

Retirement Plan

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Arlene sat in the fourth row of the second balcony of the Believers of Brentwood Church and looked out over the twenty thousand faithful followers of Reverend Jamison Stone.

I bet most of them are ants...dull and gutless ants.

According to a fable Arlene remembered from her childhood, there are two types of people—ants and grasshoppers. Ants planned, planted, harvested, toiled, and saved for the long, hard winter. Grasshoppers didn't. Arlene had always been an unapologetic grasshopper...wallowing in the pleasures of the present, believing winter would never come for her.

But, it came, blanketed her flaming locks with a hoary frost, and left her in the cold.

She was now seventy-six, running three months behind on rent, with no 401K, marketable skills, or adoring children to take her in. She did, however, have a plan.

The Reverend's booming voice echoed through the cavernous cathedral. "I know in my heart that God brought each and every one of you into this flock for a reason. I also know that he is guiding many more lost souls our way. We must grow to be able to welcome them. However, there are misguided and malicious people out there who are determined to stop this holy work."

The church had bought six acres of wooded land to build a new fifty thousand seat sanctuary. Doing so would threaten a large colony of gray bats whose cave was located on the property, and also upset the ecosystem of an adjacent stream. Now, the church's legion of lawyers and the Midwest Conservation League were in a heated legal and media battle.

Reverend Stone dabbed his forehead with his monogrammed handkerchief and continued, "So, today, I want you to fight this oppression by opening up your hearts and wallets and giving generously to our expansion fund."

Ushers, armed with offering plates, descended upon the congregation.

This was Arlene's cue. As she'd practiced for the last seven Sundays, she squeezed her way to the end of the row, took the exit in the far right corner, hurried down three flights of stairs to the basement, slipped down the hallway, and ducked into the last room on the left where the tithes were counted before being locked in a safe to await deposit.

She'd parked her Ford Fiesta just outside with a suitcase full of gauzy caftans and a ticket to Costa Rica tucked in the trunk.

Her retirement plan was foolproof. Either she'd succeed and live out her days barefoot on the beach with sweet mango juice dripping down her chin, warm sand between her toes, and the smell the sea salt rising from her tanned skin. Or, she'd be charged with armed robbery and go to prison—the one place that promised a bed, three square meals, free healthcare for life, and an overflowing commissary account...thanks to the grateful conservationists.

Right on schedule, she heard the head ushers approaching. Arlene pulled a borrowed Beretta handgun from her pocketbook, took a deep breath, and waited.