

# 12 DOORS TO PASS

A Dark Story About Love, Hate and  
the Disappointment of Revenge

Adults 15 and older

by  
Tom Gnagey





# **12 DOORS TO PASS**

**A story about love, hate  
and the disappointment of revenge**

**Tom Gnagey**

**Family of Man Press**

**© 2015**

A book for adult readers.  
[This book is not intended  
for youngsters below the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.]

# **DEDICATION**

**With love and best wishes  
this edition of  
12 Doors to Pass  
is dedicated to**

**The Very Special Crew  
At  
Tiny Tim's on the Square**

**Fayetteville, Arkansas**

**-TDG**

## It Had Come to This!

The once pink, now mostly bare wood, *Stop Inn Motel*, sat at a crossroad in the middle of a vast expanse of nothing in central Iowa. Even at its high point, some twenty years before, it most likely hadn't rated more than one star. There were twelve small units and an office at the end of one long, narrow building. A typical room offered a cracked and taped window, a well bruised wooden door, a noisy heating/cooling unit of dubious functionality, a bare plywood floor, a bath with a stool sporting a broken water closet lid, a corroded dripping faucet and a rusted shower stall with a long stiff, mineral encrusted curtain and a drain clogged with hair and other human byproducts.

Jimmy, a well built, six foot, recently discharged, unshaven marine, carrying a Beretta in the right pocket of his unzipped, gray cloth jacket, quietly closed the door on his older model Chevy and walked from the parking lot to the door marked 'Office'. He rang the bell and waited. It was nearly midnight. A light came on. The door opened. A barefoot, overstuffed, balding man in his mid-forties, girdled in an obscenely short, multiply-stained, quadruple X, white robe opened the door. Jimmy spoke first.

"Donny Zimmerman, my size and age, black hair. That white mustang in the parking lot is his. Which room?"

"I'm not allowed to give out that information except to other residents, sir."

Jimmy removed the gun in an easy, unhurried move, and dangled it down at his right side. Fat Man spoke, suddenly an eager informant.

"Room Twelve. Far end."

"He have anybody with him?"

"A woman about his age, I'd say. Reddish hair, maybe five foot four. Pregnant. I figure she's his wife. Why are you interested?"

"I'm about to kill him."

Jimmy turned and began walking down the long row of doors – there would be 12 doors to pass.

The hit and miss, gravel and chat, parking lot was lit by

a single bulb hanging below an ancient, green and white metal reflector. It extended on a bracket at an irregular angle from a weathered, dark gray, wooden pole. The lot held just the two cars that night. Running the length between it and the building was a fifteen-inch-wide, distressed, soft brick planter that may or may not have ever held plants. Rusted metal poles rose from it to support the overhang above the poorly lit sidewalk. It was badly cracked and missing chucks. As he began moving south along it, something about the sight took Jimmy back to when he and Donny had been teenagers.

**ONE:  
He Passed Door Number One  
How It Had Been**

“Of all the stupid things we’ve ever done, Donny, this is the stupidest.”

It had been Jimmy’s words there in the damp, dark alley just before another powerful right pummeled his midsection. It bent him over. In the dim light from a grime covered cellar window that hugged the cobblestone pavement, he saw blood seeping from his raw knuckles. It was a near match to the color of the brick walls that defined the immediate world of the two fifteen year olds there that night.

“Stand up and fight, you yellow bellied bastard.”

It had been Donny well into solving the problem between them in the long-standing tradition of his family – the only way he understood, the way his father had taught him, with his fists. He licked the blood from his lip, and, pinching the top of his nose with his fingers, blew into the night to clear it of blood. Donny’s family tended to hit first and get booked later.

Seeing Donny’s face there in the dim light, Jimmy remembered the first fight of substance they had – it was nearly eight years before, when they were seven. It had moved from words to fists under the tall, disfigured Oak tree that stood on the demarcation line between their side-by-side back yards – back yards that only seemed capable of growing hard packed dirt, ant hills and scrawny boys. With little more than the expected jawing back and forth between boys their age, they had just completed what they agreed was the finest tree house ever constructed. It would most certainly go down in history as such. As they stood back to gloat over the accomplishment, a problem arose about what to call the ‘organization’ which was to occupy it.

“How about *The 49<sup>th</sup> Street Club*,” Jimmy proposed.

“Not gonna be no sissy club. It’ll be, *The 49<sup>th</sup> Street Gang*.”

“Daddy says I have to stay away from gangs,” Jimmy said.

“See. A sissy like I said. Real men don’t join no sissy clubs, Sissy Jimmy with a sissy daddy.”

History has left no official record about which one landed the first blow, but there is no more righteous wrath than that of a seven-year-old boy whose family – or father – has been defamed. The screaming and threats had been substantially more powerful – and perhaps damaging – than the sting from the fists inflicted by those two, skinny, 49 pound bodies that summer afternoon, but the fervor befit the most fiercely contended heavyweight bout. The outcome had been a draw with each boy claiming victory over his shoulder as he sniffed his way into his kitchen. There were grand stories to tell about prowess and pride, for standing up for what each understood – with no room for discussion – represented the embodiment of *right*.

To defend the reputation of the Jacksons was right.

To defend the reputation of the Zimmermans was right.

There in the alley that night the blows from two powerful fifteen-year-old bodies were more damaging and dialog more profane and pointed. Neither allowed a groan. Neither allowed a tear. Each age has its own passions – at seven, dad’s reputation; at fifteen, the girl.

Her name was Amber. They had grown up together there on the block. As youngsters, they had tried to shorten or arrange a nickname for her, but nothing seemed to work. She had been the only girl ever allowed to set foot inside the tree house, but that was short lived once her mother found out and forbade it. It was from the resulting tirade by her mother that Amber learned – at seven – all males were nasty animals and that they would do despicable things to her if they got her alone. Boys, men, males, unmarried, married, divorced were not to be trusted. There had never been a father in Amber’s home so she had no actual, continuing, adult male model to use as a guide in such matters. The men in her mother’s life were usually gone by morning.

Amber, of course, related her mother’s revelations to



her friends, Jimmy and Donny. It fostered the boys' curiosity about what sorts of things boys might do to girls so Jimmy asked his father. The honest answer made him sick to his stomach. He gagged just relating the disgusting details to his friend – well, Donny and Jimmy were never friends, but that will develop. The boys solemnly swore they would never be a party to such thoroughly repulsive activities. Amber would be safe with them forever.

Time – the inevitable march toward puberty and beyond, more accurately – changed things. Amber was no longer just one of the guys, as hard as Jimmy kept trying to think about her in that way. Donny was a good deal more willing – precociously eager even – to investigate the remarkable change in perspective. Amber, suddenly transformed into an attractive young redhead, had found ways of getting boys to do things for her, buy things for her, take her places – it was more tease and promise than fulfillment, although by twelve she had already managed to maintain an eager following of panting young hopefuls.

She understood Jimmy couldn't afford to get her things. She didn't care. Jimmy was the only gentleman in the neighborhood – well, there was Frankie who moved into the house across the street when they were nine, but he wore glasses and used an inhaler. Jimmy treated her respectfully and never made indecent proposals – well, not out loud to her face anyway. She was all quite privately an important part of his essential fantasies. At the beginning of their sophomore year Jimmy and Amber succumbed to the inevitable and became 'an item' as reported in the 'New Couples' column in the school paper. It disappointed many of the other boys in their class who reluctantly shrugged it off and reset their sights. Not so for Donny who became enraged.

History bears witness to the fact that young men spurned, do in fact take their disappointment out on the new suitor rather than on the girl who dismissed them. It is one of several illogical, yet enduring – possibly genetic – characteristics of the human, teenage male. As often as not, the girl seems to enjoy the distress and rivalry she has been able to inflict or in the least, instigate. Amber, for all her wiles, harbored no such intentions where it came to Jimmy. From

her point of view Donny and his simian inbreeding never had a chance. From Donny's point of view, supported by the carnal conquests of generations of Zimmerman males, he was the only guy worthy of her attention; Zimmerman men were kings of their jungle – roughly four square blocks in all directions from their decrepit, unpainted, two-story, family lair on 49<sup>th</sup> Street.

Jimmy managed to throw three successive punches – right, left, right – that caused Donny to stumble backward.

“Why do you think beating me to a pulp – which will undoubtedly be the outcome of this evening's get-together – will make Amber think you are anything but a revolting, animal, proving to her how glad she is not to be in a relationship with you?”

Donny was not there to reason or think – not that he couldn't, when out from under the influence of blinding family and adolescent pride and passion. He was there to lay as much hurt on Jimmy as possible, short of sending him to an early grave – and as his rage grew, that, too, became a possible end game. Donny ran at Jimmy, centering his head into the boy's stomach. It propelled Jimmy backward. His body smashed against the brick wall and he slid to the alley floor limp, unconscious, bleeding and breathing erratically.

From across the alley it was not immediately clear to Donny if he were breathing. Donny walked to him and kicked him several times in his ribs. Getting no response, he left, believing he had accomplished something of purpose. There had been no onlookers. A bully, when there is even the slightest chance of failure, never allows an audience. Since that first fight under the oak at seven, Donny and Jimmy had not had reason to prove themselves against each other often, although both had reputations as young men whose feathers were not to be ruffled.

Donny's father was eager to hear all the details as he cleaned his teen boy's face and determined if stitches would really be needed. He had no interest in the reason behind the fight. He had hated the Jacksons from as far back as he could remember – as had his father. It was part of what defined a Zimmerman man.

Jimmy's family had also lived right there for generations. His dad understood the neighborhood, its unspoken rules and traditions. He understood a boy couldn't back down from a fight. He hated all that, but he understood. He would have sacrificed his right arm to have been able to raise his kid in a less violent area of the city, but he was a stevedore, needing his right arm and too poor to move from the rent-free family home.

At school, Monday, everybody knew they had been in a fight – they were the only two whose faces and eyes boasted the gory badges of a violent encounter. Nobody would ask, but they all knew it was over Amber. Odds were on Donny, but it was Jimmy who stood at his locker with Amber on his arm. The other boys hung around hoping Donny would appear. The girls gathered in the restroom to talk and talk and talk.

Donny's father was a union dock boss, meaning early every morning he hired the men who would work on his dock that day and took ten percent of the wages they would earn. Ten percent of 30 men's wages added up nicely. He always hired Jimmy's father, first, because he was the best worker on the wharfs and second, so no other official would learn how skilled he was and make him a dock boss in his own right. He hated the Jacksons because they were the Jackson's. He would do most anything to keep him from being successful. Mr. Jackson understood all that, but found himself helpless to do anything about it. Power remained in the hands of those who had it. Short of a revolution, that's just how he understood the world was put together.

So it was that the Zimmermans lived a very comfortable middle class life while the Jackson's, struggled.

Donny only felt a sense of positive fulfillment after he had inflicted pain or sorrow or terror or a sense of profound loss on someone.

In fifth grade, on Fridays, the teacher presented award sheets to her students who had done exceptionally good work that week. Jimmy always received one.

"Teacher's pet got a sheet today, I see," Donny said as they shoved their way through the school door heading for

home.

According to his mother's admonition, Jimmy did his best not to respond to such provocations although his insides burned with the desire to paint the sidewalk red with Donny's face. He folded the sheet and slipped it into his back pocket for protection. He understood Donny's sole intention was to take it from him and shred it or burn it or force him to eat it.

Amber called from behind them and ran to catch up. That was never a good thing – the three of them together. If a fight ensued, Jimmy believed he would most likely be humiliated in front of her – one of his two best friends. That day there was to be no brawl. Donny snatched Amber's math book from her and held it high.

"Here's the deal, wimps. I'll give her back her book when Jimmy gives me his reward sheet."

"It's Award sheet not Reward sheet, Donny, although I understand how you'd make that mistake since you are too stupid to ever get one."

It had not been one of Jimmy's most well planned responses and he realized that, as the weight of a thousand years of math came slamming down against his head. The force of the blow dislodged the book from Donny's hand. Jimmy picked it up, lateralled it off to Amber and told her to run. She did.

The boys stood there, nose to nose, as if hoping the mere ferocity of their gaze or the power of their clinched fists would turn the other into a melted mass of quivering goo.

Walt Clancy, a six foot six, three hundred pound recently retired dock worker happened by. He was a friend of Jimmy's dad. Jimmy wisely responded to the man's conversation and the two of them walked away toward Jimmy's house. Donny was furious. Jimmy had mixed feelings – glad he, Amber, and his sheet had survived, but miffed beyond measure that he hadn't had the chance to blacken an eye or at least knee his nemesis in the groin. His preference for the latter was twofold: to inflict the worst possible pain a guy could feel and hopefully damage his male seed pods to the point he would be unable to procreate when the time came. That, by itself he figured, should get him a presidential medal of some sort – at least the key to the city.

His realization that it wasn't over took up heavy residence in that tangled mass deep in his gut reserved for all unresolved uncertainty, fright and terror. In recent years, it had needed to grow at a faster rate than his eleven-year-old body. Life at home was pretty good. Life at school was generally great. Life out in the world was mostly just terrifying. But those were the parameters of his world. He knew no different so accepted them as his reality.

His other best friend was Frankie Guccione, a late comer to the neighborhood having arrived when they were all nine and in the fourth grade. Frail, myopic and asthmatic, he had, out of necessity, learned to survive through common sense and intellect – he possessed no small measure of each. Although he also despised the Zimmerman clan, it had nothing to do with the generational animosity between families, but more just because they were not nice people by any measure. Where Jimmy lived his life in fear with some hope for survival, most days Frankie could imagine no such positive outcome. By the time he reached twelve, he hoped to at least reach puberty so he could understand the irrational, all-consuming interest he had observed older boys developed for girls. At fifteen his goal was to at least feel a girl's special parts once before he left the earth in a body bag.

Frankie was a miniature incarnation of his father who had a lucrative barber shop in the basement of their house across the street. Jimmy and Frankie enjoyed playing board games together and doing extra credit research reports for history and science. When Frankie had extra money – which was often – he would take Jimmy to the Saturday matinee. Frankie received A's in department, Jimmy B's or C's mostly dependent on what Donny's mood had been during the grading period, and Donny, D's and F's – well, the D part was being overly generous.

They all had fine lines to walk between the expectations of home and the necessities of the neighborhood. As little boys they all got spanked – Jimmy for reacting violently to the goading from Donny, Donny for letting other kids push him around, and Frankie for going along with unsuitable things the other boys did, just so he might be accepted for fifteen

minutes or a half hour.

By the time they were thirteen, Frankie had grown past the need for discipline in most senses. Jimmy got grounded sometimes – a continuation of the problems from earlier in life. Donny got beat to a pulp by his father regularly. Nobody seemed to fully understand why – something about making a man of him.

By the day of the fight in the alley, Donny had already done several stints in juvey. Although he hated the authorities for it – *the SOB Storm Troopers*, as he affectionately referred to them – at the same time he wore those periods of incarceration with pride and proof he was well on his way to becoming a real somebody. His life had already become defined in terms of how much he was feared – which he misinterpreted as respect the way most bullies do. Girls hung with him not because they liked him but because they were afraid not to. There was a sad sort of status that relationship imparted to the fairer sex there on 49<sup>th</sup> Street. Part of him may have suspected the shallowness of the association, but he would take it however he could get it. Females were put on earth to pleasure males, period. Relationship didn't enter the picture.

If Jimmy flaunted anything, it was his good grades and physical prowess in sports. He believed he was respected – which *he* understood was all quite different from being feared. Girls felt comfortable being with Jimmy. That was not to say he wasn't aggressive and insistent in his quest for kissing and physical pleasuring, but he respected the limits voiced by the girl. As an older teen, Jimmy made every effort to stay out of trouble, but after other means had been exhausted he could be a vicious and dependably victorious fighter. Unlike the teen cultures in most neighborhoods along the wharf that had one uncontested tough guy with his disquieting entourage, their neighborhood had two, and neither was willing to risk taking the step necessary to establish the reign of just one – Donny for fear of losing and Jimmy because it wasn't to be his claim to fame or mark of success.

None of that changed the fact Jimmy hated Donny because Donny was a Zimmerman and nothing bad that ever

befell him could be horrendous or painful enough.

Donny dropped out of high school soon after the fight in the alley. Jimmy went on to graduate with better than average grades and joined the Marines. Walt Clancy had been a marine and Jimmy had been encouraged by his father to look up to him as a model. He had.

Jimmy and Amber remained a stable couple through the end of their senior year. Part of being a gentleman in the teen world of 49<sup>th</sup> Street was always using protection. Jimmy was consistently a gentleman. The week before he was to report for basic training, Jimmy proposed to Amber. She accepted, and their plan was to be married as soon as he completed his four-year hitch. That would assure him an education and a small nest egg on which to build their life together. Those obvious successes in Jimmy's life tore at Donny. They raised his typical level of smoldering hatred to the level of unbridled violent fantasy. Amber trained to be a beautician. She moved away from home immediately upon becoming able to support herself.

Three months before Jerry mustered out of the service, Donny and his younger brother invaded Ambers apartment and spent the weekend repeatedly forcing themselves on her; she became pregnant – the worst sort of revenge Donny could imagine to impose upon his life-long, Jackson, nemesis.

Amber was unable to tell Jimmy. He arrived home. Several days passed before they were together alone for the first time.

“Not complaining, Amber, but you've put some meat on your bones since the last time I saw you.”

Amber broke into uncontrollable sobs.

“Hey. I'm sorry, Amber. I didn't mean anything bad by it. Really, I didn't. You are beautiful like always. Please, don't cry.”

He drew her close and held her while she cried herself out. She gently separated and sat back.

“You will hate me, Jimmy.”

“What? Of course, I won't hate you.”

“I'm pregnant.”

“I don't understand.”

She went on to explain – leaving out no vicious detail.

Jimmy became enraged, not at her. He loved her like nothing else in his world. Nothing would change that.

“We love each other. We’ll work this thing out. First, I need to take care of something.”

“Please don’t. Just leave it be. We can move away, far away from this gosh awful neighborhood. We already decided we’d never raise our family here. Just leave him be. Please.”

Jimmy lingered over the soft kiss he gentled onto her forehead, and left.

Amber was convinced she couldn’t go on without him and chances were very good at that moment she would never see him alive again. She had hatched a plan for when his inevitable outrage overflowed. She knew his first move would be to settle things with Donny – and the settlement for her rape would be death. It was why she hadn’t told him earlier for fear he would have gone AWOL and lost everything he had worked so hard to achieve in the service. She would do whatever she could to keep him from throwing his life away during a fit of rage.

She dialed the number.

“Yeah?”

It was Donny.

“Jimmy is on his way to kill you and you know with four years in the marines behind him, he can do that without breaking a sweat. Leave, now!”

She hung up. Her baby kicked. Amber cried herself into the night. She figured she had lost the only truly good thing she had left in her life.



## **TWO**

### **He Passed Door Number Two.**

By the time Jimmy arrived at the Zimmerman house Donny was gone – along with his brother Joe and the old 45 he kept under his mattress and his white mustang and his mother's rainy day money from the box in the nightstand in his parents' bedroom. Jimmy knew all that because he had broken down the kitchen door and searched the house. Joe had apparently been gone all week. Donny's mother pleaded with him not to hurt her baby. His father cowered, sitting on the stairway his shoulders raised as if that would somehow protect him, his hands in front of his face and his head leaning against the wall. It was not the man Jimmy had thought he had known all those years.

As much as he would have liked to have broken the man's neck he let it pass. He needed to remain focused, a term he had heard a thousand times during those past four years. He knew how to do that and he would. Preserve your unit and kill the enemy – things really hadn't changed.

He moved three houses south and found Donny's best friend in his room, in bed. It took no more than a few seconds to extract a list of the most likely places Donny might run to. With a single, well-practiced blow, he broke the boy's forearm – telling him it was the least he deserved for the uncalled for, hurtful things he had done to Frankie down through the years. He'd think it over; if it wasn't enough he'd be back. Suddenly it had become a Jimmy the neighborhood would not recognize although he did take time to thank the hurting, sobbing Dante for his help.

The police would not be notified on any of the counts. In that neighborhood, the police were never notified. He went home, transferred his savings, in large bills, from his dresser into his wallet, stuffed a few things into his duffel bag, and left in his older model Chevy.

Dante, Donny's friend, had provided a detailed list, which included half a dozen very likely destinations with contact names and more. Through the years Donny had talked about all of them – sometimes as places he might live

when he got older. He would never really move – he couldn't survive away from the jungle he had claimed for himself there on the south side of Chicago.

Jimmy headed west toward Rockford, a mid-sized Illinois city that hugged the Wisconsin border smack dab in the middle of the state, some 75 or so miles from his house. Jimmy remembered that on occasion Donny's family had sent him to his uncle there when his continued presence at home was being threatened by Social Service or local juvenile authorities.

It would be a long, distressing drive into the night with only raging revenge and mixed memories to occupy his mind. There had been that time half a lifetime ago:

"No guy should reach his twelfth birthday without havin' spent time with a naked female," Donny said as they hung out in the tree house the night before Jimmy's upcoming cake and ice cream celebration."

"I'm not ready for that. I'm still a kid."

"And you'll stay a *little* kid if you don't get on with things."

"Things?"

"Doing stuff with girls – naked stuff."

In recent months, Donny had often boasted about his experiences and prowess with the feminine gender. Jimmy figured it had mostly been lies, but had been willing to listen. He couldn't say he wasn't interested. He knew all about girl parts and boy parts and why they were made the way they were. He was well aware that what he had in terms of boy parts would not yet be fully up to the naked girl stuff. He could only imagine about Donny's, although his friend was a full six months older and his upper lip had sprouted a fairly fertile growth of soft, dark colored, fuzz many months before. Jimmy seldom had reason to get close enough to actually see his lip.

"Tell you what, let's go over to Samantha's. If you give her a present or a few bucks she'll leave her bedroom shade up and walk around naked. My birthday present to you."

"Samantha's sixteen years old, Donny."

"By sixteen, a girl has everything a girl needs to have.

Lots to look at.”

“I know. I’ve seen pictures.”

“Pictures ain’t nothin’ like the real thing.”

“I don’t think so, but thanks, anyway, I guess.”

“You’re such a sissy. You turnin’ down my present? I won’t take no.”

Phrased in those terms it was hard to resist. Still . . .

“I’m thinking this is more because *you* want to see her than it is doing something nice for my birthday.”

“Of course that’s what I want. I’m a real man and you’re a sissy.”

“I am not a sissy.”

“Prove it!”

How many times in his young life had those two magical, impossible to ignore words headed Jimmy down the road to calamity? ‘Prove it!’

Five minutes later they were outside Samatha’s window. Donny tapped on it. The shade rolled up. She smiled and raised the window. She wasn’t naked and Jimmy was somewhat surprised that he was disappointed about that.

“Got a Lincoln in exchange for a good time,” Donny said waving a five-dollar bill.

Clearly girls were going to be an expensive part of a guy’s life.

“For five you can both come in.”

The window was only a few feet above the foundation and Donny was immediately inside – head, then belly, then feet. He seemed to have the system down pat, which made Jimmy believe he had been inside before. Maybe it hadn’t all been lies. He offered Jimmy a hand. Jimmy thought better of it and ran off. The window closed. The shade was pulled. Jimmy wondered if that had not probably been Donny’s plan all along.

Samantha’s mother called their case worker, and Donny was removed wrapped in a blanket. That had been the last of many joint excursions instigated by Donny that could have ended really badly for Jimmy.

It highlighted the basic condition in perennially hapless neighborhoods: Kids needed friends; the most likely sorts of friend material were the very sort a kid shouldn’t be with; but,

what's life without friends? It was the universal, ultimate dilemma for every youngster with positive aspirations who found himself entrenched in a rough neighborhood. Jimmy was that one in fifty who had, in most ways, been able to fight the predictable and survive with a clean record and all his teeth. He had done his best to pull his best friends, Amber and Frankie, along with him.

After a half hour on the road, Jimmy grew tired. It had been many hours since he had slept. He pulled into a truck stop for a cup of coffee. The large parking lot was virtually empty. He got breakfast as well. There were no other diners. Fluorescent fixtures flickered. The generously mustached cook spread his elbows on the pass-through from the kitchen and ogled the lone waitress. Pie on plates was offered in round, glass, cases on the counter – he wondered how long it had been there. The meringue wore age spots – those little brown droplets that appeared out of nowhere after twenty-four hours. A flyswatter lay at one end of the counter. He soon understood why – one of the raisins flew away. He chose to sit in a booth – wooden, straight back, initial-gouged table top; condiments and menus stood at attention against the wall.

He ordered and was soon working on his bacon (“Stiff, please), eggs (“Scrambled, moist, but firm, please”), and toast (“Flexible, with butter and jelly on the side, please”).

“Your eggs okay?” the waitress asked as she approached his table again after a few minutes.

“Fine.”

She poured more coffee.

“Goin’ far?” she asked.

“Not sure, really. Heading west.”

“Lots of west out there.”

Jimmy nodded, wishing she’d leave him alone, but understanding she wasn’t going to. He understood there were lots of lonely people in the world. Maybe she could help.

“Things always this quiet this time of night?”

“Pretty much. A tour bus sometimes. You’re just the second in the past two hours.”

“Another guy, I suppose.”

“About your age, in fact. Said he was heading for

Kansas. Nice car.”

“Saying mine isn’t?”

He flashed his great smile to make sure she understood he was kidding.

“Honey, any car that would take me away from this dump would look pretty damn good.”

Jimmy hated when women swore. She continued.

“Of course, if that was a white mustang it might look to hold more promise than a old blue Chevy.”

“White mustang?”

“Kansas didn’t talk much. Not like you. Made it seem I was buttin’ in when I tried to make conversation.”

Jimmy hoped to get more.

“My experience is that men who drive Mustangs are just wimps who are over compensating for everything they don’t have as men.”

“Oh, I got the idea he had all the things men should have. Nearly your size, not your muscles, but had a wallet spillin’ green.”

Jimmy left it at that not wanting to sound too interested. Alice or Betty or Suzie or whatever her name may have been, took the hint and left. Was the other man’s story – Donny’s, he assumed – about heading to Kansas true or might it have been planted as a false lead, left behind in an attempt at misdirection just in case? Would Donny go to Rockford or not – maybe Rockford with Kansas in reserve. There was nobody on Dante’s list in Kansas.

Jimmy figured he had made some progress. Assuming it had been Donny, he was alone – no brother, no back up, nobody waiting in the wings to surprise him. That was good if it were true. That was very good.

He paid his check, leaving what he hoped was an average tip – his experiences in restaurants was limited. He figured either too small or too large would make him memorable and he didn’t want that.

Outside, the night attendant was smoking a cigarette, which looked to be permanently hung from the corner of his open mouth. He was busy checking something at each pump. He made marks on a sheet on a clipboard. A good way to get himself blown to kingdom come Jimmy figured. He waited

until the trajectory to his car would lead him past where the man would be as he moved along. His experience in battlefield management paid off.

“Evening. Think the weather’ll hold?” Jimmy asked, stopping just long enough to give the illusion of a casual comment rather the invitation for a conversation.

“Rain on out west in the Lena/Winslow area.”

He seemed to have hooked the old man, which had been his plan.

“Not much traffic out there tonight,” Jimmy offered stopping and turning toward the man.

“Never is. Most take the interstate or the tollway.”

“You mean I’m the only patron tonight?”

“One other, white mustang, new tires, and a empty tank. That was good.”

“That must have been the fellow heading to Kansas the waitress was talking about.”

“He’ll never make it to Kansas,” the old man said chuckling.

“What?”

“When he pulled out of here he turned east. Didn’t see which way he come in from.”

“Maybe I misunderstood and she said he was coming from Kansas.”

“Could be, but he had a Illinois plate on his car – DZ something. I’m better with letters than numbers.”

“Thanks for the chat. Keep dry tonight,” Jimmy said moving on to his car.

Before leaving, he filled his tank – self-service with a credit card – five cents a gallon discount. He needed gas and he needed time to think. Donny’s turn to the east upon leaving the truck stop could have been a diversion in case he – Jimmy – came along asking questions. Donny could have guessed that Jimmy would head to Rockford, having known he’d been there before. It was the first truck stop they’d come to out of the city. Neither would have taken a major highway – cameras, speed limits, chance of being seen, things like that. Donny knew Jimmy was a cautious person – he’d keep his tank full. It made sense he would stop. Donny had clearly not tried to hide himself or his car from the waitress – if anything,

flashing his well-greened wallet, would make him memorable. Donny was without conscious, but not stupid.

Jimmy could think of at least two reasons for turning east; one, just as a distraction, turning back west as soon as he could, and, two, he was actually returning to the city to hide in the place he knew best. Jimmy had his first major decision to make. He decided to go on to Rockford. If Donny had gone back to the old neighborhood, Frankie would know about it. He'd give him a call in the morning. He could always return there, but if he were really taking out cross country he needed to keep up with him. He turned west and set his jaw. He'd call Amber in the morning as well.

It was warm for an early summer night in northern Illinois so he had removed his gray, zippered, jacket and opened the window. The sky, which had been clear prior to the stop, was becoming overrun by advancing fingers of a rolling bank of dark clouds not all that far to the west. The breeze picked up out of the south. From what he knew about the weather, that meant the main event stood directly west and he would be driving through it.

He browsed a web based white pages on his cell phone to see if he could locate an address for the name that sat at the top of his list – William Stewart, the oldest brother of Donny's mother. 222 Pettigrew. He entered that into the phone's GPS function and soon had a colorful map lighting the front seat. It was in the south-eastern part of the city. The woman's voice on the GPS was comforting. It sounded dependable rather than sexy. He drove on.

After twenty minutes, he exited the highway and entered the outskirts of Rockford. A lifelong fan of cheap mystery novels, Jimmy had been formulating a plan – an initial approach. He drove by 222. The Mustang, if it were there, was out of sight. There were no lights on inside the house. An old pickup sat in the driveway. As Jimmy recalled there had been three boys about his age who lived there back during the years Donny frequented his uncle's home. They would probably all be gone – maybe not. He circled the block and parked at the far end of the street. He could cat nap for three hours until it got light and the occupants were up and around. No enemy ever slipped up on him while he had been

cat napping – and lived – so he was confident he could keep an adequate eye on the comings and goings at 222.

His eyes opened at 6:05. The paper boy was riding his bike in Jimmy's direction through the still darkness of the morning. He turned on his headlights and got out, moving to the street side of the car and into the light. He waved to flag down the boy, man, whatever it might be.

"Happen to have an extra copy on you?"

"Yes, sir, I sure do. Seventy-five cents."

The boy was in his early teens. Jimmy wondered about the good sense of allowing a kid that age to ride the streets in such a distressed neighborhood in the dark of early morning, but he didn't bring it up. He dug in his pocket for the change.

"You seen a strange car on the street this morning?"

"Strange? I'm thinkin' you have a particular one in mind."

Jimmy smiled. He began to understand why he was trusted out on his bike.

"A Mustang."

"Not enough."

"A white Mustang – late model."

"No, sir. I'd remember a car like that down here. Sorry."

"Got a cell phone, kid?"

"That's why I'm beating my butt out here in the dark six mornings a week – to pay my phone bill. Why. Yours down?"

He reached for his jacket pocket as if willing to lend it.

"No. Thanks though. You're a nice kid."

"I am. Thanks for noticing. Good kids become invisible down here. It may not be all bad, I suppose."

"If I give you my number and, say twenty bucks, would you call me if that car shows up on this block?"

"I can do that. I live right there."

He pointed behind Jimmy. It seemed almost too handy, but his alternatives were few to none. He removed a twenty and searched his shirt for something to write his number on. The impatient youngster offered a suggestion.

"Just call me and I'll capture your number. My grandpa hates that. Says someday soon there will be no need for kids to learn how to write. Gadgets will do it all for us. I'm thinkin'



he's probably right. Don't know how soon. Sort of hope he passes before it happens. It would break his heart."

Jimmy was not about to touch any of that. He handed his phone to the kid who dialed his own number. His phone rang.

"Got ya. Let me call you and make sure it works."

He did and it did."

"If that's all, I gotta get on my way. Mrs. Burbank gets furious if her paper ain't on her porch by 6:15."

"Business completed, then. Thank you. Keep yourself with the good guys, kid. No margin in doing it any other way."

The boy nodded and left.

Jimmy wouldn't bet on any such happy outcome, but he had heard miracles happened.

Kids always knew more about a neighborhood than the adults. Just read any of those paperback mysteries.

Jimmy sat tight until eight, then he approached 222. An older man answered the door.

"I'm looking for a boyhood friend – Donny Zimmerman. Was told he might be here."

He knew the look – the one that said I don't believe a word of it, son, and you'll not get anything useful from me.

Jimmy continued.

"You look to be too old to be Donny's Uncle Billy. He always spoke so highly of him. What was that name – Sutton or something like that – Stewart, that's it, Stewart."

"Why you think he'd be here, son?"

"I called a mutual friend back in the city when I knew I'd be there for the weekend. Just mustered out of the Marines. Dante said he thought he was visiting here for a while."

"You do know the details young man. Good for you, by the way."

"Good for me?"

"The Marines."

"Oh. I see. I'm proud of the time I served, sir."

"Well, I haven't heard hide nor hair about Donny in five years. Figured he'd be in prison or dead by now. I'm his grandfather, Donald Stewart."

"Donald?"

"Yup. A terrible thing to say, but I'm ashamed to share

a name with him.”

“Let me be straightforward with you, sir. Donny has done something to me that I just can’t let go. I need to find him and talk it out – clear the air – put it behind us.”

“I figured as much. Clean cut boys like you would have no interest in looking up a scum bag like my grandson just to recall old times. Honestly, I don’t know anything about him. I suppose if he shows up I’ll do what I can for him – he’s family.”

“What about the uncle he spoke of?”

“Killed in the line of duty, two year ago, next month.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I believe you are. Thank you.”

Jimmy could see the line had been drawn – family first. He understood that. He’d not push the old man any further. It made him wonder how it had come to be that people would defend their kin in fully indefensible situations and yet point their finger at any available, fully innocent patsy, in his place.

If Donny were going to show up, he would have by then. Donny apparently had something like a four-hour lead on him. Jimmy didn’t have to wonder how Donny came to know he was coming for him. His dear sweet Amber thought she was doing the right thing. Warn Donny so he’d leave and there would be no confrontation.

She was right, of course; he knew that. It was he who was handling the situation all wrong. If he were successful, he’d most likely be on the run forever or go to prison for the rest of his life. If he failed, he’d soon be filling a body bag. He’d seen way too many of them, just never from the inside. His reaction was fully inconsistent with logic or common sense. His reaction was fully consistent with the 49<sup>th</sup> Street mentality; ‘if he gets you, you get him back harder’. Common sense was one thing. The unshakable lessons of one’s upbringing was quite another – always more powerful – always ready to force a disconnect from any approach that challenged its twisted version of the truth. He’d been able to escape much of the old neighborhood’s darker side – clearly not all of it.

He had to wonder why an intelligent, straight shooter like he was, could let the vendetta mindset override everything he understood about right and good. He would see that his

son came by no such flawed compulsions.

**//////**

### **THREE**

#### **He Passed Door Number Three**

Donny had, indeed, returned to Chicago. He had an aunt who lived on the lake, way north beyond the fancy hotels, expensive apartment buildings, and high rent office space on the North Shore. It was a small forgotten area of buildings with no redeeming features, housing mostly people with no redeeming features. Hilda was an exception. She wouldn't want to take him in, but she would. It wasn't the sort of neighborhood where you parked a white Mustang out on the street – not when folks didn't know who owned it and understood to touch it meant unspeakable suffering.

When he had driven to within a block of her apartment building, he placed a call.

"Aunt Hilda. Donny. I need a place to crash for a couple of nights. Can't leave my wheels on the street; I can manage you a few bucks; can you get me into your parkin' lot?"

"The cops after you?"

He tried to turn a smile in his tone.

"Nothin' like that. Just had a fallin' out back home. You know how tempers can get outta hand with the Zimmerman clan."

"I'll call down to Tony at the gate. Use my spot – 610. I got no car no more."

At the gate, Donny renewed a long lapsed friendship with Tony, the ancient gatekeeper. When the boy's offenses had been more or less minor, Aunt Hilda had become his refuge. He and Tony had traded more than a few nickels and matchsticks back and forth.

"Donny! I figured you'd be cuffed and chained to a bed without a mattress down at the prison in Joliet by now."

He chuckled his raspy, high pitched, chuckle.

Donny let it pass.

"Hilda call, yet?"

"Yup. Use 610. She don't have a car no more."

"Thanks."

Donny peeled off a twenty from his roll.

“In case anybody asks, you ain’t seen me for years, okay.”

“Seen who?”

He managed another chuckle, that one a bit more prolonged suggesting he got a huge kick out of his own humor. Donny wondered how many times he had probably offered that same line.

Donny flashed a salute as he was known to do and was soon parked and at the rear door of the huge old brick and mortar high rise. It had seen a hand full of murders every year as far back as 1970 when it opened. It had been one of those horribly gone wrong sociologist’s experiments of that era – take all the ugly people from two square miles, destroy their homes, force them to live in the same high-rise, and expect them to both get along and take good care of the building. The world outside the building was poor. The world inside was brutal. Beside the door, Donny faced a bank of numbered ‘call ups’, buttons with microphones and speakers used to alert apartments so they could buzz visitors inside the big metal door. Many hadn’t worked for years; 610 still did.

As disgusted as Aunt Hilda had been with her nephew most of his life, she still managed a lingering hug for him at her door. He was family.

“No suitcase or bag?” she asked looking behind him.

“Like I said, just a night or so. It’s no big deal.”

She shut and locked the door behind him – three deadbolts and two large slides.

“Hungry?”

It was typically her first question.

“No. Ate an hour or so ago. Coffee, if you got it.”

She prepared the old, glass percolator and set it on the stove. They sat at the table in the kitchen. Donny looked around. Nothing had changed since he had been a kid – the same flimsy, flowered window curtains with the ruffle across the top, the same Dutch boy and girl towels, and the fridge that thumped when it came to life.

“Ain’t heard nothin’ about you for a year, I s’pose. You’re dad an ma okay?”

“No complaints, I guess.”

“I heard Jimmy was back from the Marines,” she said.

Donny pounded the table and stood up.

“You ain’t heard nothin’ about me, but you know all about Jimmy?”

“Calm down. Gittin’ your shorts in a wad won’t change a thing about that. Yeah. People who know him get the word out when he shows up. Everybody likes him. I heard he got some medals.”

“I’d a got more if I’d a joined up.”

She pointed to his chair and he sat. She reached behind her to the counter and got a dish covered in foil.

“My home baked banana bread. You never done passed it up in your whole life.”

She pushed the dish toward the middle of the table, managing a piece for herself first.

“So, what got you kicked out the house this time?”

“Didn’t say I got kicked out. Nobody there that could kick me out if I decided to stay.”

“Nonetheless, here you are.”

Hilda was one of the few people in his life that could put Donny in his place without nursing a black eye later and that had recently come to include his father. She had not spared the wooden spoon to his young behind earlier, but he figured she’d always been fair with it, unlike her brother, his father, who sometimes laid the strap to his bare backside for a half hour at a time over letting another boy push him into the mud or take his lunch money. He didn’t love her, but he and she had an understanding about each other. She didn’t tattle to his parents about him and he didn’t steal from her. That was as close to love as Donny had ever known. She had a way of bringing out the best in him, which meant little more than keeping the lid on the worst in him.

“Okay, I had a little disagreement with a guy and he built it up into some big hairy deal and threatened to get me. Just need to let him cool off.”

“You ran away from a fight? A Zimmerman man?”

“More than that. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Seems I’m the only one who ever does understand you.”

Donny shrugged. They really did have a good thing between them. Any other human being would be on his way

to the ER for accusing him of being a coward.

They sipped and munched on, pretty much in silence. Hilda wondered and worried about what was really going on. Donny seldom told the truth if a lie would cover him or put him in a better light. She knew that. Donny had a plan to formulate and carry out. Hilda retreated to the bedroom and Donny stretched out on the couch; he broke a short smile when the long-sprung spring inserted itself into his posterior the way it had forever. As a little tyke, he had been able to work around it. As a man, he just had to live with it.

Donny slept 'til ten. His aunt fixed breakfast. He watched TV most of the day. There were sandwiches and beer at seven. Donny was ready to leave.

"I may or may not be back later."

There was no, 'thanks' or 'take care' or 'be safe'. Such phrases seemed to know better than to try and cross his lips. The feelings behind them didn't ever entered his heart. He tossed a twenty on the table.

At the door, Hilda placed her finger to her cheek. He smiled and leaned down, planting a peck on her wrinkled old face. She lit up. Hilda was the only adult that had received any indication of affection from him since he was ten. It was mechanical with little if any true feeling behind it, but that was pretty much the way all his kisses and gestures of affection were delivered. Unless it held promise of being good for him, he would not waste the effort.

On his way out to the street he pulled to a stop beside Tony's shed.

"Anybody inquirin'?"

Tony shook his head.

Donnie nodded.

"I may be back later."

Tony nodded and raised his hand.

They traded salutes. It had been there longtime routine.

Donny drove back south across town hugging the lake.

Amber had one room with one window, one ceiling fan with one light, one bed and a bathroom. It was in a small rooming house, still on 49<sup>th</sup> street, but six blocks south of where she'd grown up. It was on the third floor – once the attic



– cold in the winter and hot in the summer – always a draft. She cooked on a hotplate and had a tiny fridge. When she first moved in it had seemed like heaven – freedom and independence. The past year or so it had begun to feel cramped and she looked forward to the time she and Jimmy would be able to afford a nicer, bigger, place together.

That night her future was in limbo. She had gone to work that day. Hair dressers were as easy to come by as street walkers there so she dared not miss a day. She did her best to put on her usual, upbeat face, but didn't fool anybody. Several asked if she needed to talk after work. She thanked them and just claimed allergies – the universal excuse for red, damp eyes and puffy cheeks.

She climbed the stairs and entered her room, having worked the ten to eight shift. She kicked off her shoes, stripped down to her slip, rubbed her bulging tummy, and lay back on her bed hoping sleep would enshroud her quickly and black out her troubles until the alarm went off the next morning. She didn't eat. She had hardly eaten for a week. Each time there was a creak or unfamiliar noise in the hall her hopes leaped – perhaps it was Jimmy, back safely from whatever, wherever. It never was. She offered an occasional, half-hearted prayer for him. She believed he was beyond prayers, but what else did she have?

Early in life Amber had discovered that you only ever prayed for things you were very sure would come true. Praying for the less likely was always a disappointment. The men who visited her mother at night kept coming no matter how fervently she prayed. At night, shots rang out in the alleys no matter how fervently she prayed. Friends and acquaintances were beaten senseless and killed regardless how fervently she prayed. By twelve she was very selective in what she prayed for.

Donnie parked in the alley behind Amber's building.

He slipped into a black hoodie and tied it close around his face. Hands in his pockets and head lowered, he moved the ten yards around his car to the back door. Screwdriver in hand, it was soon open – a skill he and all his friends had acquired early on.

She had been asleep several hours when she was awakened by a noise at the door.

'Jimmy,' she thought. Her spirits soared.

She moved quickly to the door, fluffed her hair and did the spit on the little finger thing to her eyebrows. She opened the door. It was not Jimmy.

She only had a few seconds to recognize Donny's face before the fumes from the cloth he clapped over her face lulled her back into unconsciousness. He laid her back on the bed, pausing, all quite seriously for a moment to wonder if he could risk the fifteen minutes it would take to have his way with her – again. He decided against it, but that did nothing to quell his desire. He told himself there would be time for such things later. He lay his hand on her stomach figuring the life inside may have been his. He would just will it to be his.

He slipped her into a long coat and put her shoes back on. He folded her skirt and blouse and laid them on her lap, then lifted her. He opened the door, turned out the light and closed the door behind him. He made his way down the two flights of well-worn wooded steps thinking it was the first time he'd ever carried a woman who'd been knocked up. He found himself being extra careful. He wondered why. She was just a female for god's sake!

Downstairs, he opened the door and looked up and down the alley before venturing outside. He soon had her lying on the back seat – door closed. He thought he saw something half way up the alley. He put his right hand in his pocket and positioned it on his gun. He started toward it. A cat scampered from the spot, heading away from him.

"Hope you get laid, old man," he calling after it, smiling.

He got in the car and drove on through the alley.

It had been Bobby's cat. Bobby was nine. He had let Boots go intentionally to save his own skin. It had worked. He had seen it all. Experience had taught him that adults couldn't be trusted with such information so he slipped through the shadows and eventually arrived at Frankie's place. Bobby was a miniature mixture of Spiderman and Cat Woman. He could make his way to the rooftops with his feet never

touching a step. He was small for his age. He was strong for his age. Most of all, Bobby was savvy for his age.

He arrived at the window sill of Frankie's second floor room and tapped on the glass. The curtains parted and the window was raised.

"You oughta be home in bed, Bobby. What the hell are you doing up here?"

"Stuff I figured you should know."

Frankie gave him a hand inside.

"I just seen Donny in the alley behind Amber's place. He carried her to his car – she was asleep or probably drugged out. He drove off with her."

"When?"

"Maybe five minutes. I came here as soon as I seen it."

"You did the right thing. I suppose you expect a buck."

That was Bobby's well known going rate for a wide variety of unrequested services he regularly conveyed to others.

Frankie started to move to his dresser and fetch his wallet.

"No buck. This is for Jimmy. It's all in your hands now, right?"

"Right. You did good, Bobby. Now get your behind home and go to bed."

Frankie dialed his phone.

"Yeah!"

"This is Frankie, Jimmy. I just got word that Donny took Amber."

"What do you mean, took Amber?"

"Kidnapped I guess. My source said Donny came out of the back door of her building carrying her and laid her – asleep – down in the back seat of his Mustang. Then he drove off south through the alley."

"Give Bobby a dollar. I'll pay you back."

"Who said, Bobby?"

"Frankie!"

"Well, okay, it was Bobby, but he wouldn't take any money. I offered. He said this was for you."

"Good kid. Hope he lives to see fifteen. Thanks."

“How about I ride with you? Donny’s a mean SOB – and tricky.”

“This is my thing. Thanks, but there’s no reason for you to mess in it. Have a good life.”

He hung up. Frankie understood the messages. Don’t call me again and I know as well as you do I’m probably never going to come back from this.

Frankie allowed a tear. It was how he’d always been – weepy – anyway it was there in the dark of his room. He’d allow a tear if he damn well wanted to. Also, he’d not allow his best friend to risk his life on some macho, fairytale mission.

Donny drove south with no clear plan in mind. Still, he figured he was winning. Jimmy knew what he’d done to her before, and now he actually had her. Jimmy would have no way of knowing that, but of course it was what he would suspect the second he heard she was missing. Jimmy must be going out of his mind. Jimmy was weak – he let himself care about people – about the women in his life.

So if Donny had won, why was nothing settled? Why wasn’t it over? Why was he the one who was running? Something was terribly wrong. An act of revenge was supposed to be quick and decisive. He needed time to set it all straight in his head. South of Joliet he turned west moving across the state toward that big river he could never spell.

Amber began to rouse in the back seat. Donny pulled onto a side road and stopped. He had pills ‘the man’ had guaranteed would knock her out for days at a time. He managed to get her to swallow one with some warm pop and she went back to sleep probably without ever really waking up.

That experience showed him two things. He really needed to get her into a motel where she wouldn’t have to sleep all the time so she could manage her bodily functions and keep hydrated and fed. He figured the baby needed water and food. Since placing his hands on her stomach, over the baby, he began having feelings, foreign feelings, feelings of responsibility maybe. He didn’t like those feelings. He didn’t need *feelings* on top of everything else.

He passed several motels touting the well-advertised chain names. He slowed and looked another over – ‘Maggie’s

*Motel*'. Fifteen units. Back off the highway. A café next door. The flashing sign suggested a price that seemed reasonable – weekly rates even if that became necessary. He pulled in, got a room for one night and soon had Amber inside and on one of the two beds. He closed the drapes. He tried to get her to drink, but it didn't work. She was zonked! He removed her coat and pulled a sheet up over her.

"Damn, she's beautiful. Who'd a thought scrawny, mouthy, little Amber would ever turn into anything like that."

He put on a shiver. He clicked on his car alarm through the window and locked the motel door. Inside he removed his street clothes, turned off the light and laid back on the other bed. It was more to think than to sleep.

Several things were clear to him. His mind harbored nothing bounded by reality when Donny thought about Jimmy. He hated Jimmy because he was a Jackson, and Zimmermans hated Jacksons. Jimmy had gone off to war and made him (Donny) look bad for staying there in the neighborhood. That had been Jimmy's plan of course; Jacksons hated Zimmerman's and that was plenty of motivation to try and make him look bad. Jimmy had always flaunted his good grades and good behavior as if they were some sort of admirable things. He wondered how such a smart kid could be so dumb. So he had medals and the promise of college and some money. Donny could have had all that if Donny had set out to get them. While Jimmy was overseas, Donny had solidified his hold on the neighborhood; it was no longer a territory shared between the Zimmerman's and the Jacksons – all Zimmerman – all Donny Zimmerman. (Most folks in the neighborhood longed for the days Jimmy was there.) There wasn't a person over the age of three that wasn't afraid of Donny Zimmerman. That was how it should be, the good life, from Donny's perspective.

The next morning he awoke to Amber's groans. He dressed as she struggled back into consciousness. He suddenly realized he wasn't sure how to approach her, how to treat her. That was a first.

"What's going on?" she began holding the sides of her head as if that might somehow control the throbbing pain.

"You're here with me," he said. "It's Donny. I'm taking

care of you. We're in a motel. You probably want to go into the bathroom and clean up – maybe wash out some things. I'm sorry about that.”

What's with me, he wondered. *'I'm sorry about that?'* Donny Zimmerman ain't never sorry about nothin'.

“Go. Get cleaned up. You can dry your stuff in front of the fan by the window.”

Amber struggled to sit up on the side of the bed. The world seemed unsettled, unstable. First things first. She would talk with Donny later. She stood in the shower with her clothes on letting the warmth run through her hair and trickle down her body. Her head wouldn't clear. Why a motel? Why with Donny? Why was she such a mess? What about Jimmy? At least Jimmy hadn't killed him.

She tended to herself.

Twenty minutes later she emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, her clothes washed and dripping. Donny had positioned two wooden chairs for her clothes. Her inclination was to poke his eyes out and run, but she needed to know what was going on. She arranged her clothes to dry and noticed her blouse and skirt that Donny had laid out on her bed. Facing away from him she slipped into them.

“I suppose you're wondering what's going on.”

“No, I'm used to waking up in strange motel rooms with killer headaches, mostly naked in front of the man I hate the most on the planet.”

Amber lowered herself with some difficulty into the large chair near the TV. She hadn't yet looked Donny in the face. She didn't need to. It was the face she saw every time she closed her eyes – the face grinning down at her as he raped her, over and over and over again that horrific weekend nearly four months before. Suddenly she realized she was hungry, thirsty and terrified – as terrified as she had ever been. She knew the kind of terrible man that was with her there in that room. Just being that close to him made her feel dirty and ugly. She wondered if he had taken liberties with her the night before. Knowing or not knowing wouldn't change anything.

She felt her baby move. That always made her smile. Some of the girls at work said she'd soon get tired of that – a

kid kicking at your spleen all night long was not the stuff smiles were made of. She couldn't imagine it ever being anything but miraculous. It reminded her of the responsibility she had for a new life. Half of it was from her, and it didn't matter who's the other half was. She had to plan for more than just herself. That meant she had to outmaneuver Donny.

//////



## FOUR

### He Passed Door Number Four

It was just before seven that morning when Jimmy pulled to a stop in front of Frankie's house. He knocked. Mrs. Guccione answered and offered a full out hug. He couldn't determine if that meant she was just happy to see him or if she knew some terrible thing that had required consolation. He responded in kind. He had lived half his life in that house as a boy – probably more if hours were to have been counted.

“Are you hungry? Let me fix you something?”

“Thanks. No. Frankie still here?”

“Up in his room. He's talking about getting his own place. You talk to him. This is his home.”

“Boys grow up, Mama G. Mama's have to be happy for them. Later.”

Like he had ever since his legs had been long enough and strong enough, he bounded up the stairs two at a time. The mere act telegraphed a sense of security from the old days. He rapped on the door – tap, tap, tap tap tap – their secret code since they'd been nine. He entered without needing an answer.

“Jimmy. I've been so worried. You didn't do something dumb, did you?”

“Not yet. I need your brain. Where do you think Donny might take Amber?”

“I've been thinking, but I got nothing. I'm thinking that about now he's having second thoughts about what he's done. It was his typical, hot headed, do it on the spur of the moment without thinking it through way that's been getting him in trouble since he was old enough to land his first fist.”

“Second thoughts. What does that get us?”

“He'll be scared. He'll react like a wounded tiger making him more dangerous than ever.”

Frankie had always tended toward the melodramatic.

Jimmy nodded remembering back to fourth grade when Donny had pantsed a new kid on the first day of school. Not satisfied with the humiliation, he had taken the boy's belt and

whipped it across his face – buckle end to his forehead. It had needed six stitches. The kid turned out to be the new principle's son. The principle was after him. His dad was after him. The cops and the juvenile authorities were after him. He'd hidden up behind the basketball backboard believing nobody would be looking 'up' for him. A dumb move offering no possible escape route. When the first period PE boys entered the gym from the locker room and saw him, they began referring to him in the inventively profane terms only eighth grade boys can create. In his outrage, he launched himself at them down through the air, breaking his arm.

Frankie was right – corner him and you had a wild animal on your hands – a crazy, adrenalin driven, minimally intelligent wild animal.

“Think he will hurt Amber?” Jimmy asked.

“He'll do whatever it takes to control her if she's dumb enough to try and fight back. I know what you're really asking. Honestly, I imagine he'll rape her whenever he wants.”

That hadn't really been the thing to say. Suddenly there were two, adrenalin driven wild beasts in the game.

Frankie received a text message.

*“Maggie's Motel. No idea where. Control Jimmy. A”*

“How in the world?” Frankie asked.

“She must have gotten hold of his phone,” Jimmy said. “I hope he didn't catch her. Poor Amber.”

“We finally have something to go on. How do we find that motel?”

Jimmy shrugged, his face reddened and that vein on his forehead began throbbing.

“Got it – well something,” Frankie said. “Come with me.”

They hurried down to his father's barbershop in the basement.

“Dad. No time for hi's and bye's. That State Cop whose hair you cut. How can we get in touch with him?”

“Wes Wilson, badge 399. Call the substation. I have the number here in case I ever need to cancel.”

Frankie poked in the number, suddenly realizing he might not even need to go as far down the chain as Officer Wilson.

“State Police. Sergeant Canter speaking.”

“Sir, I know this is an odd request, but do you know of a Maggie’s Motel in the area? It is of utmost importance that I locate it immediately.”

“Hold a minute.”

Frankie heard him call out to others apparently close by. Presently he was back.

“There’s a flea bag by that name down at the intersection of 52 and 47 just east of Lisbon. Lisbon’s a tiny place west of Joliet.”

“Thank you.”

He hung up.

“Thanks dad. I owe you one.”

The boys turned to leave. Frankie’s dad called after him.

“You own me a whole bunch more than one, son, and don’t forget that when you’re putting me in a old people’s home.”

Usually it would have been worth smiles and chuckles, but not on that most serious day of their lives.

They stopped in the dining room. There was an atlas in the bookshelf. They opened it on the table.

“Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois – here we are.”

It had been Frankie.

Jimmy leaned in and ran his finger in circles. There’s 52 – east/west. There’s 47 north south. There’s Lisbon. I can take I-55 south to Shorewood and take a right on 52. Thanks.”

Jimmy moved to leave. Frankie grabbed his upper arm.

“Stop and think this through. Let the cops deal with an abduction. They’re trained and prepared to handle things like that. They’ll put Donny away for years.”

“I think we have a communication problem, old friend. You’re thinking reasonably and I’m thinking with my gut.”

“At least let me come with you.”

“Not a chance. You’re the smartest, kindest person that ever survived this neighborhood. I won’t let my problem jeopardize your safety at this point in your life. I love you. Be safe. And promise me you won’t call the police. PROMISE!”

Frankie nodded.

Frankie had his fingers crossed behind his back.

Frankie was suddenly faced by the biggest dilemma of his life.

Jimmy needed gas. He stopped and filled up paying cash. He used the restroom. He bought a small bouquet of flowers – in case it turned out well for them. He pulled back out onto the street. The flowers offered a pleasant scent. He went through a mental check list the way he'd been taught to do in the service.

“Focus!”

“Don't get caught speeding.”

“Don't get into an accident.”

“Approach the motel with caution. Donny's probably on the lookout for me. He is bound to be armed.”

“Breathe. Keep your cool. You need to think straight.”

“Don't expect Donny to react rationally.”

His mind drifted back to their eighth-grade year. Donny had reportedly been seen taking a girl's book report out of her locker with the probable intention of changing the cover page and turning it in as his own –not that any teacher would believe it was his. Amber told Jimmy and he rode his bike to Donny's place to confront him. He had the report stuffed in under the front of his pants. Jimmy could read the name of Amber's friend on the front page.

“You stole that report. I'm going to take it and return it.”

“No you ain't. Nobody can know. All printed out all pretty like. I just change the first page and . . .”

Jimmy dropped his bike and moved toward Donny with some ferocity. Donny mounted his bike and the chase was on. It had been another in a long line of really dumb moves on Donny's part. Jimmy had won the grade by grade bike races at the end of school picnic every year since the third grade. He'd have won in first and second, but he didn't have a bike back then. It took only a block and a half and Jimmy turned his speeding bike into the front wheel of Donny's. The two of them were in a tangle in the gutter on a deserted street. There were words, and blows, and arm locks and karate chops. Never to be beaten in a fight, yet seeing it was

inevitable that day, Donny removed the report from beneath his belt and tossed it aside, bringing the proceedings to a premature halt.

“There’s the damn report. Probably weren’t no good anyway. Wrote by a slut – your friend the slut. Not worth fightin’ over.”

That time Jimmy had been wise enough to retrieve the report and return it to Amber’s friend with no more blows or even words. He hadn’t let his chivalrous side be sucked into a fight over the girl’s honor. It had been a private bout, away from other eyes so Donny would never bring it up again. Jimmy wasn’t prone to anyway.

This pursuit was like that one in most ways: good guy chasing bad guy down a thoroughfare, only in the end, Jimmy wouldn’t just be walking away – not until his wrath had been satisfied, and at that moment he believed his wrath would not be satisfied so long as Donny had a breath left in his evil, lecherous body.

During those past several hours, Jimmy had envisioned any number of horrible atrocities he could inflict on Donny. He got some satisfaction from the idea of hanging him upside down from a tree, making a tiny incision in his carotid artery on his neck and just sitting back, enjoying Donny’s terror, and watching the life drain away right there in front him. He had considered stripping him and using a branding iron to torture him into twenty-four hours of screaming agony. His favorite – and most appropriate he thought – was castrating him, severing his pride and joy, and throwing the lot of it to pigs for lunch. Although that would inflict a terrible punishment that would plague the man for the rest of his life, Jimmy wasn’t really considering punishment – he was considering revenge.

Punishment, supposedly, had as its goal the change in behavior from unacceptable to acceptable. The offender would change and go on to live a more upright life after suffering some sort of punishment. Punishment almost never really worked that way, but the ignorant continued to believe in its power. Punishment was often the springboard for retaliation and so the revenge cycle would begin – always the fault of that punisher, of course.

Serious revenge aimed to bestow the final act in a man's life, rendering him unable to ever commit another atrocity toward his enemy. Its ultimate endgame required death. It was like the difference between life in prison – punishment – and the sentence to death – revenge.

Donny eased his car down and around the curve of the gentle ramp and was soon on I-55 heading south and southwest. It was forty miles down the interstate to Shorewood and fifteen or so to the crossroad with 47. He irrationally added still another level of anger.

“And he took her to a flea bag motel. She deserves a castle or at least the Hilton or the Holiday Inn.”

It took a good deal of control to keep to the speed limit, but he knew that was necessary. He wanted to be there already. He felt the pocket of his jacket. The gun was there. Neurotically, he had checked its load a dozen times. He knew he would do that one last time before he exited the car at Maggie's. Marines were neurotic that way. It was okay. It was their equivalent of the Boy Scout's, 'Be Prepared'.

The question came to mind whether that would be the last time he would check a gun, or open a car door or enjoy wonder-filled memories of being with Amber. He did not allow it to stay. It was the stuff of every final memory he'd ever had before starting out on patrol so he had plenty of practice relegating such matters to whatever place stored things so they would not come to mind as a distraction.

In his plan, there would be no conversation, no last word, none of that was necessary. Over the years, the two of them had come to know each other's minds. Donny knew he was coming to kill him. Donny knew the first shot between them would win. Donny probably had the advantage – a place of cover as Jimmy approached. Jimmy was too smart to be ambushed, and if he were, he'd fought himself out of several and come through to tell about them – not that he ever did.

It had been as if in a time warp. He found himself heading west on 52, not remembering having left the big highway. It was just two lanes – blacktop – old – pot holes. He slowed to forty. The sign read – *Hwy 47 one mile*. It was hard to believe he was so close. How would he feel after? If dead, nothing, of course. That would make lots of people sad.

Other people's feelings played no part in the arrangement. If alive, would it be victorious, vindicated, happy, euphoric? Maybe a more straight forward feeling like a job well done, mission accomplished, the world's a better place less one bastard. He had no idea. If his mother's rearing had anything to do with it he would feel guilty. He doubted that. There would be a sweetness to it, like when he used to lick sugar right out of the sugar bowl or stick his tongue deep into the honey jar. As a young teen he and the girl he was with would often hold fruit flavored pop in their mouths, then swallow it in preparation for a lingering, tongue to tonsils kiss – it was so sweet.

He slowed as he approached – 47 had a stop sign – 52 didn't. There it was off to his left. Fleabag, indeed. He had expected to see the Mustang. It wasn't there. Perhaps in anticipation of his visit Donny had parked it elsewhere – around back maybe. Donny would have no idea how Jimmy could locate him, but that tangled mass in his stomach would tell him that Jimmy *would* find out.

He pulled across 47 and entered the parking lot from just behind the units – out of the line of sight of any of the rooms. He checked his gun, cradling it back in his jacket pocket. He got out and walked to the office – the room closest to him and the road. He entered.

“Hey!”

He offered his wonderful smile.

“My little brother texted me to meet him here – Donny Zimmerman. Knowing him he'd have used an alias just to prank me. About my size. Has his wife with him. Red hair. Pregnant.”

“Sounds like unit six. Shall I call and alert them?”

“No. Like I said, he's my little bro. He deserves the worst of scares anybody ever put on him. Thanks for your help.”

He peeled off a ten and laid it in the old man's palm. They exchanged winks. The old man chuckled. One might have guessed he had put up with a younger brother himself back in the day.

Outside, Jimmy counted units to number six and then circled around back. At the rear, each room had a high

bathroom window and a lower full sized window. There was a gap between the drapes on number six. He couldn't see anybody inside. He heard the shower running. It must be they were both in the bathroom.

Using his boyhood hunting knife – the most he'd ever hunted with it was rats in the sewers – he pried up the window and entered. He didn't carry his service knife – it always brought to mind the stench of the enemy and the smell of Middle Eastern blood. Inside, he drew his gun and quietly opened the door to the bathroom. There was nobody to see. The bastard was in the shower with Amber. He had to be careful. Nothing in his plan called for her to get hurt. Jimmy doubted Donny would be showering with a gun, but he knew he couldn't count on that. He watched his back. It was still clear.

He reached out across his body with his left hand for the right edge of the curtain. He held the gun in his right hand at chest height. He pulled back the curtain!

Disappointment. No one was there. For some reason, he turned off the water – mama's upbringing, no doubt. 'Don't waste the hot water.' Back in the main room he stooped to look under the bed. Perhaps they had stepped out to the café next door. Why the running shower if that were the case? He had probably missed them and the running water had been a delay tactic – pretty sharp for Donny.

If Amber had left it on it might be a clue – running water – a waterfall maybe. Yeah, sure, a waterfall there in flat central, Illinois.

He exited like he had entered and walked the length of the motel to a spot where he could get a full view of the parking lot at the café next door. Nothing. Realizing his gun was still in sight he put it away. He went back to wondering if Amber might have actually left him a clue. He returned inside the room. Clearly, they had not officially checked out or the manager would have known. There were no belongings left inside. They were gone, alright.

The Bible was opened, inside down, on the lamp stand between the recliners. Neither she nor Donny was given to reading the scriptures. Jimmy picked it up and studied the pages. Nothing came to mind. Wait. He looked more closely.



Two letters had been underlined. R and I.

“Rhode Island? Rocky and Illwinkle?”

His thoughts were deteriorating although as fifth graders that would have sent him and Frankie into roll on the floor hysterics. He dog-eared the page and took the book with him. If he could just syphon his excess adrenalin into his fuel tank he'd be good all the way to California.

He got in his car and sat quietly for a time. R I? Richmond Insurance, Rage and Irritation . . . Wait. Think. A clue has to refer to the situation. The situation is, where is Amber? RI must refer to a place. Donny had been heading west. Jimmy pulled back on route 52 and continued west as well. He could think as he drove. He drove on for nearly a half hour when he came to a road sign: Rock Island 120 miles.

“Of course. R I. Rock Island.”

The summer between eighth grade and their freshman year, Donny had a cousin come to stay for a month or so. He was worse news than Donny and his brother combined. Donny seemed to look up to him. His name was Bart. Bart would walk up to a group of a half dozen strangers and punch out the biggest, meanest looking one of the group. Nobody messed with him that summer there on 49<sup>th</sup> Street. The kid was from Rock Island. It was a good sized city, one of four actually known as the quad cities right on the Mississippi river. Two in Iowa and two in Illinois. Rock Island was still in Illinois.

Jimmy's phone rang. It was Frankie.

“You alright?” he asked.

“Of course. They weren't at the motel, but I think Amber left a clue. I'm heading for Rock Island.”

“What you going to do there, knock on doors until you find them?”

“I don't know what I'm going to do, but I do know I'm not going to stop looking. You just call for a health and fitness update?”

“I thought you might want Donny's cell phone number. I assume you have Ambers. I'll text them to you along with Donny's license plate number.

“Okay. Those might be good things to have. Thanks.”

“Everybody's worried about you back here.”

“They should be worried about Amber and the bastard

she's carrying."

"Hey. The kid had nothing to do with how he came to be. Stop blaming him, her, it. You can't go on thinking that way. It's Amber's, too. I'd think that would make half of it very precious to you."

"You were wise from the first day I ran into you using your inhaler behind the gym. Thanks. It will take some doing, but I will try – I should try."

"You got money?"

"Enough for a while. I'll be okay."

"I wish you'd come home and be party to an all points for her."

"I know you do. I can't. I know you understand that."

"I know your damn pig headedness is compelling you in that direction. I don't understand why somebody as smart as you are is doing this. You aren't thinking about Amber at all, you know. You may think you are, but you aren't. You're all caught up in that Jackson/Zimmerman feud – the one you always said you couldn't understand."

While Frankie droned on, Jimmy recalled one of their conversations about it. They were freshmen, in the tree house, during one of Donny's several vacations at juvey that year.

"I don't get it – the problem between your family and Donny's."

"I don't either, if I think of it on a logical plane. But it's like in my DNA. Jackson's and Zimmerman's hate each other."

"Why?"

"Got no idea. I suppose way back when they did bad stuff to each other – unforgivable stuff."

"How can you continue it if you don't even know what it's about?"

"You sound like our mom's – Donny's and mine."

"I've never seen your dad act mad at the Zimmerman's."

"I guess I haven't either."

"Then why in God's name . . ."

"I learned about it from Donny, I guess."

Jimmy returned to the phone call when he heard Frankie ask, “Are you even listening to me?”

“Don’t confuse me. This isn’t about that feud anyway. It’s about Jimmy Jackson having to take out Donny Zimmerman because of the terrible things he has done to my fiancé.”

“More like it’s about Jimmy Jackson thinking he has to be the only defender of the woman he loves and remains too thick headed to let law enforcement handle it. Law enforcement – that’s the service we pay to protect us in cases like this.”

“I guess we will agree to disagree. I really do thank you for your concern and your help. I better get off, I’m driving. Love you.”

“No, you don’t love me. If you loved me you wouldn’t be putting my best friend in the whole world in mortal jeopardy; you wouldn’t be putting the most important girl in both our lives in certain danger; you wouldn’t be letting Donny win.”

“Donny win? How do you figure? I’m going to kill him.”

“You’re letting him poke your buttons. He wanted to punish you because you’re so much more successful than he is so he got your fiancé pregnant. Your reaction – going crazy – lived up to his fondest hopes and expectations so then he figured he could poke some more buttons and he kidnapped her. He knew you’d go out of your head and make some stupid gesture to get her back. You know Donny. He isn’t capable of thinking any further ahead than undoing his zipper. His idea had to end up badly for him, but he’s too dumb to see that far into the future. You’re smart. You know what will happen. You kill him. You go to prison for life or worse. Amber and your parents and your best friend lose the person they love the most in the world. This whole thing is your completely selfish vendetta for the purpose of saving your god damn pride. Damn you!”

“I suppose we should end the conversation, now. Thanks for Donny’s number. If you hear from Amber again, I hope you’ll pass it on to me.”

Jimmy hung up. He did his best to shrug off what Frankie

had just laid on him. Frankie's arguments were always well laid out and logical. He drove on with the sun straight above him. He smiled faintly. It was like his car was whatever the shadow caster on a sundial was called. Twelve o'clock and heading due west.

## FIVE

### He Passed Door Number Five.

“You can’t win this, you know, Donny.”

It had been Amber from the back seat as they continued west on I-80.

“I already won. I made Jimmy go crazy.”

“And when you’re drawing your last breath after he puts a bullet in your chest are you still going to believe you won.”

Donny fell silent. Amber felt she was on a roll and pressed her advantage while she had it.

“You’re not dealing with the Jimmy you beat to a pulp in Carter’s alley when you were fifteen. He’s in twice the shape you could ever be in. He’s a marine with nearly four years of experience in battle. He can kill a man with his bare hands in ten different ways. He’s been killing enemy soldiers every day he was gone. He killed them even though he had no real reason to hate them, not one on one. He knew nothing about what kind of men they were, but he still killed them. That’s what Marines do. But he has every reason in the world to hate you so just imagine how easy it will be, and think about what hideous plan he has in mind for your last minutes on earth.”

“Shut up. Don’t want to hear one more word or I’ll slap you silly.

“And risk harming your baby.”

“May not be mine.”

“But it *may* be yours, *daddy*.”

He reached around over the seat and slapped her in the face. She knew it was coming before she said her say. She fell to the side and just lay on the seat for some time, sobbing. It had been worth it.

The sky grew cloudy and before long rain set in. Looked to be the short, light, early summer variety. The drops were large and beat an irregular rhythm on the roof and windshield. There was lightning in the distance off to the north. Amber wondered if her window was closed back home. Donny hoped the dog was outside. It needed a bath.

Donny kept to a steady sixty eight miles an hour. He was smart enough not to risk getting pulled over. He knew Amber would just blurt things out and that would be that. He either needed to dope her up again or he needed get rid of her – stash her somewhere so she couldn't ruin things. He thought about that. Jimmy's whereabouts suddenly became extremely important to him.

He had caught Amber using his phone. He'd pulled up the text message and saw to whom it had been sent. He figured Frankie had passed it on. It's why they had lit out of the motel. He figured if for just one moment he could make Jimmy think the two of them were naked together in the shower, he would have added to his growing victory.

They would hole up close to the quad cities. That would give him a chance to figure his way out of the unexpected situation that seemed to have taken on an all-consuming life of its own.

He was resolute in his belief that Jimmy had to be punished and better still driven out of his mind – his brain tortured for what he had done to him – Donny. Jimmy made everybody like him – perhaps another way of gaining modest respect Donny was coming to see, but nobody really feared Jimmy like they did him and that was the bottom line. He had him there, for sure. Jimmy flaunted his prowess in baseball and basketball, coaxing friendship and admiration away from him, Donny. He studied instead of roaming the alleys and confronting the newcomers – showing them who was in charge and sending them on their way bleeding and hurting so they wouldn't forget it. Jimmy made good grades, got into the Marine Corps, won medals, and faced enemies with guns and bayonets and maybe even his bare hands. It had all been to put him down, to belittle him in the eyes of other people, to make the Jackson's win and the Zimmerman's lose. But he got him. For years Donny had his way with almost any girl he wanted to bed. What could be more macho than that – what could provide better evidence to prove who the real man was? He even had his way with Amber not once but a dozen times. He made her – Jimmy's woman – scream and cry and scratch and bite. And now he had her to do with as he pleased. It bothered him that he still hadn't. He had taken her away from

Jimmy and there wasn't a thing the big sports star good grade making marine man could do about it. He had won.

Each time he repeated that – that he had won – it somehow dimmed a bit in strength and conviction. He couldn't understand. He was the man. He was the man who was feared. He was the man who could get his way with the flick of his head. He was the man who could get others to do his bidding with no more than a look. That was what being a man all was about. It's what his father had told him. It's what his father had showed him. It's what his father demanded of him. He'd proved himself to his father by being able to take everything his old man could lay on him. There had only ever been one man to man feeling that meant anything to him – his father's arm around his shoulder after he had survived still another of his vicious beatings.

Amber sat up, still sniffing, but remained quiet like Donny had directed. From the moment she knew she was pregnant she feared for Jimmy – not because he couldn't handle anything Donny could dish out, but because of how enraged he would become and how he would go off half-cocked and get himself hurt or killed. Now, for the first time, really, she feared for herself and the baby. Donny had almost killed his own brother once when he thought he had betrayed him. Just think what he would be capable of against a helpless fetus.

“Lie down and be quiet. I got something I need to do.”

The car slowed and he pulled off the road. Amber's panic rose.

He got out of the car and was gone for several minutes. She heard a shot, then another and another. Donny reentered the car and drove away at high speed, turning again, clearly onto a side road from the jerky, uneven ride. They continued at a high rate of speed for many minutes. He slowed and turned, then again speeded up. There were several more turns.

Amber couldn't hold it.

“What have you done?”

“I was out of cash. Now I'm not out of cash. Here, I got you a Hershey bar.”

He tossed it into the back seat. Amber sat up.

“You’re bleeding.”

“Just a little nick in my neck. I’ll be fine. You can doctor it when we stop.”

“Like hell I’ll doctor it.”

She folded her arms.

“Like hell you *won’t*. You’ll do like I say or I’ll beat on your stomach till the kid’s dead.”

Amber began crying again. She knew he’d do it. She felt helpless. She was terrified. She just wanted to wake up in her bed in her room with her window and ceiling fan and hot plate. Like in the beginning it would be heaven. Donny had at least learned enough about women to understand that to tell them to stop crying was always a losing battle. He looked at her in the mirror and shook his head. She looked a mess.

They were driving through the country – farms and livestock, tractors and plows, fences and ponds. The road was narrow – a one lane slab, she thought she had heard them called.

Donny had slowed to a reasonable speed. It was only at times like that he wished he had a nondescript car like Jimmy’s. He doubted the owner of the liquor store had seen his car. He had put the old man down with the first shot. The other two were from the man, firing up at him, from where he lay on the floor in a growing pool of blood. He hoped he had bled out before help arrived. It would mean no ID, no clues about the car. The store had been empty of customers.

Eventually the slab intersected with a real, two lane road. It looked to be fairly busy. Up ahead was a motel sitting beside a Walmart. He pulled into the store’s parking lot backing into a space so his plate was covered by a light pole. He turned to Amber handing her his handkerchief.

“Clean me up. Use this old soda like it was water. Not much blood on my collar. I think it’s already stopped bleeding.”

She went about the task, doing the best she could. She found herself in the position of needing Donny. She hated it, but that’s how it was. She couldn’t believe how callus he was about killing the store keeper – yes, she *could* believe it and that was even more frightening, more for her baby than for her.



“We are going shopping. We need food. You need milk, right? Pregies need milk?”

She nodded.

“Calcium for the baby’s bones and muscles.”

His head seemed to be all over the place about the baby. She would cooperate and maybe she could get a message out.

They left the car. As they neared the doors he put his arm around her shoulders. Her skin crawled, but she didn’t fight it. She had to remember she needed him.

They made purchases – bread, milk, cereal, spam, apples, oranges, cold cuts, mustard and a six pack of beer. Donny picked up a small first aid kit and a roll of duct tape. They were in and out of the store in fifteen minutes.

On two occasions, Amber had been able to turn her head away from Donny. She mouthed the word, ‘HELP’, but could do no more. She had no idea if anybody understood.

Outside they didn’t walk back toward the car as she had expected.

“We are going to walk to the motel, there. We’ll tell them we had car trouble and it’s being worked on. In the mean time we need a place to stay for the night.”

It might work.

Amber was ready for a bed.

All they had left was a room with one double bed.

“Sounds fine. We’ll take it.”

“Don’t you want to see it?”

“We got no choice. Car’s up the road. We’re here for the duration. It’ll have to be fine.”

“I have to see ID and it’s payment in advance,” the woman said.

Donny handed her a hundred and his driver’s license. She counted back fifty dollars and a penny. She handed him the key. Room 207, up the outside stairs to the left as you leave this door. Ice, snack machine and pop in the center of the building. Have a good night. Check out is at eleven. I suppose if your car isn’t ready by then we could make it as late as two.

She offered what seemed to Amber a compassionate smile.

“About three months along, honey?” she asked walking them to the door.

“Almost four.”

“Had seven kids, myself. Good luck.”

To Donny the smile had indicated a surefire pushover if he needed one.

Amber had no opportunity to pass a message. She knew she had to be perfectly sure Donny would not catch on. She had seen what he'd done to his own brother and the store keeper.

Donny was distressed he had to register under his own name, but there had been no way out. He had always gone by his second name. Officially he was Thomas Donald Zimmerman. He had signed in as Tom Zimmerman. Upstairs, he opened the door, reached inside, and turned on the light, moving Amber in ahead of him. He was carrying the single bag of groceries.

He sat the sack on a low table by the front window and closed the shades.

“We need to get ice. We'll go together.”

He pointed to the two ice buckets sitting on the vanity beside the large plastic bowl and pile of towels and wash cloths.

“Want a pop?” he asked as she filled the pails with ice.”

“A Seven Up if they have it. My stomach's upset.”

He got her two. They returned to their room. For a moment, she weighed the idea of breaking away and running down to the office, but feared she, the baby, and the manager would all end up dead. They returned to their room.

Donny laid a can of beer on top of one bucket of ice, working it down as far as he could. He arranged the ice from the other bucket around the half gallon of milk in the large bowl. Those things done, he opened the drink for Amber and handed it to her. She was sitting on the edge of the bed. She sat it on the night stand.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“You know the drill. Leave the door open.”

She returned and took her drink to a comfortable looking chair in the corner. Donny was fixing a spam sandwich.

“Want one?”

“I’ll settle for a apple.”

He tossed her one.”

“What’s the plan?” she asked knowing she was pushing the boundary.

“We stay here tonight. If the car hasn’t been identified by mornin’ we’ll move it and may stay here another day. I got thinkin’ to do. Sounds like we got ‘til two o’clock to make that decision.”

Donny took the beer, lukewarm at best and turned on the TV. Amber took her time finishing her drink. It settled her stomach.

“I’m tired so I’m going to turn in,” she said at last.

Donny didn’t respond. Amber wondered of course if he had plans for her in bed. She came close to asking, but held her tongue. She removed her skirt and blouse and got under the sheet on the right side. She felt herself trembling. She hoped he couldn’t see it.

The next morning Amber was still asleep at noon. She awoke with a terribly familiar headache. Donny had drugged her drink. He had already been to check out the car and said he had moved it. He had paid for a second night. There was a burger place inside the big store.

“We’ll catch lunch at the store. I’ll buy you a change of clothes. I suppose they have preggy clothes.”

“That would be nice. Thanks. I’m sure I can find something.”

She tried her best to sound civil. It never came out that way. She had no idea what was going on in Donny’s head. She felt sure he hadn’t had sex with her the night before although she couldn’t understand that. As a teen he had bragged to his friends that Donny Zimmerman never went to sleep at night until he’d had at least one girl that day.

Jimmy said he doubted if it was a lie. If that was still his goal, he’d missed two days in a row. That probably was not a good omen for her immediate future. Maybe she could leave a message in the dressing room.

There would be no dressing room.

“Find stuff you know will fit. No tryin’ on today.”

From there they moved to the men’s section. Donny

got jeans, a shirt, underwear and socks.

After they shopped they ate. Donny forced a milk shake on her, “For the kid’s bones.”

In his mind he was working toward an end game where he and Amber ended up together far away from the old neighborhood – Canada maybe or the southwest. He heard Arizona was a good place – with lots of jobs.

He just needed time to bring Amber around. Girls always adored him; he’d known that since he turned twelve. She just needed time to get Jimmy out of her system.

They walked back to the motel.

“You know, that drug you give me can damage the baby’s brain.”

Donny didn’t respond. He hadn’t known, of course. He really didn’t want the kid’s brain messed up in case things worked out like he had planned.

They reached their room.

“First, we’ll change clothes,” he said. “Can you wash the others so we’ll have a backup?”

Amber noted it had been a question and not a demand. She understood his strategy and knew she didn’t dare fall into his trap. He had apparently given up a lot – leaving her alone for two days. She held no hope that would continue. He was the least trustworthy person she’d ever known – outside of her mother, perhaps.

She wondered if her mother knew what was going on and if she did, she wondered if she cared. After Amber moved out, her mother had never made any effort to contact her. Amber had dropped by the house on several occasions, but didn’t feel welcome so stopped trying. She had never felt wanted by her mother. She had no idea who her father was and doubted if her mother did either. Her life at home had imparted no sense of personal value or self-worth. Her life with Jimmy – and Donny back at the beginning – and Frankie, of course, dear, sweet, Frankie – had been her only source for feelings of personal value, acceptance and pride about herself. Jimmy had always been her rock, her go to person, her saint, even before romance had entered their relationship. She loved him so deeply it hurt to be away from him. The only thing she had thanked God for since saying her prayers as a

four-year-old, was Jimmy. He was all she had to be thankful for. She understood how sad that meant her life had been, but at least in the end she was to have Jimmy for eternity.

“You look good,” Donny said after she was changed.

“Thanks. You too.”

Of course he knew he looked good, Donny Zimmerman always looked good, but it was nice to hear it without having to force it – ‘Don’t I look great?’

Amber moved to open the blinds to let more light into the room. She stopped after just a crack. Down below, in front of the office was a police car. Her heart skipped beats and she had to work to breathe. Was it about to be over? And, with the police involved, without putting Jimmy at risk. Had he come to his senses? More likely Frankie’s doing. She closed them.

“Too bright, I guess.”

She sat back in the big chair in the corner and waited.

//////

## SIX

### He Passed Door Number Six.

Jimmy had been driving for what seemed an eternity. He slowed looking for a place to get coffee and a sandwich. He left the highway to the service road where a tall, weather worn sign boasted *Lizzy's Café* with the *World's Best Coffee*. That seemed hard to beat. Just ahead off to the right was a bevy of cop cars parked at odd angles in front of a liquor store. There were no flashing lights, suggesting that whatever danger there once might have been had been handled. Perhaps a drunken cop competition. He smiled. He didn't particularly like cops. He realized it wasn't a fair position to hold. He'd never known one. So, he had no legitimate reason to dislike them. The touted café was a hundred yards on up the road. He pulled in, thinking a waitress would probably know most everything going on in the area.

He got out of his car and surveyed the scene as best he could. No white Mustang. He didn't know if that were good or bad. On second thought, any way you cut it, it would be bad: If his car had been there, Donny was either in custody or dead and therefore out of Jimmy's reach. If it weren't, he was still out there free, but who knew where. Maybe that was the better of the two. It would mean he was still available to be hunted.

Jimmy entered the café – small, a dozen tables and six booths. A man, who had been looking back on middle age for some time, approached. He was wearing kitchen whites under a full length white apron. A white, fold flat for storage hat, sat on his bald head. Not the waitress he had envisioned.

“Whatcha need, friend? Menu's on the wall above the kitchen pass-through. Drink first?”

“Coffee.”

“Need a minute?”

“No, let's see. Your cook know how to make a good Reuben?”

“Depends on whatcha call a good Reuben.”

“Meat against the bread. Cheese against the meat. Well drained sauerkraut in between so it never touches the

bread to make it soggy. Lightly toasted on a grill.”

“Not many people realize that’s the way to do it. I assure you our cook follows that rule to a T. I’m the cook. I’m the server. I’m the floor sweeper. I’m the opener, I’m the closer. I s’pose you get the idea.”

“Oh, the joys of ownership, you say!”

The man nodded and smiled.

“Don’t have no corned beef heated. Take a few minutes, Okay?”

“Okay.”

He disappeared into the kitchen. So much for the *coffee first*,” Jimmy thought. He had selected a seat in a booth with a window, which allowed him to look back at the scene with the cop cars. Two cars left, leaving three.

“Here’s your coffee. Fresh within the hour.”

He grinned and chuckled.

“It’s true, but I just put on fresh. Need four minutes. I’m Dave, by the way.”

“I see. *Dave*, the guy *Lizzy’s Café* was named after.”

“I like you. Not many young men your age has a sense of humor no more.”

Jimmy pointed out the window.

“Why the convention of cop cars?”

“A killin’ down there not two hours ago. A robbery gone bad the way I hear it and I usually hear things like that right. Cops love my donuts. A young man in a white car. I’m the one who heard the shots and saw the man run to the car and drive off. I called 911.”

“Do you know what he took?”

“Money and a candy bar. Can you beat that? Money and one, giant size Hershey bar.”

“Get much, do you suppose?”

“Almost three thousand dollars.”

“What a shame.”

“What’s the younger generation coming to?”

Jimmy nodded and turned back into the booth thinking he had already reached the limits of nosiness without raising suspicion.

“I’ll go build that sandwich. Meat should be heated through. Grilled on marbled rye, I imagine.”



“Yes, sir. A Reuben’s not a Reuben if it’s not grilled on marbled rye.”

Dave returned to his kitchen chuckling. He seemed to be a nice man. Jimmy wondered if he was going to be the last nice man he ever talked with. He sighed a sigh that seemed to emerge from his toes, and sat back. His eyes were drawn again to the liquor store. Dave hadn’t mentioned a woman. He really didn’t think he dared ask. It was probably good. If a woman had been hurt he’d have heard about it. Maybe laying down in the back seat. Maybe in the trunk. Maybe she got away. He’d have received a call if that had happened. Of course, Donny wouldn’t have let her keep her phone. It got too complicated too soon. He’d just be satisfied that no woman was mentioned.

The sandwich arrived on a stack of three flimsy paper plates. It was perfect – the sandwich. So was the fresh coffee.

“I give ya some extra plates. The ones I got was cheap, but not really made to be used.”

Jimmy heard it as humorous and smiled. Dave chuckled confirming the intent.

“Thanks. I appreciate that. Why the four easy on and off ramps right here? Can’t think there can be that much traffic down here to a half dozen small businesses.”

“A semi-pro baseball team has a stadium just to the south. You wouldn’t believe the traffic out here on summer evenings. Sometimes I sell ten dozen brats a hour. Grandson sets up a stand out front. A pretty savvy kid for ten. Granddaughter helps me in the kitchen. Goes go their college funds.”

“I suppose those ramps made for an easy getaway for the liquor store bandit – zip, zip and right back on the interstate.”

“Ya know, that brings somethin’ to mind. He drove right on up the service road – west. There’s a few more stores and a gas station up there, but he drove clean past the on ramp. I’d guess he was huntin’ out some side road on north that the cops wouldn’t think about. I better pass that on. Two troupers stop in for a late lunch every afternoon. I’ll pass that on to them.”

Donny ate, drank, and paid.

“Got some kind of large paper cup I can buy? Got some flowers in the car and they need water.”

“Take the Styrofoam cup for my Super-Duper-Malted Milk Shake.”

He held it up.

Jimmy nodded.

Dave filled it with water and handed it over the counter.

“How much?”

Dave pushed air in his direction.

“Just be good to think I helped save the endangered posies.”

Jimmy nodded. His ear had been well chewed. He didn't mind. It had been nice. Out in the car he arranged the flowers in the cup and then belted in the cup on the seat next to him thinking it probably should have seemed special having a bouquet riding shotgun. One delicate white something-or-other hadn't made it. He dropped it out the window.

He, his Chevy and his flowers – and his Beretta – were soon heading west along the service road and past the ramp in search of a side road, north.

“Three thousand dollars can finance quite a road trip,” he said thinking out loud.

As Junior High age kids, back in the neighborhood, it was well known that a Hershey was Amber's favorite. Jimmy's, too, but nobody took notice of what a guy liked. Candy was the prelude to kisses so knowing a girl's preference was high on every boy's list of essential knowledge. Girls were expensive. If the school would have only tested over what was really important in life, the 49<sup>th</sup> Street kids would have all made straight A's.

His mother had preached at him about respecting women and waiting until marriage for intimate activities. He came to understand she was a prude and at twelve even wondered how she would have let his father get close enough to make a baby. It had been a revulsive contemplation, but one most boys had to face at about that age. He felt badly for his dad, wondering if he ever got 'the pleasures of marriage', as he had once heard a minister call it.

Jimmy's mother was a church goer. When he was

eleven she and the mothers of all the other boys his age, herded them into a room at church to attend a 'growing up' session with the minister. At the conclusion, Jimmy was convinced that if he ever touched himself again prior to marriage his apparatus would shrivel up and fall off and he would spend eternity in hell – a hell filled with eunuchs, he presumed.

Donny was the one who set the boys straight, holding his own spellbinding session afterward under the oak tree. He'd reached puberty at about four – well, very early at any rate. In their neighborhood, those so-called intimate activities became a part of most of the young people's lives at least by the time they turned fourteen.

After the minister's talk, Jimmy was convinced God wouldn't blind him for looking at a naked girl or strike him down with a ball of fire for touching one. With the eventual acquisition of full-fledged young man stuff, he had relegated the minister's talk to the growing realm of religious scare tactics and forged ahead to explore the delights of manhood. Church was mostly a mother and grandmother thing – a few daughters up to the age of sixteen or so. Donny said the minister had it made – all those women flocking around him all the time in the privacy of the church. He pointed out there was a long couch in his office.

Jimmy thought it had been a disgusting thing to suggest although he would never again look at the man or the women who attended in the same way.

Donny had the only 'authorized' condom franchise in the neighborhood and if a guy purchased fewer than seven a week Donny could be counted on to tell it around. Most bought ten just to be on the safe side – of male honor, not pregnancy prevention. There were almost no illegitimate children born in the neighborhood largely thanks to Donny. Who'd have thought that a disgusting, fully immoral, creature might really leave a positive legacy behind?

Sometimes Jimmy wondered if in his feelings for Amber he had truly separated love from lust. He hoped he loved her. He figured he did because all the months they had been apart his commitment had never wavered. Not once had he taken another girl. A special feeling surfaced every time he thought

about her – just in passing, different from the one while he envisioned them lying in bed together. He had come to believe that girls found it easier to keep their heads straight about the two notions. Guys often didn't even consider love as a concept. They'd say love, they meant lust, and found it easy to live that way. Guys were generally selfish, deceptive creatures where it came to girls. Probably why so many left a trail of exes along their life's path.

Jimmy turned onto the first road off to the right. He tried to think like Donny. Drive a zig-zag pattern for a way while looking for a place to hole up. As a little kid in pick up football, he'd always draw out plays with zig-zags. Jimmy's team usually won because when they saw the runner start left they'd all move right and have him on the ground behind the line. Donny would not chance his car on a main highway for fear somebody had seen it at the liquor store – maybe even his license number. He'd hide the car and stay put until the focus of any hunt had moved out of the area. Donny was smart that way. Someone was always after him so he'd had lots of practice.

Eventually he saw a settlement ahead. There were businesses, restaurants and motels on the near side of town. He drove around, up and down the streets for fifteen minutes. He drove past the Walmart and a motel and the café next door to it. He searched the out of the way nooks and crannies – all looking for the Mustang. Everything came up empty.

The feeling remained – Donny was close by. He wouldn't have gone any further – exposing himself – than was absolutely necessary. That area of that town included everything he'd be looking for. Jimmy wondered if he should take a room. It was heading toward mid-afternoon. He was very tired – just sleepy, not Marine boot camp exhausted. He didn't dare leave his car out in the open – Donny would recognize it. He was probably looking for it over his shoulder. Jimmy had spent no time conceiving a plan for such occasions. He could sleep in his car. He needed to conserve his cash, anyway.

He drove to the parking lot at Walmart and slipped in between some older model cars toward the center of the lot. Maybe there was a god after all! Three rows of cars ahead

and just to his left was the white Mustang backed in against a light pole. He was in a perfect spot to keep watch on it. He turned off his engine, set the seat back as far as it would go, slid down and settled in for the stakeout. The realization produced an adrenalin rush that made it difficult to sit still.

From the odd angle of Donny's car, it looked to be something more than casual parking for a shopping trip. If he had been a betting man – and more and more it seemed like he was becoming one – he'd bet they had settled in for a while. He could inquire at the three motels he had run across, but that would announce his presence in case Donny had bought the snitch services of the desk guys. That could become the stuff of an ambush. He'd stay put.

He fell asleep. Not a very Marine-like thing to have done. He awoke eight hours later. Apparently, he really had been tired. The Mustang was gone. He swore into the darkness and pounded the steering wheel with both hands. Three questions arose: had Donny moved it because he had seen Jimmy; was it just a part of Donny's plan to move on and travel at night; or, was it part of a plan to move the car around regularly so as to not call attention to it as it? There was a fourth: if Donny had seen him, why hadn't he killed him?

Questions one and two suggested he would be long gone. Number three posed some hope he hadn't seen him and he wouldn't still be in the area. He had hidden the car right out in the open – an interesting ploy. Jimmy decided to drive the parking lot. If not there, he had seen a major home improvement store on up the road. It, too, had a good-sized parking lot.

Jimmy understood he needed to be alert for Donny. He could easily be around any corner. His plan came together quickly. It couldn't have been simpler. If he saw Donny alone, he would pull up close and shoot him. If he were with Amber he'd play it by ear – probably park, approach them from between the cars, shoot Donny and rescue Amber. There would be no reason for Jimmy's car to be on the cop's radar. Jimmy needed to get a destination in mind – at least a temporary one – a place he and Amber could rest and reconnoiter about the long term. It would need to be a place Frankie wouldn't suspect – it would be his brain the cops

would try to pick. He might let something slip. More than likely Frankie would provide false leads and then come after him, himself – to talk.

Jimmy had let it be known – mostly in fun – that after his tours in the Middle East he never wanted to experience hot weather again. That would signal a northerly path – like Canada. He'd head south instead – southwest – he'd heard there were jobs there. Few things about his military training had prepared him for the labor force. Heartlessly killing swarthy, bearded men was not really a saleable skill in the civilian ranks back in the states.

In the military, it had been reason for medals and commendations. Body count for a unit was the counterpart of product production for a manufacturer. A good soldier didn't dare dwell on the individual act of slaughtering another man – a son, a father, a husband. It was the cumulative result that mattered; how many dead bodies. Jimmy had been fortunate in that he had only had to look into the eyes of a hand full of the men whose hearts he had burst, whose guts he had opened or whose brains he had splattered across the sand.

He was a merciful soldier – he made certain his victims died. He shed tears when his comrades died. They were good men fighting for right and freedom. Down through history military leaders had always been clever, making sure their recruits understood the enemy was not really human – not something deserving of anything but excruciating pain and death. Lacking that well ingrained perspective, all armies would disintegrate – all soldiers would puke and run.

As a toddler, Donny had been his playmate, somebody he was happy to see when he left the back door mornings, sporting only a diaper, in search of a day's adventure across the back yards. By eight, the separation – the clan identification had begun to become a reality. By twelve Jimmy understood Donny was a people user and abuser and he wanted nothing to do with him. Well before the fight in Carter's alley at fifteen, Jimmy had done what he could to live his life separate from and on a higher plain than the Zimmermans.

It wasn't that Jimmy didn't use girls for his own pleasure or that he couldn't send an adversary home bleeding and

broken. It wasn't that Jimmy hadn't pilfered his share of apples and oranges from the market on 49<sup>th</sup> street or that on occasion he hadn't even taken money from the poor box at church. However, as human beings went in his neighborhood, it was Jimmy's intention to be kind and thoughtful and compassionate and to treat girls and women like ladies. The latter was his father's influence – the way he treated Jimmy's mother.

By sixteen, Donny's dad was proud of the way his son was turning out – tough, feared and cunning, the boss. By sixteen, Jimmy's dad was proud of the way his son was turning out – caring, helpful, never starting a fight, but never backing down from a fight. Jimmy knew his dad loved him. Donny had no concept of love so it didn't enter into his characterization of their relationship. Love seldom developed in an environment where a child's mother ignored him and his father beat him for no apparent reason.

The sole thing the men in the two families shared was a deep sense of family and the belief that any affront to one by the other was necessarily to be met by a stronger more hurtful affront. Revenge had been the underlying engine that had defined the relationship between the Jacksons and the Zimmermans for three generations. Vengeance trumped all other overtures, all other values, all other social forces. Mr. Jackson worked to suppress those feelings. Mr. Zimmerman encouraged them.

Between his military training and those things that defined family, Jimmy was perfectly prepared to carry out his plan. He would feel no guilt, no remorse, no feeling of having done wrong when he snuffed out the life of the man who had been a part of his life for twenty-four years. He would feel satisfaction, he would feel validation, he would feel that just retribution had been levied. Jimmy had not yet achieved his goal.

Donny found himself in the odd and fully unexpected position of believing he had achieved his goals – he had won – hurting Jimmy in all the worst ways possible – but also landing in a cycle of never ending mortal danger. Donny didn't plan well for the long run.

At fourteen, Donny had stolen a Disneyland T shirt at school – one of the boys had brought it back from a family trip. He had the shirt, but couldn't wear it since it was the only one like it in the neighborhood. At fifteen he had beaten senseless the quarterback for the Jr. Varsity football team at school – the reason had been lost through the years, but most likely had to do with a girl. The team lost the all city title. Boys hated him. Girls hated him. Teachers and staff hated him. Soon after that he found that being in school was so uncomfortable he dropped out. It was the other kid's fault, of course. The legal age for leaving school in Illinois was sixteen. No school official ever let on Donny was truant.

Suddenly it had been a long time between meals and restrooms. Jimmy decided to go into the big store that boasted a burger place inside, pick up something to go and return to his car. He would eat there, then drive the parking lot in search of the Mustang.

With a sack full of food and an empty bladder, he left the store just in time to see the rear end of a white mustang heading out of the lot onto the road. He ran to his car. All four tires had been deflated – not cut but deflated. Jimmy didn't understand. Sticking them with Donny's knife would have been the expedient approach. He'd have had to buy all new tires. Use up his nest egg. Expend lots more time. Still clutching his food sack, he ran to the store and back to automotive. He explained about the tires and was soon leading a golf cart outfitted with air cylinders to his car. It was a stock service used many times a day the young man in the iridescent, yellow vest said.

The fee was four bucks a tire. He handed the boy a twenty and told him to keep the change. He gassed up at the store pumps and bought a map of the United States. By then, Donny had a half hour lead. The car had turned right – south – onto the road out front. Jimmy kept asking himself the same question: was that a diversionary tactic and had he actually adjusted his course north? Jimmy went with what he had for sure and moved south. He stopped at the Interstate and looked at his watch – midnight. He figured Donny, in a panic, would take stupid risks and if Amber were really with him



she'd encourage it – Amber was nobody's fool. He turned west on I-80. It wasn't long until he had crossed the bridge over the Mississippi and was in Iowa. He had noted on the map while at the gas pump that I-80 ran all the way to California. It would be just like Donny to head off in the direction of some commonplace destination like California.

'Where you think you'll go this summer?' 'Oh, I don't know. Maybe California.'

It sounded like Donny.

Jimmy ate. He sipped at his drink. Overseas he had really missed burgers and french-fries. Once home, he couldn't get enough of them. He hadn't ever had a mocha shake before, but he got one. Perhaps his subconscious was trying to help him have as many new experiences as possible in whatever time he had left. He tried to suppress that idea. He didn't want to think in terms of limited time. His purpose was to rescue the woman he had chosen to be his wife, the woman with whom he wanted to raise a family, enjoy life, and grow old. The shake was pretty good.

He pushed the speed limit by five miles an hour. He would risk wasting the fifteen minutes it would take to handle a ticket. He figured Donny was smart enough not to risk being pulled over so he was probably driving five under the limit. That meant he'd gain ten miles an hour on him. Assuming the thirty-minute head start translated into about a thirty mile lead, it would only take three hours to catch him. He felt confident and settled in for the duration. At about three o'clock he'd begin looking for him – them, he hoped.

He needed to figure out a better strategy when he came upon them. Maybe, hold back and wait for them to have to make a gas stop? That seemed like the best plan. It held little risk for Amber. His inclination was to sideswipe him during a high-speed chase at ninety miles an hour and watch his car roll and bounce itself into a blazing inferno in some cow pasture or cornfield. Considering Ambers safety, he would not do that.

He had let his neck and shoulders become tense. He worked to relax them. He turned on the radio for company. He turned it off. Kids' music! He smiled supposing every older generation turned off the music of the younger. It made

him think about the baby growing inside Amber. He wondered if he would ever be able to approve of it, to accept it, to love it. He wondered if it would be considered a bastard baby if he and Amber were married before it was born. As he recalled bastard meant the baby of an unwed mother. He figured it implied she had to be married to the baby's biological father for it not to be a bastard. Short of a DNA test, it couldn't be known who the father was. He wondered if Amber would want to know.

That made him recall that Donny had only been half of the tag team of rapists that attacked and terrified Amber. Once he had things settled with Donny, his brother would still need attending to. It presented an inconvenient and time consuming necessity. He would have to put Amber up in safety and comfort while he returned to the city to take care of that.

He wondered why his own survival meant so little to him. It made no sense. If he died in his effort, Amber would be alone – maybe for the rest of her life. She would be sad. Worse than sad – heartbroken, depressed, grief stricken. And she would have a baby to care for alone. She'd have to work as well as care for the child. It would be best if it were a girl he thought; less of a reminder of the father. He would want her to find another man to love and build a happy life with. They had never talked about that. They should have. That was on him.

He really liked talking with Amber. Their best talks came after sex when the effects of his man juices retreated and freed his mind to think about other things, important things, relationships, building a life together – less carnal things, non-carnal things. It was when that special feeling washed over him – the one where his man urges waned and he allowed the realization of just how precious that person laying close to him really was. During the passionate times, he wasn't at all certain he ever really had that 'afterwards feeling'. He was pretty sure it was love.

He continued into the night. There was no moon. No stars, either, upon second glance. Clouds. Not the boiling kind with wind and lightning he had been through earlier. Quiet clouds that stretched themselves out like huge sheets of softness, keeping the world safe from anything that might be

waiting to ravish it.

He remembered back to 8<sup>th</sup> grade science class. He and Frankie had made a diorama in a shoe box that depicted the water cycle – evaporation from the ocean to rain to streams and rivers and back into the ocean. They had used a small bat of cotton across the top for clouds. They had strung many strands of white thread from the clouds at one end to represent rain. The highlight was when they flipped the switch and the sun – an orange Christmas tree light – came on to begin the evaporation process. They shared an A. No one was surprised.

It was just understood between them that the diorama would rest for all eternity at Frankie's house. Jimmy's was just too disorganized. They walked toward home together that afternoon. Jimmy crossed the street to his house and was quickly inside. Donny, who had failed to come up with a project, waylaid Frankie, took the box and stomped it into the ground. Frankie admitted he'd cried when he called Jimmy to tell him about it.

Jimmy had gone looking for Donny and had him cornered between a building and a fence. His intention was to pound the life out of him. Mr. Clancy happened by – Jimmy later wondered if perhaps Frankie had called him. After no more than a dozen vicious blows, the fight was stopped. As he recalled, Donny hadn't laid a hand on him for as long as it lasted. Donny's story was quite different, although he missed school that next week – about the duration of a red and green black eye. (Admittedly an odd phrase.)

//////

## **SEVEN**

### **He Passed Door Number Seven**

While Jimmy was asleep in the parking lot, Donny had discovered him and kept eyes on the car. It was no place to fire a gun or break a window. He could use his knife if necessary. He had slipped beneath the car and made a tiny pinhole puncture in the brake fluid line – a slow, steady, drip, drip, drip. When Jimmy left to go into the store Donny let the air out of the tires. It would slow him down some, giving Donny a good head start. Of course, the main show would come at seventy-five miles an hour when the brakes failed as he tried to slow and maneuver a sharply curved off ramp.

It hadn't been Donny's original idea. He had seen it at the movies on a Saturday afternoon. Six or eight of the boys often went together during the summer they were nine. That time it had been Donny, Jimmy, Frankie and several others – five straight hours of old black and white cops and robbers movies. Bogey, Cagney – all the greats. During the love scenes, the boys would crawl beneath the seats and touch the girl's legs, sending them into fits of emotional terror. Of course, that's why the girls went to those matinees. They could care less about cops and robbers movies. The tire and brake fluid idea had come from one of those movies.

The cop car at the motel had moved on with no indication Amber and Donny had been in its sights.

Donny had no idea how quickly the brake fluid would seep away, but in the movie, it had taken several hours. While Donny was gone, Amber had remained in the back seat of the Mustang, wrists, ankles and mouth restrained with duct tape and belted in place quite securely.

He kept to sixty-five figuring he had probably gained several hours on Jimmy. He'd never been good at math and not one lick of common sense had followed him into the world at birth. Amber did her best to agree with him and support his faulty assumptions. Twenty miles down the road, Donny stopped and released her from her restraints. It wasn't a matter of wanting to hurt her it was a matter of keeping her silent and contained in places where those things were

necessary.

Donny also had a map, which he had studied in the motel room. His plan was to stay on or near I- 80 to Denver and then south on I-25 to Arizona. 80 didn't go to Denver and 25 didn't go to Arizona. Other than that his plan might have been flawless.

An hour later a police car, light twirling and siren blaring gradually moved up from behind.

"I swear I'll stick my knife into your stomach and kill the kid if you make one peep. Lay down and pretend you're asleep. You know I'll do it."

He stuck to his steady speed thinking a rapid deceleration or blinking brake lights would indicate he had been speeding – which he hadn't. That seemed momentarily humorous to him, but received no more than the hint of a smile.

"Aren't you supposed to pull off to the side and let emergency vehicles pass," Amber said.

She had been able to follow the ever-growing red flashes reflecting off the glass in the rear window well before she heard the siren.

Donny had no idea, but he did let his foot off the accelerator. His brother had taken the written portion of the driving test for him. He began to wonder if maybe there had been some useful purpose in being required to read that book.

The cop car was driving in the left lane. There were no other cars in sight in either direction. It was central Iowa. Donny suspected most people didn't even know it existed. Prepared to turn on the charm first and shoot second, Donny positioned his hand gun out of sight behind him on the seat.

The cop screamed right on by not so much as tossing a glance in Donny's direction.

"He passed us. You can sit up. Get out the map. I think there's a road just north of us – goes this same direction. That cop car may have noticed us and called it in."

"Yes, there is a parallel road up there. Route 6. Looks like any road going north will hit it."

They were less than a half mile from an off ramp – they were close together out there. It had something to do with farmers needing easy passage or some such thing. The ramp

took them down onto a frontage road that paralleled the highway for quite a way. Finally, there was a road north. The sign even said, Route 6, two miles.

It was narrow, although was passed off as a two-lane blacktop by the white dashed lines down the center. A dirt road would have been as good considering all the pot holes and wide cracks. Donny slowed to thirty and often braked below that. At the stop sign where they intersected Route 6, Donny noticed his temperature gage was reading hot. Amber knew at least as much about cars as he did. She had listened to many a boy ramble on fully unromantically about them before she and Jimmy became serious.

"You need coolant or water in the radiator. May have a leak or maybe the water pump broke."

"I know that. Just be quiet and let me think."

He didn't know and no amount of thinking was going to improve his situation.

"I suppose you're thinking of driving really slow 'til we can find a garage and hope the motor doesn't melt away."

Donny turned west and kept to fifteen miles an hour. The needle moved higher on the gage. He figured it still had half an inch to go before it ran out of red territory so he kept going.

Amber crossed her fingers hoping the whatever it was would blow or whatever it did.

It didn't.

"There's a gas station on the corner up ahead," he said.

They drew closer. It was closed. The sign in the window with moveable red hands indicated it opened at seven o'clock a.m. There looked to be a work bay. A sign in the window read, 'Mechanic on duty 24 hours a day'. Donny was unable to see the humor in it. He pulled in and turned off the engine.

"I suppose you're going to open the hood and start the cooling process," Amber suggested trying not to sound like she was making a suggestion.

"We'll sleep here 'til they open in the morning."

He got out and opened the hood. He returned.

"I'm setting the alarm so if any door is opened it will go off. The windows are locked. Get some sleep."

Amber chose to believe him about the alarm. She didn't need to get him angry at her so she let the idea of escape go for the moment. She wondered where Jimmy was. Donny hadn't shared how he had taken steps to disable Jimmy's old Chevy. They both managed several hours of sleep. In fact, they were both awakened by someone rapping on the driver side front window.

Donny rolled it down, greeted by the ageing face of a man in oil smudged mechanic's coveralls.

"Morning. Had car trouble in the night. Overheating. Hope you can help me."

"You probably need the rest room, then. Key's there just inside the door. Give me fifteen minutes to wake the old place up and I'll get right to you."

Donny's immediate impulse was to storm out of the car, take the man by his neck and tell him he was to get to it right that moment. He didn't. It had been a good choice. An old pick up drove in. A mountain of a young man – early 30's, 360 and 6/8 – got out.

"My son, Billy," the man said. "My right arm around here."

His right arm, his right leg, his right ear – any one of them outweighed Donny.

Sonny smiled and waved. He had the look of less than an 'A' student, but Donny figured he'd do anything for his daddy.

They used the restroom. By the time they returned, the car was inside. Donny wondered. He hadn't given them the key. Sonny had probably put it in neutral and pushed it in – most likely one handed. He was huge.

Ten minutes later:

"Your water pump is busted."

"Can you fix it?"

"Have to replace it."

"Can you replace it?"

"Don't stock parts for fancy cars like this one."

"What do you suggest then?"

"We can get one in from the auto supply back in Iowa City."

"How do you do that?"



“Call ‘em. They send it UPS.”

“When does it get here?”

“Noon, one, two.”

“Today.”

“Yup.”

“You’re sure that’s what’s wrong.”

“Never a hundred percent, I guess. Ain’t God.”

“Okay. I guess let’s do that.”

“Need to see your money.”

“How much.”

“Can probably get a rebuilt pump for around a hundred dollars - installed.”

Donny turned his back to the man and removed a hundred-dollar bill from his roll.”

“Here. That get us the pump?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is there a restaurant in town?”

“Just up *Mary Belle Street* right there. Open seven to nine for breakfast, eleven to one for lunch and five to seven for supper. Good cook. My wife.”

He chuckled.

“Don’t go pullin’ no hundreds on her, though. Probably can’t change anything larger than tens.”

“Good to know. I guess we’ll head up the street, then. I imagine we won’t miss it.”

The old man shook his head, turned back to the building and chuckled himself inside. Apparently, he didn’t think any response was called for.

They made the walk. The main drag was not quite a block long, one side of the gravel street only – across from a grassy lot. It consisted of a café, a grocery store, a hardware store, and what had once been the post office.

There were three rather severe cement steps up to the front door – they must not have heard about the Disabled Americans Act. There were two pickups out front. They entered.

“Morning strangers. I’m Mary Belle. Sit anywhere you like.”

She was a substantial – make that a super substantial woman, which probably explained the blimp she had for a son.

She was dressed like Betsy Ross – lace hat, long white apron and all.”

She brought the menu – one sheet hand written in red ink – color was a nice touch.

“I’ll have the #1,” Donny said. “She’ll have the # 3. I’ll have coffee. She’ll have orange juice and milk.”

The smile beneath the furrowed brow indicated the woman thought something was wrong. Donny caught it and offered an explanation.

“On our way back from Denver to Springfield – Illinois. Got this far and the water pump went out. Car’s down at the garage. Being fixed by a couple of men we understand you may know. I’m a little out of sorts I suppose. Sorry. Probably look a mess.”

“If the lady wants to freshen up, we live in the rear. You’re welcome to use our soap, towels and such.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind, I think I’ll take you up on it,” Amber managed to get out before Donny could respond.

“That is very generous. You mind if I freshen up, too? The road’s been dusty.”

“Of course. You two follow me. I’ll get you situated and then get to work on the number one and number three.”

She called back into the cafe as they moved through the drapes that apparently separated it from home.

“Ben, you keep everybody’s coffee filled, now, you hear.”

Ben was apparently one of the pickup driving, morning regulars.

In the rear, Mary Belle directed them to the bathroom and laid out towels and washcloths and opened a new bar of soap. At one point, she placed herself between the other two with her back toward Donny. She mouthed silently: ‘Are you okay?’

Amber frowned. It was as much of an answer as she could offer with Donny looking her in the face. She hoped the lady didn’t interpret it to mean she hadn’t understood. Mary Belle left them alone. They went about the business of washing. There was a comb and they both used it. They actually looked and felt much better.

As they arrived back at their table the large lady arrived

with the food.

“Well, I hope you can make the best of things while you’re trapped here in *Findley*. Hard to find *Findley* on a map, and no city limits signs any more, but once you’ve found us, *Findley* is never to be forgotten. That’s our motto – all 23 souls who call *Findley* home. I’m also the mayor.”

She had emphasized the name of the town for some reason. That escaped Donny. Amber had taken note.

“I just imagine that’s true – the motto,” Donny said, wishing she’d just mind her own business.

The food was really quite good and filling. They were Mary Belle sized servings.

When they finished, Donny laid a twenty on the table. It represented a very good tip. They stood and took a few steps toward the door. Mary Belle approached Amber with a long, narrow red scarf.

“Honey, I birthed six kids and I know how I always felt when I was as far along as you are and started showin’. This will raise your spirits. Pretty things always do.’

While she prattled on she tied it around Amber’s waist and messed with it the way women do. She patted her on her back. Amber felt something slide down her back from her neck inside her blouse. It stopped at her waist – at the tightly synched scarf.

Amber turned and thanked her.

“It’s nice to have a gal around sometimes. We just understand about each other.”

The message had been sent and received although Amber had no idea what Mary Belle had managed to get to her. It could have been a small spiral notepad or book. She’d keep it private of course.

They walked back to the garage. Amber’s brain was hard at it.

“I do feel better. Thanks,” Amber said looking over at Donny.

She intentionally kept her distance by moving as if to avoid the larger stones in the gravel road. He liked to walk with his arm around her back. That would not work. He would feel whatever it was.

“Good news,” the old man said as they approached the

front door of the garage. “Sonny here done found a pump over at Mac’s Dead Car Lot – that’s what we call it. It’s like our little joke. He took it off and I almost have it on. Not like new, but it’ll put you down the road in good fashion for another 20,000 miles or so. Can you manage fifty dollars? I can’t make change for the hundred.”

He handed it back. Donny found fifty.

“Donny, I’m suddenly sick to my stomach,” Amber said bending slightly at the waist. “It happens when you’re pregnant you know. I need to go to the restroom.”

Donny got the key and saw her inside. He opted to stay outside. Witnessing morning sickness was nowhere on his priority list.

Amber made the appropriate sounds and flushed the stool, repeating the sequence several times as she worked the object from Mary Belle out into the open. It was a cell phone. She wasted no time and dialed Frankie again. The text message was short: *Findley, Iowa, heading west now*. Donny allowed her no privacy at night so she knew she had to leave the phone behind. She worked it in among the paper towels in the trash basket. One last flush and she opened the door.

“I hate that so much, I could scream!” she said putting on a good deal of emotion and pushing by him.

She trudged on ahead toward the front of the building. It was a fully believable performance.

The car was fixed and running. The radiator and gas tanks were filled. Apparently, Sonny got a very good deal on that pump.

“Here’s my card. Six months’ warranty. If it gives you any trouble you call me and I’ll make it right.”

Donny couldn’t believe what a jerk the old man was – offering a warranty to somebody he’d never see again. They walked to the car.

“You want to sit up front?” Donny asked.

“I’m still not feeling very good. My pancake was half lard I think. Not the thing a girl in my condition needs. I’d like to lie down in back for a while.”

With Amber situated, Donny pulled back out onto the road and headed west. He had one thing left to say.

“You can order for yourself next time. I don’t know

nothin' about girls in your condition.”

Amber figured that may have been the closest Donny had ever come to apologizing. For some reason, it made her feel good. A new scarf and an apology all with a half hour.

She hoped Frankie could make sense out of the message she had sent. She hoped the message got through. She wondered if, when they found the phone in the trash can, they would follow up on the message or Frankie's number. She had done what she could. She felt the baby moving. It brought a smile, and the smile, sleep.

Donny kept a close watch on the gage. It had gradually moved up into the medium green colored safe zone and was staying there. He relaxed some noticing the white-knuckle grip he had on the wheel. It was just after nine. So far, the day had gone much better than he would have bet even an hour before.

He loved that car. A man's car encompassed his sense of pride, power and prestige. It was the only thing Donny had ever really worked to purchase. When he quit school his dad made him go to work on the docks. Although he was a good-sized boy, he was too young so his dad paid off a union official and got him a set of fake credentials. He'd given them up for the real thing when he turned eighteen. Although his father demanded that he work, he saw to it his son got the less strenuous tasks – a clipboard pusher was the derisive term on the docks. As a consequence, he hadn't built the body strength of most of the guys his age. He avoided fights and had reeled in the rhetoric with which he had intentionally provoked others in the past.

Eventually, he had every penny he needed and he dumped it onto the counter of car dealership right out of the shoe box in which he had been saving it. He watched as the cashier counted every bill. It took fifteen minutes. There was extra. He drove around the neighborhood the next morning – Sunday morning. The guys gave him a thumbs up. The girls strutted their stuff, hoping to be the first offered a ride. They all knew the 'fee' that would be required. It meant riding with Donny Zimmerman in a brand new white Mustang. Any fee would be reasonable.

Many guys named their cars, often after a girl – *Betty*

Sue – or some voluptuous movie star. *White Mustang* never shared its billing. Everybody knew it simply as Donny's White Mustang. And everybody understood nobody touched Donny's White Mustang.

He managed a smile as he relaxed. He had no regrets about his life back in the neighborhood. He'd pretty well run it – well the parts concerning the kids. Everybody knew he was the baddest dude in the area. The boys from forty-fourth stayed their distance. The boys from fifty second stayed their distance. Everything in between was his. Who else in the world controlled that kind of territory? He had made his daddy proud – he was pretty sure of that. He had any girl he wanted, except that *one*, but now he had her as well.

There were a few minor factors about his adolescence he chose to set aside, or perhaps he really never understood them. Even the kids that smiled into his face, laughed at his dirty jokes and patted him on his back after pummeling a kid half his size, hated him. If Jimmy had been bent in the direction of running the show, he'd have sent Donny to an early grave. The girls he used were, of course, using him as well – prestige, pretty things. His mother cried herself to sleep over his safety more nights than she didn't. That was all she had to offer. Many such things that he thought he knew, were not really how he interpreted them.

Amber dreamt about the birthday parties. One positive function that had grown out of the early *49<sup>th</sup> Street Club* – by whichever name – had been their solemn pledge at eight years old to always, no matter what, come together to celebrate their birthdays. The original club members had been Donny, Jimmy and Amber. Later, Frankie was included. It was about the only treasure they all managed to keep and protect from childhood – that single pledge to honor each other once every year. Neither divisions nor differences nor beliefs nor circumstances would be allowed to interfere. It was an hour of yesteryear on which they could all depend, unadulterated by size or age or looks or degree of success. It was that moment in which they celebrated only the good in each other. The hour inevitably went by without an argument, an unkind word, or a flaring temper. Even Donny had always

been civil and had been known to provide the reminder a week in advance. It was, of course, his only birthday celebration. His father hadn't allowed them sissy cakes for his kid. Frankie's 24<sup>th</sup> had been just three weeks before – put off a month until the day Jimmy arrived home. It had gone off without a glitch – under the tree since the tree house had long since become too small for all of them at once.

Donny kept his eyes on the road. There were lots of little animals needing to share that space that night. He would brake and watch them safely to the other side. City boys were always in awe of those cute little country critters. Rats weren't cute.

//////



## **EIGHT**

### **He Passed Door Number Eight**

Jimmy's eyes fluttered. He knew it was time to stop and find coffee. The sign just passed indicated an off ramp ahead and cautioned a speed of twenty-five miles an hour. He released the accelerator in anticipation of the turn. He made the gentle move to his right. The ramp was lit only from his headlights.

He pumped the brake lightly with still plenty of time to come down to twenty-five. He had no brakes. He pumped them over and over. Instead of slowing he felt the car accelerating as it headed down the long, fairly severe slope. He figured if the sign said twenty-five, thirty five was probably doable. He was going fifty. He was a Marine he didn't panic.

"Options," he said out loud.

He shifted down into second, not a happy experience for his transmission, but with a jerk and a thud the car slowed dramatically. He pulled the emergency brake. He heard the screech of metal on metal. He even smelled the red-hot heat; the car slowed even more, but would it be enough. He was at the most severe point in the curve. The speedometer read forty-four. He used the entire width of the ramp to reduce the severity of the angle.

The road straightened out and his car entered the frontage road at forty miles an hour. He let it roll to a complete stop. In a flash, he understood why the tires had not been slashed. Under other circumstances he could have even offered a, "Well played," to his adversary.

He just sat there to regain his composure – although his composure had really never waned. The problem was that soldier's best friend and worst enemy – adrenalin. He slipped the shift into drive, released the emergency brake and eased the car off the road until it stopped. He engaged the flashers and got out. He did fifty jumping jacks and jogged in place for several minutes. His thumping heart returned to normal. The rush, so prevalent in a man's temples after such an experience, subsided. He nodded and slid back into the driver's seat.

Having expected that the presence of an off ramp indicated some sort of useful life forms below, he was disappointed to find himself alone. He kept his flasher on and pulled back onto the service road heading west at twenty miles an hour. He probably had very little emergency brake left, but there was no traffic and the shift down into second had quickly reduced his speed before. It should put far less stress on the transmission at twenty. Surely there would be a gas station or a café or something not far ahead where he could arrange for assistance.

He drove on for twenty minutes before spotting anything. It was a large truck stop. It reminded him of an oasis since there was no indication of any town nearby. It lit the area like a low dome. He parked off to the side of the lot where he had plenty of room to stop. He got out and stood by the car getting the lay of the land – a dozen self-service pumps, a four-bay garage and the restaurant, well windowed across the front, with the souvenir stand near the entrance. Jimmy wondered what there was in Iowa to souvenir about.

He walked to the garage area and told a man – Mike according to the white stitching on his dark blue shirt – about his problem. Mike motioned to three younger looking mechanics, sitting on the floor playing cards and they soon had the car pushed inside and up on a rack.

“I’m thinking a pin prick in the brake line,” Jimmy suggested putting himself into the mix of bodies under the car.

He pointed. There was a drip of fluid hanging from an easily accessible portion of the line. He put his finger to it. The drip cleared and the hole appeared.

“You just want tools to fix it yourself,” Mike joked.

“I need a fast, reliable, fix. You got one.”

“Little C-clamp over a piece of rubber. Seen ‘em work like that for years.”

“Sounds good. I’m going for a cup of coffee. How long?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“How much?”

“Ten bucks work for you?”

“Fine.”

Jimmy handed over a ten and left for the café.

He let the waitress talk him into a cinnamon roll with the coffee. It was good. It was huge. It was expensive – five dollars for a roll and drink!

He remembered the first truck stop he had ever experienced up close. He and Frankie were sixteen. Frankie had the use of his father's car for the whole day, Sunday. After early Mass for Frankie, the two of them were off on a road trip – their first – to visit Frankie's grandparents who lived near Joliet, just south of Chicago. They both had brand spankin' new driver's licenses. Jimmy was surprised when Mr. Guccione gave his approval for the trip. It was fewer than fifty miles, but still. Frankie had lots of Italian relatives and that always translated into envelopes with lots of twenty dollar bills in birthday money. The day was on him.

Jimmy wasn't even sure what his Jackson family heritage was – a teacher had once postulated English. It seemed to be of no importance to his family. They were Americans. Contrary to that, being Italian was clearly reason for much pride and sense of extended family for Frankie. If Jimmy had been the jealous type he could have been jealous of Frankie for that. Jimmy could count the number of his known relatives on one hand. It was hard for him to imagine having a dozen, or two dozen or maybe a hundred like Frankie.

They stopped at a truck stop. Frankie had seen it before, but Jimmy was awestruck. There must have been fifty gas pumps and both a café and a fancier restaurant. There were ten garage bays and all of them busy. He couldn't believe you had to pay for air and for paper towels to clean your windshield. Gas was more expensive than back in the city.

"Let's go in and get a coke," Frankie said.

It had been understood that the day was Frankie's treat, but Jimmy had never liked taking anything from anybody else. He talked himself into the day by believing it made Frankie really happy to do things like that for him. He could live with that.

Frankie's family had a lot more money than the Jackson's. Jimmy's dad never talked about family money

although Jimmy knew better than to ask for any. Frankie got an allowance. Jimmy worked for whatever spending money he had. He swept out the pharmacy from eight to nine, four nights a week and washed the front windows every Saturday. He earned thirty dollars a week for the package.

Things were expensive in his neighborhood. It wasn't a slum. Several steps up from the slums over past 54<sup>th</sup> Street. It was dirty. Many of the buildings were in disrepair. On the upside, there were very few street people and lots of houses with lawns and their own garages. There were sidewalks – old and cracked, but serviceable. When Jimmy was learning to ride a bike he complained about cracks and holes. Mr. Clancy, who was helping him, said that if he learned how to ride a bike on that sidewalk he'd be able to ride his bike anywhere. Jimmy believed the man and with renewed effort and determination he was eventually managing his two-wheeler like a pro on a mountain side.

Expensive things. It was mostly Mom and Pop stores and they were even higher than convenience stores, most of which had been driven out long before, due to the high crime rate. Jimmy's dad required him to give his mother ten dollars a week for groceries. It seemed fair to Jimmy. He had started saving for college when he was just ten. It reached two thousand dollars by the time he was fifteen. His mother required surgery and his father said he needed Jimmy's savings. There was no hesitation. He handed over the cigar box with no discussion. Later that evening he heard his father crying as he told his mother about having to take the money. It was the only time he'd ever even considered that his father cried. It put a new spin on the man, on men, and being grown up in general.

The café was the fanciest place of that kind Jimmy had ever been in. The seats in the booths were red – looked like leather but probably plastic. The waitress laid down paper place mats, large soft white paper napkins and silverware, and brought water with ice right at the beginning. They each ordered a Coke – large. Jimmy had rarely had fountain beverages before. He noted how little coke there was in a glass and how there was way too much ice, but still enjoyed it all – managing small sips.

It was the first time he learned about tipping a waitress.

“Because she was so pretty,” he asked, confused.

“Because she gave us good service, doofus,” Frankie said.

They arrived in Joliet in time for dinner – lunch on Sundays in that part of the country. They prayed before they ate. That was a new concept for Jimmy. They did the fingers thing across their chests when they finished. He knew Frankie was Catholic, of course. Jimmy wasn’t into religion and his mother had stopped fighting with him to go Sunday mornings by the time he was ten. He had threatened to stand up in the pew and take off all his clothes. His mother understood he would. He and Frankie had never really talked much about religion. Frankie wouldn’t press such things with him.

Jimmy had to admit he was impressed by the Catholic’s on one occasion. The city did away with the afterschool programs for kids and teens and that church tried to keep it going. They were overwhelmed by kids – nearly a hundred showed up the first afternoon. They were only prepared for a couple of dozen. They couldn’t do it, but at least they tried and Jimmy gave them credit for that. Good kids went right back to getting into trouble. Grownups were so dumb sometimes. The city had to add three cops to the beat.

Most things in life had taught him that he needed to count on himself and nobody else, most certainly not anything as questionable as a god. For those who wanted to contemplate such an unreasonable concept he’d not interfere until their god stuff interfered with him or hurt the people he cared about.

Frankie was a good person because he was afraid god would send him to hell if he weren’t.

Jimmy was a good person because early on he came to see that a neighborhood filled with good people just made life good, comfortable, and safer for everybody and he figured that was the way life should be.

Amber was a Methodist – like Jimmy’s mother. She attended services when younger. They’d never talked much about it. Amber did her best to be a good person – well at least since she turned thirteen when she came to the realization that being anything less could get her into big

trouble.

Donny – not a bone in his body, not an intention in his heart, not a plan in his head had ever considered the long-term effects of good vs bad. Donny was bad – evil, probably, according to many of the older women in the neighborhood. Sometimes Jimmy and Frankie would wonder together whether he was that way because it was the way his ‘being’ had been put together or because it was how he’d been taught to be. Jimmy voted for the latter. Frankie leaned toward the first, thinking no human being could allow himself to develop into such a dreadful person if they had any control over it.

Frankie always thought the best of others until they proved him wrong. Jimmy never believed a person was good, or trustworthy, until he proved he was good and trustworthy. Although they had never talked about it, both Frankie and Jimmy often wondered how two such different individuals as they could have become such good friends. They would risk their lives to protect the other’s safety.

Sitting there that night as a grown up, waiting on his brake line to get fixed, Jimmy certainly hoped Frankie would just stay out of things. It was between Donny and him. He wrapped half the roll in napkins and took it with him.

“Not good news, son,” the older mechanic said.

“The line collapsed when we tightened the clamp. It’s a really flimsy line somebody put on there. It’s a replacement.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Not the old line. Got a good line here. Cost sixty bucks.”

“Go for it I guess. A good anchor to toss out at stop signs would probably cost at least that much.”

Jimmy decided it really hadn’t been as humorous as he thought it would be. The vision did make him smile, however. ‘Fred Flintstone, where are you when I need you?’

“I’ll be in the café. Can somebody come and get me when you’re done?”

Mike nodded.

Jimmy hated waiting. He had always been impatient. When he was in trouble, he wanted to get it dealt with immediately. If an inevitable fight was brewing, he wanted to

wade right in and get things settled. If he was feeling amorous he wanted . . .

He returned to the café, opened the napkins cradling his roll, ordered more coffee and made small talk with the waitress – the one from before. He described the car trouble and why he was back. She commiserated. She was very attractive. He drank coffee and nibbled at the roll. She didn't charge him for the coffee that time.

An hour passed, Mike appeared and took a seat across from him.

"All the nuts and bolts and U-fittings are rusted. Need to replace them. Have to cut them off."

"Do what you have to do. I really need to be on my way."

Mike left. It sounded logical on an old car like the Chevy. Or, he could be being taken for a ride out there in the middle of nowhere. Either way, the fastest solution was the best solution so he'd let Mike go at it. Sometimes unfair was the best a guy could find.

When he and Donny were about nine, they had, for some reason that Jimmy no longer remembered, ventured over to 54<sup>th</sup> street – a rough area forbidden to them by both sets of parents. Then he remembered – it was one of those, 'I'm braver than you are,' challenges. They figured the one who would venture the farthest beyond 54<sup>th</sup> would win.

He shook his head and broke a smile thinking back. There may have never before been two more terrified boys walking side by side in the City of Chicago. They crossed 54<sup>th</sup> and walked on. Half way into the following block they met a group of four boys – two their age and two young teens. A pushing and jawing match ensued. He believed the others started it, but then Donny *had* been there so it was a difficult call.

The two older boys pulled them apart.

"Let's do this right. Two on two. Anything goes. Last two standing win."

It was not the way they had figured their quest would go. They were supposed to show how brave they were as indicated by how far they'd go. Actual trouble had not entered

the equation back in the planning stage – all thirty seconds of it.

The teens positioned them, their two on one side and Jimmy and Donnie on the other. The teens pushed their two forward and the brawl was on. Donny was a puncher. Jimmy more a tripper, thrower, and pinner. They traded adversaries several times. At about the same moment, Donny kned the boy while having his hands around his throat and sent him to his knees in tears. Jimmy tangled his leg between the other kid's and in a well-practiced, hand on the shoulders, shove sent him hard onto the concrete; his head pounding into the sidewalk, gushing blood.

The talkative teen looked at the two on the sidewalk.

“Had enough, sissy boys?”

What followed was not at all what the 49<sup>th</sup> Street boys had expected. They figured after they sent the young ones yelping on their way, the big ones would take over and pound the hell out of them. It didn't happen that way. The teens offered their hands for a shake.

“You two are alright. Got names?”

Without thinking, of course, Donny made the introductions. Jimmy figured that could lead to disastrous consequences later on. The quieter of the two teens lifted the defeated boys by their collars and stood them up.

“Shake and remember who bested you – Donny and Jimmy from 49<sup>th</sup> Street.”

They shook hands, heads down knowing full well a second beating was only an alley away – and teen fists would tell their tale for weeks to come.

Donny and Jimmy turned and walked toward home, chests out – well at nine they really had no chest to stick out – and fearlessly laid down one step after the other until entering their 49<sup>th</sup> Street haven. The ‘fearlessly’ part was probably just Jimmy's memory gone upscale. He was sure they would have been terrified the entire walk home, waiting for a baseball bat across their backs or a hot slug eating its way into their young bodies.

It was the last time the two of them experienced anything close to a bond – and that, of course was by accident – only having occurred at the insistence of two teens they'd



never seen before or since. There was a lesson in it about fair is fair or respect the victor or some such thing. Jimmy had never taken time to sort that out. They cleaned up at Amber's, not wanting to be seen freshly bruised and bleeding in their own homes. Having to explain themselves at home never ended well.

Two hours and six cups of coffee later, Mike the mechanic reappeared.

"Good as new. Brake drum in good shape. Filled the line. Bone dry. Also, filled the radiator and topped off the other fluids. Love that old car. You want to sell?"

"Not this time through. Maybe next. Thanks. Any problem if I pull in out of the way and get a few hours of sleep?"

"No problem. Lock your doors. Sometimes teenagers sneak around thieving. Don't understand this younger generation. No respect for other people's property, or lives. Last week two kids had it out with hand guns up in Melody. Both dead. There just can't be nothin' worth killin' over. Their families is heartbroken. I hear one of their girlfriends tried to commit suicide last night. When we gonna learn?"

Mike left shaking his head, clearly saddened about the downward turn he believed humanity was taking.

Jimmy listened, but had not heard. He and Chevy found a spot under a light and he closed his eyes.

So, Donny had tried to kill him – the brakes thing. He'd come pretty close, actually. Jimmy held no malice toward Donny for that. Everybody had a right to protect themselves. That wasn't what it came down to between them. Jimmy believed it was all on Donny. Donny would understand that, but would hate Jimmy because whatever happened, Jimmy was always going to look like the good guy. Like it had always been between them, Donny would blame Jimmy for his own stupidity. He could consistently twist things in that direction. Jimmy went about presenting himself in such a way that others admired him. Donny did his best to be seen and remembered as the tough guy who could make another's life miserable in the blink of an eye if they didn't tow his line. Tough was supposed to beat nice every time – his daddy had

told him so, so why hadn't it worked?

Jimmy slept in longer than he had planned. The sun had been long up. It was right at nine fifteen. His phone rang: the first few bars of the National Anthem.

That meant it was Frankie.

"I received a text message from Amber. She was in Findley, Iowa, heading west on route 30. Where are you?"

"Not important. Thanks. Stay put. Love you. By the way, thanks for making my life so good."

He hung up before Frankie could offer anything else – advice, warning, displeasure, fear, supplication. Jimmy understood Frankie would be feeling all of those.

Jimmy unfolded his map. According to the list of towns there in the tiniest print he'd ever been required to read, Findley would be found at H-13. He found the area with his fingers. He had to search a bit, but there it was. Unincorporated Findley at H-13, not fifty miles away.

He headed north to route 6 and then west. Again, he pressed the speed limit. In the light of day that was a good deal easier and safer than at night. He felt a sense of unexpected relief. In addition to getting a better idea of location he also could assume that Amber was still alright. Unless it had been an ambush ploy by Donny. He dismissed that somber possibility and kept to the good news possibility.

He came upon the garage at the corner with *Mary Belle Street*. Donny got right to the point. He took out his wallet and showed Amber's picture.

"I understand she's been here in Findlay. Can you tell me anything?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm her fiancé. She's been abducted."

"Just what my wife suspected. With a man about your age. In a White Mustang. Water pump fizzled out on them."

"Did they say where they were headed?"

"No. Took off west. I suppose they took a left, south to the Interstate. That's just speculation."

"The girl seem okay?"

"She was pregnant and said she had morning sickness. Used the restroom. My wife said it was pretty late in her pregnancy to have morning sickness."

“Thanks.”

“We was just wonderin’ if we should call the cops with nothin’ to go on but my Mary Belle’s ladyition.”

“I’ll take care of that right now. Thanks again.”

Jimmy moved on west sticking to Route 6, thinking Donny wouldn’t risk the main highway. He’d already left it once. At last, Jimmy felt the advantage. There was no way Donny could know he was close on his tail.

///////

## NINE

### He Passed Door Number Nine

After no more than a dozen or so miles going west on Route 6, Donny counted a half dozen cop cars – state troopers, city cars and Sheriff’s vehicles. It made him nervous so he decided to turn north. He came to Route 63 and drove straight north. That road led to an east west road, 96, and he turned left continuing west.

With suddenly needing to consider the baby and all, Donny had found reason to think about his family. Amber was asleep. Looking back on life seemed like a good distraction as he drove. He really hadn’t had a relationship with his mother since he entered school. She spent the hours of her life sitting in a rocker, surrounded by a haze of smoke with her hand lifting scotch to her lips – tiny sip after tiny sip after tiny sip. He couldn’t remember an instance when she fixed a sit-down meal at the kitchen table. He supposed she was depressed. He couldn’t see why. She had a nice house, lots of money, good clothes to wear, her own car, a cleaning lady and lots more stuff most of her neighbors. Her husband was good to her in those ways; he carried the prestige of being the boss of the dock, and she had two sons who were pretty well the kings of the neighborhood – well *he* was, his brother rode his shirt tails.

She slit her wrist once when Donny was ten or so. His dad said it was to get attention – that all females wanted men’s constant attention and when they didn’t think they were getting enough they’d do stupid things like that. His father said he had a mind to just let her bleed out there in the bathtub, but he was too big hearted. Donny had never known her to have a friend over to the house – or to have a friend, as far as that was concerned. He thought he remembered that she went to church sometimes when he was real little – he wasn’t sure. That may have gotten mixed up in one of Frankie’s or Jimmy’s stories. The only time he ever saw his dad hit her was when she caught his brother stealing from her purse. His brother was six. She told their dad about it and he

told her to beat him. She wouldn't, so he made the boys watch as he beat her with his fists for five minutes. He recalled the scene as one that really hadn't produced any feelings in him one way or the other. He knew it hadn't been the only time. She often came downstairs in the morning nursing bruises. Women just had to learn their place and it was the man's job to see they did – Donny's take away from the scene at five.

That was his first 'official' real lesson in how to treat a woman. He'd never seen any inkling of affection pass between them. He figured there was the usual husband/wife activity in bed at night. His dad was a man's man, after all. Later, he had discovered that after he hit a girl she never really acted the same around him. She seemed put off. He'd have his way with girls one way or the other, but it was always best when it seemed like they wanted to be a part of it or would at least cooperate.

Sex was sex – a sport – and love was an abstraction he never understood. For sure it couldn't be a mandatory part of sex. He was great in bed – ask any one of a hundred girls, two hundred maybe – and love certainly never played a part in it.

Of all the people in his world the one he feared most was his father. In 24 years, he'd taken everything his dad had dished out and not until the past few months had he ever considered resisting him. He was his dad. Zimmerman men could take anything. He dad was just making him tough and strong. He felt certain his dad was proud of him for it. It was how Donny would raise his sons – to be strong and fearless – able to take anything anybody could ever lay on them. He could hardly wait to beat his son for the first time. It had been a huge thing to have laid his father out cold a month or so before. He father was proud of him, Donny could tell.

The thing with Jimmy had taken a wrong turn, somewhere. Donny had calculated that raping Amber would make him angry and probably end up in a fight between them. Making Jimmy angry wasn't enough. He wanted to punish Jimmy for all the rotten stuff he'd done or caused to be done to him during the past two dozen years. Making sure she got pregnant would punish him. And better, still, never knowing for

sure who the father was should drive him insane. He'd always have to see himself as 'second' when it came to Amber and him making a kid together. The abduction wasn't part of his plan. Jimmy had forced that – it was his fault. When he came after him with a gun Donny had to protect himself and how better than to take his girl hostage – the one Jimmy was supposed to marry in a few weeks.

Since then, he had even played out the scene when Jimmy ultimately found him. Donny would face him down holding Amber in front of him. Jimmy would have to shoot her to get to him. He figured by then Jimmy's hatred would have grown to the point he'd do it. He had played that moment over and over – the look on Jimmy's face when he realized he had killed her. He'd let his guard down and Donny would take the perfect shot – heart center – the end.

Donny got the rush of his lifetime just thinking about it – a rush that suddenly had him speeding along at eighty-five miles an hour. He let up on the pedal and hit the brakes.

The jolt woke Amber. She sat up looking around to figure where they were.

"I need a restroom, in a hurry," she said. "What time is it?"

"Close to noon. We could get gas, I guess. Keep your pants on, there'll be something up ahead."

Amber thought to herself she was probably the first girl he'd ever told to keep her pants *on*. It should have been humorous. It wasn't. She unfolded the map. They had passed a sign saying Lipscomb was two miles ahead.

"Where are we? Lipscomb isn't on Route 6?"

"I decided to travel north a ways. Lots of cop cars down on Route 6."

"But we're headed west unless the sun got confused."

"Had to turn back west for a while. These two-bit roads don't follow no plan out here."

"The plan probably is to connect one town with another."

He didn't respond.

There looked to be no more than a dozen houses, a long-closed filling station, and several dilapidated barns in the city of Lipscomb.

"Best restroom Lipscomb has to offer is out behind a barn, the way it looks."

He pulled into an overgrown barnyard and in a few minutes, they had both found their relief.

"I need to stretch my legs," Amber said walking off toward nowhere.

Donny allowed it. He looked her over like she should be something more than a sister-like traveling companion. He hadn't released his manly juices in several days. He wasn't used to that. He had to wonder why was he allowing her to call the shots?

She walked back to the car and again got into the rear seat and closed the door. She fully understood his look. It terrified her, but she'd not let him see it. She spread the map on her lap – more a symbolic way of protecting it than to be used as a travel guide.

"We'll soon need to eat," Donny said. "See any real towns on the map?"

He got into the car.

"Marshalltown, maybe five miles south on that road we just crossed."

He turned the car around and started back to the road they had just exited.

Donny hit the steering wheel and stopped.

"A damn flat and all I got is a damn donut for a damn spare. Damn it!"

Psychologists would call his emotional speech pattern, lazy, never having dealt fully enough with his feelings to enunciate his true feelings – confusing to both others and to himself, deep down inside.

He got out. The rear right was flat for sure. He called for Amber to get out so she wouldn't rock the car. He took the jack and such from the trunk and before long had the wheel off. He looked over the tire.

"Rusty old screw. Bet we picked it up right here in this pig sty. Next time hold your water."

Amber wasn't surprised it had been her fault. Nothing was ever Donny's fault.

He slipped the tiny tire into place.



She remembered the only time Donny had ever hit her. They were ten or eleven and at the tree house. They had come by a long length of one inch rope and the boys – Donny, Frankie, and Jimmy – had tied it in such a way so the climber should be able to enter feet first through the widow – an open hole perhaps eighteen inches' square. The plan was one person would hold the rope steady at the bottom while the others climbed. That translated, of course, into the girl held the rope and the boys climbed. Also, of course, Donny would be the first one up the rope. At the top, he reached over to take hold of the wood by the widow. He lost his grip and fell the ten feet to the ground.

It had been a bad fall, they could all see that. Donny stood up and yelled that Amber hadn't held the rope right. Before the other boys realized what was on his mind, Donny marched straight to her and gave her a shiner.

Frankie remained to help her home. Jimmy understood; Frankie wasn't put together to be a fighter.

Jimmy chased Donny across the lawn toward his house tackling him as he approached the back-porch steps. He fell forward and hit his chin. It produced a slit from bottom to top. It bled profusely. He scrambled on inside. Jimmy felt he had handled it. To that day, Donny wore his chin 'dimple'. None of the four of them ever revealed how it happened. Donny had gained some respect for Jimmy that morning – his speed, the flying tackle. He hated to think that somebody other than he deserved respect. It plagued him for a good long time – perhaps even to that day – undoubtedly to that day.

They came upon a café on the edge of town next to a garage. He parked beside the garage and engaged the owner in conversation. The man had a tire. It would take a half hour.

"Back in thirty then," Donny said. "The café any good?"

"Suppose it depends how hungry ya are."

He smiled. All mechanics seemed to think they were clowns.

Amber and Donny climbed the four steps to the porch and entered. Four other patrons were inside spread among three tables.

Donnie chose a booth by the front window. They

looked at the menu. There was a pot roast special. It looked good to both of them.

“Sorry, folks. We only got one serving left.”

“You take it Donny. I’ll get something else.”

“Okay,” Donny answered. “I’ll have coffee and water with it.”

The waitress looked at him in disbelief. Taking the food out of the mouth of his pregnant Mrs!

“I’ll have the hot roast beef sandwich, with milk and water.”

The paper placemat had a crossword puzzle – Barnyard Animals.

“So, which way we going from here, do you think?” she asked as if making small talk. Not something she had often attempted.

“Back north. Been no cop cars for the past hour, up here.”

There were pencils in a mug beside the napkin dispenser. Amber started working on the puzzle.

“Dumb word games,” came Donny’s response when he saw what she was doing. “Don’t never even say nothin’ sensible after you get one finished.”

The waitress returned with the drinks and a folded newspaper. She laid it near Donald. He picked it up and scanned the front page. Reading had always been difficult for him.

Presently the food arrived. It was very good. Amber turned over her placemat and the dish with her sandwich and a small bowl of slaw graced its plain side. They finished. Donny placed two dollars on the table and handed a twenty to Amber hitching his head indicating she should pay. He wanted to finish an article about the White Sox – six inches, six minutes.

The waitress was also the cashier. Amber handed her the twenty.

“I loved doing that crossword.”

“Never try ‘em myself. Not much good with words.”

Through a plastered smile and mechanical nod Amber whispered, “Please look at mine.”

Donny arrived and opened the door for Amber – a first.

Maybe he got the message about the pot roast faux pas and was making up for it.

They were soon back outside. The car was ready.

Amber had completed the cross-word puzzle with a few additions.

‘HELP CALL 3215552189 WHITE MUSTANG NORTH FROM HERE AMBER’

She had no idea of course if the message would be read let alone acted on. It had been clear the waitress was distressed about Donny’s rude behavior. Amber thought they had made a connection. She had slipped the runt sized pencil into her bra and would hide it somewhere in the car.

Donny turned north and Amber settled in there in the back seat.

Donny was always rude. He had never considered anybody else’s feelings in his life. He’d probably never even considered it was something other people did. Rude showed he was in charge. He called handicapped people ‘Crips’ and the mentally slow, ‘Apes’. She had never figured out if he thought he was being funny or if he was trying to put them down. Either way he was most certainly trying to build himself up. After 24 years, he still didn’t see how all that turned other people off – off of him. Maybe he did and just didn’t know what to do about it. Somebody said, ‘crazy was continuing to do the same thing over and over but expecting a different outcome’. Amber had spent a lot of her time in that neighborhood trying to stay away from him, but very little trying to understand him.

For all her faults – and there were many – Amber’s mother had done what she could to provide a good upbringing for her daughter. Amber had never gone hungry or wanted for acceptable clothes and school supplies. She had her own TV from a very early age with no channel restrictions – just like every good mother should provide. Her mother was still battling her own mother’s excessively strict and sometimes brutal upbringing. She had never raised a hand to Amber. She yelled a lot – the only way she had to make her points. She never let her ‘Johns’ touch Amber the way her own mother had rented her out regularly. She had lived her life in terror and shame and pain and humiliation. She saw to it Amber had something better than that.

By any standards, Amber had certainly had a better childhood than her mother. She did the best she knew how for Amber. Lots of kids in that part of the city were hidden from educational opportunities because their parents needed them at home for one reason or another. Amber's mother hadn't been inside a school since the third grade. She was not dumb, she was ignorant. On a map, she didn't know North America from Wales. She figured a trapezoid was some sort of back disorder. She made no attempt to keep up with her daughter's school work. Amber did believe her mother was proud she had graduated from high school, but having had no firsthand experience with learning the kinds of things schools taught, she had no way of knowing why it had been important. It had kept her daughter busy and probably away from the most undesirable boys. That had been all her mother knew to do.

Amber had been so eager to leave home she could taste it. The first year on her own – right after graduation – was wonderful even though she missed Jimmy something awful. Frankie had been a good friend through it all. She had the idea he was in love with her, too, but would never act upon it because he valued his friendship with Jimmy more than most anything else in his life. Amber appreciated Frankie for his many good qualities, but that was as far as it could ever go. She went out of her way never to lead him on. He had never come on to her.

While Jimmy was in the service, Frankie was in college studying architecture. It was his dream to design a magnificent building that would someday sit in the middle of downtown Chicago. He liked girls – very much – but was shy and awkward and – quite honestly – scared spitless at the thought of that first time he would be alone with one. Amber and Jimmy had tried to set him up with nice girls on several occasions. Eventually, Frankie asked them to stop. He joked that he had decided to become a nun.

During those past several months he had been spending a lot of time in the children's books section of the branch library, helping one of the young female volunteers reshelv books. Amber knew about it, but never mentioned it to him. He knew she was available to answer his questions and

make suggestions any time. It gave her a good feeling inside to think of him with someone special. Amber and Jimmy had often talked about what a really fine human being Frankie was – their hero in that sense. He'd be a great catch for some lucky girl.

Where Amber and Jimmy had drifted far away from religion as they grew older, Frankie had, if anything, grown closer. He led some sort of youth group at church. He didn't bother them with the details and they didn't ask. They respected each other's space when it came to differences in beliefs.

They had talked – the three of them – on occasion about the big questions of the universe – except the god thing. The three of them believed nothing was true forever. Truth was defined according to the best knowledge available at any moment. When new things were discovered, truth – or at least its perception – might have to change. Even super religious Frankie agreed that as social institutions went, religions were the worst about adopting new findings. Rather than thinking how new information could improve and make their beliefs more accurate, religions became defensive, apparently determined to hold onto the disproven for as long as the leaders could cajole their followers into continuing to believe.

For three kids from the bowels of a huge city, they thought big thoughts, set positive long range goals and were determined to improve their skills as required to live successful, helpful lives.

They had talked some about the concept of revenge. Even Jimmy understood how the process would undoubtedly eventually annihilate mankind. 'A' does something bad to 'B'. 'B' and his friends then do something worse to 'A'. 'A' and his clan launch something even worse against 'B' and his clan. Extending such a scenario, eventually most everybody has to be dead. Jimmy accepted that in the abstract. But people just didn't understand why it was different for him and his family. He could never just back down from a threat or he would likely have no family. He didn't make it known to his friends, but he believed in the philosophy of kill or be killed as it applied between his family and Donny's. The Zimmerman clan was frightening and never to be trusted. Everything he'd learned

about life from his neighborhood had screamed that at him. It had served him well in war. They – the enemy – hurt us and were determined to continue hurting us for as long as they – the good guys – existed. There could only be one solution. Make certain the bad guys were all killed.

He could kill with no remorse, fully confident he was doing the right thing – no, doing the *essential* thing.

The part of that problem he chose to ignore was the fact his enemy believed he – Jimmy – was the bad guy, out to kill the *real* good people. Because of that, they couldn't rest until the people known to them without reservation to be evil (Americans) would be erased from the face of the earth.

Frankie had come as close as anybody to shake Jimmy of that point of view.

“If you had been born into a middle-eastern family who was dedicated to the destruction of Americans, you would have been killing Americans with the same sense of right you took into battle *against them* as an American.”

It had clearly disturbed and challenged Jimmy. He had never discussed it again. The idea had come to Frankie when somebody pointed out to him that if he'd been born a Muslim instead of a Catholic, he would then be as devout a Muslim as he currently was a Catholic. His beliefs had strictly been a roll of the dice. Frankie was still struggling with that.

Amber wondered if that challenge was playing any role in Jimmy's current single minded goal to kill Donny. Amber hated Donny for what he had done to her, but she would never ask for his life over it. Frankie had once proposed that when a person proved he couldn't live peaceably with the rest of mankind, he should be permanently separated from them. He should still have to earn his own way, have freedom among those like him, but never be able to mix with the larger group again. Jimmy had considered it and he and Frankie had tossed the idea around until late into the night, never really rejecting it. Frankie liked the idea because it took punishment and revenge totally out of the rule enforcement equation. It was based on the logical natural consequences of one's actions. Amber was less philosophical – she liked it because it promised safety and comfort for law abiding citizens and took the huge financial burden of supporting prisoners off the

backs of the good guys.

They came upon a wooded area. The sign said *Forest Park*. It had to be read sideways because it had come loose from one of the two square posts arranged to hold the carved and painted crosspiece. Donny stopped at the entrance. It was a two-rut lane back into a stand of trees. He pulled onto it. They were soon a half mile off the road. An open, mown, area spread in front of them.

“We’ll stay here ‘til dark and then go find a motel.”

He rolled the windows down half way – enough to allow a breeze, but not enough for Amber to crawl through. The doors remained locked. He found a music station, leaned his seat back and closed his eyes. Amber sat up for a while trying to enjoy the scene – a little meadow, trees, squirrels and rabbits. There were lots of birds. She fell asleep sitting up.

//////



## TEN

### He Passed Door Number Ten

There were police and sheriff's cars everywhere Jimmy looked as he set out again on Route 6. Donny wouldn't stick around for that. He was on the north side of the interstate so he'd head north to get away from them as quickly as possible. Jimmy turned north at the first available road.

He had no good plan in mind to narrow down the possibilities and get him in his sights. He understood that meant he was leaving a lot to chance – just driving around in some general area. It didn't represent the well organized and reasonable way he was living his life, but he figured that's all he had just then – chance and the outside possibility that Amber would be able to deliver the definitive message. He had to be close. Surely he would be able to respond in a hurry.

Possibility and chance – he'd never seen them as being such similar concepts before. How had his senior year philosophy teacher missed that one? Perhaps someday he would go back and discuss it with him.

Lots of folks back in the neighborhood lived their lives according to chance. Rather than finding out the facts so they could make good plans they just assumed what *seemed* true was true. He figured it was a lot like living life in ignorance. People just took what came instead of working to make the things happen that they wanted to have happen. He believed his father had been guilty of that although had no idea how he could have changed things, considering his family obligations and responsibilities.

During their senior year, Amber decided she'd like to do hair, become a beautician. Some woman told her there were already so many of them around that none of them could find work – a blatantly false statement since there were many working beauticians right there in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, Amber's first impulse was to just believe that and give up on her dream. She had been willing to allow a chance, fully unverified, comment, based in ignorance, dash

her dream. It was more common than not there on 49<sup>th</sup> Street.

Jimmy insisted she look further. He dragged her to several salons in the area and they talked with the owners. What they heard over and over again was that even an average hair dresser could work steadily if she was the sort that women enjoyed being with and who was dependable. Their biggest gripe was not being able to depend on their help to be there on time, to make arrangements for shifts to be covered when they were going to have to be away, and to keep an upbeat manner around the clients – keeping the down sides of their own lives private.

With that information, upon graduation from high school Amber worked her way through six months of training and had been with the same shop for three and a half years – moving all the way up to second chair behind the owner.

Jimmy's dad had taught him that – to rise above chance and unfounded opinion. He said something like, "Just because somebody says something is true don't mean it's true. Depend on yourself to find things out or your chance at a good life will be no better than your odds at *Slap 10'* – a street game of chance with 9 to 1 odds you'd lose. He didn't remember the exact words, of course – they'd been delivered when he was only eight – but it was close enough to have stood him in good stead.

Many of the boys in high school told him the Marines was the worst branch of the service because its basic training was so grueling and they were always given the most dangerous missions. Jimmy hadn't stopped because of what they said. He talked with several retired Marines, and one he knew from when he would come home on leave. He put very pointed questions to them. He learned the truth and upon graduation enlisted. Basic training *had* been grueling – worse than his worst fantasy about it; put another way, it had been perfect preparation for what he was sure to encounter – what he eventually *had* encountered. The assignments were dangerous, but with proper planning and training they were successful virtually every time they went into battle. Jimmy believed in living according to well-founded plans, so he was understandably uncomfortable at that moment in his life.

It was fully out of character for him to set out on a

vendetta based solely on revenge. In the neighborhood, he was known as the level head – the peace keeper. He'd keep on talking and trying to find a solution right up the point where he could see ignorance or pigheadedness made a solution impossible. In such situations, he never threw the first punch, but his first was always well-placed and debilitating – he planned it. Jimmy had been respected back home as a good, tough, fair and friendly person since before Jr. High School.

What had snapped? No one doubted Donny was a dead man the moment Jimmy had decided that had to be the outcome. Everybody was pretty sure it would be the end of Jimmy, as well – either lain out on a cold slab in the morgue or in prison for life for having killed Donny. It was a lose/lose undertaking for both of them. In the end, Jimmy would lose, the neighborhood would lose, his family would lose and Amber would lose. It had always seemed like someday Donny and Jimmy were destined to have it out. It appeared Donny had cinched the deal.

Living his life according to a well based plan was the third lesson he had learned from his father. The first had been never start a fight you don't know you can win. The second had been, you never back down from a fight. He came to learn that fights came in a variety of disguises other than fist to flesh – innuendo, outright insults, defamation of character, and attacks, by any means, on your family or loved ones.

Both Amber and Frankie had tried to change his mind about lesson number two. His point was that nothing is more important than family, *period*, so, defending them was a man's first responsibility. An attack on any one of them was an attack on him. Amber had been attacked! It was hard to argue with that. Frankie had been bred to believe that family was all important although in his extended family – the part away from 49<sup>th</sup> – violence played no role. Amber, who had never had 'real' family, believed getting along was the most important goal she could have, and life with Jimmy was going to provide it.

So, defending family, the most important mainstay of society – according to Jimmy – might well keep him from ever knowing or participating in the full joys of having a family of his own. It was a conundrum he recognized as the basic fact of

his behavior, but it floated somewhere outside his being, keeping it from really influencing him in any logical or reasonable way. Clearly, it had become more important than life itself, defending family honor, which typically translated as, 'first comes revenge'.

Jimmy felt he was getting close. When he saw kids along the way he'd pull over and ask if they'd seen a really cool white mustang. He gave his cell phone number to a few of the boys who acted interested, promising a reward if they found it for him. He received no calls as he continued to move generally north. For the most part, there on the flat plains of central Iowa, the roads ran either straight north and south or straight east and west. It made it easy to keep the search plan in mind. He began a more systematic, back and forth, up and down pattern – square by square by square. It led him gradually west and north.

He understood word would get around about his questions, but he figured Donny wouldn't risk talking with anybody so shouldn't find out. Jimmy would stick with his plan.

In second grade, Donny and Jimmy were given an assignment by their teacher to find out what the most popular make of bicycle was among the third and fourth graders. Donny's idea was to 'ask around' and then put down what they thought. Jimmy thought they should go to the bike racks and count each variety. They ended up doing two reports. Jimmy's systematic survey got an 'A' and Donny's 'facts by guessing' report got an 'F'. Donny's F, of course was Jimmy's fault for showing off. Jimmy never understood that, but for Donny, presenting reasons that made sense was never much of a necessity. He believed if he said it, others should just believe it. Typically, once he had said it, Donny really did come to believe it.

At Donny's house, what his dad said was the law, the truth, the bottom line. Donny was never allowed to comment on anything his father said – no questions, even for clarifications. If, because he hadn't understood – even if due to poor instructions – and he had carried out an order

inappropriately, he was in for a beating. So, he learned early on, that what the boss said, was to be accepted without question. Picturing himself as the boss of everyone his age and younger there in the neighborhood, he expected all those folks to react as if what he said were true – the law. If they didn't, they could expect repercussions.

Jimmy hated that about Donny and failed to understand that he (Jimmy) was currently acting exactly like Donny. In Jimmy's mind, Donny had crossed the line, his line and therefore the only legitimate line, the true line. Having done that, Donny deserved to be punished to a degree commensurate with the severity of the offense. You raped Jimmy's loved one, you died. It was plain and simple – not logical, not legal, not socially responsible, not a generally agreed upon sequence, but it would be so because Jimmy said it would be so. Delivery of the revenge-centered act became the only important factor. The continuation of Jimmy's own life was not even a more important consideration. In that one, well-focused area, Jimmy's rational mind was no longer engaged. He did me wrong. I must inflict something even more powerful – more hurtful – on him. It was the revenge paradigm that even Jimmy recognized was, along with greed, the combination of human traits that would, over time, certainly destroy mankind.

Society had to be based on 'us' in its every aspect. A society trying to function according to the 'me' philosophy could not survive. The basic problem may be that the Donnys of the world could care less if society survived beyond their own lifetime.

Jimmy had written his senior paper on, "The philosophy of greed and its ultimate effect on mankind." It came in second in an all-city competition. He understood the fact – but he was propelled by something firmly established deep in his gut. Greed – wanting the good stuff just for yourself – was kin of revenge. The good stuff was Donny's death and Jimmy was determined to have that all for himself. If Donny would be killed in an auto accident, Jimmy would believe he had lost, because the death had not been at his hands.

Jimmy knew why Donny hated him, but knew it was hogwash – he had never intentionally set out to make Donny

look bad – well, perhaps in races and sports where winning was the goal. In Donny’s eyes, for him to have lost had to have involved a conspiracy of some kind devised for the sole purpose of making him look bad; therefore, each loss he suffered provided justification for revenge against whomever bested him.

As their physical prowess came to pretty well equal each other at about fourteen, Donny’s revenge overtures toward Jimmy had settled into the predictable pattern: “I’d beat his ass, but he ain’t worth it.”

As Jimmy paused at a stop sign, he received a text message.

“Aforementioned white vehicle reported heading west at leisurely pace on combined Routes 14/175. Timothy.”

Jimmy smiled. He remembered Timothy from an hour or so before. Probably ten, skinny, reddish hair, combed, fingerprint covered thick glasses that lived at the end of his nose, a bicycle assembled from junkyard parts, and a white backpack. His vocabulary flowed naturally as if he were a professor of English Literature. Just the kind to reach out and offer a helping hand. Jimmy’s map indicated the stretch of road that combined Routes 14/174 was several miles on north. He had met Timothy twenty-five miles south. He must have a network of nerds he could engage whenever mankind was threatened. Jimmy could imagine ‘*The Nerd Alliance*’, riding their bikes side by side, bent low forward, capes flowing and goggles in place, speeding down a gravel road on the way to ensuring justice was once again served. Except for the nerd characterization he’d been there. Those had been good times. He and Frankie very likely held the record for the number of times a pair of preadolescent, super-heroes had, in fact, saved the world. It may have helped that their entire world could be surveyed from the two windows in their tree house.

Back in those days there was no clear distinction between the real world and the world of fantasy. Kids were able to slip seamlessly between the realms as if it were one big bundle. Jimmy wondered when that came to stop. With puberty perhaps although some of his very best early erotic experiences existed only in the realm of fantasy – well the

vision was fantasy even if the rest was of the physical world.

Having known Donny's sordid side since the moment he had become able to have a sordid side, Jimmy's imagination was bombarding him with a constant stream of fantasies suggesting the terrible things Donny was forcing upon Amber. Donny, alone with a female over whom he held the power of life and death, was a terrifying image. Jimmy envisioned morning, noon, and nighttime debauchery. He knew she would fight him. He wanted that, of course, but he didn't want Amber or the baby to be harmed. If it took her giving in to Donny for the sake of protection, he would understand; he would never fault her for it. Donny had already committed the evillest of crimes. Jimmy only wished he could kill the man once for every one of his transgressions against her.

Donny had largely lived his life among his fantasies – boss of the neighborhood, never losing, having any girl he wanted whenever he wanted her, being a son his father was proud of. It seemed once somebody convinced themselves a fantasy was real, it became impossible to set them straight. Since Jimmy knew without reservation that he hated Donny for what he had done, he was convinced his mission was well within the confines and legitimate expectations of the real world. If others couldn't see that, it was their problem.

While wandering through the fantasies upon which he had designed his own plan of revenge – the rapes – Donny had miscalculated how things would really go down. He had raped her and he had possession of her, but what he believed would represent total victory was likely merely the prelude to the ultimate loss a man could only ever experience once.

Everybody in his neighborhood believed that bad men deserved to be punished. A beating or imprisonment or losing financial resources – those were punishments. Death was vengeance, not punishment. Punishment had as its goal the changing of behavior. A mother spanked her son so he would stop doing whatever he had done. Death did not change behavior. Death ended behavior. Death determined that neither pleasure nor pain, reward nor punishment, would ever again be a possibility. Punishment was, ostensibly, for the benefit of the punished. Vengeance was for the benefit – the

satisfaction – of the one who administered it.

If Jimmy had any reservations about his plan it came at that point. To assure Donny a life of eternal pain – excruciating pain – might provide a fitting punishment. He'd have to stick around and endure it, hour after hour, day after day, thinking about what he had done that had brought it about. But denying a man his life still seemed more extreme, more permanent, more everlasting. Jimmy had no intention of rehabilitating Donny. That would be aiding – fixing – his most reviled enemy. Frankie had helped him understand that in all likelihood Donny had a missing screw – he had been born without capabilities such as compassion, love, and trustworthiness. Without such possibilities, rehabilitation was, by definition, impossible.

So, Rehab was *impossible*. Death was possible.

Imprisonment by the authorities for rape and kidnapping – it had become a federal matter once Donny forced her across the Mississippi into Iowa – would mean his future would be in the hands of the authorities. They were pledged to – although it was clearly a laughing matter – provide safety and humane treatment during incarceration. At its very worst it would be way too good for Donny.

One night when Donny was about to turn sixteen, he came knocking on Jimmy's window. Donny had just been freed from Juvenile Detention. Donny was drunk as a skunk. When Donny was drunk, he became anybody's, talkative, best friend.

Jimmy let him in, thinking he could sleep it off and not disturb anyone, or injure himself or anybody else. Instead, Donny wanted to talk about the terrible experience he had been through while at Juvey. He understood that Jimmy was the most trustworthy boy in the neighborhood, although he would never admit it sober. It wasn't Donny's first time in Juvey, but apparently when he was younger the boys were more closely supervised. That time he had been housed in with the older boys who had severely mistreated him. He removed his shirt and showed where his cellmates had taken turns pounding fists into his upper right arm all night, every night – three nights in all. It looked worse than the often-used



hamburger reference. He had been raped every night and his bloody sheet was ignored by the guard who even seemed pleased about it. Donny knew he dared not mention either of those things to the staff or he'd go home in a body bag. He cried there in Jimmy's room. That would not be anything he would remember and Jimmy was a compassionate enough person never to bring it up. He disliked Donny greatly at that time in his life, but he couldn't imagine the treatment he described had been deserved. Donny moved to drop his pants to verify the abuse, but Jimmy convinced him that was not necessary. He was soon asleep in a heap on the floor. Donny laid a blanket over him and left him alone.

Jimmy had not slept well that night. Partly because the idea of being asleep in Donny's presence was tantamount to having a finger or ear cut off – just as a prank. Also, partly because of the disturbing stories he had just heard. There had been times he had wanted to pulverize the kid's entire store of flesh and exert the worst imaginable pain on him. Rape would have been out of the question, but few other things would have been off the table.

It was the first-time Jimmy had ever seen Donny asleep. It changed his appearance significantly. There he was a regular kid – sort of good looking even with his hair down over his eyes. Jimmy had a short-lived urge to brush it back, up onto his forehead, like caring for a little boy. He hadn't acted on it.

By morning it had become Jimmy's fault Donny was in his room. He'd clearly got him boozed up and had taken him up to his room to do despicable things to him. He left through the window vowing, "I'll get you for it." Donny had been blessed with only marginally useful verbal skills.

Jimmy's all-consuming reveries there on the back road that day, were soon pushed out of mind, again allowing his focused purpose. At combined Routes 14/175 he turned west. It was likely the closest he had been to Donny – and Amber. Amber was at the center of his pursuit and he had to remind himself that he must keep her safety in mind. That was far more difficult than seemed reasonable. His hate for Donny was clearly more powerful than his ability to maintain his

concentration on important collateral matters. How could he overcome that?

“Focus, Jackson!”

It was the image of his squad leader, dressing him down, that popped into mind. One dressing down in the Marines maintained a recruit’s focus for six months. He had needed that. At the time, he had hated it, even though he tried to keep in mind the admonitions from all the Marines he’d interviewed beforehand. “There is nothing you will be exposed to during training that is not essential for your survival and the survival of your comrades – remember that. Turn your pain and anger into gratitude.”

That was a lot like it had been in his home. Unlike Donny’s, when Jimmy had received a spanking or grounding or a bawling out, Jimmy always knew he had it coming. His father was a fair-minded man. He always had his son’s welfare in mind. After the punishment was over his father always had Jimmy explain why his father thought it had been necessary and what lesson was to be learned.

Punishment of any kind had actually been a rare occurrence for Jimmy. He was a good kid who tried to do right – no easy matter living there on 49<sup>th</sup> Street. Often, when he knew he had strayed from his father’s expectations, Jimmy would go to him and ask for suggestions about how to better handle it next time. His father was always ready with what was, more often than not, a helpful response. He usually spared the belt in such circumstances.

There was a fight club over on 54<sup>th</sup> – sometimes 55<sup>th</sup>. It cost fifty dollars to get in. There would be a half dozen or more bouts a night and always started at midnight. Being illegal, they were seldom held in the same place twice – well, the betting that went on was illegal, not two young men agreeing to pummel each other into bloody unconsciousness. The participants stripped to their skin and fought until one was down for the count and couldn’t be easily revived. It was often best friend against best friend and yet they beat each other senseless, week after week. Opponents were set just before each bout by luck of the draw. They got paid pretty well.

Donny, probably because he was afraid to go alone,

paid for Jimmy and Frankie to attend with him. He forced it with comments about their manhood and their sissy stomachs if they couldn't take it. They were seventeen. Of course, they went. You had to be twenty-one to get in. Donny furnished appropriate ID. The huge man at the door didn't care so long as they had the price of admission.

Several things about it all caught Jimmy's interest. First, the degree to which the audience got into it – yelling and screaming themselves hoarse and throwing fists at each other if they lost their bet. Second, and it was more bothersome than interesting, as he watched, Jimmy felt fully foreign urges well up inside him, wishing he were out there going at it, throwing punishing blows, drawing blood, kicking his opponent in the ribs and head while he lay there helpless in a state of semi-consciousness. His heart raced, he came to breath hard, his temples became hot, he became sexually aroused. It was the most fantastic combination of feelings he had ever had. It was the most terrifying combination of feelings he had ever had. In some odd way it made him proud and grateful he was a man. It frightened him that such feelings dwelled deep down inside him. He wondered if they existed there, hidden, in all men. If so, it didn't bode well for the survival of the species.

Five minutes into the first bout, Frankie turned white, puked and went to wait for them by the door. Jimmy had no way of ascertaining whether that was because he also recognized those feelings within himself and became terrified about it, or because he was simply repulsed by the cruelty and the willingness of one man to punish another in such a savage confrontation for no reason other than glory and a few bucks. In each bout, Donny cheered on the favorite – never the underdog – urging him to “kill the other kid”. There was no revulsion on his part. He really would have reveled in the death of one of them. Jimmy agreed to stay longer than the loudest, most sensible part of his conscience said he should.

The feelings he had experienced that night haunted him to that day. He had felt them again sometimes in combat. There, they seemed reasonable in the service of his survival from moment to moment. Still, he wondered if he could trust

them – if he could trust himself to be able to control them.

He wanted to be fully in control when he killed Donny – no adrenalin driven push or uncontrollable ‘fight night’ compulsions. He had killed lots of times. Although he harbored no guilt about any one of them, it had never given him anything close to a feeling of pleasure or produced a sense of euphoria. They had been matter of fact instances of doing what he was trained for, paid for, and expected to do. He was, however, counting on experiencing large doses of both pleasure and euphoria when he watched Donny’s eyes flutter back up into his head for the final time.

## ELEVEN

### He Passed Door Number Eleven

Jimmy had to admit he was disappointed that his band of young super heroes had not come through for him again. In his mind, he had related with Timothy as if he were again a nine year old. As hard as it seemed at the time, it had really been about the most carefree era of his life.

It seemed he had driven for hours. He looked at his watch. It was after eight o'clock. He was hungry. The world had grown dark. He couldn't remember turning on his headlights, but there they were.

He came to a roadside café in the middle of nowhere. Its name appeared to be *Café*, according to the neon sign in the window, and may or may not have been open. His first thought was how appropriate that his last meal might be in a place just named, *Café*. He had to stop thinking that way. He was going to find the two of them. He was going to see Amber to safety and then square things with Donny. He had so much to live for – Amber, a family, a job, his friends his mother and father. They all needed him and he did feel a responsibility to them, which encompassed a future well beyond that night.

The door was open. He entered. There was a counter bell with a note: 'Ring for Service.'

He rang. It took a good minute, but an elderly woman came through the open door into the kitchen behind the small dining area. It was a narrow, though deep, building. It could be she lived way to the rear. She finished tying her apron.

"I don't recognize you, boy," she said.

"No. I'm not from around here. Just passing through. Got hungry, looked up, saw this place and figured it was my destiny to come in."

"I like the way you talk. Mostly farm hands here – corn hands, really. They're here for plantin', here for hoein', here for harvestin', and here for putting the fields to bed. None of that goin' on right now. It's why I don't have no specials. Got the staples: steak, potatoes, corn, peas and apple pie. That

pretty well should handle any man your size, I'm thinkin'."

"I'd think so too. It'll be your choice. Mind if I move from the counter to a booth?"

"It'll be your choice."

She giggled into her hands.

"Drink?"

"Got milk?"

"Home grown. Large, I suppose."

Jimmy raised his right hand a few inches to indicate that would be fine, wondering about the home-grown comment – Elsie, out back, perhaps.

She left for the kitchen. Jimmy turned on the stool and stood up.

He nosed around the dining room – having been sitting for hours. It had clearly been there a long time. There were newspaper pictures on the wall from the end of World War II. There were two purple hearts, one beside a clipping and one beside a faded, color picture of a young Marine.

She returned with milk and coffee. Jimmy pointed to a booth and slid in.

"You looked like you could use coffee, too. Can't have you fallin' asleep at the wheel. Seems you're off the beaten track to just be passin' through the state."

"I had extra time so thought I'd take the scenic route. My first time Iowa. I am still in Iowa, right?"

He broke a smile. She returned it with a nod.

"Got the vittles started. Take a few minutes for the grill to heat up. Like I said not much goin' on around here right now. Keepin' a hot griddle's overhead, you understand."

"May I ask about the medals?"

He pointed.

"My father on the left and my son on the right. Lost them both in wars. War's a terrible thing we humans invented. God wants us to take good care of each other, not go off and kill each other."

"I'm sorry for your losses. Your husband?"

"Got killed in a farming accident thirty years ago."

"I'm sorry, I don't seem to be able to bring up anything but sorrow filled memories."

"Oh, the memories aren't sorrowful, son. I had

wonderful years with all three of them – all three named Harry. We always made the best of the moments we had together. My husband built that booth your settin' in and my son put me on a new roof just before the last time he left home. Daddy built the place in 1940. Only really ever had three *sorrowful* days in my life. I suppose you understand.”

Jimmy nodded. That was some woman. He didn't know where to go with the conversation. It wouldn't be immediately necessary since she left to tend to the food.

He hoped if anything happened to him his loved ones could take on the old lady's point of view and think of it as just one sorrowful day out of a lifetime. That caused him to wonder who would miss him the most. He thought about it for some time and decided it was a concept that couldn't be quantified in that way. A person would feel grief or he wouldn't.

People would miss him for different reasons. Mother and father because they had given him life – the life he was, by every reasonable measure, foolishly about to risk. Frankie, because they shared so much together along the way. They had been with each other when they had learned many of the most import of life's lessons. They liked each other, they *completed* each other – that was the word he was looking for. Amber was what he had heard termed his 'soul mate'. In many ways, they weren't even separate individuals at that point. They knew each other's minds and desires and feelings and needs. They shared a vision of their future together. If anything were to happen to him, her reaction would probably be the most devastated and long term because she and he were committed to be together forever. All of the others knew the day would come when their lives would lead them along different paths and they understood that was, generally, a good thing. Death, of course was probably different.

He wondered where he'd be buried, where the service would be held, who would attend? Military, maybe – that would be no financial burden on anyone. He wondered what percent of those who attended would be there because of sincere intentions and what percent just out of ghoulishness curiosity.

But, he must not dwell on the very thing he was going

to do his best to prevent. He wanted to live. There was so much yet to learn and experience. So much that needed to be done to make the world a safe and comfortable place. His as yet unborn – unconceived – children needed him.

The old lady arrived with the food. It was a twenty-ounce steak if one. The vegies arrived in serving dishes so he could take what he wanted. A pitcher of milk came along as part and parcel with all the rest.

It was then Jimmy realized it really had been a long time since he had eaten. The telephone rang in a back room and she excused herself.

“Probably Margaret. She calls any time a day. Some folks just don’t understand that most of us have to work for a livin’.”

Jimmy could only imagine what tales she had about him to pass on to Margaret. It was good to feel useful to somebody else. He smiled.

He worked at the food for half an hour before sending up the white flag.

The ticket read \$9.50. The steak alone at a meat market would have cost three times that. He laid down a twenty and called back to her as he left.

“I’m on my way now, ma’am. Left money at the booth.”

“Thank you. Have a good life,” came her final words.

She could have talked all day and not laid that on him – have a good life! He even felt upset by it. He soon realized he was upset at himself and not her. He entered his car and removed his cell phone from his shirt pocket to lay it on the seat beside him.

He had somehow missed a text message – from Timmy. He smiled. ‘Perhaps he’s offering to tuck me into bed,’ he thought. He read the message.

*White vehicle parked at the Stop Inn, ramshackle motel, intersection of 3 and 17. Met your friend Frankie. Nice. Good luck. No charge.*

Okay. An actual location at last.

He felt the expected adrenalin surge and his body’s normal reactions to it. He also had other feelings – ‘fight night’ feelings. No! He didn’t want those. They caused him to lose focus and caution and his sense of purpose. He would work



to make them go away by the time he arrived.

He was bothered by the reference to Frankie in the text. Dogged old Frankie had found some way to track him down. He assumed Timothy had given him the same information about the motel as he had sent him. Not good!

He looked at the map. Highway 3 ran for hundreds of miles east and west, most of the way across the state. It might be busy. Highway 17 was just a short connector and started at 3 and ran north to 18. Or, perhaps, it started at 18 and ran south to 3. There were no smiles left in his soul to acknowledge his joke.

State route 17 was eighty some miles back to the east. He had overshot Donny and Amber. It would take several hours. He started north on 17. Ten miles up the road there were crews working – stopping traffic. He rolled down his window.

“What’s up?”

“The *Boone River* flooded and took out the bridge. Have to go back south and work your way north on county roads.”

He turned around and headed south. Within no more than half a mile there was a narrow road off to the west. It led into a tiny town called *Vincent*. From there he angled generally north and eventually met State Route 3. The detour had added most of an hour. The cloud cover that had been returning every night had moved in – not threatening looking, but spread wide and dense enough to keep the back country very dark –. For that reason, he had been driving slower than he had during the daylight hours.

‘Imagine that,’ he said to himself, ‘acting responsibly in the midst of the most irresponsible thing I’ve ever done.’

There were signs, Watch for Deer. One of them had been changed to read, Watch for Dear. The work of teen boys he assumed – far more funny he was sure while they had been drunk with paint and brush than it seemed at that moment.

He turned right – east. The intersection could be no more than five miles away. He needed to regain his composure. He pulled to the side of the road – unlike his prediction, he had not met a car. He would take just a few

minutes to make sure his head was on straight and that he was functioning on brain power not emotion.

Focus Jackson!

Inside the motel room Donny and Amber were watching TV – only a three-channel menu way out there away from cities.

“I’ve decided we’ll stay here for the rest of the week – five days. Then we’ll head toward our final destination.”

“Do I get to know where that is?”

“Can’t see it can hurt – Arizona. Nice weather year ‘round. You and the baby can be outside and get great tans. I’ll get a job – maybe a stevedore again.”

“Donny, there aren’t any ports in Arizona, it doesn’t even boarder on a ocean.”

“I’m smart. I can learn whatever job’s available. I heard there are great parks out there – like the Grand Canyon and the mountain with the presidents.”

He was trying, Amber would give him that. What she really couldn’t understand was why he thought she would stay with him once they got there. Again, he probably had not carried that problem into the future with his fantasies.

It made her think again about something she had been considering quite seriously. If staying in hiding with Donny would mean Jimmy could remain safe, she was willing to do that. She hated Donny, but she loved Jimmy with every ounce of her being. She could concentrate on her baby and making a good life for it.

She still didn’t really believe it was a viable alternative, but over time her thoughts seemed to be moving in that direction. Apparently, she had received a five day reprieve of sorts – staying there. Donny had still not forced himself on her. She appreciated that, but couldn’t understand it and most certainly didn’t expect it to last much longer. Earlier in the evening he had taken a shower and was sitting there in just his boxers. That was a new behavior. It made Amber extremely uneasy.

The baby had been very active all day and evening. She was coming to understand what the girls at the shop meant. It was wonderful to feel the new life inside her, but it

just wore her to a frazzle. The girls had said, 'Just wait 'til he's eight months along and has muscles like Rocky Balboa'.

Each night when Amber got into bed she had been trying to send happy thoughts to Jimmy. She told him she was okay and that she wasn't being mistreated. She told him the baby was kicking more often all of a sudden. She said she was eager to move away from 49<sup>th</sup> Street and begin their life together. She ignored the most obvious problem and went on as if it didn't exist.

Some nights she remembered things from their childhood. Like the time they were eleven and she had told him she loved him. Jimmy said he'd heard that you had to kiss to be sure you really loved somebody so they kissed. They decided nothing wonderful happened so they must not be in love.

She remembered that *other* night; they were fifteen, up in the tree house – a tight squeeze for any two of them by then. Jimmy asked her if she thought they needed to try kissing again, just to see if there was any chance they might be in love. Amber agreed. Neither of them had a special friend at that point, although both dated often.

They held that kiss for more than a minute. Jimmy broke it off.

"*That* was pretty special. What did you think?"

Amber was still swallowing hard so she just nodded.

Jimmy initiated a second attempt. They came up for air half an hour later.

"It's a very special feeling," he said.

"Yes," was all Amber could manage.

"So?" he asked.

"So, what?" she asked in return.

"Are we in love or what?"

Amber had known her feelings for a year and she could hardly believe the love of her life had come to realize the same thing.

"It sure seems that way to me."

Jimmy rolled over on his back as if thinking about it. Presently he said, "There's one more thing I need to do tonight, then."

Amber remembered how she thought that going from being buddies to sex partners in a matter of three hours was moving way too fast, but she'd not deny him if that was what he really wanted.

"What do you need to do, Jimmy," she asked in a hushed romantic voice.

"I have to go tell Frankie we're in love – well, not me and Frankie, but me and you."

He kissed her one more time with meaning, as if to make sure, walked her home and stayed the night at Frankie's. The two of them had talked it all inside out and in the end agreed it sure seemed like love.

Amber knew what she was 'sending' to him at night was all silliness and that things didn't work that way, but it kept her feeling close to him, like he was still being a part of her life every day. It served the same purpose as writing a letter – just getting it said was important.

For some reason, at that moment she felt particularly close to him.

**TWELVE**  
**It really had come to this.**

It had been a long, tiring, uncertain road, but finally, there were no more doors to pass.

Jimmy didn't hesitate. He knocked on door number 12.

"It's Jimmy, Donny."

The lights went off inside.

A car pulled into the parking lot at high speed behind Jimmy. Its braking tires scattered the chat and gravel. The car door opened. It was Frankie.

"Go back Frankie, go back," Jimmy shouted.

He didn't.

Door number 12 opened.

Guns fired, sparking white and red and orange in the dark.

People screamed, first in agony and then into silence.

Bodies stumbled and reached out aimlessly gasping for just one more breath.

Dying eyes met dying eyes in one final moment of recognition.

The sidewalk ran red with young lives that once had been.

There would be no more birthdays to celebrate by *The 49<sup>th</sup> Street Club*.

Four families would grieve forever.

But, *right* had surely prevailed, hadn't it?

