

## Chapter 7

*How an old woman took care of Frank, and how he found his love*

Frank folded down into the passenger seat of the old woman's time-yellowed pick-up and braced himself as they jostled over the one-lane dirt road back to the interstate. They went west, and pulled in to a dangerously pocked parking lot serving a chain motel in the throes of remodeling. The motel's bright new half shone even from beneath layers of plastic sheeting. Frank was brought to a sorely abused door in the sad old half, and given a toothbrush, a fine plastic hair-comb, and a slick paper shopping bag that held a change of clothes. Inside the room was a shrink-wrapped pallet of plastic water bottles and a tall white bag, folded over and stapled, that steamed with the smell of pulled pork and vinegar. The old woman peered briefly within, took note of these arrangements, and nodded in satisfaction.

Her face lit up with a practiced air of hospitality, and she pointed this at Frank, saying, "Back tomorrow!" She left him standing dumbstruck in the open doorway, her old pick-up zipping east ahead of the low black clouds. The rain came then like a sudden paddle to the rear, and Frank closed the door, wincing.

He ate, and watched the news, and learned that the northwest suffered forest fires, the southwest had been buried under seven feet of snow, a regional bank had collapsed due to executive greed, and an angry man had attacked a children's day care with a hatchet and slaughtered several four-year-olds before incurring two-hundred-forty-six gunshot wounds, all from police-issued 9-millimeter handguns.

On the same day and in the full light of these events, the United States Senate had opened an investigation into whether the President was trafficking in stolen infants, and what relation those activities might bear to the basements of pizza parlors.

Ordinarily, these revelations would have induced Frank's insomnia. However, having just survived a plane crash and some wildly unpleasant weather before being bound, starved, and beaten; then witnessing a deeply moving Act-of-Faith, sleep found him quickly. Frank was still shaking off the cobwebs the next morning when the old woman returned, with her hospitality face set firmly in place. She used her smile like the nose of a sheep-dog, herding Frank back into the passenger seat of her little pick-up.

Skirting the city of Houston, which was still draining, they made their way through power company trucks and tree removal crews, zig-zagging around territories newly claimed by half-ovals of little orange cones. They headed uphill to a neighborhood much like the one in Indiana that berthed Frank's former mansion. The old woman turned in to a long, tree-lined driveway that led behind a sprawling palace, so much larger than Frank's old home that he could not see the whole of the structure from any angle. The well-kept frontage boasted a miniature animatronic oil derrick, and a massive construction of plywood and two-by-four bracing, lovingly carved in the shape of a great longhorn steer-head, painted orange.

The old woman drove her truck up to a humble carriage house and bade Frank exit, stepping out herself to unlock the door. Frank stood aside and watched as she secreted the vehicle within. She led him to a small door beside a much larger and more modern garage. They snuck through the smell of lubricants and motor oil up a narrow back stair to a butler's pantry, where a small table and chairs crowded the room.

She continued on, bidding Frank to follow, but he was suddenly struck on the head from behind with great force, and he lost consciousness.