

Zack and Annie

By Kate Simon

Zack Stewart road down the desert highway in Arizona. He hadn't seen another car or bike in hours. This was the way he liked it, just him and his Road King. He pulled over to take a breather. He turned off his engine and soaked in the silence. All he wanted was quiet. He'd had enough of noise and people. He'd had more than enough of both in Afghanistan. He'd mustered out of the Army six months ago and he still hadn't figured out what he was going to do. He'd gone back to his home town, Val Verde, just outside Santa Clarita. His parents were long gone and his brother had moved to LA. That left the family home to him. It was a big empty farmhouse. Empty except for the memories.

He'd reconnected with some of his high school buddies who'd formed a motorcycle club. It was good to see the guys again. They got together, talked bikes and took rides in the countryside. He remembered thinking to himself they weren't exactly Hell's Angels. When they weren't riding they all had respectable day jobs. They even did charity rides for the local children's home. They were good people to be around.

Zack bought his Road King from one of the guys who helped him get it into shape. He had fun, but it wasn't enough. What surprised him was his friends understood. The president of the club was Teddy Wellman. He was still the big bear of a guy he'd been in high school although now he had a full beard to go with his curly black hair.

"Hey Zack," said Teddy as he sat down next to him in the clubhouse.

"Hey."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing. What's going on with you?"

"No. I mean what's going on? You're here, but your not. I've seen this before." Teddy looked around at the members. "When they cut you loose from the service they don't tell you what comes next."

Zack sipped his soda. "No, they do not."

"What do you want to do?"

“That’s the hell of it, Teddy. I’m not sure. When I went into the Army I thought I’d be a lifer.” He paused and took another sip. “It didn’t work out that way.”

“Okay, what do you need to do? Did you get a job?”

“Actually, no I don’t need to. Not yet, anyway. I didn’t spend a lot of my Army salary and my parents left me a little. The house is paid for.”

“That makes it tougher, doesn’t it?”

Zack laughed. “Yeah it does. It doesn’t force me to do anything.”

“What do you want more than anything? What’s the first thing that comes into your mind?”

“Quiet.”

Teddy smiled and nodded. “I get that. You know that bike of yours is made for a long trip. Why don’t you take a trip?”

“Where?”

“Nowhere. Anywhere. Just get on your bike and ride. You’ll know it when you find it.”

Three weeks later he was sitting on the side of the road in Arizona, looking at the beginning sunset. His growling stomach reminded him he hadn’t eaten since breakfast. He looked at the map and found a place called “Willie’s” that looked like a place he could find a burger and fill up his tank.

Annie Reynolds was serving the few customers they had. “Willie’s” was the only stop for fifty miles where you could fill your tank and get a good burger or steak. William Johnson had owned the place since the late fifties. He’d told her he’d picked this location because it was so sparsely populated. They were turbulent times for an African American trying to open a business in any area let alone a predominately white area.

Annie lost her job in a Houston club and decided to try her luck in LA. She’d stopped at Willie’s to fill up and she saw he was short handed. She’d offered to help out. That was ten years ago.

Everyone called him Willie but that never seemed right to Annie and her Southern manners. Mr. William had offered her a job and she thought she stay until she figured out what she wanted to do. He’d also offered her the small house behind the restaurant. He’d lived there the first few years until he married and moved closer to town and the schools. He and his wife had been married nearly fifty years and now their grandchildren attended the schools.

Working at Willie’s had become more than a job. Mr. William and Miss Rose had become family. She spent all her holidays with the Johnsons. She thought some of her own family was still alive, but she didn’t know where. Her mother had taken off with one of her many boyfriends shortly after Annie had graduated from high school. Her brother Fred was more interested in partying and women than his baby sister. She’d taken care of herself as far back as she could remember. As much as she loved her adopted family, she loved having her own place. No landlords demanding rent, she could watch what she wanted on TV or just sit and read. A lot of times she’d just sit on the back porch and look at the desert. Miss Rose was always trying to fix her up with someone, and she’d go to be polite, but they never took. Annie figured she’d know it when she met him.

Annie heard a roar of motorcycles and hoped for the best. Maybe they would just stop for gas and go on. The front door opened and she realized she wouldn't be lucky. The Warriors were a group of bikers from outside Winslow who stopped in Ash Fork on their way to Vegas. She watched three bikers walk in and take a seat.

She spotted one she recognized. Charlie. He was always trouble. "Hey sweet cheeks, get us some beers." She poured the beers and brought them to the table. She handed them the menus and two of them took them but the trouble maker pulled at her apron. "So are you finally on the menu?" he asked. Annie looked at him and tried to hide her disgust. If the fact that he looked like he hadn't had a shower in a week didn't put her off the swastika on his forearm would.

"Burgers?" she said.

"Yeah, but you make 'um sweet cheeks. I don't want that old man touching my food."

She turned and put the order up for Mr. William. He was on the grill today. Hopefully they wouldn't notice. She looked as the door opened again. Another biker walked in the door but he had different patches. He didn't join the others. He sat at the counter. "Hello, what can I start you with." He smiled a lopsided smile and she just knew he was different.

"Hello Miss. I'll start with an ice tea."

She made a note on her pad. "Okay"

He opened the menu in front of him and looked up at Annie. "What do you recommend?" he asked.

"Depends how hungry you are?"

"I haven't eaten since breakfast."

"Oh then you want Mr. William's bacon mushroom cheeseburger with a side of sweet potato fries. You won't need to eat again until morning."

He smiled and set down his menu and smiled. "Sounds delicious."

She noted his order on her pad and returned his smile. Yeah, he definitely wasn't like the other guy. She put the order on the wheel and yelled "Order up." Mr. William was still sharp as a tack but he was getting a bit hard of hearing. Mr. William set the burgers for the other men on the pass through. "Order up."

Annie poured the nice smile his ice tea and then picked up the burgers. She took the burgers to the table and set them in front of the men. She saw the look in his eyes and she knew this was going to be bad. He flipped the dishes on the floor then grabbed her by the waist. "I told you I didn't want that colored touching my food." Charlie stood and grabbed her by the hair. Annie screamed and she saw the man with the nice smile and Mr. William come rushing toward her.

"Leave her be!" shouted Mr. William.

"Let her go!" shouted the other man.

Charlie's men surrounded her and they both had knives. They cut the apron from her waist and laughed. The other man's voice got very low and dark. "I said let her go."

Charlie laughed. "You gonna make us, boy?"

The other man grabbed a silver napkin holder and flung it at Charlie's head. It struck and dazed him. Annie saw the evil in his eyes. He grabbed the napkin holder from his table and smashed it into Annie's head and she slumped to the ground. The other's started kicking her while Mr. William tried to pull them off. She saw through a haze of blood the other man punching Charlie just before she passed out.

"What's her name?"

"Annie."

"Annie can you hear me?" Annie forced her eyes open and saw the man with the smile. "There you are. Can you stay with me? The police are here and the EMT's are on their way." Her eyes were so heavy. "No, No, Annie, open your eyes. Look at me." She tried one more time. "That's it, sweetheart, keep your eyes open." She studied his face. She realized his eyes were as beautiful as his smile. If this was the last vision she would have, it was pretty good. Then she gave in to the dark.

### Five years later

Zack hadn't been down this road for years. The last time had ended badly. Well, not as bad for him as it had for the cute waitress, Annie. Zack had thought about Annie for years. He didn't know what happened to her after the EMT's put her in the ambulance. He wasn't able to stop the other two men from beating her while he was trying to stop the leader. The owner got cut up pretty badly too. He had tried to stop the other two men with knives. Zack smiled at the thought of Mr. William. They talked while the EMT treated Mr. William's injuries. He had been at least over seventy but turned out he was pretty good at self-defense, having been a drill instructor in the army.

He had to stop the nightmares. They plagued him, especially around the anniversary of the attack. He had to find out once and for all how things turned out. He could have just called but he knew that wasn't going to be enough. He needed to see them both.

He pulled into "Willie's" parking lot and everything looked the same. He filled up his tank, then pulled into a slot and parked. He walked into the roadhouse and sighed with relief when he saw Annie behind the counter. She almost the same as she had five years ago. Her blonde hair looked a little longer but she now had bangs over her forehead and long strands down the side of her face. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Welcome. Have a seat and I'll be right with you."

Zack took the same seat he'd had that day and looked through the opening to the kitchen but didn't see Mr. William. He watched Annie walk from table to table and noticed a slight hitch in her step. She put an order in the revolving stand and called "Order up." A young man with sandy brown grabbed the order and returned to his grill.

"Hi, what can I get you?"

"I'll start with an ice tea."

"Okay," she said as she made a note on her pad. "Do you need a minute with the menu?"

“No, last time I was here you recommended Mr. William’s bacon mushroom cheeseburger and sweet potato fries.”

“I did?”

“Yes, it’s been a while.”

Annie smiled. “It could have been yesterday. I have some memory issues.”

“Is Mr. William still working?”

Her smile faded. “It has been a while since you’ve been here. Mr. William passed two years ago.”

Zack’s heart raced. He hoped it didn’t have anything to do with the attack. “I’m so sorry. He seemed so fit when I was here. What happened?”

Annie smile returned but it was sad. “He was fit for a man eighty two years old. He laid down for a nap and just didn’t wake up. He was with his wife. His kids were close. It was the way he would have wanted.

“You miss him.”

“He was like my father.”

“You’re still here. Did you buy the place?”

Annie’s eyes teared and she wiped her cheek. “Sorry. Sometimes I can’t control myself.”

Zack reached for her hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, it’s okay. I didn’t buy the place. Mr. William left it to me.”

“He did? He really did think of you like a daughter.”

“I still make it for Sunday dinner with the family, but it’s not the same without him.” She stopped and looked at Zack like she was studying him. “I’m the only one who ever called him Mr. William.”

“I heard you. That’s how I remember.”



She nodded but looked at him like she was still thinking of when she met him. She put the order in the stand. "Order up." She poured his ice tea and set it in front of him.

"Thank you," he smiled.

She held on to the glass as she stared at him. "Why do you look so familiar?"

"I have one of those faces."

She nodded and released the glass. She pushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear and he saw a scar. It ran the length of her hairline. Zack closed his eyes, remembering the bastard who kicked her in the head. He opened his eyes and realized she thought he was repulsed by her scar. She pulled the hair back over her face.

"I had an accident," she whispered as she turned on her heels and went into the kitchen.

"Damn."

Annie glanced back at the man at the counter. He sipped his tea and waited for his order. Who was he? She recognized him, she knew she did. Ever since the attack she had problems with her memory. She was better than she was. She'd been in a coma for several weeks. When she finally woke up she saw Mr. William and Miss Rose at her bedside. She remembered them but large pieces of memory were gone. She didn't even remember how she got there. Mr. William finally told her about the attack and that all three were in jail on attempted murder charges.

It took Annie months to recover. She spent weeks in physical therapy. They also did cognitive therapy to help with her memory. When she'd finally made enough progress she'd insisted on returning to work. Mr. William and Miss Rose said she could take as long as she needed but she knew Mr. William was short handed. Ash Fork was so small it had a limited pool of workers. Mr. William's children and grandchildren helped out, but they all had jobs of their own. Besides, Mr. William had his own injuries from the attack. His arms had been cut and he'd had a broken jaw.

She didn't think she'd survive when Mr. William died. He'd been like her father for thirteen years. The day he died she tried to make herself useful in the kitchen but Miss Rose brought her out to be with family. Miss Rose made sure she was okay, even through her own grief. "You are my child," she said. "The child of my heart. You came into our lives by God's intervention. William loved you like his own and so do I." Even their children, Frank and Evelyn, treated her as a sibling. Their children called her Auntie. She thought they were just very kind people until she found out about the will. Mr. William had left the roadhouse and all the property, including her home to her.

"Miss Rose, that can't be right," she said.

"It is, dear. William and I discussed it long before he passed."

"What about Frank and Evelyn and the kids."

"We've done fine, Annie," said Frank. "I have my teaching and Evelyn is happy as a nurse. Neither of us have the desire or the skill to run "Willie's."

"What about your children? It's their legacy too."

Evelyn smiled, "Well I wouldn't mind if you gave Martin a job. He doesn't make a lot at the mall. It wouldn't hurt him to learn what real hard work is."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She'd never known anyone like the Johnson family. No one put other people first. Certainly not in her own family. The Johnsons loved God and each other and their fellow man. "You're letting me have all this as if I'm family," said Annie as she began to cry. Evelyn walked to Annie and took her in her arms. "You are family. You're my sister. You were a good daughter to my father. He loved you and he wanted you to have your own place. He discussed it with us when he made his will."

"He did?" she asked.

"He wanted to make sure we were all fine with t. We were, of course."

In the two years since, she hadn't changed much about the roadhouse. She'd given Martin a job and he'd found he had his grandfather's knack for cooking. He'd even come up with his own signature burger. He was planning on going on to culinary school after high school. Mr. William would be so pleased.

She'd gotten someone to handle the occasional auto or bike repair. She'd even hired a woman to cover her, so she would not have to work every day. But today she was waiting tables and trying to figure out who the hell was the guy with the ice tea. Her back up cook, Joey, shouted "Order up" and place the ice guy's burger on the pass through. Annie picked up the burger and set it down in front of the man. "Here you go," she said.

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Thank you."

She froze and head began to swim. Then a familiar darkness took hold.

Zack bolted around the side of the counter and picked Annie's head off the floor.  
"Annie, Annie, talk to me."

Joey ran out from the kitchen. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. She fainted."

"Miss Annie, Miss Annie, are you okay?" called Joey. Annie started to moan and move around. She opened her eyes and saw Joey. She looked over at Zack and looked startled.

"It's you."

"What, Miss Annie?" asked Joey.

"Is there some place she can lay down?"

"Her house is in the back."

"Can you let me in?"

"Door's open but I don't know."

"She can't lay on the floor."

"It's okay, Joey," said Annie. "Help me up."

"No, I've got you," said Zack as he picked her up in his arms. He looked at Joey, "show me where." Joey opened the back door and led them to a small cottage. He opened the door and Zack carried her in and set her on the couch.

"You want me to stay, Miss Annie?" asked Joey. "I don't want to leave you with a stranger."

"No, it's okay. I know him."

Zack looked at her and stood stock still. He heard the front door closed and realized the cook had left. "You know me?"

"I remember now." She rubbed her head. "Ow, I hit hard. There's an ice pack in the freezer. Would you mind?"

“Of course.” He went into the kitchen and found the icepack. He wrapped it in a tea towel and brought it to her. “How about some aspirin?”

She pointed toward the open bedroom door. “In the medicine cabinet.”

He returned with some aspirin and a glass of water. He sat down next to her on the couch. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I hit my head on a linoleum floor. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was obvious you didn’t remember me. I didn’t know if I should.”

“They told me you left after they took me away. No one got your name.”

“I talked to the police and told them what happened. They were more concerned with getting those assholes secured. Mr. William told them what happened. Apparently they were well known troublemakers. The police didn’t need me. I waited until you were in the ambulance before I left.”

Annie looked at him like she was still studying him. “I was in a coma for two months.”

“Oh God, I had no idea.”

“Mr. William and his family took care of me but when I woke up I didn’t remember what happened.”

“That’s why you didn’t remember me.”

“I did remember.”

“You did?”

“Not you, exactly. I remembered your smile and your eyes. I kept seeing them in my dreams. I remember thinking just before I passed out that if they were the last things I would see it wasn’t too bad.”

“Oh Annie,” he whispered. “I had no idea.”

She brushed his cheek with her hand. “You still have the beard.”

He smiled, "Yeah. After the army I got tired of shaving every day."

"I like it," she whispered. She pulled her hand down and readjusted her ice pack. "Mr. William told me how you tried to stop them."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do a better job of it."

"You did great. There were three of them and they were armed. You weren't armed and all you had was an eighty year old man to back you up."

Zack nodded. "He was pretty tough. He disarmed the two with the knives."

"He was a drill instructor back in the day."

"He mentioned that. How did he make out? I saw he got cut pretty bad."

"He had a lot of stitches on his arms and a broken jaw but he was back to work a week later."

"Amazing."

"Yes, he was." Her eyes teared. "I'm sorry. Ever since I woke up I've had a hard time controlling myself." Zack found a box of tissues on the end table and handed them to her. "Thank you. You should see me during a Hallmark commercial."

"You don't have to apologize to me. Not for anything."

She studied him again. If he'd gotten a chance to eat he'd think something was stuck in his teeth. "You're staring again."

"I do that. It's like my brain is trying to process questions."

"What questions?"

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Why are you here? The attack was five years ago." Annie sighed. "Five years this month."

“You aren’t the only one who has dreams. I kept seeing the fight and those bastards kicking you. I couldn’t get to you. I saw the blood and...”

Annie took his hand. “And what?”

“It started to blend with other dreams, from the Army.”

“Where were you?” she asked quietly.

“Afghanistan.” Zack was stunned when she set down her ice pack and put her arms around his neck.

“I’m so sorry.” She hugged him and whispered, “You don’t have to dream about me anymore. I’m okay.”

“I’m so sorry you had to suffer.”

She pulled back and smiled. “It could have been so much worse if you hadn’t been there. Charlie was the ringleader. You stopped him.”

Zack brushed his hand over her face. He pushed her hair behind her ear and traced the scar that ran the length of her cheek. “I didn’t stop them. Can you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. You need to forgive yourself.” Annie smiled. “I just realized we’re missing an important detail. I’ve always thought of you as the guy with the nice smile. I assume you have a real name.”

He smiled and blushed. “Zack Stewart.”

Annie extended her hand. “Annie Reynolds.”

“It is nice to formally meet you Annie.”

“At least this time I’m relatively vertical.”

Zack laughed. “How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?”

“I’m feeling fine. It’s a getting late. Do you need to be somewhere?”

“No.”

“You came to Ash Fork just to see me? From where?”

“Val Verde.”

“Where’s that?”

“Near Santa Clarita.”

“California? That’s got to be, what, five hours?”

“Actually I made good time. Just under six and a half.”

“What!? You drove all that way to the middle of nowhere just to see me? You know there is this thing called the telephone.”

He took her hand in his. “No. A phone call wouldn’t work. I had to see you. I had to know you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.”

“You mean beside the lump on your head and what must be a killer headache.”

Annie smiled. “I’m made of tough stuff.”

“I can see that.”

Annie set down the ice pack. “It’s getting late. Why don’t I make you some dinner?”

“Oh, you don’t need to wait on me. I should get going.”

“Get going? You’ve got at least a four hour drive before you hit a hotel. This couch folds out. You can stay here.”

Zack looked at her, stunned. “You don’t even know me.”

Annie sat up and smiled. She brushed her hand across his beard. “Yes I do.”



Annie's head still hurt but the least she could do was make the guy some dinner. He did try to defend her. And he did carry her into house. That along was deserving of a meal. "Can I get you a beer? I don't have any here but I can get Joey to bring some over.

"No thanks. I don't drink," he said.

She stopped moving around the kitchen and looked at him. "A biker who doesn't drink beer?"

"I don't like me when I drink, so I don't."

Annie shrugged. "Huh. That's a first."

"You have to handle a lot of guys like the ones who were there that day?"

"Some. But after the attack the local club put the word out. Anyone who gives me any trouble will have to answer to them. It's been pretty quiet since then." She opened her fridge and looked in. "How do you feel about chili?"

"Spicy?"

She put her hands on her hips and smiled. "I'm from Texas."

"I feel just fine about it."

"Ice tea?"

"Sounds great." He walked up behind her. "What can I do to help?"

She pointed to a far cabinet. "The glasses are over there."

Annie reheated the chili and set out some fresh rolls. She watched as Zack found the dishes and set the table without being asked. She found herself wondering about him. He looked like the toughest of the badass bikers who'd ever walked into her place. She could see his considerable muscles on his arms and she'd bet his chest was just as well defined. He certainly looked great in a pair of jeans. His ass was...she shook her head. He could be married, involved, or gay. He turned and caught her staring. He smiled at her and she turned back to her chili. "Not gay," she thought. "Definitely not."

“What?” he asked.

“What?” she replied.

“You were staring.”

“I was just wondering if there is someone you should be calling. Letting them know you’re here.”

Zack smiled and walked closer. “No,” he said quietly. “There’s no one.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Is someone going to be upset by me sleeping on your couch?”

Annie smiled as she stirred. “No.”

“Really?”

She was amused by his genuine surprise. “Well, I think between Ash Fork being so small and the word going out that I’m friends with the local Boozefighters chapter, it’s limited my available dating pool.”

“Are they trouble?”

“Who? The Boozefighters?” She smiled. “God no. They’re just regular guys who like to ride but they look intimidating as hell. They treat me like a sister. They look out for me.” She started to dish out the chili into bowls. “So I’ve answered your questions. Now it’s your turn. So why are you single? I’m sure there is a number of ladies in Val Verde who like to take you off the market.” They sat down at the table and Zack took a sip of his tea.

“The ladies aren’t lining up.”

“For God’s sake, why? Are they blind?”

Zack laughed. “I tend to be pretty quiet. I usually keep to myself.”

“What do you do in Val Verde?”

“I have a bike shop. I do some restoration work.”

“Just Harley’s or do you do Indian’s and Curtis too?”

He looked up at her and smiled. “Most people don’t know about anything other than Harley’s”

“Most people don’t have a large clientele of bikers. You pick up a few things over the years.” She stopped in mid bite. “You don’t work on Kawasaki do you?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“They sound like annoyed bumble bees.” She enjoyed his laughter.

“Do you ride?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to learn but I never did.”

“I could teach you.”

“You could?”

“Sure. I’ve taught a few people who come to my shop.”

Annie smiled. “That’s something to think about. How do you like your chili?”

“It’s great.”

Annie watched as Zack enjoyed his dinner and wondered what the hell was she thinking? He lived more than six hours away. He had a life in California and hers was here in Arizona. She couldn’t leave the Johnsons. They were all the family she had. She shook her head and reached for a roll. This was just the man with the nice smile who would spend the night on her couch and leave tomorrow. She would probably never see him again.

Zack was helping Annie with the dishes when her phone rang.

“Hi, Joey. No, I feel fine.” She smiled and glanced at him. “Yes, he’s still here. Thank you, for your concern, but I’ll be fine. No, you don’t need to call Miss Rose.” Annie rolled her eyes. “Is Dorothy there? Let me talk to her.” She covered the speaker and looked at him. “My other waitress.” She uncovered the speaker and smiled. “Dorothy, Dorothy, stop! I’m fine. I fainted. I hit my head. Zack brought me home and I’m fine.” She blushed a bit and turned away. “Because that’s his name. Yes, he’s the one who helped Mr. William when I got hurt. Look, we just finished dinner and I’m sure you have customers to wait on. No, I don’t need dessert. I have some apple pie here. Oh, that’s nice of you, thank you. I’ll take you up on that.” She rolled her eyes again. “Yes, I promise to call if I need anything. Now get back to work,” she laughed. She disconnected the call and set down the phone. “You have to have some of Miss Rose’s apple pie. It’s the best you’ll ever have.”

“Sounds great.”

Annie got up and pulled the pie out of the fridge. She cut a two good size pieces and put them in the microwave. “Vanilla ice cream?”

“Of course,” he smiled. She pulled the ice cream from the freezer and dish a scoop on each warm slice by the time she brought it to the table, the ice cream had started to melt over the pie. He took a bite and smiled. “Oh my God, you’re right. This is amazing.”

“Told you so.”

“It sounds you have a lot of people looking out for you.”

“Yes. I have some good people around me.” She looked at him and smiled. For a minute he thought she might mean him too. No. Technically, they’ve only just met.

“What were you taking Dorothy up on?”

“She offered to take my shift tomorrow so I could have the day off. I thought it was a good idea. I could use a day off.” She picked up the dessert dishes and put them in the dishwasher. “Would you like to watch a movie?”

“Sounds good,” he smiled. He followed her into the living room resolving to sit through whatever she picked. Probably ‘Steel Magnolias’ or some other chick flick. He smiled as she checked the TV schedule on the Action channel.

“Oh, my favorite.” She clicked the button and on came Bruce Willis in an airport. “‘Die Hard 2’, how’s that?”

“Great. You like action movies?”

“I love to see things blow up,” she laughed. She sat down on the couch and smiled. “Join me.”

He sat down next to her on the couch and got comfortable. She kicked off her shoes and pulled her feet up on the cushions.

“Lose the boots. Get comfortable.”

“Okay,” he smiled. He pulled off his boots and stretched out. He sat back and watched the movie. He looked over at Annie and did his own staring. She hadn’t changed much. She was still slim and fit, no doubt from the years of hard work. If it weren’t for a few crows feet around her eyes, she could easily be mistaken for a high school cheerleader. No makeup, no pretense. Zack guessed her age somewhere around thirty. Her long blonde hair was still in a ponytail but she cut bangs across her forehead and down the side of her face, no doubt to cover the scars. The scars he didn’t prevent.

“They aren’t as bad as they used to be,” she said, staring at the screen.

“What?”

“The scars,” she said as she touched the fringe on her cheek.

He reached out and pushed the hair away from her cheek. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t stop them,” he whispered.

“Don’t you realize without you it would have been a lot worse?”

“I don’t think they’re bad. I know that’s what you thought in the restaurant, but I didn’t.” He risked reaching out to touch her cheek. “It’s just...”

“What?”

“They’re part of my nightmares. I see that bastard kicking you and hitting you and then the blood. I try to get to you but I can’t.” She surprised him by covering his hand with hers.

“Then I understand why you needed to see me in person.” She rubbed his hand down her cheek. He felt the small ridges of the stitches but that was all. “After five years they’ve faded.” Her eyes welled with tears. “Please don’t have nightmares over me. No more. You’ve suffered enough.”

“How do you know what I’ve suffered?”

“I saw it in your eyes when you came in the door five years ago and I see it now. You’re holding on to a lot of pain. I don’t want me to be a part of it. I don’t have to be. I’m okay. I recovered. I have a home, a business and good friends. I’m okay, Zack. I promise.” She ran her fingers through his hair. She leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. “Thank you for coming to my rescue. You’re a good man, Zack.”

He couldn’t stop a tear from running down his cheek. “How are you so sure?”

She smiled. “Because you’re not.”

“What do you mean?”

“After all these years, I’ve learned to read people. Some people are open books, for good or bad. It’s easy to see who they are. Some people pretend they’re good guys but I can see the fangs. You know what I see when I look at you?”

“What?”

“I see a man who’s trying his best, but you’re struggling. Every day, one foot in front of the other. You’re not even sure what you’re walking toward but you keep going. That’s real strength.”

Zack looked into her blue eyes and realized she understood him, maybe better than he did himself. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Annie smiled. “Hey, I just call them like I see them.”

He ran his hand over her cheek. "You are extraordinary."

"Nah, I'm just a waitress."

"No, you're not," he said as he leaned close and gave her a tender kiss. She deepened the kiss and he pulled her close. When they finally pulled apart she smiled.

"Well, that answers that question." she laughed.

"What question?"

"I couldn't remember anything of that day but I remembered your eyes and your smile. All these years I saw your face and I wondered what it would be like to kiss you."

Zack smiled. "What's the verdict?"

"I like it, very much."

"So do I."

Her smile faded. "But tomorrow you'll go home. Long distance things...."

He nodded. "I understand. You're right."

She brushed her hand through his hair. "I am glad we've had today."

"So am I."

Zack stared at the ceiling wondering if he'd ever be able to sleep with Annie in the next room. She was right. He turned to his side and pulled the sheets over his shoulders. They lived over six hours apart. She had made her life in Ash Fork. She'd created a family here. He had a life in Val Verde. His business was there. He had a house. He had friends. He closed his eyes and remembered Annie's kiss.

"No. Stop."

Zack woke when he thought he heard. He heard crying. "Please stop. Help me, please." He got out of bed and listened at Annie's door. "Help me, please." He opened

the door and saw Annie thrashing back and forth. “No, please.” He sat on the edge of the bed and held her shoulders.

“Annie, Annie, can you hear me? It’s okay. Annie, can you open your eyes?” She opened her eyes as gasped.

“You’re here.” She threw her arms around Zack’s neck. “You’re here,” she whispered. “You’re real.”

He pulled back and looked in her eyes. “I’m real.”

She laid back against her pillows. “For the longest time I thought you were a figment of my imagination. I thought I’d imagined a knight in shining armor to come rescue me from the bad guys.” She touched his face and the tears ran down her cheeks. “I kept dreaming about you, calling my name. But you were always just out reach.”

“I’m here now,” he whispered.

She brushed her hand over Zack’s cheek. “Yes, you are.” She pulled him closer and gave him a soft kiss. “All these years, when I was most afraid, I saw your face and I knew I’d be okay.” She kissed him again. “I saw your smile, your eyes.” She deepened the kiss. “You’re here, at least for now.”

“Are you sure?”

“All we ever really have is now.”

Zack gave her a deep kiss and slid his hands under her t-shirt. His hands rubbed over her warm skin. He pushed the top over her head as she pulled off her panties. He placed kisses down her neck, travelled down her body kissing and tasting as he explored. He stopped long enough to pull his t-shirt over his head and yanked off his boxers. He climbed into bed and took Annie in his arms. He kissed her the way he’d dreamed of all these years.



Annie stirred at the sunshine in her eyes. Her eyes popped open when she realized how late it must be. Then she remembered. She rolled to her side and curled up against Zack. She knew saying goodbye would be hard, but at least she had last night.

“Good morning,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He pulled her close and gave her a soft kiss. “Waking up in the arms of a beautiful woman is the best way in the world to wake up.”

“How about I put the coffee on?”

Zack smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

Annie was putting out the mugs when she heard the knock at door. “Annie? Are you up?” Zack came out of the bathroom, thankfully dressed.

“Pretty early for company,” he said.

“Annie, are you alright?” called the voice.

“Crap, it’s Miss Rose. I should have called her.”

“Sounds like she’s not going away. You better let her in.”

Annie squared her shoulders and opened the front door. “Hello Miss Rose. I’m sorry. I should have called.”

“Yes you should.” A small grey haired woman barreled her way into the living room carrying a container. She was wearing jeans and a long sleeve top. Her speed belied a woman of eighty years. “What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Rose. I’m fine, I promise.”

“I brought soup.” Miss Rose stopped in her tracks when she saw Zack standing in the kitchen. Annie took the soup from her hands and put it on the kitchen table.

“Miss Rose, this is Zack Stewart. He’s the one who helped me when I fainted.” Miss Rose looked back and forth between the two of them.

“And, he’s still here.”

“Miss Rose, he’s the one who helped Mr. William and me when we were attacked.”

She put her hand to her mouth. “What?”

“He tried to stop them. All these years, his was the face I remembered. I began to think I’d imagined him. When he came into the diner yesterday it took me awhile but I remembered. It all came flooding back and that’s when I fainted.”

Miss Rose walked toward Zack and pulled him into a tight hug. “My husband told me what you did. You were very brave. You took a beating but you stopped that man. William said you were so protective of my Annie. He said you made sure that the EMT’s looked after both of them but you left before they could check out your injuries.”

“I wasn’t hurt bad, Ma’am.”

“You didn’t even leave your name.”

“The police had everything they needed.”

Miss Rose touched Zack’s cheek. “We couldn’t find you to thank you.”

“I didn’t need to be thanked. I just wanted to make sure Annie and Mr. William were okay. Annie told me Mr. William passed. I’m very sorry Ma’am”

“Thank you, son. God decided it was time to take him home. I miss him every day but we had fifty wonderful years together.” She turned to Annie and held her by the arms. “Now look at me, Miss Thing.” Miss Rose looked Annie in the eyes. “You seem okay.”

“I am, I promise.”

“You eat that soup and you call me later. Dorothy told me she’s covering you today so I want you to rest.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Annie looked at the fold out bed, still pulled out and nodded. “Zack lives north of Santa Clarita. It’s over six hours away. By the time I got settled it was late. I asked him to stay.”

Miss Rose smiled. “Did I ask?”

“No Ma’am but I...”

Miss Rose ignored Annie and turned toward Zack. “Now that we know each other, don’t be a stranger.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he smiled.

“I need to go. The ladies are coming for bridge and lunch.” She gave Annie a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t you forget to call me.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

She surprised Zack by kissing him on the cheek too. “Thank you for looking after my girl, then and now.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Rose.”

Annie closed the door behind her and looked at Zack. “Well...”

Zack slipped his arms around her waist. “Do you think she bought the idea I slept on the fold out?”

“Not for a minute,” she laughed.

While Dennis Quaid walked through a snow apocalypse on her TV, Annie curled up on the couch with Zack. “Are you sure no one is missing you at home?”

“Is that your way of asking if I have a girlfriend?”

“I’ve never been known for my subtlety.”

Zack laughed and pulled her tight against him. “No one is looking for me. I have an employee covering my shop until I get back. I live alone in the house I grew up in. My parents have both passed. I have a brother who lives in LA with his wife and two kids. I belong a motorcycle club and take the occasional road trip.”

“Where you meet damsels in distress like me,” she laughed.

He gave her a soft kiss. “Why you may be the prettiest damsel I’ve ever met, I think you do pretty well at taking care of yourself.”

Annie smiled. “I don’t know which part of that compliment to kiss you for first.”

“How about one, all encompassing kiss.” Zack gave her a deep kiss. She pulled back and smiled.

“I still can’t believe there’s no special woman in Val Verde that’s not pining for you.”

“My friends will occasionally set me up but, no, none of them turned into a serious relationship.”

“It’s the same way for me. Miss Rose and the family are always trying to match me up with someone. None of them took.”

“What about your family?”

Annie shook her head. “I’m not sure where they are or if they’re even alive. My father was one of Mom’s many boyfriends who, to quote her, ‘took off as soon as I showed up.’ She hung around long enough to collect my SSI until I was eighteen. Then she took off. I have a brother, Fred, who was into partying since he was a kid. He was gone by then too. I had a job waiting tables in Houston but I lost my job when the place closed down. Everyone was always talking about LA so I decided to give it a try. I stopped here

on the way. Mr. William was short handed and he was slammed that day. I offered to help. That was fifteen years ago.”

“You never went to LA.”

“You know, I never did. Not even on vacation. I think I found what I was looking for in Ash Fork. I never needed to leave.”

“It sounds like Mr. William just about adopted you.”

“He did. From that first day he could see what I needed. Roots, a place to be needed and a family who cared about me. The Johnsons have been a real family to me.”

“I’m glad for you. You deserve a family who loves you.”

“So do you.”

They watched as Dennis Quaid miraculously found Jake Gyllenhaal even though half the planet had already frozen to death. Annie tried not to think about Zack leaving but she could see it was getting late. They’d had Miss Rose’s soup with some rolls for lunch. She could see the sun getting lower and she knew if Zack was going to get home before midnight, he needed to leave.

“I know it’s getting time for you to get on the road.”

“You know I don’t want to.”

“I know but we both agreed. The long distance thing is a pain in the ass.”

“Yeah it is.” Zack stood at the door and pulled her into his arms. “It doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop thinking about you.”

She was proud of herself for holding back the tears. “I’ll never stop thinking of you.” She watched as he walked around the side of the diner. She heard his Harley rev and listened until the sound disappeared down the highway. Then she let the tears fall.

### Five Years Later

“Yes, Amber, I guarantee it’s original. I know how long you’ve been looking for it and I wouldn’t insult your intelligence with a repop. That’s fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.” In the last few years he’d expanded from just motorcycle restoration to classic cars. When he did that, business took off. He had a knack for finding original parts and he was a gifted restoration mechanic. He had so much work he had to bring on help.

He hung up the phone and took the chrome V from the little boy’s hands. “You did a great job. It’s very shiny. Miss Amber will be very pleased.”

“Billy!” They both turned toward the sound of Billy’s angry mother.

“Uh oh,” Zack said. “I think we’re in trouble.”

“Mommy look,” said Billy as he pointed to the chrome in Zack’s hand. “I helped. Shiny.”

“He did a good job. It’s the front chrome for Amber’s 58 Impala. She’s been looking for it for two years.”

“That’s wonderful but now Billy is a greasy mess. I told you to keep an eye on him.”

“What can I say?” He smiled and ruffled his son’s blonde hair. “He’s a grease monkey like his old man.”

Billy giggled. “I’m a monkey like Daddy.”

Annie let a smile slip. “You certainly are. Now Daddy can give you another bath.” She rubbed her hand over her round belly. “It was tough enough the first time.”

Zack scooped up his son and gave his wife a quick kiss. He ran a hand over her belly. “Maybe this one will be more like you.”

“Not a chance. This one is going to be just like his Daddy and his big brother.”

“Well, I certainly could use the help. The business is getting pretty big.”

“That’s what you get for being so good,” she smiled and gave him a kiss.

“It also doesn’t hurt that I’m the only game in town.”

“Oh please, save the modesty. You have customers all over the country. Now go clean your son. I’ll get lunch ready.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he said.

When Zack left Annie’s house that day five years ago he’d thought it was for the last time. They lived six hours apart and long distance relationships didn’t work. He’d found out what he needed, that Annie was okay. She was more than okay. She’d made a good life for herself out of circumstances that would have broken most people. He could put this behind him and go on with his life.

That lasted for about a week.

Annie was surprised when he showed up on her doorstep the next weekend. He didn’t call because he was afraid she would tell him not to come. He was still afraid she’d send him away that was until she threw her arms around him and kissed him. He knew then he was home. After six months of traveling back and forth he put his house on the market and moved his business to Ash Fork. He expanded the small garage into a place large enough to accommodate his equipment and he never looked back. It turned out he was the only restoration guy within three hundred miles. Pretty quick, every gearhead in the state knew Zack Stewart was the guy to see.

He was also pretty quick about making sure Annie Reynolds became Annie Stewart. Miss Rose was in her glory helping Annie plan the wedding of her dreams. He had secretly told Miss Rose to spare no expense. He would see to it that the little girl nobody wanted would have the biggest wedding in Arizona. Since everyone knew Annie, everyone was invited. Miss Rose was lovely as the mother of the bride. Her daughter, Evelyn, was matron of honor. Evelyn’s son, Martin, catered the reception.

Annie. His Annie. When he saw her being to walk up the aisle with her adopted brother, Frank, his heart pounded. She was always beautiful, but today she was breathtaking. She giggled when she got to the front of the aisle.

“You look so different,” she whispered. It was the first time she’d seen him in a suit, let alone a tuxedo. He’d trimmed his hair but at her insistence, left the beard.

“You look like an angel,” he said as he took her hand. He’d always heard that a wedding was the bride’s special day but he would always remember it as his best day. Annie was so happy and beautiful. She greeted all the guests and she was the queen of Ash Fork. He caught a mischievous glint in her eye when she took his hand and pulled him behind a potted tree.

“I know what you did,” she said.

“What?” he asked as he slipped his hands around her waist.

“I know you told Miss Rose to go all out, do whatever I wanted.”

“I wanted you to be happy.”

Annie’s eyes glistened. “I would have been happy with a judge and the family. I never dreamed of all this. I never dared.” She touched her hand to his cheek. “You’ve made all my dreams come true.”

Yes, it had been his best day.

That was of course until Billy was born. He threw his son’s greasy clothes in the hamper and ran the water. Billy was such a happy boy, always laughing and playing. Billy splashed Zack and he splashed him back. The water fight had grown to epic proportions when they heard “Oh my God.” Zack turned to see Annie standing in the doorway with her arms crossed.

“I think we’re in trouble again,” said Billy. Zack couldn’t hold it in. He burst out laughing.

“Oh, yes, very funny,” said Annie. Zack could tell she was trying hard not to laugh. “Now you get to clean the bathroom and your son. When you’re finished, lunch is ready.” She walked down the hall before he heard her laugh.

Zack dried off his son and couldn’t help smile when his dry but still naked son help mop up the water with his towel. “Good job, buddy. Now let’s get you dressed before



Mommy comes looking for us again.” He got Billy into some dry shorts and a t-shirt before walking into the kitchen. Billy climbed onto his chair and reached for his sandwich.

“Wait for all of us to sit, young man,” said Annie. Billy retracted his hand and looked properly chastened.

Zack smiled and pulled Annie into a hug. “Are we forgiven?”

“Is the bathroom dry?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he and his son said in unison.

“Then you’re both forgiven. Now let’s have lunch.”

“Just a sec.” Zack gave Annie a kiss as passionate as he dared in front of his son.

“Daddy, I’m hungry.”

Zack leaned in and whispered. “Daddy’s hungry too.” Annie blushed bright red and pushed him back.

“You hush,” she whispered.

He sat down and looked across the table at his son and his beautiful wife. Soon there’d be one more at the table. Ten years ago he couldn’t have imagined this life. Now he couldn’t imagine anything else. Or anything better.



