

FROM “THE LOOKING GLASS: A NEW YORK LOVE STORY”

It was late afternoon when Andy saw Luz. Hurried. Beautiful. Latina. She was across from him on 5th Avenue, going in the opposite direction. He was looking for a Starbucks when his eyes fell on her. He watched her, mesmerized, as she walked down the street, briskly and with purpose. She was wearing a 1950's styled dark red dress with a large black belt around her waist, black heels, her dark hair back and up, with a bit of it draped down on the right side.

Like gazing upon a beautiful bird in flight, Andy could not stop watching her. His feet turned and moved in her direction. From across the street, he kept pace with her and followed her for blocks, admiring her slender body, the easy elegance and beauty that radiated off her.

She entered a restaurant called The Skyline. He followed her after a few minutes, and it was dark inside with soft lighting. The place was empty. No one eating, no one at the bar. However, the restaurant was stunning. Styled Neo-Deco, with an already lit fireplace, chandeliers, dark cherry wood furniture, red carpeting, and red flowing drapes pulled back with thick gold braided ropes, Andy could tell it was an expensive place to eat. Behind the bar was a tower of colored bottles filled with alcohol, strategically lit from behind, that made the area seem magical, like a tower of colored crystal, like something out of a movie. Music was playing overhead. Bossa nova. The fusion of jazz and samba so right for this space.

“Good evening. May I help you?” said the man standing behind the bar. He was young, African American, and dressed in a blue sport jacket with a black lapel, a white shirt, and a black bow tie. He was handsome and definitely looked like he should be in a movie, as he stood in front of the colored bottles, calmly resting his hands on the bar.

“Hi, there,” Andy said, caught off guard. “I was just looking around. I’ve never been in here before. Didn’t know it existed.”

“Oh...well then welcome to The Skyline. My name is Rodney. I’m the head bartender this evening.” Rodney held out his hand and Andy walked over to him and shook it. “I’m sorry to say that the restaurant is not yet open, but you’re...more than welcome to have a drink at the bar.”

Rodney looked Andy up and down, and Andy looked down on himself. He had on a Hawaiian shirt and khakis.

“I’m guessing by the way you’re looking at me, that I’m not exactly dressed appropriately.”

“New York is a city full of tourists,” said a voice from behind Andy. “We welcome everyone here.”

Andy turned and faced Luz. He thought she was even more beautiful up close. Her smile was wide, her teeth very white, and her lips looked full and soft. Her skin was smooth and glowing, and her eyes were bright.

“Hello,” Andy said. He was transfixed.

“Good evening. My name is Luz. I’m the hostess here. Welcome to The Skyline.”

She held out her hand and Andy hesitated a moment before taking it in his.

“My name is...Andy—Andrew...Jackson...Hainesworth. Please call me Andy.”

“How do you do, Andy?” Luz said.

Andy’s face lit up at that, and he repeated, smiling, “How do you do?”

“You said you didn’t know this restaurant existed. How did you find us?”

“I, uh...was walking by and looked inside. It’s beautiful in here. It reminds me of a restaurant in a movie I’ve seen a million times.”

“*Casablanca*.”

Andy’s heart jumped and he smiled even wider. “Yes...*Casablanca*.”

“I’ve seen it a million times, too. In fact, inspiration for the design of the restaurant came from that film.”

“Really...” Andy said. His heart was racing in his chest, and he couldn’t take his eyes off Luz.

“Mr. Hainesworth, would you care for a cocktail?”

Andy looked at Rodney. His smile faltered. “The kind of drinks I normally have, I’m guessing you all don’t serve here. You see I’m not a tourist. I actually live in New York. Well, I work in Manhattan, but live in Hoboken.”

“We all come from somewhere,” Rodney said. “I’m from Harlem.”

Luz added, “I grew up in Brooklyn.”

“Nice places,” Andy said.

“I can make you something very nice, if you’d like,” Rodney said.

“What do you have?”

“A new drink I’ve concocted. Crushed mint, sweetened iced tea, dark rum from Barbados, on ice with a lime garnish.”

“Sounds nice. What do you call it?”

“Paradise.”

Andy and Luz watched Rodney mix the drink, then place it in front of Andy. Andy squeezed juice from the lime slice into the drink and stirred it with the straw. He raised the glass to his lips and took a sip, then another.

“This is fantastic.”

“Not too sweet, not too tart.”

“Just right,” Andy said. “Thank you. Thank you very much.”

“Rodney, Mr. Hainesworth’s drink is on the house,” Luz said. “Since he’s our first customer of the evening.”

Andy put down his drink. “No, no, no. Please let me pay. In fact...since you’re standing here. Allow me to buy you a drink.”

Rodney’s eyes shot to Luz, and she looked at Rodney in time to see him tilt his head.

“No, no. That’s quite all right,” Luz said. “You’re our guest. And it’s my pleasure.”

“Please,” Andy persisted. “Please allow me to do this.”

Luz looked over to Rodney, but he was already wiping down the bar.

“Okay. Just this once. Since you know *Casablanca* so well.”

Andy beamed. “Thank you.”

“What can I get you?” Rodney asked Luz. “Your regular?”

Luz smiled, embarrassed. “Please.”

“One French 75 coming up.”

“Thank you,” Luz said, afraid to meet Andy’s eyes.

“No...thank you,” he said, softly, looking down on her face. “This was a pleasant surprise coming in here.”

“It’s a very lovely restaurant.”

“I agree. Have you been here long?”

“About a year or so.”

“You like it?”

“I do. Nice people work here. And we have a faithful clientele.”

There was quiet a moment.

“What do you do...working in Manhattan?”

Andy held his breath a moment. This was usually where he lost a girl’s interest. “I own an auto garage.”

“You park cars?”

“No, no. Me and my crew work on cars. We service them.”

“Is that something you enjoy?”

Andy was looking down into his drink when Luz asked him the question. He looked ahead, to the colorful bottles of alcohol. “I’ve been doing it since I was a teenager.”

“Oh, I meant...owning your own business.”

“Oh.” Andy looked over to Luz. “Yes, I do like owning my own business. It’s hard work. There’s not much fun to it. But I’m my own boss.”

“Good,” Luz said, returning Andy’s gaze.

Rodney walked over and placed the French 75 on top of a napkin. Luz mouthed a thank-you.

“Well,” Andy said, lifting his drink. “Here’s to new friends.”

“To new friends,” Luz said.

They were quiet after the toast, and the music changed. Grover Washington, Jr.’s *Let It Flow*.

“So you like *Casablanca*?” Luz asked.

“Yes, I do. Actually, I like a lot of movies.”

“Oh, really? What type?”

“Any...so long as it’s good. Old, new. Color, black and white.”

“Musicals?”

“Uhh...so-so. Do you like musicals?”

“Yes,” Luz said smiling. “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. *West Side Story*. *Chicago*.”

“I’ve seen *Singing in the Rain*. Does that count?”

“Of course!” Luz exclaimed. She took a sip of her drink. “Let me ask you a question. Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly?”

“Oh, my God!” Andy said, laughing. He looked up at the ceiling and thought a moment. “Gene Kelly!”

“Not Fred Astaire?”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. I didn’t say anything bad about the man. I just liked Gene Kelly better. Actually, truth be told, I wish I looked like Gene Kelly.”

Luz laughed heartily.

“What’s so funny?”

“I think every man wishes they could have looked—and danced—like Gene Kelly.”

“True,” Andy said. “And...George Clooney.”

“Brando.”

“A young Paul Newman.”

“Denzel Washington.”

“Ya know...I always thought he looked better as he got older. Some guys look better as they get older, and I don’t understand that. I look like I’ve been in a car accident, and he probably rolls out of bed looking handsome.”

“You don’t think you’re handsome?”

“And you don’t either, so don’t try and sell me a line,” Andy said, smiling.

Luz swallowed the rest of her drink.

“Mr. Hainesworth, it’s been a pleasure talking with you, but I have to get to work. We open for dinner shortly and I need to prepare.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you. And please...call me Andy.”

Luz stuck out her hand again. “It was a pleasure meeting you...Andy.”

Andy took Luz’s hand. “The pleasure was all mine. Good evening.”

“Good evening.”

When Andy turned to Rodney, Rodney was again making busy work wiping down the bar. There was a ghost of a smile on his face.