

Chapter 22

Disturbing News

Ralph was pouting in the recliner when Rudy and Georgia arrived for the weekly family dinner. Ralph watched as Georgia took the Boston cream cake to the kitchen. He could see Jack talking with Rudy in the living room while the women were in the kitchen, but he only heard indistinct murmuring. It was almost as if they had known each other their whole lives. The house was filled with cheerful but muffled chatter. He started mumbling to himself, "Ah might as well be invisible. Nobody's talkin' ta me. Ah need a drink."

Jack got up to greet Roy when he arrived. Roy hung up his coat and shook hands with Rudy. Then he walked up to Ralph and shook his hand.

At least someone knows Ah'm here.

At the dinner table, they discussed Ralph's progress and the surprising changes in Cora. However, when they talked about her, they lowered their voices; they didn't want Ralph to hear about her yet.

Sharon glanced at Ralph. *I wonder why he looks so angry.*

"Dean's coming over this weekend," Jack smiled. "We're going to convert the Mustang to burn unleaded. If we work hard, I'm pretty sure we can get it done in two days."

Georgia frowned. "Why aren't Art and Ricky going to help?"

Jack lowered his voice. "'Cause Dad's here. They don't want to be near him."

She sighed. "That's a shame."

Rudy shook his head. "Too bad they can't let it go."

Georgia sat up straight. "I think we need to talk about something more pleasant. You'll never guess!"

"Well, tell us!" Sharon leaned forward in anticipation.

"We have a house at the beach."

Sharon grinned. "Really, where?"

"It's a little south of Newport. Rudy had it the whole time. When we came back from Europe, we stayed there overnight. The electrical needs upgrading, so the lights go out when the weather's bad. But it's really nice. We plan to stay there when the weather's too hot here. We might even buy a boat."

"Good for you," Jack laughed. "You deserve some quiet time."

"I hope there won't be any snakes." Georgia frowned.

Rudy looked surprised. "Why would you say that?"

"I hate snakes. I had a scary experience once."

"What happened?"

"It was right after Derik and I had started to plant the trees in the yard. I was in the kitchen and I turned towards the open door to call him for lunch and this long, slithery snake was right in front of me. I swear, it hissed at me. I jumped up on the counter, screamed and just started throwing things at it, anything I could get my hands on from the teapot to the dish soap. When Derik came in, he just looked at it and actually had the

nerve to laugh! He said, 'It's only a garter snake' and he picked it up and put it outside.' She sat up straight, "I don't like snakes."

"I'm pretty sure there aren't any snakes around here that can hurt you— or at the coast." Jack turned to Rudy. "So, when do you plan to take some time off?"

"Well, it won't be for a while. I'm still watching Pierre."

"So, does that mean you have something to tell us? And do we really want to know?"

"Yeah. There's quite a bit to tell. At first, things seemed pretty normal. I checked out a guy he met with, but there's nothing on him, so Pierre was keeping his nose clean. Then, just over a month ago, he changed everything. He actually moved out of his nice house and into a real dump of a place. And he changed his appearance— dyed his hair brown and he's just started growing a scruffy looking beard. And he's wearing glasses, but I can't tell if they're prescription or not. He only goes out at night, doesn't even show up for his job. He even stopped checking in with his parole officer— which is a clear violation. If they catch him, he'll go back to prison for sure. I haven't figured out why he'd jeopardize that. He got a different car, too. Not knowing what he's got planned is frustrating."

Georgia frowned. "Sounds like he doesn't want anyone to find him."

Jack leaned forward. "So does that mean you don't know, or are you just not sayin'?"

Rudy sat up straight and stared at him.

Sharon twisted her hair, "As long as Pierre's out there, I'm not going to feel comfortable. He makes me nervous."

Rudy waved it off. "Don't worry, I've got things under control."

Jack crossed his arms. "You mean like last year? When he broke into our house?"

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"I'm just saying, you can't watch him 24/7."

Rudy let out a defeated sigh. "I already told you, I'm sorry about that."

Jack shook his head, "I'm not trying to beat you up over it; I just don't want you to be so cocksure."

Rudy put his hands up in surrender, "Okay, okay. I get it."

Sharon glanced at Georgia who seemed puzzled as she raised an eyebrow. She quickly realized that Georgia was focused on Roy. When Sharon looked at him, she realized he looked interested in what Rudy was saying, but didn't seem surprised. When the discussion turned to everyday matters, she stood up to collect the dishes. "Well, I guess it's time for dessert." She looked over at Ralph. "Remember, you only get a small piece."

Georgia looked puzzled. "Why is that?"

"Well, Ralph's diabetes needs to be controlled."

"Diabetes!" Georgia gasped. She closed her eyes with a grimace.

Sharon frowned. "Didn't I tell you about it? I guess with everything going on, I forgot to ask you to make desserts he can eat now. But it isn't too bad; we'll just test his blood sugar and make sure he gets the right amount of insulin."

Upset, Georgia put her fork down, excused herself and hurried to the bathroom. Puzzled, everyone looked around at each other.

Rudy stood up. "I'll go see what's wrong." He knocked on the bathroom door, "Honey, are you okay?" He heard her crying. "Georgia?" In a couple of minutes, she came out wiping her red eyes.

Rudy hugged her. “Ralph will be okay, really.”

She pressed herself against him as she gave him a mighty hug. He cradled her head as he held her and whispered in her ear. “I love you.”

She started to laugh through renewed tears. “I... love you... too.” She sniffed. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry.” He gave her a gentle squeeze. “I’m always here if you want to talk.”

She closed her eyes and took a shaky breath before she responded. “Maybe later.”

He kept his arm around her shoulder and led her back into the dining room.

When Rudy and Georgia got home, he headed for his office. “Georgia, I’ve got to make a phone call. Are you going to be okay?”

She nodded weakly. “Yeah, I’ve got to take Lucky for a walk anyway.”

He closed his office door and paced as the phone rang on the other end. “Hey Roy, I noticed the way you were watching me when I was telling everyone about Pierre. You’re going to have to learn how to put on a more convincing poker face. Georgia caught on to the fact that you weren’t surprised. If we’re going to work together, you can’t tip your hand like that. Understand?”

“I didn’t think about that, thanks for the advice. And uh, about that, have you been keeping me up-to-date with everything?”

Rudy sighed and sat down at his desk. “About that... now don’t get me wrong, I couldn’t fill you in at the table, but I do have a couple more things about it now that we’re on the phone. I haven’t been able to find out anything on that tattoo. Even though my contact said he didn’t recognize it, I’m still looking into it.”

“And...?”

Rudy blew out a long breath. “I overheard Pierre say something.”

“Overheard?”

“He was talking to himself and said something about Frankie suspecting him of taking some money. By the way he said it, I’m pretty sure it wasn’t him, so that’s got to be why he’s hiding out.” After a few moments of silence, he said, “Roy, did you hear me?”

“Yeah– I’ve got some questions about that.”

“I figured you might. I’ll save us some time– you know I’ve been following him. But you didn’t know that I put a GPS and a bug in his car– cars.”

“Rudy, Rudy. What am I going to do with you? You know that’s illegal.”

“What, are you going to turn me in?”

There was a moment of silence and Rudy squirmed in his seat.

“Even if I wanted to, I’d be suspected as an accomplice. So, no, I won’t.” Roy sounded annoyed. “So, are you saying that equipment is still in the car we towed?”

“Yeah, about that– is there any way you can remove them without being seen?”

“I doubt it.”

“I was afraid of that. Anyway, I bugged the house where he’s hiding too.”

Roy groaned. “I should’ve known.” Another pause. “So, it wasn’t you, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“The missing money. Did you take it?”

“You’re kidding, right? Taking money from *them* would be suicide.”

“Do you think someone is trying to frame him?”

“Anything is possible. A crime family like that has a lot of ambitious thugs that would like to climb the ladder.” Rudy leaned on his desk. “Have you learned who owns the SUV?”

“Yeah, it’s registered in a pretty swanky part of town. But something weird happened right after I got the information. My supervisor pulled me aside and said that it wasn’t part of any case I’m working on and I should stick to my assignments.”

“Roy, Roy... Didn’t I tell you to do that on your own time?”

“I did! But he happened to come in as I was getting it.”

“Okay. Is that a normal response?”

“I guess.”

Rudy tapped his chin. “On another note, I’ve been trying to compare that logbook with the flash drive—like I said, I suspect the codes in the book refer to people. I haven’t figured out who they are, but I’m pretty sure ‘BB’ is Big Bart.”

“Anything else?”

“On the rest of the names, not really. In the flash drive, I’m pretty sure some of the files are records of payouts and it shows who paid and who received. But in Pierre’s book, all the deposits seem like small potatoes compared to his usual operations. But there are so many transactions that it adds up to a lot.”

“That’s the one you emptied?”

“You’re not going to let me forget that are you?”

Roy was silent.

“Hey, you still there?”

Roy started quietly, “Do you suppose...”

“What?”

“Could he have been skimming people?”

“Roy! You’re brilliant! I’ll call you back.” He hung up, cutting off any reply. “He’s smarter than I gave him credit for. That could become a problem. I won’t underestimate him again.” He turned on the computer to research Pierre’s lawyer but he couldn’t concentrate. He couldn’t get rid of the nagging feeling that Pierre might be hiding something important. After a few minutes, he turned off the computer and gave Georgia a quick kiss before he left.