

The Accusation

Carson Aderly

The knock on the door came just after 8 a.m.

"Who the heck...?" she mumbled to herself. She was still in bed, having arrived home at 3 a.m. after driving through the night on her way back from a solo five-day camping trip in the U.P. She threw on a housecoat and went to the front door. Through the peephole she could see a sheriff's deputy. Unease churned in her stomach. "Good God," she said to herself. Could something tragic have happened to a loved one? She swung open the door.

"Morning ma'am," said the young lawman. "Are you Donna Bingham?"

Still bleary-eyed, she nodded. "Yes, I am."

"I'm Sgt. Ray Adams from the county Sheriff's Department. I need to ask you a few questions."

"Questions? Is everybody all right? My son? My brother?"

"I have no information about your son or brother Mrs. Bingham. There's another matter though."

"Well come in."

"Thank you. I'll get right to the point of this," Adams said in a business-like tone as he removed his department-issued ball cap. "Ma'am, are you the owner of a 1999 Ford Windstar van – color blue?"

"Heavens no," she replied. "I did own one like that years ago. I don't know – must be five, six years since I had that thing. It was a heap, a piece of junk, a rolling money pit. My mechanic told me it needed a new transmission. Said it would cost \$1,500. He recommended I junk it. He said he'd take care of it, and he did. Hauled it off for scrap metal I guess."

"Did anyone give you a payment?"

"For what?"

"For the scrap value. A check maybe?"

"I don't remember getting anything. Ed said metal prices were down. The tow charge and the scrap value were a wash. At least I think that's what he told me. To be frank, officer, I don't remember all the details. I just know it was taken from my life and I was glad to see it go, off to be melted down and on to its next incarnation as Chinese lawn furniture or what-

ever. Metal, it's a worldwide commodity you know."

"And this mechanic of yours – Ed? That wouldn't be Ed Gant would it?" Adams queried.

Donna could tell something was up, but having slept just four hours she struggled to comprehend the line of questioning.

"That's right, officer. Ed Gant. Now why don't you tell me what this is all about?"

"Mrs. Bingham, are you aware that your vehicle was involved in an accident two nights ago in Forest County?"

"No. I wasn't aware. And that's not my vehicle. I explained to you that Ed took it away to be junked."

"Well that vehicle that you supposedly had taken away to be junked was identified by a witness to a hit-and-run. He even got the plate numbers. Last person it was registered to was you."

The longer the discussion with Sgt. Adams dragged on, the crazier things got.

"Look officer," said Donna, her annoyance growing by the second, "I told you all I know. I got rid of that heap years ago. I know nothing about any hit-and-run accident. And frankly, I'm starting to resent your tone."

Adams tilted his head and crossed his arms. "Well, that hit-and-run I was telling you about was fatal. And the fatality would be one Mr. Ed Gant. Ma'am, I'm going to have to search the premises."

The Carlson family farm was never much of a farm, and it was even less so now. Donna, now a widow and last in line for it, had seen it go from 240 acres to about 22 now. Pieces sold off here and there through the years by her dad, then her mother, and then her brother. Shoot, they all tried to make a go of it. Wasn't for lack of effort they failed, but farming in the Northwoods is tough, with its short growing season and heavy, rocky soil. So, her parents and brother sold 10 acres here, 15 there, another 20 or so on occasion just to bridge the year's loss.

What Donna had was essentially a hobby farm. She had 11 open acres and the rest were wooded. She kept a few chickens and cats, but that's it. She'd always wanted a horse but never had the time or money to acquire one. But she had plenty of wildlife to observe and appreciate. She lived alone in the 120-year-old farmhouse, and the farm's ancient wooden barn still stood, and that's where Sgt. Adams found the 1999 Windstar after he pushed open the door.

Donna stood aghast. "How on earth...!"

The rusty old beast had been backed in. Its smashed grill and dented hood gave good clues as to its recent whereabouts, but not as strong as the matted strands of human hair protruding from a badly cracked headlight.

"Mrs. Bingham, you're going to have to come with me and answer some questions at the station," he said matter-of-factly.

Donna shook her head, hoping against hope this was all just a bad dream. "You can't be serious? I don't know anything about this! Am I under arrest!?"

"You can be if you won't come on your own."

Dumbfounded by the developments of this day, Donna turned to Adams. "Is it OK if I get dressed first?"

He nodded yes.

Detective Brad Benson handled the questioning in an interrogation room.

"Where were you two nights ago Mrs. Bingham?"

"Well if you must know, I was on a camping trip in the U.P. My brother owns some land up there, and I go there every so often to get away."

"You live by yourself on an old backroads farm. Why do you need to get away?"

"I enjoy the solitude. I enjoy kayaking the rivers up there. And frankly it's really none of your business why I like to go up there."

"And you brother is?"

"He's Butch Carlson. James Allen Carlson, actually. And you don't need to go dragging my brother into this."

"So, Butch will vouch to seeing you on his property."

"He'll vouch to me being there because I told him he was going there."

"But did he actually see you?"

"No, he doesn't live there. It's just some hunting land he's had for a while."

"So he can't vouch to seeing you, right?"

"If you're asking did he physically see me, I guess the answer is no."

Benson nodded. "I see. Well let me ask you another question. How did that van get into your barn?"

"Obviously someone drove it into my barn. But it sure wasn't me! It's a mystery to me how it got there. Go ahead and check it for prints. You won't find any of mine on it."

"Actually, someone took great care to wipe it of prints. Were you two, you and Butch, ever involved? Like romantically?"

To Donna, the line of questioning and Benson's demeanor suggested two things to her: He figured he had his prime suspect, and it was she.

"I want a lawyer."

Donna used her phone call to get hold of Rex Willard. She'd seen him on Rhinelander TV once, a short news clip about an arson case, and he had represented the defendant. He won a not-guilty verdict, too, if memory served her right.

She sat in a little holding room while waiting for Willard to show up. She pondered Benson's last question – if she'd ever been involved with Ed Gant. The short answer, she knew, was no. But she could tell that Ed had a "thing" for her. He even asked her out once. To Donna, Ed seemed like a good egg, but it was too soon after her husband, Gary, had died; she just didn't feel right about it and declined Ed's invitation. But they remained on friendly terms. They even had lunch one afternoon at Wilson's Grill – soon after Ed had proposed junking the Windstar. He also divulged that he'd been seeing someone, and after that, Donna rarely saw Ed Gant again. She bought a newer-model car and seldom needed a mechanic's service.

After what seemed like two hours, Donna's lack of sleep was taking its toll.

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