

“I know you’re not walking around in broad daylight with a shotgun,” Val gasped.

Uncle Bubba stopped on the porch and leaned on his cane, holding the gun out just as calmly as he might hold out a piece of candy to a starry-eyed child. “It ain’t real, Val.”

She caught his arm and yanked him inside the house, scanning the area to see if any neighbors were nearby. “It’s real enough to get you shot if the police see you with it.”

“And it’s real enough to keep that husband of yours in line if he comes back here actin’ a fool,” Uncle Bubba replied. He laid it across the coffee table, letting the heavy metal barrel clink a little too hard against the glass. “I used to respect that boy, but I swear I don’t know what’s gotten into him. I betcha if I put some lead in him though, that’ll tighten him up real good. Get his head on straight.”

Her twin brother Dwayne walked in the front door, arms loaded with overnight bags and a carry-out box that said *Beggars Pizza*.

“And you,” Val scolded as Dwayne kicked the door closed. “Why’d you let Uncle Bubba come out of the house with that thing?” She tossed a cold glance at the shotgun.

“Take it in the other room if you don’t want to see it,” Uncle Bubba ordered.

“I’ll keep a close eye on him,” Dwayne promised. “He can’t hurt anybody with it anyway unless he uses it to beat them over the head.”

Uncle Bubba nodded. “Yeah, that gets my vote.” He snickered as he eased down on the couch. “Dwayne, put that stuff down and get that *Bad Boys* DVD out of my bag.” He patted the couch cushion. “Val, come watch it with me. You need to relax.”

As Dwayne loaded the DVD player, Uncle Bubba scooted over on the couch, and Val curled up beside him. Her head settled on his shoulder and she prayed that peace would tiptoe into her soul.



Val awoke two hours later to a room that was completely dark except for the brightness of the screen on the sixty-inch plasma. She lifted her head from Uncle Bubba’s shoulder and fluffed her hair where it had gotten flat while she slept.

“Told you that you needed to rest,” he said, patting her gently on the arm. “You didn’t slobber on me, did you?” He inspected his sleeve.

She gave him a playful nudge with her shoulder, then pried herself off of the sofa and stretched. Headlights in the driveway and the unmistakable hum of her husband’s SUV made her whole body tense up. Suddenly she found it hard to breathe.

*Kurt. Dwayne. Uncle Bubba. The shotgun.*

Nothing but trouble waiting to happen.

Uncle Bubba called for Dwayne. “Come down here, boy, and pass me my piece.”

Dwayne’s footsteps clattered overhead, followed the sound of him rushing down the stairs. He rounded the corner and went straight for the shotgun.

Val went straight for the cordless phone in the kitchen.

“I’m calling the police,” she said, scurrying back to the living room the moment Kurt’s key slid in the first of the two locked doors.

Uncle Bubba grunted with the effort to get off of the couch. “Val, put the phone down,” he said in a muffled tone. “We got this under control.”

She shivered but relented, her hands shaking as she laid the phone on the love seat. “Uncle Bubba, that is just a toy gun, right?” she whispered back.

He didn’t bother to answer.

Dwayne took up a position behind the door. Val stood frozen in place, praying that yellow crime scene tape wouldn't soon decorate her home.

The last lock clicked and Kurt tip-toed into the semi-dark house. "Now look, Val, I don't want any trouble," he said as he felt for the switch on the wall. "I just need to get my—"

Uncle Bubba cleared his throat as soon as the decorative ceiling light came on. Kurt's gaze traveled from the old man to the shotgun he held at his side. Dwayne stepped from behind the door. Kurt glared at the two men like they were bullies on the playground. "Did you have to get involved in our business?"

Dwayne positioned himself protectively in front of Val. "My sister *is* my business." He gestured to the rest of the house. "The police having to come to this camp *is* our business."

Peeking around Dwayne's sturdy body, Val asked, "Why are you here?"

Kurt's gaze remained locked on Dwayne.

"You heard the girl," Uncle Bubba prodded. "What do you want?"

"I just needed to get a few things," Kurt said, his gaze darting around the room, probably trying to find some object to protect himself with.

"Well, me and Dwayne here are gonna do you like the cops prob'ly did you earlier," Uncle Bubba advised. "We gonna escort you through the house so you can grab what you need and get to steppin'."

Dwayne took a few steps forward and reached for Kurt's elbow. Kurt wrenched away. "Man, don't put your hands on me. This is *my* house," he said, clenching his teeth and thumping his chest with his index finger.

"You wait one cotton-pickin' minute," Uncle Bubba said, raising the stock of the shotgun to his shoulder and cocking the pump action.

All sound left the room.

Val's legs felt as though they were dissolving under her own weight. But she wouldn't give Kurt the satisfaction of seeing her blatant terror. She jutted her chin out and crossed her arms, matching Dwayne's stance. Val motioned for Dwayne to take Kurt to get his stuff so he could leave. A brisk burst of air swept over her as the two men rushed past her. Uncle Bubba brought up the rear, his "phony" shotgun still trained on Kurt.

Three minutes later, Val's two guardian angels were ushering Kurt to the front door. A laptop was in his left hand. With the other hand, he hung onto a pair of dress shoes with black socks stuffed in them. Two shirts and two pairs of slacks still on the hangers were draped over his right arm. The shaving kit, toothbrush and clean underwear sitting atop the pants and shirts were poised to slide to the floor. He jostled his belongings, trying to open the front door.

Dwayne opened it for him, saying "We're gonna be here for a hot minute, so don't think about coming back and starting some mess."

Looking like a ram ready to butt heads with a rival male, Kurt barged past his brother-in-law.

Having to have the last word, Uncle Bubba said, "You heard my nephew. Don't start none, won't be none!" As he closed the door, he crooned, "Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?"