

Ligonier Valley Writers Second Prize 2025

The Doer By Don Ellenberger

“It’s me, Grams, I need your help.”

“Noah, are you OK?”

“I’m fine. I got pulled over for running a stop sign on my way back to school. I was plugging in my phone charger, and I guess I wasn’t paying attention. The sheriff says I need to pay the fine right away or he’s taking me to jail.”

“Jail! You’re going to jail?”

“Not if I pay the \$100 fine. I hate to do this, but can you give your credit card number to the sheriff? I don’t have my card on me and can’t get hold of Mom. I promise I’ll pay you back.”

“Then he’ll let you go?”

“That’s right. I’m really sorry about this.”

“Don’t you worry, Noah. I have my purse right here.”

Dimitri switched off the AI voice synthesizer.

“Ma’am, this is Sheriff Thornton.” Dimitri had repeated his spiel so many times, his accent was unrecognizable. “Can I please have the card number, expiration date, and security code?”

After getting the data and assuring Grams that Noah would soon be on his way back to college, Dimitri bought \$900 in Bitcoin. Any more could prompt a hold by the card company. Crypto was as good as cash, and blockchain made it untraceable. Then he pushed the data out to the dark web and sold it to a card cloner.

Dimitri’s business was boring but profitable. He scraped social media sites, looking for video clips with crisp audio that met his criteria: late teens or early twenties, family not poor but not so wealthy they might be alert to his con, names of parents or grandparents.

His generative AI algorithm replicated the kid’s tone, rhythm, and vocal patterns, all integrated into a voice synthesizer. It mimicked a voice so precisely not even the mother could tell it wasn’t her child about to spend the night in a crowded cell, where who knew what might happen to them?

Dimitri used an online caller-ID spoofing service, so the kid’s phone number popped up when he phoned. Still, lots of people weren’t fooled. Dimitri was amused by the creativity of curses hurled at him. But he fooled enough people to support a very comfortable lifestyle.

He didn’t feel guilty about what he did. He didn’t feel proud. He didn’t feel anything at all.

Dimitri dialed his next mark and queued the voice synthesizer. Kevin Cochran, late teens, minor rap sheet, dad a prosperous farmer with a taxidermy side hustle. A man’s voice answered. Not old. Probably the father.

“Dad? It’s me. Don’t freak out, but I got pulled over for running a stop sign. The sheriff says if I don’t pay now, I’ll have to spend the night in jail.”

Silence.

Sometimes Dimitri called and the kid was right there in the house. One time the boy had been murdered during a school rampage the day before. Dimitri still chuckled when he thought about that gaffe.

Finally, the father spoke. His voice dripped acid. "Can that asshole cop hear me?"

"No, he's in his patrol car checking my registration." Dimitri was good at improvising.

"Did you drop off the money?"

Dimitri hesitated. This was getting interesting. "Uhhh, not yet."

"If you wanna take over the business someday, you can't keep screwing up! I'll handle the cop. Get your ass to the drop-off, grab the dope, and get back here. Understand?"

"Sure, sure. Just get this cop out of my face." Then Dimitri had a thought. "Same drop spot?"

"You're kidding, right? Intersection of 130 and Four Mile Road. 100 yards into the woods to the west, beneath the burned oak."

"Sorry, just making sure," Dimitri apologized.

"Give your phone to the cop, and no more screw-ups."

Dimitri switched off the AI program, got the credit card info, and hung up. But instead of buying crypto, he eased back in his chair. He had never stumbled across a drug deal before. The kid was going to drop off cash and pick up fentanyl or heroin or crack in a wooded area not far from Dimitri's McMansion. This could be a much bigger score than \$900. Dimitri jumped up, grabbed his car keys, and hustled outside to his black Escalade, thinking that America really was the land of opportunity.

Twenty minutes later Dimitri was cruising slowly past the drop-off spot as the sun brushed the tree line. Dusk roused crickets and fireflies.

Dimitri turned around and drove past again. And again. Until he was certain nothing but insects stirred in this desolate stretch of woodland. He pulled over, shouldered open the door, and eased into knee-high switchgrass. He stared up and down the road. He listened for snapping twigs or boots crunching dry leaves. Nothing. He slipped into the woods.

Sidestepping rotten logs and poison ivy, Dimitri reached the lightning-streaked trunk of a twisted oak. He dropped to his knees, removed the ruby rings from his fingers, and scraped away dirt, yanking free a large metal box.

"Didn't even lock it," Dimitri murmured to himself. His eyes widened as he pried open the lid, picturing the drugs he could sell or cash he could pocket.

Sitting on his porch two miles away, a bearded man coughed up spittle tinged with bits of tobacco. In the distance his son Kevin crisscrossed the cornfield on the John Deere. When his phone had buzzed with Kevin's cell number, the man had no idea if the scammer was local or from Kolkata. But he set the trap as he always did, recited fake credit card info, and waited to see if this would finally be the day someone snatched his bait.

The answer exploded in the distance, shredding the evening calm.

The man's lips curled into a tight smile.

Everybody complained about robocallers and phone scammers. But the bearded man wasn't much of a talker.

He was more of a doer.

Bio: My wife and I live in Mars, PA, and have a country home in the Ligonier Valley. I work in finance. I'm not a professional writer but I like to think of myself as kind of a professional reader. I love a good story, and I hope you enjoy this one. Special thanks to LVW for their time and efforts to provide a forum for wannabe writers like me.