

**M.E.T.A.**

**FORCE**

**ORIGINS**



**BOBBIE SUE  
JACKSON**

BLOODSTONE PRESS

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Bobbi Sue Jackson

Free Preview

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Covered in grime and sweat, Bobbi Sue was bent over the engine of her '65 Shelby GT350 Mustang, hard at work in the August heat. A small radio, plugged into an extension cord running from the tool shed, played a constant stream of southern rock and country music interspersed with advertisements for beer, Uncle Bud's Catfish Diner, and the Big Show. Bobbi had the volume up to ten. She wasn't worried about bothering anyone since the nearest neighbors were over two hundred yards away.

Frustrated with a rusted bolt, Bobbi dropped the wrench and took a break, leaning against the Mustang's white and blue side panel as she drank some sweet tea and reflected on her progress. She had found the classic muscle car in Old Man Johnson's barn just a few weeks ago. The frame and body were in good condition, but the engine was seized up, so as soon as she towed it home with her father's truck, she started looking for a replacement. It seemed like a gift from God when she found a hulking 428 Cobra Jet in the Carter County Scrap Yard. It needed some work, but with the help of the internet, she found all the parts she needed to restore it and add dual 4-barrel carburetors and a Paxton supercharger for enhanced horsepower. The Cobra Jet had to be retrofitted into the GT and was currently strewn in pieces on the ground. It looked like an impossible task to put it all together.

She took another drink of tea and went back to work.

"Hey Bobbi!" J.J., her ten-year-old brother, had crept up behind her.

"Hey J.J.," she said over the noise of the radio.

"Why don't you have a boyfriend?" he teased. Whenever he was bored he knew he could count on tormenting his big sister for fun. And that question always got under her skin.

She didn't look up from her work. "Watch it little man, or I'll burn all your comic books!"

J.J. gasped and ran for the house. "Momma!" he cried. "Sissy's gonna burn my comic books!"

Bobbi chuckled. That boy sure loved his superheroes, and that gave her some ideas for his birthday, which was coming up soon... and Christmas was only a few months after that... Time to start thinking of gifts for everyone. She smiled. Now that she had a steady job, she could afford some nice things for her family who she dearly loved.

\*

Melvin and Jake loved to ride. There was nothing better than cruising the lazy back roads of Carter County on a summer afternoon. As members of the Dark Ones Motorcycle Club, they were required to ride at least twenty hours every week. Jake

and Mel had no problem with that and often logged extra hours. Biking was in their blood. They loved the freedom, the exhilaration, and the lifestyle, but what they loved most about the outlaw biker lifestyle was the power.

"With that kind of power, a man can have whatever he wants," their new leader, Damon, liked to say. And when Jake and Mel rounded a curve on Mountain View Road a few miles outside of Oak Grove, they both spotted something they wanted.

On their left was the Jackson residence with its large front yard, overgrown and littered with old cars. Near the house was a young blonde girl working on a classic muscle car. She was wearing a red ball cap backwards, a white tank top, and blue denim "Daisy Duke" shorts. Her eyes were hidden behind black sunglasses and her brown skin glistened in the sun.

Jake and Mel made U-turns in the road, coming back for a second look. Then they turned up the long, curved driveway, eyeing the young girl like wolves.

Bobbi heard the rumbling bikers rolling up. She stopped her work and cut the radio off as they approached. Dirty, hairy, tattooed thugs wearing black leather vests covered with evil symbols—she recognized them immediately. Everyone in four counties knew of the Dark Ones. They had been around since the '70s but lately their numbers had been growing. The younger members were much more violent than the older generation and they loved to stir up trouble. It seemed that every day there were more and more of them on the streets, in the bars, and in the news.

"Hi there, angel!" the one on the right said as they came within speaking distance. Their thundering bikes rolled to a stop and they killed the engines.

"Hey, y'all," she said, not too warmly.

"We just thought we'd stop 'n' talk for a spell, sweetie." The one on the left leered at her with a toothy, devilish grin. "This here is Mel," he gestured at the other fat, oafish guy then added, "and I'm Jake! What's yur name, cutie?"

"Oh, that's mighty kind of y'all to stop 'n' talk 'n' all, but I'm sorta busy right now." She gestured at the Mustang. "Y'all might wanna find some otha' gal to talk to." She smiled politely.

"Are you workin' on that car?" Mel asked, slack-jawed.

"Yep."

"Well, whatca' doin' later, honey pie?" Jake pressed. "Maybe we can go out tonight?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can't. I'm goin' to church tonight." Bobbi smiled politely again.

"Church! Whoa. Ha ha!" They both laughed as if she had told a hilarious joke. They laughed so hard and long that an uncomfortable chill washed over her and she took a step back.

Wiping tears from his eyes, Jake asked, "Well, how about tomorrow night?"

"No, I'm busy."

"Hey, you fellas!" James Jackson had heard the thundering Harleys rolling up his driveway and watched Jake and Mel through the window until they started talking to his daughter. As soon as he saw that, he grabbed his 12 gauge from the bedroom and loaded it with buckshot. Now he was standing in the front door, putting the weapon to his shoulder. "Y'all git outa' here!"

"Whoa!" Jake raised his hands. "Don't shoot, man! Don't shoot! We was just talkin'! We'll leave, sir. We're goin'! We're goin'!"

Jake and Mel kick-started their bikes and scurried down the driveway like frightened dogs, casting terrified looks over their shoulders as they escaped.

"Are you ok, hon?" James asked his daughter as the bikers disappeared into the distance.

"Finer than frog hair, Daddy."

"You should be careful, Bobbi. Those guys are dangerous. You should'a come in the house when you seen 'em comin' up the driveway like that."

"Aw, Pa. You don't have to worry. I can take care of myself."

He smiled warmly at her courage. She was so brave, but James always prayed that she would never have to prove it. She was growing up fast and she would have to look out for herself soon. This was a dangerous world and he couldn't follow her around everywhere with a shotgun. But he could pray. And so he prayed every night that the good Lord would keep his little girl safe.

"Well, I just worry about you," he hugged her. "You're my little girl."

"I know, Pa," she smiled.

Gesturing at the Mustang, he remarked, "If you get that thing runnin', it'll be a miracle."

"Oh it won't be a miracle." She turned back to work on the engine. "I'm sure I can get it runnin'."

"You have a natural skill with cars, hon," he observed. "I'm sorry we couldn't send you to school this year. Maybe next year things will be better."

"Thanks, Pa. But you don't have to worry. I got that job at Skeeter's now. I can pay for it."

"Oh, Bobbi, I—"

"Come on, you two!" Mrs. Jackson called from the house. "It's time to get ready for church!"

Bobbi stood up from her work and leaned against the Mustang. "Aw-ite!" She yelled back to her mother, wiping her hands on a dirty rag.

"Bobbi Sue! Put some shoes on, child! I'll never understand why you want to run around barefoot!" her mother chided.

"Aw, Momma!"

"Don't 'aw, Momma' me!"

"Yes ma'am." Bobbi headed for the house. "Are we goin' to Nanna's for supper tonight?"

"Yes," her mother answered. "She's makin' barbeque, okra, an' cornbread."

"Aw-ite! That opossum's on the stump!" Bobbi cheered as she broke into a sprint for the house. Nanna's barbeque was the best in the world.

As Bobbi neared the porch, her mother pointed at a large crescent wrench lying precariously on the top step. "Pick that up before someone trips and breaks their fool neck!"

"Yes ma'am." Bobbi grabbed the wrench and put it near the front door of the house against the wall where no one would trip. The next time she went to the shed she would take it with her... as long as J.J. didn't run off with it first.

\*

That evening the Jackson family sat in church and enjoyed a sermon on the virtue of forgiveness and the perils of revenge. Pastor Joseph always gave inspiring and passionate sermons and this one was no different. He cited Proverbs 20:22 and Romans 12:19 as he said, "Do not take revenge, my friends. Leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

After the service, as the congregation was gathered outside laughing and talking, Pastor Joseph gently called Bobbi to the side. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Pastor, what is it?"

"We're looking for someone to help with the children's Bible study on Sunday morning. We would love to have your help." His eyes shone with earnestness. "You have always done so well with the Word. It would be wonderful if you could share your knowledge with the children."

Bobbi was flattered. "I'd love to, Pastor!" she beamed. "I'd be happy to help!"

"Great! We'll need you to be here about 8:30 on Sunday to prepare."

"Ok. I'll see you then." She flashed a broad smile.

\*

It was a busy Thursday night at Skeeter's and as Bobbi hurried between her section of tables and the kitchen, she stopped in the back to drop off an armload of dirty dishes. "This job sucks," she said to Sam, a boy about her same age who worked in the dish room, "but it's the only way I'm gonna pay for school in Nashville."

"Yeah." Sam agreed as he sprayed down a rack of plates before putting them in the dishwasher. "This place is a drag, but it pays the bills."

"Yeah... Hey, um, can I ask you a favor?"

"Sure."

"You think you might could gimme a ride home tonight?" she asked. "The Mustang still ain't runnin'."

"Sure," he said with enthusiasm. "But I don't get off till eleven."

"That's fine. I can wait. I get off at ten, so it's only an hour."

"Ok. Sure, then." He was clearly happy.

"Thanks!" She smiled and went back to work.

After pushing through her shift as best she could, Bobbi clocked out and found a place to sit and wait until Sam got off. While waiting, she watched the ten o'clock local news on the TV that was hanging in the corner. Stories included a sports piece on the Boone Creek High School football team's first preseason game and a weather forecast for the next few days—hot and humid with isolated showers. The feature

piece of the broadcast was an investigative report on the increasing crime rate in Jefferson City and the surrounding area.

"Hey there! Ready?" Sam was standing beside her with his keys in his hand. "They let me go a little early."

"Hey. Yeah, just a sec. I wanna see the rest of this." Bobbi looked back to the TV. According to the reporter, violent crime in Carter County and the surrounding areas was up 75% over the previous year and rates of home invasions were up more than 300%. Robberies were up more than 500% including a recent heist at a road construction site where the thieves got away with a thousand pounds of dynamite.

"That's terrible," Bobbi commented.

"Yeah," Sam agreed.

"Tomorrow night we'll take a closer look at some of the culprits behind these crimes," the reporter teased.

"As if we don't already know." Bobbi's tone was thick with sarcasm.

"Yeah, those Dark Ones," Sam agreed. "How many home invasions were there before they started showing up all over the place?"

"Someone ought'a do somethin' 'bout 'em," she said. "You know, my pa almost kilt two of 'em yesterday!"

"Really?" Sam was wide-eyed.

Bobbi started to tell him the story, but he interrupted her. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah." She resumed the story as she followed him out to his car.

Sam was nice, but he wasn't her type. He was a bookish, nerdy guy. Like her little brother, he loved comic book heroes and science fiction. He wasn't into cars or racing or church or football—all the things she liked, so they listened to the radio and talked about work as they drove the six miles of country roads out to her family's home.

"Just drop me off at the end of the driveway," she said as they neared. "If you pull up near the house, it'll wake up my pa."

"Ok." Sam pulled over. "This good?" He brought the car to a gentle stop at the end of the Jackson's long driveway.

"Great, thanks so much!" She gave him a hug and got out of his beat-up '92 Celica. She cringed at the rough sound of the misfiring four-cylinder engine and the



annoying squeak of the serpentine belt. She closed the door and stuck her head back in the open window. "You should really get that belt fixed; sounds bad to me."

He blushed and smiled, "Yeah, you're right. I'll probably have to replace it."

"Let me know if you need help with that."

"Oh, I'm sure I can manage." He smiled an awkward grin.

"OK. Well, goodnight! Thanks again!" She turned toward the house.

"Bye!" Sam waved and pulled off.

The sound of the Celica's sputtering engine faded into the night and Bobbi walked up the long, curved driveway listening to the chirping crickets and the occasional hooting owl. As she rounded the bend she noticed a light in the house was on, and as she drew closer, she spotted a strange van parked near her father's truck.

When she reached the steps she could see the front door was open and she heard laughter inside. It was a man's laugh, strange yet familiar. *Who would be visiting this late on a Thursday night?* As she drew close, she felt a strange, chilling sensation in her soul.

Bobbi opened the door, stepped inside, and witnessed the most hellish scene she could have ever imagined. Her entire family was lying on the floor. J.J. was crumpled in a pool of blood spilling from his neck, already dead! Pa was beaten and bloody. A young, redheaded biker was standing over him, holding Pa's shotgun to his head. Jake and Mel were near the kitchen watching another Dark One who had Momma pinned on the sofa, his pants around his ankles and his hips thrusting. He was grotesquely obese with shaggy black hair and there was a large red tattoo on his shoulder of Satan laughing.

As soon as Bobbi entered the room, Jake pointed his pistol. "There she is!"

Bobbi immediately stepped back out onto the porch and stood against the wall next to the door. She grabbed the crescent wrench she had left there earlier and raised it like a hammer. Mel took the full force of the wrench to his face as he stepped outside. He staggered and swore as his 9mm barked out a single shot that bit Bobbi in the thigh. She screamed with fear and pain as she grabbed his arm and tried to wrestle the gun from his hand. He resisted until Jake tackled her and they dragged her inside.

Bobbi put up a ferocious fight, slipping free of Jake's grip and clubbing Mel twice more with the wrench, splitting his head open. Seeing an opportunity in the distraction she was causing, her father grabbed for the shotgun pointed at his head. Frankie, the thug holding the gun, pulled the trigger, killing James Jackson instantly.

Bobbi was devastated by the sight of her father's murder. Time slowed and it seemed as though she was watching these horrible events from some place outside herself, as if it were a dream or a movie happening to someone else. The echo of the shotgun blast and the screams of her mother seemed muffled and distant. In the next moment Jake and Mel knocked her to the floor and started kicking her with steel toe boots and hitting her with the wrench, teaching her a painful lesson.

\*

Sheriff Tom Grady happened to be patrolling near Mountain View Road when he got the call from the dispatcher alerting him to a disturbance at the Jackson residence—a neighbor had reported screams and shots fired.

Mel and Jake were still kicking and beating Bobbi when Frankie spotted a blacked out car rolling up the driveway and parking behind their van. "Damn! The Sheriff!"

"What? Shit, that was fast! What are we gonna do?" Mel was terrified.

"I ain't goin' back to jail!" Frankie announced and racked the shotgun.

\*

The first thing Bobbi saw was a bright, hazy light and she thought she might be dead, but she was in too much pain to believe that for long. There was the beeping and humming of medical machines and she guessed she was in a hospital. Beams of sunlight were streaming through the window and glaring off the steel edge of a cart near her bed, reflecting in her eyes. She groaned and turned her head away from the blinding light. Her vision was blurry, but she thought she saw Nanna Brooks sitting by the window studying her Bible.

"Nanna?" she whispered.

"Oh my!" Nanna closed her reading and jumping to her feet. "You're awake!" She bent over her granddaughter, looking into her eyes and touching her arm. "How do you feel?"

Bobbi moaned. "Like I been chewed up and spit out. Where am I?"

"Turkey Creek."

Bobbi knew that was a hospital in Knoxville. "What happened?"

Nanna's eyes bent with sadness. "What do you remember?"

Bobbi blinked. Jumbled visions flashed in her mind. Some were surely dreams or nightmares. Others were more serene and peaceful. She saw bikers in her living room. Her father with a shotgun to his head... "Momma!" she cried out trying to sit up, but stabbing pain kept her from moving.

"What happened? Are they ok?" she asked urgently.

"Oh Bobbi..." was all Nanna could manage.

"What?"

Nanna began to cry. "I'm sorry, child. They are with the Lord now."

"What? Oh no!" A terrifying loneliness gripped Bobbi and she felt agony in her heart that was worse than all of her physical pain. She gasped and choked on a knot in her throat before breaking down into uncontrollable sobs.

Nanna gently hugged her granddaughter and together they wept for a time, mourning their lost family. At length, Nanna wiped her tears and said, "Relax, child." She put a cool hand on Bobbi's forehead. "Rest now. I'll tell the doctors you're awake."

Less than a minute later Nanna returned with an anxious looking young doctor and a pair of nurses who immediately began examining her.

"How long have I been out?" Bobbi asked as soon as she had the chance.

"Six days," the doctor told her. "Today is Wednesday, August 22. You have at least five broken ribs, a punctured lung, a fractured skull, a severe concussion, and several minor head injuries. You've also been shot in the left thigh and the abdomen. Both bullets passed clean through. Your right arm is broken in three places and you've suffered a lot of blunt trauma to your internal organs. You will probably need more surgery to stop the internal bleeding, but you're too weak for surgery right now. We'll monitor your condition for a few days and see."

She moaned, overcome with despair and pain.

\*

The next morning, cousin Jesse and Nanna Brooks were sitting on the edge of her bed talking with Bobbi when two investigators from the Lawrence City Municipal Police Department arrived. "Miss Jackson," the taller one said to Bobbi, "I'm Inspector Jeff Langly. This is my partner, Inspector David Fields. We'd like to ask you a few questions. Do you feel up to talking to us?"

"I think I might could," she mumbled. "Can they stay?" Bobbi indicated Jesse and Nanna.

"Sure." Langly pulled out his notepad. "Let's start with the obvious; did you see who did it?"

Bobbi spent the next ten minutes telling the two investigators everything she could remember about the incident. "I think," she said, struggling with memories clouded by medication, "their names were Joel and Mark..." And when she mentioned the man with the red tattoo of Satan, they nodded their heads and scribbled in their notebooks.

"You know him?" she asked.

"We've heard of him," Langly answered. "He's a particularly bad individual."

Fields closed his notepad. "We'll probably be talking to you again, Miss Jackson. I hope you get to feelin' better. We'll find the scum that did this. I promise."

"Thank you," she whispered.

As the sound of the inspectors' hard-soled shoes faded down the hall, Nanna said, more to herself than anyone else, "Don't really matter. They can't bring them back. J.J. an' James an' my sweet little Marianne an' Sherriff Grady, too, they're all gone. No amount of 'justice' will bring them back. Instead, if we're 'lucky,' there'll be reporters calling all the time an' trips to the courthouse an' lawyers an' plea deals. An' the other ones will try to intimidate us an' keep you from testifyin'. An' then, if they're convicted, there'll be appeals an' parole hearin's for the rest of our lives..."

\*

The next afternoon Bobbi was alone in her room watching *High Plains Drifter*, one of her favorite movies, when Pastor Joseph arrived. She muted the TV but kept an eye on it while she spoke with him.

"I'm glad to see you, Pastor." She smiled weakly.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner, child. How are you doing?"

"How do I look?" she asked. Then, "I'm sorry I missed my first day with the kids."

"Oh, that's alright, Bobbi. We are all just happy that you're alive." He clasped her forearm gently.

"Pastor, I'm glad you came. I've been wantin' to talk to you."

He sensed her seriousness and took her hand as he asked, "About what?"

She paused before saying, "That night, at the house, I think... There was someone else there besides the bikers and my family... a man... he was tall and strong, there was a light around him... he spoke to me..."

"What did he say?"

"I'm not sure..." Her voice trailed off as she wandered in deep thought. "His mouth didn't move, but I heard his voice... it didn't say words, it was like music that I heard with my heart, it felt like he was giving me encouragement and comfort."

"That's very interesting. Perhaps it was an angel."

"Pastor... Can you baptize me?"

"You were baptized as a child. I remember it as if it were yesterday."

"Yeah, but I just feel that I need it. I feel like... I need it... Would you mind?"

"Not at all. As soon as you get out of here, we can do that."

"No, I mean now. Right here, right now. You can do that, can't you?"

"Well, yes, I suppose."

"Please," she begged.

"Ok, child." He grabbed a bowl from her nightstand and took it to the sink, washed it, and filled it with clean water. He blessed it and returned to Bobbi's bedside. He dipped his hand in the water and let three drops fall on her forehead as he said, "Bobbi Sue Jackson, I rebaptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Father Joseph watched in amazement as a faint glow emanated from the water and flowed over her face and then her entire body. In an instant the worst of her wounds were healed. The bruising and swelling around her face faded and her eyes opened, showing with a healthy brilliance.

She sat up and pulled the bandage from her head and the IV from her arm. Somehow she was not nearly as surprised as Joseph. "You looked shocked, Pastor."

"Oh, um, well... I just didn't expect..."

"A miracle?"

"Yes," he smiled sheepishly. "The Lord is powerful indeed!"

"Indeed He is," she agreed.

\*

The next day Father Joseph hurried back to Turkey Creek, eager to hear what the doctors had to say about Bobbi's miraculous recovery, but before he found any of them, he spotted Bobbi in the lounge surfing the internet.

She hoped it would be as easy as finding any other organization online. There would be a website with an address and a phone number, maybe even a picture of the building and a link to directions on MapQuest. She was disappointed when she found the Dark Ones' website was little more than a roster of members who were dead and others who were in various jails and prisons. The "Contact" page was just a blank form that visitors to the site could use to send their own contact information to the gang. There was no address or phone number to contact them at, just an e-mail address. Digging deeper, she searched other sites and found a series of news reports detailing various crimes committed by the members but no pictures or address of a clubhouse or headquarters.

"Guess I'll have to do it the old fashioned way," she whispered to herself.

"Bobbi, what are you doing?" Pastor Joseph had been standing behind her for several seconds.

"Oh! I didn't know you were there! I was just surfing the net." She smiled and closed the web page.

"Bobbi... what you're feeling is revenge. And it's wrong. Leave it to the police in this world and the Lord in the next." His tone was kind but firm.

"Pastor, the doctor said I almost died. I think I did die, and an angel saved me because I have a purpose here. I think there is somethin' I have to do. Somethin' God wants me to do."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know exactly, it's just an urge, a callin'. I feel like nothin' can stop me, like God is directin' me and protectin' me."

"It's a lust for vengeance, Bobbi, that's all it is. Anger and revenge," Joseph counseled. "God will smite those evil men in His own time and in His own way. What He has done for you is kind and loving. And, honestly, I think it has everything to do with your faith in Him. And I'm sure all the people at church that have been praying

for you have helped, too. You shouldn't squander your blessing by sinking into the perils of revenge, Bobbi. The Lord can take blessings away as easily as he can give them."

Bobbi thought for a moment. There were a lot of things she wanted to say, but all of them led to an argument, so she held her tongue. She turned away from him and muttered mechanically, "Yes, sir."

As she turned, her golden hair brushed aside and Joseph noticed a mark on the back of her neck. "Oh," he said. "Is that a tattoo?"

"What?"

"On the back of your neck." He pulled her hair aside so he could clearly see the strange rune.

She didn't feel anything with her hand. "What does it look like?"

"Here," he took a picture with his iPhone and showed it to her. "Looks to me like ancient Hebrew. Are you sure it wasn't there before?"

"No. What is it? What does it mean?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to do some research." He put his phone in his pocket. "What else did the doctors say?" he asked eagerly. "What about your recovery? Have they accepted that it was a miracle?"

"Pretty much," she said. "They can't believe it. They ain't got no explanation. Dr. Hatfield just threw up his hands an' went, 'It must be a miracle!'"

Joseph beamed with satisfaction. "How many tests did he have to run before he determined that?"

"About fifty, I think!" she laughed. "They asked me to stay for more tests. There is some 'expert' from Vanderbilt that wants to see me, but I'm ready to get out of this place." She stood up. "Can you give me a ride home? There is something I need to get."

"Of course."

"Great! Let's go." She headed for the door. "I've already checked out."

"You won't be able to get into your house," Joseph mentioned as he followed after her. "It's still a crime scene."

"Yeah, I know," Bobbi said. "But what I'm after ain't in the house. It's in the yard."

\*

A few hours later the Mustang's parts were going together like a child's jigsaw puzzle. Not only was it simple to figure out, but the rusted bolt that had given Bobbi so much trouble before was easily broken free. When it came time to install the 428, she was surprised to find that she could lift the entire engine block with her bare hands.

She was tightening down the exhaust manifold and hoping to be on the road in a couple more hours when she spotted the investigators, Langly and Fields, coming up the driveway in their unmarked grey Chrysler sedan.

They parked and got out, waiving at her. "Hi there!" Langly yelled as he closed the car door.

"Hey y'all," she greeted them.

"I can't believe you are recovered already!" Langly was stunned. There wasn't a bruise on her.

"Yeah, the doctors said it was a miracle." She grinned and ducked back under the car.

"I'll say!" he exclaimed. Then, in a softer tone, he asked, "It must be hard for you to be here, so close to the house and stuff?"

"Yeah, well, soon as I get this thing runnin' I'll be leavin' here. An' don't worry. I ain't goin' in the house fo' anythin'. I ain't 'bout to disturb no crime scene."

"Ah, well, that's good. We don't want any confusion," Fields noted.

"So, how's the investigation goin'? Any leads?" she asked.

"You know, we've talked to a few of the Dark Ones and none of them know of a member named 'Joel.'"

"Joel? What?" Bobbi gave them a confused look.

"The names you gave us? The two guys who stopped to talk to you—right here, actually?" Langly looked around at the Jackson's front yard.

"What? Oh, no. Their names were Jake and Mel. Not Joel," she said.



"Hm." Inspector Fields opened his notepad and flipped a few pages. "I think you said their names were Mark and Joel." He took out his pen and looked at her over the top of his sunglasses. "Now you're telling me their names were... what?"

She didn't like his tone. "Jake and Mel."

He scribbled in his book. "I see..."

"Well, we'll have to start looking for these new guys now." He flashed a snide grin. "Is there anything else you'd like to change or add?"

She frowned. "No. Are there any other facts you've got wrong?"

"Well let's see..." Inspector Langly read aloud from his notes taken from her statement at Turkey Creek.

Bobbi rolled her eyes and went back to work on the car, only half listening to him. "That's about right," she said when he finished.

"Anything else you'd like to add?" Fields pressed.

She was busy attaching the radiator hose when she stopped her work and faced him squarely. "Yeah, there is, actually.

"Those assholes have been causing a lot of trouble. I seen the news 'bout 'em, an' how many's in jail. How they's always robbin' an' killin' 'n' stuff. My family ain't the first ones they've hurt, an' they won't be the last. Why don't y'all do somethin' 'bout 'em?"

"We do. That's what we're doing right now." Langly was somewhat surprised by her. "We're always investigating them and arresting them for one thing or another. Most of the Dark Ones have criminal records. You just said yourself that a lot of them are in jail. That proves we are doing something, doesn't it? The problem is that no matter how many we lock up, there are more and more of them on the streets every day."

"Yeah, why don't you find out why that is?"

He scoffed. "Well, it's because society's sick. People have no sense of responsibility. They have a huge sense of entitlement. They think they can just take whatever they want instead of earning it. There are too many gangs and drugs and it all feeds on itself. Society is just sick."

"Ok, Inspector." She turned back to work.

An awkward silence passed.

"What does that mean?" Fields finally asked.

She tossed "Nothin'," over her shoulder as she tightened a screw.

A few more uncomfortable seconds passed before the inspectors went into the house to follow up on some evidence.

Bobbi kept working on the Mustang.

\*

By the time the clock struck two, Bobbi was speeding down Lee Highway on the outskirts of Oak Grove. The resurrected Mustang roared like a lion as she passed other cars, leaving them to dwindle into nothingness in her mirror as she tore around the curves and raced down the straightaways.

Out on Route 66, just past the intersection with her path, she found what she was looking for. Three Dark Ones were cruising along at about 50 mph, reclining on their rumbling choppers as they weaved down the road.

She ran them down like dogs. The first one to feel her wrath died immediately, his head crushed between the wreckage of his bike and the Mustang's front bumper as he was dragged along the road in a shower of sparks and blood. The other two, thinking it was an accident, started to pull over, which made it easy for her to swerve into the second one, throwing him and his bike into the ditch with a hard blow from the Mustang's right front quarter panel. Seeing this, the last biker knew they were being attacked. He stomped the shift pedal and opened the throttle, desperate to escape.

After skidding over the twisted wreckage of the first biker and swerving off the road to hit the second one, the Mustang was sideways in the gravel and spinning into a 180-degree turn. It came to rest facing the opposite direction on the road. About 60 yards ahead of Bobbi were the mangled remains of the first biker, and to her left, about a dozen yards away, was the second victim lying motionless in the grass. Behind her the third one was speeding away toward Waverly in a full-throttled panic.

Bobbi figured he was headed for the Market Street Bridge and then down Route 70 to Lawrence City where the Dark Ones were from.

And then she remembered the old Fulton Street Bridge, not more than a mile away.

It had burned down years ago and had never been replaced. She had seen the site hundreds of times and had always noticed how the road on both sides of Beaver Creek curved steeply up like a ramp before dropping off into the water. There was a makeshift wooden barrier at the end of each ramp, but those boards had been there

for decades. Every time she saw it, she thought of jumping the creek like the Duke boys on TV. And she thought of that again now. It would put her miles ahead of that third biker currently racing toward Waverly and the new bridge on Market Street. He'd sure be surprised to find her waiting for him outside Lawrence. But after considering, she decided against it. Jumping a car like that was just a Hollywood gimmick after all.

She turned her attention back to the two she had caught. The one in the road was clearly dead, so she went to check the one in the grass. She found that he, too, was already dead, having struck his head on a rock. Disappointed, she climbed back into the Mustang and drove off.

The Dark Ones were, as their names implied, creatures of the night. She knew they would be more active and easier to find after the sun went down so she spent the next couple hours cruising the roads around Oak Grove hoping for the off chance of finding some more before heading over to Nanna's for supper. After a good, home-cooked meal, she would take the hunt closer to Lawrence.

She pulled into Nanna's yard just before five. She was discouraged that she hadn't found any more Dark Ones to punish, but when she noticed Pastor Joseph's car in Nanna's yard, her spirits were raised.

Soon Nanna, Joseph, and Bobbi were sitting around the kitchen table enjoying some world-class fried chicken and cornbread when the five o'clock news came on the TV in the living room. The lead story was a report about a deadly motorcycle accident out on Route 66 involving two members of a local gang. "Police believe there was another vehicle involved that left the scene before paramedics arrived," Chip Ragsdale, Channel 4's man on the scene, reported.

Pastor Joseph noticed Bobbi smirking between bites of cornbread as they listened to the report, but he didn't say anything until Nanna excused herself to the restroom. As soon as they were alone, Joseph said to her, "The police stopped by my place today asking about you."

"They did? What fo'?"

"Because they aren't stupid, Bobbi! And neither am I. I don't want to guess what happened out on Route 66 today, but the cops do. They are already guessing! They know you have a motive to kill those guys."

"So? Lots of people have a motive to kill those guys!" she argued. "They're gonna be investigatin' everyone from here to Virginia if that's how they're goin' about it!"

"Bobbi," Joseph's tone was firm, "what you're doing is wrong. The Lord says—"

"Preacher," she held up her hand, "you know how I know I'm doin' right? Because this is what I am able to do, this is what God has given me. He gave me this chance. This strength. This power. If He didn't want me to do this, I wouldn't be able to."

"Power? Bobbi, what are you talking about?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." There was disappointment in her voice. "You barely believed it when I got healed in the hospital and that happened right in front of you. How can I convince you of what I know in my heart?"

"Bobbi, even if you do have some kind of divine power, you still have to be responsible! You can't just become a vigilante."

"If I don't do somethin' about those killers, who will?"

"The police. The courts. God works through many ways. Vigilantism is wrong, Bobbi." There was a fierce earnestness in his voice. "Only God can judge."

She was done eating. And if the cops were looking for her, they could come here. She got up and headed for the door. "I'm not judging, Preacher," she said as she left. "I'm executing."

Joseph followed her out the door. "Bobbi, you're confused," he pleaded. "Just wait..."

"I'm not confused, Preacher, look." She grabbed the front end of the Mustang and dead lifted it like a strongman on ESPN. Joseph stood in shocked amazement as she dropped the car and said, "I'm as strong as Samson! Why? If not to punish the wicked, then why? Why would God give me this strength? Why heal me and give me this chance? Why not just take me to Heaven with the rest of my family?"

Joseph was speechless.

"Have you found out what that symbol on my neck means?"

Reluctantly, he told her. "It is an ancient Hebrew symbol of strength."

This emboldened her further and she told him, "When I was dealing with those guys out on Route 66 today, it felt like I was doing God's work, Preacher. Like all of a sudden I was in love with the world."

"Bobbi..." Joseph gasped at the thought.

She was done talking. A subtle rage burned in her eyes as she climbed into the Mustang, stomped on the clutch, and turned the ignition.

Joseph called out to her, "Bobbi, what are you gonna do?"

"There's only one thing I *can* do," she said as she pulled on her sunglasses. The Mustang's 428 roared and its wheels screamed like banshees as she shot away in a cloud of smoke and thunder.

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