

## David Plumb

# “The Zuni Motel”

### CHAPTER ONE

THE night clerk at the Zuni Motel died thirty-four hours after Benjamin Bean moved into the last cabin out back, three doors down from Jack Fry. It appeared to the coroner, a squat man in a seersucker suit and no hair at all, as he walked around the parking lot in spinning red lights, that the night clerk, who worked the desk for twenty-three years, had lodged a large piece of pizza in his throat and flooded the edges with bourbon while watching TV, somewhere around 3:30 a.m. Benjamin got the job and the apartment behind the office.

Nights were just fine. A perfect place to start over, get sane, stop running... stop chasing. If he didn't, he'd never make forty. Benjamin stood behind the desk sleepy-eyed. Took his time. Made his own decisions. Paid by the hour.

A woman going to St. Louis to see her only daughter dying of lung cancer checked in at 2:13 a.m. Cash. A real estate agent running back from Vegas. Broke. Afraid to call home. At 3:42 a.m. a big blond kid from Wappingers Falls, New York left his girlfriend out in the car. First time away from home. Under age? Sign here. “It looks clean.” Benjamin stuck his PK Walthers pistol in a junkie's face at 4:01 and backed him right into his red Camaro. No words were spoken.

Benjamin Bean put the gun on the desk as the tail lights faded behind him. Stains on the gray rug. Matches and an ashtray with the initials MJB in the center on the desk by the mapless rack. A soft drink cooler to the right of the door, EMPTY; the light for orange soda, shorted, blinking slightly slower than the black and white TV on the counter that ran all night with no sound. Benjamin went outside for some air.

The motel lay back in darkness, a shadow tossed from the speed of life. Worn and unpainted tan, once a stopover for families discovering America, it had been bypassed, too far up and too far down on a road nobody traveled unless they weren't in a hurry. Wasn't everybody in a hurry? The highway swooped out of the Sandia Mountains, forked left past scruffy one-story adobe houses and duplexes set north and south. Brand new flat-faced condos had begun to swipe the afternoon sun. An Air Force Base, stark as Sunday, stretched South about a mile back from the road. Cotton dresses, jockey shorts, work blues and dark socks hung from noncom clotheslines. Unknown pilots streaked the endless sky with needle-perfect radar day and night. Close to the Fairgrounds? Balloon Races? Ah yes. Well, Route 40 is faster, much faster. Zuni Motel? Not in the New Directory. Good Tex Mex down the block. Boola Pizza? Johnny Video? TV Repair? You bet! “Come back now.” Benjamin Bean stared at the cold, cold stars.

Zuni Motel for sale. Jobs up in the air. Weekly tenants in limbo. Jack Fry sold hot dogs like he was going to be there forever. J.D., the day man, stuck his face in his newspaper. The maid dusted and swept. She changed the thin sheets. Billy Sweeney kept building his motodrome. Sweeney hammered. Sweeney banged. His SKIL Saw tore slices out of hours.

Benjamin looked down the highway to his left. Empty. The eastern sky began to pale. Jack Fry's hot dog stand, a white fifteen-foot 1955 Kenskill trailer with a faded red stripe across the side took shape by the roadside just to the right of the office. Two wooden blocks jammed under the back end for balance. A spare tire, belonging to no vehicle, lay off to the side by the motel mailbox. A car went by without lights.

Benjamin heard two large dogs barking back in the housing on the other side of the road. They seemed to have found a common victim. They chased it briefly. Barks skewed off in separate echoes and stopped. Benjamin harbored an eerie feeling. Somewhere out there, the dogs stood in the dark, eyes blinking, teeth shining. Silent. Waiting. Trouble! No getting away from trouble. God knows, he'd tried.

Trouble! Always in trouble. Even in Dallas. How in hell could he go to jail for having a good time? Ended up in a cell with four maniacs, yellow-chipped paint on the walls, and one toilet. Cold metal bunks murdered sleep; a half-blanket kept him crazy. The noise never stopped. Somebody in another cell, somewhere, Benjamin never knew where, whistled day and night, off key, no discernable tune, just whistled. Got bored and plugged the toilet. Flooded the cell. Got Solitary. Naked in the dark. One hole in the floor. Another inmate alone in the next cell. Benjamin could see him through an itty bitty crack, writing on the walls in his own s. and singing EBB TIDE, all verses. Next thing he knew, he was out in the streets in Dallas with no idea how long he'd been in and no idea where he was going with no money and no job. Benjamin Bean no more than had his pants zipped up and his shoes retied, when he began trying to figure out how to get a gun and what he might be willing to do to get it and what he might do with it when he did get it, stepping out under the empty streetlights of Dallas, where everything went right on by like it didn't care.

"America has eaten all the ice cream," Benjamin said, just as loud as he could without screaming.

--from the novel, *The Zuni Motel*