman’s eyes went from floor to ceiling taking in everything. She was blond and attractive, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. But Clara thought the woman looked like she was smelling something terrible. The baby wore pink pajamas which were soaked.

“Oh! Where are my manners?” Clara said. “Let me get you a towel for that baby!” Clara got up from the couch and went to retrieve one from the bathroom. When she returned she saw the man was no longer on the phone and he and his wife stood by the doorway. Their heads were together and they whispered. They saw Clara and stopped talking, attempting nonchalance. It made Clara uncomfortable. She asked, “What did you find out?” The couple walked back into the living room. Clara handed the woman the towel.

“We’ll have to stay here tonight,” the man said. “I’ll head out in a minute and get our things from the car. Do you have an umbrella I could use?”

“Stay here? You mean *here*...in my house?!”

“Yes. Nothing is open this time of night and we can’t get a tow out here ‘til morning”, he said.

Clara started to feel alarm. She stared at the man for a few seconds. He

was tall, dark with a full beard and his hair needed a trim. He wore flannel and jeans as well. She felt a little confusion about what she should do. She was still fighting that fog. They were harmless, surely. They had that little baby and all...she couldn't turn them out now. "Well... I *guess* it'll be alright. You all can have the spare bedroom. It's company ready." She smiled to hide her anxiety.

A while later the man returned laden with bags and suitcases. "Well..." Clara started to say goodnight, but the man interrupted. "You should go on to bed now." He was looking directly at Clara. "I know when it's my bedtime, sir. I've been knowing that a lot longer than you've been alive. Goodnight." Clara whirled and went to her bedroom, closed the door and locked it. *I don't care for him one bit. Good thing they're leaving tomorrow*, she thought.

Clara woke the next morning. She hadn't slept well with strangers in the house and that fog still hung on making it hard to stay present, focused. She got out of bed, put on her robe and tottered down the hallway. She came full awake at the sight of her house. Her house was a shambles. The living room was a disaster. There were pillows from the couch on the floor, crumbs littered the carpet. Magazines were strewn hither and yon. The kitchen was even worse. It looked like it hadn't been cleaned in days. Dirty plates, glasses, and coffee mugs were still on the table. The countertop was littered with paper towels, dirty silverware, plates, and bowls. A frying pan full of grease was still on the stove. A pot of oatmeal had boiled over, it was all over the stovetop.

"What happened?" Clara asked the woman, who was sitting on the couch, holding the baby.

"What do you mean?" the blonde asked.

"It looks like an A-bomb went off in my kitchen!" Clara said.

"Would you like me to help you clean up?"

"I thought you all would be gone by now," Clara said bluntly.

"Where's your husband?"

"He's taking care of business in town," the woman said.

"Oh, did he get a car to pick him up?" Clara asked. "No," she said.

"Then how did he –" Clara started and then rushed to the garage door and opened it. The garage door was open and the garage was empty. Her car

was gone! “What on earth...? Who...?What are you people doing?” Clara exclaimed. “You can’t just come into someone’s home and just...do what you’re doing! He didn’t ask me if he could take my car! You didn’t ask to eat any of my food!” Clara was exasperated. “He’ll be back shortly. I’m sure he’ll be really careful with it. We’ll be leaving soon don’t worry, Clara.”

“How do you know my name?”

“You told me.”

“No...no I didn’t tell you.” Clara was afraid they had been snooping in her personal things.

“Well, I’m gonna have a talk with your husband when he gets back,” she said. She went to her bedroom and got dressed, then started to work cleaning the kitchen. It took her most of the morning. The woman sat on the couch and watched TV, changed the baby’s diaper, here and there, and even warmed a bottle. All the while Clara cleaned.

That evening, the man returned. He almost ran into Clara when he came into the house. “I want to know when you’re leaving? And I want to know *right* now!”

“You need to calm down,” the man said. “There’s no need for you to get all worked up like this. We’re going to be staying another night,” he said to his wife, ignoring Clara. His wife had come into the kitchen.

“Just calm down,” he said to Clara, “we’ll be leaving soon.” He left out of the house and came back in with a box. “I’ve got pizza!” he said. The couple made themselves at home in her kitchen.

In her room that night, Clara fretted over what to do. She hated to admit it, but Rodney was right. She just couldn’t handle things like she used to. And somehow dying here didn’t seem nearly as attractive as it did a few days ago. Maybe they would be gone tomorrow.

The next morning started much like the previous day, but today the man was at home. Today he was in the bedroom speaking on his cellular phone. After a long while he hadn’t come out of the room. Clara walked to the bedroom. He’d closed the door, but she heard his voice inside. She strained to hear the conversation. She only got bits here and there. “...worth a lot... money’s worth. Yes, but she’ll be difficult...I know...do what needs to be done...harder than I thought it would be...yeah...I’ll take care of it...” Clara’s heart pounded. This was much worse than she imagined. They were going

to kill her. That man was going to kill her, and they were going to live in her house and drive her car and eat in her kitchen!

Clara walked, as calmly as she dared, back to her room and locked the door. She grabbed the phone by her bed and with shaking fingers dialed 911. She told the operator that there was a man, a woman, and baby that she didn't know living in her house. They were tearing up her things, eating all her food, and using her car. She wanted them out! And she thought they might be trying to kill her.

She sat on her bed and waited for the police to arrive. There was a knock at her door. "Ms. Clara Cooper? You called 911 about intruders?" She opened the door to find a policeman standing there and the man and woman were close behind him. The officer said, "This man says he's your son, ma'am."

"Absolutely not! I don't know them!"

"He makes a pretty good case..." said the officer. "He's come all the way from California to get you. He's been in town taking care business for you these past few days. You seem to have let things go around here."

Clara was fighting that fog. She was so confused. "...I just don't know which way is up..." she said.

"Mom, I'm sorry," said the man. "I had no idea things were this bad with you! Don't you know me at all?" He'd stepped closer. Clara just felt confused and afraid.

"Imagine me without the beard," the man said.

She tried and somehow the fog lifted and there stood her son. Clara started to cry with relief. "Yes, I remember. I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, son."

"No, I'm sorry. You're just skin and bones. The house is a wreck," he said. The woman came closer with the baby. "You remember Susan don't you? And baby Clara?" Clara nodded.

"We'll take care of you now," said Susan smiling.

Clara embraced her little family. "I'm so glad you came," she said.