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## The Rude Awakening

Linda Davis

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LINDA DAVIS

*Nicky woke to the sound of Whitey crowing loudly from the porch railing just outside her bedroom window.*

*She groaned, rolled over and snuggled up closer to Pepper and Sammy, not ready to give up sleep just yet.*

Sleep had become her sanctuary lately. It was a place to retreat from Eddie, especially since he had decided he could no longer sleep well in their bed. In the past year he had gradually started spending most nights upstairs in the daybed in his office, and that was fine with her. She had begun to hate the touch of his hand on her body. It was always the feeling of need, never love. The loneliness had grown over the years and the only joy and love she felt now came from the two big dogs snoring quietly by her side.

**M**oving to this house a few years before had been a dream for Nicky. It was a big two story house in the country, located at the end of a long winding gravel road. There was a large pond and acres of woods to enjoy and plenty of room for animals. It truly should have been a paradise for Nicky and Eddie, but in truth, the peacefulness of the place only seemed to amplify their problems. Nicky loved her husband and had been playing the "it'll get better when..." game for too many years. It'll get better when he gets a better job that isn't so stressful...makes more money... when we can buy a house...when we move..., but nothing ever seemed to make Eddie happy.

*(continued on page 48)*

**T**hanks to modern technology, Eddie could work from home most days and only have to travel to his office in the city for meetings. Nicky began spending more and more time working outdoors, in the garden, in the fields on the tractor, mowing the huge lawn, clearing brush in the woods, or tending to the animals. She did anything to avoid saying or doing the wrong thing around Eddie. Constantly walking on egg shells around him could become overwhelming and sometimes sleep offered the only real escape.

So as Nicky lay in bed that morning enjoying the cool breeze and the warmth of the two big dogs next to her she drifted off to sleep again, only to be awakened again by the crowing of the big rooster. Frustrated, she threw back the covers, got out of bed and made her way through the house to the dining room and the door that led to the side and front porch. She intended to run the big rooster off with a shot of cold water from the garden hose and then to crawl back into her warm bed. But strangely, when she reached the door she found it unlocked and Eddie's truck gone from the driveway. Thinking he must have run an errand and had just forgotten to lock the door, she stepped out onto the side porch ready to remove the feathered alarm clock from his perch beside her window. She had only gone a few steps when she first heard and then saw the white van speeding down the road towards her house. She raced back inside and through the house to her bedroom to change from her short cotton gown to shorts and a t-shirt. But before she could get back to the door, two men were already inside the house. At the same time that Nicky was getting dressed, Pepper and Sammy had gone out through their dog door and into the fenced backyard to bark at the arriving van.

**T**his was wrong she thought. Strange men don't just enter your home without ringing the doorbell or knocking. And these two big men had to have been moving fast to already be inside. Nicky was shocked and terrified, but knew she had to stay calm and not show her fear. She met them as they were just a step or two inside the door. Not allowing them to move further into the house she asked them if she could help them. This seemed to throw them off a bit, as if they were not expecting this kind of reaction. At that moment the dogs ran back inside the house and Nicky,

while never taking her eyes off the two men, commanded both dogs to sit. The whole situation was weird, but the dogs' behavior made it even more so. As if sensing the combination of fear and calmness from their owner, the dogs sat alert and quiet on each side of her. One of the men said they were there to check for mold in the house. Sternly, she told the men that they had the wrong house. Unbelievably, they kept insisting they were at the right place, but Nicky refused to back down or be intimidated. The men finally left and she quickly locked the door and watched them drive away. These men wore no identifying clothing and the van had no company logo.

More than an hour passed before Eddie came home and in that time Nicky had finally stopped shaking. She met him at the door and asked where he had been and why had he left the door unlocked. His reply was that he had gone to the store and he hadn't realized that he had left the door unlocked. She told him what had taken place that morning and he asked if she had called and reported the incident to the sheriff's office. It had never even occurred to her to call anyone, besides she didn't have any useful information like names or a license plate number, just as it didn't occur to her until sometime later that he didn't have anything to show for his trip to the store.

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*Strange men don't enter your home  
without ringing the doorbell or knocking.*

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**A** week passed and neither of them spoke about what happened on that morning. Then the next week Eddie had to go in to the office in the city. Nicky hadn't slept well since that day the men came to her house and before dawn she heard Eddie upstairs showering and getting ready to leave. As she lay there in bed, she listened as he came down the stairs and left the house. She heard the truck door shut and the engine start. She stroked the fur of the dogs beside her and listened to the crunching sound of the gravel under the tires of the truck as he drove away. She waited until she couldn't here the sound of the truck any more. And still she waited, not yet ready to confirm what she knew she would find. Finally, she could wait no longer and she walked through the dark house to the side door. There, she found the door just as she knew she would- unlocked.