

Unwanted House Guest

By Sandra Denbo and Tamarine Vilar

Chapter 1

The Arrival

The howling December wind rattled the screen door as Sharon Cooper sat in her easy chair next to the roaring fireplace. She had tucked her feet underneath her and she warmed her hands around a steaming cup of hot chocolate. Although the news was on, she smiled, thinking about her family. Her devoted husband, Jack, had just gone into the bathroom to replace the washer in the sink faucet. Their son, Mark, was away at college in his junior year and Callie, their daughter, was in her room looking for a job on the Internet. She was grateful that Callie was able to help her inventory and liquidate her mother's estate last summer. Since Callie had just graduated from high school, the timing couldn't have been better. But when Sharon recalled the secrets they found, some of her anxieties returned. She would never know the whole truth about her parents and it was too late to ask them about any of it. Her father had died years ago and her mother, Alice, was in a nursing home. Alzheimer's and a severe stroke made any communication with her impossible. Although it had been stressful, Sharon was thankful for the good things that came as a result. The best surprise was discovering and getting acquainted with her mother's sister, Georgia. With all of that work and drama behind her, she appreciated being able to get back to her normal routine. Deciding to focus on the positive, she smiled again.

The knock at the door startled her. *Who would be out in this windstorm?* she wondered. She placed her hot chocolate on the coffee table and got up. When she opened the door, she tensed.

"Ralph, what are you doing here? And why do you have a suitcase?" *Please don't tell me you think you're staying here.* As a courtesy, she urged him, "Come in, it's cold out there." When she opened the storm door, a gust of wind yanked it out of her hand and the safety chain clanked loudly when the door jerked to a stop.

Ralph picked up his suitcase and gripped his coat collar close to his neck with his free hand. As he stepped forward, the wind toyed with the few gray hairs left on the top of his bald head, making them dance. Even his long, wayward eyebrows moved above his thick bifocals.

When she shut the door after him, she noticed that he was hunched over even more than usual making him appear shorter than her. When she saw that his skin tone looked sickly, she wondered if their florescent lights had cast the yellowish tint.

"Can I take your suitcase?" she offered.

He gripped it even tighter, turned away and growled, "No! Lemme talk ta Jack."

Well, so much for a hello. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Nope, gotta talk ta Jack." He carefully put the suitcase down next to his feet.

“Okay, I’ll go get him.” She peeked into the bathroom. “Jack, your dad’s here and he wants to talk to you.” She saw the new washer next to the faucet as he put down the wrench.

“Really? Uh, okay.” He muttered under his breath, “Why is he here so late? He never drives after dark,” he said as he put down his tools. Even with that irritated tone, she always thought he sounded like that blue-collar comedian, Jeff Foxworthy.

Jack came into the living room, saw the suitcase and frowned. “Hey, Dad, what’s up?”

“Ah gotta stay here.”

“What?” Jack whispered, “You’ve got to be kidding!”

Sharon groaned inside and her fair skin took on a pink hue.

Ralph’s frown pushed his wiry eyebrows down behind his bifocals and hollered, “What’s the matter? Can’t ya hear? An’ people are always sayin’ *Ah* can’t hear.” He raised his voice even more, “Ah said, Ah gotta stay here!”

Sharon heard the controlled tension in Jack’s voice. “What do you mean by ‘stay here’?”

“Ah need a place ta stay. Ah brought me some clothes fer now. Just show me where ta bed down.”

“Did you drive here?”

“Well a course Ah did, how else would Ah git here?” Ralph huffed. “Will ya quit askin’ them fool questions and tell me where ta go?”

Sharon restrained a smile when she saw Jack clench his jaw. *I’ll bet he’s resisting the urge to really tell him where he can go.*

Jack rolled his eyes. “Well, we’ve got Mark’s room available, but the bed’s taken apart and it’s in the basement. You’re lucky, we were getting that room ready for Sharon’s mother, but she ended up staying somewhere else. You’ll have to help me bring it up and put it together.” As they headed down the stairs, Jack added, “I want you to know, this is *not* permanent.”

Sharon stood at the top of the stairs twisting her strawberry-blond hair. *Oh, great. That man is the most pig-headed, old badger I ever met— that anyone ever met. This is going to be a nightmare, especially when Jack’s at work. I can handle him in small doses, but Callie and I are going to be stuck trying to deal with him every day for who knows how long.*

She went into Callie’s room and told her what happened.

Callie leaned her head back, put her hands on top of her head and gripped her long red hair. She slowly and quietly said, “No-o-o.” Then she looked up at her mom, her green eyes begged for this to be a joke.

“I can always count on you to vocalize what I’m thinking. Anyway, Dad took him downstairs to get Mark’s bed from the basement. Will you help me put the linens on it after they put it together?” Sharon tried to treat this like any other chore, although she couldn’t find anything positive about it.

After she and Callie collected the linens, Sharon stood twisting her hair as they waited at the top of the stairs for the men to come back with the bed and put it together.

“Mom, why can’t he go to Dean’s or Art’s or Ricky’s house?” Callie whined. “They’re his kids too. Why here?”

Sharon could see she was restraining an outcry as she closed her eyes.

After a cleansing breath, Callie continued. “I guess it’s because you’re the only daughter-in-law that doesn’t despise him.” She nudged her. “Well... the only one that doesn’t show it anyway.”

Sharon gave her a grim smile and a sad nod of acknowledgement. “Yeah, well that back-fired.”

Callie snorted with a grin. "Thanks, I needed a laugh."

Since Jack had to yell for his dad to hear and Ralph always spoke loudly, they could hear the men's voices as they worked in the basement.

"Dad, why are you here?" Jack said point blank.

"Ain't tellin'."

"How long will you be here?"

"Dunno."

"So you're saying it's going to be more than one night?"

"Yeah."

"More than a week?"

"Prob'ly!" Ralph snarled.

By now, they were within view at the bottom of the stairs. Jack stepped up close, bent forward and looked his dad square in the eye. He spoke slowly and loudly. "I'm going to call Dean, Art and Ricky as soon as we get this bed put together and we're going to make a schedule for you. You cannot stay here permanently. You need to get this straightened up with Mom. Are we clear?"

Ralph pinched his downturned lips in disapproval and glowered, his eyebrows bunching together. "Awright, but Ah ain't promisin' nothin'." His gray eyes mirrored his mood.

"I'm sure glad Dad doesn't take any flack from Grumpa," Callie whispered to her mom. Her eyes got wide. "Did I really just say that?"

Sharon snickered, then grinned as she whispered back. "Don't worry, I won't tell."

After fifteen minutes, the bed was assembled. Reality set in as Sharon and Callie put the linens on the bed. Ralph carefully put his suitcase in the closet.

Jack had just hung up from a conference call with his brothers when they finished. He took Sharon and Callie to the living room to tell them what they'd decided. "If this goes on for more than a month..."

Sharon gasped, "What?" and Callie moaned.

He bowed his head, "I know, that's a long time. But I couldn't get them to agree to a shorter rotation. We're going oldest to youngest, but since Dad came here first, Dean will be last. After four months, we repeat the rotation."

"Do you know something I don't?" Sharon grimaced.

He shrugged his shoulders, "No. But we're planning for the worst. That way if he goes back home soon, we'll throw a party. I promised Ricky that if Dad intimidates him, I'd come over to back him up because we have to stick together. You know how bad it is for Linda when he yells at her." He sighed. "I could tell they were all hoping he'd go home before it was their turn."

Ralph started yelling in the bathroom and Jack jumped up to see what happened. Jack rushed in and water was spraying everywhere. Sharon got up, too. When she got to the bathroom door, she saw Jack trying to close the shut-off valve under the sink. Ralph must have seen the wrench and washer and had taken it upon himself to fix the faucet. She shook her head.

Ralph always had an inflated opinion of his handyman skills, and the delusion had escalated in the last fifteen years. Like when he thought he could fix the roof ten years ago. He insisted that a staple gun was good enough. But he promptly stepped on one of his loosely attached shingles and slid off the roof. He'd landed on a rusty car engine and broken his leg in two places. Because he refused to listen to the doctor's orders, it never healed right and he'd had a limp ever since. When Jack's mother, Cora, called him about the fall, he could hear Ralph yelling in the background, more from indignation than pain.

“I told him to let you boys fix the roof,” she’d said. “I told him he didn’t have the right tools for the job. But he just wouldn’t listen. The shingles were in the garage, and you know how he is—nobody’s going to tell him what to do or how to do it. He insisted on climbing up there to do it himself. And with a darn staple gun at that...” It had been obvious that she was trying her best not to laugh.

As Jack turned the handle to the shut-off valve, he shouted, “Out!”

She stepped out of the way as Ralph stormed past her, dripping a trail of water. She shook her head when she realized Ralph had, yet again, managed to turn a simple fix into a laborious ordeal.

Ralph grumbled as he limped towards Mark’s room. “He don’t talk ta nobody else like that! Dang ornery kid.”

After the water was shut off, Sharon went in to help Jack clean up. The water had sprayed everywhere. A quick rub with a towel over his short, sandy hair was enough for himself. The room, however, required several towels.

As they worked, Jack said, “This is a nightmare.” Then he laughed. “Who would actually remove the handle and not check the valve first?”

Sharon got out another towel. “Well, I’m sure glad you’re smarter than that.”

“That’s not saying much. And I can’t believe he drove in this weather. What was he thinking? What if he hit some ice? It’s almost freezing. I just can’t seem to convince him to stop driving, even with all the stuff I’ve done to his car.”

To discourage Ralph from driving, Jack regularly went over to his parents’ house to do ‘repairs’ on his dad’s car. The repairs were to undo what he’d done before and then make another change to make it run poorly or disable it again, but he never did anything unsafe. This had worked for several years to discourage Ralph from driving— but not tonight. After Jack changed into some dry clothes, Jack brought some automotive tools outside.

Sharon brought Ralph a towel and he stayed in his room for the rest of the night; everyone was thankful for that.

The next morning, they were awakened by Ralph yelling in the hallway.

In bed, Jack rolled over and blinked at the alarm clock. “What? It’s 4:30!” He jumped up, threw on his robe and ran into the hallway to see what was wrong.

Ralph was limping up and down the hallway. When he saw Jack, he glared and pointed his finger at him. “Tell yer woman Ah want mah breakfast!”

“Go back to bed, Dad!” Jack yelled back. “We don’t get up before six around here! I have to work today and if I’m too tired, I might get hurt! Do you want to be responsible for that?!”

Ralph backed down and shook his head.

Jack leaned forward as he pointed his finger at his dad. “And don’t you *ever* talk about Sharon like that again! You’ll treat her with respect!” He moved closer so they were nose to nose. “*Got it?!?*”

Ralph nodded meekly and reluctantly went back to his room.

When Jack crawled back in bed, he said, “Can you believe he wanted breakfast? I’m so mad right now, I can’t go back to sleep.” Jack usually let things slide with stresses in his life, but his dad always pushed his buttons.

Sharon reached over to comfort him. “Oh, Sweetie, let me make you some coffee.”

“Won’t that just make him think he’s getting what he wants?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m not serving him.”

He put his hands over his eyes. “How are we going to survive a whole month of this?” He looked at her with a half-grin. “We could all get ear plugs and pretend he’s not here.”

Sharon laughed and put her arm around him. “I’ll go visit your mom to find out why he’s here. And Callie can stay here to babysit Ralph and keep him out of trouble– as much as she can. We’ll get him back home– we have to.”