



Not For Sale

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Laura yawned as she opened the living room window draperies just like she had every morning the past forty years. She had risen later than usual and was still shaking loose from the remnants of a disturbing dream. She jumped and screamed at the gruesome face pressed up against the windowpane. Blood dribbled from the opened mouth; reddened eyes wide with horror seemed to penetrate to her soul.

Lundy, her lab-mix, bounded into the room with a bark. Laura collapsed on the nearby couch with the palm of her right hand pressed to her heart. She realized now that the face belonged to a neighbor's Halloween decoration. She had seen the ghoul twisting on a branch, its white gossamer gown fluttering in the breeze earlier this week.

Lundy pressed against Laura's knee, his teeth bared at the screaming face. She gave the dog a reassuring pat. Now that she recognized the face, Laura chuckled. Last year, she donned a gory mask and hid behind her own tree to jump out at the older kids who were trick-or-treating. No doubt one had decided to play a joke on her this year.

After a cup of coffee and toast, Laura leashed Lundy for his walk. She settled a cloth mask over her mouth and nose. She would return the ghoul to her neighbor later. Pulling her front door open, she startled at the sight of the bare-faced woman on her porch. Normally, Laura wasn't easily frightened. But the dream and the ghoulish face had jangled her nerves.

"Polly," Laura said. "Didn't you see my sign?" Laura pointed to the printed paper she posted on the porch railing early in the pandemic asking visitors to please wear a cloth face covering. She held tight to Lundy's leash. The dog had never liked Polly.

Polly shook her head so that her blond perm bounced on her shoulders.

"Sorry Laura," she said. "I thought I could just sneak up here and leave this flyer." She held out a fluorescent pink paper.

Laura didn't reach for the paper, so Polly dropped it on the porch.

"Just wanted to make sure you knew how to reach me when you decide to sell," Polly said. She stepped off the porch but lingered on the walkway. "I see you're decorating for Halloween." She waved at the ghoul. "I wouldn't if I was your age." She smiled and headed next door with her stack of flyers.

Laura grimaced. The woman was relentless. She started hounding Laura to sell when she got her real estate license five years ago. She used to be a friendly sort. Her son even watched Lundy.

"This is a family neighborhood," Polly liked to say. "Don't you want to give young

families a chance to live here?”

Laura fell asleep that night with the sound of the Santa Ana winds whistling in her chimney and rushing through the palm fronds in her backyard. One year, the neighborhood was forced to evacuate because fire threatened.

She was thinking about Polly when she drifted off and her dreams were haunted by the former neighbor chasing her with a flaming sales contract. The woman's face melted into a ghoulish scream. Laura's heart was pounding when she awoke. Her mouth was dry. Lundy snored on his dog bed beside her.

Her gate creaked. Perhaps it swung open in the wind. She waited, breath stilled, for a gust to slam it closed, but another gentle creak suggested it was moved by human hands. The backyard light flicked on.

Laura crept out of bed. She carried a heavy flashlight as she glided down the stairs with Lundy beside her. The backyard blazed with light when she peaked outside. Everything appeared the same except for a large dog bone on the patio. She would have thought it was Lundy's if his wasn't on the nearby carpet.

The police viewed the grainy video of the yard. A black-clad figure could be seen with no distinguishing features. A report could be filed, but nothing else could be done. Laura held the bone with a paper towel and tossed it in the trash.

Polly pushed a plastic jack-o-lantern on a skewer into the corner of Laura's flower bed. Laura could see a row of orange dots along the street when she walked Lundy. A real estate logo was printed on the back.

Polly pushed the hair out of her face and grinned when she saw Laura. “Oh sorry,” she said, holding the neck of her blouse up so that it covered her mouth and nose but exposed her soft stomach. “It's a seller's market,” she said.

Laura grunted and headed up her walkway.

“I hear you had a burglar,” Polly said. She shivered. “Must be frightening to live alone at your age. Remember, I'm just a phone call away!”

Lundy's growl snapped Laura out of her nightmare. A muffled curse from downstairs whisked her out of bed. She grabbed her cell phone and the gun she put in the nightstand after the bone incident. The police had shown up ten minutes after her call then. Who knows what could happen now in that space of time?

Laura eased open her bedroom door. Lundy pushed past her racing down the stairs with a full-throated bark. A scream and a crash in the kitchen indicated that Lundy had found the intruder. Laura hustled down the stairs. When Lundy yelped, she sprinted towards the kitchen.

The masked intruder wielded an iron frying pan. Lundy whimpered on the floor.

Laura raised her gun and pulled the trigger. A splash of red bloomed on the figure's ample chest, another blossomed on her stomach. The pan clattered to the tile.

“You shot me!” the intruder exclaimed, blond curls escaping from beneath the hooded mask.

Sirens wailed down the block.

“It's only paint,” Laura said. “And no. I don't want to sell.”

She pulled the trigger, hitting Polly square in the forehead. “But thanks for wearing a mask.”

