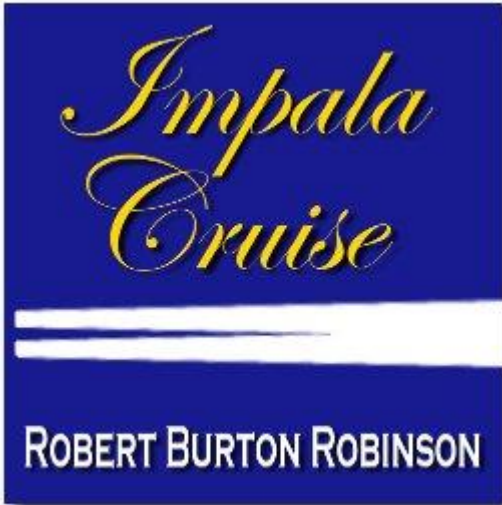


Impala Cruise

by Robert Burton Robinson



GENRE: Suspense. LENGTH: 5,629 words. SYNOPSIS: A young woman offers a ride to a stranger, knowing she may regret it. He's good-looking. But he could be a criminal. He could be dangerous. So could she.

The young clerk smiled at Obadiah as he entered the convenience store. He already felt guilty about what he was about to do. Her smile had just made it that much more difficult. He went straight to the back and began eying the wall of refrigerated beer. His whole body vibrated with anticipation, even as his blood sugar level plummeted.

How had he sunk this low? Had he lost all sense of morality? Obadiah brushed his guilt aside. The only way to pull it off was to do it without thinking. He wanted to be back on the

road in two minutes, with a cold beer in hand, an open bag of Fritos on the seat beside him, and wads of cash stuffed in his coat pockets. Unfortunately, he no longer owned a car.

Just do it. He opened the glass door and grabbed a six-pack of Budweiser.

Then he heard somebody walk into the store. He froze. The police, he thought. Somehow the clerk had suspected him and called for help. Why had he been so foolish? It was after 11:00 p.m., and this was a small town, so he thought it would be easy.

Then he heard a man's voice.

"Give me a pack of Marlboro Reds."

Obadiah relaxed. It was just a customer. And the man would never even know Obadiah was there. Since there were no cars parked out front, the guy would assume he was the only customer.

"Now give me all your money, Bitch!"

"Please...please don't shoot me—I have a two-year old."

"Hurry up! Just dump the whole drawer in the bag."

"Okay, okay. But there's not much in here. Most of the money is in the safe."

"Then crack it open!"

Obadiah wished he was anywhere but here. The guy sounded crazy. Would he kill the girl?

“But...I don’t know the combination.”

Obadiah bent over and tiptoed to the middle aisle to take a look. He could either continue to hide and be safe, or try to help the girl and possibly die. No! I just can’t deal with this right now, he thought. His head throbbed. His hands began to shake.

“Yes, you do,” shouted the man with the gun. “And you’re gonna open it right now or I’m gonna blow your head off!”

The girl began to sob. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Obadiah stayed low as he hurried up the aisle. Just as he was about to grab the man’s arm from behind and try to wrestle the gun away from him, the girl spotted him.

Her eyes tipped off the robber. He spun around.

Obadiah grabbed the man’s right arm with both of his hands, and the pistol went off. The bullet blew past Obadiah’s ear, and tore into the ceiling.

The girl hit the floor and pushed the silent alarm button.

The man struggled to break free. But Obadiah knew if he let go he was dead.

The man jabbed Obadiah in the face with his left fist.

Obadiah grabbed the man's left forearm, leaving only one hand to control the gun. He felt weak. He hadn't eaten all day. Adrenaline was no longer enough. He was losing the battle. Soon a red-hot chunk of metal would be lodged in his brain.

Maybe it was for the best. He *deserved* to die. But what about the girl? The robber would have to kill her too. He fought back with renewed strength. But he knew he couldn't hold out much longer.

The robber gasped and looked down.

Obadiah looked too, and saw what appeared to be the tip of a steel-toed work boot—jammed deep into the man's crotch from behind.

Obadiah quickly took advantage of the man's weakness, snatching the gun away.

The man bent over in agony, holding himself with both hands, assessing the damage.

The same work boot that had flattened his manhood kicked him in the back. He fell to the floor.

His assailant was a woman—5-foot-6, with short brown hair, wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and...steel-toed boots. She was cute—in a *kiss me, and I'll break your arm* kind of way. Right now, Obadiah wouldn't care if she broke *his* arm. "Thanks."

"No problem." She took out her cell phone. "Now keep the gun on him while I call the police."

The clerk peeped up from behind the counter. “I’ve already called them.”

The police arrived moments later, took statements, and hauled the man away.

The young clerk repeatedly thanked Obadiah and the boot woman. The police had taken her name, but Obadiah didn’t catch it. He had been too busy answering the questions of another officer.

The boot woman walked out and got into her big blue, 1970-something car.

Obadiah began walking along the road, wondering how long he would survive without food. He tried not to think about the beer and Fritos.

The big blue car passed him and pulled over.

When he reached the car and looked in through the open passenger window, she said, “Get in.”

Oh, Lady, he thought, you think I’m a nice guy because I tried to stop the robbery and save that clerk. I’m not nice. You need to stay away from me.

But even in the dim light of the instrument panel he saw an irresistible sparkle in her eyes.

Obadiah opened the door and got in.

He buckled his seat belt as she drove out onto the road. “Thanks again for saving me back there.”

“No problem,” she said. “I heard you tell the cop that your name is Obadiah Cross. Obadiah’s from the Bible, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“So, what are you—some kind of preacher?”

“Look, just because your parents named you after somebody in the Bible, it doesn’t mean you’ll grow up religious.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Not every Mary is a virgin.”

He looked straight ahead.

She studied his face. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What? Am I a preacher?” He hesitated. “No.” Not anymore, he thought.

“Well, you *look* like one.”

“No, I don’t. And what about you? I’ll bet your name doesn’t say anything about who you are either. What *is* your name? I never caught it.”

“Impala.”

“Oh, come on. You can do better than that. If you’re going to lie about it, at least make it believable.”

“I’m not lying. That’s my name.”

“*Really?* You don’t think I know what kind of car this is? I’m not much of a car guy, but the logo’s right here on the dash.

I saw it when I got in. So, what's your *last* name? Chevy? Are you Miss Impala Chevy?"

"No, of course not. That wouldn't work. The correct order is *Chevy Impala*."

"Okay. Then what *is* your last name?"

"Cruise."

He checked to see if she was smiling. She was not. He began to laugh.

It didn't faze her. "Go ahead. Get it out of your system."

"You're serious. Your name is really 'Impala Cruise.'"

"That's right."

"Why? Why in the world—"

"—would my parents give me such a crazy name? Most people ask me if they were on drugs at the time."

"Well—yeah. That would explain it."

"Actually, it made perfect sense to name me Impala...since I was born in the back seat of the car."

"Your mom didn't make it to the hospital in time."

"Hey, when I'm ready to go, nobody's gonna stop me. I've always been that way."

"So, who delivered you? Your dad?"

“Yep. And that’s why he could never bring himself to get rid of this car. He just kept fixing it up.”

“*This* car?” He turned to take a look at the back seat. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

Obadiah had guessed twenty-one. He was twenty-six.

“This is a ‘72 model. It was my sixteenth birthday present.”

“Okay. Glad to meet you, Impala.”

She nodded.

“But you made up the last name, right? You don’t want to give me your real last name because then I could track you down later. You’re scared of me.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m *scared* of you,” she said sarcastically. “That’s why I busted the bad guy’s balls for you. That’s why I gave you a ride—because I’m scared to death of you.”

“You’re right. I’m being stupid.”

“You’re probably just hungry. You can’t think straight. How about a hamburger?”

“That sounds great.”

She pointed to a McDonald’s billboard. It was five miles ahead.

“Only thing is...I don't have any money.”

“They take credit cards.”

“Mine are all maxed out.”

She thought for moment. “How were you going to buy that beer at the convenience store if you didn't have any money?”

“I was...uh...”

“You were gonna rob it. You're no better than that other guy. He just beat you to it. I should have let him shoot you.”

Obadiah hung his head.

She let him mope for a while and then punched him in the arm. “Get over it. I'll pay for the burgers.”

“Why? I'm a criminal. Don't you want to pull over and throw me out of your car?”

“I should.”

“Do it.”

“Nope. Gotta get you back home safe and sound.”

“I don't *have* a home.”

“Yeah, you do. In Beaumont.”

He stared at her. “What makes you think I'm from Beaumont? It's 200 miles from here.”

She looked as if she realized she'd said too much.

"Zeela sent you. I should have known. How much is she paying you?"

"Zeela? Who's that?"

"Don't play dumb. It's too late for that."

"She's not paying me anything."

"Oh, I get it. You're working off a debt. You jumped bail and now you're having to pay her back."

"She's a friend."

"My mother doesn't have any friends. She helps creeps get out of jail—for money."

"It's a legitimate business."

"It's a racket."

"Fine. Whatever. She's worried about you. That's why I came."

"Well, you just go back and tell her to mind her own business. I don't need her pity."

"It's not pity."

"Pull over." He reached for the door handle, as though he might jump out before she even slowed down.

She eased up on the accelerator. “What about the hamburger? And fries?”

“I don’t care.” But he couldn’t convince himself—much less her.

“Let’s eat first. Then we can go our separate ways.”

Obadiah didn’t care if he ever saw Zeela again. As long as he stayed away, he could blame all his troubles on her. If she had just let him live his life as he saw fit, and not tried to control him, things could have turned out so differently.

He sensed a car approaching from the rear and turned around. The headlights blinded him.

Impala glared into the rear view mirror. “What’s your problem, Man? If you’re in such a hurry, just pass me.”

Obadiah froze. Was it him? Had he seen Obadiah getting into the car? What if he had a gun?

The car raced around them and speed away.

Obadiah sighed, “Whew.”

“What?”

“That car...he almost hit us.”

“If he had, he would have been sorry.”

“What do you mean?”

“This thing is a tank. It’s forty-three-hundred pounds of heavy-duty steel. They don’t make ‘em like this anymore.”

“No, I guess not.”

False alarm. But he knew his killer was coming. It was only a matter of time.

Obadiah gobbled down two Big Macs, a super-sized fry, and a Coke while Impala ate her chicken sandwich. Every few seconds, his eyes did a quick scan of the room. “Ever feel like somebody’s watching you?”

“I’m watching you,” she said. “And it ain’t pretty.”

“I’m sorry. I was starving.” He sucked down the last of his soft drink. “I need to...make a call.”

“Okay. Wanna borrow my cell?”

“Not that kind of call.” He nodded toward the restrooms.

Oh, I get it, she thought, euphemism. “Local or long distance?”

“Long distance, I’m afraid.”

“No problem. I’m gonna get a large coffee to go. You want one too?”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

The restroom was empty. Obadiah went into the lone stall. He had just sat down when he heard somebody else walk in.

“Did you really think you could get away from me?”

It was Jim. Obadiah stopped breathing. Maybe if he kept quiet...

“I’m talking to you!” Jim kicked the side of the stall. “Say something!” He kicked it again.

Obadiah was struck with the words of his Biblical namesake: *What have I sinned, that thou wouldest deliver thy servant into the hand of Ahab, to slay me?* But he knew exactly what his sins were. And this was judgment day. It would be fitting, he thought—for him to die half-naked in a public restroom.

“Come out of there and face me like a man, you coward!” Jim kicked the stall even harder.

“I’m coming out,” said Obadiah. He stood and pulled up his pants. Then he heard somebody else come into the restroom.

“What’s going on in here?”

Obadiah recognized Impala’s voice.

“It’s none of your business, Lady. Get out of here.”

“You’re wrong. It *is* my business. That’s my boyfriend.”

“It’s okay,” said Obadiah. He opened the stall door and stepped out.

Jim reached under his jacket and produced a large hunting knife. “You ever field dress a deer, Obadiah?”

“Whoa. Put the knife away, Buddy,” said Impala, “before somebody gets hurt.”

Jim ignored her. “You start by inserting the blade at the bottom of the sternum. Of course, with a deer, I make sure the animal’s dead first. But with you, I see no need to be humane.” He began to walk toward Obadiah, who stepped backward until he was against the wall.

Impala was ten feet behind Jim, clenching her teeth. “Put the knife down.”

Jim stepped in closer to Obadiah. “Imagine how she felt...just before she died.”

“I’m sorry,” said Obadiah. “I’m truly sorry.”

“Oh, I *know* you are—*now*. But I have no sympathy for you whatsoever, because you knew better. And everybody trusted you. *She* trusted you. And you *used* her. You killed her!”

Obadiah prayed to see Impala’s steel-toed boot fly up between Jim’s legs. But maybe she didn’t want to save him this time. Perhaps she was having second thoughts about him—after what she was hearing.

“Get ready to meet your maker,” said Jim. “Tell *him* you’re sorry.” He lurched forward, pushing Obadiah’s arms upward with his left arm, exposing Obadiah’s chest. He rared back with the knife—oblivious to the fact that Impala was running toward him from behind.

She jumped into the air and landed her boots at the back of his knees, causing his legs to buckle. He went down backwards. Impala hopped out of the way. His head slammed on the ceramic tile floor. She stomped his forearm and grabbed the knife out of his hand.

Jim was dazed, but conscious. “Why are you helping him? He’s a murderer.”

“Forget about Obadiah,” she said.

“But you don’t understand.”

“Look—whatever he’s done, I’m sure he’ll pay for it. Just stay away from him. Or next time...I’ll kill you.”

Obadiah tiptoed his way around him. Impala wrapped the knife in paper towels and put it under her left arm.

As they came out of the restroom, Impala picked up the coffees she had left on a table. She handed one to Obadiah and they walked out of the restaurant.

She threw the knife into the woods. They got into the car and drove away.

After a few minutes of silence, Obadiah said, “Thanks for rescuing me—again. But I’m still not going to Beaumont.”

“Well, that’s where this car is going. So...” She slowed the car down and began to pull off to side of the road.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re either going all the way or not at all.”

“Oh, come on, Impala. Surely you’re not going to just leave me out here on a dark highway in the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s not the middle of nowhere. You can walk back to the McDonald’s. It’s five miles, tops.”

“I’m not going back there.”

“Afraid you might run into the deer hunter?”

“That would be preferable to running into Zeela.”

“How can you say that? She’s your mother. She loves you.”

“I don’t need *her* kind of love.”

“Look. It won’t kill you to just talk to her. Ten minutes—that’s all I ask. Then you can do whatever you want.”

“How about a compromise? Drop me off in Silsbee. I’ve got an old friend who lives there. Then, after I get up my nerve, I’ll go into Beaumont and pay a visit to Zeela.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to think about it.” She pulled back onto the road. It’s only two hours or so, which is going to put us there at 3:00 in the morning. So, we might as well stop at a motel and get some rest.”

“You do remember that I don’t have any money.”

“I’ve got it covered.”

Obadiah did need rest. But he wasn’t sure he could relax enough to fall asleep. He could almost feel Jim’s knife in his chest.

Impala had spotted a Motel 6 billboard a few miles back. They were getting close.

She glanced over at Obadiah. “So, where’s your car?”

“Huh?”

“A guy like you has a car. Where is it?”

“It got repossessed.”

“Where’s your stuff? You don’t even have a backpack.”

“Don’t rub it in.”

“I guess that’s why you were gonna rob that convenience store.”

He looked away.

“How did you get in such bad shape? Weren’t you a pastor of a church?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Yes.”

“What happened?”

“When I graduated from the seminary, I was contacted by the search committee of a small country church. I went there ‘in view of a call’ one Sunday. ‘In view of a call’ means—”

“—I know. It means you went there to preach and meet everybody, for them to decide if they wanted you as their pastor.”

Obadiah looked surprised.

“Zeela explained it to me.”

“Oh. Well, I ended up accepting the call. And it was wonderful...for the first year or so.”

“Isn’t it unusual for a pastor to be single?”

“It’s not the norm. But they really liked me. And everything was fine...until this young woman came to me for counseling.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Yes.”

“But married, right?”

“She and her husband were having problems. They’d only been married two years. I told her their issues were fixable.”

“But then you made a move on her.”

“No. She’s the one who made the move. One day she broke down in my office and started crying. I tried to console her, and then...she kissed me.” Obadiah’s guilt overcame him for a moment. “One thing led to another...”

“You had an affair with her.”

“It didn’t last long before I came to my senses. I told her it was over. She said she loved me and threatened to tell her husband if I broke it off.”

“But you broke it off anyway, and now her husband wants to kill you. The cowboy in the bathroom with the knife, right?”

“Yeah. But it’s much worse than that. She went home and took a handful of sleeping pills. They said it wasn’t a lethal dose though, and that she probably would have survived...if she hadn’t drowned.”

“*Drowned?*”

Obadiah began to cry. He could barely speak. “She got in the bathtub.”

“You loved her.”

“I had no *right* to love her,” he shouted, fighting the tears. “Not in that way.”

“But it wasn’t your fault she killed herself.”

“Yes, it was. If I hadn’t given into temptation she’d still be alive.” Tears gushed down his checks.

“How did her husband find out about the affair? Did she tell him?”

“I don’t think so. But he must have suspected that something was going on. And then at the funeral, I think I gave it away. He could probably see it in my eyes. I think *everybody* could. I resigned the next week. Then he confronted me, and I confessed. He looked like he wanted to kill me right then. But I guess he didn’t have his knife with him.”

“No. He just wasn’t mad enough yet. He could have stabbed you with a letter opener.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” said Obadiah. “I had to get out of the parsonage right away, so I threw some clothes in my car and took off. I tried to get a job, but nothing worked out. I ran out of money and started sleeping in my car. Then my car broke down.”

“Man, you’ve had nothing but bad luck.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it. God is punishing me.”

“You’re punishing yourself,” she said. “Here it is.” She pulled into the motel parking lot and drove up to the lobby entrance.

After Impala had checked them in, she drove around to their room and they went inside. She insisted that Obadiah shower first.

“Okay. But you know I don’t have any fresh clothes to change into. I don’t even have anything to sleep in.”

“That’s no problem. Sleep in the buff. Your clothes can air out overnight.”

“Well, I...”

“Just wear a towel.” She winked at him.

Obadiah went into the bathroom and closed the door. He heard Impala on the phone, but he didn’t much care who she was talking to. Probably Zeela. Whatever. If he had to meet with her, he would. But he would not stick around for long. That much he knew.

When he was finished, he came out of the bathroom with one towel around his waist and another draped over his shoulders.

“Hope you saved a couple of towels for me.”

“I did.”

“Okay. Sleep well,” said Impala as she went into the bathroom.

He pulled back the covers, let his towels drop to the floor and got into bed. Obadiah was not accustomed to sleeping in the nude.

He ran his hands across the sheets, trying to determine if they were fresh. Maybe the maid skipped the sheet washing occasionally. His bare skin could well be rubbing up against the dried sweat of a previous night's lathery sex. He considered holding the sheet up to his nose for a sniff test. But some things are better left unknown. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about it.

When she came out of the bathroom, he pretended to be asleep.

"You okay?" she said.

He opened his eyes. She was standing beside his bed in a towel. Then she pulled it off—revealing a very naked, sexy body. Impala was much hotter than he would have imagined—if he had even thought about it. Who could think of her in that way? When a woman talks and acts tough and beats up men—you don't tend to think about how womanly she is.

"You like?"

He couldn't find words.

Impala pulled up his covers to take a look. "Nice." She got in with him. His body was going nuts.

"Are you okay?" Suddenly she was standing beside his bed again. But this time she was wearing a baggy T-shirt and gym shorts.

"Uh—yeah." What a dream, he thought.

“Sorry I woke you up. It’s just that you were mumbling something.”

He gulped. “What did I say?”

“I couldn’t quite make it out.”

“Well, I’m fine. Really. I’ll try not to talk in my sleep anymore.”

“Okay. Goodnight.” She got into her bed and clicked off the lamp.

His body was still buzzing with titillation. It would be hard to get back to sleep. Not that he minded. And like it or not, he would never see Impala the same way again.

“Hey, Sleepyhead, I’m gonna walk over to Denny’s. You hungry?”

Obadiah couldn’t believe it was morning. He opened one eye to confirm it, and saw the sunlight seeping in from around the curtains. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, then hop up and get dressed. I’ll get us a table.”

When she opened the door it nearly blinded him. She let it slam. He jumped. Might as well get out of bed, he thought. Otherwise, she’d come back and drag him out by the ear.

He found her tube of toothpaste on the sink and helped himself, using his finger as a toothbrush. His clothes smelled

slightly better than the night before, but they looked as though they'd been slept in.

As he walked along the front of Denny's toward the entrance, he saw Impala inside. He stepped up to the window for a closer look. Some guy was sitting at the table with her. She seemed to be having a nice conversation with him while sipping coffee.

What did Obadiah think—that he was the only man in her life? Was he actually jealous? That was crazy. He barely even knew her. Their one intimate moment had taken place in a dream.

Obadiah considered just leaving—walking back to the room. But he was hungry. And who the heck was this new guy anyway?

Then he saw the man get up from the table. Impala got up too. She followed him to the cashier and he paid the bill. Obadiah was standing at the door when the two walked out. Impala ignored him.

He started to say something, but decided to wait and see what would happen next. Impala was following the man into the parking lot.

Two police cars screeched into the parking lot. But there were no flashing lights. No sirens. What was the hurry? The Grand Slam breakfast?

The man looked back at Impala. "Sorry, Babe, I gotta go." He made a run for his car.

Impala ran after him.

Obadiah just stood there and watched—amazed and confused.

The man made it to his car and reached for the door handle.

Impala raised her right boot waist high and kicked him in the back, knocking him down.

One of the police cars pulled up behind the man's car, trapping it in place.

By the time the man got to his feet, one of the cops had a pistol aimed at his chest. "Hold it right there!"

The man froze.

Impala walked over to where Obadiah was standing. "Ready to eat?"

"Uh...yeah." He followed her back inside the restaurant while the police handcuffed the man and took him away.

"What was that?"

"Shh," she whispered. "People are already staring at us. Don't make it worse."

Once they were seated, Obadiah said, "Who was that guy?"

"A bail jumper."

Obadiah looked at her in disbelief. “What are you—a bounty hunter? That’s it. That’s what you do for Zeela—you hunt down bail jumpers.”

“No, I’m not a bounty hunter. Not yet. Right now I’m just a secretary. But I’ve already finished my training.”

“So, you’re telling me Zeela didn’t send you out to catch that guy?”

“No. I just got lucky. In fact, she’ll fire me if she finds out I did anything more than calling the police. She could lose her license. But I just kinda fell into it. When I saw him through the window I thought he looked familiar.” She held up her phone. “I’ve got all the pictures and info in here—just in case.”

“Just in case you run into one of Zeela’s bail jumpers?”

“Yeah. Even though I didn’t really think it would ever happen. But there he was—big as Texas. And I knew it was him because I spotted his car.”

“Could have been somebody else with the same kind of car.”

“Somebody else with a metallic blue ‘69 Chevelle SS396?”

“Okay. Probably not.”

“That thing’s got a high performance engine.”

“Good to know,” he said felicitously. “So, you called the police.”

“Yeah. And I tried to keep him inside until they got here, but he was in a hurry to get back on the road.”

“Were you actually gonna get in his car?”

“No, of course not. Although I wouldn’t mind taking that car out for a spin.”

Obadiah shook his head. “Zeela must be awfully proud of you.”

Impala stuck her tongue out at him. “Don’t you dare tell her I sat and had coffee with him, or that I knocked him down in the parking lot. If she finds out I’m toast.”

“Relax. I won’t squeal on you.” Then it hit Obadiah. He was just another one of Zeela’s bail jumpers. He had stepped off the straight and narrow, and now she was reeling him in. He was Impala’s first official catch.

Obadiah asked to borrow Impala’s cell phone, and called his buddy in Silsbee. Then he gave it back to her.

“So, he’ll pick you up at Whataburger,” she said.

“Yeah. He’s moved way out in the country, and he says we’d get lost trying to find his house. Of course, he’s gonna be late. Johnny is always late.”

“Well, you should have told him 9:00. Then he’d be sitting there waiting for you when we pull in at 9:30.”

“I don’t mind waiting. Besides, I can’t lie to him.”

“Oh, that’s right—you’re a preacher. Or you *used* to be one.”

He looked down and sighed.

“I’m sorry. That was mean.”

“Besides, he just came off a graveyard shift.”

“What kind of work does he do?”

“He’s a welder. They’re working a shutdown,” said Obadiah.

“It means they shut the plant down so they can do maintenance work on it.”

“I know. My uncle is a pipefitter at the Exxon Mobil plant,” she said. “Well, are you about ready to go?”

“Sure.”

She handed him the car keys and a twenty-dollar bill. “I’ve got to make a quick trip to the Ladies Room. I’ll be right out.”

“Okay.”

Obadiah paid the bill and walked out to the car.

Impala was alone in the restroom on her cell phone. “...yeah, about 9:30...okay, bye.”

They drove into Silsbee at 9:22 a.m.. The Whataburger parking lot was nearly full.

“Well, thanks again for everything,” said Obadiah. “And I’ll pay you back as soon as I get a job.”

“Don’t worry about paying me back.”

“No. I insist,” he said. “But I really could use...just a couple more bucks, if you don’t mind.”

“For coffee?”

“Yeah. I may be waiting for quite a while.”

“No problem. In fact, I’ll come in and have a cup with you.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. You probably want to get home.” Yet he really wanted her to stay.

She killed the engine. “Let’s see how Whataburger coffee compares with Denny’s’.”

They got out and went into the restaurant.

“I’d like two large coffees,” said Impala.

Obadiah stood a few feet behind her, looking around the dining area. In the unlikely event that Johnny had already arrived, he was probably asleep in a booth.

Then he spotted Jim—the vengeful, grieving widower. He would never give up until Obadiah was dead. Why not just get it over with? Why not surrender? He had killed Jim’s wife just as surely as if he had stabbed her in the heart with a butcher knife.

Jim got up from his table, reached into his jacket, and pulled out a pistol.

This is it, thought Obadiah. I'm a dead man. Fine. I deserve it. Go ahead. Kill me.

But Jim wasn't pointing the gun at Obadiah. He was aiming it at Impala. Why? Was it because of what she had done to him in the McDonald's restroom? It didn't matter why. Adrenaline gushed into Obadiah's bloodstream, as he leaped on Impala.

As they hit the floor, two shots fired in rapid succession.

Obadiah's body was draped over Impala like a human shield. He was certain he'd been hit. The pain would kick at in any moment. But that wasn't the worst of it. Jim wouldn't just walk away. He'd come over and finish the job. And at close range, bullets would go right through his body, into Impala.

"It's okay. He's gone."

Obadiah couldn't believe it. He looked up. "Mom?" Her pistol was still smoking. "You shot him?"

"I got him in the shoulder. He dropped his gun and ran out. He'll be okay if he gets to a hospital soon. The police will pick him up there."

Before Obadiah could respond, Zeela had already walked away, and was on her cell phone talking to the police.

"Good job," said Impala, who was happily lying beneath him.

“Thanks. So, you called Zeela and told her we were coming here.”

“And it’s a good thing I did.”

“Well, since she saved our lives, I guess I’ll forgive you.” He started to get up.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back down. “How would you like a job? We can be a team.”

“A bounty hunter team? No, thanks.”

“Sure. You’ll quote scripture like a preacher, while I seduce them with charm. And then—”

“—charm?”

“What? You don’t think I can be charming?”

“Well...”

She grabbed the back of his head, pulled it down to her, and gave him a long, passionate kiss.

Suddenly Obadiah flashed back to the sexy dream he’d had the night before. Oh, my God, he thought. I’m gonna do whatever this woman tells me to do.

She released the kiss and smiled at him with a sweetness that he would not have thought possible from this butt-kicking woman.

“I’ll think about it,” he said. But she had him. And they both knew it.

“Okay, Ken and Barbie,” said Zeela, “you can get up now.”

But Obadiah didn’t want to get up. As he gazed into her eyes, he could tell she wanted another kiss. So he eased in until he made contact with her warm, moist lips.

And for the first time in a long time, Obadiah knew he had a future worth living for.

THE END

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