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“You come visiting your shed in the middle of the winter dressed to the nines? Wearing a freaking pair of oxfords? Do I have the word s-t-u-p-i-d stamped across my forehead? You hear that dog in there, mister? Well, you better start talking the truth or I’m gonna open that door.”

“Look, I’m Ned Giles. I’m a banker in New York City. I got into some trouble out there and came here to escape. That’s the honest to God truth.”

“Go on. What kind of trouble?”

“I’ll tell you everything,” Giles said nervously. “Can you just lower that cannon?”

She lowered the barrel a foot to where only his ankles were at risk.

“I raised a red flag on an account connected to an underworld figure, a Serbian guy named Bogdan Kovac. I suspected he was laundering money through the bank. I thought someone should know so I called our top compliance guy. Well, a day later I get a late-night call. Caller ID says ‘unknown number.’ Then a creepy voice says on the other end, ‘Leave it alone.’ I asked the caller, ‘Leave what alone?’ All he says is ‘You’ve been warned.’

“I knew the meaning of the call, but I’d be damned if I would ‘leave it alone.’ I contacted the bank examiner and told him of my hunch. Next thing I know, the Kovac account is closed and my superiors stop inviting me to lunch and for drinks after work. They start avoiding me like the plague, tell me they’re too busy to talk. This goes on for about a week.

“Then, just yesterday morning, I’m driving to work when this black SUV pulls alongside me at a red light. The passenger smiles at me, and I nod to him. Next thing I know he’s pointing a gun at my face. I hit the accelerator and shoot right through the red light with the SUV following. Only he doesn’t make it; the car is T-boned by a delivery truck.

“But I got the message. I circled back toward home and saw a strange car parked down the road. They had my house covered. Probably work, too. So I hit the highway, left New York and came here to hide.”

“W-o-o-w-w,” said Wanda, her eyes big as silver dollars. “You’re on the run from the mob. That is s-o-o-o cool. Well you should be safe out here. We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

Giles scoffed.

“I’ll give ‘em three days before they track me down. By now Kovac has a crack team of digital investigators looking for me. These guys, they can hack into any database. The fact the property is in Mom’s name is good. She took a different last name after she remarried. I figure by now they know where my cell phone is – wherever that may be. They also know the last place I used by credit cards. They’re at work as we speak sifting through all digital specks of information about me. They know I’ve got no access to money, that I’ll run to a familiar place. Sooner or later they’ll turn up snippets about Alvin, Wisconsin and send people here looking for me. Someone will sidle up to a local guy at a bar, buy him a couple beers and tell him he’s looking for an old buddy named Ned Giles. Someone will know someone, and before long it’ll come out that Ned’s late mother once owned a place out in the woods.

As if mesmerized by Giles’s saga, Wanda, who felt safe enough to lay the shotgun on a nearby table, once again let out a long “w-o-o-w-w.” She then cocked her head and asked, “Does anyone know you’re out here besides me?”

“Nah. I drove straight to the property. Got in just before nightfall, completely worn out. Had about 10 minutes of daylight, enough time to light a heater and find something to lie down on. I slept until 8 or so, got up and came here looking for gasoline.”

“Well this is the most excitement I’ve seen since Mitch won a \$500 scratch-off,” said Wanda as a conspir-

atorial smile spread across her face. “Hey, I got an idea. Why don’t you let me hide you here?”

“Absolutely not,” Giles replied reflexively. “Are you nuts? These guys are killers. Just run and get me some gas and I’ll get out of your life. Just tell ‘em you never heard of me.”

“Where you gonna go with only a few hundred bucks in your pocket?”

“That’s my problem.”

“Oh quit with the Bruce Willis act will ya. I keep a loaded double-barrel and the meanest dog in Forest County. You think a couple of bad boys from out East scare me? Think this through Ned; you’re dead meat out there. I got a spare room. We can hide your car in a mini-storage place I know of. If they find your carport, so what? We’ll sanitize it. It’s supposed to snow three inches tonight. The only tracks they’ll find on this road will be mine. I’ll be your eyes and ears; I’ll know if anyone’s been poking around here looking for you. And I’ll keep my mouth shut. At least, it’ll give you time to plan your next move, maybe alert the FBI or something.”

Giles had to admit that her plan made sense, but there’re few things he hated more than to impose.

She sensed his mind grinding over the decision.

“Ned, it’s very simple. Stay here or die.”

He looked down at the floor, wearing a pained expression. “What about the dog?”

Wanda smiled. “I’ll handle Harvey.”

She rummaged through a closet and found some old clothing belonging to Mitch. The overalls were too short but the plaid shirt fit OK. It was actually warm and comfortable. Harvey took a liking to Ned once he was swathed in clothing bearing his deceased master’s scent.

“OK, I’m headed into town to get groceries and gas,” said Wanda. “You need anything while I’m out.”

“A tooth brush,” Ned said, holding out \$60.

“Will this cover the gas and groceries?”

Wanda pocketed the cash. “That should do.”

No sooner had she hit the supermarket in Iron River than she started blabbing about needing to find the closest FBI office.

“Why do you need to get hold of the FBI?”

asked a grocery worker she knew.

“Let’s just say my friend and I have some valuable information,” she replied.

“You seen another yeti?” the acquaintance quipped.

“Better than a yeti,” she replied smugly.

Wanda also spread word about her quest to contact the FBI at the gas station, the Dollar Store and Mic’s tavern, where she stopped for a quick beer.

Most of those who knew Wanda let her declarations go in one ear and out the other. Except for Larry, who sat at the end of the bar and listened as she talked to the bartender. Larry had always had a thing for Wanda and even worked up the nerve to ask her out once. She feigned feeling flattered but politely declined. Mitch had despised Larry, claiming he once stiffed him on a load of firewood.

Wanda returned with groceries and gasoline. She’d bought Giles some fresh socks and underwear, a pair of gloves and some cheap boots.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna need another \$20 from you,” she said.

“Well worth it,” he said as he peeled off another Jackson.

Wanda and Giles actually found one another engaging as they whiled away the hours playing cards and sipping hot tea. Wanda intimated that she’d always dreamed of visiting Times Square in New York. “I’ve always wanted to see the ball drop at New Year,” she said whimsically. “It just seems like such a fascinating place.”

Later they “sanitized” Giles’s car port and parked the Subaru in a storage unit. They returned to Wanda’s mobile home as the sun set and snow began falling.

“Nearest FBI office is in Green Bay,” Wanda said. “I can take you there, tomorrow if want, just in case they got the roads staked out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Giles said. **T**he two lit out in Wanda’s 1998 Dodge Dakota just after 8 a.m., cutting tracks through the snow-covered forest road. No sooner had they gone a half mile when they saw a dark-colored car approaching from the other direction. A knot formed in Giles’s throat as Wanda reached to the floor-board for her 12-gauge.

As they drew closer, the car revealed itself to be a black SUV.

“Damn Ned, they’re already on to us!” Wanda said nervously.

The car ahead hogged the narrow road so the Dakota had nowhere to get around it. The two vehicles stopped, facing each other 10 yards apart.

Wanda rolled down her window, swung open her door and rested the barrel of her shotgun where the window sank into the car’s side panel. She crouched behind the door.

“Hands up or I’ll light you suckers up like a pinball machine!” she shouted. The three men in the car said and did nothing. After about 20 seconds, one of them rolled down a back window and shouted out.

“Put that damn thing away Wanda before someone gets hurt!”

She recognized the voice as Billy Sanderson’s. He was a deputy with the Forest County Sheriff’s Department.

“We need to speak with the FBI, Billy!”

“This is the FBI, Wanda!” he replied as one of the two agents flashed his badge out the window.

“Wanda, I think they’re legit, put the gun down,” Giles said urgently.

“Well what the heck are you doing out here trying to scare the bejesus out of us?” she said to Sanderson.

“If you’d get a phone we wouldn’t be out here,” Sanderson answered. “Larry Cantwell called us last night. Thought you might be in trouble. Said you were running your mouth about needing the FBI. He watched through the trees as you and Mr. Giles here put his car into the storage unit.”

“You know his name?”

“Yeah we know his name. We went inside the unit and got his plates. Then we called the FBI and they sent these two up from Green Bay to debrief Mr. Giles.”

An agent explained to Giles that the agency had been gathering evidence against Kovac and his associates at the bank for close to six months. After Giles went to the bank examiner and placed himself in danger, they decided to act. They raided the bank the same day Giles split town, and they rounded up four bank officers. Later that day they apprehended Kovac and five of his underworld associates. All 10 of the perps were locked up in a federal prison, being held without bail while they awaited arraignment. None of them were going anywhere soon.

“We’ll need to talk to you back in Green Bay sometime in the next few days, Mr. Giles,” one of the agents said. “But you’re free to go now.”

Wanda drove Giles back to the mini-storage unit to retrieve his car. Then they headed back to her place so he could grab his belongings before hitting the road.

As he slid behind the wheel of his car, he handed a small card to Wanda.

“If you ever get a phone, call me sometime. It’s my number at the bank. I can’t guarantee it’ll beat this for excitement, but at least I can show you Times Square.”

She took the card. “You got a deal, Ned.”