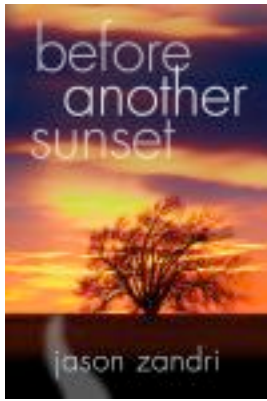


before another sunset



jason zandri



Westville, Texas. A small town with friendly people; families that have stayed and endured life's ups and downs. Many have left as the town no longer can fully support its own. An old woman maintains one of the remaining small businesses at the center of town, helped by Maria, her second floor tenant. Maria's daughter Caroline starts to question her father's absence. She also dreams up an idea to help the local library. Friends uncover true feelings and a kind drifter's travels bring him closer to the town.

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Chapter One

Peter Dempsey checked the time on his phone while leaning against his red Peterbilt 379. With the single cell signal bar flashing in and out of service, the time rolled from 5:59 to 6:00. He stretched his large arms up and over his head, and arched his back. He stepped away from the cab of the truck and turned east to let the early morning June sun hit his face.

A warm breeze came up from the south, seemingly starting from the rear of Peter's truck, blowing the loose, dry, Texas flatland all over State Route 385.

Peter closed his eyes for an instant while the sand worked its way across his face and the two day stubble. As suddenly as the burst came, it ended and a lighter morning breeze followed up in its place.

Charlotte Cassidy made her way out of the side door into the parking lot of the small store that bore her name. She looked into the sun and Peter's direction and called out, "You do know I've been in here a bit despite not being open," her eighty two year old voice cracking a little at the end of her comment.

"Yes Miss Charlotte," Peter responded kindly while removing his baseball cap and making his way over. "I'm about to get all cooped up in the truck again. The last thing I wanted to do was come in on the early side just to sit at the counter, even though the company and the coffee are otherwise well worth it."

"Well," Charlotte said quickly turning around with a tiny smile, "come in when you're ready." A bit of her relaxed, southern accent escaped with her response. "I'm not about to come out here to fetch you again."

Peter smirked as Charlotte disappeared back into the store ahead of him. Try as she might, Charlotte only sounded so gruff. After that it was more motherly or grandmotherly depending on the recipient's age.

Peter turned his head to the right and looked across Route 385 to the stores and homes on the north side of the road as he hit the side stoop of *Charlotte's Place* and then stepped inside.

Maria Moreno was already behind the counter getting the coffee ready to serve to the customers. "Good morning, Mr. Peter," she said smiling politely, with a little nuance of her Mexican accent coming out. "I hope you slept well last evening. The temperature dropped a little lower than normal for this time of the year."

"It was actually a might refreshing Miss Maria," Peter responded with a slight southern twang to his comment, taking a seat on one of the stools along the serving counter. "There are some nights, 'specially on my northern routes in the winter, where I just have to run the rig all night long or I'd done freeze out. Then down here in the summer, there are those nights where it's just too hot no matter what you do."

Maria stopped her work for a moment along the back of the counter area and dropped her long black hair out of her hair catch to tie it back up tighter. "So I would believe "it is a dry heat" holds very little merit on nights such as those."

"That be right on target," Peter said smiling. Charlotte made her way around Maria with a mug for Peter and the freshly brewed coffee decanter. "Thank you Miss Charlotte. I sure am going to miss this coffee once I am back on the road."

"Because it's good or because it's free," she quipped with the slightest smile.

“Oh now, you know I come out of the way on some trips just to come through here,” Peter said with just a hint of defense in his tone.

“Oh I know... let an old gal play with you,” Charlotte responded playfully.

Peter pulled the coffee mug off the counter, took a small sip, and then set it down. Charlotte made her way back to the coffee burner station while Maria came over with a menu. “Did you need to take a look at it or do you already know what you want?” Maria responded, looking up at the store clock.

Peter just looked over at Charlotte who was now near the grill and he nodded slightly to her. With that, Charlotte began to cook Peter’s usual order of pancakes, cooked in bacon grease, with an order of bacon strips on the side.

“Miss Charlotte, I believe we are all set up. I want to run up and check on Caroline and then I will be right back down,” Maria said calling back to the grill area while heading towards the backroom exit.

“I’m fine child. Go on up and tend to your daughter and then come back down as soon as you can. You’re always quick...” Charlotte responded and then trailed off. Maria smiled to her and then exited into the backroom and out the back door, making her way over to the apartment side of the building. She then headed up the stairs to her second floor apartment.

Charlotte finished up the breakfast order for Peter and came around the corner to set it down in front of him. “Are you headed back east along 385 or are you heading over to the interstate?” Charlotte asked, grabbing the syrup for the pancakes.

Peter took the milk off the counter and poured a little into his coffee. “Yeah. I have to make a stop... to um...”

“Maria left,” Charlotte replied, lowering her voice. “Are you still having issues with the back taxes on the truck?”

“Yes ma’am. I’m so embarrassed by it all,” Peter said as a knot formed in his throat. “I thought I was thinking of everything, you know, going off on my own, and working for myself.” Peter took another sip from his coffee and continued. Charlotte pulled up a loose raised stool on the serving side of the counter. “I really did think I had everything in order, but once you miss one thing, you find another, and so on. When the government opens the books to take a look at your taxes, that’s when you realize all the details you’ve missed. If I can’t get to a resolution soon, I’m worried they’ll take the truck in place of the taxes I missed and owe, being behind schedule and all.”

“Fffft!” Charlotte exclaimed. “That’s the logic of the government for you. Take away the ability for someone to make their livelihood; as if that would help them to pay up on what they owe. Doing that is going to help someone? “Pro” is the opposite of “con” so it’s only logical what is the opposite of “progress.””

Peter responded softly with a slight sigh and a little bit of a smirk with her comments. “Well in my case, it actually does cover the bills. If they repossess the truck and trailer and sell it, it’ll cover everything that is due. It’ll shoot my credit to hell and leave me without a way to earn a living driving, but all that is owed would be paid. Maybe there’d be a little left over, but not much to do anything with.”

“Do you really think it’ll come to that?” Charlotte asked leaning forward and then looking back to the rear of the store to see if Maria was on her way back in.

“It is that bad but I met a fella who is trying to help me out. He thinks maybe there is a way to talk with someone at the IRS to get a settlement cost of what I owe, and then lock it into a payment schedule that I can manage.”

“Not some slick, corporate, government huckster I hope,” Charlotte said with a tone of disdain in her voice.

“No, no, Miss Charlotte. A regular fellow. Nice guy. Sharp as a tack. Literally has nothing except the clothes on his back. Well, that and whatever he carries with him in this big duffle bag he always takes with him,” Peter said as his entire tone changed to the positive. “The things he does, the way he gets things done, it’s almost like magic.”

“Hrumph!” Charlotte said scooting off the stool. “I don’t believe in magic or that much good will from someone. What’s in it for him?”

“You might if you met him. I’ve talked about Westville to him. He moves around quite a bit. He’s a drifter. He doesn’t have a permanent place to stay and he doesn’t ever stay around in any one place too often. I have to say, having only seen him over his last couple of stops or so, where he goes, he makes quite the impression. Somehow, he always seems to make a positive difference where he is at the time.”

“Who does Mr. Peter?” asked young Caroline leading her way in from the rear of the store ahead of her mother.

“A friend of mine down the road a ways. So how is our cheery eight year old this morning?” Peter asked with a wide smile.

“I’m eight and a half. I’ll be nine in just a few months,” Caroline said smiling and rounding the counter to the serving side, with her backpack draped over her shoulder. “With school all done for the summer, it’s almost like the time won’t be there at all and POOF, I’ll be nine.”

“Yes, well youngin’, I wouldn’t recommend growing up any faster than you need to,” Peter said, turning in his chair to cut up more of his pancakes. “At eight-ish, nine-ish, that’s the sweet spot of childhood. Trust me when I tell you, you want to stay right there.”

“Mr. Peter? Why do all old people say that?” Caroline asked innocently.

“Carolena!” Maria exclaimed from the coffee station. “You should not respond to an elder like that!”

“Oh it’s OK Maria. I’m not offended. It’s the way she has to size me up,” Peter said turning to Caroline who took the seat next to him. “You see little one, you’re at this spot in life where you’re old enough to do many things, fun things, but also young enough to not have a bunch of worries and things to be responsible for. Does that make sense?”

“I think so,” Caroline said putting her backpack on the ground after untangling her long black hair from the strap.

Maria made her way over and reheated Peter’s coffee as Mel Porter came through the front door of the store. “Good morning Doc,” Maria said as she finished refilling Peter’s coffee.

“Good morning everyone. Caroline, Maria, Peter... you too Miss Charlotte,” Mel Porter said taking his usual seat at the far end of the counter. “How is everyone this fine, first Monday of June?”

“I am quite well myself, Doc,” Maria answered while taking a coffee mug for him and filling it.

“Peter, I understand you’re getting ready to travel for your next run this morning. East or west?” Mel asked pouring sugar into his coffee.

“I’ll be headed east for this run, Doc. I have a delivery and some other business to address as well. I do expect to be back through in about four weeks, as usual,” Peter answered as he finished off the last of his breakfast. “Well I’m all done with breakfast, guess I’ll square up and head out now. Any earlier time up the road now is cushion in case there are issues. Nothing from the Sheriff right?”

“I haven’t heard anything from Sheriff Neely on the scanner, so I reckon the road is clear,” Henry Baylor, who owned Baylor Appliances, announced assuredly, walking into the store and heading towards the counter. “You should have a nice smooth ride Mr. Peter.”

Peter looked at the younger man and smiled a little as Henry took a seat on the stool at the turn of the counter where he could see Maria best. Peter patted Caroline on the head, waved to Doc and Maria, and called out to Charlotte as he dropped cash for breakfast on the counter. “I’ll be planning to see y’all again in a few weeks. Keep the grill warm for me.”

“We will Mr. Peter. Drive safely,” Maria answered as she stepped away from the front counter area.

Peter took his cap and leaned over to Henry and whispered in his ear, “Confidence. You’ve known each other a long while, you’re thirty nine, she’s twenty seven so the age difference is not a whole, big issue... You’re going to have to take the leap. She’s strong willed and progressive but she still is the type of woman that looks for the man to make the first move. Good luck. Fill me in over the Fourth of July holiday; I should be back around then.”

Henry smiled at Peter’s words as he watched the trucker take his leave from the store and then looked over to Maria. Peter was right. They had been friends for a long time. Henry would come in to the store two or three times a week just to talk to her and see how she and Caroline were doing. He always knew there was a little more to it than “friends” but for one reason or another he never told her his true feelings. Henry adjusted his lanky frame on the stool a bit and leaned forward.

Charlotte walked to the serving counter and watched Henry’s eyes follow Maria around the back counter area. She smiled slightly as he would notice being seen and then look away or around the store and then try to follow her more by looking in the mirror. Charlotte wasn’t a particularly soft woman but she did like to see good things for the people she cared about and she cared about Maria and Caroline a great deal.

“Maria, child, can you please get me a couple boxes of paper towels out of the back and put them in the front display while it’s slow in here?” Charlotte called out as she looked over at Mel who was eating and reading the newspaper.

Henry fiddled with his coffee mug while Caroline changed seats and took a stool at the far opposite end of the counter. He watched Maria come out of the backroom and walk past the serving counter entrance towards the display in the front of the store. Only when his line of

vision crossed Charlotte did he realize she was watching him. Somewhat embarrassed at being caught he looked down into his coffee and then at the time on his watch.

“It’s not time to open the store yet so we can have a little chat,” Charlotte replied in a hushed tone pulling a stool over to take a seat. “How long are you planning to pine over her?”

“Miss Maria?” Henry said innocently.

“Yes,” Charlotte said in her matter of fact tone. “I would presume at this point it is a foregone conclusion that you’re interested in her. Certainly everyone else knows it. She might even at this point.”

Henry looked over at Caroline to confirm she couldn’t hear the conversation. With her nose pressed inside a book he assumed she couldn’t. “Well Miss Charlotte, we are friends,” he said in a quiet manner. “I do like to come around and talk to her. She’s very smart and kind. But I’ve known her a long time being a bit older and all.” He paused to take a sip from his coffee. “I remember when I was in my twenties and she was, well... too young to consider. Then she met her William and all...”

“Who has left,” Charlotte responded sharply. “And time has gone by from that and your other concern. I realize that the town isn’t getting any larger and to be quite blunt, since the travelers have thinned out with the shrinking economy and all, people that want to be together are limited to their friends or friends of friends around here.”

“I just don’t know really how to say something,” he responded meekly with a slight hint of southern drawl. “I was never really good at it and it’s worse now that I am older and some folks I used to know and considered have moved away to El Paso and such.”

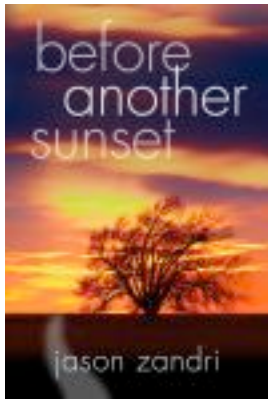
“She is a kind woman,” Charlotte responded softly. “Even if she is not interested in that manner she will be proper about it. I think you should make the effort if it is something you feel. You will never really know one way or the other until you try.”

“I feel funny about her little girl too,” Henry said with a slight gesture. “I’ve known her since the day she was born.”

“Knowing the both of them for as long as you have puts you in a more comfortable place than another suitor if you think about it. You are already friends so you have a head start and can only move “up” from here. As I mentioned, if the interest isn’t there at least you know and you can be basically assured she’ll handle it properly. She may be tough as nails sometimes on the exterior, but she has a soft heart.”

Henry mulled over what Charlotte had said as Maria wrapped up at the front of the store and returned but he said nothing further.

The bell on the front door of the store rang as a couple more people entered for breakfast and coffee.



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