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The Mask

by Fran Duffield

Alex got up energetically from the sofa. “Well, if we are going to have any lunch, even though I hesitate to mention food just yet to someone in a delicate state” he said, “I’d better make a trip to the shop and the bakers before they put the shutters up again”

He was right, Roz didn’t want think about eating just yet. She felt she should make a gesture. “Shall I come with you?” she said “I suppose some air might do me good”

Alex put his hands on her shoulders and gently lowered her onto the sofa.

“Don’t be a goose!” he laughed, “it’s nearly the hottest part of the day, and it’s roasting out there already. You just rest and recuperate” He slipped his sandals on as he spoke, grabbed a hat and sunglasses from the hall table and checked both pockets “Yup, got the cash. See you in a bit!”

Roz hardly had time to call out a goodbye, before the door slammed behind him and his footsteps crunched quickly away down the driveway. Although it was more time lost with Alex, she felt a guilty relief at being on her own: in this state it was hard to keep up a smiling front. She moved slowly to the beige kitchen to get more water, and noticed Alex hadn’t taken his phone. It made her feel a bit edgy, being here alone and unable to contact him: horror headlines of villa residents being attacked and robbed floated through her mind.

Don’t be so stupid, she upbraided herself, he’s only gone to the local shop, he won’t be long.

She sank back down on the sofa, thinking she would just close her eyes for a minute.

Roz started up with an unpleasant jerk as the shrilling of a phone cut through her dozing stupor: she was confused for a moment, then realised it wasn't her ringtone. By the time she had pulled herself together and got up, the ringing had stopped.

She'd tell him as soon as he got back, she thought, glancing up at the slightly yellowed plastic wall clock. She was surprised to see it was nearly two o'clock, then a stab of anxiety went through her. Where was he? What time had he left? How far away was this shop? Her head was clearing, and she was hungry now.

She got up and brushed her hair, trying to be calm, and almost jumped as the key scraped stubbornly in the lock, and Alex pushed his way in with his elbow, clutching a perilously thin carrier bag and an unwieldy loaf. Both he and the loaf looked rather the worse for wear from the heat, and she took the bag and bread from him and put them on the kitchen top.

"Water, water!" he groaned, and throwing his hat without looking where it went, downed two glasses straight off, before lying flat out on the tiled floor in the living room with his eyes closed.

As Roz unpacked the shopping and put it away, she called to him. "How far away is this shop? You've been ages!" In the living room, Alex opened his eyes and stared hard at the ceiling. "It's a fair step. And I can't make the world speed record in this temperature. Plus the shop was being minded by what may have been his great-grandmother, top to toe in black, and apparently determined not to actually serve anyone."

"I wasn't complaining, I was just getting a bit worried, I wouldn't want you to rush in the heat" said Roz in a conciliatory tone. "Oh, and you had a phone call"

Alex sat up. "Did you answer it?" he said, his eyes flicking to the hall table where the phone lay.

"No, I'd dozed off on the sofa, and it had stopped ringing by the time I woke up properly"

Alex got to his feet. "Just as well, probably some idiot at work who hadn't read my email saying I'd be away, or bothered to check the calendar." He moved quickly to retrieve the phone, checking the call list.