

CHAPTER 25

Andi and Brando

"Oh well," Andi said, stirring her drink and taking a small sip. "Looks like you're stuck with me!"

"Not such a bad thing," Brando replied easily, taking two packets of sugar and emptying them into the coffee mug that a dark-haired waiter set in front of him.

"Did you eat already?"

"Now that you mention it, I *am*. Want to order?" He gestured towards the two menus on the side of the table.

"Sure, thanks!"

"What's good here?"

"I've been to the bar here but haven't had a meal. My guess is that if you like seafood, this is your place."

Brando glanced over the menu. "Okay, I'll do the lobster."

Andi grinned. "Wow, the whole nine yards, eh? Do you even know how to eat one?" she teased.

"Of course. We have lobster in L.A. you know."

"I actually didn't know that. It never crossed my mind. Never been to L.A."

"Never been to L.A.? We'll have to do something about that." He tapped the menu on the table and smiled at her.

"Why, Brando Cunningham, are you inviting me to visit you in the big city of Los Angeles?" She was pretending to study the menu, secretly pleased.

"Maybe so. Maybe so," he murmured, enjoying the sight of her blushing slightly in the candlelight. Maybe Savannah was right about trying to fix them up. He cleared his throat, bringing himself back to reality. "Totally up to you." He nodded at her menu. "What looks good?"

“Well, I didn’t have enough carbs today at the luncheon for Auntie Zan, so I’m going to have the baked stuffed shrimp.” They laughed and gave their orders to the dark-haired waiter who smiled flirtatiously at Andi. When he finally left, she said, “Do you think Ben’s going to be all right?”

“Yeah, sure. We’re both pretty tired.” He took a slug of the coffee. “And I’m glad you’re here. Savannah talks a lot about you.”

“She talks about you too. And Micah.”

“Do you have kids?”

Andi coughed. “Nope! Not me. Never even thought about it really.” She shrugged. “I don’t stay with men very long.”

Brando frowned. “Must be something wrong with the men you’re picking.”

Andi froze, her drink halfway to her mouth. “Wow. Um. Thank you for that.” She took a sip, the shock of the compliment reverberating through her entire body. “No, it’s just that I... well, to be perfectly honest I got hurt really badly by love when I was in high school, and -”

“Don’t tell me. He left you for a blonde cheerleader?” Brando studied her intently.

Andi laughed. “No, no. I actually WAS the cheerleader, although not blonde as you can see.” She lifted her hair off her neck and let it fall down her back. “Actually, he died.” She said it matter-of-factly and set her drink back down on the table.

“Hey, Andi, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s okay, really. It was a long time ago. And he’s gone now.”

Brando leaned forward, meeting Andi’s eyes. “But he’s still here?” He placed his hand on his heart.

Andi smiled, surprised at his sensitivity. “In some ways, yes, I guess so. We were very close. He was a foreign exchange student my junior year of high school. From Spain. Went back to Spain after graduation of course, and before I graduated high school and could move there to be with him, he was in a bad car accident. My mom and I, we flew over as soon as we heard but it was... too late.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Andi tossed her hair back again, looking away from Brando's penetrating gaze. "Yeah, well. I got over it."

Brando touched his hand to his heart again. "But maybe not really."

She looked at him thoughtfully and stirred her margarita again. "Yeah," she said softly. "Maybe not really."

They both sipped their drinks in silence for a moment and accepted their salad plates from the waiter who spent an unusual amount of time making sure that Andi was happy with the particular configuration of vegetables on the plate.

Andi carefully cut her tomato slices after he left. "What about you? Savannah said you aren't married anymore?"

"No, we separated and divorced six years ago." He chomped on a crouton before spearing a cucumber wedge. "Micah was four."

"That's rough on a kid, I guess."

"Yeah," Brando nodded. "But we all got through it. He's a great kid."

"I know." Andi smiled. "He emailed me right back when I contacted him about getting in touch with you after Auntie Zan died."

"He was so concerned. Should've seen him." Brando smiled, remembering. "Texted me over and over when he got your email. Ben was beside himself when he found out. Also, pissed as hell when he realized Savannah hadn't told him herself." He took a warm roll from the bread basket and bit into it, savoring the yeasty saltiness after the cool crunchy salad.

"No butter?" Andi raised her eyebrows, indicating the small porcelain dish of creamy yellow dollops.

Brando shook his head. "Not me," he replied around a mouthful of the bread, then swallowed. "Saving the butter for the lobster."

"Well, suit yourself, I guess." Andi slathered the soft butter on half of a roll and bit into it lustily. "Oh my God, this is soooo good!" She savored it for a moment then set down the rest of the roll. "I told her to call Ben. I really did."

"I believe you."

"I think she's scared. Savannah."

“Their relationship did happen a little fast I guess.”

“No, I mean she’s scared of being loved, the way... well, the way that Ben actually loves her. Unconditionally. Totally. And so on. Know what I mean?”

Brando started on another roll, looking puzzled. “Not sure.”

“Well, her parents loved her that way. She’s one of the lucky ones who had that kind of love when she was young, but then they both died within a year of each other.” Andi swiped a finger around the rim of her margarita glass and touched it to her tongue, savoring the salty tang. “It’s a deep wound, you know, being torn away from loving parents like that.”

“Didn’t know that about Savannah. But Ben probably does.”

“Yeah, he knows. He knew the first night they met and let me tell you, Savannah doesn’t talk about her parents’ death with just anyone.”

The dark-haired waiter appeared to inquire about their salads. He lingered a little longer than necessary, so Andi smiled generously at him. “Thank you... Salvador,” she said, squinting a little to read the brass nameplate on his pristine white jacket.

“Bueno, bueno,” Salvador beamed and made a little bow. “Your meals will be out very soon.” He enunciated each word slowly, as if still thinking in his native language and translating in his head.

Brando chuckled as the waiter walked away. “Salvador would very much like to take you home tonight,” he said in a mock Italian accent as he poured some more of the blue cheese dressing over the greens.

“Well, he’s going to go home alone, not to worry,” Andi replied, picking up a cherry tomato and popping it in her mouth.

“Oh reeeeeally?” Brando teased. “You and the handsome waiter would make beautiful little dark-haired babies.”

Andi blushed and ducked her head, smiling, as she tucked into her salad again. “God forbid. No little dark-haired babies in my future I’m afraid.”

“Oh?” Brando paused, fork in mid-air, studying this beautiful woman sitting across from him.

“No, I...I just don’t think I’d be a good mom.”

"Because...?" He continued eating his salad slowly, watching her.

Andi put her fork down and crunched on some ice from her margarita for a minute. "Well, because I'm just not good with kids."

"But you do kids' parties at Life Celebrations, right?"

"Yeah, but that's Savannah's thing, not mine. Oh, don't get me wrong. I *like* kids when they get to be, oh, about 8 or 9, and you can have an intelligent conversation with them. But babies? Toddlers?" She shook her head and thoughtfully chewed on a cucumber spear. "Not so much. It's just not in me." She shrugged apologetically.

"Then you'll love Micah." Brando set his fork down and pushed the salad plate away even though he'd only eaten half. He is 10 going on 40, and sometimes I have to use Google to find out what the hell he was talking about."

Andi laughed out loud and pushed her plate away too. "That's too funny."

"Not funny, being that kid's father sometimes. But I love him to death."

"I'll bet," Andi said with a smile. "I bet you're a good father. You're kind of like my dad. Gentle, thoughtful, patient."

"Hey thanks! You know all that about me just from sitting here and having a drink with me?"

"Oh sure. Ask Savannah or any of the others. I can tell a lot about people just by looking at them, or... well, after I've spent a little time with them."

Brando smiled and took a swig of his beer. "Well, that's a good trait to have, isn't it?"

"It really is." Andi twirled the stem of her margarita glass slowly. "Especially when it comes to potential clients who come into the office for what we call an 'intake.' I know it's a term that therapists and doctors use but we look at it that way too, to see if the client is a match for us and our energy. Nine times out of ten, I hit the nail on the proverbial head when I tell Savannah that we shouldn't take a certain client."

"Because you can tell they'll be difficult?"

"Well, it's about more than being difficult. We can handle difficult. We can handle challenges. They happen all the time, regardless of the client. But there are certain people who come in and are persnickety- my mom loves that word- or derogatory, or even demeaning in the way they talk to us, or the way they talk about other people. But it's more than what they

say. It's something about the energy. I can read peoples' energy really well I guess. I've been like this since I was a kid."

"That's pretty amazing-" Brando started, but was interrupted by the reappearance of Salvador who swooped in with their meals.

Andi clapped her hands as she inhaled the buttery ocean smell of her shrimp and Brando grinned at the lobster feast before him. Again, Salvador paid most of his attention to Andi, and Andi was kind but not flirtatious. Brando noticed this silently and took his first crack at the steaming lobster happily.

When the meal was over, Andi was feeling energized in spite of the carbs she'd had before, during, and after the meal (they had shared a luscious piece of apple pie a la mode). She hadn't intended to stay this long; she'd really only come to tell Ben that Savannah needed some time to herself. But Brando... well, there was a surprise around every corner, as her grandmother always used to say. Of course, Savannah had been saying wonderful things about Brando all along, but then Savannah was in love with his best friend so what else would she say? But now, Andi could see for herself how special he was. It had been a long time since she'd felt so relaxed and at ease, so totally herself with a man. And this wasn't even a date!

She shook her head, marveling at this, as she made her way back to the table from the ladies' room. And before she had time to censor herself, she heard herself asking Brando if he'd like to talk a walk. "Just around Salem," she explained brightly, looking away, as if fearful he might turn her down. And she was surprised at that feeling as well. "I can show you the Wharf; it's really pretty at night. And if we're really feeling ambitious, we can head down to the Common."

Brando finished signing the credit card bill, then stood and pushed his chair in, untying the lobster bib which had quite a few stains on it, Andi noted. "I would like that," he said with a smile. "Unless... of course... you want to invite *Salvador* instead."

Andi laughed out loud and a few heads turned. She covered her mouth, smiling and (surprising herself yet again) took his hand. "No way, he's too young for me," she whispered, leading Brando out of the restaurant and onto the sidewalk.

They walked comfortably side by side in the darkened street, lit mostly by streetlights. Not many others were out at this hour, and the night was cool but not chilled.

"So have you lived here all your life?" Brando asked after a while.

"No, not me. I grew up in the Big Apple."

"Then how did you meet Savannah?"

"We both went to Southern Connecticut State University. She was majoring in theatre and education. I was there for hospitality." She held up a hand. "I know what you're going to say. Why didn't I just stay in the city for college?"

"Was I going to say that?" Brando wondered aloud, shaking his head and smiling.

Andi bumped his arm with her elbow. "Come on, you know you were thinking it!"

"Okay, maybe," he admitted. "So...?"

"SCSU has a really good hospitality program and it's actually only an hour out of the city. Plus, I got a good scholarship. And I loved being close to home but not having to live there. You know what I mean?"

"Sure, sure. Everybody's gotta grow up and spread their wings."

"Yeah. So anyway, Savannah and I were roommates freshman year and that was it, best friends from that day forward. We've always liked to say we've got each other's backs... and fronts and sides too."

Brando chuckled. "Great saying. I like that."

"It's like that with you and Ben too, right?"

"Oh yeah, of course. Except we go back to high school."

"Hey I didn't know that," Andi said, stopping and pointing off to the right. "That's Salem Harbor. Pretty, huh?"

"Sure is." Brando put his hands in his pockets.

"Maybe not as pretty as L.A., I suppose, but--"

"Prettier actually. L.A.? The skyline's pretty... from afar. Not so much up close. But I love it I guess."

"You guess?" Andi turned around and added, "Let's head to the Salem Common. Also pretty. They leave the white Christmas lights up all year round."

"Sounds good. But what I meant was... I'm not really attached to L.A. like some people are. I mean... I grew up in Seattle, like Ben, and then spent some time living in New York with him

during what I call 'The Great Broadway Adventure,' and then I followed him to L.A. So it's just where the work was."

"Oh, I see. You could probably live anywhere?"

"Well, sure, except I'm interning or 'shadowing' at a recording studio in L.A. now. Sound. That's always been my 'thing' but I got sidetracked when Ben hit it big on Broadway in the show with the band and then after, when he went out on his own and needed me."

"Right, right. So, you were his P.A. for a long time then?"

"Yeah, about ten years I guess."

Andi took his hand as they crossed the nearly deserted street and then let go as they found themselves on the other side, walking past some more shops, a big church, and the stately Hawthorne Hotel.

"Has Ben hired someone to replace you?" Andi asked, lingering for a moment in front of one of the hotel shop windows.

"He did. Name's Mitch. I've been training him. But this trip was too personal so I came without him."

"Right. It's more like something Ben would need a friend for, not an assistant."

"Exactly. I told him, 'I'm coming with you.' And that, as they say, was that."

Andi laughed and they continued walking. "You're pretty bossy, aren't you?" She bumped elbows with him again.

"Huh." Brando replied, frowning slightly. "Never thought of myself that way. I was just thinking of protecting him and just... being there for him. And for Savannah. She's kind of grown on me." Brando took Andi's hand this time as they crossed the street on the other side of the hotel, then continued to hold it as they walked together through the tall iron gate into the Common.

"Yeah, I get it," Andi said, enjoying the feel of her slim hand in Brando's much larger one. "I guess I'm pretty bossy myself when it comes to Savannah."

"I'll say!" They both laughed.

Andi fell silent for a moment, then said thoughtfully, "We make a good team, huh? Protecting Ben and Savannah."

"From...?"

"Well... from themselves, I suppose."

Brando laughed out loud and the sound felt familiar to Andi's ears. She smiled.

"Damned straight," he said.

"And the paparazzi."

"That too," Brando replied. "Mind if we sit a few minutes?" He indicated a dark green bench with wrought iron legs on the edge of the sidewalk, facing the cupola in the center of the Common.

"Sure," Andi said, plopping down and patting the space beside her. "Not used to walking a lot in L.A., are you?" she teased.

"Not really," Brando admitted. He looked around at the green grass and the stately trees, the old homes lining the four edges of the Common. "But I kind of like it." He shifted in his seat. "Can we go back to what we were talking about... in the restaurant. Before *Salvador* interrupted us with our meals?"

Andi grinned, blushing a little, and grateful for the darkness. She pretended to yawn. "Okay, sure, but you'll have to remind me what the topic was. It's been a loooooong day."

He leaned his elbows on his knees. "You were telling me that Savannah is afraid of being loved. Unconditionally, you said... the way her parents loved her."

"Right, of course."

"Just trying to make sense of it. If I can figure it out, maybe I can help Ben?"

Andi nodded.

"I get what you're saying. But there are other people who love her that way, right? Like you, for instance, and the other people at your company? And her aunt loved her like that, I assume?"

"Oh sure. And Martin loved her that way too. He was her husband right out of college. More like a best friend, but yeah. Savannah certainly has had no shortage of love in her life."

"Huh. I forgot about Martin. He was at the service today."

"He was. Savannah leaned on him a lot."

“And they divorced because...?”

Andi sat on her hands, more because this whole topic was agitating to her than that her hands were cold.

“Because Savannah realized that she loved him as a friend, not as a husband. So she was the one who ended it. But see, that’s another thing she’s afraid of... realizing she’s made a mistake with Ben and having to hurt him.”

Brando thoughtfully stroked his beard. “That’s a lot to be afraid of. And that’s what held her back from calling Ben when her aunt died? That fear?”

“Yeah.” Andi nodded, feeling a little sad about how afraid Savannah seemed lately. “That and.. Well, I’ve told you all of this, I might as well tell you the rest.” She hesitated.

“Go ahead. What can it hurt?”

She cleared her throat. “Well, it’s like this. Savannah’s mother died from breast cancer. So she’s afraid she’s got the gene and is also going to die. From breast cancer. At a young age. And so, layered on top of that, she’s afraid that she will hurt Ben by dying young, not to mention if they have a baby-”

Brando slapped his hands on his knees. “She’s pregnant?”

“No, no!” Andi laughed and smacked him on the arm. “No. Just listen to me, will you? Savannah is all about ‘what if’s’ right now, see? *What if she has a baby with Ben and then she gets cancer and dies like her mom did? What if she realizes this is all a big mistake and she has to hurt Ben by breaking it off?* Etcetera and so on.” She shook her head sadly and studied Brando. “I’ve been trying to coach her to stay in the present moment but it’s not working. Nothing I’m doing or saying is working. It’s like she’s stuck in a fog of fear or something.”

“That’s gotta suck.” Brando scratched his head. “Does Ben know about all of this?”

“I don’t know how much she’s told him, although of course he knows that her mom died of breast cancer when she was 44.”

“What about that therapist woman who was at the service today? Short? Dark curly hair? Kylie? Keesha?”

“Keely. Yeah. She’s the best. Got Savannah through a lot of guilt and grief during and after the divorce. But Savannah would have to reach out to her. I can’t make an appointment for her.” Andi sighed softly.

“Why the hell not?”

Andi paused for a second. “Why not?” she asked quizzically, frowning.

“That’s what I said.” He touched her arm. “Look. You kindof made an appointment for Ben to come to the memorial service, didn’t you? Why not make an appointment for Savannah to talk with Keely? Or talk with Keely yourself and have her reach out to Savannah?”

Andi jumped up and clapped her hands excitedly. “Hey, that’s not a bad idea.” She gestured towards the sidewalk, now shining silver in the moonlight. “Let’s get you back to the hotel, then I can go home and call Keely.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s 9:07, that’s not too late, I don’t think.”

Brando stood and stretched his long, heavy frame. “Glad you’re on board with my good idea,” he teased, taking her hand lightly in his as they headed back towards the wharf and the hotel. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“Yeah, Ben brought you along for a reason. But really. It’ll be good for Savannah to talk with Keely about all of this. If I can get her away from Life Celebrations for an hour.” She shook her head and tightened her hand in Brando’s as they crossed the street by the hotel. “She told me that after she gets some sleep she’s going to start working on the next party. I think she’s just trying to ignore her feelings, which is definitely not a good thing.”

“For sure.”

“And don’t tell Ben what I’m going to do. He probably thinks I’ve meddled enough in their business for one lifetime.”

“Nah,” Brando replied lightly, studying Andi from the side, enjoying her profile. “That’s what friends are for. And you’re a very good one.”

“Thanks Brando. Goes both ways.”

They paused in front of the Hawthorne Hotel shop window again. Andi pointed to the antique doll display. “I used to collect those when I was little. Have a whole shelf of them in my living room.” She grinned.

Brando nudged her, hip to hip. “That’s how you spend your free time? Collect dolls?” His tone was teasing, and Andi laughed.

“Not anymore, but they’re worth a lot of money so I like looking at them. And they have good memories attached to them.” She continued walking, Brando close beside her although they were no longer holding hands.

Brando was feeling something he hadn’t felt in a long time. Like someone had taken his glass of what looked like stale ginger ale and stirred it up so that, lo and behold, there was plenty of fizz bubbling up. He smiled to himself, enjoying this new effervescence inside of him. “So. No doll collecting. What then? What do you like to do in your free time?”

“Not much of that, I’m afraid,” Andi replied sardonically. “But when I do have some I like to be on the go, you know- skiing, partying, hanging out with friends.”

“Ah, so you’re an extrovert type of person.”

“You could say that I guess. What about you?”

They crossed the street in front of Pickering Wharf and made their way towards the parking lot and Andi’s car. “Hanging out with Ben and Kline. And Micah. Sailing, fishing. He’s really into theatre so sometimes we go to plays and musicals.”

“He sounds like a great kid.”

Brando noticed Andi studying him and smiled inwardly. “The best,” he replied fondly.

“What’s he doing while you’re out here with us?”

“He wanted to come with me, wanted to be here for Savannah. That’s exactly what he said, can you believe it?”

“Savannah says he’s an old soul.”

They had arrived at Andi’s car in the parking lot of the hotel, but Brando didn’t want to let her go. “That he is. He’s with his mom right now. I have him every weekend and any days that Katrina can’t deal with him. Hey, Andi? Do you want to come inside and have some coffee, or a drink before you head home?” He gazed at her hopefully.

Andi hesitated. The air was colder, now and she was only wearing a light sweater over the dress she’d worn to the service. And she really was tired. Wanted to go home and crawl under the covers, send a text so Keely would know to reach out to Savannah. But here was Brando. Looking at her like... like what? Like he had gifts to give her if only she would stay a moment to unwrap them. When was the last time she’d been with a man who had looked at her this way? Sure, there had been umpteen men since Marcus. Double, triple times umpteen. And

they looked at her, of course, but not like this. Not with this consideration, this intention. She checked with herself inside. . . and decided that she liked it.

“Yeah, sure, I could use some coffee,” she finally said, and with the last word, she heard Brando exhale as if he’d been holding his breath for a while.

Seated at the bar, Andi continued the conversation. “You said something about Katrina not being able to deal with Micah?”

Brando nodded, playing with the napkin, swiveling slightly on the bar stool. “That’s right.”

“But I thought he was a great kid.”

“He is! But-” He paused while the bartender put their two coffee drinks in front of them, complete with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. “A real manly drink you ordered for me here, I see.” He grinned.

Andi laughed. “Drink it and you’ll thank me,” she replied, bringing a spoonful of the whipped cream to her mouth. “They make the absolute best hot buttered toffee coffee. Better than anything you ever had in L.A. I bet.”

Brando pushed the cream aside and took a small sip. “Mmmm... you’re right. Never actually had a hot buttered toffee coffee before so I have nothing to compare it to, but I’m going to assume that you’re right anyway.”

“Ha, ha,” Andi said, grinning through a mouthful of whipped cream. “This is the best part, though.” She pointed to the whipped cream dotted with the sprinkles. “But you were saying? About Micah? And Katrina?” Andi found herself more curious than she expected about the family dynamics at play with Brando and his ex-wife.

“The thing is- Micah is so special, and I’m not just saying that because I’m his father. And Katrina’s got problems that make it hard for her to be there for him like he needs her to be. Sometimes she just goes off the deep end, you know? She might even be bipolar. I don’t know because she won’t go to a doctor to find out. She’s got a lot of shit in her past that she’s never dealt with, too, pardon my French.”

Andi felt a tug at her heart on hearing this about Micah’s mother. “Hey,” she said lightly. “I can probably out swear you any day, don’t worry about it.”

Brando grinned and busied himself stirring the whipped cream into the dark blend of coffee and chocolate. “We’ll have to try that sometime.”

“Okay, you’re on!” Andi held her mug with both hands and drank deeply. “Keep going. About Katrina. And Micah.”

“Well, we got pregnant unintentionally. Hadn’t even thought about it. We weren’t even married. But I loved her.” His voice softened. “I really did love her and I think she loved me. As much as she could anyway, with all that crap from her past in the way. I just didn’t know her well enough then to know that she wouldn’t make a good mother.” He took a gulp of the drink and wiped his mouth with the napkin. “But now it’s all, what do they say, water under the bridge. I’ve got Micah and that’s a huge gift to get from the mess we made of the marriage.”

Andi placed her hand on top of Brando’s and she felt him hold his breath again. Christ, was she really having this effect on him? “Seriously, would you do it all over again, knowing that Micah would be the outcome?”

Brando let out his breath and smiled heartily. “Hell, yes!” he boomed and the busy bartender came right over.

“Anything you need, sir?” she asked, and Andi noted a bit of flirtation in the other woman’s eyes and in the way she was leaning on the counter by Brando.

“No, no, I’m fine,” he said more quietly. “It’s all good. Thanks.” The bartender sauntered back to where she’d been drying some wine glasses.

“Looks like she’s your Salvador,” Andi teased. “Shall we call her Salvadorita?”

“What?” Brando swiveled on his seat to face her. Their knees were touching and Andi felt his warmth soothing her weary body and spirit. Today had been a long day. It was hard enough to be grieving, like Savannah, but also difficult to be the strong rock for that grieving person to lean on.

“I’m just saying that she was coming on to you,” Andi whispered, leaning in so the bartender wouldn’t hear.

“No way,” Brando whispered back, but he was smiling. They swiveled back to their drinks, side by side at the bar, savoring the alcohol-infused sweetness for a few minutes in silence. After a while Brando spoke. “Hey, you were saying, at dinner, about how good you are at reading people, right?”

Andi nodded.

“So, can you tell that Ben and Savannah are right for each other?”

“Oh yes. I could tell even before I met him, just from hearing her talk about him. And he’s a public figure, so I am familiar with Ben’s energy in a public way. But actually, it’s no different now that I know him in a more personal way.” She paused. “If that makes sense?”

Brando looked thoughtful. “Sure. Can you read *my* energy?”

Andi playfully punched him on the shoulder. “I already did. Brando, don’t you remember? At dinner? When I was telling you about what a good father you are?”

Brando laid his hand on top of hers. “No, I mean, I was wondering if you were aware that I was going to do this...” He leaned in and kissed her gently on the lips.

Andi found herself leaning into the kiss, wanting more... much more. Then reality set in and she pulled back abruptly.

Brando took both of her hands in his and gazed at her intently, his hazel eyes meeting her blue ones. “Can you read my energy now? Can you tell me if you know *we’d* be good together? Or not?”

Andi blushed. “Oh, I... I don’t know...”

Brando patted her hands and put his own back on his mug. “Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have-”

“It’s okay Brando, really. I just need to ... think for a minute. I wasn’t expecting you to... I wasn’t expecting that...”

Brando nodded and studied her expectantly.

Andi took a deep breath, held it, and let it out slowly. “I think I’ll... I just need to take my time on this one. It could get complicated, you know? I mean, you’re going back to L.A. soon, right?”

Brando sighed and stood up, took some bills from his wallet and placed them on the bar beside their half empty mugs. “Yeah. That’s where my life is. And yours is here. I get it. No harm done.”

He moved away from the bar, and Andi hurried to grab her purse and catch up with him. “Wait. Brando.” Andi put her hand on his arm, enjoying the feel of his warm skin against hers. I really do like you. And I’m attracted to you too. I just don’t want to-”

Brando laid one hand on top of Andi’s. “It’s okay. You don’t have to explain. I get it.”

They turned and walked side by side to the bar's exit. "It's just... with you being Ben's best friend... You know, I don't just want to have a one-night stand and then have to keep seeing you. Because Ben and Savannah are always going to be a couple. I know that in my bones. Which means we'll be seeing each other, you and me. I guess that's what I'm trying to say."

Brando studied Andi's conflicted face for a moment, then put his arms around her. "But I was thinking it might not be a one-night stand," he murmured into her hair.

Andi savored the feeling of being in this man's arms. Was it possible that they had only just met this morning? Maybe it could be something more than what she was used to. Maybe she could let herself feel...everything... with him, the way she had with Marcus. And how many years ago was that now? Almost 20? Maybe it was time to let that grief go. Maybe she could feel safe right here. With Brando. She slowly moved a few inches away from him but kept hold of his forearms. "Maybe," she said finally. "Maybe. Let's maybe... sleep on it?" She noticed his raised eyebrow. "I mean, separately?"

They both laughed, releasing an underlying anxiety that neither had been aware of until just that moment.

Brando leaned in and kissed Andi's mouth again, a bit more fervently this time. Andi kissed back. When they broke apart, Brando grinned. "Sure, I'm open to that. Ben said he'd be here another few days, but if things don't work out with Savannah, then we'll be leaving sooner."

"Okay, I see," Andi said happily. "No pressure."

"No pressure. Right." Brando laughed. "Something to think about anyway, you and me."

"Don't worry, I will be thinking about it." This time Andi leaned in and gave a kiss as good (or maybe better) than she'd just gotten. "You've given me plenty to think about," she said, stepping back and getting out her car keys.