

Until Next Time

Of all people on the freeway, why did it have to be the Grim Reaper who stopped to check on her? At least, Ann assumed that's who it was, considering the motorcycle's license plate read REAPER. The figure wore all black, except for a helmet spray-painted with a half-exposed brain.

Shaken after her crash into the guard rail, Ann rested her head against the steering wheel and practiced her meditative breathing techniques.

Tap tap. She opened her eyes; it was the face of death hovering on the other side of her window: Gleaming white bone and dark eye sockets that froze her in their gaze. Is this how she died? 25 years old, on a shoulder off Interstate 10 to Tucson? She closed her eyes and a shiver raked her spine. When she opened them again the skull was gone, replaced by a face that was quite human, if not rather sad and lonely. She must have imagined it— maybe she had hit her head during the crash.

"You okay?" The Reaper asked. He was older and rough-looking, with weathered skin and long, tied back salt-and-pepper hair. He smelled of smoke. Ann nodded, relieved he wasn't who she thought he was, and climbed out of her car.

Desert stretched for miles in all directions, interrupted only by a ribbon of black road. The Arizona sun was merciless. Squinting, she looked up at him, one hand on the mace tucked inside her purse, just in case. "Thank you for your concern, that's so nice of you."

"No problem," he said. His voice was deep and rasping. Although cars zoomed by, standing next to him felt strangely intimate. He seemed to gather silence into him like water filling an empty vessel.

"A coyote ran across the road and I freaked," Ann said.

He wiped his brow. "It's hot as hell out here."

"You would know," Ann joked.

The Reaper smiled without humor. "I would." He lit a cigar and on his exhale, said:

"Been riding south from the wildfire."

"The one burning in California?"

"Yes." Stiffly, he eased himself onto the ground, in the shadow of his bike. There was so much pain in the Reaper's eyes, Ann no longer felt scared of him. Instead, she felt scared *for* him. Maybe he pulled over so he could have someone to talk to. She crouched down awkwardly beside him. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Under the cornflower blue sky, on asphalt that stunk of fresh tar and radiated heat, he told her about the city devoured in flames. The ash and smoke and fire that closed in on both sides of the highway. The charred bodies and skeleton cars and screams.

Sitting next to the Reaper, Ann felt too young and unequipped to comfort him. She didn't know what to say, so she just sat with him, and stayed for a while longer, until the smoke in his eyes cleared a little.

Later, the Reaper watched Ann ride away in a tow truck. She could have easily died, but with the fires still raging, he didn't have the heart to take yet another life before its time. He would meet her again one day, but hopefully as a figure of mercy, and not terror.