

## Chapter 16 Hospital Surprise

Dennis is trying to dress himself when I walk into his hospital room. He looks up and half smiles. I think he is a little embarrassed.

“Leaving so soon?” I ask as I plop down in the only chair in the room. There are two overnight bags on the floor near the bathroom. Roxy must have slept here with him.

“Yeah, the HMO says I’m all better,” Dennis replies as he tries to button his shirt with one hand. His head is down as he concentrates on putting the buttons through the holes. I’m tempted to help, but think better of it.

“Except for your cast and the bandages around your chest, you don’t look too bad, Dennis.” All the swelling in his face is almost gone. There is small scab on his lip and a fading bruise along his jaw. In another week, you wouldn’t know that he had been beaten up, except for the cast, of course.

“These guys were pros. I’ve been in dozens of Golden Glove fights and never hurt this bad. They knew how to hit you in ways that caused maximum pain and left few marks.”

He raises his left arm to show off his cast. “This was my fault. I broke my wrist when I missed one of them and hit the car window. The ribs aren’t broken just bruised. The nurses say I can remove these bandages around my chest in a few days.”

Dennis keeps fumbling with his shirt. He hasn’t looked at me directly during this conversation. It’s painful when a man finds out that he isn’t invincible.

There is so much we need to talk about—the Polks, the march on the jail, the board meeting...I don’t know where to begin. I need his input. I need his help.

He looks up. “Walker, I can’t do this any more.” The words hang there for a few minutes. My heart stops beating. This can’t be happening.

“Come on, Dennis. You’re best investigator reporter in Northwest Florida. This is in your blood.” The words have no impact. I don’t know what to say. A wave of guilt hits me. All I ever think about is the paper. It never occurred to me that Dennis would ever think differently.

“I’ve lost too much blood this time.” Dennis sits up straight and painfully takes a deep breath. Only the two bottom buttons on his shirt are buttoned. “Walker, it was only a matter of time before somebody carried out their threats. This is real, not make believe. These guys could have killed me.”

What can I say? He’s right. It’s not fair to put him or anyone in jeopardy. But why attack Dennis now?

“Tell me what happened.”

Dennis slowly and methodically tells his story. It’s as if he is sharing a book or movie with me. He’s a professional, too, and he knows how to tell a story.

He made the usual rounds to his favorite bars on Tuesday. He noticed the two guys at Intermission who were watching him. Thinking that they were some buddies of Roxie’s ex-boyfriend, he ditched them by slipping out the backdoor.

“They weren’t the same guys that we saw at Global. These were better dressed and more menacing. Roxie’s Ex was a bookie. These fellows looked like collectors.”

Dennis didn’t see them again until he went back to his car after hitting several more watering holes. They jumped him as he reached for his keys. Dennis put up a pretty good fight, or so he remembers, until he busted his wrist on his car window.

Then, one of them hit him with blackjack or maybe a sock filled with quarters.

“I woke up in a warehouse. Then the pain routine began. They would taser me and my chair would fall over.” I can see the dart marks round his collarbone. “They’d kick me a few times, set my chair back up and taser me again. They threw in a couple punches, too. I’m not sure how long this went on. The whole thing could have lasted five minutes or five hours. I don’t know. I kept passing out.”

Not a word was said while Dennis was tasered, kicked and punched. Dennis was gagged to muffle his screams. Eventually they left him alone, and he kept flowing in and out of consciousness.

“The doctor says that I had a major concussion. I had trouble focusing my thoughts. My wrist was killing me.

“Once when I came to, I could hear someone arguing with the two thugs somewhere behind me. He was saying something about my car being found and how stupid my new friends were. He wasn’t happy about the broken wrist either.”

“I think I heard him say, ‘This was to be a mugging, not a kidnapping.’ Then next thing I remember is you bringing me here.”

“Dennis, can you describe your attackers?”

He nods. “But I don’t think they’re still around. When I was on back floorboard of their car, I vaguely remember hearing something about them getting back to New Orleans.”

“Why did they do this to you?”

“That’s what the cops keep asking. I’ve been racking my brain trying to figure it out, Walker. They hardly said a word. It was a beating that was sent as a message, but it wasn’t supposed to leave any lasting marks. Somebody wants me, probably you, too, to stop doing a story. Hell, maybe they want us to shutdown the paper. Walker, I don’t know.”

I have to ask the question. “Does Roxy think they are tied to her Ex?”

Dennis smiles and shakes his head. “No, she found her Ex has a new stripper girlfriend and has moved to Tampa. Roxy even called him. He swears he couldn’t give a crap about what happens to Roxy or me. No, I think this has something to Polk’s death, but I really don’t want to know what.” He starts fumbling with his shirt again.

He looks at me again. “Walker, I want out. For this first time in life, I was scared.”

“How about just editing for a couple weeks? I could use your help to figure out how to cover this Polk death.”

“Nice try, Walker. You and I both know that I have to quit cold turkey. There is no halfway in what we do. You can handle this. You always do.”

“I’ll miss you, man. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Walker, you just need to find someone who knows how to add “not’s” to your sentences.” Dennis winces as he laughs at his own joke.

Roxy steps into the room. “I’ve got the car downstairs, baby.” She ignores me and finishes buttoning Dennis’ shirt. She slips his shoes on his feet.

Roxy is a fit, little brunette. She’s wearing jeans and a green tank top. The gap between her shirt and jeans reveals a diamond belly button ring. My guess is her age is around 28 or 29. Roxy isn’t a beauty, but has a great smile that makes her attractive. Unfortunately, she isn’t smiling now.

“The orderly is bringing the wheelchair,” she says. Roxy never liked Dennis working for the Insider. She resented how much time I demanded of him. Tuesday nights were his free nights and I let Dennis roam free without supervision. Clearly she thinks I should be the one with the busted ribs and bruises. I’m sure others do too, lady.

“Dennis, what are you going to do?” I ask.

Roxy answers for him. “My father is going to loan us the money to open a gym. Dennis will teach self-defense. I will handle the Pilates classes.” Dennis blushes. I’m not sure there is much demand for a self-defense instructor with a broken wrist.

“That’s great, guys.” No need for me to burst the bubble. “Let the Insider run some ads to help you kick it off. We can do it in trade for some memberships.”

Roxy looks at me finally. Her eyes soften. “Thank you, Walker. That would be really nice.”

“Roxy, I am so sorry that this happened.”

Her eyes tear up. “I know, Walker. I know.” She might forgive me for not staying with Dennis last Tuesday night, but she still wishes I was the one hurting, not her boyfriend.

The orderly comes and helps Dennis into the wheelchair. Roxy puts one of the bags in his lap. She carries the other one.

“Walker, don’t call me for a few weeks,” Dennis says over his shoulder as he heads out of the room. “I need the separation. Let me call you.”

I nod. They leave, and I’m left sitting in the hospital room by myself.

They say that bad things come in threes. I hate to see what happens next.

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