

It's Only Paranoia if You're Wrong

By MPS

Jason stood under a dying street lamp. His apartment door was unlocked. It hadn't been when he left. Keen eyes scanned the street; the same old houses, the same battered cars, normal, quiet, suspicious. The only movement was a leaf of newspaper cartwheeling down the street.

"Fuck."

He reached under his worn jacket and pulled out his Springfield Compact. He ejected the clip. He knew it was full; he counted the rounds anyway before replacing the clip.

Jason pulled back the slide a hair. Brass glinted in the winking light. Satisfied, he nudged open the door; it creaked agonizingly loud. He stepped into the kitchen, letting the door squeak closed behind him.

Jason stood there unmoving. Time slid by, marked only by the click-click-clicking of the analog clock over the stove. Only when his eyes adjusted and the lines of his apartment materialized from the ghostly gray haze to the familiar cramped space did he edge into the room. He was careful to avoid the loose boards near the island staying as close as he dared to the wall. Bullets loved to travel along walls.

His eyes panned over the room, right to the left, always right to the left. Kate slept on the couch: that was odd. Her red hair fanned out over the floral pillow her mother had knitted for their wedding. He crushed the urge to run to her and scanned the room again. Right to left.

He stalked across the doorway between the kitchen to the den's inner wall. He slipped along that wall to the bathroom door, then past it. Once he was on the same side as the opening, he pushed the latch down and let the door swing open. He pointed his weapon into the black. The room was hardly big enough to turn around in. The roof slanted at the angle of the stairwell above: empty. He let the door slide closed and quickly checked his rear: clear.

Keeping a foot away from the wall he crept forward, careful to keep as much of his body under the stair line as he could until he was kneeling just behind the banister. Jason peered up the stairs looking for anything that would betray the presence of another person crouched in the inky darkness of the second-floor hall. He waited, staring into the black. A passing car painted an orange stripe of light along the wall. It rushed towards him. Jason closed his dominant eye as the light passed over him. For a moment, the world was bleached white, then plunged into darkness. He reopened his dominant eye, still adjusted to the dark, and his night vision returned. Anyone lurking on the landing above would have shot him while he was illuminated.

Jason finally gave in to the need to check on Kate. He moved carefully over to the couch, angling his body and weapon towards the stairs. Jason knelt. A shaking hand reached for Katelyn, pushing her red hair aside to expose the ivory flesh of her neck. She seemed so still. He placed two fingers on the soft skin just behind her windpipe. He was rewarded by a gentle pulse that almost made him sigh audibly.

"Jason," she said groggily and stirred. He clamped a calloused hand over her mouth. Harder than he had meant to. She started, fully awake her brown eyes falling on him and widening when she saw the gun.

"Did you remember to lock the door?" He whispered,

"Yes, of course," She insisted, "I know how particular you are. I even double-checked."

"You're sure?" he pressed.

"I-I think."

His face remained implacable, but his eyes flicked to her in silent rebuke. "Stay here while I clear upstairs. If you see anyone who isn't me, yell."

"I will."

"Don't move from the couch if you can help it. Not until I get back." This time she just nodded. As he stood, Katelyn took his hand and kissed his palm. He smiled, even as the hackles on his neck stood. He made his way back to the stairs, always keeping the weapon pointed ahead. He moved silently, walking on the balls of his feet. Jason padded up the steps; walking along the edge with the banister so the boards wouldn't creek. He reached the top landing and paused. The bedroom door stood open. Pale light from a streetlamp spilled out across the shaggy carpet. He came alongside the door keeping his eye on the closet at the far end of the hall.

Jason swooped into the room. His weapon traced the wall, right to L...It snapped to the pair of glowing eyes that glared at him. He clenched his jaw as he stared back into the unflinching gaze-- of Kate's teddy bear. He had never held her cute attachment to the childhood bobble against her. He had also never almost shot it.

Jason let out a long silent breath and slipped back into the hall.

The closet, that was it, that was where the enemy had to be. He stalked forward, balanced on his toes: ready. He reached forward; slowly, careful to keep the bulk of his body and weapon out of the way of the door's opening arc. He grasped the handle, turned the knob. His heart thundering in his chest.

Jason sprang back, yanking open the door, weapon level. There in the dark of the closet, set against the off white of old paint, sat shelves of towels; and empty air. He sighed, audibly this time, and turned toward the stairs. Jason snapped on the safety as he plodded down. Kate sat there watching him.

"Is it clear?" her voice was soft.

"Clear." He said, placing the gun on the coffee table as he slumped onto the couch. She sat up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"It's ok." She gently ran her fingers through his dark hair, "You're ok, you're home, home is safe.

"I know," He lied.