

## Extended Honeymoon

Comfortable with fast-paced living on the edge, Sophie Daggers was not surprised by her reaction. As an urbane, trim, self-proclaimed professional, the remoteness of their rural outpost troubled her. She felt encroaching darkness of the somber trees casting a pall. The shadow of her past seemed to have followed her to these gloomy woods.

“How I let you plop me down in this wilderness reeking of sulfur-belching paper mills and rotting fish is beyond me,” she spat.

Mack Daggers had couched their escape to the north woods of Wisconsin in terms of “an extended honeymoon” in a forest hideaway. Within the day of their arrival Sophie let him know how erroneous his characterization of their post-nuptial destination to nowhere had been.

“Some bed of roses, lover boy, your monumental lapse in sanity cast us into a stinking cesspool on the River Styx!” The honeymoon had dipped into the forested horizon sooner than he expected. After only three weeks of marital bliss he had learned to deliver opinions with endearments or as passing suggestions.

“Darling, after you bungled ledger entries again and were sacked at Market Chase Bank, we were lucky to get out of Cleveland,” Mack replied. “Had that manager discovered the truth it could have been far worse, you know, prison time. This surely beats conjugal visits to the jailhouse bunk. Besides, you were pleading for the simple life. Got away clean. What’s not to like, sugar pie?”

“Choking on brats-and-sauerkraut every meal, that’s what,” Sophie snarled. “Watching fat yokels lop their beer bellies on the counter, listening to the hicks fart and suck their fuzzy green teeth in this backwater dump.”

“Well, we got jobs to help blend in.”

“That’s a laugh. The ladies in the Whitetail School District office all wear football jerseys. I’m the only one in a dress and makeup. Thank god my bookkeeping job only lasts through tax season. And how about your great new work? Stocking inventory at Farm and Forest Supply Depot. What a joke! Mack, you never baited a hook, held a gun, or mowed grass, much less sold farm or lumberjack equipment. Blend in, my ass.”

“Still, we should count our lucky stars, Sophie.”

“Through all these trees you can’t see the stars to count, hubby. What little daylight there is disappears no sooner than you get up and it’s dark again. Light deprivation. Perpetual shade drives them mad like blind, colorless termites gnawing at dead roots.” Mack sighed and switched on a lamp to read a farm implement catalog. Sophie lit a cigarette and strummed red fingernails on a windowsill as a struggling twilight faded rapidly.

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They had first met at Johnny’s Downtown restaurant and lounge in the renovated, upscale Cleveland warehouse district. To celebrate winning salesman of the month for the third consecutive time, Mack had bought round after round of highballs from a bankroll of a hundred C notes. He was characteristically overdressed in sporting a grey Armani suit and glad-handing smuggled Cohiba Cuban cigars-not Dominican knockoffs-to resentful admirers.

“Time To Share!” Mack, an itinerant, high-end salesman, toasted his business associates who rarely succeeded in selling Gulf coast timeshare condos. They soaked up the free drinks.

He couldn’t help but notice Sophie seated alone at a small, round lounge table nearby. She wore an Oscar de la Renta cobalt and tangerine suit, Gucci ivory silk blouse, with gold and garnet earrings and matching pendant. Introducing himself as “celebrant” he offered her a Bombay Sapphire gin cocktail as he explained the victory party. Re-crossing her shapely legs, Sophie expressed congratulations with a smile and sip. Having stopped in the upscale bar alone to celebrate

her own success, her silver Gucci purse bulged with cash, which she could now keep discretely intact. Long, attractive eyelashes highlighted her striking blue-green eyes, and her fashionably short-cropped light brown hair effected intelligence. Sophie learned that his current gig of selling luxury timeshares over the past six months had been lucrative. His handsome face smelled pleasantly of Christian Dior aftershave. His wavy dark hair and good looks sported a carefree, easy-come-easy-go confidence that appealed to her. Sophie liked that Mack was younger and found her attractive in acknowledging her alpha personality. The young man was attracted, if not somewhat intimidated by, Sophie's sophistication, her stylish tortoiseshell glasses, and perhaps more accurately, her edgy independence. She commanded all eyes.

They were both risk takers. Their brief, chance courtship developed through convenience. One-night flings in a parade of different cities had worn tedious for each. Six years younger than his new bride of thirty-four, Mack found her witty, challenging intellect refreshing compared to younger women he picked up on the sales circuit. Sophie had tired of liaisons with rich bosses in midlife crisis, married or not. The happenstance crossing of their paths at Johnny's provided opportunity for perhaps something more. Over subsequent dates, Sophie came to admire that nothing seemed to phase unflappable Mack, like making sales pitches and shaking off rejections. Mack knew people—eventually some sucker would fork over a pile of money for whatever dubious goods or service he was peddling. As their relationship intensified, she confided that her taste for expensive clothing, jewelry, and lifestyle exceeded an accountant's salary. He learned that Sophie supplemented her income through creative bookkeeping. Discovering shared inclinations, they bonded and within a month wed at the Cleveland Municipal Court.

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“But, dammit, he could have talked me out of my rash suggestion to go ‘woodsy owl,’” Sophie thought, as she stared out the frosted window of their rental apartment into the cold, dark night of Packerton.

“A guy in feed-and-seed told me about a local holiday tradition,” Mack said as if reading her mind. “A hook-and-bullet club hangs paper lanterns twinkling along a groomed snow path through the forest on Christmas Eve. The whole town turns out for snowshoeing, then warms up with hot, spiked cider at the end of the trail. Want to go?”

“Right. Packerton’s the trail’s end all right...to a bunch of inbred pine nuts. The cross-eyed superintendent’s always cleaning one rifle or another on his desk and tossing blaze orange or camouflage clothing onto thickets of mounted antlers. Keeps shotgun shells in a candy dish.”

“Well, the Pine-Knot-For-Me saloon must be heated. You’ll warm up to Packerton after we meet some real, downhome people outside of work.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of, Mack,” Sophie retorted with her chin in her hand.

As newcomers only a month before long winter’s grip, the newlyweds grew increasingly bleak. On recommendation from one of Mack’s coworkers, they drove in quiet desperation to the “outskirts of town,” and wandered into the Pine Knot, a Packer bar. Patrons included woodsmen, mill workers, farmers, and anyone with a pulse—Green Bay football fanatics all. A grizzled, salt-and-pepper haired geezer in grimy blue coveralls, frayed plaid flannel shirt, and a faded Packers cap met them at the shanty’s door.

“Folks around here call me ‘Rex’, sometimes ‘T. Rex’ at end of happy hour,” he said.

Taking his outstretched hand, Mack introduced them as first timers to the Pine Knot as if it weren’t obvious. Sophie rolled her eyes.

“That calls for celebration. Let me buy you a beer,” Rex said as he thrust icy bottles of Leinenkugel into their hesitating hands. “What brings you to our forest hideout?” Mack and Sophie exchanged glances.

“We’re on our honeymoon. Saw Packerton tucked up here in the north woods on a road map,” Mack said before Sophie had opportunity to bolt. “After two weeks, we were running on fumes in both our car and bank account. Tell him, sweetie.” Disinclined initially, she decided to respond without making a row.

“We got married and laid off during the same week in Cleveland. Mack and I decided to start fresh elsewhere, someplace with nice friendly folks, like you.” She kicked Mack under the table.

“Sophie landed a temporary bookkeeping job in the school district here,” Mack continued. “She’s good luck. Farm and Forest just hired me.” They sipped their beers.

“Can’t say as I like payin’ property tax for schools,” Rex said. “Taxman’s always gougin’ us, and for what? Youngsters ‘round here cut timber and milk cows. Don’t need no education for huntin’ or fishin’, or drinkin’ beer neither.” Rex took a long pull and wiped froth from his stubble onto a dirty flannel sleeve. “But your work place, Mack. That’s a whole different bucket a’ bait. Farm ‘n Forest,” he snorted, slapping his knee, “is where all us locals trade for life’s necessities- chewin’ tobacco, ammo, fishin’ gear, tools, hardware, and boots.” “Here’s to you honeymooners, newly hired!” He drowned his tonsils with another Leinie.

“You grew up here then,” Sophie said, as Mack glanced at her in relief. Rex guzzled with head back and eyes closed.

“Nope, been here jus’ goin’ on five years workin’ at the railroad yard. Like you I left them big cities filled with nothin’ but rats. Degenerates, swindlers, and hacks cheatin’ and taxin’ you each time you itch your bum. I was a lifer in Uncle Sam’s army. Bounced my calloused ass all over It’ly and Germany. Fin’ly caught action in the dustbins of Iraq and Afghanistan. Swallowed lotsa sand

and seen lotsa mayhem. Throat's still dry." The air was as empty as the bottles Rex stacked on the clear plastic table cover over photos of toothless, grinning, muddied and bloodied Packers.

"That why you quit? All the carnage and gore?" Mack asked. Rex squinted at him, then tilted another longneck to the ceiling, foaming at the mouth like a mad stag with chronic wasting disease.

"That must have been terrible, I'm sorry," Sophie said, feigning interest as Rex finished off the beer with a deep belch.

"Sorry? Hell, I miss it! A damned ROTC greenhorn from Chicago busted me for doin' my job. Discharged. Hells bells!" Rex said in a heavy, gruff voice. "Times change, things change, but not me." He mumbled, "Gotta hit the head then the rails," and walked away without another word.

"Terrific, Mack, we found ourselves our first downhome friend. A drunken war criminal dishonorably discharged for god knows what. Probably living in a rusty boxcar. He's a smoldering powder keg." As they walked out of the tavern, vague apprehension rolled through their minds. Their musings remained unsettled and unspoken as another long night loomed before the silent honeymooners. Rex pushed back his smudged cap and scratched his dry, flaking scalp watching the Daggers exit just as happy hour started.

Rex was the life of the Pine Not soiree, which customers pronounced, "sorry," as in "Sorry as hell you had to work today." Joking and gathering local gossip, he kept his sandy throat lubricated. As the daily ritual progressed, however, he became more sullen, then agitated, and alternately sullen again. By last call, nobody ventured near T. Rex. That's how he wanted it then, off by himself to finish his beer in drab solitude. "I ain't changed and ain't gonna," he mumbled to a twelve-point buck adorned with Packer buttons and green and gold pennants. He made escape to his rail yard night work, but nobody dared approach as he staggered out the door.

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From wearied isolation in search of solace, Mack and Sophie appeared more frequently at the Pine Knot. Seeing the Daggers enter to sit in a corner, one of the regulars took Rex aside. Unobserved, he bent Rex's ear in whispers for several minutes, then returned to rejoin loud yodeling at the jukebox. Rex ruminated over a beer, then waded casually through peanut shells, spilled popcorn, and spilled beer to Mack and Sophie's table.

"How's you two honeymooners gettin' on?"

"Like green and gold!" Mack said.

"Colors of fortune," Rex replied. "No money troubles, eh?"

"No, we're above water now. Especially since Sophie's working a second job on weekends doing Lutheran church's accounts. Why do you ask?"

"That's good to hear, your moonlightin' wife generatin' extra cash flow. And on your honeymoon, too, lucky rascal!" Rex rapped his knuckles on his capped head. Sophie's eyes blinked, then dilated.

"I'm a little light nowadays myself," Rex continued. "Since you two are rollin' in dough, how 'bout tidin' me over with five hundred?"

Gulping, Mack said, "Now, Rex, look here, we're ust making ends meet. Sorry, but we can't help you, certainly not with that much." Mack opened his wallet and pulled out a bill. "Here's a twenty, to help in a pinch."

"Oh no you don't, Mack," Sophie said. "Let the man tell us what kind of trouble he's in. Then we'll decide what to do with that twenty in your hand. That's hard-earned cash."

"Not too hard-earned, eh, Sophie? More like easy pickin's for you, ain't it, lovebirds?" Rex replied, taking a swig from a frosty longneck.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mack asked. Sophie stood and flashed a look at Mack.

"Come on, Mack, let's go. It's beer talk. We're not handing out good money to a drunkard."

“I ain’t drunk and I ain’t the one here who’s got troubles, missy,” Rex exhaled in stale, hoppy breath.

“Just what are you talking about?” Mack yelled, as he stood and put his arm around Sophie’s waste. She fidgeted and shot a cold, penetrating stare at Rex.

“It’s this way. Seems both the school and church might just discover they’s each a bit short. Let’s say a little dickey bird told me, Mack, your wife’s been reachin’ into the cookie jar. Five hun’red a week’ll do for me. Modest ‘nuff, don’t you agree, Sophie?” he said, wiping his damp whiskers on a sleeve. The Daggers stood to leave. “You’s know where to find me. No later’n Friday,” Rex said to their white faces as he returned to the bar.

“Time to pack up and move on, Sophie,” Mack grunted back at their apartment.

“That suggestion would’ve had me cartwheeling to the car two months ago,” Sophie said. “But, now, when the current arrangement has become quite profitable, even with greasing Rex’s lizard claws, you want to leave? No, we’ll stay through mid-April to reap the harvest, then go.”

“You’re a mysterious woman, Sophie. Why do you want to linger? It’s not just the money, is it? I mean you can squeeze blood from a turnip anywhere. Could get dicey, sugar baby.”

“It’s the money all right, easy winners,” Sophie said. “Then we’ll blow this godforsaken backwoods with our pockets full for somewhere warm and sunny with spas and salons.”

“What about Rex?”

“What about him?”

“Well, what’s not preventing him from turning informant, sicking the dogs on us?”

“Because he’s in on it.” Her eyes were slits.

Mack assented in silence, but something told him they should depart sooner, not later.



“How about keeping me company on this cold, dark night, Mack?” Sophie nuzzled up against him on the rented twill sofa wrapping her arms around his neck. Talk of money always made her amorous.

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Each Friday during happy hour, they slipped the hush money to Rex in the Pine Knot’s snow-packed, graveled parking lot. At these rendezvous, Rex routinely offered to buy drinks, but they declined. The next installment fell on Christmas Eve. The Pine-Knot was open for business and thriving. Holidaymakers arrived early for a head start on celebrating Jesus’ birthday and watching their beloved team on the bar’s widescreen television. Several weeks of relentless winter snow had buried the sun, seemingly set for good. Mack handed a money-filled envelope to Rex, who stamped in a shadow beyond reach of the bar’s neon beacon glowing bright gold.

“Come in an’ git warm. You and Sophie sop up some hops, I’m buyin’.” Rex staggered but caught himself against the wall.

“No, but thanks. It’s Christmas Eve. Why don’t you join us snowshoeing on the lighted trail set up special for tonight?” Sophie had told Mack to suck up to Rex to keep him happy. “She brought whiskey with eggnog, brandy, and peppermint schnapps to keep us warm and cozy in the woods.” Mack pulled a flask out of his parka. “Here, have a jolly drop of this.”

“That’s right neighborly,” Rex said as he downed a slug of brandy. “No trains runnin’ tonight, I’m on holiday.”

“So you’re going with us? Sophie’s in the car and wants to wish you merry Christmas.”

“And prosperous New Year, eh?” Rex added elbowing Mack as they walked towards the black Lexus. “Howya, Sophie?” Rex said. Mack announced Rex would come along with them on the candlelit trail.

“We’re happy to have a real guide with us,” Sophie replied. Rex planted himself in the backseat putting a blanket on his lap. Mack pulled onto the snowy road.

“Supposed to dip well below zero tonight,” Mack remarked as she poured three whiskey egg-nogs into paper cups from a large thermos.

“Here, better fortify ourselves against the cold,” she said. Rex drained his cup and asked for more as “a damn improved way to drink milk.”

Mack drove on slowly and carefully farther into the deepening woods. Crunching softly on the plowed road leading out of town, the vehicle chased its headlights searching for the trailhead destination in the pitch darkness of the thick, wild forest.

Reminiscing on past Christmas Eves overseas, Rex said, “Lotsa machinegun tracers, flare bursts, an’ grenade explosions—them firefights lit up the sky so bright you couldn’t see no stars an’ no moon at all. Course you can’t see ‘em here neither most a’ the time.”

“Trees hide everything in darkness here,” Sophie said, thinking how strangely absurd having Rex there. She grimaced, then handed him another whiskey with a forced smile.

Rex looked out the window imagining columns of dark grey uniformed soldiers at attention, shoulder to shoulder. As the headlights swept forward, the flanking uniforms turned from grey to black then dissolved into the wilderness expanse. He shoved an empty cup to Sophie in the front seat. “Fill ‘er up, missy moo.”

With alcohol sloshing warmly in their stomachs, they spotted two blazing torches on the left side of the snowy road. A huge green banner with hand-painted gold lettering announced ‘MERRY CHRISTMAS, PACKERTON! 1½ miles on trail to Warming House. ALL WELCOME’. They pulled over onto the plowed shoulder where several dozen other cars were parked. Bundled in woolen hats and scarves, fleece-lined gloves and boots, and heavy synthetic fiber-filled parkas, they tucked bottles and flasks into pockets then stepped out into the frigid night air. Mack walked to the

back of the car to open the trunk. He retrieved three sets of aluminum snowshoes and a heavy, carved walking stick, propping them up in the snow against the rear bumper. After more brandy, Rex leaned against the closed car door. As he wheeled unsteadily to join Mack and Sophie, who were reaching into the trunk, he lost his balance on the icy road and fell spread-eagled.

“Damn, one of them forest blackguards coldcocked me. Well, good on him for catchin’ me nappin’,” Rex slurred. With Sophie on one arm and Mack on the other, they hoisted him to his feet and walked him to the rear of the Lexus.

“Here, sit on the bumper, Rex. I’ll help you with your snowshoes,” Mack said. While Mack tied them on, Rex finished the brandy, tossing the empty bottle into a deep snow bank. The Daggers locked on their snowshoes, then helped Rex to his feet.

“You’ve imbibed lots of yuletide cheer. It’s a hike to the warming house, Rex. You sure you want to carry on?” Sophie said. Rex nodded to move out, but he was so unsteady that the Daggers had to bear him up arm in arm.

“Into the breach!” he yelled, pointing like a three-star general as they lurched forward to the trailhead. “Onward, Christian soldiers!”

They plodded between the torches towards flickers of the dim lanterns off in the forest. Behind his head, Mack caught Sophie’s eye as they marched towards the next faint light fighting the darkness. He mouthed the words, “What are we doing?”

As they started late, there were no other people on the trail. A half mile in, Sophie asked, “Rex, did you ever go ice fishing?”

After a pause in delayed comprehension with a glassy stare, he responded in slurred voice, “Yeah, plenty a times. I ‘member a lake ‘round here maybe up a ways.”

“Out on the lake we can see stars. Wouldn’t that be nice? How about you showing Mack and me how to ice fish under the stars?” Sophie said. After they veered off the trail thirty yards, Rex

tripped and fell face forward into the snow, laughing then cursing. They helped him up dusting the snow from his face and parka.

“Jumpin’ Baby Jesus, fisher a men! Damn, my face’s frozen. S’more brandy!” Mack’s flask flashed silver in front of Rex’s bloodshot eyes. He drained it. “Tha’s better.” Mack and Sophie breathed heavily under the exertion of toting their load through the deep snowdrifts off trail. Twenty minutes later a break in the forest darkness appeared before them as a rising moon gleamed brightly onto the reflected surface of the snow-covered lake. Reaching the frozen shoreline, Rex squinted blindly towards the white expanse from the shadow of the woods. Dark, invisible storm clouds loomed behind them. After a brief rest, Rex took a swig from the flask and draped his arms over Mack and Sophie’s shoulders. The three strode onto the platinum surface, ice bending and growling under their snowshoes. Advancing some fifty yards offshore, Mack stopped.

“This looks like it might be as good a place as any to fish, right, Rex?” Sophie asked. She handed the wooden staff to him. “Pretend this pole is an ice drill and a fishing rod, too. Show us how.” Rex grinned drunkenly, lost his balance, stumbling. Mack caught him and helped stand him up on the groaning ice. He leaned on the heavy wooden staff and started rotating it dizzily between his palms like a scout rubbing a stick to make fire in a hole.

“Drillin’ the hole! One’st I get it, les’ chum Sophie’s fudge down the hole. Them lunkers like sweets.”

Rex stopped his work temporarily and took a sloppy gulp from a fresh pint of whiskey. His eyes glazed and drifted as he returned to spinning the vertical pole to “drill” the ice, which growled again beneath their feet. Exerting himself and struggling with consciousness, Rex inhaled deeply, threw his head back and looked skyward without seeing or registering the existence of the starry points of light. Imitating a wolf, he closed his eyes and howled to the cold moon.

An eerie look shone intensely on Sophie's white face reflecting light from the lake's icy surface. Quickly improvising next steps, she gestured rapidly to Mack to drop down on all fours behind Rex. Taking a quick step towards the wolf man, Sophie struck Rex forcefully with stiff extended arms to his chest, thrusting him swiftly over Mack's arched back. Upon impact, a crack like a gunshot announced thin ice giving way. Before they could react, a large jagged hole formed, swallowing all three. Plunging into the lake, the icy water shocked Rex into quasi-sobriety. A frantic, breathless struggle for air and life occurred in an instant. Wild flailing animated the churning, frigid water. Each reached desperately for a grip on the receding edge of the gaping maw.

Plunged opposite the two men, near exhaustion, and terrified of immediate drowning, Sophie gained a tenuous handhold. In attempting to pull herself out, the ice grip broke off in her soaked gloves, expanding the hole and distancing her farther from the edge. Clad in sopping parka and snowshoes like anchors, Sophie sank away into the watery darkness. A black snow squall swept over the lake obscuring all light.

Fumbling, Mack found the nape of Rex's neck, pushed up for air, then launched toward the edge of the hole. Concurrently, a flash of awareness shot through Rex's clearing mind, "Thievin' bastards 're out to kill me!"

He gulped air and groped furiously for Mack's head. Rex gripped the wooden pole in one hand and thrust his other gloved hand onto Mack's crown, thrusting him under the icy water. Abruptly, he moved the stick over arm-flailing Mack at his throat, clamping both hands on the staff then jerking hard. Both men submerged thrashing and clawing. On the verge of losing consciousness, Rex let go of his chokehold and pumped to the surface. Mack bobbed up with a sloshing scream to Sophie to save him. Mack grabbed the floating stick from the water, swung and shattered the bridge of Mack's nose. Streaming blood with gurgling water-filled lungs, Mack fought in crazed horror. He lunged blindly for Rex as a life buoy. A teeth-smashing elbow to his assailant's

mouth allowed just enough room for Rex to maneuver away to draw a huge breath. With all his might he jabbed the staff, lancing Mack's left ear and breaking his jaw. Straining for breath, Rex pulled himself up cautiously such that his upper body lay prostrate on the tenuous ice surface.

"Gonna make it, take it slow. One thigh up, then t'other, almost there," Rex thought. Suddenly, a powerful tug yanked his ankle. Rex kicked viciously with his free foot, releasing Mack's clutch. Rex swung the club down on Mack's forehead in three sharp, heavy blows. Panting as he lay horizontally on the fragile edge, Rex watched red water swirl over the sinking, drowned man. "Fire in the hole!" Rex shouted into the void. "Assholes," he muttered, "goddamn big city rat assholes." Inching flat on his stomach across the frozen, cracked surface of ice towards the shoreline, the moon disappeared as the snowstorm smothered everything in a fierce, cold darkness.

Shivering violently, Rex crawled, plowing the spongy surface through the gale-driven snow in whiteout conditions. Upon reaching the forest edge he rested momentarily, then mustered strength to stand. Beyond endurance he strode to reach the trail and refuge of the car. An hour later, frostbitten and spent, the road appeared. Only the Daggers' snow-covered black Lexus with eighteen inches of fresh snow remained. Rex turned the key, the engine caught and roared to life as he tried to stop shaking.

With the wind chill, the temperature plunged in the early hours after midnight of Christmas Day. Rex drove unnoticed through the black forest as an incessant flying barrage of snow pellets battered the windshield. Entering the sparse, sleeping village battened down for the storm, Rex continued undetected to the deserted rail yard. Upon parking, he picked up Sophie's silver Gucci purse from the floorboard. In a zippered pouch within the handbag, he discovered a thick deck of cash. He stuffed it into his jeans pocket, opened the car door, and entered the blinding snowstorm.

Sliding open the maintenance bay door, he climbed onto a forklift, loaded two metal alloy car ramps onto the forks, and wheeled towards an empty boxcar on a side track. Levering the end

door open, he clamped the ramps securely with sliding bolts on ledge of the boxcar's floor. After slotting the ramps over each rail, he drove the Lexus into the container. He placed wheel locks under the tires, then closed and secured the boxcar's door. Using the forklift, he returned the ramps and forklift to their original locations and slid the big metal door closed. After backdating an entry that car PX137 was loaded and ready for haul in the logbook, he walked over the tracks to a back alley and home. "Them bastards, I tole 'em I ain't changed. Them or me," Rex muttered under his breath.

At his trailer, he collapsed shivering onto a bare mattress on the yellow linoleum floor, covering himself with a second-hand down comforter as well as moldy but dry winter clothes. The storm raged through the remainder of the night and all of Christmas day. At forty below, the ice-fishing hole froze over solid, and the twenty-eight inch snowfall covered all traces.

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At the Pine Knot, open on Christmas day, of course, the Whitetail County sheriff announced that the Dagers had disappeared with embezzled funds from school district and church coffers. Furious celebrants groaned and grunted their strong displeasure either way—for the money just lost to the Dagers or for the fumble just lost to the Vikings.

"Low-lifers!" Rex bellowed. "Lootin' our community and skippin' town in the night!"

"Where do you think they went?" the sheriff asked.

"Maybe Chicago, Detroit, or the Twin Cities. Some big city with lotsa rats."

Rex walked outside with the sheriff. The swirling snow continued to accumulate.

"We'll nab those grifters, T. Rex. They couldn't have gotten too far in this storm."

Waiving the beer Rex had bought him, the sheriff yelled something from the patrol car as he drove away. His shout was drowned out by a long, loud whistle blast of a train outbound to New Orleans.

