

## Bethula Born

The sun was setting over Bethula, not that there was much to set over—a narrow highway, the creek that ran alongside it, a cemetery that housed most of the town’s population, and the Circle K Bonnie worked at. Still, the place was beautiful when the sky was ablaze with the red death of day and the crickets and cicadas came out to churr under the longleaf pine forest.

Bonnie’s shift was over but she wasn’t ready to go home, so she leaned against the outside wall and flipped open the zippo her brother had given her years ago, back when they were both still young and dumb. She fished a joint from her pocket and its end became an ember. She took a long, acrid drag, welcoming heat into her lungs. It did little to ease the anxiety that had followed her since puberty.

Then came a rumble from down the road, which became a roar as a motorcycle approached. Its rider turned into the gas station, and a moment later she dismounted—a middle-aged woman, a few years older still than Bonnie, with shorn hair and an otherworldly aura. She walked up to the fluorescent lights of the store, but instead of going inside, wandered over to Bonnie.

“You mind sharing some of that?”

Bonnie raised an eyebrow. “Ain’t it dangerous to drive one of those high?”

“Ain’t looking to get high, just an excuse to linger. It’s been a long time since I left.”

Bonnie perked up. Bethula was the kind of town with one way in, birth, and two ways out—death or a foolhardiness that killed everything central to your soul. “I don’t recognize you,” Bonnie said, passing her the joint.

The woman took a long drag and smoke poured from her lips. “I don’t suppose you would yet, I left a long time ago after a falling out with my father.” She looked Bonnie dead in the eye. “Why the hell ain’t you left yet?”

“Why would I?” came the reflexive response. “Bethula’s home. My family’s here. My world’s here. Don’t see why I’d leave.” She took the joint back from the woman and breathed in, hoping again it might quench the uneasiness deep in her bones. It didn’t.

The woman gave her a pitying look, like somehow she *knew*. “What’s your name?”

Bonnie bit her lip. She knew the answer she should give—the one everyone expected and wanted to hear—but it died on her tongue. Instead, a near-supernatural compulsion came over her. “Bonnie,” she whispered.

“That’s what I thought.” The woman took the joint back, eyeing the ember at its end. “Life is short. Which is hardly a revelation, but you’re pissing it away.”

“I am not,” Bonnie bit back. “I love this town, and I don’t mind working here.”

“Sure, but have you told anyone else here your real name, not the one on that nametag?”

Bonnie looked down and flushed, her work uniform still on. The name on it, the same as her grandfather’s, mocked her. “You know I can’t do that. Not in Bethula.”

The woman took another hit and shook her head. “Maybe one day things will be different, but today is today. It’s killing you, ain’t it? Keeping that kind of secret locked up inside.”

Bonnie stayed silent. The answer was already clear, apparently.

“I’ll strike you a deal—I can take you out of Bethula, for a price.”

Bonnie snorted. “A trucker offered me the same thing. His price was a blowjob, what’s yours?”

“Your immortal soul.”

Bonnie sputtered. “You can’t possibly be that high yet.”

“Stop pretending you ain’t caught on yet,” she insisted. “You know who I am, so you know that this is your typical, Faustian deal. Give up your immortal soul, and I’ll take you somewhere you can be yourself.”

Bonnie blinked, struggling to process what was real.

“Well?”

Bethula was everything she had. Here, she had family potlucks and Fridays spent by the creek fishing. Here, she had a brother who bailed her out of jail when she was young and stupid and had started using as a way to cope. Here, she had her whole past and future written in the names and dates of the cemetery. Out there, she had nothing but a half-dream she could be something she could never dare to be here—herself. A woman.

“I don’t think so,” she whispered

“Your funeral.” The woman dropped the burnt-out joint and crushed it beneath her boot before stepping into the store.

Bonnie closed her eyes and imagined the funeral. Imagined the gravestone carved with the wrong name. Bonnie had no issue with dying—sometimes, she dreamt of the smooth, slick barrel of a gun. How it would feel, round and stretching her lips, firm in her mouth and sharp in

her throat. The peace of no longer feeling that every part of her was a lie, of not being scared of hurting her family and losing the love of everything she loved.

She shivered and looked out at the horizon as the sun was swallowed by the swell of the earth. The sky was no longer red, it was cerulean, green, and orange—the colors of the northern lights. Almost as if somehow they'd marched their way down south.

Then the door opened again and the devil strode out, clad in black leather and dreams.

“You sure? Last time I make this offer.”

Bonnie paused. “How would I give you my soul?”

“We can figure that out later. How about we start by getting on the road?”

Bonnie froze, still unsure.

“Bonnie?”

Slowly, Bonnie nodded. She could worry about her immortal soul later—right now, it was her mortal one in need of saving.