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The Kindness of Strangers: Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen

Skip Eno

I'm not ready to call a motel prostitute. A drink sounds good. A voice in me, the voice of my top dog, says, "No. No! Lenny! You know you shouldn't do this. Nothing good can come of going out in a strange town for a drink Dumb move!"

Underdog pops right up, "Hey, it's all right. One drink doesn't hurt anyone. You need it. You deserve to relax. This is hard work you're doing." I haven't had this inner conflict in a long time, only a few times since I nearly ruined my marriage with Sylvia in our first two years. A few times I've gone on one-night benders, nothing like my old binges. I am usually able to have one or two drinks and quit. There is no reason I can't do this tonight, and I need to wind down a bit. A drink or two and maybe shoot a few games of pool? Why not? After I get back, I'll call Lilly.

I walk out the door of 111, Top Dog's voice is just a whisper, "Bad idea, Lenny."

The "Stop-N-Talk Lounge is a mile from the Great American--very convenient. I can easily find my way back to the motel after dark. I pull into the strip mall parkinglot, I notice a combination of work trucks and new economy cars clustered in the slots close to the lounge. The center houses a donut shop, a small appliance repair shop, a ladies clothes resale place, and a couple of empty storefronts. Not upscale, but then I'm in a blue button down collar shirt with the sleeves rolled up and khakis. I should fit right in.

A smudged glass door opens into an anteroom with a pay phone and a bulletin board, business cards randomly tacked. I pull open the solid oak door and step into the cool, dark interior. The odor of stale beer and Otis Redding's 'Sittin' On The Dock of the Bay" greet me. I wait a moment inside for my eyes to adjust. As soon as I can see a bar with stools running down the wall to my left I walk on in. I realize it is darker than usual for a bar because I am still wearing my clip-on sunshade. I take it off and shove it into my shirt pocket. Now I can see. A couple of middle-aged guys in sports jackets sit at the bar close to the door. They look like salesmen dropping in for a quick one on the way home.

Five or six stools sit empty. So typical! The drop-ins sit closest to the door. The regulars will be at the far end of the bar. As I expect, they glance at me as I walk along the bar. They lose interest and go back to their quiet conversations. I pick a stool close to the middle, next to the slot where table waiters drop orders and pick up drinks. A good place to grab an occasional maraschino cherry or an orange slice from the fixings array.

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The bartender is a short woman, on the heavy side. She wears her Hawaiian shirttail out, so her lines are straight from her shoulders down to her slacks. Her hair is graying and close-cropped. She hasn't decided to see me yet. She wipes the counter in front of the locals. One old guy says, "About time you did some work, Sal!"

She snaps her bar towel in his direction, grinning. "At least I've got a job, you old coot!"

Two elderly women, stooped at the end of the bar cackle, the deep, wet coughs of emphysema. The old coot's buddy chuckles without looking up from his drink. "Frank, I guess she doesn't know retirement is work." All four of them guffaw. Sal shakes her head and walks my way, laughing and calling over her shoulder, "You've gotta wonder what kind of government would pay you guys to sit here all day!"

She stops in front of me. "What can I get for you young man?"

"Thanks for the upgrade! Hi Sal--I'm Lenny and I'd like a brandy and soda with a chunk of lime or lemon, whichever you have."

Sal looks down the counter to see if the locals have heard my order and she says loudly, just in case they haven't, "A brandy and soda with fruit! Isn't that little old for you, Lenny?"

I'm used to this reaction, though it's not usually so loud. I think Sal has been drinking her mistakes. "You're right about that, but I'm allergic to wheat. That cuts out beer and bourbon and it leaves me with brandy or wine. Wine makes me drunk."

Sal tilts her head, thinking. "Yeah--you'd be right there. Not much you can eat or drink!" She turns to the back bar and grabs a bottle from the bottom shelf.

"Ah, Sal, have you got a top or middle shelf brand?"

She turns, frowning, with a bottle of Christian Brothers in her hand. "Isn't this stuff good enough for you?" She sounds riled.

I have an audience now, and I am in social trouble. "No. I'd drink it, but they use caramel coloring in it, just like coke, to give it color. Caramel coloring has wheat in it. A little better brandy is aged in oak barrels. That gives it its dark color and a better taste."

She seems satisfied with my explanation and conversation at the local end of the bar resumes. As she puts the Christian Brothers back, Sal says, "I'm going to the store room. I think we've got some good stuff there. The owner likes brandy too." She ducks under the pass through next to me. "If we don't have any, what do you want?"

"I guess a glass of red house wine."

Sal seems satisfied, knowing I'm going to drink something. Her time won't be wasted.

"Be right back!" She walks toward a door on the left, behind the locals.

While I wait, I swivel around to get a look at the whole place. The wall behind me has dark, scratched paneling half way up, with a series of large mirrors stretching the length of the wall. The reflection between the mirrored back bar and the wall makes the place look bigger. As I follow the wall to the back, I see that there is a wide, arched opening to the right of where Sal disappeared. Through the arch I can see a jukebox against the back wall. Someone has punched up the Beatles playing an old Chuck Berry tune. I don't know the title but I recognize the words, "I haven't had no goodlovin' since that woman said bye, bye." Not a bad juke box. I like this place better by the minute. A sign hangs over the arch. Block letters are printed on white cardboard: "Booths & Bathrooms & Tables". I'll have to check those out later. I can hear the sounds of laughter and the click of pool balls.

Sal comes through the door with a bottle in her hand and nearly collides with a tall woman in a red and white striped tank top and a short black velvety skirt. She carries a round tray loaded with empty beer bottles above her shoulder. She is flat chested and skinny, but she looks healthy. She wears ankle socks and running shoes--maybe a jogger?

Sal yells, "Honk, Honk! Sorry Jilly!"

Jilly pulls up short, balancing the tray expertly and gives Sal a little kick in the butt as she charges by.

Sal laughs and says, "Ooh, do that again Jilly! It hurts sooo good!"

Jilly falls in behind Sal, "Not till you beg, gal!"

Sal sweeps past me and ducks under the counter. She hands me an unopened bottle of E&JVSOP. "How's this?"

"Hey Sal, that's great! This is good stuff. Thanks!"

I hand her the bottle and she begins opening it. "You won't thank me when you pay for it. This is going to cost more than Christian Brothers and I'm probably going to get in trouble with my boss." She begins to pour the brandy. "I can't believe you're going to have me put soda in this good stuff. It smells great!"

Jilly puts her tray of clinking empties on the counter next to me. She spots the brandy as Sal pours and turns to me. "Hey, brandy! Very cool!" She looks

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down at me, batting sparse eyelashes, her green eyes flashing,"Flirt. Flirt. Flirt." She is so close I can only see her in parts. Her nose is narrow and straight, its end pointing upward. Her dark plum-colored lipstick contrasts with her big, whitened teeth. For a moment, I wonder if she is going to bite me. As quickly as she turned it on, she turns it off."Sal, five bud lights and one Heineken. Oh yeah, one vodka and juice."

Sal plops down my drink with a chunk of lime skewered on a plastic stirrer and slides open the beer cooler.

Jilly turns to me as she waits for her order. "So, who are you Mister Brandy and Soda?" The eyelashes bat again and her teeth sparkle.

"Hi Jilly. I'm Lenny." I offer my hand. She enfolds my hand with her chilly, long fingers. No shaking, just holding and looking. I am careful not to jerk my hand away, but I pull back as soon as she lets me go. It has been a long time since I've been the target of flirting. I'm not sure I remember how to handle it.

"So Lenny, where are you from?" She reaches up to flip stray strands of thin brown hair back over her bony shoulder. She looks anorexic.

"I'm from San Antonio, Jilly."

Sal hears this, stops popping beer caps, and yells out, "That right? I took basic training for the Air Force there, long time ago at Lackland."

"Lackland's about ten or fifteen miles from where I live. I used to teach some classes out there."

"Jilly wants back in the conversation "Are you a military man, Lenny?"

I laugh. "No Jilly, I teach communication at a university."

Jilly swoons! I mean she throws a big one at me, ala Marilyn Monroe, Ohh! A university professor! How cool!" I could imagine her singing, "Happy Birthday Mr. Professor, Happy Birthday to you!"

Sal saves me. Slamming beer bottles onto Jilly's tray, she says, "Great balls, Jilly! Let the poor man have a drink!"

Jilly hoists up her tray onto her shoulder, looks at Sal, sticks out her tongue, "You're just jealous, Sal!" As she turns to deliver the drinks, Jilly stops, blows me a kiss, "You get tired of the old folks in here, come on back where the young people hang out!"

As Jilly smoothly carries away the heavy tray of drinks, Sal says, "She's a good waitress, but she's a ditz!"

I turn back to Sal. "Ya think!" Both of us laugh and I take a long, slow drink

of my brandy and soda. It tastes good!

Chapter Nineteen

Three brandy and sodas under my belt, I weave my way to the bathroom. It is small, dirty, the stool sits next to the urinal without a divider, and the door has no lock. The toilet seat is spattered with urine; the loose roll of toilet paper is wet, brown and rippled from lying on the wet, grimy floor. I pray I don't have to use the stool. As I stand at the nearly overflowing urinal, I look at myself in the metal mirror in front of me. My salt and pepper head of hair is still full, but the receding hairline continues to creep backward and a tuft of hair in front hangs down over my forehead. I start to push it back in place, but stop. I should wait till after I wash my hands--good idea, Lenny! As I zip up and start to turn toward the sink with one dripping faucet, I stop to address myself in the mirror. I look at myself with a severe scowl, "Slow down and be careful!" I laugh as I turn back to wash my hands.

The door bangs open as I'm looking into the empty paper towel container. I big guy in jeans and a western shirt lurches in, sees me checking for towels, laughs as he unzips and stumbles toward the stool in the back of the room. "Nothin' in there! Haven't ever seen towels in here. That's what pants are for dude!" He pees on the toilet seat, irritating the shit out of me, but I decide against chastising him. I want to, but I won't. He's too big to lecture. I push the door open. As I step through, flipping water from my hands and wiping them on my pants, I say, "You're right about the pants, dude." The door swings closed and I am faced with a choice between the bar and the growing crowd of "young people." No choice, dude! I'm used to being around college students. The crowd of locals at the bar does not draw me.

I swerve to the left, feel a slight looseness in my balance and think, "Easy, slow--you haven't had anything to eat." I walk past a row of booths, most of them empty. I look at my watch. It's 7:30, still early. Plenty of time for a couple of drinks, play a little pool and get back to my room in time to call this Lilly person.

Three pool tables sit side-by-side. Two of them are in use by a couple of groups of guys in their mid-twenties, some in their early thirties, all of them in work jeans. Three or four women sit on stools against the wall watching the men play and smoking cigarettes. They all seem to know one another. I wish I could smoke. The smell usually turns me off, but it attracts me tonight. The only time I ever want a cigarette is when I'm drinking. I don't need one, not right now.

I walk over an unused pool table. Its felt top is loose, scraped and peppered with cigarette burns. I look around to see if anyone is about to use the table,

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but no one seems interested. I dig through my pockets to find some quarters. As I bend over to insert the coins in the ball release, I am surprised to see that only costs seventy-five cents, a good deal! I drop in the quarters and shove the slide. I hear the familiar sound of balls dropping and rolling. As I rack the balls, Jilly slides up next to me, puts a hand on my shoulder and leans over as if to show cleavage. There is none. "Glad to see you decided to join the in-crowd, Lenny. Want one of those fancy drinks?"

I stand up. Jilly is a half a head taller than me and she is standing close. I can smell something sweet. I look up at her. She leaves her hand on my shoulder. She doesn't seem bothered by the difference in our heights. She is starting to look good. Idly, I wonder why she would flirt with me. I'm in my fifties. She looks like she's in her thirties. The numbers don't make sense to me. "Sure, Jilly, another brandy and soda would be swell."

She gives me a big horsy grin, rubs her hand up and down my back, and she is gone. This is weird. I have to be careful here. Pool will clear my head. I pick up a stick, roll it on the table. It wobbles. I try another. It wobbles less. I see a couple of guys glancing over at me as I prepare to break. They're watching to see if I'm any good. If I shoot well, they'll watch a little longer. If I shoot poorly there will be coins on the table soon. I probably look good for a few dollars in bets. I break, not as solidly as I'd like, but two striped balls fall. I am shooting stripes. My other self is shooting solids. As I line up my first shot, I encounter the reason I haven't shot pool in a while. Bifocal lenses! The balls up close are in focus, but the end of the table is out of focus. If I shift my angle the balls up close are fuzzy and the distant balls are clear. Age sucks! I take my glasses off and put them in my shirt pocket. Everything on the table is softly out of focus. I also feel a bit naked without my glasses. I try to shave a ball into a side pocket. I miss widely. I hear the quarters tapped down on the table before I raise my head.

The toilet seat spoiler is grinning at me. He's about six-two and a little overweight, but solid. He has a Workman tool on his belt. His hands are callused. "Hey dude, mind if I shoot a game with you?"

I continue shooting, each shot getting a bit better, but still not good. This guy's going to go for a bet right away.

Jilly shows up with a tray full of drinks, sets mine down, smiling. "Sal says she'll keep your tab. This one's on the house." She giggles and leans over to whisper in my ear. "She says for you to be careful, but you don't need to listen to her. I'll take care of you." She makes a smooching sound that hurts my ear and turns away to the next table.

"Dude! Jilly's on your ass! This is your night!"

I straighten up, grinning. This is surreal. I look at pee dude and shake my head. "Not happening dude!" I hold up my left hand and point to my wedding ring.

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Dude smirks, "Hey, that don't slow down Jilly! You watch. Play your cards right and you're gettin' laid tonight!"

Two drinks later I hand ten bucks to Dude, which means he owns the table, but he decides to leave. I should let the table go, pay my tab and return to the motel. It's 9:30 and I'm tired and a little tipsy.

A short, pudgy guy sporting hair about an inch long that stands straight up like a baby bird's ruffled fleece steps up with quarters. "Wanna play?"

"Sure." Why not? I'm not on a schedule. Maybe I can win a game.

He reaches out to shake hands. "I'm Gary."

"Hi Gary, I'm Lenny."

He motions to someone behind me to come over. I turn around to face a young woman in her mid-twenties. She is beautiful--raven hair, round face, big oval brown eyes, and a gorgeous body. Gary says, "This is Gracey. Mind if she shoots with us? We'll just go by the numbers and the most balls made wins."

"Yeah that's fine with me. Hi Gracey, I'm Lenny." I offer my hand. We shake. Her hand is soft, warm and small. Her fingernails are long and purple. I can't take my eyes off her. Sometimes a woman is so beautiful I just have to look.

Gracey smiles. She knows how she looks and she knows men look at her.

I'm embarrassed. I look away. Gary has been watching and I think, "Whoops! I have to be more discreet or I'm going to have some trouble."

Gary says, "Want to break?" Not a trace of a jealous attitude. Odd.

"No, you go ahead." I turn to Gracey, "Unless Gracey wants to break."

She smiles. Full lips, white, straight teeth. "No, let Gary go ahead."

Gary breaks. The seven ball falls. He walks around the table, getting a line on the one ball, which is partly blocked. He can hit the one, but he can't sink it. He leans over, smacks the cue ball hard, striking the one ball and careening off, scattering balls all over the table. He looks at me, grinning. "Lousy shot! You next?"

I turn to Gracey. "Ladies first." I glance back to see if this bothers Gary, but he is walking back to a booth. He lights a cigarette and takes a drink of beer. I look back to Gracey and she is leaning over the side of the table across from me, real low, and I have a clear view down the front of her loose, V-neck sweater. She is braless and her breasts would fit right in a Victoria's Secret commercial. I glance away. I'm not the only one watching. All the guys at the next table are frozen in motion, mouths open. I am embarrassed. Gracey is not

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much older than Asia. I know what I would think about a geezer my age ogling my daughter. Still, Gracey is an amazing sight.

Gary walks back to us, and I wonder what a beautiful woman is doing with such a toad.

After winning two games, Gary says, "I owe you a couple of drinks. Let's go sit in the booth, unless you want to keep playing."

"No. Thanks. That's about all the pool I can handle tonight. One drink is plenty. I've got to get going." I glance at my watch--11:40--time has flown!

Gracey excuses herself to go to the bathroom. She weaves slightly as she walks away. She has been drinking vodka mixed with orange juice, one after another.

Gary motions me into the booth. He seems like a nice enough guy. He isn't real bright though. He doesn't get the difference between a communication teacher and an English teacher.

"What do you think of Fahrenheit 451, Lenny?"

"I read it a long time ago, Gary, but I liked it. Seems like we might not be too far away from wide ranging censorship with this Ashcroft from your state."

"Yeah, for sure. How about Lolita? What do you think of that book?"

It's a great book, Gary. I..."

"What do you think of old guys doing it with young women?"

"Not much more than older women with young guys, Gary. But Lolita wasn't just a young woman--she was a girl, and that's different."

He ignores my response. Gary leans across the table, speaking in a quiet voice looking me intently in my eyes. "Lenny, what do you think of Gracey?"

I sputter, "Ah, well, ah, Gary." I take a swallow of my drink. "She's charming and sweet. You're a lucky guy."

"No, man. Do you think she's sexy?"

I draw back, alert, worried. I don't like the direction this talk is going.

Jilly saves me. I look up as she skips to the table and leans against me with a big smile. "Drinks gentlemen?"

Before I can respond Gary orders a round for the table. Jilly bends down to

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wipe the table. She moves the empties to Gary's side and leans past me, wiping. As she pulls back, she whispers in my ear, "Danger." Jilly, puts the empties on her tray, stands straight, looks at Gary and says, "One bud light, one vodka juice and one brandy soda lime coming up."

As soon as Jilly leaves, Gary leans across the table again. "What do you think, man? Is Gracey a fox or not?"

I know I'm being baited, but I'm not sure why. He could be looking for a fight, but he doesn't seem drunk. He's been sipping his beer. "Of course, Gary. She is beautiful and you know it. You have a lovely woman." I figure reference to Gracey as his property will flatter him so no offense can be taken. It's a despicable way to talk about a woman, but the possibility of sparking violence outweighs the sexist talk for me at this moment.

Gary doesn't move back. He looks over his shoulder toward the bathroom. "Man, she is one amazing experience in bed! You want her?"

My worst fear is realized. No right response exists for this. I am pissed and worried at the same time. I decide to play it straight, to avoid confrontation. "Gary, I'm a married man, and Gracey is your lady. I'm uncomfortable talking about her this way. I don't know how you two handle your relationship, but I would never, and I mean never, presume to get involved with Gracey.

He doesn't give up. "She likes it, Lenny. She likes to get it on with older guys like you. Maybe it's a daddy thing, but I don't mind. You can have her, Lenny. Doesn't that interest you? No strings, no attachments, no money, just fantastic sex!"

He sounds like a car salesman. He's made my answer easy. I hold up my ring hand. This is the second time I've done it tonight. "No way, Gary. As attractive as Gracey is and no matter how liberal you are, I'm not playing around. I haven't yet, and I don't intend to."

Gracey and Jilly arrive at the same time. Gary gets up, hands Jilly a twenty and walks off to the bathroom. Jilly gives me a look with one eye cocked. It looks like she has something in it, but I assume she means it to be a "watch your ass look.

Sliding into the booth across from me, Gracey smiles shyly, grabs her drink, and gulps it down. I check the bathroom area--no sign of Gary. I take a sip of my drink. I think I'm actually getting sober. I decide to take a risk. "Gracey?" She is staring off toward the pool tables. "Gracey!" I have her attention. "Gracey, do you know Gary has been offering you for sex with me?" This is it. All hell may break loose.

Gracey giggles. "I know. He likes to watch. I don't mind? Do you want to do it?"

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To be honest, within myself, yes, I would love to do it. Maybe not with Gary watching. I know better than to be honest with her. That is one benefit age has brought, the ability to know when not to say what I'm thinking. "Gracey, I'm happily married. I've never cheated on my wife, and I'm not going to start now not even with you, no matter how beautiful you are." She smiles at the compliment. I check for Gary and continue. "Look, I'm here in Liberty because I'm trying to track down my father. He is sick and he has wandered off. I'm not up for getting into any kind of involvement. To be honest with you, what you two are doing worries me for both of you."

Gracey laughs and rolls her eyes. "Don't worry about me. I'm a big girl. I know what I'm doing." She looks straight at me with those astounding eyes and runs one of her feet up and down the inside of my right leg."

Before I can leap out of the booth--I'm ready to run--Gary sits down next to Gracey. He looks at Gracey. He looks at me. "How are things going here? Have we got a thing going?"

Gracey says nothing. Her foot is pressed up against the inside of my thigh. If she were any taller, I know where that foot would be. So much for innocence. She's into this game too.

I reach down and push her foot away. "No Gary. No deal. I can't do this, and I've got to go right now." I start to swing my legs out of the booth.

Gary holds both hands up. "That's cool, man. I can respect that. No pressure, just one request."

"What's that?"

"Our ride left about an hour ago. We don't live very far away, but I think Gracey's too wasted to walk home. Could you give us a ride?"

I know better than to pick up strangers and give them rides, but this guy doesn't look like a problem to me. He's a twisted asshole, but he doesn't look dangerous. He's right. Gracey looks drunk.

"OK. We have to go right now though." I stand up.

Gary pulls Gracey across the seat as he gets up. "Come on babe. Lenny's going to give us a ride. Let's go."

Gracey is not falling down drunk, just pleasant and loose. She smiles at me as Gary pulls her up. "Thank you Lenny. We like you." She seems to walk fine with Gary's hand braced in the small of her back.

I stop at the counter to pay my tab. Gary says, "We'll wait for you outside."

Sal hands me my check. Ouch! Fifty-six bucks!

She laughs as I wince. "Told you that stuff was expensive!"

I grin and hold out my credit card. "That's okay Sal. The entertainment has been worth it." She shakes her head, takes the card, and goes to the machine. As she runs the card, I notice the old coots have been replaced with slightly younger coots. The sales guys are long gone. I look up at the clock behind the bar. It is after twelve.

Sal is waiting with the card and slip held out as I look down from the clock. "You've made a night of it, Lenny," she says with a snicker.

I write in a good tip on the card for Sal and Jilly and hand the slip to her to separate the copies. She hands me the yellow one. "Thanks for this from both Jilly and me!" She waves the slip at me.

"You're welcome, Sal. You have a friendly place. Thanks!"

She smiles. "Come back, Lenny." Sal turns to walk away, stops and turns back. "Lenny, I see you've met Gary and Gracey."

"Yeah, the odd couple!"

Sal rests both of her hands on the bar. "A whole lot odder than you think, Lenny. Be careful. Think with your head, not your balls! Enough said." She walks down the bar to check on the coots.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. Jilly looks down at me. "Sal just warn you about those two?"

"Yeah, she did, Jilly, in no uncertain terms!"

"Good. Watch out for them. You don't want any of their action." She grins. "If you'd like to have some of my action, I wouldn't mind wrapping these long skinny legs around you. Just give me your motel name and room number. We close soon." She smooths some stray hairs in my beard.

"I'm probably blushing, Jilly, but I am honored. You are one sexy woman, but there is only one woman for me." For the third time this evening, I hold up my ring hand. "Bye, and thanks Jilly."

I turn to leave, and I feel a soft pat on my butt. I turn back Jilly hands me a matchbook and says, "If you change your mind, you can call here for the next hour. The number's on the cover and mine is written inside. Bye Lenny!"

As I walk toward the door, I stick the matchbook in my pants pocket, wondering, "What's with all of these people in this town? They all have Y's on the end of their names and they all want to fuck!"

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Outside, Gary is leaning with his back against a truck. Gracey leans back against him. His arms are around her. One hand is inside her sweater cupping her breast.

Give me a break. This guy doesn't give up--he's still going for the sale. I walk by them as if I don't notice what he's doing. "Come on y'all. My car is over here."

They follow. I open my door, climb in, and click the window unlock switch. Gary opens the front passenger door and starts to help Gracey get in. I hold my hand out to stop them. "No, Gary. Both of you get in back."

Gary says, "Sure man, whatever you say." He pulls Gracey back, closes the door and opens the rear door. After helping Gracey in, he sits next to her and pulls the door closed. "Thanks man! We really appreciate the ride!"

I think, "Sure you do. And I know what you would have had Gracey doing if I had let her in front." I start the engine, turn around and ask, "Which way?"

Gary leans forward. "Turn left out of the lot, go to the second stop light and turn left. I'll show you from there."

As I turn at the second light, I yell, "Now where, Gary?" I am watching them closely in the rear view mirror, just in case he tries anything.

Gary says, "See up there about half a block ahead? There's a white apartment building on the left. Stop in front."

As I pull up, Gary leans forward. "This isn't where we live, man. We are about a half-mile away, but I need to stop here for just a minute to talk to my sister. She doesn't have a phone and I'm supposed to sit with her brats tomorrow, but I can't. I just need to tell her real quick. Can you wait just a minute?"

"Sure, but hurry!" When they are out of the car, I'm out of here!

Gary leaves Gracey in the car. I hear her tell him, "Honey, I don't feel good."

"I'll be right back--you'll be fine."

Gary walks across the street, enters a door--I can see stairs in front of him. Lights come on in a second floor window. Gracey leans forward to me. "Lenny, I don't feel so good. I think I'm gonna be sick!"

I don't want her to be sick in my rental car. I jump out, run around the car and help her out. We're in front of a park. I support Gracey across the sidewalk to the grass. She explodes just as we reach the grass with a geyser of orange juice and vodka. The retching starts and I help her to her knees and a second batch erupts. I lean over, put my arms around her stomach and squeeze. I've been in her condition often enough to know what to do.

Gracey expels a bit more fluid and the dry heaves takeover. I let go of her to work through them. I turn to check across the street. No sign of Gary. The light is still on upstairs. Gracey stands up, puts an arm around my neck and lays her head against my shoulder. The smell of puke makes the most beautiful of women unattractive. I help her back to the car. I can't leave her here like this. She slides across the seat and opens the window for fresh air. I close the door and walk back around to my side and get in. Door closed, I turn around so I can see Gracey behind me. "Gracey. Gracey, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, Lenny." She leans up against the front seat.

"Gracey, what's going on here? Tell me what's going on?"

Gracey slumps back. She is silent. I wait. With a groan, she leans up against the front seat again. "Lenny, you are a nice guy. Thanks for helping me."

"You're welcome, Gracey. Now tell me what is going on."

"Gary thinks you've got a lot of money. He's going to rob you. He wants your money and your car too. He's a bad guy, Lenny. He'll hurt you bad! If he comes out of the apartment with another guy, you hit it and get out of here!"

"What about you, Gracey? You're in the car."

"You can let me out up the street. I can get home. I'll tell him you didn't like the look of another guy showing up, so you took off. He'll buy that. I don't want you to get hurt! You're too nice."

"Okay, Gracey. So what if he comes out by himself?"

"He'll try it at our place. He'll have you pull up out in the alley where nobody can see. He'll do it there."

"What kind of weapon does he have?" I am sober and alert now. The adrenaline is flowing.

"A knife. He's got a big knife. His gun is in the apartment. If he can get you to come up, he'll use the gun."

"Is this what he planned? To get me interested in you, get me to come to your apartment for sex and then rob me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. He makes me do it!"

"Well, you're very good at it, Gracey. You've done this before!"

"Yes." Silence, then small sobs.

Trickster's Way Vol 2

"What does he do to the men, Gracey?"

"I don't know. He takes them away at gunpoint. When he comes back, they aren't with him. Their cars are gone and he has money. His brother helps him sometimes."

"That's his brother he is talking to in there, not his sister?"

I hear shouting across the street. Gary is face to face with a shirtless guy in boxer shorts. He isn't going anywhere.

Gracey says, "Lenny, if they come over here together, you go fast!"

"You've got it Gracey." The car has been running all this time. I put my foot above the gas pedal and my right hand grips the shifter at my side. I check to make sure the parking brake is not set. It isn't. I'm ready.

Gary yells, "Fuck you!"

His brother turns back to the door, grasps the handle, turns around and yells, "Fuck you too! Get out of here!"

Gracey says, "He's not coming! Listen! When we pull up behind our apartment, I'm going to pretend to be totally out of it. He'll ask you to help get me upstairs. You say yes. He'll pull me out of the car, then you go. Go fast and don't look back!"

Gary is walking toward the car with a big grin. Gracey says, "Hurry, listen to me! You've got to look like you are going to come upstairs or he'll get the knife out in the car!" I look back. Gracey is slumped low against the door.

Gary looks in her open window. "Wow! Gracey's out!"

I don't want to open my window or my door. I yell at him, "Come on guy, go around and get in with her. I don't want her to vomit in my car. Let's go. Help her!"

Gary walks around the front of the car, peering at me. I watch him closely. If I see anything in his hand, I'm gone. I don't care if he is in front of the car! His hands are empty as he climbs in back with Gracey. "Man! She's blitzed!"

"Give me directions, Gary."

"Yeah man. Drive to the end of this block, turn right and go three blocks. There's a stop sign at the corner. Go straight through and turn right into the alley. I'll show you where to park."

I shift the car into gear and pull off, not too fast, just smooth and under control.

Trickster's Way Vol 2

I am running through "what ifs." Whatever comes down, I'll just deal with it."

Gary says, "Lenny. I'm sorry about that scene back there. That was my sister's boy friend. He's a real prick! He was giving me shit about not babysitting."

I keep my eye on him in the mirror. Gracey groans and leans over against Gary. Good! She has made it harder for him to do anything in the car. Smart girl."

Gary calls out, "Okay, through this intersection and right at the alley. Go slow--there's a big dip. We have to go in this way because we lost our front door keys. I'll have to take her up the back stairs. Can you give me a hand? They're real steep. Yeah, right ahead! Just pull over in front of the garage doors. Nobody ever opens them, so you can park there. Can you help me, man?"

Just as Gracey said. "Yeah, Gary. I'll come around and help you." I roll to a stop in front of the garage doors, and then Gary does something unexpected. He reaches across Gracey and opens the door on my side. "Lenny, get out and pull her out. I'll push."

What now? He wants me out of the car. I open my doors slowly, turn as if I'm going to get out. I'm stalling for something to happen, something that gives me an edge. This is going to be hairy. I can hear Gracey moan, and yell, "Baby, I'm going to vomit!"

She lurches out of the car, falling to her knees on the gravel about five feet from the car. Gary jumps out to pick her up. That is all I need. I have not taken the car out of gear. I transfer my foot from the brake to the accelerator and gun it without bothering with the open doors. I hear gravel flying. I fishtail slightly. I let up on the gas slightly and straighten out. The doors fly shut and I'm going fast! I look into my rear view mirror. Gary is standing in the middle of the alley, one hand in the air with the middle finger up. I can't hear what he's yelling, but I'm sure it's not nice. I hope Gracey will be okay, but I'm not going back to see. As she said, she's a big girl.

I head directly for the Great American, wondering if I mentioned to Gary where I'm staying. I'm pretty sure I didn't. I'll park on the other side of the motel and walk back to my room through the passageway where they have the ice and soda machines. I check my speedometer to make sure I'm under the speed limit. I've been drinking and I don't need a ticket. This strikes me as funny--I'm laughing, harder and harder, as if I've just heard a great joke.