

J.D. Lavelle

# Crossroads

What will you do when the dead have risen?

author of LOCKED UP



*Crossroads*

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Find out more about the author and his writing at [www.jdlavelle.com](http://www.jdlavelle.com).

# Chapter 1

“Get out of the car.”

Donnie didn't look at the man who spoke. He just reached for the door handle, and was glad to get out of the car. The man gave him the creeps.

“If this is what it's going to be like on the outs,” he thought, “then I'm in trouble.”

The car ride from the correctional facility had been mercifully brief, but it was still long enough to set Donnie's teeth on edge. They'd barely pulled out of the parking lot when his new guardian looked at him and asked, “You're afraid of being out here aren't you?”

“What?” Donnie said, slightly incredulous. This wasn't exactly encouraging talk. And Donnie was a little nervous about being free for the first time in almost a year. Well, more than nervous, but he wasn't about to admit it to a total and complete stranger.

“I'd be afraid too,” the man continued. “You heard about what's happening. The sickness. The plague. Whatever it is.”

“Yeah. I guess,” Donnie admitted. “I think I heard something about it when I was locked up. Not much though. I didn't get to watch the news. But the officers talked to us. Well...some of them talked to us.”

In truth, Donnie knew very little of what was going on in the outside world. Being locked up made him forget there was a world outside the fences and razor wire. The man looked back at the road and shook his head. After a moment, he muttered, “Probably safer inside a prison.” Then continued louder, “Well, you're free now. Free to die like the rest of us.”

The man hadn't said another word until they pulled into the driveway of the group home and told him to get out.

“Okay,” Donnie said, pulling himself out of the car and into a light rain. The gray skies were just starting to drip water. “I just want to eat something,” he thought. “Real food. No more institutional oatmeal in the

morning – too runny or too lumpy. With someone’s spit in it for flavor. Nasty salad greens for dinner with the edges of the lettuce all brown. Mystery pudding...” He shuddered as he surveyed his surroundings. At least it was a nice-looking neighborhood. The lawns were well groomed and green. The houses were close to each other, but still retained their individual dignity. He looked up at the red brick house before him. There was a long walk up to a cement porch.

“Home, sweet, home,” Donnie said, as he threw his backpack over his shoulder and walked to the front door. Just as he was about to reach for the door handle, the door opened. Inside the doorway stood an unkempt teenage boy.

Donnie didn’t say anything, he just stood staring, wondering why the boy didn’t get out of the way so he could step inside out of the rain. Donnie started to count, slowly, hoping that this was not a sign of things to come in his new home.

“You the one from that boy’s school?” he asked, still letting Donnie stand outside in the open.

Donnie smiled, sardonically. “Boy’s School?” he thought. “Try prison.” Then aloud, he replied, “Yeah, I guess.”

“Are you sick?” the teen demanded.

“Uh...no,” Donnie said.

“Why is everyone worried about getting sick?” he wondered. “Just how bad was it? Was there some big flu virus going around?”

“I just want some food,” he mumbled. “Real food.”

Most of his peers on the inside fantasized about their first meal on the outs. Each offender knew his release date weeks in advance and planned down to the last detail what and where his first meal would be.

“I’m going to the Chinese buffet on the highway that leads out of town,” one young man dreamed aloud. “All I can eat. And you know what my fortune cookie is gonna say? ‘I’m free, losers!’ ”

“The gas station,” another said. “The closest gas station I can find. I

need a forty-four ounce soda and a pack of smokes.”

Donnie hadn't had any time to consider what or where he would eat. His release had been so sudden that he was still trying to digest the fact that he was really free. It had been so long that he'd been outside the razor wire fences that he was in shock. In double shock because of the talk of sickness and death in the outside world.

“Good. You better not be sick. Bringing in your germs. You wouldn't be coming in here if you was sick,” the other boy growled, still not moving. “And another thing. Don't go thinking you're so tough and smart. I don't care if you did just get out of boy's school. Don't come walking in here thinking you're all that. I run this house. And it don't matter who they put in here to be in charge.” He hooked his head over at the car that still sat running in the driveway, eyes never leaving Donnie's.

“People come and go, but I'm still here and this is my house and you listen to what I gotta say. This is Bobby's house. You understand?”

Donnie looked up at him, eyes hardening. He said nothing for a moment. He'd learned patience. Being inside had taught him that. The other boy stood waiting and watching.

“Yeah, sure,” Donnie said. “You mind if I step inside?”

The boy just shook his head, confident that he'd just asserted his dominance over Donnie. For his part, Donnie didn't want trouble and he certainly didn't want to be sent back to prison for punching this obnoxious little jerk. He'd spent too long trying to get out of prison just to get locked up again. He wasn't about to screw up this placement – his only real option - within the first two minutes of his arrival. Too bad this idiot standing before him had other ideas.

Thunder sounded. The rain started to come down a little harder. He squinted up at the sky, frowning, and felt the chill of fear. Donnie thought, “Something's going on. I was inside long enough to know to trust my gut. Something's not...”

“Hey,” a voice interrupted. Donnie turned to look at the man who'd

driven him to the group home. He now stood in the rain. Donnie looked at him, shuddering as another chill crept up his spine. Why was the guy just standing there with the car door open, the engine running, and the rain pelting him?

“What?” came the sarcastic reply from the doorframe.

“Behind you,” the counselor called, pointing.

Thunder sounded again in the distance.

“...right,” Donnie finished aloud. He turned sharply, looking at the door, squinting through the rain. A figure stood, visibly swaying, behind Bobby.

“Hey!” he yelled, moving out into the rain. “Get away from me! What do you mean, sneaking up on me like that? You can’t go walking up on people like that, especially when you’re...”

Donnie stepped backwards, reflexively, eyes widening at the sight before him. It was a teenage girl, not much younger than Donnie. Her eyes were filled with pain and there was a mixture of dark blood and vomit staining her front. Her breath came in gasping heaves. She took one lurching step forward, then two.

“She’s got it!” Bobby yelled. “She’s got it. I know she’s got it. Look at her.”

He kept moving backwards, oblivious to the rain, eyes focused on the threat. Donnie followed suit, moving away from the sick girl.

“This isn’t right,” Donnie thought. “None of this is right. This can’t be happening. I gotta be dreaming. This can’t be real.”

“I knew it was going to be hard,” Donnie told himself. “I knew I was going to be scared on the outs at first. But not like this.”

This wasn’t just the fear of being free of the safety of prison. This was something altogether different. Something more. Something worse. Donnie knew in his gut that something was really wrong. He could feel it.

“What’s happening?” he whispered.

The sick girl suddenly went limp, sagging to the ground. Donnie

watched in horrified fascination as she sprawled face down on the concrete. Her body convulsed as blood poured from her mouth, forming a puddle on the sidewalk along with the rain.

“No,” Donnie whispered. “She can’t die. Not right here in front of me.”

“I ain’t helping her,” Bobby said. “You people hear me? I ain’t doing nothing for her. She went and got herself sick. I’m not gonna get sick by touching her.”

“No,” Donnie repeated, stepping back and away. “Look at her,” he said, panting – not from exertion. He felt his pulse racing. “She’s not breathing!” he hissed. And it was true. Her breath no longer came in ragged, heaving gasps. She lay on the sidewalk perfectly still.

Donnie turned and ran. He ran back to the car where the man stood. He didn’t move. He just looked at Donnie, a strange look on his face, and said, “You’re afraid now. Aren’t you?”

Without thinking, Donnie lunged at the man and shoved him. He went sprawling onto the wet grass

“Shut up,” Donnie spat. He fought for control. Donnie stood, fists clenching and unclenching, as he tried to slow his breathing.

“I’m not afraid,” he lied, even though Donnie felt like the world had suddenly turned inside out. Even though he felt like he was going crazy. Donnie managed to take in two long, slow breaths, but his heart wouldn’t stop racing. Donnie shook his head.

“I’m not afraid,” he said again.

Bobby screamed. It was the sound of terror. Donnie knew it, and the sound sent a wave of fear washing over him. He turned to look at Bobby who stood, pointing.

What Donnie saw filled him with horror. The young girl had raised her head, but the neck was twisted at an unnatural angle. Blood poured from her mouth as her jaw churned up and down.

“Run,” he croaked. “I gotta get out of here.”

Donnie climbed into the car. Fumbling with his backpack, he managed to get the car in reverse and punched the gas pedal to the floor. The tires spun on the wet pavement, found some traction, and squealed out of the driveway and onto the rain-soaked street.

He slammed on the brakes, as he pulled on the steering wheel, heedless of other drivers. Donnie stomped on the accelerator and roared down the quiet streets of the small town. He didn't think. He simply drove.

"Gotta run," Donnie thought, then aloud, "get out of here as fast as I can. Someplace. Anyplace." But he had no place to go and he knew it. Donnie was a free man – with no home, no family, no money, and a record. He pounded the steering wheel with his fist.

He wondered briefly if he weren't going insane. One moment he felt fear, the next he felt anger surging within him. It was the same anger he'd felt when he was arrested and sent to prison. The same fear that had grown when the other offenders inside the prison threatened him.

Donnie's hands tightened on the wheel and he ignored that little voice in his head - the one that was repeating the steps to calm his anger. The one that was telling him to slow down and take deep breaths.

"What's happening to me?" he said through gritted teeth. The streets blurred past as he sometimes obeyed and sometimes ignored the street signs and traffic signals. He was panting with fear and anger, oblivious to his surroundings. He had no idea where he was going. The small town was not his. He'd been locked up in the facility on the far northwest edge of the town then transferred to the group home nearby. It didn't matter. He just needed to escape.

A man!

"Oh God..." Donnie yelled, jerking the wheel to the right in a vain effort to avoid the person that suddenly appeared in the road – standing stock-still. For a brief moment time seemed to slow. He saw a man with his hand held up as if to say "stop" and his lips were moving, but Donnie couldn't hear or understand the words. Then time returned to normal and



he forgot about the man in the road as the car went careening out of control. The roads were wet and the car tires didn't have enough grip on the road. Suddenly the front left tire found traction, and spun the car around and Donnie, freshly released from prison, had a split second to see the oak tree looming in front of him before his world went dark.